

Obituary: Edward Willis (Ted) Williams 1920–2013

Rodney Lewington¹

Ted Williams died on 4 June 2013 in his 93rd year. He was a life member of the Wellington Botanical Society who served on the committee and participated in many of the Society's activities for over 40 years.

Ted was an unassuming man with a wide range of interests of which botany was just one. Born in Paremata, he spent his childhood and early teens at Mangamaire, some eight miles out of Pahiatua. This was a railway town—a railway station, a cheese factory, a store, a post office and a school for about 20 children. The house was a mile out of town and had no electricity, no radio to start with, but a lot of reading. Ted told of his father buying second hand books and the use of the “railway library”. Books, ranging the countryside, and a well above-average ability to absorb knowledge seem to have formed the base for Ted's wide interests and full life. Books continued to be an absorbing interest until the end.

Leaving Pahiatua District High School at 14 with matriculation he worked first in a local solicitor's office and then for the local authority. He moved to the Labour Department in Wellington in 1936. In 1937 Ted transferred to Native Affairs in Wanganui (where he met Nancy Nicholls who he later married). In 1940 he transferred to Rotorua. He became Assistant District Officer in Rotorua, and latter a Māori Land Court Commissioner, District Officer and State Services representative in Palmerston North. In the later part of his career Ted was often required at head office to help with drafting law as it affected Māori. Ted stayed with the Māori Department until retiring as Deputy Secretary in 1978, and continued to work in the preparation of reprinted statutes for a few years in the Parliamentary Council's office.

Ted had become a territorial in 1938 because he “could see things coming to a head”. At the start of the War he was called up and was a commissioned officer. He turned in his commission to become a sergeant so that he could go overseas and served in Egypt, Libya and then Italy with the 21st Infantry Battalion, leaving the army in 1944 as a 2nd lieutenant.

From Ted's reminiscences one got an appreciation of his understanding of the way people interact under various circumstances—a group of territorials setting up camps in New Zealand for the newly forming battalions, a platoon of soldiers advancing north though Italy, negotiating in Māori circles,

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Ted takes tea. This could be on any, and every, BotSoc trip in four decades. Family photo courtesy of Julia Williams.

his ability in Te Reo and understanding of Māori protocol. He was known to use these attributes to negotiate access with a Māori land owner for BotSoc.

Before going overseas in 1942, Ted married Nancy, who at that time was a shorthand typist in the Department of Native Affairs. On returning to civilian life they moved around the country as Ted rose through the ranks within the Department of Native Affairs and its successive reincarnations. At the same time they were bringing up their four children. His love of his family was central to his life.

Working in Wellington Head Office in 1948 gave Ted the opportunity to study part time at Victoria University and in 1954 he gained a LLB, as well as a little more Latin.

The family returned to Wellington in 1967. They first lived in Thorndon and Taita before settling in Cecil Road, Wadestown in 1968 or 69. By now Ted was well up the management hierarchy. He was involved in Māori housing, land development and welfare, mainly in the Māori trustee field.

After he retired Ted expressed his views on management:

“There’s a modern tendency to talk about business management as a separate skill whereas us old-timers believed very strongly that there was great merit in having come up through the ranks and becoming a ‘sharp end’ man. Over the years you’d accumulate knowledge about who was who, what they did, where they lived and what importance they had. I had connections which meant if something came up involving another department or district there would usually be someone I could contact.”

One reason Ted offered for buying a house in Wadestown was its closeness to Otari-Wilton's Bush. Being in Wellington gave Ted the opportunity to pursue his interest in botany through University Extension and Workers Education Classes. There he met some BotSoc members who encouraged several class participants to join the Wellington Botanical Society.

The class field trips also brought together a group of likeminded people who continued as the "Sunday Walking Group". They would meet on a Sunday to walk, talk and botanise. This close-knit group explored the Greater Wellington Region for the rest of their active lives.

Ted Williams served on the Wellington Botanical Society committee for many years and was President from 1974 to 1976. His Presidential Address, covering the life and explorations of William Colenso, reflected his abiding admiration for this early botanist.

Ted and Nancy were on most field trips—from 1972 their names appear regularly in Tony Druce's trip book. We remember Ted as reliable field companion, willing to offer an opinion on a species' name and give his reason, although he shared Tony Druce's approach to plant identification: "I know it because it looks like it, just as I know you by your face". Ted was a competent amateur botanist although I never knew him to stray beyond the vascular plants. His later interest was in small leafed native plants, in particular coprosmas.



Ted serves dinner to Darea Sherratt in the shearers' quarters during BotSoc trip to Rocky Hill and the Pahaoa Taipos, Wairarapa, Queen's Birthday 1980. Family photo courtesy of Julia Williams.

On BotSoc trips, Ted would always do his share of the chores and came to the fore when needed. He will be long remembered for his “porridge call”. Ted reminisced with pleasure on the “very extended family of fellow trampers”, that included Lindsay (A.L.) Poole and Nancy Adams. He appreciated Nancy’s line drawings in his well-thumbed copy of “Poole and Adams”.

With the family grown up and Nancy having trouble with Parkinson’s disease they moved to a more convenient house in Ngaio in 1990. His Ngaio garden had a good representation of natives and Ted knew the provenance of each one. He was particularly proud of a southern rata.

As the years caught up with him and BotSoc trips became too strenuous, he was pleased to enjoy the company of the oldies in the Sunday Walking Group.

Ted was a lover of words and had a repertoire of poems that he could recite on the march or around a camp fire if the urge came to him. Even in the retirement home, where he lived the last few years of his life, he was known to entertain his fellows at the Friday social hour.

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