

Re: Newsletter 26 Supernatural beings in forest, pp 6-8

I greatly enjoyed the article by J. Bastow Wilson on supernatural beings in forests. But gremlins appear to have interfered with the interpretation provided regarding goblin forest.

Goblin forest on Mt Taranaki (Egmont) is a vegetation type not a place.

Cockayne (1928) referred to it thus:

“On Mt Egmont kamahi forest is so striking that it has received the popular and expressive name of “Goblin Forest”. It occurs as a distinct belt from the neighbourhood of Dawson Falls to North Egmont house and it probably extends right around the mountain.”

If this quote is insufficient, Cockayne’s full intent can be garnered from his 29 June 1917 field notes (MS 74 in the Auckland Institute and museum). In these notes he variously records:

P4 “*Weinmannia* branches from near the bases so that there are numerous, slightly leaning trunk-branches. As one ascends the forest gets more “goblin-like”: the branches are much mossed.”

P5 “The forest here is of the “Goblin type” but not nearly such far-spreading branches as noted near Dawson Falls.”

P5 As one proceeds the forest gets still more of the “goblin” character, the branches spreading more like extended arches”.

From the above, it is evident that Cockayne was reflecting the Taranaki usage of the term goblin forest in relation to a vegetation type not a place. This interpretation is also the one I followed in “Vegetation of Egmont National Park” (1986) and John Dawson (1988), in his book “Forest vines to snow tussocks,” uses it in relation to beech forest of similar structure and physiognomy.

If I recall correctly, others have also used the term goblin forest, for example, Greta Stevenson, in describing the high altitude kamahi-dominated forest on Hauhungatahi in the central North Island.

The term goblin forest although not as widely used as elfin forest, cloud forest, mossy forest or elfin woodland does then have a place in ecology.

Bruce Clarkson, Waikato

Cockayne & the Mt Egmont ‘Goblin Forest’ – Reply

I am grateful to Dr Clarkson for enlivening and informing this discussion. He gives, in full, Cockayne’s published (1928) comment on ‘Goblin forest’ to which I referred in my article. It is clear that Cockayne is referring to a locality, not to a botanical type of forest since:

- a. Cockayne says ‘On Mt Egmont kamahi forest is so striking that it has received the popular and expressive name of “Goblin Forest”’ [following Clarkson’s transcription]. The ‘it’ clearly refers to the forest on Mt Egmont, so it is only the forest at the Mt Egmont locality that is being thus named.
- b. He uses a capital for Goblin. Locality names have capitals; forest types (like elfin forest) do not.
- c. Had Cockayne intended to coin a new forest-type name, he would certainly have made explicit that he was doing so, and he would have given a definition, however brief.

I do not believe there can be any doubt but that in this sentence from *The vegetation of New Zealand* Cockayne was mentioning a vernacular locality name, not coining the name of a new forest type. Bruce Clarkson has corrected me to make it clear that the first published misunderstanding of Cockayne was his in 1986, not John Dawson’s in 1988, and I thank him for that. It would be an interesting exercise in the sociology of science to follow the spread of this error.

I am afraid that I have not read Cockayne’s field notes. I assume that the trip described was to Mt Egmont (Dr Clarkson does not say). If so, the reference still seems to be to the vegetation of the ‘Goblin forest’ locality. This interpretation is reinforced by the intermittent capitals and by the quotation marks. If these notes are indeed from Mt Egmont, and there are no references to goblin forest elsewhere, this interpretation seems certain. In any case, Cockayne ensured there was no ambiguity when he published on the topic some years later. He did not describe any goblin forest type. Leonard Cockayne was an intelligent and widely-respected ecologist, and I am surprised that Bruce should think he would make such a mistake. (Unlike me: see separate apology.)

J. Bastow Wilson, Otago



‘Goblin-faced’ tree, Western Australia. *Photo by Peter Bannister*