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**Botanical Definitions** of terms in Peter Nichol's article.

*Alison Stringer*

**apomixis:** the production of viable seed without fertilisation

**dehiscence:** to open and shed contents when ripe

**protandry:** the anthers shedding pollen before the stigma is receptive in the same flower.

**Reference:** HH Allan. Glossary, *Flora of New Zealand Vol 1*.

## Biographical Note

### **John Smaillie Tennant (1865-1958) *Educationalist, Botanist, Sportsman***

There are members of the Botanical Society of Otago who, as staff or students of the Department of Botany, University of Otago, will be grateful to the Tennant Bequest for research funds or a grant-in-aid to attend workshops or conferences, and there will be other members who have attended the Department's annual John Smaillie Tennant Lecture. Over the years the Bequest has supported distinguished speakers such as David Bellamy, David Galloway, Peter Wardle and Eric Godley among others.

So who was Tennant?

John Smaillie Tennant was born in Dunedin on 15 April 1865. His father, John Tennant, had arrived at Port Chalmers in March 1859 on the *Tamora*, his birthplace given as West Linton, Peeblesshire, Scotland, 1835. Upon settling in Dunedin he took up the post of clerk in a customs agency and soon became Chief Clerk and Cashier for the Government Customs Office. His mother, Elizabeth Colledge, arrived at Port Chalmers on the *Selvilla* in 1862. She was the second child of Joshua Colledge and Elizabeth Farquhar, born in Cavers, Roxburgh, Scotland, 1842. His parents married on 2 June 1864 and were living in Grant Street, Dunedin at the time John, the eldest of six children, was born.

When John was five the household (including cat and dog) were transported by lighter to their new home "Whitfield" in the bush at Ravensbourne, which was an isolated location in 1870, access being via a track around Pelichet Bay (now Logan Park) or by boat. His mother took responsibility for his primary education until the road to Port Chalmers went in. Then he began formal classes at Albany Street School. He much preferred the bush and beach but after his father discovered his "wagging", the daily five mile walk became part of his routine. In addition to this formal education, John, who was a precocious child with an absorbing interest in everything around him –

social and natural, was learning from his parent's wide circle of friends, plus at a very early age was cultivating his own useful friendships including that with G. M. Thomson (1848-1933), a noted Otago naturalist.

The family shifted to College Street, Caversham at the end of 1877 and the next year John went to the Normal School in Moray Place that had opened as a Teachers Training College in 1876. He is recorded in the 1879 Examination Lists as being in Standard V and having passed his exams. The School Inspector overseeing these exams was Donald Petrie (1846-1925) who would become a friend and fellow botanist in later years.

It was in 1880 that John, aged 15, began his teaching career as a Pupil-Teacher at the Normal School. He stayed in this post until the end of 1884, then he was at Teachers Training College fulltime passing his School Management Examination in 1885. He enrolled for a BA at the University of Otago in 1886. Tennant's obituary said that while at Training College he had worked for and helped establish a Diploma of Education at the University.

Fig. J.S. Tennant, Graduation, 1899

In March of 1887 Tennant took up the post of 4<sup>th</sup> assistant teacher at the newly opened High St School, Dunedin. This teaching position was a full-time post so the ensuing years were busy ones as he also studied for a BA (1891), BSc (1892) and MA (1899), went on several expeditions to Fiordland, researched locally (he became a member of the Otago Institute in 1893) and taught botany on a part-time basis at the Technical School and the University. After the Professor of Biology, T. J. Parker, died in 1897 and before his replacement, Professor W. B. Benham arrived in May 1898, Tennant and his friend W. Mawson took the Botany and Zoology classes. He was steadily promoted at High St School ending up as 1<sup>st</sup> assistant in June 1895 and is described in Inspectors Reports as

an intelligent and thorough teacher  
but with some want of force...[and]  
takes commendable interest in the  
outdoor sports and past-times of his pupils.

[Otago Education Board, 1883-1901]



These years also held sadness as several members of his close-knit family died, including three siblings, his grandfather, aunt, mother and father-in-law. He had married Edith Ethel Moresby Zohrab in 1894 and they lived in Maitland St while in Dunedin. Edith was the eldest daughter of Constantine Edward Zohrab and his wife Edith Wills of Wellington.

It should be noted that by 1880 Leonard Cockayne (1855-1934) was teaching in Otago and taking an increasing interest in local flora. B. C. Aston (1871-1951) was also working and studying in Dunedin in the 1890's and he too would be an expedition companion in later years. Professor Geoff Baylis thinks this coterie of Otago botanists were tough characters. Certainly photographs and expedition notes suggest this, and we know from Tennant's obituary he was a keen sportsman winning trophies for rowing, swimming and diving while also participating in representative cricket and rugby. The most notable of his achievements at this time was the first navigation by canoe of the Waiiau River, Southland, in January 1892 (apparently Maori avoided this hazardous waterway in their long canoes). Tennant was a lean, tall man. Professor Baylis said his uncle, B. C. Aston, was 6 feet and Tennant is taller when they were photographed beside one another on the Auckland Islands in 1907. As testimony to his fitness (even in middle age) we have the following:

During the four years beginning January, 1911, Aston made six excursions to the Ruahine-Kaimanawa mountain system. Some of these trips were very strenuous. In January, 1911, he and J. S. Tennant explored the Kaimanawa Mountains which, up to that time, were unknown botanically. They ascended Waipahi, 5,200 feet, and Korokarenga, 5,300 feet. As if that were not enough mountaineering for one week, they crossed the plain on the west side of the Kaimanawas and climbed to the top of Ngauruhoe, 7,500 feet.

[Oliver, 1952]

During 1899 he resigned his Dunedin teaching job and became Headmaster at Ashburton High School, remaining there until 1905. Besides his commitment to the school and local Technical College, around this period he was also an active member of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science.

After leaving Canterbury he became Inspector of Schools in Wellington. During the following years he was botanically active throughout the region, the Chatham Islands and on the Subantarctic Expedition of 1907 where he concentrated on collecting lesser-known plants - grasses, mosses, liverworts and lichens. On various occasions he teamed up with Petrie, Aston and Cockayne.

In 1912 he was appointed Principal of Wellington Teachers Training College, Kelburn, and *ex officio* lecturer in education at Victoria University College. He would openly defend his controversial introduction of Montessori methods into the Public School system but it was his belief that school should be an enjoyable experience and that each child develop at their own rate. When the University created a chair in education in 1923 Tennant became its first Professor, although this was only a part-time appointment at first. J. C. Beaglehole, who knew him during these years, wrote

Tennant's calibre was considerable- with both literary and biological interests he was a really well read man, and could quote Holy Writ to advantage. In courtesy he was second only to Kirk.

[Beaglehole, 1949]

He retired in 1926, first living in Wellington then Nelson. Edith died in November 1924 and was buried with her parents and one of her 8 sisters in Karori Cemetery,

Wellington. His marriage to Winifred Jessie Gray Maitland took place in 1926. There were no children from either marriages.

Travelling, painting and writing were his retirement activities but he retained an interest in botany being especially concerned about the flora of the dunes at Tahuna Beach, and plantings that were being made there. He died at home on 7 April 1958 in his 93<sup>rd</sup> year. A Dawn Redwood in Queens Gardens, Nelson has the honour of his ashes buried at its base.

When Winifred died in 1974 she more than made good her husband's wishes by gifting over half her estate to the Department of Botany, University of Otago for "the scientific study of native plants". Tennant's original bequest, in recognition for "all the university had done" for him, was thought to have come from his friendship with the Reverend John E Holloway (1881-1945), first head of the Department.

Besides the John Smaillic Tennant Lecture and Bequest, the grass, *Poa tenmantiana* Petrie, first described on the 1907 Subantarctic Expedition of the Philosophical Institute of Canterbury, was named after him.

### Acknowledgements

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**References:** (Only the major references are mentioned below. The list is extensive and will be included in a full biography to be published elsewhere).

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Mary Anne Miller, Department of Botany, University of Otago