

Obituaries

Muriel Ethelwyn Fisher, QSM 25 July 1915 – 23 July 2012



Born in Carterton in July 1915, Muriel's family soon moved to Wellington, to a new home at Ngauranga, at the site of Wellington's largest freezing works. Muriel spent her formative years in Wellington and although much of her life was spent in Auckland, she remained at heart, a Wellingtonian. Her love of native plants slowly developed while still a schoolgirl, and it was the long walks through the hills of Wellington and a teacher who encouraged the botanical interests that cemented her lifelong passion. Her aim towards the end of high school was to matriculate and progress to Victoria University where she hoped to study botany.

In 1931, Muriel was holidaying with her brother Sydney who lived in Taradale when the Napier earthquake occurred. This was a very traumatic experience for her and she was very wary of earthquakes for the rest of her life. After this 'rocky' experience, New Zealand was in the grip of the Great Depression. Times were very difficult and Muriel's aspiration of attending university had to be shelved. Instead she had to enter the workforce, first as an assistant in a church bookshop and then in a position with the New Zealand railways, a job Muriel described as

"the most soul-destroying imaginable". To retain her sanity, Muriel finally convinced her parents to allow her to join the Tararua Tramping Club and so began a lifelong love of the Tararuas and, of course, alpine plants. Through the Tararua Tramping Club and friendship with Dr Lucy Moore, Muriel became a foundation member of the Wellington Botanical Society.

During World War II, Muriel was 'manpowered' to various occupations while ever expanding her knowledge of native plants with exhaustive expeditions on her bicycle throughout the South Island and Coromandel Peninsula. Towards the end of the war, Muriel moved to Auckland where she enrolled at Auckland University studying geology. Here she met a lecturer in the engineering department, married him and had two children, Malcolm and Mary. Sadly her husband died in 1949 and Muriel was left with two young children. Somehow she convinced the authorities at Auckland Training College to accept her for teacher training and with typical determination she managed to combine motherhood and study – requiring many long nights completing assignments.

Fortunately around this time she met William (Bill) Fisher and the real story of Muriel's contribution to our 'native plants' now begins. Bill and Muriel were wed in 1952 and off they went on their honeymoon as part of a group of trampers staying at the Auckland Tramping Club hut on Mt Ruapehu, Bill sleeping on the top bunk while Muriel, Malcolm and Mary slept on the bottom bunk. Bill and Muriel shared a passion for native plants. All family holidays and weekends involved exploring different parts of New Zealand searching for rare and unusual plants. They then started propagating a few natives to be sold at Forest and Bird meetings and later as the word spread, to the general public, reflecting the slowly awakening interest in native plants.

In the late 1960s Muriel began to ponder the possibility of writing a book about her beloved natives. There had been no significant popular publication on natives since Leonard Cockayne's *The cultivation of New Zealand plants*, published in 1923! In her very modest manner, Muriel considered herself to be under-qualified to write such a book. However, with typical iron-clad perseverance, she pushed on with the project and in 1970, *Gardening with New Zealand plants, shrubs and trees* was published. What a success – suddenly there was a reference book available for budding native plant enthusiasts. So popular was the book that Muriel received the Wattie Book of the Year Award for non-fiction (now the Montana NZ Book Award) in 1971. This book was revised and reprinted in 1994 under the title *Growing New Zealand plants, shrubs and trees*. In 1970, Bill and Muriel jointly received the Loder Cup, an annual award to encourage the preservation of the native flora and in 1985 Muriel was awarded the Queen's Service Medal.

Muriel's book was followed by *New Zealand ferns in your garden*, published in 1976 and featuring the stunning artwork of Lal Ward. *A touch of nature* followed in 1981, illustrated by Elaine Power, and finally in 2005, *Fernglen, the Muriel Fisher story*. All these books have enormous significance in their contribution to the expanding documentation of our native flora and have no doubt encouraged the next generation of experts to produce some outstanding publications in recent years.

Throughout this period (from the 1960s onwards), Muriel was politically active, ever promoting the cause of her native plants. She provided considerable support for the 'tree sitters' at the Pureora Forest, helping one of her former students, Stephen King. Muriel placed her reputation on the line, meeting with politicians

and confronting the police, at the same time cooking meals for the 'tree sitters'. After a long battle, logging was eventually suspended and Muriel could return to Auckland. From this time onwards, Muriel began letter-writing to both national and local politicians. Distressed with witnessing the destruction of the forests, she and a local group of supporters took on the politicians and developers of the Chatswood subdivision in Birkenhead in the 1970s, and were foremost in securing the protection of the remaining large tract of kauri forest, now the Chatswood Reserve. Whenever she perceived an injustice, a letter would be sent reminding the particular person of their responsibilities. Muriel showed me many of these letters, they were just brilliant!

When Bill died in 1983, Muriel was faced with the dilemma of how to maintain the 12 acres of her property. After considerable consultation with various local bodies, eventually Muriel gifted part of the land to the North Shore City Council and the remainder was purchased by the same, the end result being a remarkable place called Fernglen Gardens. The property was secured for posterity and so began the development of the comprehensive plants collection.

Muriel was an active committee member of Fernglen for many years until unable to physically attend meetings, but always her thoughts were on her beloved property. Muriel's mantra was always to look to the future generation of plant enthusiasts. She was always exceptionally generous in imparting her knowledge,

while remaining incredibly modest about her many achievements. Possibly the highlight of Fernglen's development for Muriel was the construction of an Alpine House. Her years of tramping in the Tararuas and expeditions to the South Island had inspired a life-long passion for the many diverse alpine plants. She had developed special growing mediums and methods for cooling plants in Auckland's hot, humid summers, so that somehow many of these difficult to cultivate alpine plants managed to survive. Amazing!

Muriel has left an extraordinary legacy, her books, and of course Fernglen Native Plant Gardens. She leaves an enormous collection of memories for many of us. Muriel's warmth of greeting and her obvious enjoyment of company when you visited were always very genuine and sincere. How I miss these visits and phone calls with my wonderful friend Muriel. A remarkable woman indeed!

References

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Awards

- 1970: Loder Cup.
- 1971: Wattie Book of the Year Award for the first edition of *Gardening with New Zealand plants, shrubs and trees*.
- 1985: QSM for community work in spreading the "gospel" about native plants.
- 1989: Award of Merit from the city of Birkenhead for volunteer service.
- 1991: Associate of Honour of the Royal Institute of Horticulture in recognition of service to New Zealand Horticulture.
- 2009: North Shore City Council named an area of several hectares of reserve land near Island Bay in Birkenhead as the Muriel Fisher Reserve.

Obituary compiled by Nev Arbury, landscape designer and committee member on behalf of the Fernglen Native Plant Gardens Management Committee.

