

# Obituaries

## George MacMurray Fuller FRIH, MBE

9 January 1929 – 19 June 2015

The Friends of Pukekura Park have lost a stalwart in George Fuller who died on 19th June 2015. He was passionate about our Park where he lived and worked for 25 years. He said "I was in Paradise. I was working and earning a living in one of the most wonderful city parks in the world. We lived so close to the heart of the Park I felt its pulse."

George MacMurray Fuller was born at Henderson in Auckland, on 9th January 1929. His parents had a family orchard business and recently Fuller Lane was named after them. One of their neighbours was an orchid breeder who encouraged him to learn more about plant nurseries by going to New Plymouth, and to learn more about orchids by going to England. He left school at the age of fifteen to work in Palmer's first nursery at Glen Eden, and then spent time at Duncan and Davies Nursery in New Plymouth, the biggest nursery in the Southern Hemisphere. It was while he was there that he met Fred Parker who had a garden full of plants and was an orchid enthusiast. He worked weekends in Fred's garden.

In 1947 George boarded a ship bound for England. Some members of the crew left these ships when they arrived in New Zealand and deck hands were needed to replace them, so George became one of these. At first a naïve young fellow, he soon learnt a thing or two about the world and its people and it was not long before he was advanced to become assistant steward at the captain's table on this voyage.

He began work in St Albans north of London at Sanders Nursery, the biggest and most famous orchid nursery in the world, and spent four years there. He helped stage a gold medal winning exhibit at Chelsea Flower Show, and found the whole experience a fantastic learning curve. This work made it possible for him to go to Kew Gardens as a student which he did for two years. During

this time he became engaged to Doris with whom he had worked at Sanders'. The rules at Kew in those days said employees had to be single, so George decided to come home, having spent six years in England.

But a Swedish millionaire was looking for an orchid grower to grow plants hydroponically under glass, a brand new venture and part of this deal was that he represented the company on a visit to Australia and New Zealand, so George took this offer up and married Doris at Henderson on 29th December 1953. The Queen's visit took place at the same time and this had an influence on their wedding transport, for they had spotted an old buggy which they wanted to use, but it was needed by the Queen, so was painted pure white, losing some of its rustic appeal.

Following their honeymoon the couple headed off to Båstad in Sweden where George worked for Elektroflora. There he learned new techniques being used for horticulture and enjoyed living in a Scandinavian country. He spent six years there before wanting to head home with his young family of two boys. But an English man was starting up a big propagation nursery in Malta and invited George to pioneer the development of that nursery, an offer he could not resist. Four years later this nursery was producing one million chrysanthemum cuttings a week which were transported to England and sold from there to flower growers in Europe.

Sixteen years had now passed since George left New Zealand and Malta was gaining its independence from being a British colony and so he decided to return home. The family now with three sons returned to Auckland on *The Canberra* through the Suez Canal and expanded the household of his brother for a while. Here he obtained a job assembling Volkswagens in Otahuhu and

declined another job offer as a lowly gardener in the Auckland City Council Parks division.

Thinking he would obtain a job in Palmerston North he travelled there and on returning back through New Plymouth he called on Fred Parker who was planning to donate his extensive orchid collection to Pukekura Park, but required assurances that they had a competent person to look after it. Here was the man Fred was sure would undertake that job.

So it came about that George moved in to Pukekura Park in early 1965 to induct Fred's orchids into the fernery. He was made Curator of the Park the following year and lived on site in the Curator's house on Victoria Road. His children Chris, Alec, Ivan, Claire and Linda all grew up with Pukekura as their playground and often accompanied George on his missions within it. He was rueful in declaring that the Park became his obsession and castigated himself that he was neglectful of his wife and family. Some nights saw him out shooting possums or following up some strange noise within the Park, for the Park never sleeps. One such midnight vigil was that of vandals throwing seats into the lake. George had a great way of teaching these "young hooligans" a lesson and as a natural consequence of this behaviour (with the help of the police) they had to return for duty the next day in order to retrieve the seats from the lake themselves. Another such lesson was taught by George to another group of young people who decided to take a midnight skinny-dip in the lake. That little twinkle in George's eye lit up when he seized the opportunity for this lesson on water safety. While the group were busy dancing on the fountain platform in the middle of the lake, he quietly relocated their clothes and when the swimmers returned to retrieve their clothes they were gone. He strongly believed that the riding of bicycles within the Park was undesirable

and was known to have thrust rake handles amongst the spokes of bicycle wheels to prove his point.

George was curator of the Park for 25 years from 1966 to 1990 and left his enduring mark. He was not only a plantsman, but an ecologist and engineer – he really understood the factors which were present to affect the Park. His environmental awareness came to the fore as he became ever more involved with the land. Much of his concern within the Park lay with the passage of water through the area and the deterioration in the condition of the pathways. He was unstinting in his praise for key developers of the Park and was very mindful of the fact that no one person knows everything about the Park. He began planting trees straight away, which was a personal mission with him and later he would be surprised that so soon he couldn't get his arms around their trunks.

With the late Ian McDowell, George planned and built the waterfall, a project of which he was immensely proud. There was only a weeping elm to transfer from the site and when this was done work commenced with the help of a team of Park workers and some from the roving wider work force within the Parks team. Some of the squared blocks hewn by prison labour were laid in the area below the lower water curtain cascade and other boulders were donated and laid carefully. George marvelled at how things came together for the waterfall. He discussed the concept with Ian McDowell who got out a pencil and a scrap of paper and drew up what he thought George had in mind – an artist's sketch. They puzzled on how they were going to make it all hang together. Someone suggested they could use concrete power poles. A phone call to the boss at the Council Electricity Department resulted in four brand new power poles turning up on site that were duly cemented into the face of the bank as a kind of backbone to it all. There were no engineering drawings or feasibility studies or consultants, they just sat down and talked over how best to do it and then got on with it.

There aren't any big boulders in the construction because each rock had to be physically manhandled into position without the use of a crane.

Their very limited budget did not allow for such luxuries. George and Ian handled and positioned each and every rock. Their progress was to some degree limited by how quickly the skin could grow back after being worn off their poor hands. He said they were very lucky not to have suffered back injuries as well.

Getting back to the basic concept and design philosophy, the fall of water was intended to be like a river such as the nearby Waiwhakaiho River, starting as a little trickle high up in the mountains then slowly getting bigger with rapids in places till it gets to the flatland near the sea where it flows smoothly over the last fall into the sea at the bottom.

Another clever design feature was that they wanted moss and algae to grow on the rocks to make it look natural and they knew that this would not happen unless all the rocks were wet every time the water ran. To achieve this they had to build channels from the pool on each tier down behind each fall to wet the rocks behind. They put in tubes and stuffed them with newspaper to keep out the concrete. It worked really well and was all green and slimy looking within months of being finished.

They fortunately realised fairly early on, that if the falls at the top were going to be tiny, then it was not going to be possible to pump all the water to the top. It is kind of pyramid shaped and would have looked ridiculous with vast amounts of water roaring over the tiny first fall. So they installed a second branch off the water pump, halfway up with a huge valve to allow them to adjust the flow. On the upper tiers they wanted the flow of water to be wild and raging and random, rather than orderly, a little like nature. Considering how little any of them knew about designing and building a natural looking waterfall the result is a truly remarkable achievement (Fig. 1). A plaque was unveiled to record this construction during October 1970.

With one successful project completed, George's creative juices were ready for the next park project challenge; the water-wheel. This was erected in 1976. The wheel itself had been sourced from the Omata dairy factory where his son, Chris had a holiday job at the time. Once



**Fig. 1** The waterfall at Pukekura Park, a remarkable legacy constructed by George Fuller and Ian McDowell. Photo: Jim Evans, via Flickr.

again George had completed another project to his usual high standard and had been hugely involved every step of the way.

Another memory George's family recalls is of George telling of his efforts to provide interesting entertainment during the annual Festival of Lights. He knew that every society and club in town was capable of doing something that would interest the general public. But in those early days, in the 1970s, he had to beg and cajole clubs and groups to come along and show what they do or what they make. He had the Machine Knitters Club knitting jerseys and the crochet ladies doing workshops with the public and marching girls and radio control boats and aeroplanes as well as musical groups, a brass band, kapa haka groups, anything to make the place buzz. Over the years, it morphed and changed its form and focus and lots more musical groups began performing, many with large amplifiers and speakers and to some degree he resented all that noise, for two reasons – it intruded on the peaceful serenity of the illuminated park at night and also because his bedroom window was just 50 metres from the stage. But he did realise that it was the sound of lots of people enjoying the free entertainment in his beloved park.

George was a man of many passions and deeply loved all the wonders of nature. No exception when he was





**Fig. 2** George Fuller: tree lover. Photo: Derek Hughes.

doing his rounds in the park one night and heard an unusual sound coming from the trees surrounding the fernery lakes. This captivated him for many nights and his mission was to find out what creature was making these sounds. It must have been sheer determination and much patience that caused him to discover that a little tree frog was the culprit and in fact a previously undiscovered species of tree frog. Many nights were dedicated to trying to photograph and identify this little creature.

George was a very strong advocate for keeping the Park “natural” without structures such as tar-sealed walks and paths with edges. Praise was heaped on the endeavours of the retired farmers he was able to employ to keep the path surfaces maintained. These men had been working with water and soil all their lives and understood the effects of heavy rainfall. He fiercely resisted attempts to seal paths and fought plans for unsuitable development projects. He believed that progress should not come at the expense of the Park’s greatest assets. He also believed there should be no straight lines within the Park.

He loved all the trees (Fig. 2) and this became even more evident later on when he worked with Cory Smith to compile a book about those trees they regarded as significant, both within the Park and beyond it<sup>1</sup>. George also wrote many descriptive articles; these



**Fig. 3** George leading a tour of Pukekura Park. Photo: Derek Hughes.

were in great detail, very precise and subjected to many crossings out and corrections before finding their way to a typist. Walks guided by George were always fascinating in their detail; he knew the history and possessed a huge depth of knowledge of the whole of the Park. The smaller side tracks were special to him, as he ran these for his recreation needs. Sometimes his tendency to let his stories wander meant the walks were much longer than anticipated, but then the knowledge imparted was well worth the extra time involved. He was such an enthusiastic guide (Fig. 3).

In 1966 he was the organiser of the Taranaki Floral Festival. His interest in orchids never waned (Fig. 4A–B) and he became Patron of the Orchid Council of New Zealand and was a member of the Taranaki Orchid Society. He was successful in breeding a pure yellow *Disa* orchid after years of trial.

George also had a lifelong interest in photography. He meticulously photographed and recorded the details of orchids and many other things that he was involved with over his lifetime from the late



**Fig. 4** George with orchids from his collection. **A**, Pleiones. **B**, *Disa* Pukekura Park ‘Red Statement’. Photos courtesy of the Fuller family.

<sup>1</sup> Smith, C. and Fuller, G. (2002). The Notable Trees of New Plymouth. Waikato Polytechnic.



1940s in black and white on glass plates and film and then on colour slides from the early fifties. At his Victoria Road house the laundry was often turned into a darkroom where he would process black and white film and photographic prints. These photographic skills were also transferred to his children as they grew up. This photographic treasure is significant (in size and history) and the intention is to digitise some of the material and make it available through the relevant organisations.

There are stories of George's experiences with slide shows and every now and again he would have disasters where the slide cassette would be dropped or have to be transferred messing up the order and flow of the presentation or many of the slides would come up sideways. He even did one presentation backwards because of this phenomenon and recalled one experience where a couple of slides even popped completely out of the projector startling everyone.

He was awarded the MBE in 1990 for his services to the community and in 2009 he wore this medal proudly on his suit during his campaign to save the trees on the Bowl road when the New Plymouth District Council decided to form a new road

connecting the Racecourse with the Brooklands Bowl because recent stables development had blocked the entry to the current road. As proposed and passed in urgency by Council, this road would have wiped out a shelter belt and destroyed a large pūriri (*Vitex lucens*) tree estimated to be about 400 years old, as well as some 25 other mature native trees. He dubbed the pūriri tree "Enigma" and stood vigil at lunchtimes for seven consecutive days, explaining to the public about the need to preserve the tree and its roots, as he had painstakingly probed the road surface for root structures and found that this tree had grown on the edge of a cliff. He traced the roots of other native trees and taped the area which would be affected and was protective of a kohekohe (*Dysoxylum spectabile*) which arched over the present roadway. While various Friends of Pukekura Park supported him at these times, it was because of his tenacity that in the end a compromise was reached. George was overwhelmed by the Council turnaround and he stated "It's proved that an individual with a little bit of logic, enthusiasm or obsession can move people in big ways." He was unique, he put his heart and soul into the Park and his fight, his "last stand" was typical of his strength of mind

and dedication to the Park.

In 2010 *The Taranaki Daily News* voted him Person of the Year, a merit he richly deserved.

For those of us who have known him, George was a man with sparkling humour, who knew his subject and was prepared to stand up for what he believed in. He was a man of integrity who had a vast array of knowledge about his precious home, Pukekura Park. We will miss him.

Many thanks to the Fuller family for their input and use of photographs.

**Adapted with permission from an obituary compiled by Adrienne Tatham for *The Magazine of the Friends of Pukekura Park*, Vol. 10, No. 3, October 2015, pp. 6–10.**

**Also see the obituary for George at [www.stuff.co.nz/taranaki-daily-news/69571866/former-pukekura-park-curator-dies](http://www.stuff.co.nz/taranaki-daily-news/69571866/former-pukekura-park-curator-dies).**

**Images of George's remarkable orchid collection are at <http://fuller3.wix.com/gforchids>.**

**George Fuller joined the Royal NZ Institute of Horticulture in November 1965, and was made a Fellow (FRIH) in 1989.**

## William Russell Sykes AHRIH, ONZM, FMLS 13 October 1927 – 5 January 2018



**Fig. 1** Bill on his 89th birthday in colourful clothing, including a mauve scarf, his favourite colour.

Born in south east England in 1927, Bill Sykes (Fig. 1) came to New Zealand in 1961 to become a botanist specialising in cultivated and adventive plants at Botany Division of the DSIR Lincoln, a position he held until his retirement in 1992. Remarkably, this was followed by 25 more productive years as a Research Associate at the Allan Herbarium at Lincoln.

Bill's expertise was very wide, encompassing the cultivated and wild floras of Europe, the Himalayas, the tropical South Pacific, and New Zealand's native, adventive, and cultivated floras. He was one of three main authors of our *Flora of New Zealand*, Vol. 4, *Naturalised*

*Pteridophytes, Gymnosperms, Dicotyledons*. Bill continued to publish up until 2016, culminating in the publication of the Cook Islands flora that year.

Bill was much loved by the research community in New Zealand for his botanical enthusiasm, his encyclopaedic knowledge, his gentle manner and a warm sense of humour that made him friends everywhere.

### Life summary

Bill's interest in botany started at primary school with collecting the local English chalk flora. After leaving school he worked for the seed nursery of Thompson and Morgan in Ipswich in 1946 and 1947, which gave him his first grounding in horticulture.