

Derrick William Thomas Rooney 11 March 1938 – 19 February 2022

Derrick William Thomas Rooney (Fig. 1), the eldest of three children, was born on a rural small holding on 11th March 1938 at Kingsdown, just south of Timaru.



Fig. 1 Derrick Rooney, 2011.

He attended primary schools in Timaru and Fairlie, and for his high school years boarded at St Kevin's College in Oamaru, where he excelled at English and won numerous prizes.

After leaving school, he joined *The Press* as a cadet journalist in Christchurch. One of his first jobs was to assist the trotting and racing editors in compiling the horse racing results. This involved travelling by train to Greymouth and flying to Wellington. Another job was to proofread the notes for the gardening section, and it is from here that his interest in plants started to develop.

Derrick was involved in the early Christchurch jazz music scene and was President of the newly formed Christchurch Jazz Society and editor of their quarterly magazine *Jazz*. He wrote his first article, *The Growth of Jazz* for *The Press* in 1956.

Between 1964 and 1968 he wrote a weekly column *The People's Songbag* for *The Press* that was about jazz and folk music.

During this time Derrick (Fig. 2) met Kathryn Browne, who was at the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts, and they married in 1966.

By now Derrick was also a regular exhibitor and prize winner at Canterbury Alpine Garden Society meetings in Christchurch.



Fig. 2 Derrick Rooney in the late 1960s.

By 1978 he had progressed to chief sub-editor at *The Press* and there was an opportunity to write a regular column on gardening.

His first article in the *Gardener's Diary* was published in September 1978 and was about daffodils. Quoting Shakespeare Derrick wrote: "I would, ' said Shakespeare's *Perdita* as she flirted with her swain in the 'The Winter's Tale,' I had some flowers of the spring that might become your time of day ..."

During this period the family permanently relocated to Hororātā, and Derrick began establishing what was to become a significant and well-known garden on their one-acre section. It was here at Hororātā that Derrick and Kath also raised their two children (son Sean, and daughter Kerry).

Derrick and Kath established a very large vegetable garden and worked towards self-sufficiency. Almost every vegetable the family ate came from their own garden. Derrick particularly liked heritage seeds as he claimed they had more flavour.

An early feature of the garden at Hororātā was an alpine rock garden constructed from volcanic rocks sourced from a local farmer at the head of the Wairiri Valley on the Harper Hills. The garden was very popular with groups, with many garden tours hosted (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 Garden tour group at Derrick Rooney's alpine rock garden, Hororātā, in the early 1980s.

For many years Derrick had a popular roadside stall selling plants he had propagated. He also operated a mail order business for the same, called *Hardy Plants*. All plant labels had neatly written descriptions and comprehensive instructions on plant care.

In the 45 years that he gardened at Hororātā (Fig. 4), Derrick converted a conventional garden into what was described by journalist Mary Lovell-Smith in 1999 as "a rambling garden crammed with an impressive array of botanical treasures" (e.g., Fig. 5).



Fig. 4 Kath and Derrick Rooney at the front gate of their Hororātā property, 2013.



Fig. 5 *Galanthus elwesii* (greater snowdrop), one of Derrick's favourite flowering bulbs.

Derrick had a philosophical approach to gardening, “there’d be no excitement or challenge in growing flowers, fruit, and vegetables if garden plants really were utterly reliable. Gardening would be boring if you didn’t have to worry about helping crops to cope with animals that browse them, bugs that infest them, and weather and soil that are alternately hot, cold, wet, dry, calm, and windy, and in no particular order.”

Shortly after moving to Hororātā, Derrick resigned as chief-sub-editor to become a full-time feature writer specialising in rural affairs and forestry as well as writing a second weekly column, *Country Diary*.

In May 1988, Derrick was elected an honorary member of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture. He regularly contributed articles for the *New Zealand Garden Journal*, with the last ones written in June and December 2020.

In 1998 he retired as a feature writer but continued writing both the *Gardener’s Diary* and the *Country Diary* as a freelancer until the early 2000s.

In 2000, Derrick and Kath took out a QEII covenant on seven hectares of broadleaf forest and shrubland on their lifestyle block at Te Moana, Geraldine. At the time, this was the only covenanted area in the Orari Ecological District, and its value was heightened by the presence of the vulnerable native broom species *Carmichaelia kirkii* (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6 Derrick Rooney examines a patch of *Carmichaelia kirkii* (climbing broom) at Te Moana, Geraldine, 2000.

A long-time member of the New Zealand Farm Forestry Association (NZFFA), Derrick contributed in many ways. When the organisation started its Indigenous Forest Section in the 1990s, Derrick was the founding editor of its journal, *Indigena*.

He was also a very active member of the Central Canterbury Branch of the NZFFA, having served as chairman and then secretary. He resigned as secretary in 2020 after a period of ten years, due to ill health.

Derrick was an active member in his local community and was involved in organisations as diverse as the Malvern Computer Club (President), Hororātā Domain Board (Secretary), Silverwood farm experimental area, and the H.E. Hart Arboretum at Lake Coleridge.

A prolific writer throughout his life, Derrick has written articles and papers for numerous periodicals including the *New Zealand Gardener*, *Growing Today*, *New Zealand Tree Grower*, *New Zealand Garden Journal*, *New Zealand Journal of Forestry* and the journals of the Scottish Rock Garden Society, Canterbury Alpine Garden Society, Canterbury Botanical Society, and New Zealand Botanical Society.

He made a resolution to write only about plants that he had grown or had seen growing either wild or in the gardens of friends. “As a deliberate policy, I never kept copies of my columns. If I wrote about the same plants more than once, I wanted to do the research over again, so that the writing was always fresh ... I was not afraid to contradict myself, and there was a notable occasion when I forgot what I had written a week earlier and gave different advice about the same plant on successive Fridays.”

He also set about improving his knowledge of plants and had forged friendships with several prominent botanists, ecologists, and horticulturists, including those at the former DSIR Botany Division: Brian Molloy and the late Margaret Bulfin, Tony Druce, and Bill Sykes. Bill Sykes, Kew-trained and Botany Division’s specialist in introduced plants, was a strong influence on Derrick.

In 1995, Brian Molloy invited Derrick to contribute a chapter in the book *Riccarton Bush: Pūtarīngamotu* about the trees planted in the Riccarton Bush homestead grounds in Christchurch.

Derrick was a voracious reader and had an encyclopaedic ability to recall Latin plant names and a multitude of other facts that he had garnered through his readings.

Derrick was also a keen amateur photographer and most of the photographs illustrating his articles were taken by him. He has left behind a collection of thousands of photographs of plants.

His other interests included art, carpentry, fishing, cooking, firearms, natural history, cycling, poetry, humorous quotes, and brewing wine and beer.

Prior to his death Derrick had completed a draft manuscript for a book. In his own words; “Nearly 20 years later people still talk to me about my garden diaries and sometimes produce clippings, and this book is the result: not the usual type of gardening book, but an anecdotal, eclectic, and I hope readable collection of observations that includes some advice on growing and establishing plants as well as easy-to-follow keys to topics such as identifying your deciduous trees in winter when they have no flowers or foliage.” The Rooney family intend to publish this book.

He is survived by his wife, son, daughter and five grandchildren (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7 Derrick with grandson Liam Rooney at Hororātā in 2006.

Obituary prepared by Sean and Tonya Rooney