

# Obituaries

*Dr Ross Ewen Beever* MSc (Auckland), PhD (Leeds), FRSNZ, FNZIAHS, FAPPS  
3 January 1946 – 3 June 2010



Dr Ross Beever was a mycologist and plant pathologist with Landcare Research in Auckland. His main professional interest was in fungi, their taxonomy, their genetics, their physiology and the diseases that they cause.

Early in his career he collaborated in novel and innovative research on the uptake of phosphorus by fungi, work that had important implications for both our native plant communities and for agricultural and horticultural crops. Many soils in New Zealand are low in phosphorus and plants rely on symbiotic fungi for its uptake.

Another major interest was control of *Botrytis cinerea*, one of the most destructive of fungal pathogens. In New Zealand it is a particular problem of grapes, kiwifruit, berryfruit and many ornamentals. Ross and his co-workers made a long-term study of fungicide resistance in *Botrytis*. This work established the genetic and biochemical basis of fungal resistance to dicarboximides, one of the more important groups of fungicides used for control of *Botrytis*. This work was the basis for practical advice on managing fungal resistance in general.

Ross trained as a botanist at Auckland University and although he later specialised in the study of fungi, he retained an interest, indeed a love, for our native plants. He was encouraged in this by his father, Jim Beever, author of the book *A Dictionary of Maori Plant Names*, by mentors such as Lucy Moore and Bill Hamilton, and by his wife Jessica, one of New Zealand's most distinguished bryologists.

For Ross, botany was a hobby but he was much more than a mere enthusiast or hobbyist – he brought to his botanical studies the same rigour that characterised his work on fungi. He studied the large-leaved variants on off-shore islands, he studied the incompatibility breeding systems of cabbage tree (*Cordyline*) species, and with Warwick Harris demonstrated that cabbage trees are adapted to their local environments. This interest in cabbage tree biology meant that he was well placed to lead the team that successfully investigated the “Sudden Decline” of cabbage trees. The cause was found to be the phytoplasma “*Candidatus* Phytoplasma australiense”. More recently, he was leading a team from different scientific groups studying the death of kauri caused by *Phytophthora* species.

On a happier note, by physiological manipulation he was able to obtain viable seed of the single remaining plant of *Pennantia baylisiana*, a female plant lacking the corresponding male, and the many hundreds of offspring grown have ensured the survival of this endangered native of the Three Kings Islands.

Ross received many awards during his career, including Fellowship of the Royal Society of New Zealand. One award that gave him particular pleasure was being elected an Honorary Life Member of the Auckland Botanical Society, in recognition of his work for the Society, an honour that had previously been bestowed on his father. Another was his nomination for the Allan Mere, given each year to a distinguished New Zealand botanist. In November 2010, Dr Jessica Beever received on his behalf the posthumous award of the Allan Mere.

Ross was a skilled naturalist with an extensive knowledge of native plants and fungi. He was always willing to share his knowledge with others, scientists or amateurs. He was committed to his research and undertook research that was relevant to the needs of New Zealand. He was an excellent mentor of younger scientists and students and a good friend to his many colleagues.

Ross Beever was a good friend and he will be missed.

**Obituary compiled by Ross Ferguson. Ross Ferguson and Peter Buchanan published a more detailed obituary in the *New Zealand Journal of Botany* 48(3–4): 139–151 (2010).**

*Dr Eric John Godley* OBE, Hon. DSc (Cantuar), FRSNZ, AHRIH  
10 May 1919 – 27 June 2010



Eric Godley with his favourite native plant, kowhai. He grew this tree from seed collected from Ohingaiti in the 1960s. In 2001 it was described as a new species and named *Sophora godleyi* in his honour. Photo: Peter Heenan.

Father of post-war botany and old-school scientist Dr Eric Godley combined science with “people skills”.

The eminent botanist popularised the study of plants. He was able to relate to people at every level. He was a down-to-earth bloke who enjoyed watching rugby and having a few beers.

Fellow botanist Dr Brian Molloy says of Godley: “Very few scientists could communicate with the general public as well as he could.”

Godley’s long-running magazine column, *A Botanist’s Notebook*, introduced many people to the science of plants. It later formed the basis of Godley’s popular book of the same name<sup>1</sup>.

“Eric was a scientist of great eminence, especially in plant breeding systems, the botany of the sub-Antarctic islands, relationships between New Zealand and South American plants, and his favourite plant, the kowhai.

He was known internationally in the botanical sciences and he received many awards<sup>2</sup>,” Molloy says.

For many years, Godley spent the Christmas-New Year break botanising in the mountains around Maruia Springs.

“He believed you learnt most from direct contact with the plants. He belonged with the plants and he enjoyed being with them,” Molloy says.

Godley, a former senior-grade rugby player, chummed up with Molloy, a former All Black. The pair spent many a Saturday afternoon on the bank at Lancaster Park (AMI Stadium), rounding it off with a couple of pints at their favourite pub.

Molloy remembers leaving the park after a Canterbury defeat, amid the scowling faces of disappointed fans. Godley commented on what a miserable evening these fans would have. Then he added: “But we’re all right, Brian. We’ve got our plants.”

Godley was a contented and accepting man. Even in later years, with declining health and in pain from a leg amputation, he never complained. Godley died aged 91.

Raised in Auckland, he was head prefect at Takapuna Grammar School and starred in rugby, cricket and athletics. He graduated with an MSc from Auckland University in 1942, then served with the army in Italy.

After World War II, he completed his PhD in Cambridge, England. He married in 1955, but the marriage did not last. He had no children.

Godley lectured in plant genetics at Auckland University from 1948 to 1951, then joined the Crop Research Division of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research at Lincoln as a geneticist.

He was director of the division from 1952 to 1958, when he was made director of Botany Division, a position he held for 22 years. Then, freed from administrative duties, he continued with the division for five years as a scientist.

His successor as director of the Botany Division, Dr Henry Connor, says: “I would call him the father of post-war botany in New Zealand.”

Godley oversaw the botany division’s shift in 1960 from central Christchurch to Lincoln, where it expanded significantly.

Molloy says his leadership style was based on trust. He left his staff to get on with their work. He once said that, if he spotted a staff member on the beach during work hours, he would not mind, as the staff member would be thinking about botany.

He was a kind and considerate boss who “rescued” many botanists from jobs in which they were unhappy and provided positions for them, Molloy says. “He was always friendly. His door was always open, to staff and visitors.”

He employed only one secretary and did most of the division’s administration himself. “He was an unobtrusive communicator and an administrator extraordinaire.”

Botanist Dr Colin Meurk says Godley was “very supportive of young, budding scientists, took them under his wing and helped them get a foot on the career ladder”.

He trusted people to do a good day’s work and developed a “great esprit de corps in his staff”. He won the affection of staff members. He was a classic example of the “gentleman and scholar”.

Godley’s research led to many publications in his speciality, the reproductive biology of New Zealand’s native flora. His work in Chile and on sub-Antarctic islands sparked international interest in the link between New Zealand and South American native plants. He suggested the Antarctic had played a role in the link, as some form of bridge.

He established New Zealand’s national herbarium and a network of botanical stations around the country. He took lead roles in many research organisations. In retirement, he researched and wrote on the history of botanical study in New Zealand.

His work in explaining the variation in kowhai was acknowledged with the naming of a previously unknown species after him, *Sophora godleyi*. He was the first president of the New Zealand Botanical Society and a Fellow of the Royal Society of New Zealand, and was awarded the OBE in 1990.

However, his honorary Doctor of Science, from the University of Canterbury, meant the most to him.

Meurk says Godley was of the “old school”. He was critical of modern structures governing science and research<sup>3</sup>. He agreed with the concept of accountability, but not with “the sledgehammer approach” to it.

<sup>1</sup> Reviewed in the *New Zealand Garden Journal*, 2007, Vol. 10(1): 27–28

<sup>2</sup> For example, Eric Godley was made an Associate of Honour of the RNZIH in 1984.

<sup>3</sup> Godley, E. (1986/87): Editorial: A set-back for science. *Annual Journal of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture* 14: 91.

Reproduced with permission from an obituary prepared by Mike Crean and first published in *The Press*, 10 July 2010, section C, p. 13.

An obituary written by Dr David Galloway, along with remembrances by others, are published in the *New Zealand Botanical Society Newsletter*, No. 101, Sept 2010 and No. 102, Dec 2010.

A day-long commemoration to Dr Godley was held 29 Nov 2010 at Lincoln University.

## Rene Orchiston *AHRIH* 3 January 1919 – 19 October 2010



Rene Orchiston (centre) at the National Weavers Hui at Takitimu Marae, Wairoa in October 2009. She is holding a small feather kete made by Mere Cousins (left) of Palmerston North.

At Labour Weekend, family and friends gathered in Gisborne to celebrate and farewell Rene Orchiston, who died 19 October 2010, aged 91.

Rene was a woman of many talents, hugely creative, with a quick mind and generous spirit, who has left a significant public legacy – particularly her collection of weaving cultivars of harakeke (also called New Zealand flax or *Phormium*) for which she was awarded the Associate of Honour of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture in 2003 (*New Zealand Garden Journal*, 2003, Vol. 6, No. 2: p. 20).

Born Irene Alison Witters in January 1919, Rene grew up on family farms in the Gisborne area. She married Ralph Orchiston in 1940 and they bought a property 'Weka Lodge' at Hexton, a site previously owned by Thompson's Nurseries.

As well as raising a family of four children, Warwick, Allan, Don and Louise, Rene developed her skills as a plantswoman. She was an enthusiastic member of the Poverty Bay Horticultural Society and grew hundreds of heritage roses. She imported budwood and developed plants which were subsequently donated to the

local Gisborne rose gardens, and Wellington's Lady Norwood Rose Garden.

Rene was a talented spinner and weaver of wool, and founded a craft group at Matawhero and later, with sisters Joyce and Margaret, at Muriwai Marae. It was during this time that Rene noticed that much of the harakeke that Māori friends were using for weaving was not very good. Ordinary flax can be tough to plait, is hard on the hands to manipulate, can have edges that fray and split, and the fibre used for cloak making is difficult, if not impossible, to extract. Rene knew from listening to older weavers, and also in reading histories and stories of early times, that better quality selections existed – and she made it her mission to find them.

And find them she did – around 60 selections, travelling with husband Ralph throughout the North Island, visiting weavers and marae, tracking plants down through old records, swapping harakeke fans of good varieties or exchanging them for fruit and honey from their farm. The newly obtained varieties were planted out in a paddock at their home.

As well as collecting these fine harakeke, Rene did another thing that has increased the value of the collection markedly. She carefully recorded the names of the individual selections, described their traditional uses, their form and leaf characters and complemented this information with the results of her own experiments. The documented collection was donated to the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research in 1987, where it now forms the core of the National New Zealand Flax Collection developed and maintained by Landcare Research at Lincoln.

Rene didn't just collect and maintain these special varieties of harakeke. Rene's marvellous legacy is that she freely gave away numerous divisions of the plants – to keen individuals, weaving groups, schools, marae, public gardens – so that anyone with an interest in weaving could have the very best material to work with. Landcare Research has continued this philosophy, and today these taonga (treasures) are growing in gardens and public places all over New Zealand.

After husband Ralph died in 1990, Rene moved to Aberdeen Road, Gisborne, beside the river. In the distance, Rene could look out on 12 tall scarlet oak trees which she had propagated to mark Queen Elizabeth's coronation in 1953, and then gifted for planting in Mangapapa Park. She developed and looked after another beautiful garden and continued to express her creativity through painting, photography and floral art.

As reported in the *Gisborne Herald* (6 Nov 2010), her daughter Louise said "I always see mum's life as being a kaleidoscope of colour, design and beauty ... all woven together with immaculate craftsmanship".

Rene was a plantswoman, talented artist, a methodical collector and recorder, and a generous and beloved friend to many. The legacy of her vision and passion for flax is a gift that will continue to connect people right across New Zealand.

**Obituary compiled by Sue Scheele. Sue says that Rene and her family were very proud of the RNZIH award and her AHRIH title was printed on the back page of her funeral service card.**