

Bernard Cracroft Aston (1871 – 1951)

Bernard Cracroft Aston, agricultural chemist, botanical explorer and horticulturist, was born on 9 August 1871 at Beckenham, Kent, the eldest child of Murray and Mary Aston. He attended Horling Grammar School, and when his parents, with their four sons and two daughters, migrated to New Zealand, he continued his education at Christchurch Boys' High School. In Christchurch his father was in business as an artist, antiquarian and dealer, but eventually settled with his family in Dunedin as district agent for the Mutual Life Association. From 1886 to 1890 Bernard did clerical work with the firm while continuing his studies, and in 1890 he became an analyst for the Milburn Lime and Cement Company.



Muehlenbeckia astonii

Sometimes known as shrubby torotoro, wiggywig or mingimingi, *Muehlenbeckia astonii* is a round shrub up to 2 metres tall, with dark reddish zigzagging and interlacing branches. Heart-shaped leaves, pale green on the underside and only a few millimetres across, are in small clusters on the slender branchlets. The delicate white or greenish flowers are insect pollinated. The species is gynodioecious, with individual plants being either female or 'inconstant males', which occasionally set seed, but of low viability. A translucent white cup of swollen sepals surrounds the dull black three-angled nut. The plant is deciduous in cooler parts of the country. Restricted to the southern coasts of Wairarapa and Wellington, and coastal Marlborough to Banks Peninsula, it is threatened by lack of regeneration and loss of habitat.

He explored the hills of Otago Peninsula and Dunedin, and began a life-long interest in gardening with native plants, deriving information about their growing requirements from his frequent visits to Henry Matthews' Hawthorn Hill nursery and grounds. In 1894, as secretary of the revived Dunedin Naturalists' Field Club, he was instrumental in the publication in 1896 of a list of the local flora. Excursions further afield included Central Otago, Southland and Stewart Island. He was in touch with leading botanists Petrie and Kirk, and in 1896 joined his father as a member of the Otago Institute. The first of his many contributions to the *Transactions and Proceedings of the New Zealand Institute* was made in 1899.

Aston moved to Wellington in 1899 to a position with the Department of Agriculture, and began a distinguished career in agricultural chemistry. His botanical interests widened, and his many published papers included three in collaboration with Professor Easterfield, on the chemistry of the New Zealand flora, and another fourteen relating to poisonous plants. His work took him to all parts of New Zealand, and in his holidays he made lengthy botanical explorations of the Tararua, Ruahine and Kaimanawa Ranges and the mountains of Marlborough. He also visited the subantarctic islands twice. He returned from his travels with many plant novelties, and his name has been commemorated in ten species or varieties, including *Muehlenbeckia astonii*, which he collected at Palliser Bay, Wellington.

Later, his interests turned more to conservation and horticulture. He advocated the "Preservation of National Monuments," was a member of the Tongariro National Park Board and a councillor and president of the Forest and Bird Protection Society. At the same time he was developing his Karori hillside garden and recording much of his long experience in horticultural publications. He was unmarried, but after retiring in 1936 encouraged the early studies of his nephew, Geoff Baylis, who became Otago University's first professor of botany. Bernard Cracroft Aston, one of our most versatile and industrious scientists, was made a Companion of the British Empire in 1948. He died three years later, on 31 May 1951.