

Isaac Bayley Balfour (1853 – 1922)

Born in Edinburgh, Scotland, on 31 March 1853, Isaac Bayley Balfour was the third child and second son of botanist John Hutton Balfour and his wife Marion Spottiswood Bayley. Isaac was educated at the Edinburgh Academy, but his interests and abilities were in the biological sciences learned from his father, rather than the classics taught at school. His father's position as professor of botany at the University of Edinburgh and Regius keeper of the Royal Botanic Garden enabled Isaac to visit the gardens, which were not open to the public then. Undoubtedly his ready access to botany influenced his career. He studied at the University of Edinburgh and in Germany, graduating BSc with first class honours in 1873.



Nertera balfouriana

Nertera balfouriana in the Rubiaceae or coffee family, is an inconspicuous species until it fruits. It is a creeping and rooting glabrous herb, forming dense patches up to 25 cm or more across. The slender almost fleshy stems have many small leaves in opposite pairs. Tiny four-lobed flowers appear in October–November. Fruits are often abundant and quite distinctive: bright orange, 7–9 mm long and pear-shaped above the foliage, and may last for several months. *Nertera balfouriana* is widespread but local in lowland to subalpine areas of North, South and Stewart islands from the Kaimanawa Range southward, usually in damp sand, turf, sphagnum and cushion bogs or on permanently wet stream banks.

From 1873 to 1876 while a lecturer in botany at the Royal Veterinary College, Edinburgh, he furthered his experience and qualifications. He participated in the 1874 expedition to Rodriguez(s) in Mauritius, east of Madagascar, to observe the transit of Venus, and took the opportunity to investigate the local flora. The fieldwork he carried out enabled him to gain his doctorate on his return. In 1877 he gained his Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery degrees, and was also elected a fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. He was appointed professor of botany in Glasgow in 1879, and early the next year led an expedition to Soqotra, off the southern coast of Yemen. His zoological, geological and botanical collections made during 48 days on the island included 500–600 specimens of flowering plants, many of them new to science, which were described and meticulously illustrated in his monumental *Botany of Soqotra* (1883).

After five years at Glasgow, and another four years as professor of botany at the University of Oxford, Balfour returned to Edinburgh in 1888 to take up his father's old positions, and made his mark with a major financial and physical transformation of the Royal Botanic Garden. He produced a number of papers during his career, and founded the journal *Annals of Botany*. Much of his research centred on his interest in the Sino-Himalayan plants, and botanist and plant collector Reginald Farrer sent him field notes, illustrations, botanical specimens and seeds from abroad. Honours awarded to Balfour in his later life include the Royal Horticultural Society's Victoria Medal of Honour in 1897, the Linnean Medal in 1919, and a knighthood in 1920. Among several plant species named after him is the New Zealand herb, *Nertera balfouriana*.

Sir Isaac Bayley Balfour died at Haselmere, Surrey, on 30 November 1922.

Sir William Wright Smith, who succeeded him as Regius keeper of the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh, wrote, "Among the plants raised from the seed which was sent to us by Cockayne, perhaps the one we treasure most is *Nertera Balfouriana*, which he himself named in honour of his friend, the late Sir Isaac Bayley Balfour. This plant with its numerous pryiform, orange coloured fruits always does exceedingly well with us and was greatly prized by Sir Isaac."