

Carl Traugott Beilschmied (1793 – 1848)

Carl (Karl) Traugott Beilschmied, the son of poor weavers, was born on 19 October 1793 in Langenöls in Schlesien (Silesia), a region of central Europe. Settled in the Middle Ages by a mixed German and Polish population and annexed by Prussia in 1742, most of Prussian Silesia reverted to Poland after World War II. Carl was orphaned at the age of two and brought up by his grandfather and aunt, doing menial work from an early age but also learning to read and write. When he wanted to learn Latin, the landlord paid for his private tuition, and in 1802, impressed by his attitude and ability, the pastor arranged his schooling. Official recognition as an orphan gave him access to learning with other students; he worked diligently and in 1807 was apprenticed to a pharmacist. At the end of 1814 his employer enrolled him at college; he stayed three years and in 1819 passed his exams.

A bursary in 1820 enabled him to study at the University of Bonn from 1820 to 1822. His growing interest in the natural sciences and his desire to be near the botanical garden led to his professor, Nees von Esenbeck, offering him accommodation. He even gave him money to go to Switzerland, but Beilschmied's employer became ill and he had to work in the pharmacy again. When he was 29 he accepted an offer to manage a pharmacy in Ohlau, and in 1826 he bought it. On 5 July he married his predecessor's widow, Henriette Friederike, née Koschel, and the following year he adopted their four-year-old daughter.

While continuing his pharmaceutical work, he could now spend more time on the sciences, especially research in botany and phytogeography. He bought books, made notes and studied local plants, and in 1829 published a paper on the flora of Silesia. Mainly self-taught in English and Latin, and with a developing knowledge of other European languages, he translated works by Schouw (1830), Humboldt (1831), Lindley (1832) and Watson (1837), and a series of Swedish works, paying for most of the printing costs himself. Times became hard, however, and he needed help to produce *Flora of Regensburg* (1839–42).

From 1835, his failing health kept in check by medication, he enjoyed visits from associates and, usually with his wife and daughter, made short trips to Austria, Italy, France and Switzerland. Each year was a bonus! In 1845, when his daughter married a chemist and moved to Herrnsstadt, Beilschmied and his wife also shifted there, but distance made it difficult to maintain his contacts. However he found consolation in new plants to study in the nearby sandy and often flooded moors.

In 1847 tuberculosis was diagnosed, and he died at Herrnsstadt on 6 May 1848, leaving an extensive library and herbarium.

A stocky man with angular features, lively eyes and the German trait of punctuality, Beilschmied had a thirst for knowledge and was well read in many fields. He accepted goodwill and honours gratefully and considered himself fortunate – every new discovery gave him pleasure! In 1831 his benefactor Gottfried Daniel Nees von Christian Esenbeck (1776-1855), founder and first director of the botanical garden of the University of Bonn, named the genus *Beilschmiedia* in his honour.



Beilschmiedia tawa

Beilschmiedia is a genus of about 40 mainly tropical species of aromatic trees and shrubs. The three New Zealand species are endemic. *Beilschmiedia tawa* (*tawa*: a Māori name for the tree) is common in the central parts of the country where it is often the dominant canopy species in lowland forests. It may grow up to 28 metres or more in height and trunk to 1.2 m in diameter, with outwardly smooth, dark bark. The long thin willow-like green leaves are lighter underneath. Small inconspicuous flowers are followed by comparatively large fruit 2–3 cm long of a purple-black plum colour with a bloom, which rely solely on the kererū (or where present kōkako) for distribution. Māori used to soak, dry and pulp the fruit for food, and used the wood for making bird spears. *Tawa* timber, when available, makes attractive and resilient floorboards and panelling.