

# John Carne Bidwill (1815 – 1853)

John Carne Bidwill was born at St Thomas, Exeter, in southeast England, on 5 February 1815, the son of Joseph Green Bidwill, a merchant and former officer in the 4th Dragoons, and his wife Charlotte Wilmot, née Carne, the daughter of traveller and author John Carne. Perhaps John Bidwill inherited the urge to travel from his grandfather. He was educated for a commercial life, but at the age of 17 went to Canada for nearly two years. In April 1838 he set out for Sydney as a representative of his father's mercantile business. While awaiting the survey of an allotment of land, he made his first visit to New Zealand, arriving at the Bay of Islands in February 1839.



## ***Libocedrus bidwillii***

The genus *Libocedrus* contains three species in New Caledonia and two in New Zealand. *Libocedrus bidwillii*, kaikawaka, pāhautea or mountain cedar, grows up to 20 metres tall, but may develop to little more than a 4–6 metre shrub at high altitude or in cold, wet ground. Its trunk tapers rapidly and forms a cone-shaped head with short branches; the distinctive bark is loose, light brown and flaky. In the young stage the branchlets are flattened. The ultimate branches of the mature tree are always four-angled, with almost uniform leaves, which readily distinguishes it from the taller-growing *Libocedrus plumosa*. In the North Island *Libocedrus bidwillii* grows in montane and subalpine forests from Te Aroha southward, and in the South Island at all altitudes, but lowland only in high rainfall areas.

Although most coastal districts had been explored by then, the interior was still new territory to Europeans, and Bidwill took up the challenge – his goal, the central mountains! He sailed to Tauranga where missionary James Stack persuaded some of his Māori servants to accompany him, and on 17 February the group headed inland, Bidwill taking careful note of the vegetation they passed through. With the help of additional porters at Rotorua, they continued, crossing Lake Taupo in a large canoe. He explored the lower slopes of Tongariro, collecting plants and seeds, and climbed alone to the summit of Ngauruhoe – ignoring the strong disapproval of his Māori companions, to whom the mountain was tapu. Back in Tauranga he boarded the missionary vessel on the first stage of his return to Sydney. Business interests brought him back to New Zealand in 1840, this time to Port Nicholson. His *Rambles in New Zealand*, which was published the following year and reprinted in 1952, 1974 and 1996, includes observations on agricultural practices and the effects of firing. Plant specimens, including those from Ngauruhoe, the first from a New Zealand alpine area, were sent to Kew.

In Australia again, in 1841, he joined naturalist Joseph Hooker on excursions around Port Jackson during the brief stay of *Erebus* and *Terror*, and when he returned to England in the second half of 1843 he took with him a live bunya-bunya tree, which Sir William Hooker studied and named *Araucaria bidwillii*. He spent a year in Tahiti in 1845, and in 1847 held briefly the position of government botanist and director of the Sydney Botanic Garden. In March 1848 he visited New Zealand for the last time, and botanised around Nelson and the nearby ranges. When he returned to Australia he was appointed commissioner of crown lands, but after an exhausting road-making survey, during which he became lost for eight days, he became critically ill from the effects of starvation. He died on 16 March 1853, aged 38. He was unmarried.

John Carne Bidwill was an ardent collector, and the pioneer botanist of New Zealand's mountain regions. His name is perpetuated in several of his discoveries, among them the small alpine plant *Forstera bidwillii* (now *Forstera tenella*), the bog pine *Halocarpus bidwillii*, and mountain cedar *Libocedrus bidwillii*. Wellington's Bidwill Street is named after Charles Robert Bidwill, who, encouraged by his elder brother John, came to New Zealand in 1843 with some 1600 sheep and other livestock; he was the first to take sheep into the Wairarapa, and became one of the leading run-holders in the country.

