

# Henry Hartley Birley (1863 – 1924)

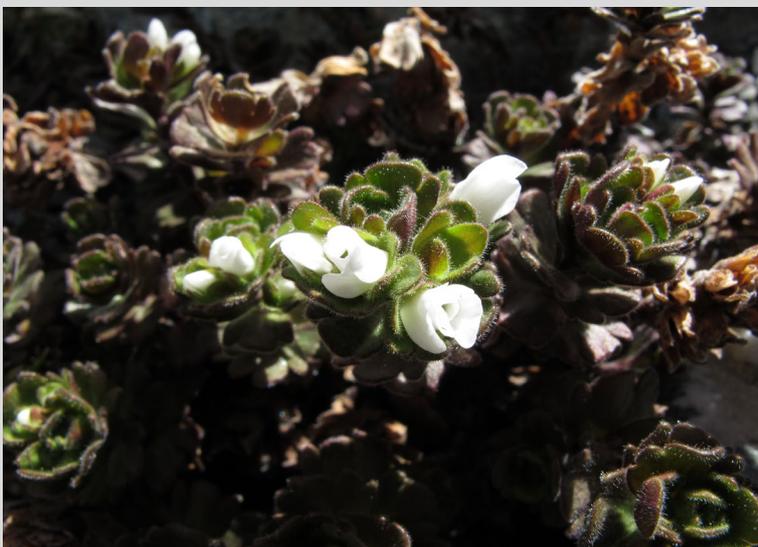
Henry Hartley Birley, born on 22 July 1863, is recorded as the first Pākehā child born at the head of Lake Wakatipu. His mother, Sarah Ann Hartley, née Plummer, from Norfolk, England, had arrived at the Otago goldfields via Sydney the previous year and established the first Mt Earnslaw Hotel at Simpsons Creek. Information about his birth father, Mr Henry Hartley, remains elusive. In 1866 Sarah married Joseph Karley Birley, a Yorkshire man lured by gold to California, Australia, Otago and finally Glenorchy, where he had considerable success at his Buckler Burn claim. Together, Sarah and Joseph built and ran two further Mt Earnslaw Hotels and raised Henry and their daughters Constance and Isabel. During 1876 and 1877 Henry boarded with the Sabine family while attending the Lower Shotover School.

Harry Birley (as he was usually known in adulthood) became a well-known alpine climber, guide and explorer. In 1885 he and two others climbed without axes to the glacier later named after him, on Mt Earnslaw. The next year he packed gear to Sylvan Lake for James Park of the Geological Survey. On 16 March 1890 he made the first ascent of Mt Earnslaw (2819 m) reaching the east peak on his own, and leaving as proof a bent shilling in a medicine bottle within a cairn. At the nearby gold mining settlement of Macetown (now uninhabited) on 17 March 1897 he married Mary Hood. For about five years he was postmaster as well as guide, and it is thought that he also installed telegraph poles between Queenstown and Glenorchy. *Birley's Guide Book* appeared around 1900, and when the extraordinary but little known traveller and botanist Lilian Suzette Gibbs (1870-1925) visited New Zealand in 1907–1908 he guided her on two major excursions from Glenorchy.

Lilian Gibbs was born in London into a well-off family, and after her education at private schools in England and Europe she studied horticulture and botany. While based at the British Museum (Natural History), London, she travelled and collected in distant parts of the world, and wrote papers on her research. An avid upholder of women's rights, she became one of the earliest female fellows of the Linnean Society and other prestigious scientific organisations. In 1907, after three months in the highlands of Fiji, she came to New Zealand, and from October that year until February 1908 she travelled from Auckland to Bluff, observing the vegetation and collecting mainly liverworts.

She met Donald Petrie in Auckland and collected with F G Gibbs in the Nelson area. On her first main excursion with Harry Birley, a climb of Mt Bonpland in February 1908, they collected specimens of an alpine plant that was described in 1911 as *Veronica birleyi*. It was transferred to *Parahebe* in 1944, and in 2006 became *Hebejeebie birleyi*, the new genus name referring to the anxiety the plants (three somewhat similar species) caused taxonomists. Their journey to Mt Earnslaw took nearly three days by buggy and on foot, and finally she walked the Milford Track before leaving New Zealand, enamoured of the flora she had encountered, but dismayed by the wanton destruction of large tracts of forest for grazing.

Harry Birley later became a miner, working with three others a scheelite claim on Mt Alaska, and by 1921 he was a coalmine proprietor at East Taieri. He died at The Grange, East Taieri, near Dunedin, on 1 February 1924, survived by his wife, two sons and two daughters.



## *Hebejeebie birleyi*

*Hebejeebie birleyi* and *Ranunculus grahamii* are often cited as the highest growing vascular plants in New Zealand, being found up to nearly 3000 m above sea level. Both species are named after mountain guides. *Hebejeebie birleyi* is a dark straggling subshrub forming loose patches up to 10 cm tall and 20 cm across. The almost fleshy, dull leaves are usually dark greyish green or purple; the white flowers, which have no nectar guides, appear in November to December. The species colonises rock shelves, ledges and crevices in the higher mountains from Aoraki/Mt Cook to northern Fiordland, also the Remarkables, Eyre and Hector Mountains. The type locality is Mt Bonpland, near Glenorchy.

PHOTO: John Barkla