

Aimé Jacques Alexandre Bonpland (1773 – 1858)

Aimé Bonpland was born on 26 August 1773 in the village of Saint-Maurice near La Rochelle, France, the son of Simon-Jacques Goujaud-Bonpland, a distinguished physician and surgeon, and his wife Marguerite-Olive de la Costa. His birth name was Goujard, and it is said that his father, who was also a vintner, admiring a particularly good strain, exclaimed, "Thank God, here is a good plant." The "bon plant" became a nickname, which was then adopted by father and son as a permanent surname, "Bonpland". After his early education at a local school Aimé, under pressure from his father and brothers, studied medicine from 1791 to 1794, but perhaps his new name predestined him to botany. Developing a strong interest in natural history, he became acquainted with some of the leading scientists of the day and the teaching of botanists Antoine-Laurent de Jussieu and René Louiche Desfontaines. In 1795 he fulfilled his

military duty to the French Republic as naval surgeon at the port of Toulon, and then returned to Paris to continue his medical studies and pursue his consuming interest in botany, travel and exploration. Fortuitously, in early 1798 he met Alexander von Humboldt, who saw in him a kindred spirit, and they soon began planning scientific expeditions to foreign lands.

Humboldt's reputation and influence helped secure the Spanish government's permission to enter territories officially closed to foreigners, and the scientific expedition, which he personally financed, got underway in June 1799. Bonpland and Humboldt spent almost five perilous years in Central and South America, collecting around 60,000 plant specimens, most of them found by Bonpland, and accumulating an enormous amount of information in other scientific fields. Their expedition was later described as the "scientific discovery of America" and helped make Humboldt famous. Back in Europe, Bonpland received a pension from the French government and in 1808 the position of botanist to the Empress Josephine and director of the garden at Malmaison, her country chateau. During the next ten years he put his New World collections in order, published several works both in his own name and as second author to Humboldt, and made botanical excursions to other parts of Europe. This happy and productive period in Bonpland's life came to an end in 1814 when Josephine died.

Distraught, he returned to South America in 1816. After four years in Buenos Aires, teaching and practising medicine, he established an experimental yerba maté plantation in disputed territory near the Paraná River, for the production of high-caffeine Paraguay tea. His success attracted attention, and during a house detention of over seven years, he practised medicine. When he was released in 1829 he returned to plantation life and established two thriving estates in Brazil and in Argentina, growing citrus and other crops, and raising sheep.

His marriage to an Indian woman, and children, gave him even stronger links with South America and for many years he was almost forgotten in Europe. However, Humboldt and others knew of him, and on his 80th birthday he was honoured in both France and Germany. He died a year later, at Restauración, Argentina, on 11 May 1858. *Celmisia bonplandii* (described as *Erigon bonplandii* by John Buchanan in 1887) is named after Mt Bonpland near the head of Lake Wakatipu at the southern end of the Humboldt Mountains, where it was first collected.



Celmisia bonplandii

A low-growing shrub forming loose patches up to 50 cm across, *Celmisia bonplandii* has broad sticky leaves in tufts at the branch tips, dark green and glossy on the upper surface, with white tomentum beneath. The midrib, petiole and broad sheath enclosing the stem are deep purple. The flower stalks (15–30 cm long) are also purple, with several narrow bracts and a large head. It occurs on rock outcrops in snow tussock herbfield or subalpine scrub in subalpine to high alpine areas in western Otago-Southland and Fiordland.