

Robert Brown (1824 –1906)

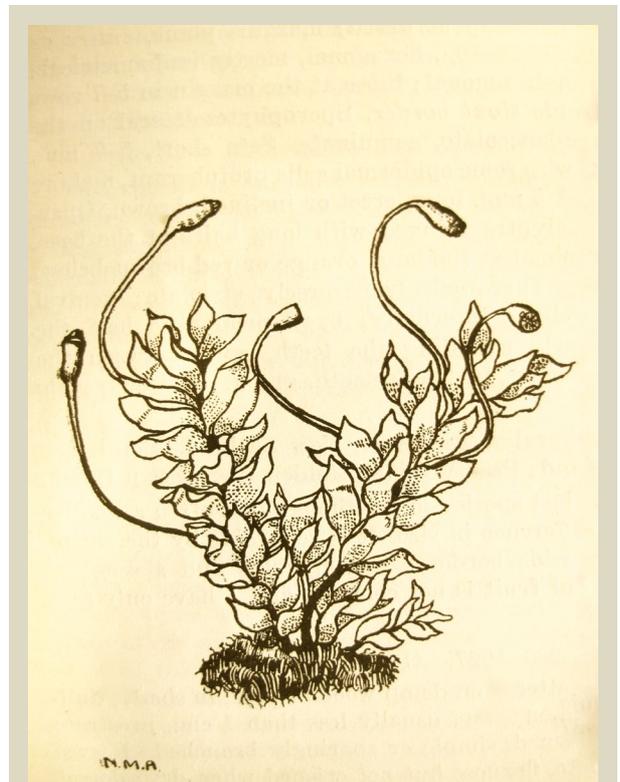
Robert Brown, the son of Mary Miller and her husband George Brown, a bootmaker, was born in Glasgow, Scotland, probably in 1824. Nothing is known of his early life and education – he may have been self-taught. On 7 May 1849 at Edinburgh he married Helen Nicolson, and they were to have at least three children reach adulthood. It appears there were no children from his second marriage in the early 1870s to Harriet Davis of Glasgow.

A shoemaker with an early interest in natural history, especially botany, Robert Brown made long excursions on foot into the Highlands each year to investigate the flora. He studied for a while at the Andersonian Institute in Glasgow, and later in New Zealand he described and named a "new" composite plant (that turned out to be an introduced weed) after his former teacher and lecturer in botany, Roger Hennedy.

Brown was 50 years old when he came to New Zealand with his second wife and family in about 1874. He bought a property in Andover Street, Merivale, Christchurch, and developed a beautiful garden with unusual indigenous and exotic plants. At first he engaged in his trade, but his passion was botany. He turned his attention to the ferns and mosses of Banks Peninsula and soon travelled widely, mainly on foot, carrying a heavy swag and sleeping out if necessary, in mountainous areas of the South Island and the southern part of the North Island, collecting mosses and other plants and noting their distribution and habits.

Elected a member of the Philosophical Institute of Canterbury in 1887, he also corresponded with eminent European bryologists Victor Ferdinand Brotherus, Jules Cardos, and probably Hugh Neville Dixon, the British and world authority at the time. Robert Brown began studying mosses in earnest. At first he was reluctant to publish papers about them, but from 1892 to 1902, despite his primitive equipment, limited access to contemporary scientific literature and lack of formal training, he published 22 papers on mosses, illustrated with his camera lucida drawings. Many of the names he gave to species are now considered synonyms and are no longer used, but his extensive collections, some from habitats long gone, and his information relating to ecology and climate change, remain of value. Part of his herbarium is now housed at Landcare Research, Lincoln, and the remainder in the herbarium of the British Museum.

Still capable of walking 30 to 40 miles a day, even in his late seventies, he botanised all the way from Kaikoura to Blenheim when over 80 years old, his slight figure erect, his features crowned by a shock of snow-white hair. He became a casualty of an influenza epidemic and died at his home in Christchurch on 13 December 1906, survived by two sons and a daughter. Harriet Brown had died in 1886. Robert Brown is remembered in the North Island moss species, *Calyptrochaeta brownii*, first described as *Eriopus brownii* by Dixon in 1927, and for his apt words, "Trust not authority, pay no heed to the books, but go to the plants themselves."



Calyptrochaeta brownii

Hookeriaceae is a large family of mosses mainly of the tropics, with seven genera represented in New Zealand, mostly in wet forest. Most have fairly rounded leaves and more or less flattened shoots, and might easily be mistaken for liverworts but for their typical moss capsules. The calyptra is multiform, and in many species is fringed around the base; the peristome is double. Mosses in the genus *Calyptrochaeta* have stems bearing two forms of leaves arranged in six rows. Lateral leaves are larger and fan out from the stems; dorsal and ventral rows are smaller and more or less flattened; the nerve is absent or short and double. *Calyptrochaeta brownii*, mainly a North Island species, is a small slender plant, and the leaves have a very weak border, entire margin and almost no nerve

ILLUSTRATION: Nancy Adams