

# John Buchanan (1819 – 1898)

John Buchanan, eldest of the four children of William Buchanan and Nancy Somerville, was born on 13 October 1819 in Levenside, Dumbartonshire, Scotland. After attending the local parish school and mechanics' institute, he was apprenticed as a pattern designer at a calico print works, which led him to study plants as potential design material. He became foreman of the drawing shop of Henry Monteith and Company near Glasgow, and unmarried, emigrated to New Zealand on the barque *Columbus*, arriving at Port Chalmers in 1852.



## ***Carex buchananii***

The *Carex* genus takes its name from the Greek *keiren* 'to cut', referring to the cutting edge of the leaves. It is a widespread genus in cold and temperate regions, and high mountains in the tropics. About 73 species are native to New Zealand. Although they have many structural details in common with grasses, there are also differences. *Carex buchananii* is a very distinct species, often grown for its erect bright reddish-brown foliage. Its narrow leaves, up to 60 cm tall, are three-angled but appear cylindrical, and taper to an extremely fine, attenuated tip, often curling like a spring. Flower heads, which appear in summer, consist of five or more rather distant spikes, with the lower ones the largest. *Carex buchananii* is found in the South Island, and in the North Island in Hawke's Bay and Wellington, in coastal scrub, damp ground near streams and short tussock grassland.

He tried his luck briefly in the goldfields of Victoria, Australia, before returning to farm a 10-acre section he had purchased on Mt Cargill, near Dunedin. Within a year he was employed to assist in reconnaissance survey and mapping work, during which he made several pencil sketches of inland Otago; one of them is now in the Alexander Turnbull Library. He also continued what had become an absorbing interest in the collection and study of plants, sending large numbers of dried specimens, at first to a Scottish botanist friend, and then at the latter's suggestion, to Joseph Hooker at Kew. So impressed was Hooker with the quality of the collections that he recommended Buchanan to James Hector, newly appointed geologist to the provincial government of Otago.

After Hector arrived in New Zealand in 1862, Buchanan, as his botanist and draughtsman, travelled over much of Otago, collecting and studying plants wherever he went. His findings, summarised in *A Sketch of the Botany of Otago*, were displayed at the 1865 New Zealand Exhibition. Buchanan continued to send plants to Kew, but also retained duplicates for his own herbarium, and contributed nearly thirty papers to the *Transactions of the New Zealand Institute*. When Hector became director of the Geological Survey and Colonial Museum in 1865, Buchanan was appointed to his staff in Wellington, which gave him further scope to travel, study the country's vegetation and publish his results. Although primarily a botanist, he also made contributions in the fields of geology and zoology. Above all, were his illustrations for the first 19 volumes of the *Transactions*, and his work *Indigenous Grasses of New Zealand*, illustrated by the technique of "nature printing", which appeared in three parts between 1877 and 1880. Only a few of his watercolour landscapes have survived.

In 1880 John Buchanan was elected a fellow of the Linnean Society, and on his retirement in 1885 he was awarded life membership of the New Zealand Institute. He returned to Dunedin, to the "brilliant freshness and varied colours of the Otago vegetation" and died fourteen years later, on 18 October 1898, at the age of 79. Several plant species, including *Carex buchananii*, are named in his honour.