

# Athol Ceadric Albin Caldwell (1898 – 1976)

Athol Caldwell was born in Wellington on 3 August 1898. He was educated at Karori School and Wellington College, and in 1915 went to Canterbury College where he graduated Bachelor of Civil Engineering in 1919. His first appointment from August 1920 to June 1921 was assistant civil engineer in the Public Works Department at Arthur's Pass, working on the construction of the Otira Tunnel; it is likely that his keen interest in native plants and tramping began there. He then joined the electrical branch of the Public Works in Wellington. On 6 December 1922 he married Adelaide Georgina Roberts of Bennetts, North Canterbury. They honeymooned at Arthur's Pass.

In 1924 they moved to Hamilton where Athol was assistant engineer in charge of the early hydroelectric power survey and investigative work on the Waikato River. This gave him further opportunities to observe native plants. The Caldwell's three children David, Colin and Dorothy were born during those early years. Promotion in 1939 to district electrical engineer of the State Hydro-Electric Department (SHD) extended his responsibilities from Taupo northwards; he joined the Auckland Botanical Society and whenever possible planned his business trips to coincide with the society's evening meetings.

Diligent in everything he undertook, he set about learning all he could about the New Zealand flora. In 1947 he made the first of many botanical excursions with Michael Gudex, first assistant at Hamilton Boys' High School and renowned as a horticulturist with expertise in identifying and growing native plants. In September 1947 another friend,

schoolmaster-botanist Varner J Cook, described *Scirpus caldwellii* (now *Bolboschoenus caldwellii*) after Athol Caldwell, "for many years an enthusiastic collector and student of our indigenous flora and who did much to stimulate the writer's interest in New Zealand plants".

He became a mentor to Audrey Eagle, who arrived from England in 1949 with her husband Harold, and applied for a position in SHD's drawing office. Fresh from exploring the English countryside, she started learning the names of trees in "the shrubbery", an area of native plantings that Athol Caldwell had established on the site. She was soon invited to join botanical trips and in 1952 there was enough local interest to form a branch of the Forest and Bird Protection Society. With Athol's encouragement she started painting native plants, and by 2006 her watercolours of all known species of New Zealand trees and shrubs had been published.

Retiring in March 1959, Athol Caldwell continued his interest in native plants, his herbarium and collection of botanical books. A lay canon and self-taught bell-ringer of St Peters Cathedral, he had supervised installation of the eight bells and soon after his retirement spent six months lining the walls of the ringing chamber with rimu panels. His last bush excursion, in October 1974, was with friends in Sir Walter Scott Reserve, which he had helped set up eleven years earlier. As he became increasingly unaware of life around him, Adelaide supported and cared for him as long as possible, and he died at Tokanui Hospital on 27 February 1976, aged 78.

## ***Bolboschoenus caldwellii***

*Bolboschoenus* (Greek *bulbos* 'swelling bulb' and *schoenus* 'rush') in the family Cyperaceae have bulbous tubers, and because they have a compact head of flower spikelets at the end of the stems, are sometimes known as club sedge. *Bolboschoenus caldwellii* is a summer-green perennial forming clumps 30–90 cm tall, with creeping rhizomes bearing tubers. Leaves up to 4 mm wide are grass-like, stiff, tapering and scabrid, the inflorescence a compact or slightly branched head of 3–8 spikelets. Mainly coastal, it is found in scattered populations from Kaipara Harbour to Dunedin (and in Australia) on sandy margins of lagoons, estuaries and waterways.

Coastal wetland habitat, Firth of Thames, 2010

