

Konrad Hermann Heinrich Christ (1833 – 1933)

Hermann Christ, the son of a lawyer, was born on 12 December 1833 in Basel or Basle (French *Bâle*), a major industrial centre in northern Switzerland, where most of the inhabitants speak German. As a teenager he began to collect plants in the surrounding agricultural countryside, and in 1853, when studying law at the University of Berlin, he accompanied the professor of botany, Alexander Braun, on field trips. The following year, while continuing his studies at the University of Basel, he published a book on the plant geography of the region, based on his earlier excursions. In 1856 he moved to Lausanne on the shore of Lake Geneva, ostensibly to study the local laws and to perfect his French, but also to learn about the flora of the Swiss plateau. He passed his examinations and in 1859 began work as a recorder in a court of justice.

He married, and from 1868 worked as a barrister, while also pursuing his botanical studies. His first research in plant taxonomy was a work on the Abietineae, an ancient group of conifers, published in 1863. It was followed by his book *Roses of Switzerland* in 1873, and contributions to the genus *Carex*. Visits to the Canary Islands in 1885 and 1889 resulted in two articles on the Canarian flora, and it seems he collected also in Algeria and West Africa. Ferns became his particular interest, and he worked tirelessly on this group after his retirement, publishing 44 related papers, including three extensive books. His most important work, however, was probably *Das Pflanzen-leben der Schweiz* (1879), a general account of the Swiss flora with several plant distribution maps. It was a great success and several editions, including a French translation, were brought out.

Later in life, concerned about the mistreatment of people in the Congo region, he worked with and supported missions in Africa. Overcome with grief when his wife died in 1908, he lost interest in botany and sold his herbarium. However, his election as a foreign member of the Linnean Society in 1912 seems to have induced him to return to his research, and in his final years he focused on the history of botany. In good health until the age of 99, his condition deteriorated rapidly after a broken leg, and he died at Riehen on 23 November 1933, a few days short of his 100th birthday.

In the Jardín Botánico Canario, bronze plaques at the Scholars Fountain honour botanists, including Hermann Christ, who studied the flora of the Canaries. His contribution to botany and especially pteridology was commemorated in the genus *Christella* by the French botanist Augustin Abel Hector Lévêillé in 1915. *Christella dentata*, a pan-tropical species throughout the warmer parts of the world, reaches its southern limit in New Zealand. *Asplenium christii* in southern Africa and numerous species elsewhere are also named in his honour. Braun's holly fern, *Polystichum braunii*, is named after his mentor at the University of Berlin.



Christella dentata

Christella is a mainly tropical genus of around 50 species of terrestrial ferns with creeping rhizomes and deeply divided fronds. *Christella dentata* (Latin *dentatis*: toothed) is a soft fern with elliptic fronds up to 100 cm long, characteristically broader in the middle and tapered towards both ends, with the basal few pinnae hastate (arrow-shaped and directed outwards). The sori are mostly arranged in up to seven pairs. A short-lived fern of recently disturbed ground and widespread in the tropics and subtropics, it was probably never common in New Zealand. Nearing extinction, it is currently known from just two small sites in the Far North.