

Leonard Cockayne (1855 – 1934)

Leonard Cockayne was born near Sheffield, England, on 7 April 1855, the youngest child of William Cockayne, a prosperous draper, and his wife Mary Shepherd. Much younger than his six siblings and taught by a governess, Leonard was a lonely child who spent hours observing plants and animals in the nearby woods. In 1877, after a fragmentary higher education, which included preliminary medical studies and a little botany, he left England for Australia, and taught there for several years. He moved to New Zealand in 1881, to take up teaching positions in Otago, and married Maria Maude Blakeley, who had arrived before him and taught at Balclutha and Dunedin. They were to have one son.



Euphrasia cockayneana

Euphrasia in the Orobanchaceae family is a genus of semi-parasitic plants containing about 100 species from the temperate regions. The flowers are snapdragon-like, with a shorter, two-lobed upper lip and a larger three-lobed lower lip. The yellow eyebright, *Euphrasia cockayneana*, is an almost fleshy, partly hair-covered annual herb 10–15 cm tall, and is distinctive in having bright yellow flowers. It is often abundant and quite conspicuous when in flower, in low alpine damp open areas of mixed snow tussock-scrub and herbfield, in the high rainfall regions of central Canterbury and Westland.

Cockayne's interest in New Zealand plants was aroused by school inspector Peter Goyen and teacher George Thomson, who were both keen botanists. An inheritance from his father in 1884 enabled him to leave teaching and buy a small farm at Styx near Christchurch, where he grew a collection of plants, including alpines, and in 1892 a sand-dune property near New Brighton, where he established an experimental garden, Tarata. He exchanged plants and seeds both in New Zealand and abroad, and joined shoemaker and botanist Robert Brown on many botanising excursions. Through the Philosophical Society of Canterbury, which he joined in 1895, he made further contact with other scientists, presented a conference paper and soon became recognised as an authority on New Zealand vegetation.

When his finances ran low in the early 1900s, he failed in an attempt to persuade the government to create a position of government botanist for him. However, he got official support for his botanical survey work, and made expeditions to many parts of the country and outlying islands, followed by extensive written reports. He was more interested in observing plants in their natural habitat than in collecting specimens – his major contributions to botany were in plant ecology and hybridisation. He set out his views in a prodigious amount of written material, including *The Vegetation of New Zealand*, first published in 1921 and the standard reference for 70 years.

By the time he and his wife moved to Ngaio, Wellington, in 1917, Leonard Cockayne was well known and highly regarded. He received numerous major awards and held eminent positions in scientific and conservation organisations. A man of independent and at times radical views, he could be dogmatic, but he also considered the views of others. Despite failing eyesight during his last few years, he continued his research until his death at Wellington on 8 July 1934, followed a few months later by that of his wife and companion, Maude. Both were buried in the grounds of Otari Open Air Native Plant Museum (Otari/Wilton's Bush), which he had founded in 1927. The distinctive yellow eyebright *Euphrasia cockayneana* is one of several plants commemorating his important and original contributions to botany.