

William Colenso (1811 –1899)

William Colenso was born in Penzance, Cornwall, on 17 November 1811, the eldest child of Samuel May Colenso, a saddler and town councillor, and his wife Mary Veale Thomas, the daughter of a solicitor. William was educated privately, and after completing an apprenticeship with a local printer, took work in London. In 1834 he came to Paihia in the Bay of Islands as a missionary-printer. Within a few weeks the first book printed in New Zealand – part of the *New Testament* in Māori – came off the press. Over the next eight years, as well as fulfilling his other onerous mission duties, he put out a great volume of printed work in both English and Māori.

Several journeys to the Far North and East Coast districts rekindled an interest in natural history. He made perceptive observations on the Māori people, their language and customs, and was fascinated by the plants he collected. Meeting Charles Darwin in 1835 inspired him to make a serious study of botany. Allan Cunningham, the New South Wales colonial botanist on a six-month visit to Paihia in 1838, gave him encouragement, equipment and instruction. Colenso must also have impressed Lady Jane Franklin during her 1841 visit to New Zealand, for on her return to Tasmania she sent him a botanical microscope and facilitated his entry into scientific publication. The visit of Sir James Clark Ross's Antarctic expedition ships, also in 1841, enabled Colenso to meet Joseph Dalton Hooker and accompany him on botanical excursions during his three months in New Zealand. A strong friendship was formed, and for over 50 years Colenso continued to correspond and send Hooker further specimens.

Shortly after his marriage to Elizabeth Fairburn in 1843, Colenso studied for full-time missionary work. He was ordained the following year and appointed to establish a new mission station in Hawke's Bay, to take charge of a vast district extending from Taupo to Wellington. He spent about seven months of each year visiting his parishioners, nearly always on foot and often alone. His legendary crossings of the Ruahine Range were arduous – not always successful physically or evangelically, but always botanically rewarding.

In 1852 he was dismissed from his position for a relationship with a Maori girl. He overcame his rejection and entered local and national politics. In his later years he concentrated on his botanical work, wrote extensively, and lectured. His services to science were recognised by his election as a fellow of the Royal Society in 1866, the first New Zealander to be so honoured. Although reinstated by the church 41 years after his dismissal, he died at

Napier on 10 February 1899, “a lone and solitary figure”, at the age of 87.

Unfortunately William Colenso's fine intellect, skills and tireless energy were countered by an overbearing and intolerant manner that often brought him into conflict with others. Although his plant identifications were frequently challenged, his contribution to botanical knowledge over sixty years is indisputable. From thousands of plant specimens collected there were hundreds of new species, and many were named for him. *Colensoa physaloides* is so distinctive that ever since its discovery by Richard Cunningham in the 1830s taxonomists have had difficulty classifying it. Its differences led to J D Hooker creating for it a new genus, honouring Colenso's work in the botanical field.



Colensoa physaloides

Colensoa physaloides (Greek *physaloides* 'bladder' or 'bellows'; resembling *Physalis*: cape gooseberry) is one of New Zealand's most unusual endemic plants. Also known by the Māori names koru or oru, it is a soft shrub-like plant up to one metre tall, resembling a lax hydrangea bush. Its deep blue flowers and purple fruit are borne in clusters of 5 to 12, but are often hidden by the leaves. Both may be found throughout the year. Plants grow in coastal and lowland forest, usually along the banks of streams and along forest margins in North Auckland and several northern offshore islands.