

James Dall (1840 – 1912)

James Dall (rhyming with “ball”), the son of cabinetmaker Joseph Dall and his wife Margaret, née Jackson, was born in England at Colliergate, York, on 25 November 1840. He went to sea as a young teenager and spent many hard years as a ship’s carpenter, before settling at Nelson, New Zealand, where he began a horticultural and plant collecting business. In 1876 he supplied plants for the Botanic Gardens, Wellington, then administered by the Colonial Museum, and in 1879 he wrote to Dr James Hector at the museum, offering to collect plants in the Nelson area. He made annual visits to Sydney with orchids, ferns, lycopods and other items for sale, and at the Melbourne International Exhibition of 1880–81 was awarded the bronze medal for his Wardian cases of New Zealand ferns.

It is not known exactly when Dall left Nelson. It is recorded that in 1886 he held an exhibition in Collingwood of Australian and New Zealand curios, birds, platypus and other items of interest, and his trade card, highlighted with an illustration of his Melbourne Exhibition medal, gave his locality as Collingwood. In 1892 he acquired two sections halfway between Collingwood and Rockville, near what is known locally as Dall’s Creek, where he ran a few cows, had a small orchard, nursery and shade house, and lived in a two-roomed shack with his botany books, stuffed birds and other natural history objects.

Dall’s expeditions to the province’s mountains, frequently on his own, led to the discovery of five new plants, three of which were named after him. In 1882 John Buchanan described *Celmisia dallii*, collected “on the Golden [Gouland] Downs near the head of the Aorere River by J Dall, in compliment to whom as an explorer and collector it has been named”. *Carex dallii*, found near the source of the Heaphy River, was received by Kirk in 1892 and described by him two years later. The most interesting plant associated with James Dall is the rare and beautiful small tree *Pittosporum dallii*. Although it is uncertain whether the original collection was made by Dall or by his friend Jack Flowers, who had a sheep run in the area where it grows, Dall certainly recognised its uniqueness, and did his utmost to obtain seeds and flowers to enable Cheeseman to complete his description. However, a fall in 1898, from which he never fully recovered, prevented Dall from making further expeditions. Shortly before his death at Nelson Hospital in 1912 he described its locality to Frederick Giles Gibbs, who rediscovered it the following year.

James Dall is remembered as a slightly eccentric but kindly old man with a long beard, and his live tree ferns in boxes up to 4 metres long, destined for overseas gardens, were a familiar sight on the Collingwood wharf. A simple plaque in the Collingwood cemetery, and the three New Zealand plant species that bear his name, commemorate him.



Celmisia dallii

Celmisia is an Australasian genus of more than 60 species, centred in New Zealand. Most are mountain dwellers. *Celmisia dallii* is confined to the mountains of western Nelson south to the Paparoa Range. It is a large tufted herb, often with several together in a clump. The large leaves are shining pale-green, with white to pale buff tomentum (soft woolly hairs) beneath; the minutely toothed margins are slightly upturned and therefore the leaves appear white-rimmed. The long, 20–30 cm flower stalks have broad leafy bracts, and are topped by large flower heads 3.5–6 cm across. It is most common in open tussock-herbfield or grassland, sometimes on rock outcrops; occasionally in open, stony subalpine forest and scrub.