

Johann Karl Ernst Dieffenbach (1811 –1855)

Johann Karl Ernst Dieffenbach, the son of a Lutheran cleric and professor of theology, was born on 27 January 1811 at Giessen in the Grand Duchy of Hesse. He began medical studies at the university, but to avoid trouble after his involvement in liberal student politics, he fled to Zurich, Switzerland, where he completed his studies and graduated in 1835. German pressure led to his deportation in 1836, and he finally found refuge in England where, using the name Ernst, he eked out a precarious living teaching German and contributing to medical and scientific journals. His intellect and the thoroughness of his work soon became known, and in 1839 he sailed to New Zealand in the *Tory* as naturalist for the New Zealand Company, to examine and report on the flora, fauna and natural resources of the colony, and possible sites for settlement.



Kellera dieffenbachii

Previously called *Drapetes*, *Kellera* is a small southern alpine and subantarctic genus, centred in New Zealand. *Kellera dieffenbachii* is the most widespread of the eleven species, and is present in almost all the mountain regions of North, South and Stewart Islands, at 600–1500 metres. It is a trailing plant with pale-green, prostrate leafy branches forming a loose mat or patch up to 20 cm or more across. The small, white tubular flowers occur terminally on the branchlets from November to January.

After landfall at Queen Charlotte Sound and exploration of the Cook Strait area, he made extensive journeys into the interior of the North Island, observing, surveying, collecting and recording. With whaler James "Worser" Heberley and the assistance of a cook and a Māori guide, he reached the summit of Taranaki/Mt Egmont on 25 December 1839 – perhaps primarily for the adventure and challenge, but certainly not to the neglect of his scientific responsibilities. He also went to the Chatham Islands to help assess their potential for purchase and settlement, but considered them "deficient in natural resources."

When his work for the New Zealand Company was completed, Dieffenbach wanted to continue his exploration, especially of the South Island, for the government, but his offer was turned down and in 1841 he returned to England. There, he wrote his two-volume *Travels in New Zealand* (1843) which contained, as well as detailed accounts of his journeys and scientific surveys, an assessment of the whaling industry and observations of the Māori and their customs, with humane recommendations for their future welfare. His clear, easy to read writing style, fine scientific descriptions and thoughtful philosophy, brought him acclaim in the European academic community, but was largely ignored in the colony.

He returned briefly to Germany in 1843, alternating between there and England until 1849, when he was appointed professor of geology at his hometown university. He married Katharina Emilie Reuning in April 1851 and had two daughters, Klara and Anna; the second was born three weeks after his sudden death from typhus on 1 October 1855. He was 44.

A long narrow headland at the northern entrance to Tory Channel commemorates Ernst Dieffenbach. Botanists honour him in two Chatham Island plants (the soft-foliaged speargrass *Aciphylla dieffenbachii* and the coastal shrub *Hebe dieffenbachii*). The alpine herb *Drapetes dieffenbachii* (now *Kellera dieffenbachii*) was named by William Jackson Hooker "after its first discoverer", the German naturalist who collected it on Taranaki/Mt Egmont on Christmas Day 1839.