

# Anthony Peter Druce (1920 – 1999)

**T**ony Druce was born on the family farm at Kumeroa, east of Woodville, on 18 June 1920. He became interested in botany at Hereworth Preparatory School in Havelock North, where engineer, teacher and botanist Norman Elder introduced the school's tramping club to the North Island bush and mountains. After attending Wanganui Collegiate School (1933–1938) Tony studied at Canterbury University, where he met his future wife, Helen Hodgson, doing her MA degree. Both were members of the University Tramping Club, and Tony became club captain. He completed his Bachelor of Engineering (Civil) degree in 1942.

While in Auckland helping with radar development he took a botany course at Auckland University, and at the end of 1943 moved to Wellington to start work as a draughtsman with the Dominion Laboratory of the DSIR. Out in the mountains again with the Tararua and Heretaunga Tramping Clubs, he honed his botanical, tramping and navigational skills. In December 1947 Tony and Helen married, taking their honeymoon in the Northwest Ruahine Range, and built their home in Pinehaven, where their three children grew up.

Tony had a reputation for "knowing his plants", and was soon offered botanical positions with DSIR. The whole family accompanied him on many of his legendary field trips, during which he developed his empirical method of describing vegetation. His survey of Taranaki/Mt Egmont involved 32 major trips between 1959 and 1966, and led to publication of a vegetation account in the park handbook (1964) and an outstanding tree-ring dating study (1966).

From the 1970s, visits to the South Island mountains became more frequent. Following the tragic death of his daughter Fenella, killed in 1977 when Three Johns Hut was blown over a bluff in Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park, Tony organised the building of a hut in the Upper Cobb Valley as a memorial to her. His exploratory trips took him into remote country, and extended his interest in the relationships between vegetation, soils and rock terraces. He recorded and updated species checklists of native plants for each of the 335 localities from North Cape to Otago, and collected plants of doubtful identity, growing them on at Taita Experimental Station or in the garden he and Helen had developed at Pinehaven.

He had an eye for detail and an amazing memory for place, and although sometimes seeming shy, he related well to people. When persuaded, he could give fascinating and thought-provoking talks on places or problems. From the late 1940s until 1992 he was to the fore of the Wellington Botanical Society's activities, making a major contribution to its bulletin and organising and leading parties to remote parts of the country. Always encouraging, and generous with his knowledge, Tony Druce died in Wellington on 15 March 1999.

One of several plants named after him, *Melicytus drucei*, was described in 1996 by Molloy and Clarkson, with the citation, "The specific epithet honours A P (Tony) Druce for his unrivalled field knowledge of New Zealand plants, and who discovered this species during his botanical explorations of the Egmont region."

## ***Melicytus drucei***

*Melicytus* from the Greek *meli* 'honey'; *kytos* 'cavity' is named for the honey cavity below the stamens. *Melicytus* is a variable genus of trees and shrubs with around 22 species in New Zealand and some in Australia. *Melicytus drucei* is an erect, hermaphrodite, divaricating shrub up to 2.5 metres tall with rigid stems and branchlets tapering to spinous tips. Adult leaves are rather inconspicuous. Small yellow flowers, which appear from October to December, droop from the branches, and produce abundant fruit, white with scattered purple to black spots or patches, from March to May. It is known only from mixed shrubland of the Ahukawakawa Swamp and Pouakai Range in Egmont National Park, and is threatened by hare and possum browsing.

