

John Fairchild (1835 – 1898)

John Fairchild, born in 1835, was the second son of William Fairchild and his wife Ann, née Sanders. In the 1820s members of the Fairchild and Sanders families had left the south of England to settle in Canada, where they engaged in shipbuilding, sailing and fostering the Bible Christian Church. William, who had farmed in Devon, had a small farm in Prince Edward Island, and his five children were probably born there. John left home in his teens to go fur trapping and then went to sea as a carpenter. Leaving the *Joseph Hensley* at Liverpool in 1858, he joined the *Florence Nightingale* bound for Australia, and for a time made handcart wheels for gold-miners. Returning to sea, he was carpenter on a brig from Sydney. After it was wrecked near Manukau he remained in New Zealand, working in the coastal service, and in 1861 purchased the cutter *Thistle*, which he ran between Onehunga and Kawhia.

During the New Zealand wars he piloted warships operating on the coast, and in 1864 he joined the government service as master of the paddle-wheel steamers *Sturt* and then *Luna*. He was in command of the lighthouse tender *Stella* during the building of the Brothers and Puysegur Point lighthouses, and her larger sister ship *Hinemoa* when the Mana Island tower and light were dismantled, transported and re-erected at Cape Egmont in 1881. In 1895 he was sent to Britain to bring back the Glasgow-built *Tutanekai*. He remained skipper of the latter until his death in July 1898, killed on the ship when equipment failed during a loading operation in Wellington, leaving his wife Mary, née Charlton (born 1841 at Kawhia, daughter of Captain George Charlton and his wife Ann Robson), three sons and five daughters.

The government steamers were used not only for servicing lighthouses, but also for transporting personnel, railway construction materials and rolling stock, and for laying cables, patrolling seal fisheries, provisioning castaway depots and searching for shipwreck survivors. After 1885 they regularly carried passengers, and were almost the only way that scientists, government officials and the public had of visiting outlying islands. The steamer captains, and their officers, especially long-serving ones like Fairchild and his successor on the *Hinemoa*, John Bollons, became renowned for their knowledge of the islands, gleaned both from their own observations and shared discoveries with their passengers. Their assistance was frequently acknowledged in reports, letters and diaries.

Thomas Cheeseman, curator of the Auckland Museum, was on the *Stella* in August 1887 when the government sent an expedition to annex the Kermadec Islands for New Zealand. He published reports on the flora of the islands, and also of the Three Kings, which were visited briefly on the return voyage. Describing a new species, *Pittosporum fairchildii*, he said, "I have named this fine species after Captain Fairchild, of the SS *Stella*, through whose kindness I was enabled to land on the islands." On Adams Island in the Auckland Islands group, a sheltered spit of land with one of the largest concentrations of megaherbs in the subantarctic is known as Fairchild's Garden. The names commemorate a highly respected seaman who made a significant contribution to the botanical exploration of New Zealand's remote islands. A Kawhia street is also named after him – but that is another story!



Pittosporum fairchildii

Pittosporum fairchildii has brown bark and grows up to 5 metres tall. The young branchlets and new leaves are covered in white silky hairs, the leaves becoming glabrous when mature. The five-petal flowers are a very dark, almost blackish red. Its distinctive fruits mature to yellow-green but do not open, falling off the tree to the ground where, as they rot, the seeds are dispersed. It is locally common on the main Manawatawhi/Three Kings Islands from sea level to the highest points.