

# Isaac Earl Featherston (1813 – 1876)

Isaac Earl Featherston was born at Newcastle upon Tyne, England, on 21 March 1813, the fourth son of Thomas Featherston, a wealthy retail grocer, and his wife Jane Earl. Delicate in health from infancy, he was educated at a private school at Tamworth and at Edinburgh University, where he graduated MD in 1836. After travelling extensively in Europe, he married Bethia Campbell Scott of Edinburgh on 10 December 1839.

Concerned about his health (he had tuberculosis), Featherston came to New Zealand as surgeon superintendent on the New Zealand Company ship *Olympus*, and arrived at Wellington in May 1841. Despite being shocked at the primitive state of the settlement and the swampy land being sold, he practised medicine and soon took a leading part in the cultural and political life of the community. In 1842 he was a committee member of the Mechanics Institute and secretary of the Wellington Horticultural and Botanical Society; in 1845 he became the first editor of the *Wellington Independent*, and the following year he helped set up the Wellington Savings Bank. He was also prominent in the agitation for self-government, and worked for the interests of the settlers, who presented him with a silver salver and tea service "for advocating their claims and bringing them to a successful issue."

Featherston was elected first superintendent of the newly constituted Wellington province in 1852, and was also a member of the House of Representatives from 1853 until his retirement at the end of 1870, a controversial career focused on provincial rather

than national politics. Inevitably, much of the work of raising his family of eight daughters and four sons was left to Bethia, who died in 1864. His energy and diplomacy during the 1860s land conflict failed to avert war, and for bravery while leading Māori auxiliaries in Major General Chute's West Coast campaign, he was awarded the New Zealand Cross. Although he undertook three overseas missions in the national interest, his inflexible provincialism irked the government, and in 1871 he was offered the position of New Zealand's first agent general in London. His work there, mainly the recruitment of migrants, was affected by deteriorating health, and he died at Hove in Sussex, England, on 19 June 1876.

The slight figure of "The Little Doctor" smoking his eternal black cigar epitomised thirty years of early Wellington history, and is commemorated in the name of a Wellington street and a Wairarapa town, a Chatham Island shag (*Phalacrocorax featherstonii*) and an endangered plant (*Leptinella featherstonii*). The latter, collected by Henry H Travers, was described and named by Ferdinand Mueller in *The Vegetation of the Chatham Islands* (1864) with the citation, "The writer selected this plant, one of the most interesting of those of the Chatham Islands, for bearing the name of the Honorable Dr. Featherstone [sic], Government-Superintendent at Wellington, New Zealand, as a mark of recognition of the favor shown by that able officer in introducing some years since a number of living plants from the Chatham Islands into the Melbourne Botanic Garden." The nature of the plants and their actual collection remain a mystery.

## ***Leptinella featherstonii***

*Leptinella* is a widespread, mainly New Zealand genus of creeping herbs with small button-like flower heads. The Chatham Island button daisy or muttonbird plant, *Leptinella featherstonii*, is one of the most distinctive plants on the Chathams archipelago. A robust erect woody shrub with firm, fleshy, glaucous to dark green leaves and small button-like yellow flowers in spring and summer, it is the only button daisy to have elevated woody stems. It is found growing on peaty, coastal sites, usually with burrowing or nesting seabirds. Habitat loss through erosion, weed invasion, browsing animals and other factors has led to its near-extinction on the two main islands, but it is still common on some outer islands.

