

August Heinrich Rudolf Grisebach (1814 – 1879)

August Heinrich Rudolf Grisebach was born on 17 April 1814 in Hanover, Germany. He was educated at the Lyceum in Hanover and the cloister school at Ilfeld, and from 1832 to 1836 studied medicine, mainly at the University of Göttingen where his uncle, the eminent botanist Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Meyer, was his first botany instructor. He graduated from the University of Berlin in 1836. The following year he was employed as a lecturer at the University of Göttingen; he became associate professor in 1841, and in 1847 full professor of botany at the medical faculty there.

He had already travelled in the western Alps as a student in 1833. His first taxonomic work was on the family Gentianaceae, and in 1838 he published his *Genera et Species Gentianearum*. In 1839–40, inspired by the scientific expeditions of Alexander Humboldt, he undertook expeditions to the Balkan Peninsula and northwest Asia Minor, areas in which the flora was then virtually unknown. With his basic equipment (including a barometer and thermometer, a microscope, two plant presses with a thousand sheets of blotting paper, plus two pistols and ammunition), the sultan's permit and his interpreter, he not only studied the vegetation, but also climbed mountains to establish their heights.

This was the start of his work on phytogeography, which he continued for several years. The papers he published on his return helped establish his reputation as a botanist and geographer, and in 1844 he was elected to the German Academy of Naturalists Leopoldina.

He made further botanical journeys: to Norway (1842), the Pyrenees (1852) and the Carpathians (1852), and also worked on the botany of the Caribbean and South America. His major work, *Die Vegetation de Erde nach ihrer Klimatischen Anordnung* (The Earth's Vegetation after its Climatic Arrangement), was published in two volumes in 1872. He was made director of the Göttingen botanical gardens in 1875, and appointed a privy government official in 1878. He died on 9 May 1879, at Göttingen, Germany.

His son Eduard was an author, lawyer and diplomat. However, August Heinrich Rudolf Grisebach is better remembered by several plant species, including the New Zealand gentian, *Gentianella grisebachii*, named in his honour. The species was first described by Joseph Dalton Hooker in his *Icones Plantarum* (1844).



Gentianella grisebachii

Most of the 24 New Zealand gentianellas ('little gentians') grow in the mountains, and are among the last of the alpine plants to flower. Except for the brightly coloured flowers of our subantarctic island species, ours have white flowers. *Gentianella grisebachii* is a small, slender annual herb with weak, sprawling stems but erect flowering tips. The single or paired flowers are on very thin stalks up to 3 cm long. Both the calyx and the corolla are deeply cut into narrow pointed lobes. It is fairly common, but often local, in lowland to montane damp grassland, shrubland or herbfield from the central volcanoes and Taranaki/Mt Egmont southwards.