

Johann Franz Julius Haast (1822 – 1887)

Julius Haast was born on 1 May 1822 in the Rhineland city of Bonn, Germany, the son and second surviving child of Mathias Haast, a merchant, and Anna Eva Theodora, née Rütth. Seven other children died at a young age. Julius was educated at grammar schools in Bonn and Cologne, and in 1838 returned to Bonn to take a two-year commercial apprenticeship, possibly training as a mining technician. During the 1840s and early 1850s he is believed to have travelled extensively in Europe as a trader, before settling in Frankfurt where he worked in a bookshop. On 26 October 1846 he married Antonie Auguste Caroline Schmitt from a well-known musical family; their son Robert was born in January 1848.

The political climate in Germany gave Haast an opportunity to travel to New Zealand for a shipping firm, to investigate prospects for large-scale emigration by Germans. He landed in Auckland in December 1858, a day before the arrival of Ferdinand Hochstetter, an Austrian geologist and naturalist. They became life-long friends, and together made explorations of the central North Island and Nelson districts. When Hochstetter returned to Europe in 1860, Haast stayed to make surveys of the West Coast and its coalfields for the Nelson Provincial Government, a decision perhaps influenced by the death of his wife on 14 October 1859. He did not see his son again until 1886. In November 1860 he received an urgent request to report on the Port Hills, where contractors for the Lyttelton tunnel had encountered hard rock. He was appointed provincial geologist the following year, and continued his explorations, including much of inland Canterbury, the Southern Alps and the

Rangitata, Ashburton and Rakaia headwaters. During his journeys he collected many previously unknown plants; the genus *Haastia* and several species are named after him.

In 1863 he married Mary Dobson, daughter of Edward Dobson, provincial engineer, and sister of surveyor Arthur Dudley Dobson, and at their home Glückauf ('good luck') beside the Avon River, they raised their five children. Haast took an active part in the intellectual and cultural life of Christchurch, founding the Philosophical Institute of Canterbury, the Canterbury Museum (of which he was the first director), and co-founding with Bishop Harper the precursor of Canterbury University College. His fine voice and violin expertise enriched the musical scene.

His versatility encompassed geology, palaeontology, zoology, botany and philosophy, and his voluminous papers brought him world acclaim and honours. These included an Austrian knighthood in 1873, entitling him to style himself von Haast, and a year before his death, a British knighthood. His investiture in London was also an opportunity to visit his ageing sister Veronica, and his soldier son, Robert, in Germany. He was physically and mentally a big man, eager and energetic in the pursuit of his interests. He had critics – those who considered his reports too wordy and his avid soliciting of personal honours improper – but his jovial personality, lifelong passion, achievements and encouragement fully earned him his place among the great scientific pioneers in New Zealand. He died in Christchurch after a short illness, on 16 August 1887.

Ranunculus haastii

Ranunculus haastii is a plant of low to high alpine debris slopes and screes. Well camouflaged amidst its rocky background, the thick, waxy, glaucous mauve-margined leaves arise from a stout rhizome that reaches down through the mobile shingly surface to moist, stable sandy soil below. Leaf blades are deeply divided, measure up to 100 mm across and are borne on stems 50–150 mm long. In November and January the classic glossy yellow buttercup flowers, 20–40 mm across, appear. Although one of the more common scree plants of dry greywacke mountains of central and eastern areas of the South Island from Marlborough to western Southland, its coloration and sparse cover make it inconspicuous except when in flower.

