

# Ernst Ludwig Heim (1747 – 1834)

**E**rnst Ludwig Heim, a German physician and naturalist, was born in Solz, Thuringia, on 22 July 1747, a son of pastor Johann Ludwig Heim and his wife Dorothea Regina Wagner. In 1766 he went to Halle, where he studied medicine, botany, astronomy, natural law and philosophy, and in 1772 he was awarded his doctorate in medicine. Living in Spandau near Berlin from 1775, he served as government physician and travelled across the Netherlands, France and England, visiting hospitals and studying public health. In 1780 he married Charlotte Maekker, the daughter of Johann Peter Maekker, a merchant, and his wife Maria Catharina Tesmern. After the loss of infant twins in 1776 and another child in 1786, three daughters and two sons reached adulthood.

Heim's diagnostic skills included the observation of colour and smell. He treated rich and poor alike with his rough humour and earned considerable respect and popularity. Among his patients he treated the Prussian Queen Luise – but failed to prevent her death. Nor could he save Baron von Humboldt from the ravages of war and age. But he continued to make frequent visits on horseback from Spandau to the nearby castle and village of Tegel, where he had already passed on his knowledge of the growing of exotic trees and plants to the baron's predecessor von Burgsdorf, and helped with the landscaping of gardens and plantations.

Dr Heim became a close friend of the Humboldts' counsellor and tutor Gottlob Christian Kunth, and his visits usually coincided with mealtime, after which he instructed the boys William and Alexander in botany. He explained to them the classes of the Linnean system, and they often joined him on excursions in the vicinity. In 1782 theologian and teacher Christian Konrad Sprengel, who had known Heim at Halle, consulted him. Physically, mentally and spiritually exhausted, Sprengel was advised to seek relaxation and recovery in the study of nature, and was offered instruction in botany with the young Alexander von Humboldt. It worked, and Sprengel went on to make botanical discoveries himself!

In April 1783 Dr Heim, with his wife and young daughter, moved to the Gendarmenmarkt in Berlin. He set up in practice in the Markgrafenstraße and saw three to four thousand patients every year. As well as treating many of the poor free of charge, he often bore the cost of their medicines. In 1799 he introduced smallpox vaccination based on Edward Jenner's work, and in 1822, fifty years after earning his doctorate, he was made an honorary citizen of Berlin. He died on 15 September 1834.

A commemorative stamp was issued in his honour in 1984, 150 years after his death, and numerous landmarks bear his name. The American shrubby plant genus *Heimia*, often known as sun opener or shrubby yellow-crest, is named after him, and also the cosmopolitan moss species, *Henediella heimii*. Originally named *Gymnostomum heimii* by Hedwig in 1801, it has had several generic name changes since then, but retained the species name honouring the renowned German physician and naturalist. *Henediella heimii*, rare in New Zealand, is one of eight mosses recorded from southern Victoria Land, Antarctica, where New Zealand scientists are making a major contribution to the knowledge and conservation of the region.



## *Henediella heimii*

Plants of *Henediella heimii* (also known as *Pottia heimii*) form dense yellow-green to brownish or reddish-brown tufts that resemble many other mosses. Fortunately, it is often found fruiting. The long, thick twisted seta can be unusually tall (1 cm or more) for the size of the plant, and the mature capsules are distinctive: the operculum, once lifted, remains attached to the capsule by a rigid column of tissue. Mainly coastal on bare brackish soil, and sometimes inland, it is distributed widely in the northern hemisphere, and is also found in southern South America, Tasmania, New Zealand (rarely) and Antarctica.

IMAGE: Walter Hood Fitch (as *Bryum antarcticum*)  
Hooker's *Flora Antarctica* Plate CLIII, 1844