

Richard Helms (1842 – 1914)

Richard Helms, the son of Frederick Helms, a Lutheran minister, and his wife Caroline, was born on 12 December 1842 at Altona, then an independent city and now an urban borough of Hamburg, Germany. In 1858 he immigrated to Melbourne, Australia, where he worked for his cousin, a tobacconist. Four years later he moved to Dunedin and turned to dentistry. After returning to Melbourne, he came to New Zealand again in about 1870, and for the next eighteen years moved between Greymouth and Nelson, practising as a dentist or in business as a watchmaker/jeweller. On 9 February 1878, in Greymouth, he married Sarah Ann Elder née Reay, a widow, with whom he had two daughters.



Crassula helmsii

Crassula is a large genus of succulent plants worldwide. *Crassula helmsii*, New Zealand pygmy weed, is endemic and known only from the West Coast of the South Island from Karamea to Haast. It is a perennial, decumbent mat-forming herb with green, pink or white succulent, prostrate, heavily branched stems, rooting at the nodes and ascending at the tips. A coastal to lowland species, it is found in shallow pools of fresh water or in damp, usually shady places, such as under rock overhangs, and occasionally on cobble beaches and gravel bars, but only where fresh water is flowing close to the surface. It has naturalised and is regarded as a serious weed in Britain.

PHOTO: Jeremy Rolfe

Helms extended his remarkable versatility and quickly established himself as an intuitive and zealous natural history collector with a wide range of interests. His notable discoveries in entomology included bees, beetles and in 1882 in the Paparoa Range, the rare forest ringlet butterfly *Dodonidia helmsii*, which was named in his honour. Professor Hutton at Canterbury College acknowledged him as a friend and expert collector of land snails, and at the 1880–81 Melbourne International Exhibition an exhibit of dried New Zealand ferns earned him a certificate. His botanical collecting included mosses, liverworts and lichens, many of which reached museums and private collectors in Europe through his younger brother Alvin, a Hamburg dealer in natural history objects.

In 1888, leaving his wife in Greymouth, Helms became a collector for the Australian Museum in Sydney, working in the Snowy Mountains and regions of the Darling and Richmond Rivers. He joined the New South Wales Department of Agriculture in 1890, first as a collector and from 1891 as a bacteriologist. He made further collections as a field officer with the 1891–92 Elder scientific exploring expedition to Central Australia, from which Ferdinand von Mueller named the shrub *Grevillea helmsianum*. After a brief visit to Greymouth in 1895, he lived the rest of his life in Australia, and from 1908, retired in Sydney, he worked on his collections. In 1914 he returned home ill after six weeks in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands; he died a week later, on 17 July 1914. His wife had died in Greymouth in 1901.

"He was one of a type, now vanishing, of keen, self-taught, field naturalists. The whole range of natural science attracted him, in botany, zoology, geology and ethnology, he was equally interested and of these his knowledge was encyclopaedic. In the field he was an expert hunter, handy with tricks and traps and having the wisdom of a savage as to where a bird would nest or a beetle burrow. Quite careless of hardships, such as cold, hunger or fatigue, he would explore alone in the toughest country." (Charles Hedley, 1915)

Many zoological and botanical species in both Australia and New Zealand commemorate Richard Helms. In New Zealand at least seven mosses, three liverworts, and two small herbaceous perennials, *Mitrasacme montana* var. *helmsii* and *Crassula helmsii*, have been named after him; the latter two from his Westland collections were described by Thomas Kirk in 1889.