

James Bruce Irwin (1921 – 2012)

Bruce Irwin's love affair with New Zealand Orchids began in Wanganui, where he was born on 17 November 1921. His father Samuel Irwin, a Scot from Ballyboley, County Antrim, Ireland, was a men's outfitter in Wanganui for many years; his mother Margaret (née Howie) was born in Invercargill. Bruce was the fourth child in their family of five – three sons and two daughters. During his secondary school years at Wanganui Technical College Bruce had two unusual friends – unusual because of their interest in native plants – and on weekends they would bike and walk miles, looking for new plants, including orchids.

In 1939, at seventeen, Bruce joined the Lands and Survey Department in New Plymouth as a draughting cadet and after about three months was elevated to survey draughtsman. Nearby, Egmont National Park, with more orchids to find and draw, was explored with new friends Sid Gibson and his son Owen. War intervened, and despite life in army

camp, military mapping with Lands and Survey, RNZAF pilot training and a year in Japan with J-Force, he pursued his orchid interests whenever possible. Much of his work with Owen Gibson on Taranaki/Mt Egmont and most of his orchid watercolours were done during or soon after the Second World War. In 1950 Dan Hatch named *Pterostylis irsoniana* in recognition of "the labours and enthusiasm of Messrs J B Irwin and O E Gibson [hence '*irsoniana*'], who between them have done much to elucidate the orchid flora of Mount Egmont". Bruce Irwin and Joan Mary Graham married around 1951, and during their twenty years or so together Murray and Robyn were born.

Later, in the Cartographic Branch of Lands and Survey in Wellington, his paintings attracted the attention of botanist Lucy Moore. Bruce left the department in 1962, and for the next five years managed a run-down holiday camp in Marlborough Sounds. Dr Moore visited him there, and a long and productive collaboration began, starting with work for Volume II of the *Flora of New Zealand* (1970) and culminating in *The Oxford Book of New Zealand Plants* (1978). By then Bruce was doing detailed pencil drawings at the Art Department of the Otago Medical School; Lucy advised him on the purchase of a microscope and gave him lessons in botany, and for 11½ years all his spare time was spent on illustrations for the Oxford book.

Retiring to Tauranga in 1981, he grew exotic orchids and continued to work on the New Zealand species. He made the drawings for *Vegetation of Egmont National Park* (Clarkson 1986), and was a major contributor to publications of the New Zealand Native Orchid Group, of which he was a life member. In 2007 *Bruce Irwin's Drawings of New Zealand Orchids* was published by the group, and the following year a selection of his work was exhibited at the Tauranga Art Gallery. He was a recipient of the New Zealand Botanical Society's Allan Mere, the John Easton Award, Wellington Botanical Society's Jubilee Award and the NZNOG's Hatch Medal. In 1997 a new orchid species that he discovered at Erua, near National Park, was named *Pterostylis irwinii* in his honour.

Bruce Irwin shared his perceptions and extensive knowledge in a quiet and unassuming manner, often laced with dry humour. He cared for orchids at Te Puna Quarry Park when well into his eighties, tended his garden and corresponded with friends and fellow enthusiasts until a few weeks before his death at Tauranga on 4 January 2012, aged 90.



Pterostylis irwinii

One of the so-called greenhoods or grass-leaved orchids, *Pterostylis irwinii* is a large, slender-leaved plant. The flowers appear from November to December. The tepal ends are sometimes reddish; the lateral sepals are incurved and lean forward, forming an inward-turning jug spout at the sinus; the labellum is dark and tapered. *Pterostylis irwinii* grows in light scrub or bush; until 1998 it had been found in only one site near Ruapehu, but has since been discovered in Northwest Nelson.