

Magnus Earle Johnson (1885 – 1976)

Magnus Earle Johnson, the son of Emily and John Charles ("J C") Johnson, was born in Auckland on 11 February 1885, the elder son in their family of two boys and four girls. His father, who was born in the Isle of Wight in 1851, came to New Zealand as a young man, arriving in Wellington on the *Edinburgh Castle* in 1870. He served two years in the Armed Constabulary, and also did contract work in the Waikato. After visiting England in 1884, he settled at Whananaki, near Whangarei, where for several years he operated a large sawmill in partnership with Mr C Galbraith. He later ran sheep and cattle on some 900 acres of land and built an English-style homestead, which he named Willow Bank.



Elingamita johnsonii

An endemic genus of one species, *Elingamita johnsonii* commemorates the 1902 wreck of the steamship *Elingamite* near the foot of the cliffs where the plant was first discovered. *Elingamita johnsonii* is a small tree with smooth pale grey bark, dark green glossy leaves 10–18 cm long, leathery, widest towards tip, and small pale dots visible when held against the light. Conspicuous yellowish tubular flowers are grouped in short clusters at tips of stems; the globose, drupe-like fruit up to 17 mm in diameter change from green to bright red as they ripen. For over 30 years thought to be confined to West Island in the Three Kings group, new populations of *Elingamita johnsonii* have been discovered on nearby Hinemoa and Arbutus Rocks in the Princes islets.

At some time in the early 1900s the family moved to Kauri on the northern outskirts of Whangarei. Magnus attended public school and high school, but it is not known where. For six years he was a volunteer in the Marsden Mounted Rifles, attaining the rank of sergeant. At the onset of the First World War he was working as a road engineer for the Public Works Department at Ohakune; three months later he enlisted as a trooper in the Auckland Mounted Rifles, and on 1 December 1914 he left to serve overseas.

After being wounded at Gallipoli and convalescing in England, he returned to the Middle East as lieutenant. His distinguished service was mentioned in despatches on 16 January 1918, he was awarded the Military Cross in April 1918 and a bar to his Military Cross a few months later. However the honours were tempered by the loss of his younger brother Olaf, also of the Auckland Mounted Rifles, killed in action in Egypt on 9 August 1916, aged 24. In 1919 Magnus Johnson returned to New Zealand and began a distinguished army career in which he received the Efficiency Decoration, was promoted major and became area officer for Nelson. In November 1940 he reached retiring age and was posted to the retired list.

During most of his retirement he lived at Remuera, Auckland, and sailed his yacht *Rosemary*, a 26' "C" class keeler with an auxiliary engine. Between 1945 and 1957 he made eight or more trips to the Three Kings, about 60 km northwest of Cape Reinga, and on at least four of these he took Professor Baylis, head of Otago University's botany department. Despite bad weather and difficult landings, the expeditions were botanically rewarding. In 1950 Johnson made the first European landing on the group's West Island. He had a keen eye for the unusual, and found an unidentifiable tree with karaka-like leaves and large bunches of relatively small brilliant red fruits. The next year, in dense fog reminiscent of conditions at the time of the 1902 wreck of the *Elingamite*, he and Baylis found flowering and fruiting specimens; Geoff Baylis later described the tree as a new genus and species, *Elingamita johnsonii*. By December 1955, Johnson had achieved his objective of landing Baylis on all the forested islets of the group.

Magnus Earle Johnson left Auckland in about 1970 for Gisborne where he died on 28 May 1976, in his 92nd year. His yacht, which he named after his daughter, is commemorated in Rosemary Rock, one of the Princes Islands of the Three Kings group.