

# Robert Malcolm Laing (1865 – 1941)

Robert Malcolm Laing was born in 1865 at Caversham, Dunedin, the son of William Laing. A William Melville Laing had arrived at Port Chalmers in 1849 and taken up land at Halfway Bush, but he had died in 1860. Robert's father was almost certainly William Laing, seaman, who in 1860 was charged with absconding from the ship *Sevilla* and sentenced to eight weeks imprisonment with hard labour. By January 1862 he was employed as a landing waiter for the Dunedin Customs Department, and on 4 May 1864 he married Elizabeth Ogilvie Malcolm at St Andrews Parish Church, Dunedin. Robert Laing was educated at Caversham District School, where he excelled in reading, spelling and dictation, and at Otago Boys' High School. He was awarded a senior scholarship when about 14, entered Canterbury College in 1882 and graduated seven years later with MA (honours) and BSc (natural history, botany and biology). His career as a science teacher began in 1884 with a two-year stint at Timaru Boys' High School and ended in 1926 with his retirement after 38 years at Christchurch Boys' High School.

Parallel to the education of his students was the pursuit of his own scientific knowledge. He was elected a member of the Philosophical Institute of Canterbury in 1883 and held office many times. He worked steadily on his special interest, the local seaweeds, at that time an almost untouched field. The first of his more than twenty papers on marine algae was published in 1885, laying the foundation on which later students could build. He had a keen interest in the land flora, also. As well as his work on the vegetation of Banks Peninsula and the

Canterbury foothills, he made scientific trips further afield: an ascent of Mt Anglem, Stewart Island, with Cockayne, Gibbs and J Crosby Smith in 1907, an expedition to the subantarctic islands organised by the Philosophical Institute of Canterbury later that year, and a visit to Norfolk Island. Further papers were published, but it is for *Plants of New Zealand* (1906), written with Ellen Wright Blackwell, that Laing is best remembered. It ran to seven editions over the next 60 years.

In retirement Robert Laing lived in the Cashmere Hills, Christchurch, making frequent visits to his cottage at Arthur's Pass, and continuing his research. He died, unmarried, on 19 May 1941. Described as a kindly man, modest, generous and retiring, his stern classroom manner belied a desire to help and encourage young people. An interest in natural history put poet and writer Blanche Baughan in contact with Robert Laing, and botanists Donald Petrie and Victor Lindauer were among his more than 30 correspondents. His impressive algal herbarium is now housed at Landcare Research, Lincoln, on permanent loan from the University of Canterbury. Land and marine plants honouring him include *Euphrasia laingii* from the mountains of eastern Nelson-Marlborough and Canterbury, the genus *Laingia*, with *Laingia hookeri*, a bladed red alga found in Cook Strait, and two small seaweeds, *Gigartina laingii* and *Champia laingii*, both named by Victor Lindauer, one of the next generation of New Zealand phycologists.

## ***Champia laingii***

*Champia*, named for Louis Auguste Deschamps (1765–1842), a French surgeon-naturalist, is a genus of seaweeds with hollow, mucus-filled stems divided by septa. Of the 40 or so species scattered across subtropical to warm temperate regions, five are found in New Zealand. *Champia laingii* is a small prostrate seaweed up to 3 cm high, with irregularly branched finger-like stems, the internal diaphragms prominent and appearing as evenly spaced transverse stripes. Bright pink, blue or green in colour, and iridescent when in water, in New Zealand it is found on rock in sheltered intertidal pools on open coasts of the North Island, northern South Island and Chatham Islands.

PHOTO: Mike Wilcox

