

René Primevère Lesson (1794 – 1849)

Pierre Adolphe Lesson (1805 – 1888)

René Primevère Lesson and his younger brother Pierre Adolphe Lesson, the sons of a navy clerk of modest means, were born in Rochefort, France, on the Bay of Biscay.

René Lesson was a zoologist with a particular interest in birds, and was also skilled in botany. He became a naval surgeon and pharmacist, and in 1822 sailed from France on *La Coquille* under the command of Duperrey, on a 2½-year circumnavigation of southern waters. Dumont d'Urville was second-in-command and in charge of zoological and botanical collections, and was assisted by Lesson who, naturalist as well as doctor, made on the spot drawings of plants too delicate to be preserved. For two weeks in April 1824 they were at the Bay of Islands, New Zealand, but with the flowering season nearly over, there were few additions made to the herbarium. However, Lesson's section is the most comprehensive in the official publications of the voyage, and includes descriptions of Māori and missionary life, the landscape, wildlife and vegetation. His medical account and journal were published in 1829 and 1830, and he authored a prodigious amount of other writing on zoology, ornithology, botany and French antiquities. He attained high rank in the naval medical service, was made an officer of the Légion d'Honneur in 1847 and died in Rochefort in 1849.

La Coquille, renamed the *Astrolabe*, sailed south again in 1826 for further exploration and research, with Dumont d'Urville in command. Included in his

complement were some officers from the previous expedition, but not (as sometimes stated) René Primevère Lesson! It was his younger brother Adolphe who was surgeon/naturalist on the *Astrolabe*, in New Zealand waters from January to March 1827. From the large number of plants collected by Dumont d'Urville and Lesson at Tasman Bay, Hauraki Gulf and the Bay of Islands several new species were subsequently named.

The botanical culmination of both these visits was the publication in 1832 of *Essai d'une Flore de la Nouvelle-Zélande* by Adolphe Lesson and Achille Richard. Some of Forster's plants and manuscripts held in the Paris Museum, and plants first collected by Banks and Solander on Cook's voyages, were also included. Thomas Cheeseman noted that it "is the first publication dealing with the flora of New Zealand as a whole, and possesses considerable merit, so much so that it is to be regretted that so little use has been made of it by New Zealand botanists".

Adolphe Lesson embarked on at least two further voyages, and from 1843 to 1849 was chief of health in French Oceania. When he died in 1888, his library and writings were donated to the public library and his ethnographic collection to the geographical society (now the municipal museum) of Rochefort.

The Lesson plants, including the seaweed genus *Lessonia*, and a species of five-finger, *Pseudopanax lessonii*, are named after Pierre Adolphe Lesson.

Anemanthele lessoniana

Anemanthele ('windswept plume'), a monotypic genus of grass endemic to New Zealand, has had many name changes. Its only species is *Anemanthele lessoniana*. Hunangāmoho to the Māori, and commonly known as gossamer or wind grass, is not abundant in the wild, but is widely grown in gardens. It is a densely tufted, wiry perennial 60–80 cm tall and spreading with age. The leaves are flat, the blade twisted near the base, bringing the under surface upper-most. Flowering stems 30–150 cm long, with open drooping panicles, give the plant a light, feathery appearance. Unless growing in shade, it is a yellowish to golden-brown colour. It occurs in dry and open forest margins, scrub and cliff faces, sea level to montane, in eastern areas of the North and South Islands.

