

Marie-Anne Libert (1782 – 1865)

The twelfth of thirteen children, four of whom died at a young age, Marie-Anne Libert was born on 7 April 1782 in Malmédy, a small village near the present Belgian-German border. Her parents, Henri-Josef Libert, a tanner and property-owner, and his wife Marie-Jeanne-Bernadine (née Dubois), were literate, middle-class people who, perceiving Marie-Anne's intelligence and early interest in her surroundings, arranged for her to be educated. Her first teachers were the Sepulchrine nuns of Malmédy, a community in which her aunt had twice been Superior. When she was twelve, she was sent to a girls' boarding school in Prüm, 30 miles southeast of Malmédy, in the Rhineland, to learn German and arithmetic to facilitate her help in the family business. Her studies soon progressed to include algebra and geometry, as well as violin lessons from a Benedictine of the Prüm abbey.



Libertia micrantha

Seven species of the genus *Libertia* are recognised as endemic in New Zealand; another six or seven species are found in Australia, New Guinea and Chile. *Libertia micrantha* is a dainty iris up to 12 cm high. Slender rhizomes, lightly anchored by thin wiry roots, put forth erect to semi-erect fans of leaves with a dull lower surface. Relatively large white flowers up to 15 mm across are borne in sparse panicles from November to February. A widespread and locally common species of high rainfall forests and riverbanks, *Libertia micrantha*, mīkoikoi, favours montane habitats, often on fallen logs and root mounds, associated with mosses and lichens.

On her return to Malmédy she became absorbed in natural history, and during long walks in the countryside observed and collected specimens of plants and minerals. Her father's library was her only resource for their identification, but the scientific works were all in Latin – so she taught herself, and became proficient in the language. When she took her first plant collections to Alexandre Louis Lèjeune, a physician and prominent botanist in the region, he asked her to collect for him, and offered her the necessary references. She became an expert on the Malmédy flora, and many of the plants listed in his *Flore des Environs de Spa* were found by her.

In 1810 the celebrated Swiss botanist Auguste-Pyrame de Candolle, professor of botany at Montpellier University, made a scientific tour through Belgium, and Lèjeune and Marie-Anne accompanied him through the high country north of Malmédy. At de Candolle's suggestion, Marie-Anne began a study of the cryptogamic flora of the region, and early in her explorations discovered a new, almost microscopic genus of liverwort that she named *Lèjeunier*; it became the type for a tribe within the Jungmanniaceae family. Her first publication, a report of *Lèjeunier*, appeared in 1820, and her description of a new fungus genus she named *Desmazierella* after her contemporary, Lille mycologist Jean Baptiste Desmazières, came out in 1829. These, and other scholarly publications, enhanced the reputation she had acquired among European botanists, and led to a number of honours, including the naming in 1924 of the iris genus *Libertia* by the German botanist Sprengel when he was sent herbarium specimens from one of Cook's voyages.

At the age of 55, deciding she was too old for plant collecting, she diverted her focus to her other long-time interests, local history and archaeology, but continued to guide visiting botanists on plant excursions. Her scientific work did not prevent her from doing her share of the work in the family business, which she and her brothers inherited and expanded. Only three of the nine surviving Libert children married, and Marie-Anne, a sister and four brothers lived a simple life in the family home. Upright in character, and unwilling to accept injustice, Marie-Anne Libert was active in civic and community affairs and was always staunchly Belgian, in spite of changing political boundaries. She died on 15 January 1865, after three days of illness, in her 83rd year.