

Ruth Mason (1913 – 1990)

The eldest of four children, Ruth Mason was born in Auckland on 7 November 1913, the daughter of Dulcia Martina Rockell and her husband Henry Greathead Rex Mason, a barrister and solicitor. Rex Mason was active in the early days of the Labour movement and later became a cabinet minister in the first Labour government. The family lived in Pukekohe until 1921, and then moved to Epsom where Ruth continued her education at St Cuthbert's College, leaving as dux to study at Auckland University College in 1931. By the time she graduated BA in 1934 and BSc in 1937 her interests were focused on botany. She went on to complete her MSc with a thesis on *Griselinia lucida*, graduating in 1938. Like many other botany students, she was a keen member of the Auckland University Field Club.

In 1939, after a year as a student at Auckland Teachers' Training College, she accepted a position at DSIR's Botany Division in Wellington. Her first professional task was to establish a seed herbarium and to develop work in seeds and seedlings under the guidance of botanist Lucy Moore. Research into the gut contents of feral animals and identification of plant remains in moa gizzards led to her participation in the 1949 Fiordland expedition to study food preferences of wapiti and deer.

During a wartime investigation of fibre quality in linen flax (*Linum usitatissimum*), she lived temporarily at Timaru, and in her spare time explored the botany of the area, including Washdyke Lagoon. Thus began her major professional interest in the taxonomy and ecology

of water plants for which she is probably best known. In 1949 she began a series of expeditions throughout New Zealand, collecting and documenting some 13,500 specimens. She moved with the Botany Division from Wellington to Christchurch in 1954, and then to Lincoln in 1960.

In 1961 Lucy Moore described *Hebe pauciramosa* var. *masoniae* honouring Ruth Mason, who originally collected it near the head of the Cobb Valley, Nelson, in 1946 and recognised some of its distinguishing features. *Laccaria masoniae*, a light mauve gilled fungus of southern beech forests, was described in 1964 by mycologist Greta Stevenson. In the 1960s a visit by Professor R L D Wood of Rhode Island, USA, rejuvenated Ruth's interest in the fresh water algae, the stoneworts, and led to their collaboration in a manuscript and publication of *Nitella hookeri* var. *masoniae* in 1977.

During her career she wrote numerous articles and reports, and fascinated by words and their usage, she corresponded with lexicographer Dr Harry Horsman, editor of the *Dictionary of New Zealand English* (1997). Her extensive library reflected her many interests and the organisations she supported, especially those associated with tramping, music, history, botany and ecology. After her official retirement in 1971 yoga became an absorbing interest. Ruth Mason died in Christchurch Hospital on 14 May 1990 from injuries sustained when struck by a car on a pedestrian crossing near her home in Prebbleton, where she had lived for nearly thirty years.

Hebe masoniae

Hebe (Greek goddess of youth) is the largest genus in our native flora. Most are shrubs, but others reach the size of small trees. Leaves, in opposite pairs, are arranged in four ranks; flowers, mostly white and with four petals, sometimes have brightly coloured anthers. *Hebe masoniae*, formerly described as a variety of *Hebe pauciramosa*, is a shrub up to a metre tall. The leafy branches are often quadrangular; the leaves, concave and glossy, are sharply keeled the full length beneath. From November to January plants produce terminal clusters of white or mauve tinged flowers. *Hebe masoniae* is found in tussock grassland, scrub or bog in the mountains of Northwest Nelson.

PHOTO: David Lyttle

