

# Frances Mary Young Mason (1882 – 1932)

Frances Mary Young Mason, née Wood, the eldest daughter of Richard Francis Marmaduke Wood and Ellen Lingen Burton of Shropshire, England, was born on 12 November 1882. Both parents were from wealthy families: the Burtons were descended from landed Shropshire gentry, and the Woods had significant property and mercantile interests in Bermuda. Her father was born in Kent, educated at Eton and served in the Northamptonshire Militia. In about 1880 he purchased Belswardyne Hall, near Cressage, and moved there with his growing family. By the turn of the century Richard and Ellen had three daughters and five sons. Frances was almost certainly privately educated, as were her siblings.

Her uncle could have encouraged her interest in botany and decision to travel to New Zealand. Richard Francis Lingen Burton had arrived here in 1881 with his cousin Herbert Pryce to learn farming, and later took up land at Apiti. In 1902, after succeeding to the family seat, he returned to Longner Hall and divided his time between the Shropshire estate and his New Zealand run, his interests in the insect life of Shropshire and the cultivation of New Zealand plants, including orchids, from seed. Frances may even have accompanied him on one of his later visits.

At St Johns Church, Feilding on 20 November 1907 she married Edward Laidley Mason. Born in Tasmania on 24 January 1873, Edward was the son of Archdeacon Alfred Nathaniel Mason and Clara Emma Atkinson, and had been on the Feilding staff of the Bank of Australasia for several years. The bride was given away by Herbert Pryce, then farming at Rangitawa. Some time later Mason was transferred to Dunedin and then to New Plymouth,

where Frances was employed in the native plant department of Duncan and Davies Nurseries. In 1916, after the tragic deaths of her two youngest brothers in the war, and her husband's departure for the front, she went to England, and while there worked for six months at Kew Gardens.

Edward rejoined the bank after his discharge, and while he was away on relieving work Frances visited friends at Tangitere, in Hawkes Bay. The Auckland Museum Library holds the plant list she made there, and 25 letters she wrote to Cheeseman, mostly during 1919–1920 when the Masons were at Manaia. Her collecting, mainly from the coast, included the small plantain described by Cheeseman in 1921 as a new species, *Plantago masoniae*, with the citation, "I have pleasure in associating the plant with the name of its discoverer, to whom I am much indebted for information respecting the vegetation of south-western Taranaki."

When ill health led to Edward's resignation from the bank at the end of 1920, he and Frances took up a small farm in Westown, New Plymouth, naming it Belswardyne after the family seat in Shropshire, and lived there for the next twelve years. Frances had little time for plant hunting, but enjoyed her garden and patch of bush, her friendships and contacts, voluntary church work and membership of the Auckland Institute. The Masons made a final trip to England together, arriving at Southampton on 30 June 1932. Five weeks later, on 8 August 1932, Frances died following an operation at the Royal Ear and Throat Hospital, London, at just 49 years of age. It seems that there were no children of the marriage.



## *Plantago triandra*

*Plantago* (Latin planta 'flat', or 'the sole of the foot', named for the leaves lying flat) are mostly annual or perennial herbs with the leaves on a rootstock. Eleven species are native to New Zealand. *Plantago masoniae*, a small rosette plantain with fleshy, broad and sometimes deeply notched leaves, often with black blotches, is now treated as a synonym of *Plantago triandra*, a widespread species found from coastal to alpine habitats up to 1500 m above sea level in North, South and Stewart Islands. The tiny flowers are borne deep within the leaves, and capsules, also tiny, are one per stalk, which elongates only shortly with maturity.