

# Rossell Henry Michie (1894 – 1987)

**B**orn on 7 September 1894 at Okaihau, Northland, Ross Michie (pronounced Mickie) was the third son in a family of two girls and three boys. His father Charles, a bushman, was an offshoot of Waipu Nova Scotians; his mother was Cecilia Margaret Rose, a granddaughter of Richard Matthews, who came to New Zealand in 1835 to join his older brother, the Reverend Joseph Matthews.

Ross was still a baby when his mother took him to Awanui where she was postmistress for a number of years, and Ross was educated at Awanui School. He left at fifteen to become an apprentice bootmaker in an Auckland factory, working there for six years. During the First World War he served overseas in the New Zealand Artillery. On his return he took up a soldier's settlement grant near Kaitaia, and purchasing additional land as it became available, developed it into a dairy unit. He married Kakahi-born Margaret Barnet whose father, too, was a bushman; they had a son and two daughters, and when their son Stan married in 1954, Ross retired from farming to the home he built on the outskirts of Kaitaia.

Ross Michie came from a family with wide interests. His elder brother Charles was a farmer, mechanical engineer and noted astronomer. The early botanist Richard (R H) Matthews, son of Joseph Matthews, was a relative. Like Matthews, Ross Michie roamed the Far North, finding many new or rare species and developing the extensive knowledge of the flora and wildlife for which he became renowned. In 1944 he undertook a botanical survey with fellow enthusiasts Beddie, Potts and Finlayson, and the

following year his son Stan accompanied him to observe the birds. He located colonies of rare flax snails – the species *Placostylus ambagiosus michiei* was named after him – and he collected kauri gum, shells and other specimens.

His love of nature extended to concern for its conservation. He joined the fight to save Waipoua Forest, and propagated and distributed rare plants to help ensure their survival. In 1949 he was made a fellow of the Royal Institute of Horticulture (NZ), and in 1957 he gave the Banks Lecture on “Distinctive Features of the Far North.” He was associated with Forest and Bird, and Wellington and Auckland Botanical Societies, and observations from his 1962 visit to the Three Kings were published in the latter's newsletter. Indoor and outdoor bowls were other keen interests, and he served on the executives of each discipline.

As advancing age made wilderness expeditions more difficult, he utilised his surplus energy and creativity to decorate his house, garden and concrete pots with shells, tiles and rainbow colours – a daring form of folk art that had a compelling attraction for visitors. He had strong and unconventional opinions that he had no hesitation in expressing, but when he trusted people he was always helpful. Predeceased by his wife three months earlier, Ross Michie died, aged 93, on 27 October 1987. Although the plant he rediscovered at North Cape has been re-classified and no longer bears his name, many continue to think of it as *Pittosporum michiei*.



## ***Pittosporum pimeleoides***

*Pittosporum pimeleoides* subsp. *majus* (synonym *Pittosporum michiei*) grows only on the serpentine Surville Cliffs of North Cape. Thomas Cheeseman first found it in 1896 and it wasn't seen again until located by Ross Michie in 1945. It is an almost vine-like plant, which scrambles for support through the surrounding vegetation, and has stiff obovate-elliptic leaves, usually in whorls. Flowers (July–August) are fragrant, the petals yellow with a central crimson streak, male and female on different plants; the male flowers are usually in clusters of 5-6 and the female solitary. The fruit splits into two to show the black sticky seeds of irregular shape in yellow to dark orange pith. Although not threatened it is listed as range restricted, due to the small area it occupies.