

## Isobel Murray Morice (1909 – 2003)

Isobel Murray Morice was the daughter and granddaughter of well-educated Scottish immigrant families. Her maternal grandfather, Caithness-born Presbyterian minister John Ross, and his wife Williamina Duff Wallace, established a school in the Turakina manse in 1875. At first co-educational, it became renowned for its high quality of scholarship, and later became the Turakina Maori Girls' School. The eleven Ross children all made good use of their education at the manse, and Mary Christina, the second daughter, was a governess before her marriage.

After the death in Scotland of James Morice, a medical officer for the East India Company, and the death by drowning of his eldest son, the Rev. George Morice at Balclutha in 1884, remaining members of the family came to New Zealand where three other sons had already settled in the Gisborne district. The youngest sibling James Murray Morice (1861–1930), born in Elgin, Scotland, and educated there and at Edinburgh University, graduated BSc in 1887 and gained field experience before following them in 1888. He obtained work on road and general location surveys with the Lands and Survey Department until 1902 when he became assistant city engineer at Wellington, specialising in water supply and sewerage works.

In early May 1908 the wedding of James Murray Morice (aged 47) and Mary Christina Ross (aged 36) was celebrated in the Turakina Presbyterian Church. Isobel, their only child, was born in June the following year. It has not been ascertained where she received her early education, and it is feasible that she may have been home-schooled. Drawn towards chemistry she graduated BSc at Victoria University College in 1931 and continued her doctoral research at King's College (London), transferring to Durham University during the Blitz, and completing her thesis in New Zealand (1941–1947). Her work in the Department of Agriculture's chemical laboratory and DSIR fats laboratory included research on triterpenes, facial eczema in sheep, butterfat, shark liver oil, rapeseed, apple and other seed fats, and the publication of scientific papers on her findings.

Outside the laboratory she was an enthusiastic botanist and member of the Wellington Botanical Society, serving as secretary for 13 years and president for a term. She seldom missed a meeting or field trip, and was sometimes accompanied by a Nepalese protégé from her travels abroad. In 1966 her friend Lucy Moore named *Astelia nivicola* var. *moriceae* in her honour, "In acknowledgment of the work of Dr Isobel Morice who first recognised these

plants as distinct; she has searched specifically for *astelia* inflorescences in many remote areas, and has contributed plants for growing, herbarium specimens and invaluable field notes relating to a number of species."

After her official retirement, Isobel worked in the office of the Royal Society of New Zealand, preparing subject indexes of the society's transactions. Until her last few years at Malvina Major Retirement Village she lived in the family home at 40 Wadestown Road. A local identity and long-time worshipper at the Wadestown Presbyterian Church, Dr Isobel Morice died on 18 June 2003. She was 94 years old.



Isobel Morice, Castle Hill, 1993

### ***Astelia nivicola* var. *moriceae***

Containing about 25 species around the Pacific Ocean, but centred in New Zealand, *Astelia* ('without a stem') are mostly terrestrial plants, ranging from large flax-like tufts to small turf-forming mats. *Astelia nivicola* var. *nicicola* ('growing at high altitude') is widespread in South Island high rainfall areas, in snow tussock herbfield, especially near its upper limit, whereas *Astelia nivicola* var. *moriceae* ('after Dr I Morice') is found only under beech forest near the treeline on cold facings, in Nelson, Westland and Fiordland. In some areas, *Astelia nivicola* var. *moriceae* can be distinguished from the superficially similar and equally abundant *Aciphylla nervosa* by its rich brown velvety abaxial (underside) hairs.