

Ferdinand Jakob Heinrich Mueller (1825 –1896)

Born in Rostock, Germany, on 30 June 1825, Ferdinand Jakob Heinrich Müller was the only surviving son of Frederick Müller, commissioner of customs, and his wife Louise, née Mertens. After the early death of both his parents and older sister from tuberculosis, he was apprenticed to a pharmacist in Husum, Schleswig-Holstein, and became an ardent and knowledgeable botanist. He completed his pharmacy qualification at the University of Kiel (1845–1846) and was awarded a PhD for his thesis on the flora of southern Schleswig. A chance meeting with Ludwig Preiss, who had spent the years 1838–42 collecting natural history specimens in Australia, attracted Mueller to the potential health benefits and botanising opportunities of that country, and he and his two surviving sisters migrated to Adelaide in 1847. While working occasionally as a pharmacist, Mueller devoted most of his time to investigating the South Australian flora and writing papers on his findings. A farming venture was abandoned because it interfered with his botanical work!

In 1852 he became a naturalised British subject, anglicised his name and moved to Melbourne. The next year, on the recommendation of Sir William Hooker, he was appointed government botanist by the first lieutenant governor of Victoria, Charles Joseph La Trobe. He travelled widely in Victoria collecting specimens, and sent duplicates to Joseph Hooker at Kew. He also reported on the possible medicinal value of some plants and the commercial potential of Victorian trees. As botanist to the North Australia Exploring Expedition (1855–1856) he travelled 5000 miles in 16 months, and of nearly 2000 specimens observed, 800 were new to Australian botany. After his return to Melbourne in

1857 he was appointed director of the botanical gardens, but in 1873 differences of opinion over the objects of the gardens led to his replacement. Mueller promoted explorations of New Guinea and Antarctica, and supported botanical expeditions and collection in the colonies. After temporary trade was established between Melbourne and the Chatham Islands, a few plants trickled across to Mueller in 1858, but the first major botanical exploration of the Chatham Islands was not until 1863 when Henry Travers spent six months there. From the 129 species, including ferns, mosses, lichens and algae, sent to the Melbourne Museum, Mueller compiled and published his *Vegetation of the Chatham Islands* in 1864.

Mueller was dedicated to his work and had little private life. He was a prolific writer; his correspondence is said to have reached over 300,000 letters in his lifetime, and he published over 800 papers and major works on Australian botany, much of it still relevant. Among his many honours was the use of 'von' in his name (an indication of nobility) in 1867, followed by a hereditary baronetcy in 1871, granted by King Karl and Queen Olga of Württemberg, and reciprocated in 1872 with the naming of Mt Olga (Kata Tjuta) in central Australia. In 1879 he was awarded a British knighthood.

At a time when women had little access to science, Mueller had a network of lady collectors and painters (but always used male illustrators for his publications), and although twice engaged, he never married. Baron Sir Ferdinand von Mueller died in South Yarra, Melbourne, on 10 October 1896, survived by his sister Clara Wehl.



Colobanthus muelleri

Colobanthus (Greek *kolobus* 'docked, maimed', imperfect, because it lacks petals) is a southern hemisphere genus of more than 20 species. *Colobanthus muelleri*, described and named by Kirk from the Chatham Islands type specimen, is a small rosette-forming plant with stiff outward curving pointed leaves barely 1–2 cm long, forming shiny green tufts. In summer a short upright stalk bears a single insignificant green flower without petals. The pointed seed capsule is more obvious, and when its five yellow lobes have split and the seeds are released, the purple interior is exposed. It is a fairly common plant of coastal cliffs and fixed shingle herbfields in the North Island from South Taranaki and the East Coast southwards, and South, Stewart and Chatham islands.