

Robert Murrell (1865 – 1943)

The Murrells of Manapouri had their origins in Kent, England. Robert Murrell, known in later years as “Old Bob” to distinguish him from his son, “Young Bob”, was born in 1818 in Tunbridge Wells, and is thought to have spent his early years there. He is known to have gone to Australia, and may have served in the household of Sir John Franklin, governor of Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania) from 1836 to 1843, but this has not been verified. In about 1854 he married Elizabeth Anderson, and in the early 1860s he travelled to the deep south of New Zealand where he worked as a shepherd for several months before returning to Australia to collect her.

Their first venture after moving to New Zealand in 1865 was to provide lodgings for waggoners and travellers at Stag Creek, north of Dipton, in Southland. Robert (“Young Bob”) was born there on 17 December 1865 and his brother Alexander in 1869. In the late sixties while working as a boundary rider at Manapouri Station, Murrell saw the need for a hotel or guesthouse in the district, and in 1870 built the Takitimu Hotel on the back road to Te Anau, near Redcliff. After the death of Elizabeth in 1882, and Robert in 1896, “Young Bob” sold the hotel. (It burnt down in 1902 and the site, still marked by shelter trees, is known as Bob’s Corner.)

On 13 December 1885 in Invercargill, young Bob Murrell married Margaret Scott, the daughter of James Scott, his father’s companion on his first visit to New Zealand, and Elizabeth Looly. Margaret was born in Oreti in 1866. In 1889 Murrell bought the guesthouse at Manapouri and the launch *Titiroa* for service on the lake. When journalist James Richardson visited Manapouri and Te Anau in 1891 he noted that Robert Murrell was “building a first-rate eight-roomed house for the accommodation of tourists”, and that he had two boats for the use of visitors. Murrell soon established himself and his growing family at Grand View House, built for him by George Dore of Mossburn. Murrell hospitality continues there today.

Robert Murrell played a large part in the exploration of Fiordland. In 1888 during a search for missing Professor Mainwaring-Brown he ascended what was later named Wilmot Pass. The following year Richard Henry and Robert Murrell pioneered a route from Lake Te Anau to George Sound, and from 1894 to 1896 he accompanied surveyor Thomas McKenzie in the Spey and Seaforth areas. He was appointed chief guide on the Milford Track in 1906, and four years later took over management of the government’s new lake steamer *Manurere*. His knowledge of the local flora and fauna was often sought by visiting scientists, and a hebe discovered in the Kepler Mountains by George Simpson and John Scott Thomson in 1942 was named after him.

Margaret died in 1929 and Robert Murrell in 1945. They had eight children – a daughter and seven sons who carried on the family tradition of hospitality and exploration. Their first-born, John Robert, a distinguished mountain guide, was killed in action in 1918.



Hebe murrellii

Members of the genus *Hebe* (or *Veronica*), the largest in our native flora, are subshrubs, shrubs or small trees with opposite leaves arranged in four rows. *Hebe murrellii* is a spreading or trailing subshrub with ascending to erect branches up to 20 cm tall. The greenish to pale brown branchlets have a red band at the nodes. Spikes 1–3 cm long of white flowers with two protruding purple anthers appear from December to March. *Hebe murrellii* is confined to Fiordland and western Southland mountains, usually on shady rock ledges and loose stony debris at 1300–1750 m.