

Lancelot William McCaskill (1900 – 1985)

Lancelot (or Lancecot) William McCaskill the son of Janet, née Bissett, and Daniel McCaskill, was born at Winchester, South Canterbury, on 8 May 1900. His father, a wool scourer, died when Lance was five. After attending Winchester School and Timaru Boys' High School, Lance studied for a diploma at Canterbury Agricultural College, Lincoln, and then went to Christchurch Training College. In the early 1920s, as an itinerant agricultural instructor with the Auckland Education Board, he promoted the study of native plants, and distributed free plants from the Thames Valley joint venture nursery in which he was involved. In Hokitika on 19 August 1925 he married Isobel Murray Aitken, a teacher.

Between 1928 and 1944 he taught agriculture and biology at the Dunedin and Christchurch Teachers' Training Colleges, and established a teaching garden of more than 400 native plant species in Christchurch. After part-time study, he graduated Master of Agricultural Science at Otago University in 1930. He helped set up the first Young Farmers' Club at Palmerston, Otago, in 1932, and later became the movement's patron. Work on deer damage in Otago forests made him aware of soil erosion problems, and while in the United States in 1939 on a Carnegie fellowship, he studied rural education and soil conservation. These interests remained his focus during the rest of his working life at the Canterbury Agricultural College (later Lincoln College) from 1944 to 1965, and in his long and active retirement.

A national figure in the area of soil conservation, McCaskill served on the North Canterbury Catchment Board for 18 years, the Soil Conservation and Rivers Control Council from 1952 to 1957 and the Forestry Development Council from 1969 to 1971. He also wrote numerous books, pamphlets and articles, and was a frequent newspaper correspondent. His major books, *Molesworth* and *Hold this Land*, were published in 1969 and 1973.

His passion for native plants took a practical form in the regeneration and management of Riccarton Bush, and his remarkable conservation effort in the early 1950s to save the Castle Hill buttercup (*Ranunculus paucifolius*). Although the plant was later found to be not as unique as originally thought, the fenced Lance McCaskill Reserve within Kura Tawhiti Conservation Area has also protected other small, rare and endangered plants. In his early years as a member of the National Parks Authority his emphasis on the scientific role of the parks led to conflict with some park users, but realistic and determined, he would not compromise his values.

Lance McCaskill ("Mac" or "McTussock" to his colleagues and friends) died on 9 August 1985 in Christchurch, survived by two sons and a daughter. His wife had died in 1980. Internationally recognised by the Peter Scott Award for conservation merit in 1964, his work was acknowledged in New Zealand with a CBE in 1969, and a number of academic and professional awards. The threatened Canterbury limestone plant *Heliohebe maccaskillii*, which he discovered in the Weka Pass area in October 1937, honours him.

Heliohebe maccaskillii

The endemic New Zealand genus *Heliohebe* (Greek *helio* 'sun' or 'sun-loving hebe') of five species and four sub-species, was segregated from *Hebe* in 1993. *Heliohebe maccaskillii* is confined to limestone, and is typically a low shrub spreading to 1 metre wide. Prostrate to decumbent semi-divaricating branches, with small weakly-toothed obtuse-tipped leaves, produce a profusion of white or mauve flowers during October and November. Nationally endangered, it is confined to eight sites in the Waipara area of North Canterbury, and is threatened by competition from weeds, drought, limestone quarrying, land development and spray drift.

