

Alexander McKay (1841 – 1917)

Alexander McKay was born on 12 April 1841 in the isolated village of Carsphairn in the south Scottish uplands. His father William Sloan McKay, a shepherd's son, became a joiner and wheelwright when he married Agnes McClellan. Alexander, the third of their ten children, lived with his paternal grandparents during his early years; he later recalled making his first geological observations at the pool where his grandmother scoured wool. An indifferent scholar at the village school but an avid reader, he excelled at scripture history. His formal education ended at the age of eleven when he began summer work as a cowherd and attended school only in winter. In the evenings he knitted stockings.

He emigrated at the age of 22 and arrived at Campbelltown (Bluff) on the *Helenslee* in September 1863. During his first year in New Zealand he walked the length of the South Island, earning barely enough, mainly from gold prospecting, to survive. In the diggings of outback Queensland the following year he got malaria, but little else! In 1866, his sights on the Otago goldfields again, he made an incredible winter traverse of the McKenzie Country on foot, and at Lake Ohau Station found shelter, work – and a wife! He married English-born Susannah Barnes on 24 August 1868, at Dunedin, where her sister lived. The next year their first son was born.

With little work available, McKay returned to prospecting, and in 1870 at Ashley Gorge a chance meeting with Canterbury provincial geologist Julius Haast changed his life. He was offered employment as a general field assistant, and was soon excavating moa bones and collecting saurian (reptile) fossils for the Canterbury Museum. Although his views frequently differed from those of Haast, he was

recommended to James Hector, then director of the New Zealand Geological Survey and the Colonial Museum. In early 1873 McKay collected fossils at Amuri Bluff for both Haast and Hector, and he accompanied a large consignment to Wellington. Susannah joined him there a month later, and gave birth to their second son the following day.

In 1876 McKay was promoted to field geologist, and by 1885 he had made major surveys throughout the country, usually alone, but on an arduous traverse of the lower South Island his colleagues James Park and John Buchanan accompanied him. Transferred to the mines department in 1892 and designated government geologist in 1897, he held the position until his retirement in 1908. Despite failing health, the death of his wife in 1906 and his remarriage less than a year later to Adelaide Dootson, he continued writing and enjoying music. On 8 July 1917, exhausted, he slipped into a coma and died.

His reports are still valuable reference documents, and his findings on earthquake fault movements and the uplift of mountains pioneered modern earth science in New Zealand. He was elected a fellow of the Geological Society of London in 1888. During the 1880s he also expanded his interest in photography, and made the world's first telephoto lens. His name is perpetuated by a waterfall in Otago, the Alexander McKay Cliffs in Antarctica, two buildings in Wellington, the McKay Hammer Award and an alpine plant, *Argyrotegium mackayi*. Described as *Raoulia m'kayi* by John Buchanan in 1882, it was "Named in compliment to Mr. A. McKay of the Geological Survey, as a successful collector, who discovered the present species on Black Peak Range, South Island, at 5,000' altitude".



Argyrotegium mackayi

The small Australasian genus *Argyrotegium* (Greek *argyreon* 'silver'; *tegium*, 'little mat') was created in 2003 by J M Ward and I Breitwieser for two mat-forming species (*Gnaphalium* and then *Euchiton*) that have long puzzled taxonomists. Two of the three New Zealand species reach the alpine zone. A perennial herb with creeping and rooting stems, *Argyrotegium mackayi* forms small, loose mats up to 20 cm or more across, with soft, overlapping, pale grey to almost white leaves. The small, usually single, flower heads are buried at the stem tips and emerge on stalks as the fruits develop. It is widespread from the Ruahine Range southwards, and also parts of Australia, in wet alpine and subalpine areas.