

# Joseph Hobson McMahon (1874 – 1948)

Joseph McMahon, the second son of Patrick (Peter) McMahon and his wife Mary Blaymires, was born at Kenepuru Sound, Marlborough. His father, from County Monaghan in Ireland, had been to sea, deserted and spent time in the New South Wales and Victorian gold diggings, before coming to New Zealand in 1857. He is believed to have purchased Taradale at Kenepuru Head in 1860, settling there permanently in 1863 and marrying two years later. Joseph grew up with his three brothers and six sisters at Taradale, and spent much of his life there. By the turn of the century the original bush-covered holding, bound by several miles of shoreline, was largely cleared, with several hundred acres of fertile level land and about 1500 acres of rugged country carrying around 1500 sheep and a small herd of cattle. The homestead, surrounded by native trees, was picturesquely situated at the head of the bay.

A shy and isolated young man, but obviously intelligent and observant, Joseph McMahon was befriended by Joshua Rutland (1836–1915), a keen botanist and anthropologist, who lived some distance away, up the Pelorus River opposite present-day Canvastown. In February 1893 Joseph told his friend of several mounds of clay, supposedly graves, on a steep fern-clad hillside at Kenepuru. Their subsequent investigation of the mounds disclosed not the bones they expected but a quantity of ashes and charcoal indicative of cremation sites. Later questioning of several Māori confirmed that cremation had sometimes been practised in the past, to prevent the bones of their people being carried away by enemies and converted into fishhooks.

The following summer, in January 1894, McMahon collected two alpine daisies on Mt Stokes, the 1203-metre peak to the north of Kenepuru Head. Rutland sent them to Thomas Kirk, who named them *Celmisia rutlandii* and *Celmisia macmahonii*. In 1896 Kirk visited Mt Stokes, probably guided by McMahon, who had earlier supplied him with a chickweed from the locality. This, too, was a new species, which Kirk called *Stellaria minuta*. After Kirk's death in 1898 McMahon sent valuable material to Cheeseman, Cockayne and Petrie. He also corresponded with Charles Chilton, professor of biology at Canterbury College, and sent him specimens of *Crustacea* including, in 1902, an isopod found with nests of ants in the Rai Valley.

McMahon continued collecting for many years, extending his range, adding new locations and at least one more species (*Carex raoulii*) to the New Zealand flora. By 1940 he had retired to Picton, where two of his sisters lived, but still spent time away at Taradale. He died in a Nelson hospital on 8 April 1948 at the age of 74, and was buried in the Picton cemetery. Professor Arnold Wall, who collected on Mt Stokes in 1922 under McMahon's guidance, described him as an odd eccentric character, but an active and intelligent collector, "only the cowman on a small dairy farm, but with a good assortment of botanical books in his whare". Arthur Healy, scrub-cutting in the sounds during his 1938–1939 summer vacation from Massey College, visited McMahon, and remembered him as a courteous, quiet, kind gentleman, who generously shared his knowledge of the Marlborough plants. At least one local resident dismissed McMahon as mad: "He goes off into the mountains to collect flowers!"

## *Celmisia macmahonii*

*Celmisia macmahonii* var. *macmahonii* is a distinctive sub-shrub with branched stems that form cushions up to 60 cm across. The narrow, pointed leaves in rosettes at the branch ends are densely covered with silvery to buff silky hairs that turn brown when dried. The flower stems, 8–15 cm long, are covered in similar hairs and terminate in a small daisy flower head 2–4 cm across. The only known populations are on Mt Stokes and nearby Mt McMahon in the Marlborough Sounds, where it grows on ledges and crevices on bluffs and rock outcrops near the tree line. Feral goats threaten its survival.

