

Donald Petrie (1846 – 1925)

Donald Petrie was born on 7 September 1846 in the parish of Edinkillie, Morayshire, Scotland, the son of Alexander Petrie, a farmer, and his wife Isabelle Morrison. After his education at Aberdeen Grammar School, Donald studied at the University of Aberdeen, graduating MA in 1867. He taught briefly at Glasgow, and later that year took up an appointment at Scotch College, Melbourne, Australia, where his uncle, Alexander Morrison, was principal. Petrie's manner and teaching skills were impressive; in 1873 he applied successfully for the position of inspector of schools in the province of Otago, New Zealand, and from 1894 until his retirement in 1919 he was chief inspector of schools for the Auckland Education Board.

He had long been interested in botany, geology and chemistry, and in 1874 became a member of the Otago Institute, where G M Thomson and A C Purdie, both founding members of the Dunedin Field Naturalists' Club, encouraged his interest in botany. In 1878 he presented a paper to the institute, the first of over 60 that he was to publish. His duties as a school inspector allowed him many opportunities to search for new plants by the roadsides as he travelled throughout Otago, and in his spare time he explored the mountains. Further afield, his quest took him to Stewart Island with Thomson, to Westland and Canterbury with Cockayne, with James Adams to Hicks Bay and Hikurangi Mountain, and the Tararua Range with Bernard Aston. He was a thorough collector, and continued searching for plants until a year before his death.

Most of Petrie's papers were descriptions of previously unknown plants, about 180 species or varieties in total; he was particularly interested in grasses and sedges, and became an authority on them. He was associated with several scientific institutions, and received high honours, including his election in 1886 as a fellow of the Linnean Society, and in 1910 one of the twenty original fellows of the New Zealand Institute. In 1924 he was awarded the Hector Memorial Medal and Prize for his contribution to furthering knowledge of the New Zealand flora. Petrie deplored the failure of New Zealand museums to establish comprehensive collections of native and introduced plants, and in 1922 he gave the Dominion Museum his herbarium of some 1800 species from nearly 15,000 localities.

Petrie married Mary Cherrett at Thorndon, Wellington, in 1882; they had two sons and one daughter. After the family moved to Auckland, he purchased farmland at Waingoro near Raglan for his sons; he sold this in 1919 and bought the property Te Whio near Wellsford. He continued searching for plants until a year before his death at his home in Auckland on 1 September 1925; his wife Mary died at Auckland on 20 March 1953.

Donald Petrie is commemorated in the botanical names of a distinctive alpine scabweed, *Raoulia petriensis*, described by Thomas Kirk in 1877, and at least twelve plants with the specific epithet *petriei*.

Raoulia petriensis

Raoulia is a New Zealand genus of mat and cushion plants, most of which reach the alpine zone. *Raoulia petriensis* is an unusual, loosely cushion-forming, almost shrubby plant with branched stems often trailing downhill, and short upright leafy branches that form loose mats up to 30 cm or more across. Minute golden-green leaves are tightly packed, with thickened and recurved tips that give a corrugated texture and appearance to the stems. Prominent white heads 6–7 mm across conceal the leaves at the tip of the flowering branches. Often rare, yet in places locally abundant, it may be found among frost-shattered rocks at 1400–1700 m on the higher greywacke mountains of South Canterbury and North Otago.

