

# Thomas Shearman Ralph (1812 –1891)

**T**homas Shearman Ralph was born in 1812 at Arrungabad in India, where his father was government resident. He gained his MRCS England (1836) and LSA (1840), and for ten years was surgeon to the West London Lying-In Institution, and to the Dorcas Society, Long Acre, London. In 1842 he was elected an associate of the Linnean Society of London; his membership record notes that he had a considerable collection of East Indian plants, and that some of his New Zealand plants were at Kew Gardens. His early scientific writing includes two manuscripts on the structure of plants (1846) held by the Linnean Society, and *Elementary Botany for the Use of Beginners*, first published in London in 1849.

Mr Thomas S Ralph (surgeon), Mrs Ralph and three children were listed as passengers on the 574-ton *Cresswell*, which arrived in Auckland from London on 20 March 1851. They settled in Wellington; their house on The Terrace, shown in an early water-colour by John Pearse, was one of a succession acquired for their growing family – their second and third daughters were born in Wellington. Dr Ralph practised medicine and became an active member of the scientific community. He joined and became secretary of the newly formed but short-lived New Zealand Society, forerunner of the New Zealand Institute, and read to members his paper on the peculiarities of *Nitella*. He gave lectures on a wide range of scientific topics, his papers on the katipo (1856) and the tree ferns of New Zealand (1858) were published in journals of the Linnean Society, and a plant he collected in the Patea area became the type specimen of *Pittosporum ralphii*. When requested, he assessed rock samples for traces of gold. He was also one of the first lithographers and etchers to work in New Zealand; his work in this field included illustrations for Māori versions of *Robinson Crusoe* (1852) and *Pilgrim's Progress* (1854), a plan of Wellington and landscapes of the burgeoning city.

In early 1853 Dr Ralph went to Melbourne, and was away for five months. In May 1857 he gave notice that he was about to leave the colony, but it is unknown when he actually left. He returned to Melbourne, to live at South Yarra, Carlton, and for more than twenty years at Kew, now an affluent suburb of Melbourne. In 1859 he joined the Philosophical Institute of Victoria (which became the Royal Society of Victoria), and was a member for around 30 years.

An ardent microscopist, he founded and was first president of the Microscopical Society of Victoria and was curator of the pathological collection at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, resigning to return to medicine as surgeon at the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne. His *Elementary Botany* was republished in Melbourne in 1862, and several papers on medical topics and on aspects of botanical anatomy – mainly of exotic plants – were published in the Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria. Predeceased by his wife Anne in 1882, Thomas Shearman Ralph continued in active practice until about five years before his death at his stepson's home in Carlton, on 22 December 1891, in his 80th year.



## ***Pittosporum ralphii***

*Pittosporum* is a genus of about 200 species of mainly Australasian trees or shrubs, with alternate or whorled leaves. The 25 New Zealand species and subspecies are all endemic. *Pittosporum ralphii* grows to 10 metres tall, with slender spreading branches. The branchlets and underside of the oblong, leathery and slightly wavy leaves are clad in dense white tomentum. Terminal umbels of 3–10 dark red flowers appear in late spring, followed by 3-valved capsules of black seeds. *Pittosporum ralphii* grows from sea level to 900 m in hill country, especially on mudstone cliffs and gorges, from East Cape to North Wairarapa, and Patea and Whanganui River areas.