

# Stephenson Percy Smith (1840-1922)

Stephenson Percy Smith was born at Beccles, Suffolk, England, on 11 June 1840, the eldest son of John Stephenson Smith, a timber and corn merchant and later a civil servant, and his wife Hannah, née Hursthouse. Persuaded by Hannah's brother, Charles Hursthouse, who had published *An Account of the New Plymouth Settlement*, the family of eight emigrated on the New Zealand Company ship *Pekin*, and arrived in Wellington on Boxing Day, 26 December 1849. John travelled overland to New Plymouth, and the rest of the family joined him in February 1850.

Percy went to school at New Plymouth and then Omata, leaving when he was fourteen to help on the family farm. The outdoors suited him; he was keenly interested in the local flora and fauna, and took painting lessons from landscape artist John Gully, who had taken up land nearby. In February 1855 he joined the provincial survey department as a cadet under Octavius Carrington, helping to subdivide the land around the New Plymouth settlement, and in his spare time he made long and rigorous exploratory trips, mainly on foot. During his long career he carried out surveys of the Chatham Islands and most of the North Island, and was promoted through the ranks of the civil service, to become surveyor-general in 1889.

In August 1887 he was a member of the official party sent to the Kermadec Islands with Captain Fairchild on the *Stella*, for the formal annexation of the group to New Zealand. On the return voyage he and Thomas Cheeseman spent a few hours ashore on the main island of the Three Kings group; Cheeseman subsequently dedicated a "singular" new plant that he had discovered there, *Paratrophis smithii* (now *Streblus smithii*), to his fellow traveller, Mr Percy Smith.

Smith was familiar with the Māori language. In addition to his surveying duties, he collected and recorded information about the traditional history and culture of the Māori people, and after his retirement in 1900 was able to devote himself full-time to this work. In 1892, he co-founded the Polynesian Society and journal, and was its chief contributor for thirty years. He also published a large number of major works, including the monumental *History and Traditions of the Maoris of the West Coast, North Island* (1910). He was a corresponding member of four prestigious overseas organisations, and in 1920 was awarded the Hector Medal and Prize by the New Zealand Institute for his research in Polynesian ethnology.

On 23 April 1863, in Auckland on a three-year transfer, he married Mary Anne Crompton, the daughter of W M Crompton, a Taranaki editor, schoolmaster and provincial representative; they were to have four children. He and his family lived in Auckland again, from 1871 until his retirement, when he returned to New Plymouth. He remained in government affairs, however, and in 1901 was sent to Niue for five months to help draft a constitution after the island's annexation to New Zealand. In this time he collected around 100 botanical specimens, now in the Auckland War Memorial Museum herbarium. He also served on many local bodies, including the Recreation Grounds (Pukekura Park) Board. Cultivated specimens of the plant named after him are grown in the park today. Stephenson Percy Smith died at Matai-moana, his home near the



## ***Streblus smithii***

*Streblus* are trees or shrubs with milky juice and alternate leaves, found from Madagascar, Southeast Asia and Malaysia to eastern Australia and the Pacific Islands. Three species are endemic to New Zealand. Previously referred to as *Paratrophis smithii*, *Streblus smithii* is a shrub or small tree up to 5 metres tall, occurring naturally only on the Three Kings. It has slender zigzag branches, with corky lenticels in the bark, which exudes a thick white sap when cut. The large leaves are dark green, glossy and leathery, with distinct venation. Male and female flower spikes are on separate plants, solitary or in pairs, the male spikes up to 14 cm long and female up to 4 cm long. The drupes, about 9 mm in diameter, are bright red.

racecourse, on 19 April 1922, eleven years after the death of his wife.