

Isaac Swainson (1746 – 1812)

Isaac Swainson, born in 1746, was the son of John Swainson, yeoman, of High House, Hawkeshead, Lancashire, England, and his second wife Lydia Park. Their small estate came to the family through Isaac's grandfather Christopher Swainson who, in 1692, married Agnes, daughter and eventually heiress of Henry Sawrey of High House.

Isaac went to London as a young man, and after working as a wool draper became an assistant to Dr Mercier in Frith Street, Soho, where he settled. He later bought from Dr Mercier the recipe for a patent medicine, Velno's Vegetable Syrup, one of several non-mercurial herbal preparations with variations of the name, lauded as a cure for venereal diseases and other complaints. The profit to be made from the sale of such medicines was so great that competitors stole trade names from their rivals, and accused each other of medical malpractice. Swainson became embroiled in the so-called vegetable wars, wrote profusely on the efficacy of the medicine and proclaimed himself the sole proprietor of the genuine product. He was reputed to have made as much as £5,000 a year from its sales. Apparently he also studied conventional medicine and gained an MD in 1785, but there is no record of his subsequent election to the Royal College of Physicians.

Swainson was best known as an enthusiastic and knowledgeable botanist, especially in the area of medical botany. Shortly after 1788, the profits

from his enterprise enabled him to lease a sizeable estate at Heath Lane Lodge in Twickenham, London, and realise his ambition to establish a botanical garden. A new house was built and the garden laid out. Under the management of Arthur Biggs, later director of the Cambridge Botanic Garden, it was planted with every species of tree and shrub then available, and meticulously maintained. Its large botanical collection was the first private one of its kind in the country.

Isaac Swainson died on 7 March 1812 at his house in Frith Street, Soho, and was buried at the Holly Road Burial Ground, Twickenham, where his wife Mary had been buried six years earlier. There were no children of the marriage, and his entire estate, which included the balance of the lease on Heath Lane Lodge as well as his Soho house, was left to his niece Margaret Canham, who retained the property until her death in 1837. Swainson's portrait, painted by James Raphael Smith and engraved in 1803 by Edward Scriven, suggests an amiable and genial gentleman, and apparently he was well liked. He is honoured in the Australian genus *Swainsona*, named for him by botanist Richard Anthony Salisbury in 1806. The New Zealand endemic scree pea was classified with this group until 1998, when it was put in its own genus, *Montigena* ('mountain-born'). The naturalist and artist William Swainson (1789–1855), who immigrated to New Zealand in 1841, was Isaac Swainson's cousin.

Montigena novae-zelandiae

Montigena novae-zelandiae is one of more than 35 legume species found in New Zealand, but its genetics, growth form and habitat are very different from the others. It is a small, long-lived woody sub-shrub that in summer produces loose rosettes or cushions of fleshy leaf shoots from the deeply buried rootstock. The leaves, which are folded along the mid-rib and divided, have a blue-grey waxy bloom with a reddish tinge. Pink or occasionally golden-brown flowers are followed by unusually large seedpods that darken to an orange-red colour, and are subject to browsing by hares, deer and other introduced mammals. The scree pea is widely scattered but inconspicuous on stable scree slopes east of the Main Divide in Marlborough, Canterbury and Otago.

