

Harry Talbot (1898 – 1982)

Harry Talbot was born at Ince, near Wigan, in Lancashire, England, on 1 October 1898, and began his education there. When he was about nine years old his parents and their three sons came to New Zealand, arriving in Wellington on the *Lambton Grange*. They then travelled by coastal steamer to Greymouth, where Harry attended school for about six months. His next schools were in Blackball, near Paparoa, where his father was a coalmine manager, and Taylorville, across the Grey River from their home in Wallsend. Harry then travelled daily by train to Greymouth District High School, and in 1917, after his senior year as a pupil-teacher, he went to Dunedin Training College. Enlisting in 1918, he served in the Army of Occupation in Germany, and back in New Zealand did casual work before re-entering training college. His first teaching positions were sole charge at Owen Valley School near Murchison for part of 1922, and two years at Arapeti School in the Wellington area. A trip to New South Wales in 1924 to follow an All Blacks rugby tour developed into two years swagging around Australia before his return home for Christmas, 1926. He then taught in Taranaki 1927–1935, and at Springfield School in Canterbury 1936–1956. Outdoor summer vacations made him realise how little he knew about the plants he saw.

Isolated at Springfield, he purchased botany texts and a microscope and began self-study of the local weeds and cultivated plants. Lance McCaskill, nature study lecturer at Christchurch Teachers College, recommended Cheeseman's *Manual of the New Zealand Flora* and suggested a meeting with Walter Brockie, then in charge of the native section of the botanic garden. This led to the forging of a close friendship, over twenty years of joint fieldwork, mainly in the northern South Island, and

the beginning of Talbot's particular interest in the sedges. Teachers Varner Cook and Gordon Clark were later companions, and when guiding a Pacific Science Congress group to the Craigieburn Basin in 1949, he met Swedish botanist Carl Skottsberg and Canadian ecologist Pierre Dansereau.

A wet introduction to the Goulund Downs in Northwest Nelson in 1951 was the forerunner of a ten-day trip with Brockie in 1954. Instead of walking in and camping, they used packhorses and a new four-bunk hut. One of their discoveries, *Bulbinella talbotii*, was described by Lucy Moore in 1964, and *Coprosma talbrockiei*, a puzzling creeping plant described by Moore and her associate Ruth Mason in 1974, was "named for Harry Talbot and Walter Boa Brockie, the composite epithet being chosen to commemorate the contributions to New Zealand botany made by these two friends during many joint expeditions in the South Island, particularly its central and northern parts, from the early 1940s to 1970".

In 1956 Talbot, now retired, moved with his mother to Richmond, and in 1962 Brockie retired there also. In December that year they returned to Goulund Downs, this time by helicopter, to search for more material of their puzzling plant. Their last trip together was to Haast Pass in 1963, and in the summer of 1967–68 Talbot went to the Chatham Islands with his Richmond friend Ron Simpson. In 1979, aged 81, he was awarded the Senior Bledisloe Trophy "for inspiring and helping people to become botanists". During his final years poor eyesight precluded botanical work, but his memory for plants was infallible. He died on 4 January 1982 at the Alexandra Home in Richmond, aged 83.



Bulbinella talbotii

A genus in the family Xanthorrhoeaceae, first described in 1843, *Bulbinella* ('little bulb') contains around 20 species occurring in South Africa and New Zealand. *Bulbinella talbotii* is a stout, fleshy prostrate plant scarcely rising above the ground, with widely spreading leaves 100–400 mm long and 3–7 mm wide. Very short fat spikes of densely crowded chrome-yellow flowers nestle almost hidden among the glossy brown foliage from December to January. Geographically restricted to the Goulund Downs of Northwest Nelson, in boggy ground and fringing pools of water within open shrubland, it is little known and easily missed.

Goulund Downs, Northwest Nelson, 1982