

## William Lewis Townson (1855 – 1926)

William Lewis Townson, the son of Mary and Benjamin Townson, a surgeon and physician, was born in 1855 at Liverpool, England. He was educated with a medical qualification in view, but chose instead to become a pharmaceutical chemist. He came to New Zealand as a young man, and in 1888 set up in business as a chemist and druggist in Westport. The following year, when he was 34, he married Lucinda Dagg at Masterton.

During his Westport years he collected plant specimens, at first for Thomas Kirk and later for Cheeseman, from the extensive Southwest Nelson district, much of it not previously botanised. Many of his finds were described in Cheeseman's *Manual of the New Zealand Flora*, and several, including *Aciphylla townsonii*, *Dracophyllum townsonii*, *Gentiana townsonii* and the new orchid genus *Townsonia*, were named in his honour. Around 1906 Townson moved to the North Island, carrying on his pharmacy work in several centres before buying the Thames business of the late J W Hall (*Podocarpus hallii*, now *Podocarpus cunninghamii*) in 1918. He continued to send Cheeseman specimens and observations from widely spread districts, but the North Island had already been well combed by other collectors. Townson's most important work was in the South Island, and his one published paper was on the vegetation of the Westport District and a list of plants. Further finds in that area were Petrie's *Euphrasia townsonii* (1912) and Cheeseman's *Veronica townsonii* (1913).

Townson wrote about his Westport travels, "I have never regretted consenting to prepare this list, although I had no conception that it would prove to be such a big undertaking, for thousands of miles had to be walked, over hill country and plain, in fair weather and foul, and numerous difficulties had to be surmounted. But in looking back upon these years of wandering, when all my senses were on the alert, and my thews and sinews were strong to stand the strain of the longest day's tramp, when the book of nature was no more a sealed book for me, and the trees, plants and birds became my familiar friends, they were, undoubtedly, the happiest years of my life."

Townson was of a modest and gentle nature, but full of energy and enthusiasm. A man of many interests, he was a student of Māori customs and traditions, and a lover of music, good literature and gardening. He related well to others, and shared his time and knowledge generously. When William Lewis Townson died at Thames in 1926, at the age of 71, tributes at his funeral included, appropriately, floral contributions from pupils of the local high school, to whose rambling club he had been guide, counsellor and friend.



### ***Hebe townsonii***

Some botanists place *Hebe*, as well as its six related Australasian genera, into the larger genus *Veronica*. The species are mostly of shrubby habit, but with a remarkable range of size and shape. *Hebe townsonii* is a distinctive species readily distinguished by its two rows of marginal donatia on the undersides of the leaves. It is an openly branched bushy shrub up to 2.5 metres tall, with erect branches; leaves lanceolate or linear, dark green above and light green beneath. Inflorescences of 21–42 flowers, often slightly mauve at first and fading to white, appear from September to November. It is known from only a few localities in northern and western Nelson, and North Westland, growing in scrub on and around calcium-rich rocks. However, the species is cultivated widely in New Zealand.