

# Man of peace, insects and expert on weeds

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By Grant Rosoman

The lush overgrown central city backyard is reminiscent of something more tropical. Bizarre and colourful plants protrude from the green mass, surrounding a very quaint brick cottage. Bill Sykes, 64, wiry and fit looking, emerges and comments on the unusual origins of a couple of the plants.

If you ring Bill at Lincoln DSIR, or Crown Research Institute as it is now called, chances are you'll find him in the herbarium absorbed in some unusual specimen. He is New Zealand's leading authority on adventive (not native) plants in New Zealand and is highly respected internationally. The publication of *The Flora of New Zealand Vol 4: Dicotyledons and ferns*, in 1983, was a hallmark in his career, ending 14 years of joint work.

He's called a taxonomic botanist, or in common terms Bill is New Zealand's most respected identifier of weeds.

He migrated from England to join the Botany Division of the Department of Science and Industrial Research 31 years ago.

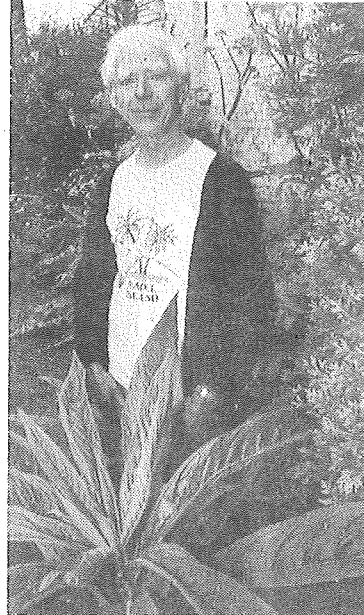
## Adventures

Much of Bill's work has been done on the islands of the South Pacific. These adventures have included many trips to the Kermadecs, several to the Cook Islands, to Niue and Tonga. Although any romantic notions of life in the tropics are quickly dispelled by weeks of hot damp fieldwork, or fun and games getting on and off the islands.

Adventure and danger are all part of the job to Bill. On his first plant collecting expedition to the Himalayas in the early 1950s, he endured months of dysentery and hepatitis. At one stage he was too sick to even get out of his tent for several days. As well, leeches, flies and other crawlies had to be contended with. With a wry grin Bill recalls how his first published paper was not on plants but on his experiences with leeches in Nepal.

## Author

Bill's long list of published papers on the botany of the Pacific began with a bulletin describing the plants of Niue in 1965. More recently he has worked extensively in the Cook Island group. He has a check list of all plants already com-



At home: Bill Sykes among the plants he loves.

pleted but hopes to be able to finish a complete description of the flora of the Cooks.

However, it looks as though the publishing of the Cook Island Flora is to be shelved. With the change from DSIR to a CRI, it has not been judged as a priority, so funding has been withdrawn. It would seem that this ends a long programme of botanical research in the Pacific.

For Bill, his years at DSIR ended with a letter, saying he was surplus to requirements. Although he was due for retirement later this year, being sacked in this undignified way far from honoured his dedicated commitment over the past three decades.

Bill's old office has been taken over by the new marketing division. "But with science being carried on by so few at present, I don't know how much they will have to market," he says.

To be fair however, he has been given a small office to continue his work.

Bill's passion for plant and animal life began in the hills of east Suffolk. He grew up in Wyverstone, a village in south England. His father was a farmer, milking Jersey cows. The ponds, ditches and hedgerows were Bill's playground and his first subjects of research.

Bill recalls how his first love was not for plants, "Ever since I could crawl, insects were my great inter-

est. I was well known in the village for my breeding all sorts of insects in containers and tanks, especially aquatic ones."

However, at 15, after passing school cert at Stowmarket Secondary School, he decided there was no career in studying insects, and chose horticulture.

Bill's mother wanted him to continue school but Bill was acutely aware of the burden it would be on his family.

"I knew that my mother had to pay for me to go on in school but she didn't have much money with the depression on in the mid-thirties."

Work as a gardener's apprentice was the beginning of his training in horticulture and botany, including two influential trips to Nepal and eventually an honours degree in Biology from Chelsea College of Science and Technology in 1960. Soon after Bill immigrated to New Zealand with his wife Betty, to take up a position at DSIR.

Bill's love of and fascination with plant life and insects is perhaps only surpassed by his passionate stands for peace and justice. He was on the ban the bomb marches in England in the late 1950s and protested outside the South African embassy in London after the Sharpeville massacre.

Watching a V1 bomb fly overhead during World War 2, carving on a tree the date of when the first hydrogen bomb was exploded, and being deeply affected by Hiroshima, are how Bill remembers his early awakenings of war and the threat of nuclear warfare. "I still recall very clearly Hiroshima and dropping the bomb. I was young then of course, in my teens but it still made a big impression on me. I didn't immediately think 'ban the bomb' and all the rest of it but it sank in very deeply."

Only a few months after his arrival in New Zealand he was marching in anti-nuclear protests. Later he became active in the anti-apartheid movement. His second wife Shona was a South African ("who had left mainly because she didn't want to bring up her children under the system there"). The Springbok tour of 1981 saw Bill as committed as ever, as did the Homosexual Law Reform Bill in the mid-1980s.