



# *Pohutukawa*



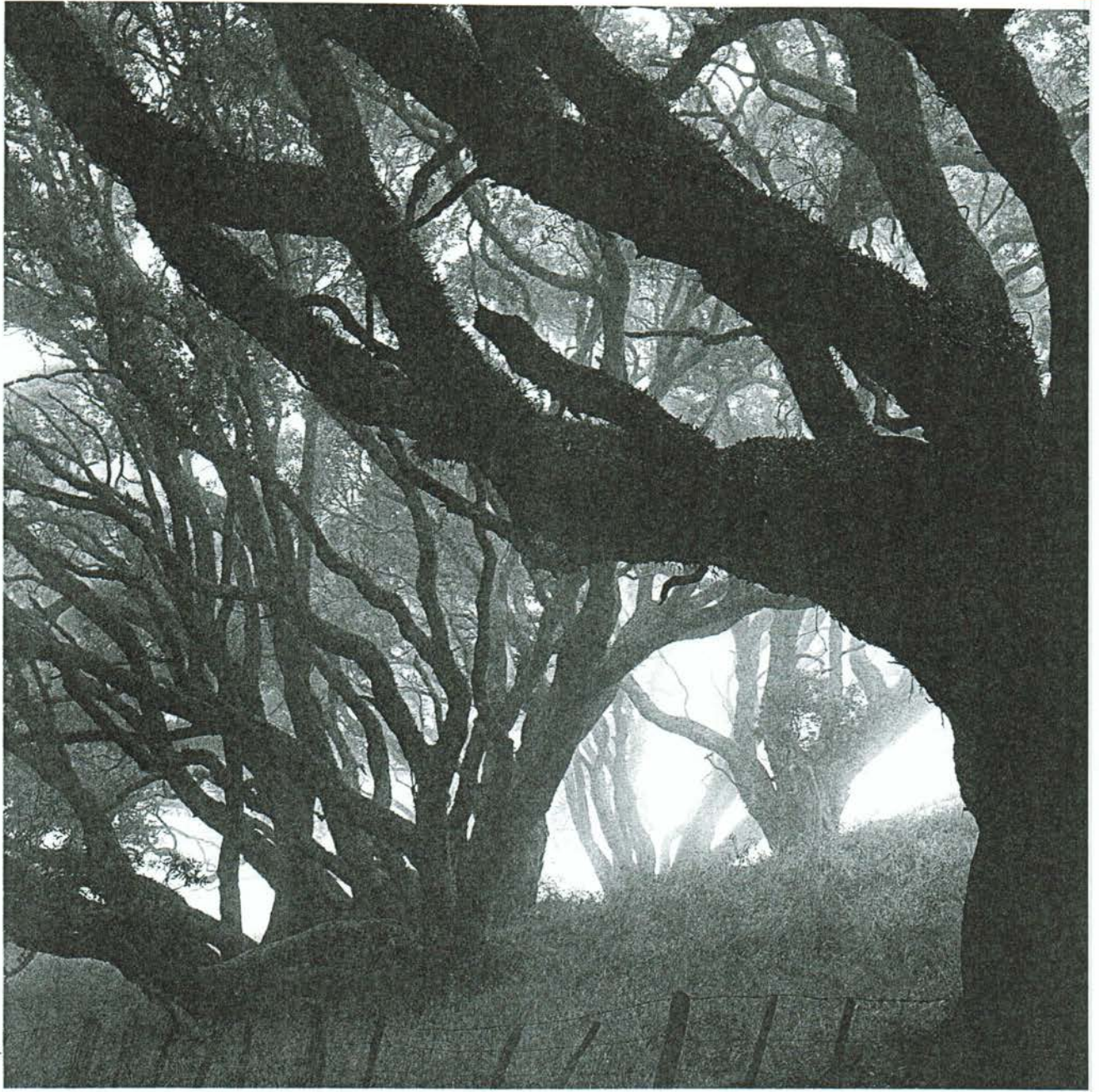
FLAME OF THE NORTH

By JO HARDY/McNEILL, ROGER BLACKLEY and WARREN JUDD



KENNEDY WARNE

*Whether providing shade for a summer picnic, standing sentinel on a crumbling cliff or splashing Christmas crimson along garden edge, street or shoreline, the pohutukawa is one of the trees New Zealanders hold in greatest affection. Its grizzled bark and joyous blooms speak to us not just of the enduring qualities of the tree, but of the land itself.*



GRAEME MATTHEWS

*P*ain and age are in these gnarled forms, in bare roots, clutching at the earth, knotting on the cliff-face, in tortured branches, dark against the washed sky.

BRUCE MASON, *The End of the Golden Weather*



KENNEDY WARNE

*O*ur flowers are pale . . .  
Save those red trees that put forth such a blaze  
The very Tasman could not put it out  
When summer strikes the tinder of their boughs.  
EILEEN DUGGAN, *A Book of New Zealand*

WITHOUT A DOUBT, it is one of the top ten flowering trees in the world," declares Graeme Platt, the native plant impresario. "In the north, a beach isn't a beach without pohutukawa trees around it. Overseas visitors who saw pohutukawa were always wanting seed from me when I had the nursery. The tree is doing well in Seattle, California and Australia, and it is almost a weed along the coast near Capetown."

Small wonder that it is so widely appreciated. Even apart from its smother of spectacular crimson blossoms in summer, the pohutukawa is a tree of outstanding character. Rough roots, thicker than the tentacles of Nemo's squid, grope and grasp their way down cliffs. They seem more like misdirected branches than delicate tendrils seeking nutrients. Crooked, gnarled, furrowed limbs span ten or more metres, often cantilevered out from sheer cliffs. In between, roots and branches may form a temporary confederation to produce a squat trunk, but as often as not branches just spring out of a plot of ground.

The whole tortured frame looks to have endured a thousand years of adversity, even when it has seen only fifty summers. Even the leathery leaves, downy white below, satin grey-green above, seem to have been honed by hardship.

The pohutukawa is a member of the huge myrtle family, which includes among its 3000 species eucalypts, guavas, feijoas, bottlebrushes, manuka, kanuka and swamp maire. In the New Zealand biological region two species of pohutukawa occur naturally: the common mainland tree *Metrosideros excelsa* and *Metrosideros kermadecensis*, a pohutukawa endemic to Raoul Island—a thousand kilometres to the north. In the same genus are several species of rata, both trees and climbers. The northern and southern rata sometimes start off their lives as climbers, then eventually throttle their support trees to become forest giants in their own right.

Pohutukawa seem to suffer from a fundamental

confusion about the distinction between roots and branches. Not only do the roots resemble branches, but in many trees the branches sprout great beards of aerial roots that rarely reach the ground. When they do contact dirt, they certainly can attach, and mat and thicken into a walking stick for the branch. Even when a normal branch sags to the ground, it habitually establishes massive roots too. Perhaps this identity crisis arises from the fact that many sprawling pohutukawa trees are more horizontal than vertical, and the ground they inhabit is often more

vertical than horizontal! For this is a tree that can survive on the salty edge of the land where no other can, clinging precariously to impossible rocks and cliffs, a tree that lends strength to the land in its eternal wrestle against the onslaught of the waves. A tree indeed.

Unfortunately, the pohutukawa is no longer flourishing with its ancient vigour along the coastlines of Aotearoa. To be sure, those glorious flowers still brighten northern shores each Christmas, but there aren't anywhere near as many as there used to be. Principal culprit in their demise is the rapacious Australian brushtail possum, which feasts on them and their rata cousins as if they were floral caviar. But Graeme Platt, always an independent thinker, reckons that the possums don't

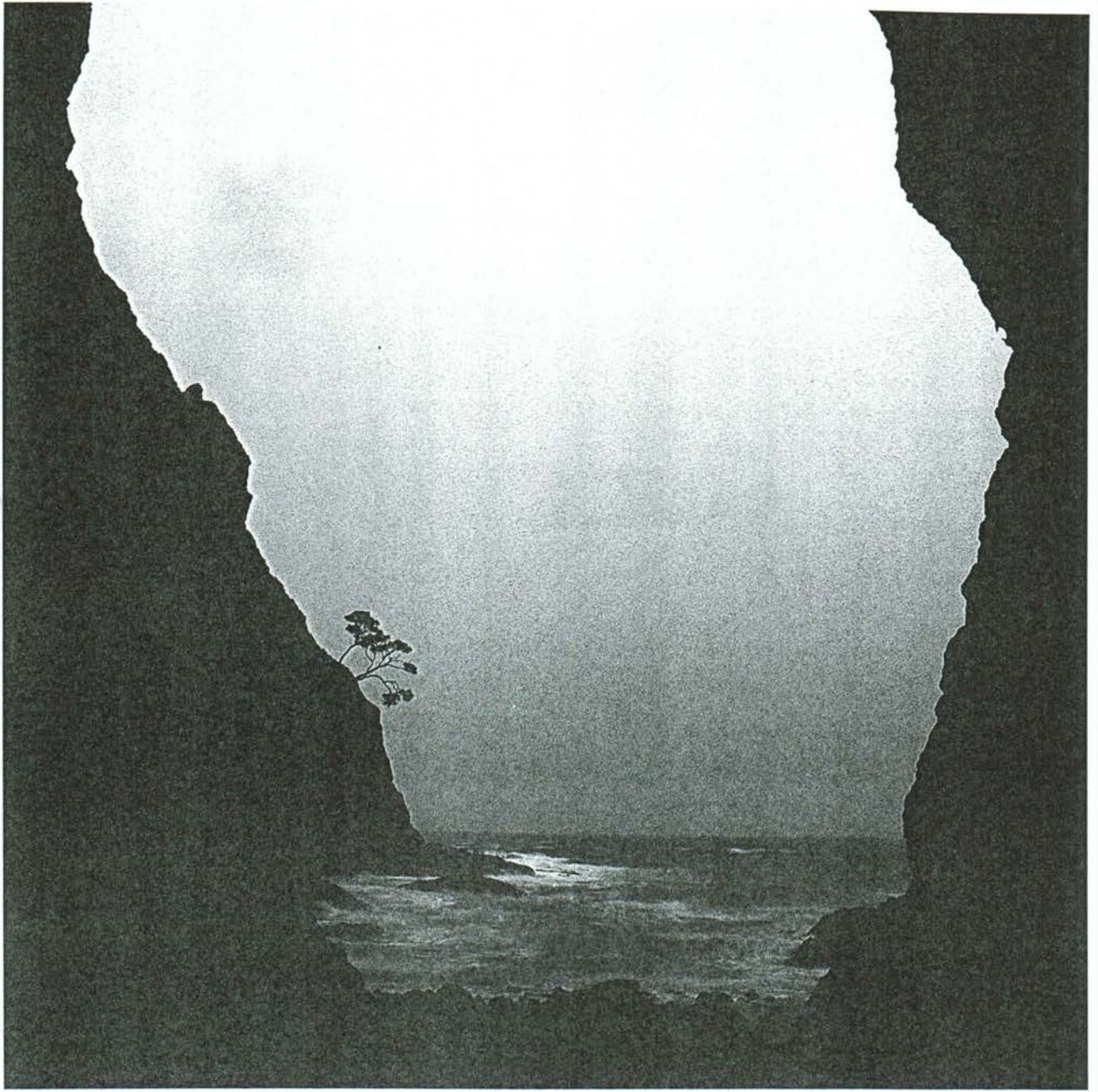
deserve as much blame as they are receiving. Human abuse, an inability to germinate among exotic weeds, lack of adequate nutrition in the areas the plant is now found in, and shortage of rain through felling too much Northland forest in earlier times—all these factors contribute to the pohutukawa's decline, he says.

Studies conducted in the late 1980s by the Forest Research Institute on 197 stands of pohutukawa located around the northern coast between East Cape and Kawhia found that Northland trees were generally in poorest condition. Worst of all were those along the eastern shore of Kawau Island, where rotting trees littered the ground. More alarming than the health



BRETT MCKAY

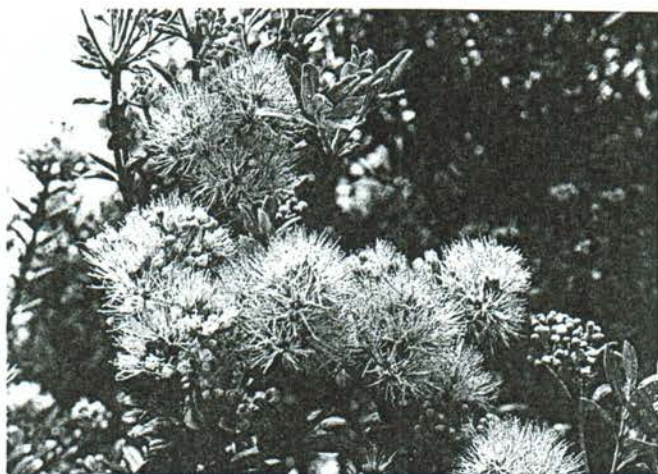
*The frazzled, battered roots of coastal pohutukawa may look devoid of life, but have a remarkable ability to suck moisture from salt-blasted cliff faces, and anchor the tree with an iron grip. According to Maori legend, the pohutukawa at Cape Reinga (opposite) has stood for a millennium or more, and represents the departure point for the spirits of the dead; they slide down the tree's exposed roots into the underworld.*



ARNO GASTEIGER

*G*rim, gaunt and weird  
Adorned with strange fantastic arms  
It stands: a silent beacon  
To departing shades;  
A leafy portal to the gates  
Of dark and mystic worlds.

SARAH AND EDWARD FEATON, *The Art Album of New Zealand Flora*



ERIC LEE-JOHNSON



ANTHONY WRIGHT



KENNEDY WARNE

*Rare specimens of pohutukawa are discovered with yellow or orange blooms, and these are often favoured for propagation as cultivars. Also popular is the Kermadec Islands pohutukawa, which has smaller, rounder leaves than the mainland tree. Not unlike beards in humans, aerial roots are abundant on some pohutukawa but absent from many. The brush-like clumps of rootlets do not usually reach the ground, but when they do they enlarge and provide their host branches with extra support and, presumably, nutrients.*

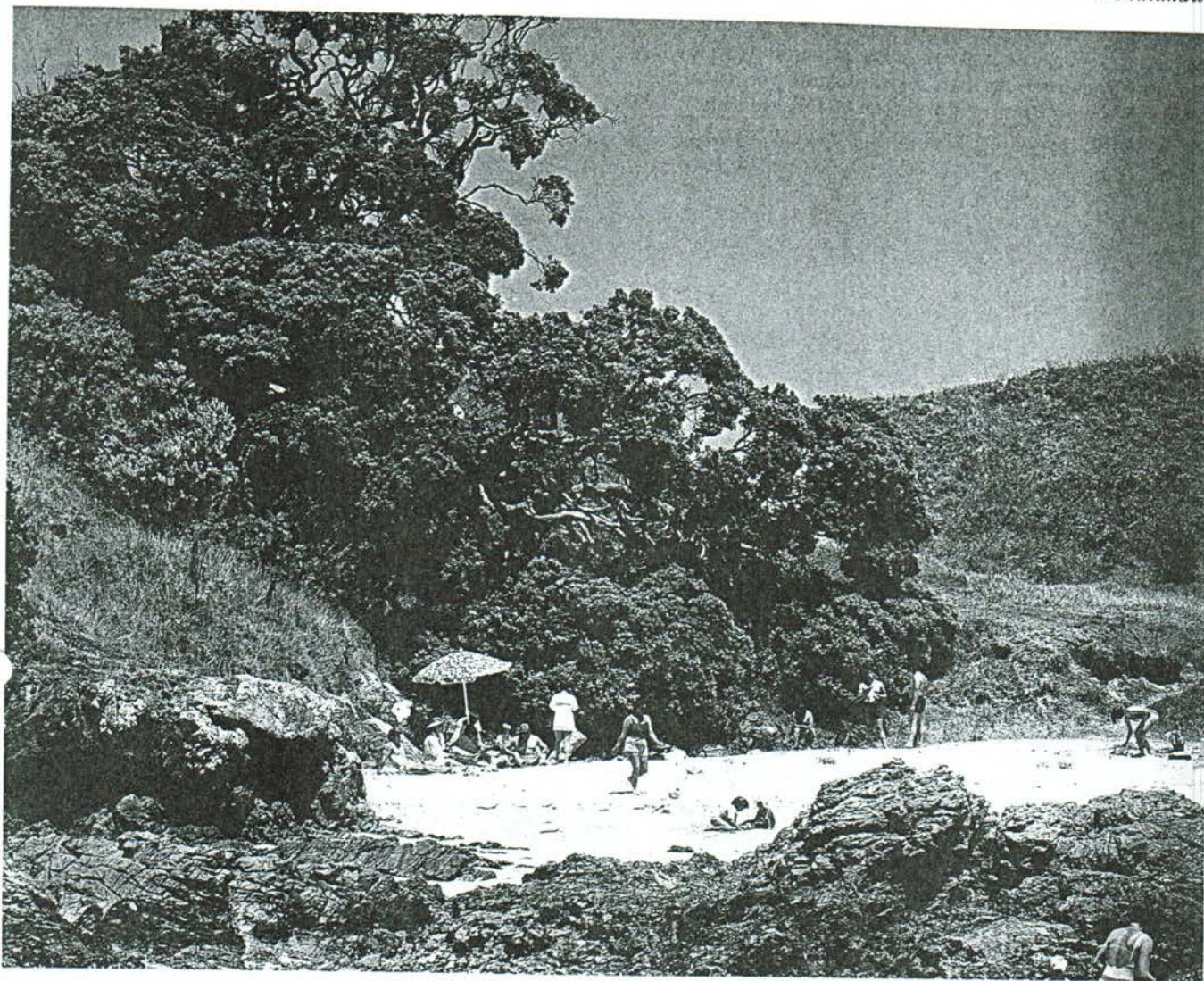
report was the age distribution of the stands: 80 per cent were classed as old or mature. Only 27 stands consisted mainly of young trees.

Everyone agrees that the pohutukawa remaining today are just a shadow of the forests that once existed around many northern coasts, but now are to be found only on a handful of islands, particularly Rangitoto and Mayor Island. Clearing of land by both Maori and

Pakeha has been to blame, and the situation has been exacerbated by two peculiarities of the tree. First, pohutukawa are extraordinarily susceptible to fire, a favoured weapon of land clearers. Even a grass fire around the base will kill a mature tree. Second, seedlings are unable to regenerate in the presence of competing vegetation such as kikuyu grass. Young trees do well on bare ground, such as roadside cuttings, but there they are often at the mercy of trampling and browsing cattle and goats.

Brightest spot in human dealings with pohutukawa has been planting of the species south of its normal range. Pohutukawa is a latitude 38 tree (like kauri and mangrove) that naturally only occurs north of Kawhia and Gisborne. But as long as the young tree is not exposed to frost, it will grow much further south, so it is now a familiar tree in Wellington and in the west and north of the South Island.

Troubled by the Forest Research Institute's findings, the Department of Conservation was able to enlist the support of forestry company Carter Holt Harvey in establishing the Project Crimson Trust in 1990. The object of the Trust is the betterment of pohutukawa (and very recently its cousins the rata), by protecting existing



GAYLENE EARL/FOCUS NZ

trees and planting more. Several enthusiastic volunteers devote much of their time to running Project Crimson. One is Ted Wilson, a retired businessman and life member of the Auckland Carnation, Gerbera and Geranium Society—a reflection of his lifelong enthusiasm for breeding and showing flowers.

“Carter Holt provides the bulk of our funds,” Ted explains. “We use that money to have pohutukawa grown, and we then donate young trees to various groups who approach us seeking trees. We don’t provide trees for planting on private land, nor do we support plantings south of the tree’s natural area, but we give trees to DOC, local bodies, schools, Forest and Bird, and community groups. This year we are supporting between 40 and 50 planting projects, as well as making contributions to research that should benefit the trees.” The research includes attempts to chemically synthesise the scent of *Dactylanthus taylorii* (the wood rose) another favourite possum food, in the hope that it might be useful for attracting possums to baits, and a study into why only 10 per cent of pohutukawa seed is fertile.

Ted not only does much of the organising of Project Crimson activities, but visits sites where pohutukawa are debilitated, collects seed, distributes it to nurseries and

*The quintessential northern holiday: sun-drenched beach, family gathering, picnic food and, as a backdrop, a pohutukawa in full crimson flame.*

organises the distribution of plants. Care is taken to collect seed from the areas where the trees are to be planted, and the young trees are then returned to those same areas a couple of years later. “We’ve found that the larger the plants, the better they survive when planted,” Ted says, “but transporting big plants is expensive, so we try and grow them near where they will be used. We are having trees grown from Whakatane to Te Pahi.”

In Auckland, trees are grown for Project Crimson by the Crippled Children’s Society Nursery in Mt Albert and at Paremoremo Prison. Joe Watt of the prison staff says that the pohutukawa growing project has been very successful. “Last year we grew 16,000 plants from 19 different sites. A lot of the inmates haven’t had this sort of experience in the past, and they develop a bit of ownership pride and interest in the project. One whose interest was sparked by the work has gone on to do a horticulture programme with Massey University.”



Project Crimson has supplied 40-50,000 pohutukawa for planting over the last few years. A major current project is the erection of a 2.5 km possum-proof fence across the Cape Brett peninsula, to be followed by extermination of all possums on the peninsula and replanting of young pohutukawa to replace the ranks of dead and dying in the area.

Not only Project Crimson is concerned about the plight of pohutukawa. Terry Hatch, a nurseryman near Pukekohe who has developed a deep affection for native plants, commented that "a while back pohutukawa seemed to be getting chewed off everywhere, so I decided to grow a few." That year he grew 23,000 plants and sold them all. With Graeme Platt, he has toured the North Island and taken cuttings from promising or unusual pohutukawa. Two that have proved good cultivars are an orange-flowering variety from behind the hotel at Te Kaha (and called "Te Kaha") and "Vibrant," from a tree at Tapu, north of Thames.

"When you look closely at the flowers of pohutukawa, not many really look that good. Very few plants possess the long stamens that we find attractive. From my observations, bees prefer plants with short stamens, so I hand pollinate plants with long stamens to get seed from them. I suspect that if pollination was left to bees, we'd end up with only short-stamen pohutukawa."

In prehuman New Zealand, most pollination of pohutukawa was probably carried out by the abundant nectar-feeding birds and geckos, who may not share the bee's preference for flowers with short stamens. Bats, too, apparently have a taste for pohutukawa nectar, and, on Little Barrier Island, roost in old pohutukawa.

"Pohutukawa seed has a most glorious fragrance," Terry enthuses, "like richest, thick honey. It would make a wonderful perfume." But it has a downside, too. "Put a sheet on the ground and tap the branches with a stick in April or May to collect seed, and stand clear! The seed is

very fine and acts like itching powder. It takes a couple of washes to get it out of your clothes."

For nearly four decades Mike Stuckey has been making pilgrimages each summer to the pohutukawa on Rangitoto—not to admire their beauty, but to harvest their bounty: honey. "It's the whitest honey in the world, and has a very delicate flavour. Kids like it, and it's very good for bottling where you don't want the honey to overpower other flavours.

"Rangitoto has the only accessible pohutukawa forest in the country, and the honey we harvest would be better than 99 per cent pohutukawa. Twenty years ago we were getting between 11 and 20 tonnes of honey annually, depending on how heavy the flowering was. Slowly it declined until we were only getting four or five tonnes from the 200 or 300 hives we took down each summer, and it was barely worth the effort. Since the big 1080 [poison] drop there to kill possums a couple of years ago, we've recovered eight tonnes despite poor flowering. Before the drop, I'd go down, see all the buds, and always overestimate the crop, since the possums ate a lot of buds. Now I'm consistently underestimating it."

Mike is sure that the oldest trees on the island are no more than 200 years old, and says most are much younger. "My

mother went to the island in 1922, and said it was mostly bare rock. When we took her back in 1960, she couldn't believe how much more vegetation there was, and most of that was pohutukawa. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that the pohutukawa forest there will last for too many centuries longer. Pohutukawa can colonise and survive in the harshest conditions—such as the lava fields of Rangitoto—but once established, falling leaves and rotting branches will form humus that less hardy plants can grow in, and the pohutukawa will be squeezed out.

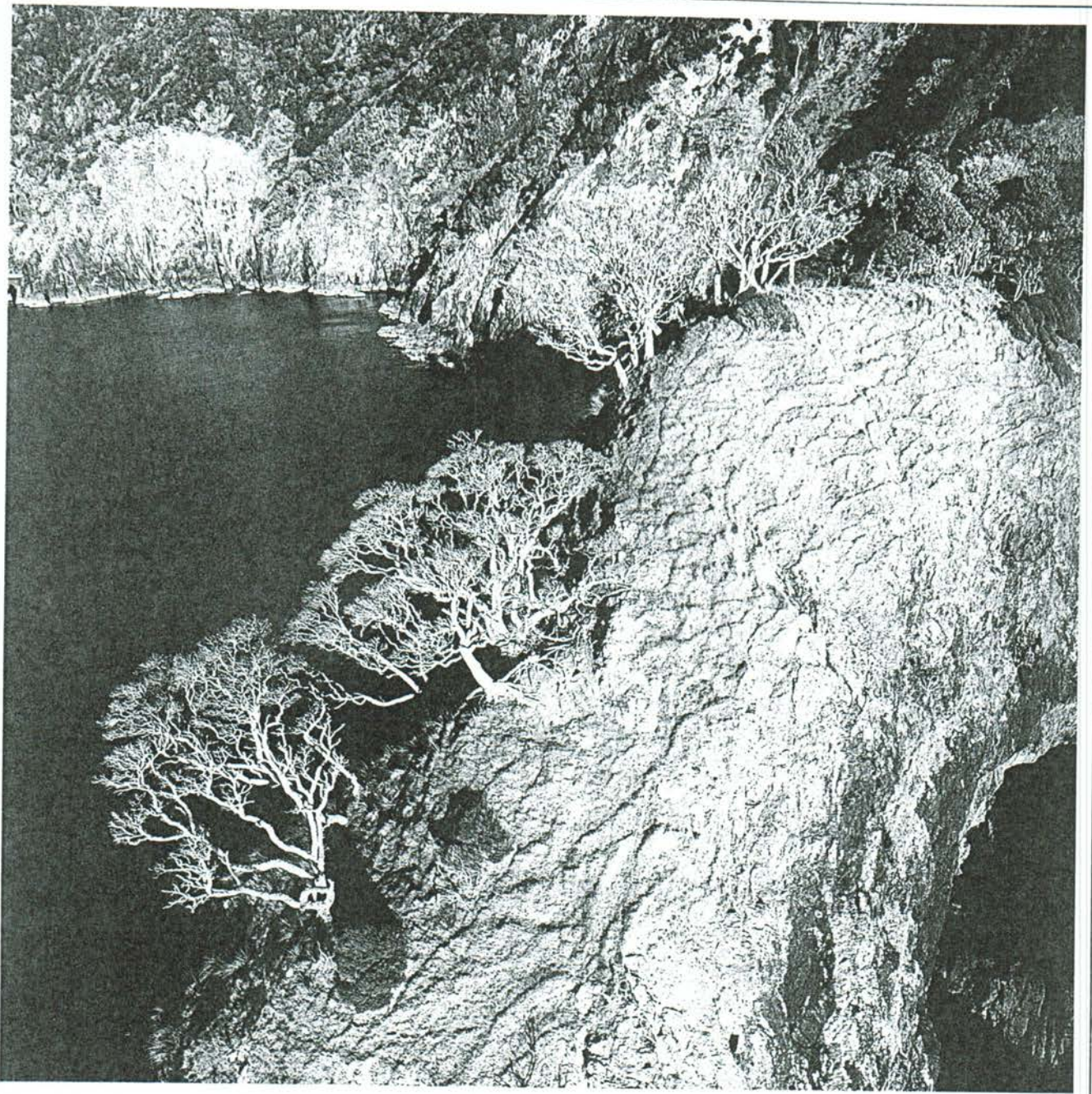
Their successors are unlikely to be as splendid.

Warren Judd



ARNO GASTEIGER

*Cute but lethal, possums have a particular fondness for the leaves and buds of pohutukawa which eventually results in the deaths of even large trees. Pohutukawa on Cape Brett, in the Bay of Islands, have been particularly hard hit (opposite), and a possum-proof fence is now being erected across the peninsula. While it won't help the dead trees, new plantings and seedlings should benefit once possums have been eradicated from the area.*



ERIC LEE JOHNSON

*The pohutukawa on that shore are gigantic personages, their lifted roots grasping the rocks like ancestral gods from the ocean.*

*SYLVIA ASHTON-WARNER, I Passed This Way*

# A Northland perspective

THE POHUTUKAWA was a cautionary tale in a Dunedin education.

Nowhere to be seen—except in pictures of the far-fabled north, where oranges also grew—it was a subject, along with equally unfamiliar kauri and mangroves, we were warned to avoid in choosing from the School Certificate English essay topics on offer.

Stick to what you know, they said.

The only tree I knew personally was a poor stunted oak in the fire station courtyard. Probably included in the original design by some optimistic institutional planner who hadn't reckoned on the spit and polish zeal of the Fire Service, the oak was hacked back annually to its naked trunk.

When Christmas came around we Southerners were just as disenfranchised by the pohutukawa pictures on the determinedly New Zealand cards as we were by the snow and robins borrowed from the other side of the world.

Of all the Christmas symbols, only angels, pine needles and presents in their shiny wrappings seemed to belong to us, because, in those days, God was everywhere, pine forests were familiar from the drive over Three Mile Hill (where we had it on good authority the teddy bears' picnic actually took place) and the prosperity which begat presents was safely enshrined in the Welfare State.

You don't know how lucky you are, they said.

Today, from a Northland perspective, it is clear a different spirit stalks the land. Here no institutional planners hold sway for long, and trees are gods.

Prosperity only ever grazes the north in a series of booms, busts and promised bonanzas. Feasts and famines. One year champagne and

new dresses; the next home-made cards and being pleased to have bread and butter at the same time.

Beneficiaries, the last shreds of the Welfare State, are to be seen on Thursdays thronging those

ness of the need to respect, not homogenise, religious and cultural differences.

Today's prevailing theology is of a secular ecological doomsday, with dolphins as its angels; a view to which all but the most diehard of herbicidal farmers subscribe.

Culture always evolves in tune with the demands of social change, and thus the pohutukawa has emerged as a transcendent multipurpose symbol: of Pakeha New Zealand identity after the cultural cringe, of the Maori spirituality inhabiting the land and of widespread environmental concern.

Pohutukawa pre-date people on this land. Here before the great migration, before Tasman, Cook, Father Christmas and all, they may even (if reports of Australian fossil evidence are to be believed) pre-date the chance that continental drift offered for Maui's fish to swim away.

Written versions of creation stories speak of a warrior, Tawhaki, visiting the heavens on a quest. In the uppermost heaven he met Tama-i-waho, a being possessed of great powers, who caused Tawhaki to fall, and so perish at the

far-off place where the sky hangs down. The next morning the blossoms of the pohutukawa were of a strange new colour produced by the blood of Tawhaki as he fell.

A mere thousand years ago, voyagers on the great Maori migration to Aotearoa saw their first pohutukawa flowers. Stories are told in the histories of more than one canoe of sacred red feathers (kura) carefully carried from the homeland. When the travellers saw brilliant splashes of pohutukawa flowering on the coastline they decided their old red feathers were but coals to Newcastle, and cast them into the sea. On reaching land and discover-

## The Weekly News



*Christmas Number  
1934*

*From colonial times, the December-flowering pohutukawa has been adopted as New Zealand's Christmas tree, and used to illustrate everything from cards to covers.*

Northland towns still equipped with banks, while Letters to the Editor run hot with elderly critics who managed perfectly well in the Depression without the consolations of fast food and Lotto.

Supermarkets are open on Sundays, and mainstream Christian evangelism has given way to aware-

ing the flaming abundance was made merely of flowers which drooped upon picking, they went to retrieve the precious red feathers, only to find them in the possession of one Mahina, who refused to give them back. The resultant phrase "te kura pae a Mahina" might signify "finders keepers," but would seem more likely to point to the foolishness of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, or, indeed, of forgetting what is of value from the past in the mad rush to embrace the promise of the new.

In a thousand years of human occupation, pohutukawa have found use practically as medicine and in boatbuilding, symbolically in both Maori and Pakeha spiritual traditions, artistically in visual and literary images, customarily in the barbie-on-the-beach rituals of the Kiwi summer and ideologically in environmental crusades.

Although sucking the nectar of pohutukawa flowers has been recommended for sore throats, records of pohutukawa medicinal uses concentrate principally on the inner bark which, cut out where the rising sun strikes the tree, has been used in the form of an infusion to treat diarrhoea, dysentery and venereal disease, chewed as a sure cure for thrush, bound against wounds to stop bleeding and steeped in water as a mouthwash and gargle.

Northlanders still pack it into dental cavities as a last-ditch folk remedy to kill the pain and, incidentally, the nerve of the tooth.

The 106-foot *Stirlingshire*, largest sailing ship ever built in New Zealand, was laid down on Great Barrier Island in 1840. Its kauri planks were fitted to massive, naturally curved pohutukawa ribs. The sinuous forms of iron-hard pohutukawa timber are still used in boatbuilding for angled keels, sterns and knees which require no shaping, and in contemporary sculpture and furniture making.

Among northern coastal tribes, particular pohutukawa became tapu because they were places where the

bodies of the dead were hung, or because the placentae of children of note were placed in their branches.

For both Maori and those Pakeha who prefer more localised belief systems to European and Middle Eastern models, the ancient and weathered pohutukawa perched on the water's edge at Te Reinga, on the point where two oceans meet, is the last leaping place of the spirits of the dead; gateway to the underworld



*The natural curves of pohutukawa "knees" provide furniture-maker Henry Mackeson of English Bay, in the Bay of Islands, with graceful legs for his unusual tables.*

and last stop before Hawaiki, the eternal spiritual homeland.

Some would have it that bushclad ridges rustle, grasses are mysteriously knotted and pohutukawa bloom the colour of blood along the pathways of the spirits as they travel north.

The fabled tree, with infrequent

blossoms known as Te Pua o te Reinga or the flowers of spirit's flight, is, by some accounts, 1200 years old—a natural bonsai, kept in trim by the inhospitality of the rock to which it clings and by the raging elements in that strange wild place where there is no horizon and where even I, raised in the south on teddy-bears' picnics and Latin verbs, have seen an old woman walk into the setting sun without returning.

At Oihi Beach in the Bay of Islands in 1814, Samuel Marsden conducted a Christmas service against a backdrop of flowering pohutukawa. With the coincidence of its December flowering and its red blooms—a colour sacred in many cultures as a portent of blood, royalty, the sacraments, fertile ground, birth and the life force itself—its future as a symbol was assured. Even for those whose Christmas homage is paid merely to a secular summer holiday, typically celebrated at the beach, the pohutukawa is a presence at the feast, a launching pad for the kids as they swing out to splash into sparkling summer seas, and spreading shade for the Boxing Day picnic with sandwiches made from the leftover ham.

IS THERE A New Zealand poet who has not stained a page with the colour of pohutukawa, compact in its evocation of homeland, of childhood, holidays and of the mysteries of life lived on snakeless islands with borders no mere imaginary lines but the clean clear geographical edges of vast oceans?

A. R. D. Fairburn, in *Memories of England*, drew his image by negative definition: "No dragon's blood breaking in crimson flowers," and Peter Bland in *Letters Home*:

I remember once she said—Our pohutukawa blossoms have the scent of salt and oranges. That's what this rose smells of—not Surrey but her that summer on an Auckland beach.

There's Allen Curnow in *Spectacular Blossom* where: "woody tumours burst in scarlet spray," and Alan Mulgan in *Aldebran and Other Verses*: "When pohutukawa dips, red on our blue infinities."

In Bruce Mason's play *The Pohutukawa Tree*, the symbolic tree hanging over the porch was planted after a battle, "that its red flowers might be a sign of blood between Maori and Pakeha forever."

In *The End of the Golden Weather* Mason describes the "territory of the heart we call childhood . . ."

The beach is fringed with pohutukawa trees, single and stunted in the gardens, spreading and noble on the cliffs and in the empty spaces by the foreshore. Tiny red coronets prick through the grey-green leaves. Bark, flower and leaf seem overlaid with smoke. The red is of a dying fire at dusk, the green faded and drab. Pain and age are in these gnarled forms, in bare roots, clutching at the earth, knotting on the cliff-face, in tortured branches, dark against the washed sky. Pain and age are in these gnarled forms, in bare roots, clutching at the earth, knotting on the cliff-face, in tortured branches, dark against the washed sky.

For Hone Tuwhare "pohutukawa bleed their short-lived brilliance" at Te Kaha, and in *Lament* he writes:

At dawn's light I looked for you  
at land's end where two oceans froth  
but you had gone without leaving a  
sign  
or a whispered message to the  
gnarled  
tree's feet or the grass of the  
inscrutable  
rock face . . .

Even southern poets like James K. Baxter and Janet Frame sing their pohutukawa songs. Here is Baxter in *A Takapuna Businessman Considers his Son's Death in Korea*:

. . . Muskets blazed  
From the hunched snipers of  
pohutukawa  
The day you stole my wallet and  
my car  
And drove to Puhoi . . .

For Janet Frame, Christmas

is holiday blossom beach sea  
is from me to you  
is from you to me

is giving giving  
in a torture of anxiety  
panic of pohutukawa...

When I first came north I was warned that to pick pohutukawa flowers is bad luck. No-one can tell me why. My own superstitions, handed down from a long line of Cockney grandmothers, suggest there are always good reasons for these warnings which need to live on the popular imagination to preserve safety and survival against a day when no health or conservation departments exist to prescribe advice.

Perhaps the pohutukawa warning is a conservation measure or a reference to the tapu surrounding particular trees generalised over time and distance, or maybe it's simple reverence for the sacred colour of blood.

The ghost I saw in the corner of the Maori reference section in the library may well have been a warning, too, against picking the metaphorical flowers of the north's secret stories—an echo of "stick to what you know".

What is clear from 20 years of painting the landscape in the north is that trees are people, too—the figures on the land. *Macrocarpas* are the big dark wizards; pines are the soldiered ranks of armies, pointed sticks at the ready; willows are the *corps de ballet* and totara the ragged boundary markers.

Pohutukawa are placentae, straight out of the herbal doctrine of signatures, connecting the blood beat of life to mother earth. Their art nouveau branches are a pantheist's stained glass window frames, and their forgiving shapes a coastal draughtsperson's godsend, hiding a multitude of sins at every headland's edgy refusal to remain on a logical plane, swathing the points at which all lines should meet with trickery in more outrageous colours than anything mere pigment, poetry or perspective might achieve.

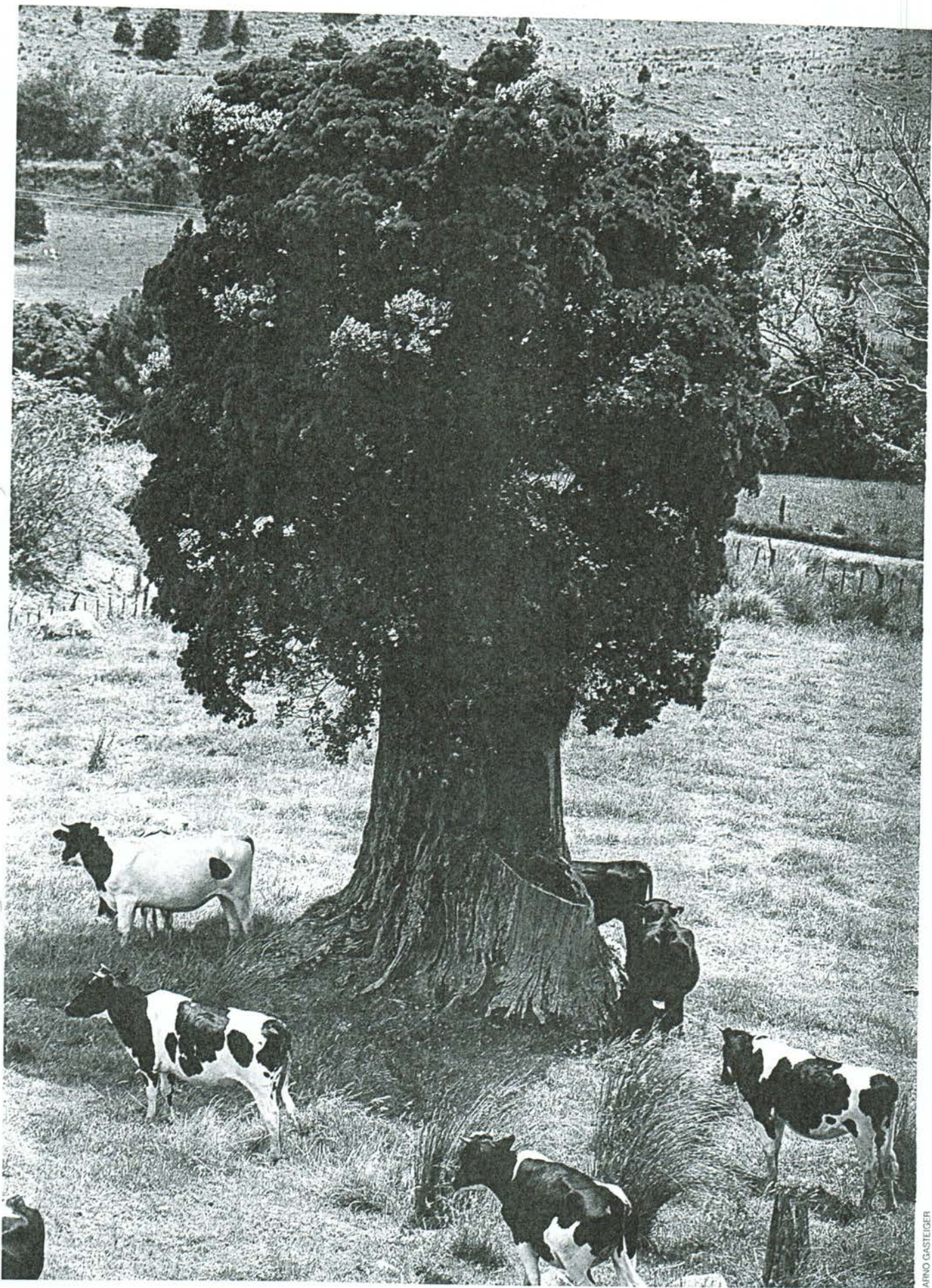
Jo Hardy/McNeill

*T*raditionally a coastal tree, pohutukawa will thrive wherever they are beyond the reach of frost. A dead stump in a farmer's paddock provides a suitable outdoor pot for a young tree which may be a hybrid between pohutukawa and its cousin the rata. Such hybrids are particularly common on Rangitoto and Great Barrier Islands.

**FURTHER READING:**

*New Zealand Pohutukawa*, Geoff & Maurice Conly, Grantham House, 1988.

*New Zealand Geographic*



# The painted pohutukawa

IT IS HARDLY surprising that a tree as striking as the pohutukawa should have commanded the attention of many New Zealand artists.

One of the tree's earliest champions was Alfred Sharpe, an Englishman who emigrated to New Zealand in the 1850s. A pioneering conservationist, Sharpe was passionately interested in the fate of all indigenous trees, but the pohutukawa was a particular favourite—one which he considered an ideal street tree for Auckland's boulevards.

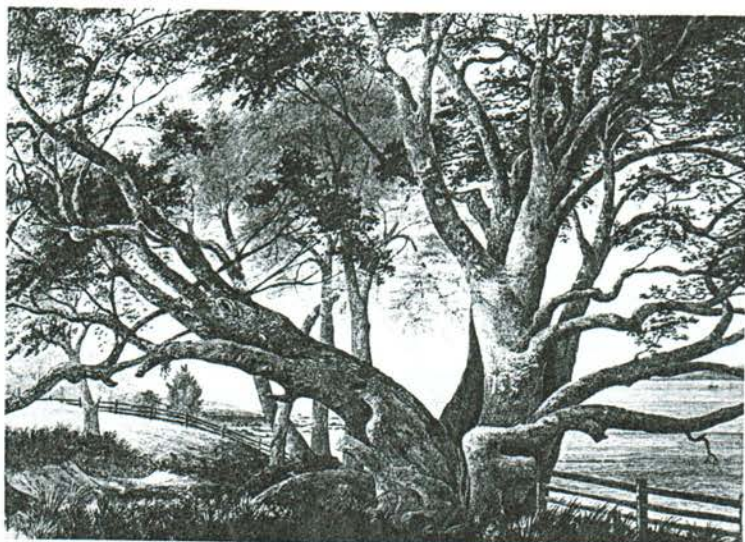
Sharpe's 1876 watercolour of an ancient pohutukawa, part of a sacred grove called Te Urutapu at the northern end of Auckland's Takapuna Beach, is one of the most remarkable tree portraits in New Zealand art (*above*). The particular specimen he chose to immortalise was, in 1876, on fenced

farmland grazed by wandering cattle, and Sharpe carefully described the stumps that indicated absent limbs. On an upper branch we can even make out a wasps'

garden of the Mon Desir Hotel, where it had more to fear from wandering humans than it ever did from cattle.

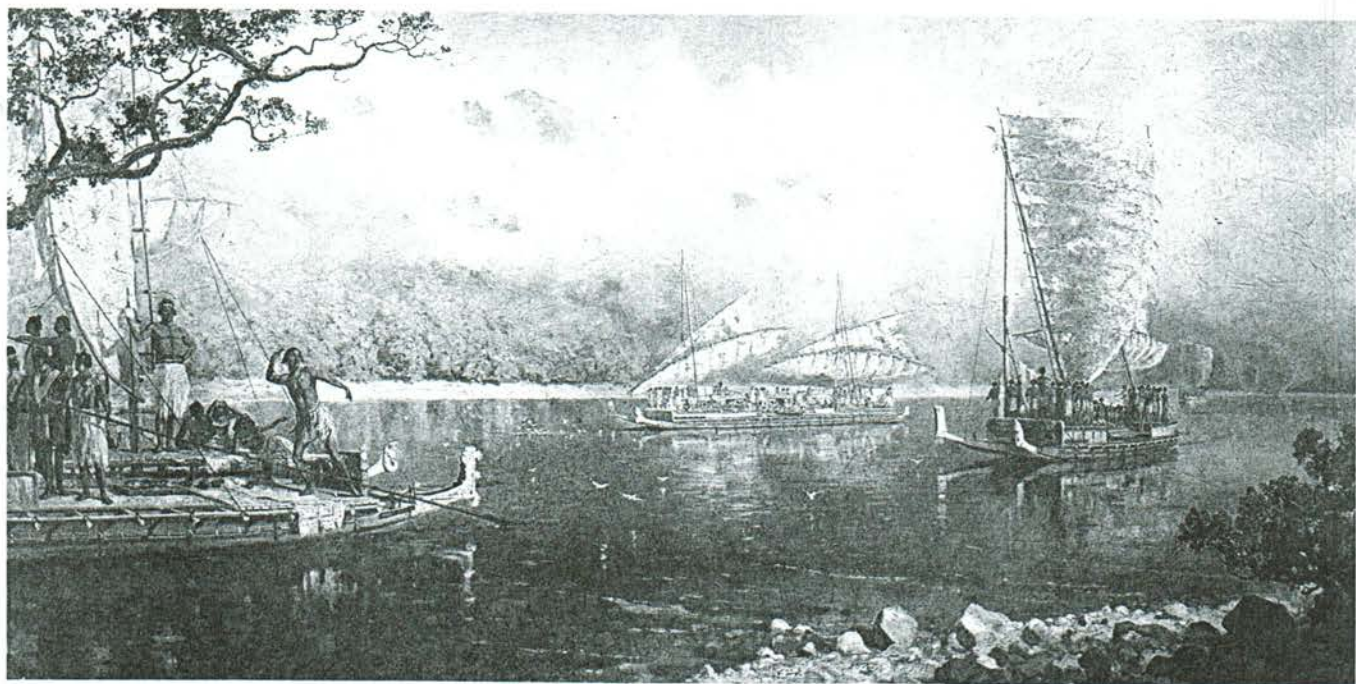
While the inspiration for the picture springs from a long tradition of tree portraiture—especially the English tradition of depicting ancient oak trees—Sharpe combined the tight focus of the Pre-Raphaelite landscapes he saw as a youth with his appreciation of the unique flora of his adopted country. The result is a work with few parallels in colonial art, for Sharpe presents his pohutukawa not so much as a *species* but as an awesome *individual*.

Under pennames such as "Anti-vermin" and "Conservator," Sharpe blasted the work of the acclimatisation societies—the groups responsible for introducing the possum, the



AUCKLAND CITY ART GALLERY

nest—evidence of the imported "vermin" which Sharpe repeatedly identified as a threat to New Zealand's unique environment. In recent decades, Sharpe's pohutukawa presided over the



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rabbit and a host of other disasters, both animal and vegetable. Ironically, Sharpe later became an avid importer of pohutukawa into Australia. He desired the "giant myrtle of New Zealand" to grace the parks he was designing in New South Wales. Pohutukawa now line several Newcastle inner-city streets, and there are a number of splendid specimens planted by Sharpe in King Edward Park.

Many colonial artists, both resident and itinerant, depicted the astonishing transformation that overtakes the pohutukawa in December and January. The travelling artist and author Constance Gordon Cumming stayed with Sir George Grey at Kawau Island in January 1877, and made an evocative depiction of a flowering pohutukawa in Grey's garden. In her book *At Home in Fiji* (1881), she described how "in its prime, each tree is one mass of glowing scarlet; and the effect of its flame-coloured branches overhanging the bright blue water, and dripping showers of fiery stamens in the sea or on the grass, is positively dazzling."

Kennett Watkins played an important role in Auckland's art world of the late 19th century, directing the first art school from 1879, and founding the New Zealand Art Students Association in 1883. Watkins' huge oil paintings were considered major works in his own time, but have spent most of this century consigned to the storage racks.

His *Legend of the Voyage to New Zealand* was unanimously declared the "Picture of the Year" at the 1912 exhibition of the Auckland Society of Arts. The legend of the picture's title is a story preserved in the traditions of two migration canoes, Tainui and Te Arawa, both of which first made landfall when the pohutukawa was in blossom. Both traditions record a similar story, of

immigrants casting overboard their prized red-feather ornaments in the excitement of seeing the red-plumed foliage of Aotearoa, and of inevitable disillusionment. The traditions are also firm about the sometimes bloody rivalry between these two groups of immigrants, and the fact that Tainui arrived after Te Arawa. Yet Watkins' painting presents the full "fleet" of six canoes gliding

the distance. The work is titled *Day Dreams. Christmas Time in Maoriland*.

A quite different painter seduced by the lure of the pohutukawa was Edward Friström, a Swedish-born artist who came to New Zealand via Australia. Friström sometimes employed a poster-like style, flattening landscape elements into simplified shapes. His most celebrated



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calmly across glistening waters, completely unscathed by the epic voyage across the Pacific (*opposite*).

Louis J. Steele was another history painter of the period, a close associate of Watkins and the teacher of Charles F. Goldie. Steele's 1916 contribution was the ceremonial launching of a war canoe, a scene of human sacrifice viewed from the safe distance of a shady pohutukawa. Another Steele composition had Captain Cook meeting Maori chiefs, similarly framed by pohutukawa.

For Auckland-based painters of this period, the pohutukawa was a potent signifier of "the North." Settlers had already appropriated the flowering pohutukawa to stand for Christmas. A 1902 painting by Goldie presents a Maori mother and baby posed under a flowering pohutukawa, with a native village in

work is a tiny oil painting on cardboard, depicting a flaming pohutukawa with a sun-drenched strand of beach beyond (*above*). By abstracting the essentials of the scene, Friström has constructed a potent icon of the northern summer.

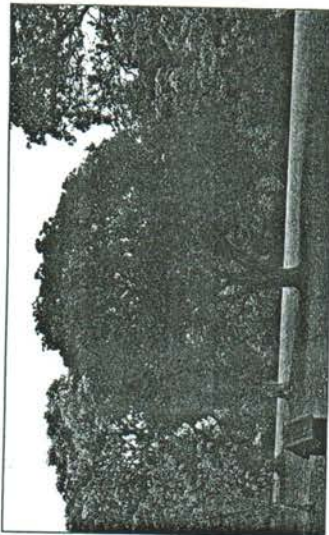
A modernist of the following generation, painter and photographer Eric Lee-Johnson, also adored the pohutukawa. The tree's gnarled and writhing forms fitted brilliantly into Lee-Johnson's gothic vision of Northland, a brooding landscape of tangled vegetation and decayed wooden churches. It was fitting that when family and friends gathered for Eric Lee-Johnson's funeral in 1993, the sole tribute on his coffin was a branch of flowering pohutukawa.

Roger Blackley



# Pohutukawa, jewel of the north

Story and photos by Jack Hobbs



**T**HE pohutukawa (*Metrosideros excelsa*) is widely regarded as one of the world's great flowering trees. Because it varies so much in the wild, nurserymen have been selecting individuals for many years to introduce into cultivation.

Considerable variation occurs in the flowers of pohutukawas, colours including pinks, yellow, orange, apricot and many shades of crimson and scarlet. Different trees also vary greatly in their habit, foliage and bark. Aerial roots are common, and in extreme cases these resemble huge beards hanging from the branches.

Individuals also differ considerably in their eventual size. A specimen in Auckland's Parnell Rose Garden, christened 'Parnell', is about 40 metres in diameter. It produces an abundance of large red flowers most summers, but was selected mainly for its majestic habit. Plants are available, but obviously are suitable for large gardens only.

The abundance of bloom produced by pohutukawas differs from year to year. Last summer was a brilliant season for most trees, although some which normally flower well hardly flowered at all. Pohutukawa should receive some initial training according to their location and use. In gardens where space is limited they are generally best grown on a single trunk, allowing branching to occur about two metres or more above ground. This requires the continual removal of side branches and suckers for the first few years.

In a more natural setting near the beach, it may be decided to allow a more typical habit to develop, with multiple leaders arising from the base. This will result in a much wider, spreading tree.

Because individual trees differ in so many of their characteristics, it is important to consider all of these when making selections. Graeme Platt, of Platts Native Plants in Albany, has been evaluating pohutukawas for over fifteen years and looks for the following characteristics: flowers should be large with long stamens and prominent pollen, and they should be produced in large quantities reliably every summer; their colour should be bright, and when in flower they should produce little veg-

**ABOVE:** A pohutukawa trained on a single trunk is the ideal in gardens.

**RIGHT:** A good form of pohutukawa (*Metrosideros excelsa*). The flowers of plants in the wild vary considerably.

etative growth so that their flowers are not concealed.

Graeme prefers trees which flower inside the canopy of the tree as well as outside, this not being a typical characteristic of most pohutukawas.

When selecting, flowers are only one characteristic which should be considered. The trees should have a good strong structure with a clean appearance, rather than the twiggy growth of some specimens. Specimens with a very erect narrow habit can be useful as street trees and where space is limited.

Large glossy leaves are preferable to those which are small and dull. The potential also exists for frost resistant selections to be introduced. Although the pohutukawa is mainly a coastal tree which does not tolerate frosts, it also occurs around the Rotorua lakes. Admittedly it is often growing there in the relative warmth of thermal vents, but selections from areas such as this may produce relatively hardy cultivars.

In frost-prone areas larger plants, especially those which have developed their adult foliage, are most likely to survive. They are still likely to tolerate light frosts only.

Graeme Platt has done much of his pohutukawa hunting with Terry Hatch. Together this intrepid duo have covered vast areas and looked at tens of thousands of trees in search of perfect specimens. The area between Whakatane and East Cape in particular contains many outstanding trees, as well as several excellent hybrids.

They say that of all the trees they have looked at no two are the same - that they are as individual as people. Graeme considers that many previous introductions were chosen only because they had unusual features, such as variegated leaves, rather than overall excellence.

'Vibrance' has particularly impressed me. The name is an appropriate description of the bright scarlet flowers which have an iridescent orange glow. Its stamens are exceptionally long, and the long rounded leaves are very handsome.

It forms a medium sized tree ideal for gardens and for growing in large tubs. It flowers on older bare wood inside the tree as well as outside, and grows easily from cuttings. The original tree was discovered in Waiohau Bay, Coromandel, and Terry Hatch regards it as their best selection yet. It is currently being produced in large numbers, but will not be available in garden centres until 1993.

Several other Platt/Hatch selections are currently under evaluation. The following four are particularly promising, and although not yet widely available they are worth watching out for in future.

'Firestone' has bright orange-red flowers and pointed leaves. It was found

in Coromandel in an area where Graeme collected stones to build his fireplace.

'Te Kaha' is an outstanding small tree found in the Bay of Plenty. It may become larger in gardens but should still be suitable for tubs and where space is limited. It has red flowerheads with very long stamens, and large handsome leaves.

'Tamaki' has large red flowers with an orange glow, and an attractive upright habit. The original tree is growing along Auckland's Tamaki Drive.

'Hauraki' was chosen for the outstanding red flowers it produces. It is a tall erect tree growing in Long Bay Regional Park, where a wide range of interesting forms can be seen, including some with flowers in shades of pink, cream or yellow.

Many other nurserymen have made their own selections over the years. Duncan and Davies have evaluated approximately 25 selections from the Taranaki District since 1976, and now have about eight in production. Most of these have developed into narrow erect trees when grown at their Waitara Nursery.

**T**IM Rumbal, Duncan and Davies' manager of new developments, tells me that most of their plants are grafted because cuttings are more difficult and slower to strike. Several of their cultivars were originally selected by that grand Waitara plantsman, Felix Jury.

'Flame Crest' is a tall erect tree of oval shape which produces a heavy crop of orange-scarlet flowers every year. Tim Rumbal rates it particularly highly.

'Fire Mountain' has very bright orange-scarlet flowers, and a wider growth habit than 'Flame Crest'. It was discovered by Felix Jury growing on the banks of the Waitara River.

'Scarlet Pimpernel' was another Felix Jury selection, and the first cultivar released by Duncan and Davies. It is regarded by Jim Kumbal as still the best scarlet. It forms a smallish tree, and all its flowers open simultaneously.

'Royal Flame' produces dark red flowers late in the season. Golden pollen enhances the flowers, which despite their deep colour are still bright.

*Metrosideros excelsa* 'Aurea' has sulphur-yellow flowers, but although it is unusual I much prefer the reds. For many years Duncan and Davies produced this variety from seed, but now offer a cutting.

'Pink Lady' is a small upright tree with pinkish flowers. 'Christmas Cheer' is an interesting selection by Rob Bayly, of Bayly Nursery in Gisborne. It produces large crimson flowers in distinctive clusters at about Christmas time.

Several cultivars with variegated leaves are available, most being forms or hybrids of the Kermadec pohutukawa, *M. kermadecensis*.