Bruce Irwin's orchid paintings

1941-56 watercolours of New Zealand native orchids

compiled by
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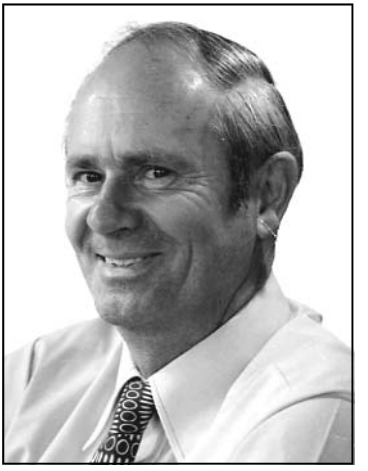
Number 13 in the New Zealand Native Orchid Group's *Historical Series*
Wellington 2004. ISSN 0114-5568

James Bruce Irwin

Beauty is truth, and truth beauty.
That is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know.

—Keats



Bruce Irwin was interested in plants from an early age. At Wanganui Technical College he was one of several friends who would bicycle up the river looking for new plants at weekends: his friends were interested in native orchids.

At seventeen he became a draughtsman at the Lands and Survey Department at New Plymouth. Cedric Gibson taught him an enthusiasm for the bush, and Owen Gibson, Cedric's son, later became Bruce's colleague on botanising trips. The Egmont area was good for orchids, and he painted at first to natural scale.

Many of these watercolours were made during the Second World War. There were few opportunities to paint at Army camps, and later at a joint Lands and Survey/Army military mapping unit and at RNZAF stations where he trained, and where, two weeks before Hiroshima, he was recalled. The next few years were his most productive, "until I realized that more detailed large scale pencil drawings were of greater value botanically—and much less trouble to make!"

While working in the Cartographic Branch of Lands & Survey in Wellington, Bruce was asked to talk about native orchids at a meeting of the Wellington Botanical Society; among those who attended was the botanist Lucy Moore. She saw his watercolours of orchids and was impressed (these are the very ones: you will be impressed too). So began a fruitful botanical relationship.

Years later when Bruce Irwin was looking after cabins at Resolution Bay in the Marlborough Sounds, Dr Moore came to visit, talked and borrowed his drawings. Lucy Moore had been approached by the Oxford University Press to write a book of New Zealand plants, and she needed an artist. Bruce moved to Dunedin in 1967, and a week later she phoned to arrange a meeting with the publishing company representative.

At that time Moore and Edgar were working on Volume II of the Flora of New Zealand. Some nomenclatural changes for several orchids were necessary, and in 1968 a long paper appeared in the *Journal of Botany*, written by Lucy Moore and illustrated by Bruce Irwin.[1] The *Flora* was published in 1970.[2] Irwin's meticulous original drawings are at Landcare Research in Lincoln.

While he worked part time at the Art Department at Otago Medical School from 1967 to 1979, he was using every spare moment to draw for the Oxford book. He had long since stopped drawing life-size, and was doing enlarged illustrations using a binocular zoom microscope.

Most of the plants he found in Otago, some he collected on trips to the north, and a few were sent down. To be a good botanical artist and to understand taxonomic features which should be emphasised one needs to be something of a botanist, Bruce Irwin told me, and he is certainly that. He worked for eleven and a half years on *The Oxford Book of New Zealand Plants*.[3]

The book was launched in style. It was 1978, the quincentennial year of the Oxford University Press and the Oxford man organised a splendid dinner at a Dunedin hotel - he asked for French champagne, and there was plenty of it.

Most reviews were enthusiastic, the only valid criticism being that the orchids appeared to have been given more than their share of space. Professor Bayliss paid a real compliment in requesting a specially bound copy for his farewell presentation. It was nominated for the Book of the Year Award in a year when there were no separate categories—and lost out to Maurice Gee's *Plumb*. In any other year it would have triumphed.

Bruce Irwin left Dunedin eighteen months later, and retired to Tauranga. He grows orchids for pleasure, and his great skills as a botanical illustrator are in constant demand. He told me, "Abstract art never appealed to me, and to some extent my early orchid watercolours hindered the development of a freer style which I could admire in others' work but seldom achieve myself". He was a member of the Otago Art Society, and in Tauranga taught art at the Boys' College. He has contributed innovative and artistic plans for orchid displays for the Tauranga Orchid Society since 1985; the Society's display won first place at the 1990 World Orchid Conference in Auckland and has done so at every national and local show since. He is a valued member of that Society.

He has also been involved from 1996 in the planting and care of a very large number of orchids in the Te Puna Quarry Park, a magical place, a "community development in the environmental arts" for the enjoyment of the public young and old. Bruce's birthdays are celebrated in the Quarry each year with cookies and a glass of wine.

He made twenty drawings for Bruce Clarkson for his monograph on the *Vegetation of Egmont National Park,* published by the D.S.I.R.[4] He illustrated the Native Orchid Group's 1990 book, *The New Zealand orchids: natural history and cultivation*, and many of the drawings in the Group's *Field guides* are his. He designed the Group's logo and badge. He has continued to contribute drawings and commentary on native orchids in many papers for the *NZ Native Orchid Journal,* and remains an active and highly valued contributor to the Group's activities.

In 1947 Owen Gibson discovered a new species of Pterostylis on Mt Taranaki. Dan Hatch called it *Pterostylis irsoniana*: "ir-son", a combination of the two names, "to acknowledge the labours and enthusiasm of Messrs J.B. Irwin and O.E. Gibson, who between them have done much to elucidate the orchid flora of Mount Egmont".[5]

Later Gibson and Irwin discovered, near Wellsford, *Molloybas (Corybas) cryptanthus*.[6] A Thelymitra was found during the same excursion, at Ahipara by Gibson and at Kaimaumau by Irwin, who nicknamed it "sanscilia". Hatch described it as *Thelymitra sanscilia,* and though Lucy Moore regarded it as a freak of *T.* aff. *pauciflora*, most now regard it as a distinct species. He has extensively researched the different forms in the *Nematoceras (Corybas) rivularis*

aggregate, and with Brian Molloy has been responsible for their separation into different species. He continues to research the forms in the *N. triloba* and *Pterostylis montana* aggregates, as well as different forms in *Prasophyllum* and other genera.

Brian Molloy paid him high tribute with the description of a plant Bruce had discovered at Erua, now *Pterostylis irwinii.*[7]

The best teachers wait and watch—and intervene only to encourage: Bruce's generosity of spirit and his readiness to help are never intrusive, but are hugely valued by all who know him. He is our greatest native orchid illustrator. His later orchid illustrations have mostly been accurate scientific pencil sketches on embossed "eggshell" paper, to provide a pleasing texture to his shading.

Dan Hatch has referred to his "genius" with the pencil, and those who cherish these plants are captivated by his artistry. He is a Life Member of the New Zealand Native Orchid Group, and has been the recipient of the Allan Mere (presented by Lucy Moore in recognition of H.H. Allan: she would have approved its award to her artist colleague), the John Easton Award and the Wellington Botanical Society's Jubilee Award.

The watercolours reproduced here are of terrestrial orchids, many of them of the *Corybas* and *Pterostylis* alliances. The details of the flowers, sometimes accompanied by dissections, are in fine pencil, with colour added later; usually several plants are shown, from several aspects (he noted on the painting of *Nematoceras [Corybas] acuminatus,* "All drawn from one specimen" plate 14). Often these form a pleasingly classical pyramid, and as often a receding perspective. The colours are accurate, white or pale areas often left alone with darker colours around them. The foreground is sketched in darker colours, and the background is usually given a pale wash (the cover illustration of *Aporostylis bifolia* is an exception), often in a contrasting mauve for green plants. He says, "The botanical value of the watercolours is small—they merely record my early interest in orchids", but he creates a lovely work of art while at the same time illustrating the essential features of the specimen: this is art and science—beauty and truth—perfectly combined.

The watercolours were scanned using an Epson Perfection 1240U scanner, and manipulated using Photoshop 7 software: foxing and blemishes were removed from the electronic images, and fading pencil lines accentuated by increasing contrast in a very few cases. I have tried to keep colour as faithful to the originals as possible.

Ian St George
April 2004

References

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2. Moore L.B. and Edgar E. *Flora of New Zealand*, Vol II Wellington, Government Printer, 1970..
3. Moore L.B. and Irwin J.B. *The Oxford book of New Zealand plants*. Wellington, Oxford University Press, 1978.
4. Clarkson B.D. and Irwin J.B. *Vegetation of Egmont National Park New Zealand*. National Parks Scientific Series No.5. Wellington, Science Education Publishing Centre D.S.I.R., 1986.
5. Hatch E.D. The epiphytic orchids of New Zealand and a new species of Pterostylis from Mount Egmont. *Transactions of the Royal Society of N.Z.* 1950. 78: 104.
6. Irwin J.B. Notes on the finding of a new Saprophytic Orchid. *Well. Bot. Soc. Bull.* 1950. 23: 23-24.
7. Jones D.L., Molloy B.P.J. & M.A.Clem. *Orchadian*1997; 12 (6): 269 f.

Plate 1: *Acianthus sinclairii,* Titirangi, 15 Sep 1945. “Seed almost ripe”

Plate 2: *Acianthus sinclairii,* Titirangi 23 May 1946

Plate 3: *Chiloglottis cornuta,* Kaitake Range, 4 Nov 1945

Plate 4: *Cyrtostylis oblonga*, Horotiu, 21 Aug 1949

Plate 5: *Diplodium (Pterostylis) alobulum*, Wanganui, 26 Aug 1945

Plate 6: *Diplodium (Pterostylis) alobulum*, 30 Aug 1945

Plate 7: *Diplodium (Pterostylis) brumale*, Laingholm, 7 May 1949

Plate 8: *Diplodium (Pterostylis) trullifolium*, May 1946

Plate 9: *Diplodium (Pterostylis) trullifolium,* Ardmore, May 1946

Plate 10: *Hymenochilus (Pterostylis) tanypodus*, Springfield, 21 Nov 1951

Plate 11: *Hymenochilus (Pterostylis) tristis*, undated

Plate 12: *Microtis unifolia,* Pukerua Bay, 7 Dec 1952

Plate 13: *Molloybas (Corybas) cryptanthus,* Pinehaven, 29 July 1956

Plate 14: *Nematoceras (Corybas) acuminatus,* Pouakai Range, 28 Sep 1947

Plate 15: *Nematoceras (Corybas) iridescens,* Onaero, undated.

Plate 16: *Nematoceras (Corybas) macrantha*, Wanganui, 23 Oct 1944

Plate 17: *Nematoceras (Corybas)* "Kaimai"?, Koru, 6 Sep 1945

Plate 18: *Nematoceras (Corybas)* spp: *N.* aff. *triloba,* Mt Taranaki, 3 Nov 1945; *Singularybas (Corybas) oblongus,* New Plymouth, 4 Nov 1945; *Nematoceras (Corybas) orbiculatus,* Wanganui, 22 Jul 1947.

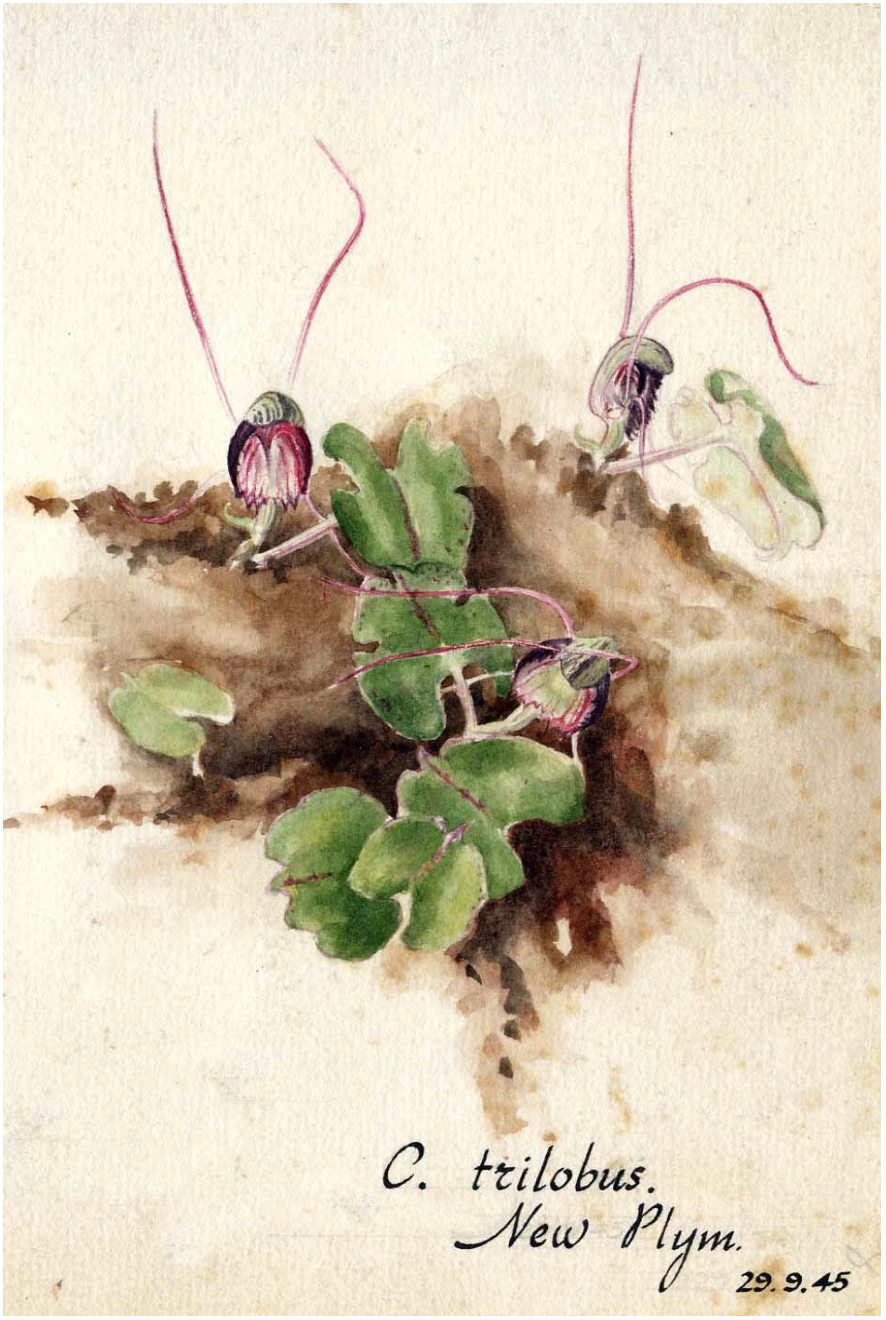


Plate 19: *Nematoceras (Corybas)* aff. *triloba*, New Plymouth, 29 Sep 1945

Plate 20: *Nematoceras (Corybas)* aff. *triloba*, Te Kuiti 1948

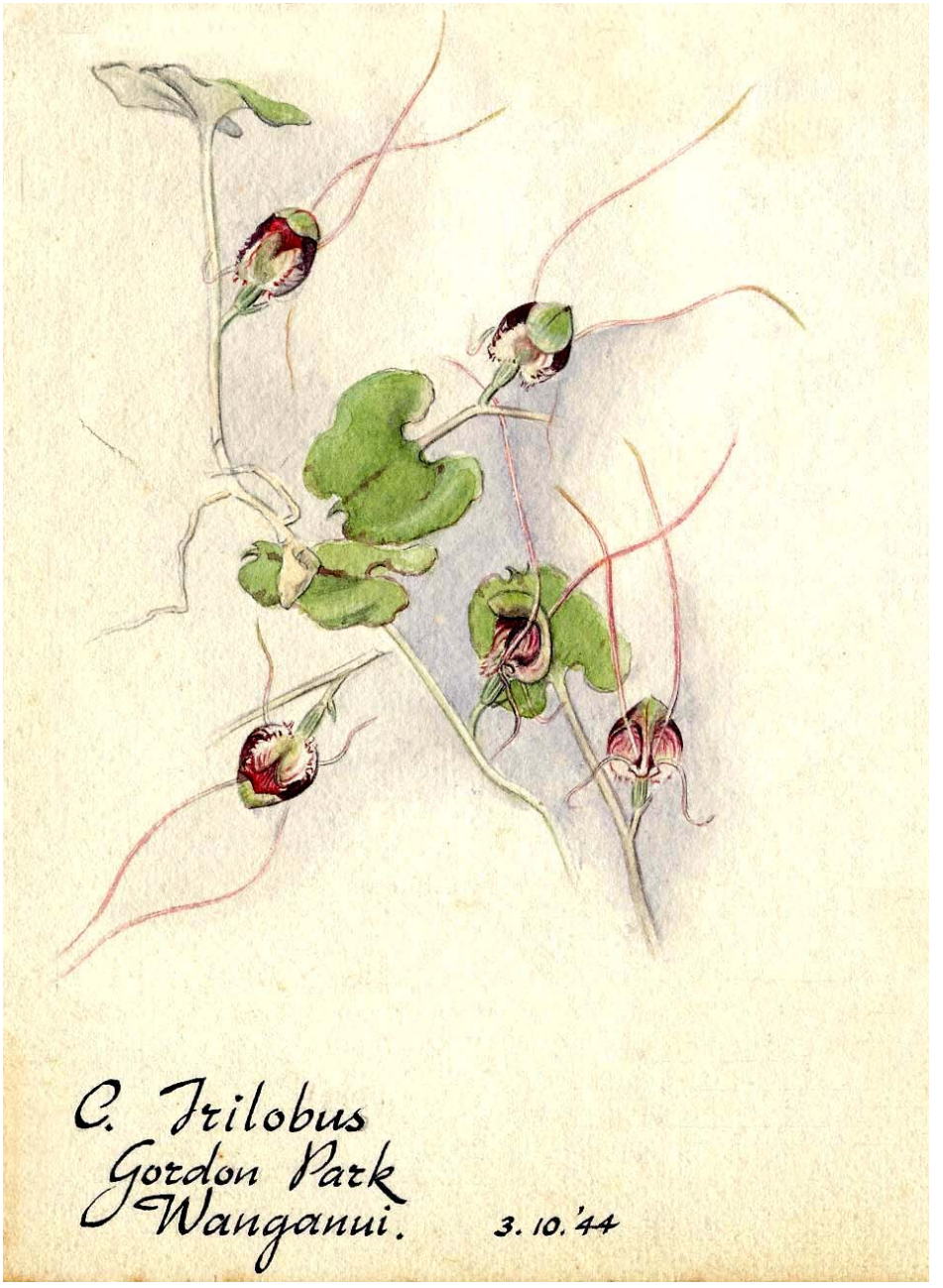


Plate 21: *Nematoceras (Corybas)* aff. *triloba*, Wanganui, 3 Oct 1944

Plate 22: *Pterostylis banksii*, undated

Plate 23: *Pterostylis foliata,* Mt Pirongia, undated

Plate 24: *Pterostylis graminea*, Pouakai Range, 1 Dec 1945

Plate 25: *Pterostylis graminea*, 23 Oct 1950

Plate 26: *Pterostylis humilis,* Mt Taranaki, undated

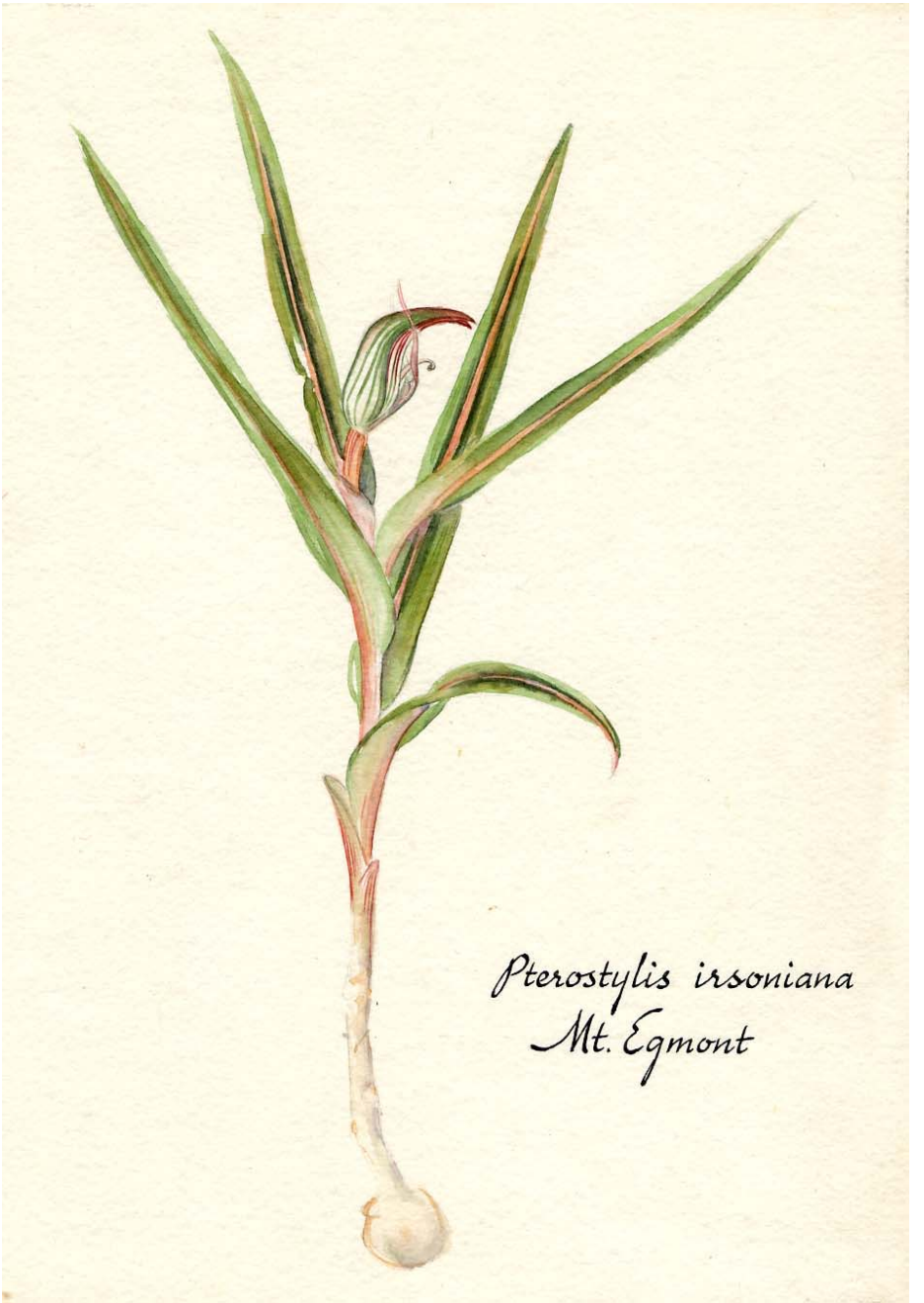


Plate 27: *Pterostylis irsoniana,* Mt Taranaki, 25 Nov 1949

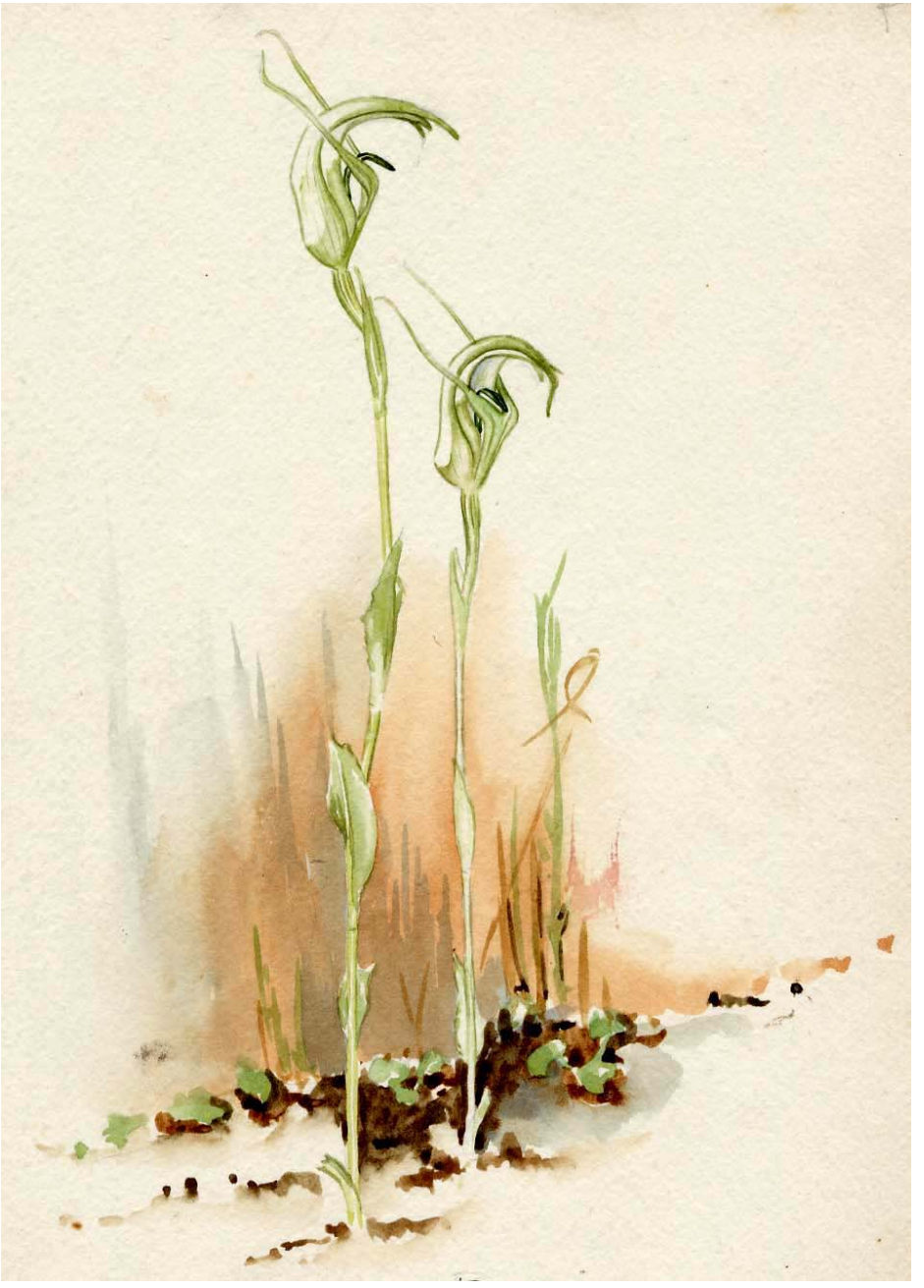


Plate 28: *Pterostylis micromega,* Ngaere Swamp, 21 Dec 1942

Plate 29: *Pterostylis montana,* Pouakai Range, undated.

Plate 30: *Pterostylis* aff. *montana*, Pouakai Range, 7 Oct 1945

Plate 31: *Pterostylis oliveri,* Arthur's Pass, undated.

Plate 32: *Pterostylis patens,* Mt Taranaki, 3 Feb 1946

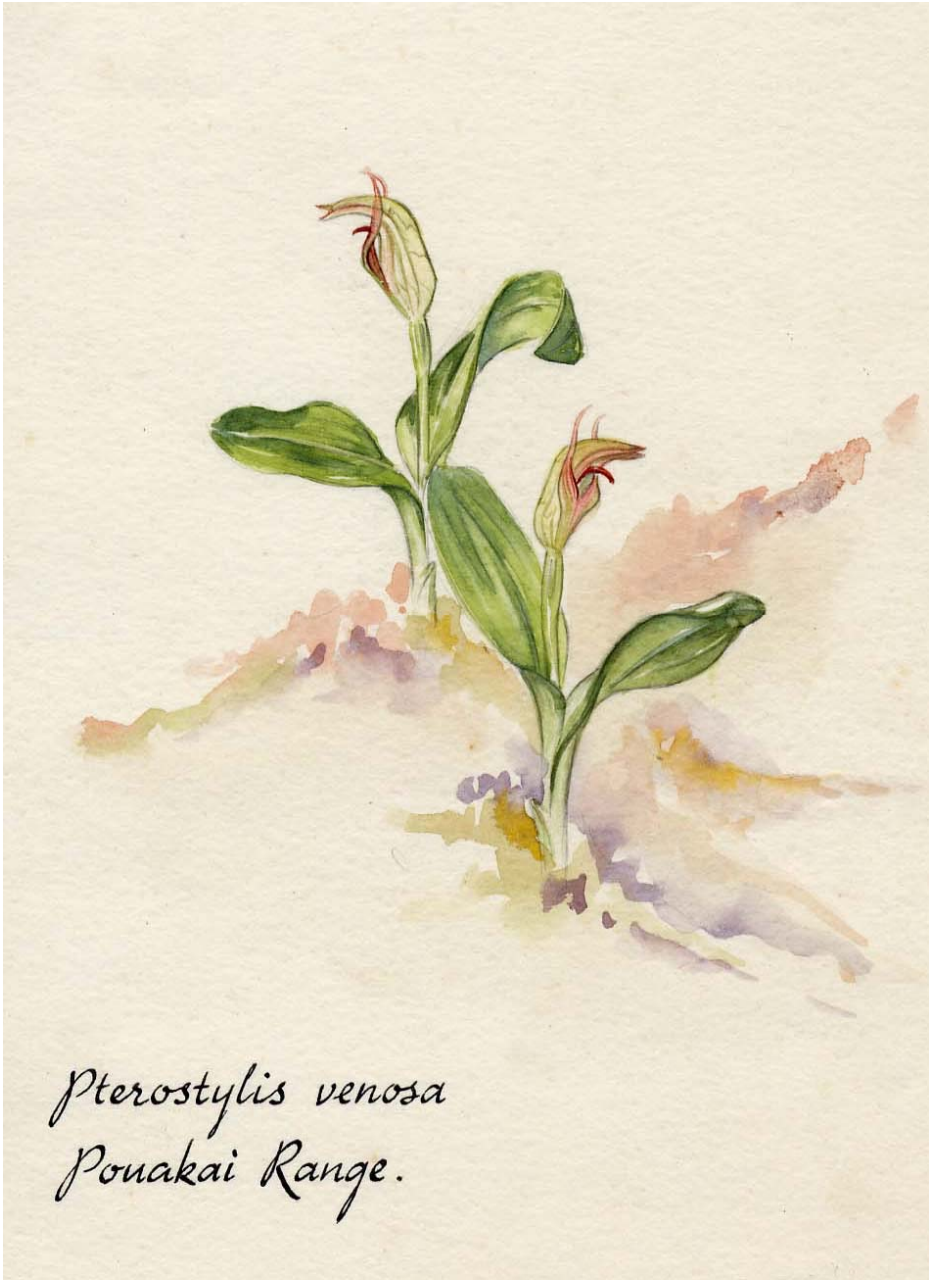
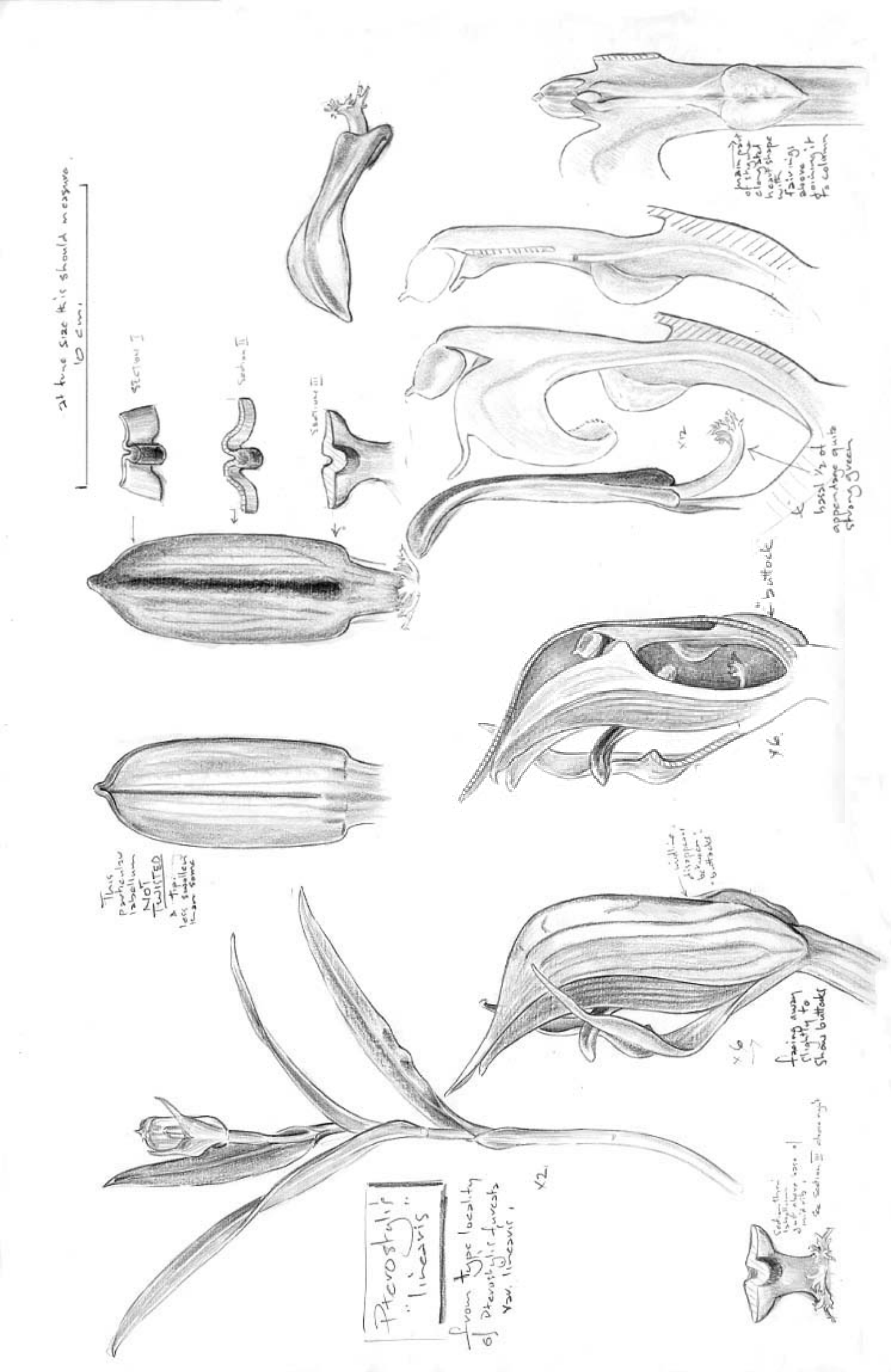


Plate 33: *Pterostylis venosa,* Pouakai Range, undated

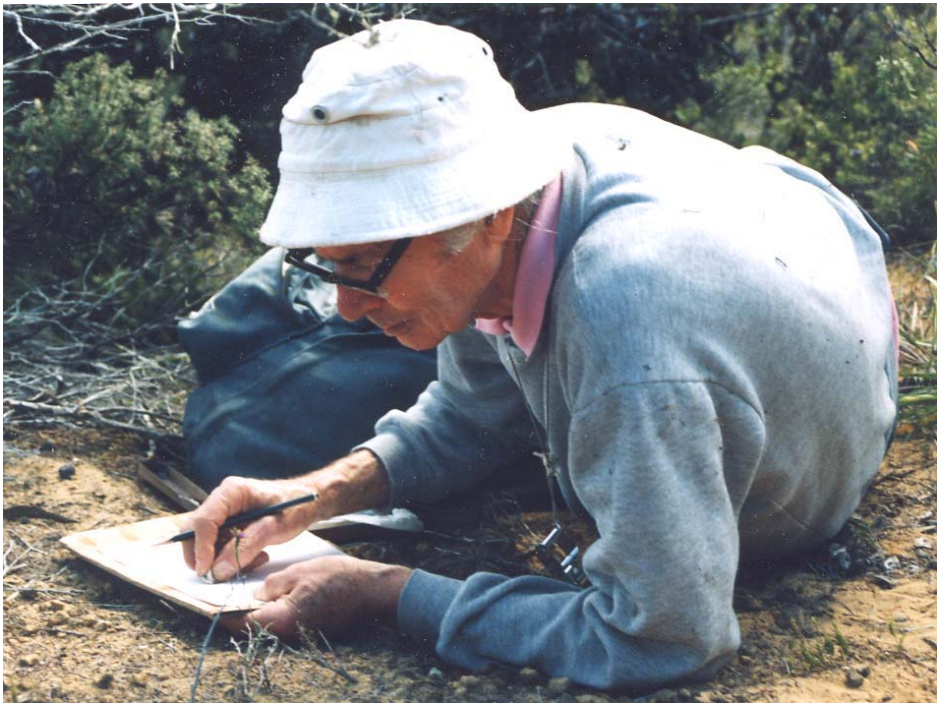
Plate 34: *Pterostylis venosa,* Mt Taranaki, 17 Oct 1945

Plate 35: *Singularybas (Corybas) oblongus,* Koru, 4 Nov 1945

Plate 36: *Thelymitra pulchella,* Hauhangatahi, undated



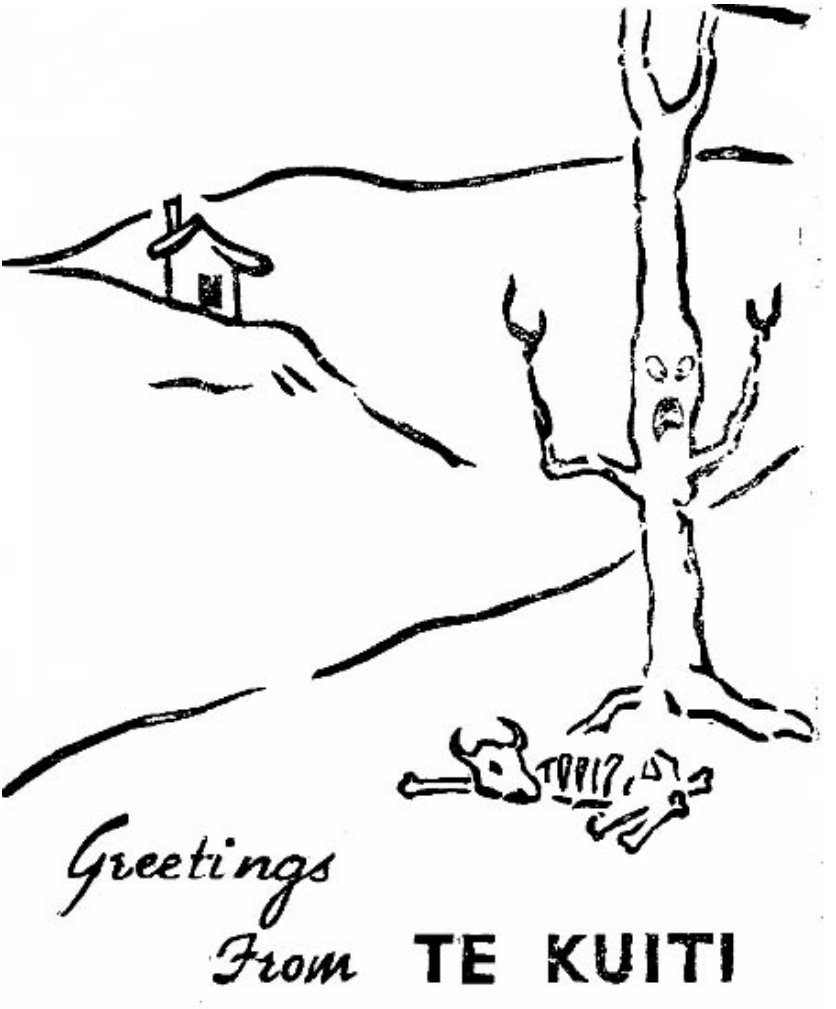
at true size this should measure 10 cm.
SECTION I
Section II
Section III
This particular labellum NOT TWISTED
& tip less swollen than some
Pterostylis linearis
from type locality of Pterostylis furcata var. linearis.
x2
x6
facing away slightly to show buttocks
buttock
x6.
x12
basal 1/2 of appendage quite strong green



Bruce Irwin

—sketching *Thelymitra matthewsii* at Te Paki—
or, more correctly "...using 'the instrument', as an old Housing Dept surveyor called it. I occasionally helped him when his work brought him to New Plymouth. Each day he would check his equipment. Theodolite, plumb bob, *Chambers Trigonometrical Tables*, and 'the instrument'—an eraser".

◀**Plate 37:** *Pterostylis paludosus*, Murimotu, 1987.



Christmas Card (linocut) 1949.
After he had served with Jayforce in Japan 1946-7 Bruce was posted by Lands and Survey to Te Kuiti; though the work was interesting and he found new orchids, his draughting career was not advancing, and he wanted to make that point to Head Office, so devised this card. He sent it with the message, "How about a shift?" and almost at once was transferred to the Cartographic Branch in Wellington.

Notes on the plates

Cover: *Aporostylis bifolia,* 225x160mm, no annotations, undated.Plate 1: *Acianthus sinclairii,* 90x90mm, "Titirangi 23 May 1946".

Plate 1: *Acianthus sinclairii,* 110x105mm, "Titirangi, Auckland. Drawn 15 Sep 45. Seed almost ripe".

Plate 2: *Acianthus sinclairii,* 90x90mm, Titirangi 23 May 1946.

Plate 3: *Chiloglottis cornuta,* 220x160mm, no annotations, 4.11.45.

Plate 4: *Cyrtostylis oblonga,* 215x120mm, no annotations, 21 Aug 49.

Plate 5: *Diplodium alobula,* 150x75mm, "trullifolia var. alobula" is crossed out and "now P. alobula" added, and "Note leaf at base of stem", "Wanganui, 26 Aug 45".

Plate 6: *Diplodium alobula,* 130x95mm, 30 Aug 45.

Plate 7: *Diplodium brumale,* 200x130mm, "Note juglike lip, especially prominent on bud, Laingholm 7 May 49" and "Now brumalis".

Plate 8: *Diplodium trullifolium,* 230x180mm, "Horotiu. Lily like rostellum, pollinia 4", annotated sketches, undated.

Plate 9: *Diplodium trullifolium,* 220x140mm, "Var. gracilis" has been crossed out, May 1946.

Plate 10: *Hymenochilus tanypodus,* 200x110mm, "Leaf very thick, fleshy, 21 Nov 51 in dry stony ground, Kowai Rd, Springfield, much later developing than in 1950, embossing becoming conspicuous in old leaves"

Plate 11: *Hymenochilus tristis,* 190x80mm, no annotations, undated

Plate 12: *Microtis unifolia,* 240x170mm, extensive annotations to the sketches, "Pukerua Bay, 7 Dec 52".

Plate 13: *Molloybas cryptanthus,* 150x140mm, "Pinehaven 29.7.56".

Plate 14: *Nematoceras acuminatus,* 220x130mm, "Rivularis" is crossed out and "acuminatus" added, "28 Sep '47, Pouakai Range, Elevation 3000ft".

Plate 15: *Nematoceras iridescens,* 190x140mm, "Now iridescens", undated.

Plate 16: *Nematoceras macrantha,* 165x110, "Wanganui, 23.10.'44".

Plate 17: *Nematoceras* sp., 140x110mm, "C. macranthus var. longipetalus" is crossed out and "now orbiculatus" crossed out and "actually C rivularis" added, "Koru 6.9.'45". The colony was destroyed by flooding about 30 years ago, so identification is now impossible.

Plate 18: *Nematoceras* spp. 225x150mm:
(1) *Nematoceras* aff. *triloba,* "Mt Egmont 3000ft, 3 Nov 45" "Ngatoro";
(2) *Singularybas oblongus,* "C. oblongus, Dry Sunlit bank New Plym. 4 Nov.45", "Koru";
(3) *Nematoceras orbiculatus,* "C. macranthus var. longipetalus Wanganui 22 Jul.47", "It is now realized that this is actually the original C. rivularis. NO Probably an unnamed species. Confirmed C. orbiculatus (Colenso)".

Plate 19: *Nematoceras* aff. *triloba,* 150x120mm, “New Plym. 29.9.’45”.

Plate 20: *Nematoceras* aff. *triloba,* 150x120mm, “Te Kuiti 1948”.

Plate 21: *Nematoceras* aff. *triloba,* 130x110mm, “Gordon Park, Wanganui, 3.10’44”.

Plate 22: *Pterostylis banksii*, 240x165mm, no annotations, undated.

Plate 23: *Pterostylis foliata,* 230x150mm, no annotations, undated.

Plate 24: *Pterostylis graminea,* 160x110mm; Irwin has crossed out “montana var. rubricaulis” and noted “has to be graminea”, but later “Identified by EDH as montana v. rubricaulis probably because plants have only 3 lvs”, 1 Dec 45. Pouakai is south of the southernmost limit of *P. agathicola.*

Plate 25: *Pterostylis graminea,* 230x160mm, no annotations, 23 Oct 50.

Plate 26: *Pterostylis humilis,* 170x120mm, no annotations, undated.

Plate 27: *Pterostylis irsoniana,* 220x130mm, no annotations, 25.11.49.

Plate 28: *Pterostylis micromega,* 210x150mm, “Ngaere Swamp, Ord Rd, 21 Dec 42”.

Plate 29: *Pterostylis montana,* 170x140mm, “New Plym., Pouakai Range, 600ft.?”, undated.

Plate 30: *Pterostylis* aff. *montana,* 230x170mm, “montana v. typical” has been crossed out and “sp. aff. montana” added, 7 Oct 45. This date precedes Dan Hatch’s receiving the Stewart Island type specimen of *P. montana* from Cedric Smith.

Plate 31: *Pterostylis oliveri,* 225x215mm, no annotations, undated. Drawn at Arthur’s pass.

Plate 32: *Pterostylis patens,* 220x170mm, no annotations, 3 Feb 46.

Plate 33: *Pterostylis venosa,* 120x120mm, no annotations, undated.

Plate 34: *Pterostylis venosa,* 110x100mm, annotated “species not determined, cultivated 17.10.45; note upper sepal seems to exceed petals; long lip”, and later “Pterostylis venosa, Egmont”.

Plate 35: *Singularybas oblongus,* 230x155mm, “Koru 4.11.45”.

Plate 36: *Thelymitra pulchella,* 210x150, “Hauhangatahi”, labelled with Petrie’s name *T. caesia*, undated.

Plate 37: *Pterostylis paludosus*, 420x300mm, Murimotu, 1987. Irwin's notes read (clockwise from the title at the top) “P. ‘linearis’ MURIMOTU, coll. Dec. 87. NOTE ‘linearis’ seems generally to have a cordate stigma. This particular labellum NOT TWISTED & tip less swollen than some. At true size this should measure 10cm. Main part of stigma elongated heart shape with fairings above joining it to column. Basal half of appendage quite strong green. ‘Buttock.’ Midline disappears between ‘buttocks’. Facing away slightly to show buttocks. Section through labellum just above base of midrib - see section III above right. Pterostylis ‘linearis’ from type locality of *Pterostylis furcata* var. *linearis*.”