

Some Native Trees

Address by Rev. Father C. J. Callaghan, S.M., to the Hastings-Havelock North Section

It is a fortunate occasion when speaker and audience are at one in their wishes. You come to hear about some of our native trees, and that is what I wish to speak of.

All of you, by your presence here, show that you appreciate our New Zealand trees, and want to know more of them. Of the appreciation of beautiful things we may say what a writer said of spiritual matters: that when it is lacking, it is not missed; but, when we begin to possess it, we at once desire more. We move among people who for the most part do not appreciate the beauty of our native flora, for our New Zealand culture is still deficient in that respect. To encourage us to open our eyes, we may consider two things.

First, it is sub-human to be blind to the beauty of our trees. Animals pass by and beneath them all unknowing; and so do many people on our roads today. Yet there is beauty there, and many have taught themselves to see it, and so may we. Folk who go to art galleries and not to the bush may persuade themselves and others that they are cultured; but the sense of beauty cannot be adopted for an occasion or to impress others; and if it seems to be receptive only to the works of man it is suspect. For God is the great artist, and He is the first gardener, as Chesterton says. Through the ages He continues his work, and in our land He has planted a garden which many other lands might envy.

Secondly, the bush is a community of living beings. Each plant has its characteristics, its personality of a sort. I wish to introduce you to some of them, first, some of the rakau rangatira, the lordly trees.

1. The white pine or kahikatea. Bushmen not botanists named our pines. The kahikatea has no cone or needles. It has a tiny nut, set on top of a kind of fruit. It is a podocarp, which means "foot fruit". The stalk or stem (peduncle) holding the fruit becomes fleshy, forming a kind of berry; so we can think of it as a tiny fruit, with the stone set on top of it. This is the fashion in which the yew carries its seeds. The name of yew is *Taxus*, so our podocarps and dacrydiiums are taxads (of the yew family).

This type of seed is seen on the kahikatea, the totara, the rimu. These three are dioecious (single sexed); so it is only on the female plant that the seeds are to be found. They are like tiny Chinese lanterns, the rich crimson of the berry contrasting with the black or dark-blue nut on top of it. The male flowers are small cone-like catkins and are, of course, borne on the male tree only.

These tiny fruits are not concealed, but are set off by the foliage; for both the kahikatea and the rimu have tiny scale-like leaves. These overlie the branchlets and stand out only slightly at their pointed ends; and the totara has thin, needle-like leaves.

The kahikatea is best seen in the early adult stage, say, at 20 to 30 feet in height. Its outline is a regular, tapering cone. Its foliage is of an attractive dark green; its branchlets are numerous and delicate, suggesting the intricacy of a lace pattern. In full maturity its foliage appears greyish, and is massed towards the top in the umbrella pattern usual with our large trees. At this stage the trunk is its most remarkable feature, massive and hardly tapering for a great height. It is our tallest tree, 60 to 100 feet; sometimes 150, with record specimens over 200. Captain Cook was so impressed with one in the Thames area that he recorded its measurements: it was 19ft. 8in. in circumference 6ft from the ground, and 89ft to its first branch; it was straight as an arrow, and tapered little. Its bark is a greyish brown. Like some other trees, the kahikatea has a distinctive juvenile form. Instead of the small scale-like leaf, it then has leaflets growing in two opposite rows along its branchlets and on its stem. These are at first a brilliant green, but later turn bronze as the sapling struggles towards the light. At this stage the juvenile in deep bush is unattractive; but in cultivation, with sufficient light, it need not be so.

All our taxads are rain-forest trees; but the kahikatea especially is a water lover, growing in swamps or by rivers. The Riccarton bush in Christchurch is an instance of a kahikatea forest growing in former swamp land in an area whose rainfall was too low for other types.