

William Stewart Hamilton (fl.1880 – 1889)

Almost as elusive as the plant named after him, William Stewart Hamilton is known only from information gleaned from a single decade of records.

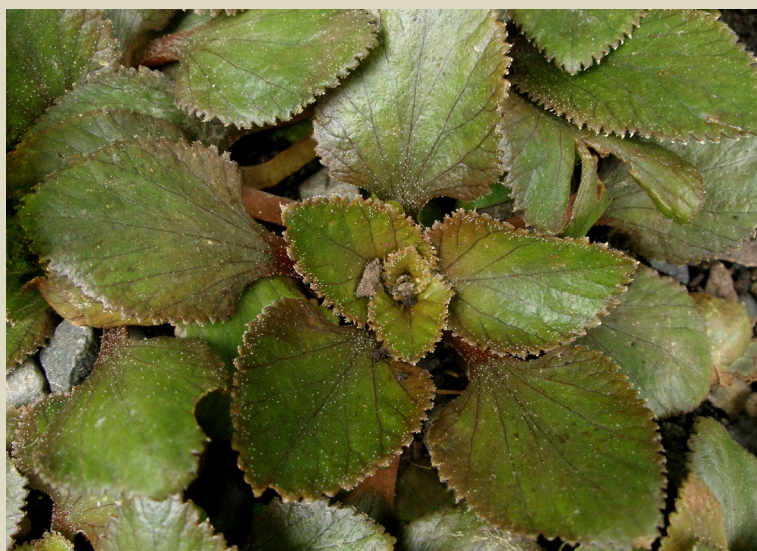
In 1880 at Invercargill a meeting of eight people formed a society known as the Southland Institute, devoted to the promotion of science, philosophy, literature and art. One of those present was school inspector Peter Goyen, a friend and associate of Donald Petrie. At the second meeting W S Hamilton was reported to have spoken on Orepuke black sand, and at the annual general meeting the following year he was elected vice-president and Goyen secretary for 1882.

Hamilton and Goyen made a trip to Stewart Island in December 1881 and climbed Rakeahua, where they collected the first *Aciphylla* (speargrass) from the island, a new *Raoulia* species, which was subsequently named after Goyen, and a rare filmy fern, *Hymenophyllum rufescens*. Hamilton spoke on his geological and botanical observations at further meetings of the Southland Institute, and four of his papers were published in the *Transactions of the New Zealand Institute*. In "Notes on the Occurrence and Habits of Some of our New Zealand Plants" (May 1884) Hamilton mentioned names suggested by Thomas Kirk for two new plants he had found (*Tillaea hamiltonii* and *Gunnera hamiltonii*), the latter in the hills near the mouth of Oreti River, Southland. However, it was several years before these species were properly described, and the names validated.

Hamilton was elected secretary of the institute for 1884 and 1889. At the annual general meeting of the Invercargill Athenaeum in January 1886 it was reported that W S Hamilton had attended fourteen committee meetings the previous year. He spoke at the November 1887 meeting of the Southland Institute, but was not mentioned as being present at the Athenaeum's annual general meeting that year. In 1888 and 1889 there were no reports from the Southland Institute in the *Transactions*, but membership lists, which included W S Hamilton, were still being published. By 1890 and 1891 there were neither reports nor membership lists.

In the institute reports William Stewart Hamilton was always referred to as W S Hamilton. Had his name not been published in full in the *Electoral District Rolls*, which described him as a gentleman and land-owner, and *Wise's New Zealand Directory* for 1885–86, which listed "Hamilton, William Stewart, Secretary Southland Institute, Esk Street, Invercargill," he could easily have been confused with William Smith Hamilton (c.1824–1903), who also made Invercargill his home for several years.

No report of the death of William Stewart Hamilton has been found, and his life remains a mystery! As Dr Eric Godley, who investigated all possible avenues in his original research (the basis of these notes) speculated, "Perhaps he was some kind of mining consultant, or mineral surveyor, perhaps he was an alchemist and a gentleman; perhaps this note will persuade others to join the search."



Gunnera hamiltonii

The *Gunnera* genus contains about 40 species found mainly in the Southern Hemisphere, but also in Hawaii and Central America. *Gunnera hamiltonii* is the largest and rarest of the six New Zealand species, with only a few known colonies in Stewart Island and near Invercargill. It forms patches of overlapping rosettes reaching 10 cm in diameter. The tough, triangular leaves on wide reddish petioles are bronze-green tinged with red, and have regularly toothed margins. Numerous tiny flowers on erect stems up to 12 cm tall, male and female on separate plants, appear in spring. It grows in sand dune hollows near the sea, and is an attractive rock garden plant in a few public and private gardens.