

Lady Peg Fleming



The late Sir Charles Fleming and Lady Peg Fleming. Photo: Chris McLean

Last year, the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society was awarded the inaugural Charles Fleming Award for environmental work. This award, a medal, handed out by the Royal Society of New Zealand, commemorates the achievements of scientist and conservationist, Sir Charles Fleming, who died in 1987.

Forest and Bird's Education and Extension Officer Andrea Lomdahl talks to Lady Peg Fleming about her husband and how he would have felt about Forest and Bird being the first recipient of this award.

Andrea Lomdahl: Sir Charles was one of NZ's first conservation knights and his leadership inspired a generation of conservationists. Forest and Bird is greatly honoured to receive this award. Do we deserve it?

Peg Fleming: Yes, you do deserve it. I know that Charles would have been very pleased that the Royal Society awarded Forest and Bird this medal. In the early days Forest and Bird had a big membership but its attraction was the weekend outings and summer camps it arranged and the journal. It had no political clout. Charles couldn't bear that, knowing that New Zealand needed dedicated people with knowledge of its extremely important flora and fauna to fight for the preservation of their environment. Here were the people. He became a member of the executive and from then on the structure began to change quite rapidly until now Forest and Bird has become a very important environmental action group, speaking with the backing of a large cross section of the population. Charles would certainly have approved of the way the Society has diversified into so many new issues. Not only are they fighting to save our native forests, but they are speaking out on all conservation fronts, even marine resources.

AL: Sir Charles began the campaign to save the Mamaku kokako forests with his *Listener* editorial "Mammon on the Mamaku". What are your thoughts and how would Sir Charles have felt about the Tasman Accord which now protects the remaining Mamaku forest for the kokako?

PF: I feel as though the Tasman Accord is like a memorial to Charles. When he was young he used to go for holidays to Rotorua with his family. He used to take his push bike and ride up into the bush to enjoy the robins and other bush birds. That was when he developed his great love for the Mamakus.

Later he got to know a group of local farmers and Catchment Board chaps who used to write to him and let him know what was going on behind the screen of native bush along the roadsides, showing their great concern. Charles and I had shares in Forest Products, inherited from our fathers who bought shares in this new company after the slump of the early thirties. It was hoped it would help New Zealand industry and bring work to the unemployed. Together with other shareholders from this group of Hauraki Plains men he wrote to the company to tell them we were concerned their clearfelling operations were ignoring soil and water conservation values and that there was a need for native forest reserves. The water coming out of those streams where logging was taking place was full of silt and destroying river life. The day the Accord was signed, Conservation Minister Philip Woollaston unveiled a memorial to Charles at Waimeha Lagoon, Waikanae. I think he purposely planned the two events to happen on the same day, knowing how important the Mamakus were to him. Charles would have been so pleased.

AL: How did Sir Charles develop his love of nature and interest in science and conservation?

PF: It started when he was very young. Neither of his parents was involved in science but they gave him a lot of encouragement. Each summer his family spent time at Takapuna Beach, Auckland where he collected shells on the reef. It was there he developed his interest in marine biology. On his eighth birthday his parents gave him the book he had asked for – Suter's *Manual of New Zealand Mollusca*.

Charles went to King's Primary School and there was one teacher there who used to take the boys to the reefs near Auckland. He noticed that Charles had a special interest in conchology and one day asked a friend, Dr A

W B Powell, conchologist at the Auckland War memorial Museum, to come along on one of these trips. Charles vanished away from the main group, that was typical of him when he was young; he used to vanish and do his own thing. When he came he came back, he'd found a nudibranch, which Dr Powell was keen to have when he realised that it was a new species. Charles had quite enough knowledge at the Primary School age to know that he had made a new discovery and he wasn't going to give it up. That was when Powell recognised Charles' special talent. From then on Charles became involved in Powell's Shell Club at the Museum and here he met Bob Falla (Later Sir Robert) another man who was to shape his future life.

Powell took Charles to the Chatham Islands and the Waverley on the West Coast on shell collection expeditions and at 17 he was invited to join the "Will Watch" expedition to the Three Kings and other islands with Dr Powell, Dr Falla, geologist Professor J A Bartrum and Graham Turbott, Geoff Baylis and others. This expedition, in the first term of Charles 7th form year at Kings College, made him determined to leave school and go to University. He finally got his own way.

At varsity we did the same subjects, zoology, botany, geology and chemistry, but Charles had a BA degree as well. I had had ambitions to be a PhysEd teacher, but Charles soon changed that. The expeditions and trips we did were far more interesting and after my first year of a BA degree I changed to science and completed my BSc the same year as he did.

Scientific research was always Charles' greatest joy and his interests were exceptionally broad but when he saw his precious Mamaku forest being clearfelled and replaced with *Pinus radiata* he realised that he must put a lot more of his energy into conservation.