

An Artist Family on Great Barrier Island

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The Osbornes, a talented immigrant family of the 19th century.

It appears that one need not live in a city to become famous; real talent can gain recognition even if nurtured on an isolated and wild island in the Hauraki Gulf. It was in this beautiful but lonely place that Fanny Osborne was born in 1852, one of a family of eleven, and it was on the deserted beaches near her home that her mother gave her her first lessons in drawing, using only a stick to trace out ships and flowers in the sand.

Fanny's father was Neill Malcolm, a member of a Highland family, who became a barrister of the Inner Temple, London. In 1846 he married Emilie Wilton, the 18-year-old daughter of an army colonel, the couple deciding to emigrate to New Zealand after their first child was born. They arrived in Auckland by sailing ship in 1848, after a four months voyage. Mr Malcolm was urged by Sir Frederick Whittaker, then Attorney General and Superintendent of the Province, to continue the practice of his profession but he adhered to his plan to go farming, though at first he had little success. Finally, they took over the estate on the Great Barrier Island of an English family named Barstow and there they landed, with their two small children, somewhat overwhelmed by the "sombre magnificence of the forest, its stillness and the splendid harbour, with its many bays and beaches." The Malcolms lived there, at Tryphena, and their family grew to include five sons and eight daughters, many of whom left the island as they grew up and married.

A young Englishman, Alfred Osborne, who had studied music and languages in Germany and whose father had inherited some property on the Great Barrier, came to spend time not far from the Malcolm's but, owing to a dispute over land titles, Fanny's family and he became bitter enemies. Fanny, however, fell deeply in love with Mr Osborne and the pair eloped to Auckland by sailing ship and were married in the Bishopscourt chapel by Bishop Cowie. The ceremony was performed without the presence or approval of the Malcolm family but both bride and groom were of age. Strangely enough, the Osbornes

returned to the Barrier to live, Fanny facing a life very similar to that of her mother, as the couple had 13 children, all being born without the help of doctors or nurses, as had been the case with Mrs Malcolm.



It was not until she was about 40 that Fanny Osborne was able to take up her painting again but her work gradually became known and admired. Two Governors of New Zealand, Sir Charles Fergusson and Lord Bledisloe, were struck by the beauty of her water-colours and bought examples of her work. Lady Alice Fergusson stayed with the Osbornes on two occasions and both she and her lady-in-waiting made sketches of the old homestead.

Both Osborne parents passed their talents on to many of their children. All five daughters painted and one of the sons was well-known for his beautiful designs in inlaid wood. The eldest daughter, Lillian, married the tutor, Thomas Gibbard, who was engaged by Mr Osborne to complete the education of his children. Mrs Gibbard exhibited her paintings in England and the two water colours of New Zealand wild flowers and berries, now reproduced in colour prints again, were purchased by Sir Henry Brett about 1906. He had colour prints done by the "Star" and included them in loose-leaf form with Brett's Annual. The originals were left by Lady Brett in her will to her grandchild, Nance Brett, daughter

of Arthur and Eva Brett. On the inner front cover of this journal is a notice about this second set of colour reproductions of Mrs Gibbard's wild flowers, with a note of where they can be obtained. The pictures are oval in shape, very soft in colouring, accurate, and arranged in an attractive and artistic way.

This new set of colour-prints, done by the modern photographic methods, has been commissioned by Mrs Nance Brett-Patrick as a tribute to her grand-father, who took a keen interest all his life in gardening and flowers. Many readers will probably possess the well-known and valuable Brett's Gardening Guide, produced many years ago first under his direction.

Some members may remember Mona Martha Brown, a teacher of mathematics in Auckland, who later married into the Osborne family. She bequeathed a set of Fanny's water colours to the Auckland Museum.

Material with acknowledgement to Violet Roche, a niece of Fanny Osborne.



Lillian M Gibbard "Still Life of Flowers" Watercolour, signed lower right, 17cm x 21.5cm, framed



Fanny Osborne: Pohutukawa
Metrosideros excelsa Sol. Family: Myrtaceae



Fanny Osborne: Kowhai
Sophora microphylla. Family: Papilionaceae



Fanny Osborne: Manuka (Tea-tree)
Leptospermum scoparium. Family: Myrtaceae