

Remembering Art Whistler 1944–2020, American botanist

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Wayne Arthur "Art" Whistler died in Hawaii on April 2nd, after contracting Covid-19 during a trip to Washington State, USA. An inveterate traveller, as befitted the Pacific's leading ethnobotanist, he had this time gone to the worst of places, and not even his truly being "75 years young" could save him.

Art (I never knew his first name until now) had many friends. Memories and anecdotes are being shared online and a substantial obituary and full biography will no doubt appear soon. Here, I want to write mostly about what I admired in him and his work.

Art used to say that a lifetime of botany was the inevitable result of having been born near Death Valley — the grass was greener everywhere else. More important probably was his '60s time in the Peace Corps, teaching biology in American Samoa. There he discovered tropical Pacific culture, and the Samoan language (eventually grasped, he would say, at about four-year old level). He took up residence in Hawaii and in the 70s completed a Ph. D study of Samoa's vegetation, supervised by renowned ecologist Dieter Mueller-Dombois.

A notably independent career followed. He became an effective getter of grants and a most frugal stretcher of them (as I write, friends of his around the world will be discarding bottles marked Try on Art). He made trips all over the Pacific, teaching or doing conservation work, always collecting. He was associated at various times with the Bishop Museum, the University of Hawaii, and the National Tropical Botanical Garden, but retained a substantial number of his duplicates. These, along with a very professional attitude to keeping up with the literature, allowed him to quickly assess the value of new taxonomies.

Art's relaxed (even, rumped) demeanour would not long prevent new acquaintances from realizing that here was someone who knew Pacific botany from top to bottom, including exactly where and how he himself had added to it. His sharp eyes and excellent memory made field trips intensely enjoyable for his field companions, no matter what their level of knowledge. Many new records for the Pacific islands have come from his work, e.g., the discovering or relocating of a number of rare Samoan species, and his recent, almost casual, finds of several indigenous species in what had seemed the well-known flora of Niue.



Fig. 1. Art Whistler with Rhys and Ewen at lunchtime when he last visited the Auckland Museum herbarium. Photo: Alice Campbell, 21 Oct 2019.

I believe his collections run to 14 000 or so numbers, about right for fifty years of balancing fieldwork against the need to get it out for others to see.

He certainly did the writing-up. This was accomplished mainly in monographs, for example, those on ethnobotany and plant names in the Cook Islands (helped here considerably by Gerald McCormack), Tonga, Samoa and the Societies. These four works are near-complete treatments, rich in rescued plant-names and observations, obscurities explained, errors corrected, and informative photographs. If a museum curator wants to know what an object from the Pacific might be made of, or, exactly how it was made, beginning with the raw material — see for example a description of mat-making in Samoa — it is to these works that he or she will turn.

A number of taxonomic articles, including revisions of *Syzygium* and *Psychotria* in Samoa, and an often-cited one about "the other Pacific gourd", *Benincasa hispida*, were valuable contributions too. He also put together and published himself popular works on plants of the Pacific, which are perfect for the beginner in their punchy, colourful photographs (like many of us, Art preferred film to digital).

In the last twenty or so years Art came quite a few times to New Zealand. He would usually do some updating with Bill Sykes in Christchurch, and work through Auckland War Memorial Museum's folder of queries that Ewen Cameron and I (Fig. 1) would

have readied for him. He gave our society's 2010 Lucy Cranwell lecture, building it around his new book "Plants of the Canoe People", and published a fuller version in the June 2011 issue of our Journal.

Art was a practical, well-organized person who generally valued the benefits of tradition above innovation, for example, with respect to the local biosecurity rigmarole : "You mean I can't just soak them in alcohol and hand them in at the airport ?". On visiting us in Auckland he would spend time outside the herbarium, going again and again to our fine Maori and Pacific Islands galleries. As a collector but also as someone with a wide curiosity he often voiced regret that museums were becoming tourist traps and event centres rather than acquirers and displayers of collections.

In recent visits to major European herbaria Art consolidated his understanding of the older collections, with the intention of putting the last touches on his *ms.* Floras of Samoa and Tonga. Fortunately for us, he did complete one of these before his death, and I believe it is now with the National Botanical Tropical Garden, ready for publication. It will be the first full account of Samoan plants to appear in more than a hundred years and thus a major event in Pacific botany.

In the preface to his 2004 "Rainforest Trees of Samoa", though, Art felt compelled to say that although a lifetime of pleasurable work in the Pacific had provided him with great friends, including many young biology students, he was also left with the sense that few permanent gains were being made, or even were capable of being made, in conservation in this region.

He might also have described the circumstances of the end of his life just as strongly, pointing out that the CV-19 pandemic has been the result of a

deplorable lack of common sense in one section of the human population.

Art's temperament however was an optimistic one, and, if he had had New Zealand listeners to the above statements, I have no doubt that the subject would soon have been changed — he might have asked some hard question, on Rangitoto perhaps, or why the South Auckland suburb he stayed in should be called Dannemora. Or best of all, relate his latest adventure: "It rained and rained and our camp was flooded; we stood around in water for two days waiting to be rescued ... everyone had diarrhoea and I put my press on a NZ Army helicopter with a plant in it I'd only seen once before and I never saw the press or the plant again".

I sometimes think of that missing press. Sadly, there will now never be a phone call with an unexpected but familiar voice saying "It's Art ... I'm at the airport ... I've found it".

His publications include:

The Vegetation of Eastern Samoa (1980), Ethnobotany of the Cook Islands (1990), The ethnobotany of Tonga (1991), Flowers of the Pacific Islands Seashore (1992), Tongan Herbal Medicine (1992), Polynesian Herbal Medicine (1992), Wayside Plants of the Islands (1995), Orchids of Samoa (1996), Samoan Herbal Medicine (1996), Tropical Ornamentals (2000), Plants in Samoan Culture (2001), The Samoan Rainforest (2002), Rainforest Trees of Samoa (2004), Plants of the Canoe People (2009), Annotated list of Tahitian plant names (2015), and Flora of Tokelau (2018).

Eponymy

Art's achievements are commemorated by "*whistleri*" epithets for Pacific Islands species in the orchid genera *Calanthe*, *Dendrobium*, *Peristylus* and *Taeniophyllum*, and dicot genera *Abutilon*, *Hoya*, *Huberantha* and *Psychotria*.

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