

Lady Franklin's whitey wood

Acradenia frankliniae Milligan ex Kippist, a native of Tasmania, is worthy of being grown more frequently in our gardens. SEAMUS O'BRIEN has seen it growing wild and writes about its discovery, naming and cultivation.

Sir John Franklin (1786–1847) served as Lieutenant-Governor of Van Diemen's Land from 1839–1843. It was a pioneering time in Australia's colonial history and he and his adventurous wife, Jane, Lady Franklin (1791–1875) spent a great deal of time exploring the southern and western coast of Tasmania. Lady Franklin also had a keen interest in botany and on a visit to New Zealand she met the German naturalist Ernst Dieffenbach (1811–1855) and the Cornish missionary and botanist, William Colenso (1811–1899), who later named the rusty filmy fern *Hymenophyllum frankliniae* in her honour.

Lady Franklin created a private botanic garden near Hobart but this was short-lived and ultimately, with her husband, she opened to the public the private botanic garden surrounding the Lieutenant-Governor's residence in Hobart. This had been established in 1818 and is today the Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens and among the best-stocked gardens in the Southern Hemisphere. It is the second oldest botanic garden in Australia, founded just two years after the Royal Botanic Garden, Sydney.

In March to May 1842 she accompanied her husband on a hazardous expedition from Hobart to Macquarie Harbour on Tasmania's west coast. The purpose of the journey was to establish a land route across the island. A penal settlement had previously been established at Macquarie Harbour, but was abandoned in 1831 due to its isolation, the only contact with Hobart at the time was by sea routes. At the invitation of Lady Franklin, the travelling party included Dr Joseph Milligan (1807–1884), a surgeon with the Van Diemen's Land Company, who travelled as medical attendant and naturalist.

A keen botanist, Milligan was also a friend of Ronald Campbell Gunn (1808–1881) and was one of a number of colonial botanists who corresponded and collaborated with the Hookers at Kew. In April 1842,



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Opposite, the characteristic dark glossy foliage of *Acradenia frankliniae* BIBET 174, the whitey wood, seen here in its native habitat in Tasmania; and **above** its masses of white flowers on a plant growing in Melbourne, Derbyshire (northern England).

Milligan, Lady Franklin and the party were exploring the Macquarie Harbour area when they found an evergreen bush densely furnished with dark, leathery aromatic trifoliate leaves. Three years later, in February 1845, Ronald Campbell Gunn re-discovered it on the banks of the Franklin River, a tributary of the Gordon River, which reaches the sea at Macquarie Harbour.

Milligan's discovery was formally described in 1852 as a new genus, *Acradenia* by Richard Kippist (1812–1882), an English botanist with a special interest in the Australian flora, and was dedicated to Lady Franklin, thus *Acradenia frankliniae*. He based the genus on Milligan and Gunn's sterile (non-flowering) specimens. Kippist was able to supplement his description using flowering material at Kew, from a living plant that had been sent there in a Wardian case in 1845, the first introduction of this species (Kippist, 1852). The



Habitat of *Acradenia frankliniae*, the Pieman River, in the west coast region of Tasmania.

generic name is in reference to the glands at the summit of the carpels (Bean, 1933) and is based on the Greek *acros* (at the top) and *aden* (gland).

It is sometimes stated that Milligan's collection was gathered on the banks of the Franklin River (Bean, 1989, Stapf, Otto *et al.*, 1927), though this is not correct. Kippist clearly states it was found in the neighbourhood of Macquarie Harbour, and among the assortment of plants sent to Kew in a Wardian case with the original introduction of the genus was a collection of various plants from Mount Sorrell, a large peak that dominates the harbour.

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Acradenia frankliniae also grows on the Gordon and Pieman rivers, within the general drainage catchment area of Macquarie Harbour, and is thus endemic to a relatively small area of western Tasmania. In Tasmania it is sometimes known as wirewood, though more commonly as whitey wood, on account of the appearance of the wood, which was the basis of an axe-handle industry on the west coast in the early 1900s (Wapstra, 2010).

In *The Endemic Flora of Tasmania*, Winifred Curtis (1905–2005) states 'During mid-December some reaches of the Gordon River... provide a spectacular floral display; clusters of white flowers overtopping and framed by shining dark green leaves cover the tall shrubs and small trees of *Acradenia frankliniae* that line the banks. The shrubs and trees, 3 to 10 m high, have slender branches which spread and droop so that, from ground level, there is a canopy of blossom' (Curtis, 1975); the specimen illustrated by Margaret Stones (1920–2018), was grown at Nymans in Sussex. A Tasmanian collection was established there from the 1929–30 Tasmanian travels of Harold Comber (1897–1969), whose father, James Comber (1866–1953), was Head Gardener at Nymans.

In cultivation it is generally confined to the coastal gardens of Britain and Ireland, but is harder than generally stated. The earlier illustration in *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* was portrayed from material grown in the garden of the 4th Marquis of Headfort (1878–1943), at Kells in Co. Meath, a cold climate by Irish standards (Stapf, Otto *et al.*, 1927).

I first met it on Ilnacullin (Garinish Island), the magical island garden in

Bantry Bay, West Cork, where the oldest plant, now a small multi-stemmed tree, was supplied by the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin in 1933. It is also cultivated at the Talbot Botanic Gardens at Malahide Castle, Co. Dublin, the garden of Lord Talbot de Malahide (1912–1973), who sponsored the six-volume *The Endemic Flora of Tasmania* and whose family had a large estate called Malahide near Fingal in Tasmania.

It was thrilling, then, to finally meet it in its native terrain on the banks of the Pieman River during the British-Irish Botanical Expedition to Tasmania (BIBET) in January 2018 (see *IDS Yearbook 2018*, pp. 75–86). We had trekked along the river bank to see the last remaining Huon pines (*Lagarostrobos franklinii*); contorted specimens, battered by the tidal surge up the river driven by the roaring forties. We collected our material (BIBET 174) from a small 4 m tall tree in dense riverine rainforest where it grew alongside *Nothofagus cunninghamii*, *Olearia argyrophylla* and *Lagarostrobos franklinii*.

At the National Botanic Gardens, Kilmacurragh it grows in our Southern Hemisphere collection along the Araucaria Avenue where it is valued for its handsome, leathery dark green trifoliate leaves which are covered with prominent glands. Here, it flowers in June and July, when it is smothered in white blossoms, borne in terminal clusters, each flower with five white petals and with a raised yellow ovary and ten protruding stamens. The sepals and petals, like the leaves and carpels, are also gland-dotted.

Despite coming from an extremely wet coastal region of Tasmania, the whitey wood appears adaptable, growing well in both acid and alkaline soils and tolerating the relatively dry conditions at our Dublin site, the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, where rainfall averages a mere 686 mm per year (compared to Kilmacurragh's average of 1118 mm).

Propagation is easy from semi-hardwood cuttings in July / August, though tricky from seeds which require leaching treatment for several weeks (Howells, 2012). The whitey wood should be more widely grown in our gardens and it is hard to understand when one sees it carrying its midsummer show of starry-white blossoms why it is uncommon in cultivation. Well-grown it is a first-class plant that bears the name of an aristocratic pioneering plantswoman.

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