



Larnach Castle, New Zealand

In autumn 2013 **KAROLA BRACKENBURY** visited the home of Margaret Barker who was until that year IDS Vice Chairman for New Zealand and was delighted by the plants, details and atmosphere of her garden and arboretum on the Otago Peninsula of the South Island of New Zealand.

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After the IDS AGM meeting in Christchurch in 2013 my husband Ian and I made a long desired trip to Dunedin. Margaret Barker has been our Vice President for five years and over that time I have grown to have an ever increasing respect for her many achievements, which are accompanied by truly remarkable modesty. I was determined to see the garden at Larnach Castle, and in particular find out how she had selected her trees.

When I first met her in 2010 Margaret told me that she had just purchased 17 hectares adjacent to the Castle property. Later, in 2011, she wrote in our newsletter about the planting at Camp Estate, as the new property is called:

"At 300 metres and above, the windswept site presents major challenges. But that's what life is about...High land on the Otago Peninsula originally supported a mixed broad leaf podocarp temperate rain forest which trapped fog to amend the precipitation. But you can't just go out and plant a rimu or even a broadleaf seedling donated by the birds. These trees survived with the shelter of other trees and perhaps originally, after the volcanoes, emerged from sheltering colonizers. So what do we have to do, being rather too impatient to let the bush regenerate naturally? Plant macrocarpas and pine



Larnach Castle is New Zealand's only Castle, built in 1871 by William Larnach. It overlooks Otago Harbour with stunning views to Harbour Cone in the middle ground; Portobello Bay and Harington point extend into the far distance.

trees Pinus radiata those old stalwarts of the New Zealand landscapes now, but endemic to the coast of California. Within their shelter, once established, miro, matai, kahikatea and rimu can be planted. The totaras, we have found, have more grunt and can be planted where it is more open to the wind. Oh, the perseverance required."

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Perseverance is what Margaret has in spades, if I may be forgiven a pun. She has recounted her long apprenticeship in dealing with the vagaries of gardening on the Otago Peninsula in her book *The Garden of Larnach Castle*. In the big storm of 1975 many huge old trees fell and blocked the drive to the Castle and cut off the electricity. It took two years to repair the damage. Many of the large old American species had already invaded the surroundings of the Castle even falling through the roof of the stables. Over the years, and after other trees had been found to be more desirable, many of the overgrown macrocarpas and pines were cleared. On a visit to San Francisco Margaret saw how old macrocarpa could be "pruned up", so some chosen ones remain and make a dramatic sculptural statement in the right place.

The art is in working with the conditions which you are given. Gradually the unique character of the site was used to design a garden faithful to the traditions of her predecessors but open to inspiration from our New Zealand plants. Trees collected include *Metrosideros* and *Nothofagus* but she has also looked further afield for different forms from other parts of the world.

We drove to Dunedin from Geraldine on a mild autumn day and at Blueskin Bay, on impulse, took a side route over the Port Hills as we approached the city. We passed Mt Mihiwaha (561 m) and over a saddle and as we wound down to Port Chalmers we could see the whole length of the harbour. Opposite us on the other side we caught a glimpse of the Castle among the trees. It was a steep drop to the harbour and then we hugged the shoreline into the city and out again towards the small seaside township of Portobello on the Peninsula. We passed the numerous little inlets and settlements which are so attractive to Dunedin residents and eventually we found the road to Camp Road, which led steeply uphill. At the ticket office we were waved on as Margaret had generously invited us to stay at the Lodge.

The front façade of the Castle was splendidly imposing in the evening sunlight. Inside we were given a warm welcome and shown to our room in The Lodge. We had the most amazing view. Unlike the drive, which wound its way through dense trees, shrubberies and hedges, we had a whole panorama to the east and north. Just below were the stone walls and fields of the local farms leading down to the water. To the east was the symmetrical Harbour Cone (315 m) and further away the slopes of Taiaroa Head, where the albatross are, and northwards was the harbour entrance and curving sand bar. Round to the north was Port Chalmers. The evening light on the water was breathtaking and we simply sat on our balcony and had drinks and supper

looking at it.

This was just as well as the next morning the view was completely different. When we woke the whole hillside was shrouded in a damp mist; one could barely see more than few meters and trees and buildings loomed out of the fog. However, sustained by a good Scottish breakfast in the Stables we set off. We decided it would be a good idea to follow the numbered Native Plant Trail, which might enable us to get out bearings. The mist rose slightly and although there had been a few visitors about when we arrived the evening before we were lucky enough to have the place almost to ourselves.

Up the steps leading from the Lodge we came to a large

Xeronema callistemon, a New Zealand native plant from the Poor Knights Islands.



photograph © Stephen J. Quirby

old tree. It was *Metrosideros robusta*; the northern rata, probably planted in Larnach's time. He bought the land in 1870 and died in 1898. The interesting story of Larnach and his castle may be found on the website. We looked around; we were on a neat

photograph © Stephen Jaquary



Right, *Mitraria coccinea* from Chile.

Below, A bronze statue of Alice in Wonderland is surrounded by rose adorned trellis obelisks with heart-shaped finials on the Wishing Well lawn.

photograph © Margaret Barker





Carmichaelia williamsii, an endemic broom from coastal areas of north eastern New Zealand.

lawn surrounded by griselinia and totara hedges and furnished with three obelisks where red roses bloomed. Ahead was the glass balcony of the eastern side of the castle and on the right the original long glass house, now restored. It was the Wishing Well lawn and sure enough the well was there, and also a bronze sculpture of a girl with golden hair, holding, was it a flamingo? Of course: she was Alice in Wonderland. Already I was under the spell of the fine old buildings, the trees, the plants and the imaginative charm of the mood that had been created.

Normally one would start the trail behind the ballroom which is used daily as a café. To reach the start we passed some wrought iron gates leading to the side door courtyard and a small garden with Kaka beak, *Clianthus maximus*, in flower, and a rimu, *Dacrydium cupressinum*, planted about 1880. It was underplanted with *Myosotidium hortensia*, the Chatham Island forget-me-not. Nearby I noticed the addition of a pink belladonna and a yellow gazania, which gave a splash of colour contrast. In her book Margaret says she like to have fun with colour but does not hesitate to tear something out and plant new if she thinks the look becomes tired. The natives form the structure and have a 'staying quality'; they have individuality and a connection to the landscape. The exotic plants of the traditional floral beds surrounding the castle are seasonal. For example to the left of the imposing flight of steps at the Castle entrance are a group of tall *Cordyline australis*, the iconic New Zealand cabbage tree.

We made our way past the immaculate round lawn in front of the entrance to the narrow path behind the ballroom. While Ian doggedly searched for the

numbered plants of the Native Trail I studied a vine on the wall bearing red flowers (*Berberidopsis corallina*) and then a hedge bearing red berries at which a bird (later identified as *Mitraria coccinea* from Chile) was feeding. Then I saw another climber, white this time: was it... could it be *Lapageria*? I had to stop again and photograph it. The long gravel path was edged with box; on either side were ferns and lancewood, *Pseudopanax ferox*, mountain cabbage tree.

Cordyline indivisa, other natives, another *Lapageria* and beyond a huge gnarled old red beech, *Nothofagus fusca*, shrouded in mist. At the end of the path was a bright red throne. Later Margaret told us it was the most photographed item in the garden but without the visitors it provided a perfect contrast to the graceful green forms of the native tree ferns; one seemed to be in a rainforest but might meet a vengeful queen at any moment.

Next we took a turn round the rockery which had many herbaceous plants nestled in the crevices and sloped steeply away down the mountain. There was a small stream and rock bridge and we checked off the weeping broom, *Carmichaelia stevensonii*, and the daisy, *Celmisia semicordata*. Then we remembered we had a lunchtime engagement so, like the white rabbit, hurried on to the South Seas garden, below the drive that leads to The Lodge.

Here was a complete change of mood; sharp-edged and bold palms, grasses and succulents. A rustic wooden door had been built into the base of an old macrocarpa. A sculpture was surrounded by a sea of *Senecio serpens* from South Africa and *Festuca coxii* from the Chatham Islands. The mist had risen somewhat and the bright colours and strong architectural shapes were striking. The carefully graded path levelled off near nikau palms, *Rhopalostylis* Chatham Island and various pohutakawas and metrosideros as well as rampantly growing *Carmichaelia williamsii*, the yellow-flowered native broom with its strange flat branches.

As the path turned and a flight of steps took us back up towards the Belvedere my attention was drawn to the hard landscaping. I took more photographs: broad wooden steps, a stone seat, a rock-fall and then the steel staircase with blue wooden railings encrusted with lichens. This area was constructed in 1996-1997. The big macrocarpas below the Lodge were removed to open the view, which was similar to the view from our room. The rocks were brought in and carefully positioned and the steps and stairs were designed to lead visitors gently up the steep slope. Much of the work was done in-house and it was all of the highest quality.

Margaret had arranged to meet us for lunch in the café. After the AGM she had little time to rest as she was scripting her part in a series of scenes of Victorian life which were to be acted out in various rooms in the Castle. These were to be available in several languages to provide audiovisual guide for visitors. I mention the visitors because they are the bread and butter which support the Castle and its surroundings.

Larnach Castle receives more than 100,000 visitors a year and thus it



photograph © Stephen Koster

contributes significantly to Dunedin's economy. But the visitors do have to be looked after. The ballroom café was warmed by three welcome wood fires and served an excellent lunch.

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Over lunch we were told about the garden and trees at the Castle. One of the oldest trees is a northern rata planted by Larnach. A strange thing has happened. This tree often begins its life as an epiphyte high in the branches of another tree; slowly it puts down roots and eventually over many years will stand alone. A rata has seeded itself and is growing vigorously in the lower branches of a macrocarpa and it is believed that the seed came from Larnach's tree.

The rata was one of several examples that had shown Margaret that unexpectedly many species from more northerly latitudes could succeed in Dunedin. People didn't expect nikau palms but there they were. She was especially proud of her collection of *Metrosideros*. In the 1970s she had planted *Metrosideros carminea* at the base of a 5 m tree fern. After 20 years it began to flower! About 15 years ago she planted the pohutukawas below the Lodge. They were *Metrosideros excelsa*, the southern and northern rata, *M. umbellata* and *M. robusta* and two hybrids, *M. excelsa* × *robusta* 'Mistral' and 'Maungapio'. 'Mistral' is a natural hybrid between the pohutukawa and the northern rata which Graeme Platt found growing on the Coromandel Peninsula. He called it 'Mistral' after the wind that pervades the Mediterranean. We had seen these from our balcony and also some young Norfolk Island pines, *Araucaria heterophylla*. In 1975 a rare northern white rata (*M. bartlettii*) was found near Cape Reinga and Margaret planted it to mark the birth of her granddaughter Charlotte in 2003. She is growing *M. parkinsonii*

Opposite, The belvedere at the top of the rock garden commands a view down the hillside.

Right, A flight of broad wooden steps leading up to the Belvedere.

on a trellis because its scarlet flowers sprout from the branches! "These plants don't mind the salt spray."

We quizzed Margaret about the difficulties of growing plants on top of a mountain. The castle is 300 m a.s.l. and often has snow in winter. But below it and almost all around is the sea. It mitigates the effect of the height. The cold air slips down the hill and the sea breezes blow it away. It is a maritime climate as well as a montane one. What is the rainfall? Well 27 in. a year. It has been said that the Castle is the second wettest place in Dunedin with no long dry periods. The mist and fog are an essential part of the climate. The trees are able to collect moisture from them, but there are very strong winds and shelter belts are needed in every direction.

What about the soil? It is thin. We make our own compost and feeding is essential to support the flowering plants. Also deadheading to produce good flowering through the season. There are not many pests; some grass grub in the lawn and leaf miner on the Kaka beak. Spray is only used on the roses. We prefer to do things naturally.

What about staff? Well there is the Head Gardener, two apprentices, two groundsmen and extra help in summer. (I was told by the receptionist that Margaret herself often works in the garden.)

It was very hard to get the Prince of Wales and kidney ferns growing; Margaret purchased some copper mist sprayer and slowly the ferns grew taller along the ballroom wall, but they were very slow. Like the nikau palms; which are not very big.

Were there any new projects? Last year they decided to tidy behind the stables. A path was cleared and natives planted, but what had been found in the South Seas garden was that after 12 years the trees were too close; when you plant you double up but then you have to thin; you have to edit it.

Well what would you say was at its best right now asked Ian. "Well it's not a tree, a woody plant; did you see the *Lapageria*?" (That's the one I spotted, I boasted to Ian.) Actually the crimson one could be seen out of the window. We had finished our lunch and Margaret guided us back down the path behind the ballroom. Yes that was a white one, and climbing up the tree



photograph © Stephen Jaquary

photograph © Stephen Wooster



The red throne at the end of the path provides the perfect contrast to the graceful green forms of the native tree fern, awaiting the arrival of the queen of the rainforest in the garden at Larnach Castle.

fern outside the window was an older *Lapageria rosea* the prized Chilean bell flower, copihe. I thought it looked magnificent. It had grown right up its host and was blooming profusely. "But it took years and years".

We moved on to the rockery where we met the head gardener, Fiona Eadie. She joined the staff after studying Botany at Otago University and many years' experience in managing a native plant nursery. She has written a book on the 100 best native plants which has been reprinted many times. At the Castle she wrote the guide for the Native Plant Trail. Like everyone we met she is dedicated to her work and is achieving superlative results.

We walked on down the steps to The Lodge drive and saw the rata growing on the macrocarpa stump. Just along was a shrub with pretty yellow and pink flowers. I had photographed it but did not know it. "Oh! It's the national flower of Peru"; *Cantua buxifolia* (or *Fuchsia buxifolia*). I learned later that this pink or yellow trumpet shaped flower was sacred to the Incas and had many useful properties. I looked again around the hillside and there were many things I had missed. The silver astellia, the large leafed rengarenga from Poor Knights Island and colourful gazania, the spiralling *Aloe polyphylla* and the golden *Bulbinella setosae*; more Kaka beak, succulents, pingao grasse, *Lithodora* and agapanthus for a touch of blue. And of course in summer the *Metrosideros* would be in flower. All these plants suit the conditions and are happy.

Going up the stairs we stopped to take a look at *Pennantia baylisiana*. This species was discovered in 1945 on Poor Knights Island by Professor Bylis of Otago University. For years it was considered the rarest plant in the world and only one plant remained in the wild, a female, and without a male it could not be reproduced. From cuttings taken by Professor Baylis suddenly one produced flowers with both male and female parts and these were artificially propagated. Numbers are now increasing in New Zealand and there are two of these precious shrubs here, both doing well.

Then we visited the Field where there was a collection of native beech trees and other *Nothofagus* from Chile and Australia, many already a good size. Over the years Margaret has learned that she cannot grow maples, or the yellow and purple foliage deciduous trees. The European beech does survive. Larnach had also planted deciduous trees but they have long gone. What had survived from his time were the monkey puzzle, the rata, the deodar, rhododendrons and European beech. All these came from a maritime or montane climate. Eventually Margaret decided to go to Chile to find how the South American trees grew in the wild and found that there were Chilean beeches which did turn colour, *Nothofagus alpina* and *N. antarctica*. Also in Chile were *Eucryphia cordifolia*, *Luma apiculata* and *Lapageria rosea*, the Chilean national flower. She made a long journey on foot to see the Patagonian cypress, *Fitzroya cupressoides*. And after that expedition she went further afield to Tasmania and New Caledonia with the IDS, and to China, to the Chatham Island, Lord Howe Island and the sub-Antarctic

Auckland and Campbell Islands. She writes in her book: "as time went on I became more inspired by what I saw growing in natural wild places than by what I read about in books". These journeys resulted in a new direction for the planting. While formal beds round the castle remain traditional, down the slopes of the hill and in the neighbouring property are planted our own New Zealand native and related southern hemisphere trees. These will be the trees for her grandchildren.

Margaret had to leave us but I knew that I had been given a rare gift; the fruit of long experience. We continued round the collection of *Nothofagus* in the Field, and then looked at the spectacular view of Dunedin and Saddle Hill (473 m) through the laburnum pergola leading to the green lawn and the reflecting pool. The day had brightened up and we were back to formal mode in keeping with the grandeur of the Castle. However seeing the view made us want to explore a little of the Otago Peninsula, so we drove off to see the small township of Portobello and follow the narrow winding road to the albatross colony at Taiaroa Head. We came back another route past small farms with stone walls. All the original vegetation had gone and sheep grazed the sparse rocky hillsides clad in gorse. The belts of shelter macrocarpas had started to fall down from old age. It could be the Welsh mountains or Scottish Highlands; only at Larnach was there life, imagination and colour.

Had I found the answer to my question of how to choose what trees to plant? I suppose that what I had learned was that rather than choosing what one wished to plant it was more a humble case of letting the plants and trees choose themselves.

For all information on Larnach Castle, opening times and facilities please consult the website: www.larnachcastle.co.nz

