OBITUARY: BRUCE ROY

Bruce Roy was one of New Zealand’s gentlemen who quietly laboured away for the country and its economy without making a fuss about it. He rang me in January this year to say that he’d been diagnosed with multiple cancers and didn’t have long to live. Only a few short weeks later Jane, his daughter, rang to say that Bruce had passed away, and to tell me how much he had appreciated what we’d done for him. And that was little enough.

I can’t remember exactly when I first met Bruce but believe it was about 30 years ago when he was peddling the draft of his book on New Zealand weeds around research agencies, looking for someone to publish it. I think that was at a meeting of the New Zealand Institute of Agricultural Science at Lincoln. Nobody was interested at the time, and it wasn’t until much later that he made a presentation to the New Zealand Plant Protection Society or its committee. Someone, I think it may have been Anis Rahman of AgResearch Hamilton, said ‘You know, we’ve got a good collection of photographs of weeds and we could use those to illustrate Bruce’s book.’ The basis of the Society’s collection of photographs of weeds had been Alan Upritchard’s photographs used for the Society’s A Guide to the Identification of New Zealand Common Weeds in Colour (still selling well), supplemented by other photographs from various sources, and from the growing collection being assembled by Trevor James.

The team got to work. Anis Rahman helped find finances to sort through the photographs. Paul Champion and I edited Bruce’s text, making it more reader-friendly, while Dave Fullerton sorted out suitable pictures. Many other people helped at different stages by contributing photographs, checking the text, considering the suitability of species for inclusion, and determining the official ‘weedy’ status of the species. I especially mention Arthur Healy, Bill Sykes, John Randall and Catherine Beard for their help with the first edition of the book, which appeared in 1998. I must also mention Rob and Fiona Richardson who organised design, editing, typesetting and production management of all three editions of the ‘Illustrated Guide’. The New Zealand Plant Protection Society provided funds for printing. But, without Bruce’s initial effort, and his perseverance in seeking help to get An Illustrated Guide to Common Weeds of New Zealand published, none of this would have happened.

As stocks of the second edition declined, we were approached to do a third, enlarged and updated edition. Although Bruce was instrumental in getting the first edition of the book produced, we felt that the book had changed so much from Bruce’s original text that perhaps the time had come to modify the authorship. I drove across to Bruce’s home in Omokoroa, near Tauranga. He proudly showed me round his house and garden which, at the age of nearly 90, Bruce still looked after himself. No television and no computer, but a lot of books about plants. I asked Bruce how he’d feel if we took his name off the 3rd edition of the book. He laughed. ‘I was never bothered about that.’ He said, ‘I just wanted to see a good weed book.’

That was the little we’d done for Bruce, but he was grateful for our efforts. He himself had done much more. His obituary in the NZ Herald tells that Bruce served as a Lieutenant in the Royal New Zealand Naval Volunteer Reserve in World War 2. He spent much of his life as a farmer at South Kaipara Head, and had a life-long interest in what we used to call natural history and especially in botany. For many years, until his legs caused problems, he regularly went on field trips with the Auckland Botanical Society.

Bruce Roy was modest, generous and helpful. All three editions of ‘the Roy book’ have incorporated the key to weed identification based on flower colour and plant size that Bruce first developed. Many people have commented on how useful it is. That, and the book itself, serve as Bruce’s memorial.

Tribute contributed by Ian Popay