

John Dallachy

Text and photographs by Peter 'Bill' Lavarack

Travellers on the Bruce Highway north of Cardwell may notice a creek named 'Dallachy Creek'. This small creek honours one of Cardwell and North Queensland's pioneers and the discoverer of many of the orchids of the north - John Dallachy. His story starts in Melbourne with the famous German botanist Ferdinand Mueller.

Ferdinand Mueller (later known as Baron Ferdinand von Mueller) was a German who came to Australia in 1848 and obtained the position of Superintendent of the Melbourne Botanic Gardens in 1857. Although he never visited the north eastern tropics of Queensland, Mueller had a far reaching influence on the botany of the region through his network of collectors, prominent among who was John Dallachy. It was these collectors who really got the ball rolling in terms of filling in the list of

North Queensland orchids. At Rockhampton A. Thozet and the O'Shanesey brothers were prolific collectors, but none rivalled Dallachy at Cardwell.

John Dallachy arrived in Australia from Scotland in 1849 and was appointed as superintendent of the Melbourne Botanic Gardens. In 1857 he was replaced in that position by Ferdinand Mueller. He seems not to have had any enmity to Mueller and collected specimens for him in Victoria, western New South Wales and later in Queensland. He arrived in Cardwell with the first party to set up a new settlement in 1864. A major aim of the new settlers was to establish a road over the ranges to the Valley of Lagoons where good pasture had been reported by the explorers. On the way to Cardwell he collected in the vicinity of the present towns of Rockhampton, Bowen and Proserpine and at Mt



Melaleuca woodland near Cardwell – location of several orchid collections by Dallachy.



Ferdinand Mueller in 1867 when he was supporting Dallachy at Cardwell.

Elliot near Townsville.

Mueller could scarcely have chosen a better situation for Dallachy's collecting. Close by are a diversity of habitats including coastal mangroves, lowland *Melaleuca* woodland on poorly drained soil, coastal open forests on better drained sites, lowland rainforest, rock faces, upland rainforests at an altitude of about 1000 metres and all sorts of mixtures of these types. It is clear that he collected from sea level to the higher mountains which must have been quite a task as there were no maps and no roads in 1864. Life was made easier for him by the rapidly growing settlement which boasted a sheltered harbour regularly visited by ships.

Between 1864 and 1871 Dallachy sent thousands of botanical specimens to Mueller among which were at least 30 orchids (see Table 1, p. 318). About half of these were described as new species by Mueller, the remainder were found to be previously named species from southern Australia or from outside Australia, recorded in Australia for the first time. Dallachy provided details of habitat and locality on the first of his duplicates, but Mueller later placed his own labels on the specimens and generally

gave the locality simply as 'Rockingham's Bay', although some would have been collected 100 or more kilometres away. Duplicate specimens in overseas herbaria often have only this rather scanty information, leading to a misconception that Mueller himself collected at Rockingham Bay.

Unique amongst the collectors in North Queensland, Dallachy was paid for his collecting. This is explained in a letter from Mueller to Bentham in 1870:

....no one ever in Australia enjoyed such facilities to explore a jungle district, than Mr Dallachy. He is now half a dozen years quietly and purposely settled at Rockingham's Bay and his plants cost me from that district alone over 1000 pounds sterling! He has nothing in the world else to do, than to collect, as he is a kind of pensioner of my department. As he is no botanist in the true sense of the word, he incurs no loss of time in minute examinations. Besides he is stationary at R's B., and has a cottage to dry and keep his collections in, and commands the sea-

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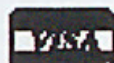
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Liparis habenarina first collected by Dallachy in 1864

port & the dense forest in one hours walk.' (Sanderson 2005 p. 85).

In this Mueller was comparing Dallachy's comparatively luxurious conditions with his own difficulties on the fast-moving Gregory Expedition of 1855-56.

Unlike other collectors he was not looking for new grazing or agricultural lands or for gold or timber resources. He had a single scientific purpose and he was there for an extended stay of several years. Having the time and the support, Dallachy was able to produce thousands of specimens, providing the best record of the flora of a remote Australian area in the mid 19th through to the early 20th century. There are more than 8000 specimens collected by Dallachy in the National Herbarium of Victoria and well over half of these came from Cardwell. In areas easily accessible from Cardwell he was able to monitor plants and

collect specimens when they were in flower and fruit, an advantage not available to collectors who visited a site only once. He travelled extensively, often alone, in areas where no other white man had been.

The local indigenous people understandably did not respond well to the invasion of their land and for several years local settlers were reluctant to move far from Cardwell unless accompanied by native police. Indicative of the sort of problems the local Aborigines posed was the spearing of Dallachy's daughter Mary in 1865 or 1866 while on a picnic on Garden Island. Men from Hinchinbrook Island had approached unseen via the nearby Gould Island. Fortunately she was not seriously injured. However Dallachy himself had a charmed life with respect to the local Aborigines. According to Dorothy Jones (1961)

John Dallachy seems to have been the only settler who could roam the swamps and the jungles with impunity. The native police were at his disposal should he need them but he never was in a position to have to call



Rhomboda polygonoides first collected by Dallachy in 1865



Dendrobium smilliae on rock at Brown Creek.



Dendrobium agrostophyllum, first collected by Dallachy in 1870. Photograph by Greg Steenbeeke

on their assistance as he carried his own protection more dependable than a snider rifle. Concealed blacks had doubtless often watched him and their universal opinion was that he was quite mad. As such he was sacrosanct. He always wore a white panama hat on his grey head and carried a small type of gun which he used to shoot down specimens from high trees. To shoot at nothing but trees was curious enough, but to pick up a fallen leaf or berry, study it and carefully stow it in a box full of similar "game" was convincing proof that the elderly white man was far from normal. So he was left severely alone according to the aboriginal code.

It seems that to the Aborigines, Dallachy with his full head of white hair, was an elder who should be respected in line with their culture, perhaps even more so because of his strange habitats (Betsy Jakes *pers. comm.*).

Unfortunately Dallachy died of fever at the Herbert River in 1871, ending seven years of collecting in the north. Thirty plants were named after him. Among the orchids he is commemorated by is *Nervilia dallachyana* (although this is now usually considered a

synonym of *N. plicata*).

References

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- Upton, W.T. (1989.) *Dendrobium Orchids of Australia.* Houghton Mifflin Australia.

Table 1 is presented on the next page.

Table 1. New Records collected by Dallachy

New species described by Mueller

Bulbophyllum nematopodum F. Muell.
Cadetia maideniana (Schltr.) Schltr.
Dendrobium agrostophyllum F. Muell.
Dendrobium fellowsii F. Muell.
Dendrobium lichenastrum (F. Muell.) Krzl.¹
Dendrobium smillieae F. Muell.
Dipodium ensifolium F. Muell.
Habenaria xanthantha F. Muell.

Liparis angustilabris (F. Muell.) Blaxell
Liparis habenarina (F. Muell.) Benth.
Nervilia holochila (F. Muell.) Schltr.
Nervilia uniflora (F. Muell.) Schltr.
Phreatia crassiuscula Nicholls
Pomatocalpa macphersonii (F. Muell.) T.E. Hunt
Pseudovanilla foliata (F. Muell.) Garay
Rhomboda polygonoides (F. Muell.) Ormerod

New records for North Queensland

Apostasia wallichii R.Br. ‡
Caladenia carnea R.Br.
Calanthe triplicata (Willemet) Ames
Corymborkis veratrifolia (Reinw.) Blume ‡
Cymbidium madidum Lindl.
Dendrobium speciosum Sm.
Goodyera viridiflora (Blume) Blume ‡
Goodyera rubicunda (Blume) Lindl.²

Habenaria hymenophylla Schltr.²
Habenaria propinquior Rchb.f. ‡
Hetaeria oblongifolia Blume ‡
Nervilia plicata (Andrews) Schltr. ‡
Phaius tankervilleae (Banks) Blume
Pholidota imbricata Hook. ‡

Thelymitra angustifolia R. Br.

These records are taken from the Website *Australia's Virtual Herbarium*.

‡ New record for Australia at time of collection

¹J. Dallachy collected a specimen near Cardwell in 1868; but according to Upton (1989) the Edinburgh Botanic Gardens had a plant in 1836 from Earl Fitzwilliam.

²According to Collins (2003) Dallachy collected *Habenaria hymenophylla* and *Goodyera rubicunda* in 1873. This date is incorrect as Dallachy died in 1871. It is quite possible that he did collect specimens of these species near Cardwell, but I can find no record of such specimens in the Australia's Virtual Herbarium.

Liparis angustilabris. Photograph by Greg Steenbeeke





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