

Story: Hudson, George Vernon

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1895

Hudson, George Vernon

1867–1946

Postal clerk, entomologist,
astronomer

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George Vernon Hudson was born on 20 April 1867 at London, England, one of six children of Emily Jane Carnal and her husband, Charles Hudson, a professional artist–craftsman. George's mother died when he was two years old. The sensitive upbringing he received from his father was in strong contrast to the bitter experiences he had at school, where they 'never ceased to ridicule' his natural history inclinations. These inclinations developed from the age of nine when he began collecting insects with his brother Will. At 12 he began a diary which he kept for the remainder of his life, and at 13 he wrote his first small manuscript on insects, illustrated with detailed paintings.

In 1881 George, his father, brother and sister left for New Zealand, where they met up with his two older brothers and sister. After living in Nelson he became a cadet in the post office in Wellington on 1 February 1883. His father died in 1884, and by then Hudson had determined to present New Zealand's insect fauna to the general public in the manner of natural science books in Europe. His job involved shift-work, which allowed him the leisure time to collect insects, work out their life histories and illustrate them in colour.

His first book was completed by the end of 1886 at the age of 19. Eventually, with help from Sir Walter Buller and others, *An elementary manual of New Zealand entomology* was published in April 1892. Hudson is best known for seven illustrated books published between 1892 and 1950. Three large volumes on butterflies and moths were published in 1898, 1928 and 1939, comprising over 2,500 coloured insect paintings. He also produced a book on aquatic insects in 1904 and another on beetles in 1934.

In November 1907 he joined a scientific expedition to the subantarctic islands on the *Hinemoa* and spent 10 days camped on Auckland Island. Sixty-one species of insects were found, and many were described with accompanying colour paintings in volumes edited by Dr Charles Chilton. Hudson's contact with local scientific interests was through participation in the Royal Society of New Zealand and its predecessors. He became a member of the Wellington Philosophical Society in 1885 and was its president in 1900, 1901 and 1940, by which time it had become the Wellington Branch of the Royal Society of New Zealand. He was elected one of the original fellows of the New Zealand Institute in 1919, and was awarded the Hector Memorial Medal and Prize in 1923 and the Hutton Memorial Medal in 1929. He served on the board of governors of the institute from 1923 to 1933 and on the council of its successor, the Royal Society of New Zealand, from 1933 to 1946.

Although principally known for his entomology, George Hudson also made significant contributions to astronomy. In 1885 he bought his first telescope, and by 1904 had installed a four-inch telescope observatory built at the back of his section. It attracted much interest, especially during the appearance of Halley's Comet in 1910. His shift-work job made him aware of the value of the daylight

hours, and on 16 October 1895 he presented a paper to the Wellington Philosophical Society advocating seasonal time adjustment. The idea was ridiculed by a number of society members, but ultimately T. K. Sidey, a parliamentarian, gained acceptance of one hour summer time which was trialed successfully in 1927. After some controversy, Hudson was awarded a special T. K. Sidey medal at the inaugural meeting of the newly constituted Royal Society on 16 May 1934. His other notable astronomical achievement was the discovery of a bright new star, Nova Aquilae, on 9 June 1918.

In 1891 George Hudson had bought an acre of land in Messines Road, Karori, where he built a three-roomed house. On 30 December 1893 at St Mary's Church, Karori, he married Florence Woodhead Gillon, a teacher at Wellington Girls' High School. Hudson continued to work at the post office until his retirement in 1919, reaching the position of principal clerk of the postal division.

He was critical of the formal education system and wrote outspoken letters to newspapers criticising this and institutionalised science. He provided alternative methods of learning through his books, which required no scientific training to be understood, and by holding regular meetings in his house for young boys eager to find out about insects and astronomy.

George Hudson died at his home on 5 April 1946, survived by his daughter; his wife, Florence, had died in 1935. His achievements place him among New Zealand's distinguished pioneer naturalists.

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