**Stream:** New Zealand environmental historians – ‘making a difference’.

**Paper title:** “Lancelot and ‘Little Frog’, tracing McCaskill’s legacy, the preservation of the Castle Hill buttercup (*Ranunculus paucifolius*).”

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**Abstract:**

This research paper investigates the life and times of ‘little frog’ a small buttercup with few leaves, endemic to the South Island and ‘nationally critical’ in terms of its conservation status. The buttercup is specific to a particular geographic zone – Castle Hill. In February 1919 Prof. Arnold Wall, Professor of English, Canterbury College, described *Ranunculus paucifolius* to the New Zealand Institute at Christchurch as ‘unique to the world’.[[1]](#footnote-1) Wall’s view represents the post-War era dedicated to generating public understandings about national science, which post-World War Two were couched in terms of ‘preservation’.[[2]](#footnote-2) The buttercup grew to 10cm high and lived sheltered from the nor’west wind in a small amphitheatre of steep grassy slopes banked with piles of weathered and unusually shaped limestone rocks. Yet is was the work of Lancelot McCaskill, a ‘zealous’, ‘energetic’, ‘larger than life’ character, who ensured that ‘little frog’ was preserved for all time in its 6ha ‘land castle’ – free from browsing predators.[[3]](#footnote-3) Lancelot and ‘little frog’ is a story about a plant-loving teacher, who took the classroom and laboratory into the field in order to learn about and preserve this ‘peculiar’ plant. McCaskill was also involved in soil conservation and was the ‘science conscience’ in the establishment of the post-war national parks system. Kenneth Cumberland said ‘everything about him was big, his stature, his energy, courage, enthusiasm and heart’. [[4]](#footnote-4) Described by others as a ‘prima donna like Dame Nellie Melba’,[[5]](#footnote-5) McCaskill used his personality to influence people, lobbied hard for the establishment of a Nature Reserve, and sent seeds to botanical gardens in England and Scotland in his quest to save ‘little frog’. Writer of the Automobile Association’s *New Zealand Motor World* magazines in the 1960s and 1970s, he sent New Zealand families on ‘scenic drives’, this tradition has continued and today the plant’s biggest threats are botanical theft, ‘clumsy feet’ and film crew.[[6]](#footnote-6) Today his work can be remembered and experienced at Lincoln University’s McCaskill Alpine Garden. Created in the 1980s, with his students, the raised garden was designed to draw the visitor into ‘being there’ amongst the South Island’s small tussocks and mountain and high country grasses.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Biographical details:** Dr Joanna Cobley teaches New Zealand history at the University of Canterbury.

1. Prof. A, Wall, “Ranunculus paucifolius T. Kirk: its Distribution and Ecology, and the Bearing of these upon certain Geological and Phylogenetic Problems,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the Royal Society*, Vol. 52. (1920), accessed 1 June 2015 <http://rsnz.natlib.govt.nz/volume/rsnz_52/rsnz_52_00_001090.html#n136> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. L. W. McCaskill, *The Castle Hill Buttercup (Ranunculus paucifolius): A story of preservation* (Lincoln College, Canterbury, NZ: Tussock Grasslands and Mountain Lands Institute, Special Publication No. 25, 1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A. P. Thomson, ‘Obituary: Lancelot William McCaskill: An appreciation,” *New Zealand Journal of Forestry*, Vol. 30. No. 1 (1985), accessed 1 June 2015 <http://www.nzjf.org/free_issues/NZJF30_1_1985/E96CD257-62F8-4CA5-AC7F-0E6E12550F6B.pdf>; the term ‘land castle’ was used by David Bellamy in *Moa’s Ark: To the lifeboats*, directed and produced by Peter Hayden (Natural History New Zealand, 1990), clip 4, accessed 1 June 2015 <http://www.nzonscreen.com/title/moas-ark--to-the-lifeboats-1990>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A. P. Thomson, ‘Obituary: Lancelot William McCaskill: An appreciation.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bellamy, *Moa’s Ark: To the lifeboats*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Joy M. Talbot and Pat V. Prendergast, *McCaskill Alpine Garden, Lincoln College: A Collection of High Country Native Plants*, Special Publication No. 27 (Lincoln: Tussock Grasslands & Mountain Institute, 1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)