

*Hermitage' in New Zealand: the Origins and Development of the Te Kauwhata 'Hermitage' Syrah.*

By Dr. Gerald Atkinson

The Te Kauwhata 'Hermitage' Syrah line with which Alan Limmer established his original Syrah planting at Stonecroft, has its origins in New Zealand in vines imported *from Australia*. These were planted around 1900 at Waerenga research station (which later became the Te Kauwhata national viticultural research centre) by none other than the Government Viticulturist, Romeo Bragato. There had been private imports of the same vine material from Australia (New South Wales and / or Victoria) before — *e.g.*, by judge Francis Dart Fenton for his Kaipara vineyards in the 1880's — but *all* of these were wiped out as phylloxera spread through the north between 1890 and 1910.

Contrary claims that the Te Kauwhata 'Hermitage' Syrah vines somehow derive from plantings at James Busby's residence at the Bay of Islands (*ca.* 1834 – 40s) are utterly without foundation. Indeed, judge Francis Fenton (who had lived in the far north since 1850 and was well familiar with its colonial and viticultural history) is recorded in various places (*e.g.*, The Auckland Star, December 1898) as stating that “After a time... [powdery] mildew ... attacked [the Busby vines], and as no remedy was found for it and no one devoted any particular attention to the vines, they died away.” So the Busby connection to the Te Kauwhata 'Hermitage' vines *does not* derive from vines that somehow (magically?) survived from his bay of Island's personal vineyard.

Busby *was* nevertheless responsible for introducing 'Hermitage' Syrah to Australia (although he also assigned to his Syrah vines the alternative names / synonyms “Ciras”, and “Scyras”, from which the Australian name 'Shiraz' thence emerged). For in 1833 Syrah came into New South Wales as part of the very large vine collection Busby imported and donated to the colony. He collected his Syrah, from two sources. One (under the name 'Hermitage') was the vineyard of Francois Durand a prominent banker and winegrower in Rousillon in the south of France (who in turn had obtained his Syrah from Hermitage in the northern Rhone). The second source (this time under the name 'Ciras' or 'Scyras') was by direct acquisition from a once-prominent grower on the hill of Hermitage itself: the vineyard of a Monsieur Machon. Phylloxera later destroyed these Hermitage vineyards (and almost certainly wiped out Machon's winegrowing business with it), starting in 1877. The genetic lines Busby collected may well have then ceased to exist in their native home as a result.

Ironically, Busby had very little, if anything, further to do with Australian viticulture after his collection was imported, due to his commitments as Governor of the colony of New Zealand from 1834 onward, and thereafter due to his entanglement in other matters in New Zealand more or less right through to his death in 1871.

It was instead the New South Wales horticulturist and winemaker *William Macarthur*, of Camden in Sydney, who was overwhelmingly responsible for popularising and widely spreading Busby's 'Hermitage' Syrah in colonial Australia. For Macarthur made a close study of the Busby vine collection and selected from it a very limited number of vines that he considered were the select few worthy of serious cultivation. 'Hermitage' / 'Sciras' was very prominent among these, and through his Camden nursery Macarthur sold tens of thousands of cuttings of 'Hermitage' to South Australia, Victoria, and in New South Wales, from the 1840s through to the 1870s. As a result, today, most (*if not all*) of the finest old Syrah / Shiraz

vineyards in Australia are made up of material from the two Busby 'Hermitage' / 'Sciras' lines of Syrah / Shiraz. This is Rolls Royce Syrah material therefore!

In New Zealand, the 'Hermitage' vines Bragato introduced *ca.* 1900 (from either South Australia or Victoria) languished at Te Kauwhata for the next more than sixty years, albeit more or less completely ignored and unwanted by any wine producer. However, in 1968 they were selected for use in D.S.I.R virus elimination heat-treatment experiments intended to try to produce high health virus-eliminated versions of the old vine stock at Te Kauwhata. Material from two old TK Hermitage vines was heat-treated, and somewhere between 5 and 15 separate lines of high health Syrah were created as a result. (Five are documented; the other seven to ten are something of a matter of speculation thanks to very confused records.) These had been successfully freed of the leaf roll and other viruses they had been infected with at Te Kauwhata in the many years since their introduction by Bragato. (The original Busby material was definitely of very high health; any virus in this material is the result of infection *after* its arrival in colonial Australia or post-1900 in NZ.)

The new high health DSIR heat treated vines were planted at Te Kauwhata *ca.* 1970-71 (and the remaining old, and entirely virused, 'Hermitage' vines were then destroyed). But there was still no interest in the variety even in its new high health form throughout the 1960s and into the 1980s; it simply lapsed, again, into complete obscurity. However, in the middle 1980s, Alan Limmer became interested in experimentally growing Syrah and happened to be working at Te Kauwhata at the same time. A small row of some of the several and dispersed plantings of the DSIR heat treated 'Hermitage' Syrah at Te Kauwhata had been listed for pulling out (doubtless to make way for something much more popular), and Alan decided to save material from each vine. This then, *at last* — after around eighty years — saw the Busby – Macarthur – Bragato connection that is responsible for these vines being in New Zealand, finally realised as a productive vineyard planting. However, it has to be said that without the fortuitous intervention of the D.S.I.R. in 1968 and their use of two of the old Te Kauwhata 'Hermitage' vines in their successful virus elimination experiments, Alan would have been wasting his time: his planting would have been an abject — hopelessly virus-infected — failure. Instead, thanks to the D.S.I.R. and sheer fortunate happenstance, it became a huge success.

Stonecroft planted one of the first vineyards in the Gimblett Gravels, and indeed, Alan Limmer had to take the district council to court to stop them turning the gravels over to quarrying and a drag racing strip! In due course, his 1990s Syrah wines were internationally acknowledged as showing huge potential for the variety in this part of Hawkes Bay, and he generously donated a mass selection from his 'Hermitage' Syrah range to Hawkes Bay vine improvement group. From here what has become known as the 'mass selection' Hermitage line of Syrah took off in a big way through N.Z. Vine Improvement Group and then through the various vine nurseries. Today, the likes of Craggy Range, Villa Maria, and Trinity Hill use it, alongside Stonecroft, as a major and key component of their top Gimblett Gravels Syrah wines. Indeed, there is still no other genetic line — in New Zealand or Australia — that can hold a candle to it. Nor is there any other with such a remarkable and star-studded history extending over more or less two centuries from once-great (pre-phylloxera) vineyards on the Hill of Hermitage to today's Gimblett Gravels!