

A Short Biography of Sir Julius von Haast

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This short biography has been prepared to summarise the life and work of Sir Julius von Haast and to put the papers that follow into context. It has been largely compiled from similar biographical accounts in the *New Zealand Dictionary of Biography* (Maling 1990) and the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Langer 2004), updated with more recent research, especially by Nolden (2016).

Johann Franz Haast was born in Bonn, Germany, on 1 May 1822, one of nine children of Mathias Haast, tailor and lottery office keeper, and his wife Anna Eva Haast. He attended school in Bonn and at the Höhere Bürgerschule in Cologne, which he left prematurely in 1838 to undertake a 2-year apprenticeship, possibly as a mining technician. The information available on Haast's early life in Germany is incomplete. He recorded that his father wanted him to leave Bonn and sent him to live in Verviers, Belgium. There is no evidence that he ever undertook full-time university study, but it is clear that he acquired a broad knowledge of the natural sciences, especially geology and mineralogy, was fluent in several languages, and had gained skills as an artist and cartographer. In 1844 he moved to Frankfurt am Main and was involved in a variety of commercial occupations, including as a textile seller, a haulage contractor and a bookseller's salesman. On 26 October 1846 he married Antonie Schmitt, daughter of a well-known musician. They had one son, Mathias Robert, born in 1848.

In 1857, Haast was commissioned to translate Charles Hursthouse's *New Zealand: the Britain of the South* into German. The following year he accepted a proposal from English shipowners Willis, Gann & Co to travel to New Zealand and report to them on the prospects for German emigration. Haast reached Auckland on 21 December 1858, the day before the Austrian frigate *Novara* arrived carrying geologist Ferdinand Hochstetter who was invited to undertake a reconnaissance geological survey of Auckland Province. Haast asked if he could join him. Hochstetter, who had limited command of English, was pleased to have a German-speaking companion, who was also a competent English speaker. The two men formed an effective partnership and an enduring friendship over the next 8 months, and Haast rapidly gained experience in geological and topographical mapping.

After the Auckland project was finished, Hochstetter was invited to report on mineral prospects in Nelson Province. The planned work in Nelson was incomplete when Hochstetter had to return to Vienna, and he recommended that Haast finish the survey. This involved the exploration of remote, mountainous country, which was successfully completed by Haast, including the discovery of what was to become New Zealand's largest bituminous coalfield near Westport. Based on the published report of his explorations, Hochstetter arranged for Haast to be awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the German University of Tübingen.

From the time of his arrival in Auckland, Haast adopted the first name Julius. His wife Antonie, who had stayed in Frankfurt, died in October 1859 and their son was raised by her relations. Haast decided to remain in New Zealand where he could start a new career as a geologist. The photograph of Haast in Figure 1 was taken at about this time. He became a naturalised British subject in February 1861 and joined the Anglican Church. In June 1863 he married Mary Dobson, daughter of Canterbury Provincial Engineer, Edward Dobson, and they were to have four sons and a daughter. His name recorded on the marriage certificate is John Francis Julius Haast.

In late 1860, Haast was asked by the Canterbury Provincial Council to urgently examine the site of a planned railway tunnel between Lyttelton and the Canterbury Plains as the contractor had

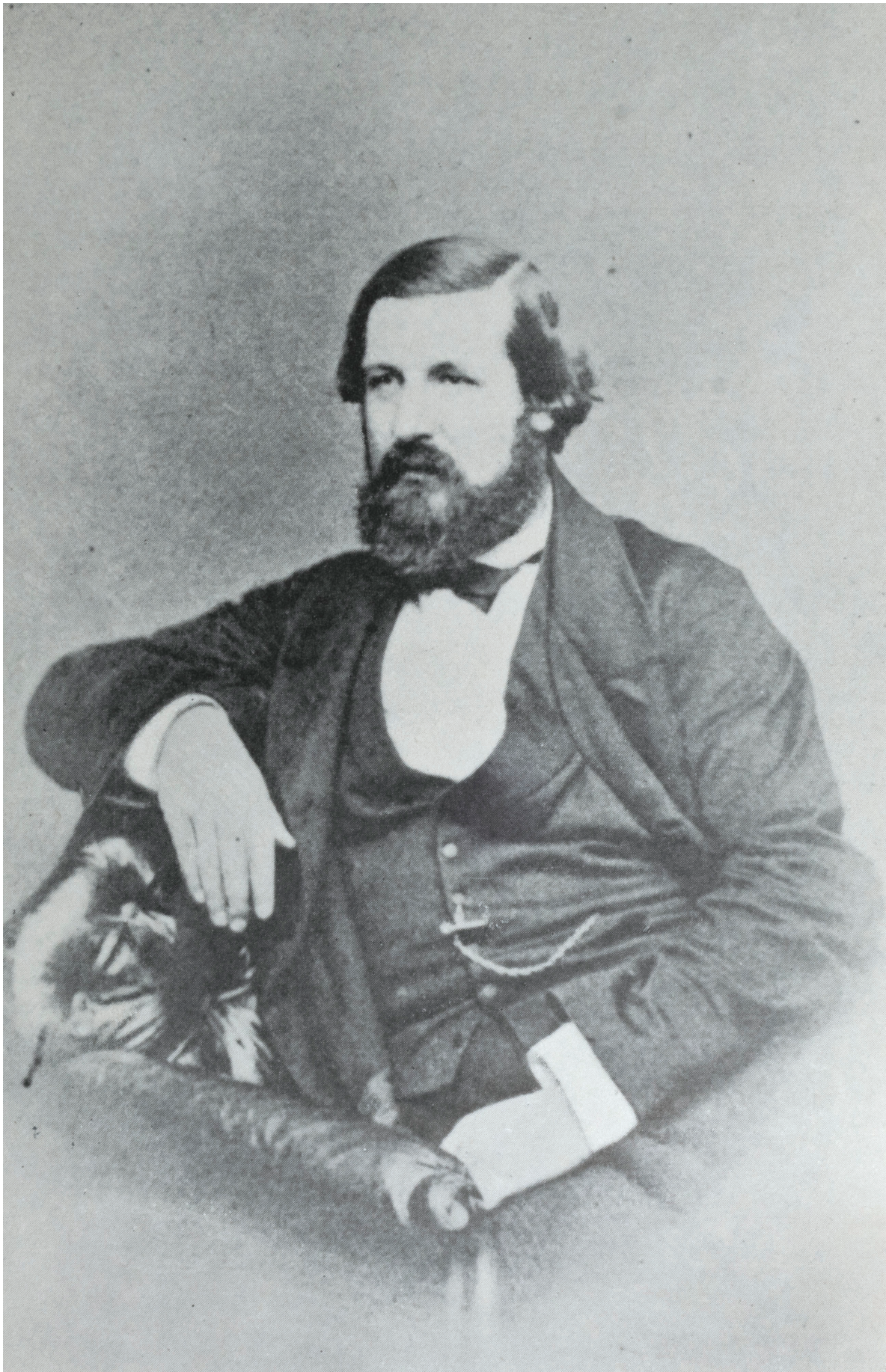


Figure 1. Julius Haast in about 1863 when he was actively involved in fieldwork and exploration of Canterbury. This image was used as the frontispiece for the 1948 biography written by his son, Heinrich von Haast. Photographer unknown

abandoned the project after striking very hard rock. Haast correctly predicted that this was only a local feature and the tunnel was duly completed within budget. This established his credibility in Canterbury, where he was appointed Provincial Geologist in February 1861 to undertake a geological and topographical survey of the province. Most of the flatter land near the coast had already been surveyed and subdivided for farming, but the steeper country and alpine regions were almost a blank on the map. Over the next 5 years Haast and his assistants systematically explored and traversed all of the eastern catchments of the Southern Alps in the Canterbury Province, mapping mountains, valleys and glaciers. Haast also made significant field sketches of the major glaciers they encountered. The results of this work and subsequent geological surveys were written up as *Geology of the Provinces of Canterbury and Westland*, published in Christchurch in 1879.

The exploring expeditions provided opportunities for Haast to name many previously undescribed topographical features, and he started a system of naming them after well-known scientists and other notables, although in doing so he often ignored established indigenous names. In June 1862, he wrote to Sir William Hooker, the first Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew 1841–1865, informing him that he had named the Hooker Glacier after him and explaining that he was planning to create “a kind of Pantheon or Walhalla for my illustrious contemporaries”.¹ It was an imaginative vision, but it also provided an opportunity for Haast to initiate correspondence with leading scientists in Britain, Europe and North America. Astutely, as it turned out, he named the Franz Josef Glacier after the Austrian emperor.

Haast was keen to establish scientific institutions based on what he had seen in Europe. He founded the Philosophical Institute of Canterbury (which eventually became the Canterbury branch of the Royal Society of New Zealand) and started to publish the results of his research in the *Transactions of the New Zealand Institute*. He inaugurated a museum based on material he had collected during his explorations, taking advantage of the discovery of a rich store of excellently preserved moa bones at Glenmark, near Christchurch. Haast supervised the excavation of cartloads of moa skeletons, which were transported to Christchurch where he and his assistant reassembled them. Until the 1860s, research on the moa was the closely guarded preserve of the British palaeontologist Richard Owen, but with a copious supply of new material Haast started to publish his own identifications of species. As a consequence, in 1874 Owen rather reluctantly wrote, “I begin to feel that my share in the work of the restoration of the extinct birds of New Zealand is over You stand at the head of my successors in that Work [sic], and merit every honour & recompense for your share in the Natural History of your fair islands”.² The Glenmark swamp excavations also revealed fragments of a giant bird of prey, which Haast named *Harpagornis moorei*. It has subsequently become known as Haast’s eagle, the largest bird of prey ever known to exist.

Haast started his museum in unoccupied rooms in the Canterbury Provincial Buildings in 1867. He sent moa skeletons, bird skins and other material overseas to major institutions, using them as a way of obtaining valuable material for his own museum by exchange. The development of Canterbury Museum became his passion, and he raised funds for the construction of a fine stone building that was opened in 1870. With an impressive building and collections based on the spectacular moa displays and material imported from European museums, Canterbury outshone other New Zealand museums in the late nineteenth century.

Haast had wide interests in the natural sciences. He regularly collected alpine plants and several species were named after him by William Hooker’s son Joseph Hooker, Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew 1865–1885. Excavation of early Māori sites carried out under his supervision led to important ethnological papers. He predicted the presence of artesian water beneath the

gravels of the Canterbury Plains and recognised the former widespread extent of glaciation in the Southern Alps. Papers on his New Zealand discoveries were read before the Geological and Zoological Societies in London and the Royal Geographical Society awarded him a gold medal for his explorations.

Bishop Henry John Chitty Harper and Haast played a leading role in the movement to establish Canterbury University College and its affiliation with the University of New Zealand. Haast taught geology and palaeontology, and became its first professor of geology. He also served as a member of the Senate of the University of New Zealand from 1879 until 1887.

An entirely self-made man, Haast was an effective self-publicist which helped him to gain many awards. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of London in 1867. The Emperor of Austria awarded him a hereditary knighthood in 1875, which entitled him to be called von Haast. Appointed New Zealand Commissioner to the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in London, he was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1886. Haast died in Christchurch on 16 August 1887, soon after returning from England. On his gravestone, in the graveyard of the now-demolished Holy Trinity Church, Avonside, his name is recorded as Julius von Haast – the first name he chose for himself, the title ‘von’ he earned from the Austrian Emperor, and the family name ‘Haast’, the only constant name through his life.

Julius von Haast was an extrovert, energetic and enthusiastic in his many interests, including the development of the musical and artistic life of Christchurch. His impetuosity and outspokenness led to public and scientific arguments that could have been avoided, but those disputes do not lessen his achievements. Canterbury Museum is his lasting memorial.

Endnotes

¹ Letter from Haast to Sir William Hooker, 9 June 1862. Nolden, Nathan, Mildenhall 2013, p 23. Available from: <https://www.gsnz.org.nz/publications-and-webstore/product/94> [accessed 19/07/2022].

² Letter from Richard Owen to Haast, 13 October 1874. Haast collection, Alexander Turnbull Library.

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