

# Sydney Parkinson, Botanical Artist on the Endeavour Voyage 1768–1771

Jane Humble<sup>1</sup>

*“Without the help of drawing ‘tis impossible any account thereof should be perfectly intelligible”* Joseph Pitton de Tournefort, Botanist 1770 (Carr 1983).

Had cameras been available in 1768 when Joseph Banks assembled his equipment and his party for the *Endeavour* expedition it is certain he would have taken one on the voyage. Instead, the responsibility of recording discoveries on this historic scientific journey depended on the journals and sketches of his scientists and his two artists; they recorded everything they saw and brought the assembled herbarium and zoological specimens to life.

Banks chose two artists to join his party on the *Endeavour* voyage: the young Scot, Sydney Parkinson, was to paint the botanical subjects and following the death of Alexander Buchan, the second artist on the voyage, Parkinson also took on the task of illustrating the zoological specimens and some of the topographical views.

During the three years of the journey Sydney Parkinson produced about 260 completed signed paintings, 676 unsigned botanical field sketches with colour notes and another 300 non-botanical subjects. Unsigned sketches have been attributed when the descriptive notes are known to be in Parkinson’s handwriting. To put this huge accomplishment into perspective, the criterion for membership of the English Society of Botanic Artists today requires proof of five completed works within the period of one year, to demonstrate that one is an active artist.

Tragically Parkinson was among those who died of fever after the *Endeavour* left Batavia (present-day Jakarta), on the return journey to England.



Figure 1. Sydney Parkinson, self (?)-portrait in oils, British Museum (Natural History). (Image in public domain.)

---

1 16 Izard Road, Khandallah, Wellington 6035. [jhumble16@gmail.com](mailto:jhumble16@gmail.com)

Sydney, the younger son of an Edinburgh Quaker, was apprenticed in his teens to a draper. He seems to have shown a natural aptitude for drawing and Dr. Averil Lysaght suggests that it is possible that he may have had lessons from William De la Cour who was teaching in Edinburgh in the 1760s (Carr 1983).

When the family moved to London, the 19-year-old Sydney was employed by another Quaker Scot, James Lee of the Vineyard Nursery in Hammersmith, to teach art to his daughter Ann. It was in 1767, through James Lee, that he met Joseph Banks who at once employed him to complete paintings of fish and insects from his recent Newfoundland expedition. At this time Banks was also employing Georg Dionysius Ehret to record his botanical subjects from the same expedition. There is no record of contact between the 60-year-old Ehret and the younger artist but there is little doubt that Parkinson would have been influenced by Ehret's work.

In the early days of the *Endeavour* voyage, Parkinson was able to keep pace with his drawings of newly discovered species. But by the time the New Zealand and Australian collections came on board, he had only time to sketch and partially colour the parts of the plants which were thought to be critical for future identification of the species, particularly those fugitive characteristics which would rapidly wilt and fade.

Both Cook and Banks recorded their admiration for the industry of this artist in the warmest terms.

*Amiable, virtuous, skillful [sic], hardworking, a good journal keeper and ardent collector of miscellaneous objects.* Cook in Beaglehole (1955).

*In fourteen days one draughtsman [Parkinson] has made 94 sketch drawings so quick a hand has he required by use...Sydney Parkinson certainly behaved to me during the whole long voyage uncommon well and with unbounded industry made for me a much larger number of drawings than ever I expected.* Banks in Beaglehole (1962).

Parkinson worked in the Great Cabin along with Banks, Banks's secretary Herman Sporing, his servants, and Banks's assistant Dr. Solander. This was also where this party and the captain had their meals. In the absence of refrigeration the specimens the artist were working on were wrapped in damp cloth and kept in tin trunks in the Great Cabin.

*... I wish that our friends in England could by assistance of some magical spying glass take a peep at our situation, Dr. Solander sets [sic] at the cabin table describing, myself at my Bureau journalizing, between us hangs a large bunch of seaweed, upon the table lays the wood and barnacles.* Banks in Beaglehole (1974).

The Great Cabin was traditionally the captain's domain but as Beaglehole

(1974) commented in his biography of Cook, “if Cook’s friends had had the magical glass they might have wondered whether he retained any rights at all in his own cabin”.

After weeks of privation, cramped working conditions and storms at sea, the four months spent in the Society Islands and Tahiti should have been idyllic. But not so for the unfortunate artist as Banks records of Parkinson’s trials with the insects:

... *they eat the painters colours off the paper as fast as they can be laid on... many expedients have been thought of, none succeeded better than a mosquito net which covers chair painting and drawings.* (Carr 1983.)

Two months after leaving Tahiti, having sailed to the 40 degree south latitude as instructed by the Admiralty, the *Endeavour* was now returning northwards when Nicholas Young sighted land on the 6 October 1769. The disastrous story of the first two days ashore in New Zealand has often been told. The unjust name Poverty Bay remains as evidence of the overall unhappiness of the company regarding the events that had taken place, which resulted in the deaths of two local men. On 11 October, Banks wrote on the subject of his botanical collecting:

... *this morning we took our leave of Poverty Bay with not above 40 species of plants in our boxes.* (Carr 1983.)

Parkinson, who had not gone ashore (one assumes he was too busy at his drawing board and making the most of the welcome steadiness of being at anchor) noted:

... *our botanical gentlemen gathered a variety of curious plants in flower.* (Carr 1983.)

Included in this expedition’s very first days of collecting in New Zealand and illustrated by Parkinson were *Myoporum laetum*, ngaio, recorded as *Myoporum litterale* by Banks and Solander, and *Piper excelsum* named *Piper myristicum* by Banks and Solander. We know the botanists had much more success collecting specimens as the expedition made its way around the coast. At Anaura Bay, Tolaga Bay, and Mercury Bay there were many botanical novelties to be found. At Mercury Bay the collectors were able to go ashore seven out of the eleven days they were there. From these collections some of the plants Parkinson made sketch notes for were: *Brachyglottis kirkii*, *Sophora microphylla*, *Rhabdothamnus solandri* and *Passiflora tetrandra*. The *Brachyglottis* was given the unpublished name of *Cineraria glastifolia* by Banks and Solander, and Frederick Polydore Nodder finally completed that illustration in London in 1779.

The longest time spent at anchor was in Queen Charlotte Sound where arriving on 15 January 1770, Cook stayed for 22 days and the botanists went

ashore on 19 days and recorded about 220 species, their largest list from any locality in New Zealand. Finally on 31 March, Cook set sail for the east coast of Australia. Cook had surveyed the New Zealand coast from 8 October 1769 to 31 March 1770.

During the 174 days around the coast of New Zealand the *Endeavour* was at anchor for 55 and conditions on 44 days were suitable for the botanists to go ashore. Their collection of coastal and lowland plants consisted of about 360 species. The dates are significant because by happy chance the timing of this visit was during spring and summer when most species were in flower thus making classification possible.

These dates and numbers build a picture of Banks and Solander collecting enthusiastically while Sydney Parkinson remained in the cramped Great Cabin drawing and painting for all he was worth with little hope of keeping up.

The majority of the drawings from the New Zealand part of the journey remained unfinished. On the return to England a team of five botanical artists was employed to prepare the definitive versions of all of Parkinson's studies under the supervision of Banks and Solander. Between 1772 and 1784, eighteen engravers were engaged by Banks to make plates from the completed paintings using the old cumbersome line engraving method. More than 700 plates of plants recorded throughout the voyage were prepared at a fantastic reported personal cost to Banks of seven thousand pounds in contemporary money. Sadly these plates remained unprinted for more than a century.

These engravings were to have illustrated the proposed Flora of the *Endeavour* voyage, and the 184 depicting the New Zealand species were to accompany Solander's descriptions in a volume called *Primitiae Florae Novae Zelandiae*. Sadly, with Solander's death in 1782, the project came to a halt.

As the exploration of New Zealand continued to expand botanical knowledge in the 19th century, Joseph Hooker's *Handbook of New Zealand Flora* (1867) became out of date, and in the 1890s the New Zealand Government commissioned Thomas Kirk to prepare a new Flora. The Director of the Colonial Museum, James Hector, obtained permission from the British Museum for Kirk to use the *Endeavour* engravings for this new book. As a result, in 1895, duplicate sets of herbarium specimens and six proof sets of black and white engravings were received in Wellington. Unfortunately Kirk died in 1898 before his Flora was completed, although *The Students' Flora* was published in 1898.

In the early twentieth century a run of lithographs of Australian plants

was published and a further limited edition of thirty black and white plates was published by the Royal College of Art in 1973.

Finally, between 1980 and 1990, the first edition of colour prints from the eighteenth century copper plates was published by Alecto Historical Editions in association with the British Museum (Natural History), now known as the Natural History Museum. This sumptuous colour printing is the culmination of two remarkable achievements separated by 200 years: the first, Cook's successful return from his scientific voyage of exploration; and the second a highly risky and expensive printing project undertaken by Alecto. It is also a belated tribute to the industry and dedication of the young artist Sydney Parkinson.

Parkinson's work from the *Endeavour* expedition is held at the Natural History Museum in London together with the notes and records by Banks, Solander and Sporing and some herbarium specimens. This collection is an active area of research today.

The botanical history from the *Endeavour* voyage while not neglected, has remained muddled for several reasons. Although Solander had prepared a detailed manuscript of the expedition it was never published. Banks's grand plan for a wonderfully illustrated edition was never completed although he is quoted as saying it only required another two months of work. However, there were far too many distractions for Banks once he was back in England. It remained for subsequent authors to study the collected specimens in depth and formally name them.

On the return of the *Endeavour* to England there was a drawn out dispute between Banks and Stanfield Parkinson, Sydney's brother, over the ownership and copyright of Sydney's journal and related material. Stanfield was the next-of-kin and rightful executor, but before he died, Sydney had asked Solander to make sure that his friend and mentor James Lee should be allowed to study his papers. In due course, Stanfield borrowed the rough draft of Sydney's journal from Lee. Breaking a promise given to Lee, he proceeded to make arrangements for its publication in advance of the Admiralty's official account of the voyage. A bitter and protracted quarrel followed. Many doubts have arisen about changes made to the rough draft for publication and in the absence of the fair copy, which was believed to have been written by Sydney Parkinson, the value of this document has been severely undermined. It contained discrepancies with the other journals of the voyage and there was no way of deciding how much had been deleted or added. This publication can be studied online on the Oakspring website ([www.oakspring.org/parkinson.html.facsimile](http://www.oakspring.org/parkinson.html.facsimile)).

The story of Sydney Parkinson has not been served well by history.

Although he had worked diligently in cramped and uncomfortable conditions to fulfil his contract to produce botanical illustrations for Banks, he had no opportunity to finish the bulk of those sketches because of his untimely death on the journey home. This fact alone means that the artistic and botanical merit of his work remains difficult to assess. All that can be said with certainty is that his early work caught the attention of knowledgeable and influential people. His drawings and paintings were never published as intended by Banks, as the definitive botanical publication of the *Endeavour* voyage was never published by Banks or Solander.

## REFERENCES

### Cited references

- Beaglehole, J.C. (editor) 1955: The Journals of Captain James Cook. Volume 1. The voyage of the Endeavour, 1768–1771. Cambridge University Press for the Hakluyt Society.
- Beaglehole, J.C. (editor) 1962: The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks 1768–1771. Angus & Robertson Ltd., Sydney.
- Beaglehole, J.C. 1974: The Life of Captain James Cook. A. & C. Black Ltd., Stanford.
- Carr, D.J. (editor) 1983: Sydney Parkinson Artist of Cook's Endeavour Voyage. British Museum in Association with the Australian National University Press, Canberra.

### Other references

- Anon. 1980–1990: Banks' Florilegium. Alecto Historical Editions in association with the British Museum, London.
- Blunt, W. 1951: The Art of Botanical Illustration. 2nd ed. Collins, London.
- Brownsey, P.J. 2012: The Banks and Solander collections – benchmark for understanding the New Zealand flora. *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand* 42: 131–137
- Murray–Oliver, A. 1969: Captain Cook's Artists in the Pacific. Avon Fine Prints Ltd. Christchurch.

### Useful websites

- [www.oakspring.org/parkinson.html](http://www.oakspring.org/parkinson.html).facsimile
- [www.southseas.nla.gov.au/journals/parkinson](http://www.southseas.nla.gov.au/journals/parkinson)
- [www.plantexplorers.com/explorers/botanical-artists](http://www.plantexplorers.com/explorers/botanical-artists)
- [www.nhm.ac.uk/our-science/departments-and-staff/library-and-archives](http://www.nhm.ac.uk/our-science/departments-and-staff/library-and-archives)