

Great Botanists III: Joseph Banks (1743 – 1820)

By Don Beer

I am aware that everyone here has one or two stories and at least a little other information about Sir Joseph Banks. Without repeating that material too much, I will try to expand our understanding of some of it and add a few other points as well that might help put him in a historical context. My aim will be to suggest to you that Banks's importance was wider than you might have believed from what is usually said about him, and that he was in some ways a transitional figure.

What do we know about Banks? We know that he was fat and rich. Let's start with the fat part. As a young man he was considered good-looking; he was tall for the times and athletic. But obesity ran in his family. His great grandfather had trouble in later life finding a horse strong enough to carry him. Banks's obesity developed gradually. It was complicated and doubtless increased by gout, which was also a family tradition and a common ailment in the 18th C. Gout is caused by a build-up of uric acid in the blood, which deposits itself as crystals in the joints and surrounding tissues; it can be excruciatingly painful – when you think of what Banks achieved, its magnitude is enhanced by the fact that much of it was managed while he was suffering acutely. Gout deprived Banks of the use of his legs from 1805 onwards – he had to be carried or wheeled to meetings in a chair.

You can see the progression in these pictures, despite the inevitable degree of flattery in them.¹

We also know that Banks was rich, but how rich? Cook had risen to a senior position in the Royal Navy, and captaining the *Endeavour* was an extremely responsible position. His salary in that demanding role was £90 p.a. Banks had an income of £6000 p.a. This also gives some indication of their difference in social status and the potential difficulties in their relationship on the *Endeavour*: Banks was immensely superior in a social sense - Cook would normally have deferred to him - but Cook was in charge of the ship. Delicate negotiation was sometimes necessary between them.

Where did Banks's money come from? As you know, he inherited it while he was still a minor. But where did the family wealth come from? The answer is that in 18th C terms it was relatively recent: it was mostly due to Banks's great grandfather, another Joseph Banks, who lived in the late 17th and early 18th centuries (1665-1727). This Banks was an attorney in Yorkshire who became very successful in the law and, who, in a period of economic expansion, was able to parlay that success into a number of important (and lucrative) public offices, into becoming agent to not one but several ducal estates, and into involvement in property speculation. He even had an interest in a coal mine. With the immense wealth he garnered, he did the usual thing: he purchased land, but, being very astute, he purchased land on the border of the Lincolnshire fens, which he rightly judged would

¹ As a young man Banks was a good swimmer and robust, as befits someone who had come through Eton, where one of the boys' favourite activities was brawling with the local navvies. Banks was interested in others' weight as well as his own: he kept lists of his friends' weight.

become increasingly valuable. That value was ultimately realised by his great grandson.

Was Banks an aristocrat? Only in the most general sense. He was not a peer or nobleman and therefore in the strict sense not an aristocrat. He was not entitled to sit in the House of Lords.² In 18th C social terms he was a gentleman i.e. a member of the gentry, in fact in the upper portion of the gentry. We understand a gentleman to be a person of superior character, in particular someone who shows exquisite sensitivity to the feelings of others. In the 18th C a gentleman was someone who owned a certain number of acres (1000++), which implied a certain income (say, £5000 p.a. or more) as well as a certain social standing. Remember that England was a small country in which land dominated the economy, the social system and government.

One thing I nearly always say to visitors is that Banks is called ‘the Father of Australian botany’. He has also been called ‘the Father of Australia’ and ‘the Father of Australian settlement’, titles which reflect a particular time in our past. Just after federation when the new nation was looking for uplifting or at least acceptable founding myths and yet was still deeply ashamed of its convict past, Banks and his association with science seemed to fit the bill. ‘Father of Australia’ was an appellation particularly promoted by J.H. Maiden of the RBGS. Nowadays, when we are less sensitive about our

² His father, grandfather and great grandfather had each been elected to the House of Commons. He declined this ambition just as he declined the standard Grand Tour of the Continent as a way of finishing his education. He considered himself non-political (i.e. in terms of parliamentary politics), but he could be effective when he thought the interests of the land were threatened.

penal past, there is less need for Banks in that role, just as the evidence for such a claim fails in some respects to satisfy modern standards of proof. We will come back to this phrase because there is still a grain of truth in it.

The term ‘Father of Australian botany’ deserves some comment. If Banks was a botanist, he was self-taught. As a schoolboy at Eton, he became interested in plants³ and paid women who collected for apothecaries 6d. for every piece of useful information they could supply to him. Almost the only book he was ever caught reading at Eton was his mother’s copy of an almanac of herbal medicine. At Oxford the Professor of Botany had not given a single lecture in more than thirty years of employment, so Banks imported a botanist, Israel Lyons⁴, from Cambridge at his own expense to give a series of lectures. When his mother moved to a house near the Chelsea Physick Garden,⁵ he spent a lot of time there. It was a pretty shaky

³ It happened suddenly, or so he later claimed. One evening he was swimming in a river nearby. When he got out, he found that the other boys had already left. He dressed and strolled back toward Eton at his own pace, along a path surrounded by flowers. It suddenly occurred to him how beautiful they were. He asked himself why he shouldn’t be learning about ‘these productions of Nature’ instead of Latin and Greek, at which he was very poor. He felt it was his duty to follow his father’s wish and study the classics but resolved to pursue botany in his own time. Re the classics, it was a common jibe at Oxford for his fellows to shout, ‘Here is Banks, but he knows nothing of Greek’. At a time when education was all about the classics, it was a damning criticism and no doubt added to Banks’s image then and later as a buffoon.

⁴ Lyons (1739-1775), considered a child prodigy in mathematics, was the son of a Jewish silversmith and, as a Jew, not permitted to become a member of Cambridge University. He was only offered the role after Cambridge academics declined it. Lyons was just four years older than Banks. Despite the immense difference in station, they became friends and remained so until Lyons’s untimely death at the age of 36. Through Banks Lyons got a position as astronomer on Constantine Phipps’s expedition to the North Pole in 1773. An example of Banks’s important role as a patron of natural scientists.

⁵ Banks was then an undergraduate of Christ Church, Oxford.

scientific education. And even though Banks appears to have filled most, if not all, of the gaps with his own reading and practical study, it is significant that he published very little - in fact, almost nothing - in the way of scientific papers.⁶

The title 'Father of Australian botany' derives not so much from Banks's role as a botanist as from his importance as a collector. His apprenticeship was served aboard a Royal Navy expedition to map Newfoundland and Labrador (1766). Here he learned about life aboard ship and he was introduced to the various disciplines of collecting – the skills of the observation of plants (and people) and the selection, recording and preservation of plants. There followed the voyage with Cook (1768-71)⁷ which made his name: he returned with 30,382 plant specimens across 3600 species, fourteen hundred of them previously unknown in Europe. The great Linnaeus described Banks's specimens as a 'matchless and truly astonishing collection, such as has never been seen before, nor may ever be again'. After that Banks did not do much more collecting himself – his only trip was to Iceland - but he was continually sending out agents to gather specimens from far-flung parts of the world like Australia. Those specimens

⁶ The tendency among older, adulatory scholars to present Banks as the outstanding botanist of his age has been abandoned by more recent, discriminating and sober scholars. However, he does seem to have possessed an impressive range of botanical knowledge. His main publications were two pamphlets on agricultural subjects, one on corn blight and the other on wool.

⁷ Banks's scientific equipment for the trip cost over £10,000, twice as much as the ship itself. In addition to Solander, artists, servants, dogs, and his guitar, he took boxes, barrels, an underwater telescope, special wax for storing seeds, and a library of natural history books. 'No people ever went to sea better fitted out for the purpose of Natural History', declared one observer. (Hay, p. 10.)

ended up in his own botanical collection, in the royal gardens at Kew (of which he was the effective head), or in other private collections.

It has been argued – persuasively, I think - that Banks was for his time a relatively new and discriminating type of collector. First, he only collected items that added to scientific knowledge – rather than, for example, collecting what he didn't already have.⁸ And then he specialised. Items outside his field of botany he gave away to museums and other collectors. In this he differed from the older virtuosi collectors who tried to gather across all or most fields, and so he pointed the way towards the future. He bequeathed his botany collection and his library to the British Museum, and when they went over to the Museum in 1827, they began – or at least foreshadowed and stimulated - a process of specialization there.

Is this then Banks's historical importance – as a collector? Nowadays we see another area of his life which was even more significant. If you consult a biographical dictionary on Banks, you will often read that he was a member of a great many scientific and cultural organisations – President of the Royal Society (Britain's and perhaps the world's premier scientific body) 1778-1820, founding and influential member of the Royal Horticultural Society, member of the board of the British Museum, member of the Boards of Longitude, the Mint, of Agriculture and the Royal Greenwich Observatory, and of other quasi-scientific governmental bodies and organisations. Hostile contemporaries described him as 'the autocrat of the philosophers'. In short, particularly from 1778-79 onwards, he forged a

⁸ Note that Banks's interests encompassed ethnology and archaeology as well as the whole range of natural history.

role for himself as a public man of science and more generally as a representative of the republic of learning in general, both national and international. When it came to British science Banks was for most of his later life the leading man, despite his lack of distinction in actually conducting and publishing his own scientific research.

Let me list some of the things he did in this role. His home at Soho Square in London is said to have been the hub of an international scientific empire (Fara, p. 57) – he had contacts everywhere, even overseas and even in wartime⁹. He was a noted patron of natural scientists, employing them himself or securing positions in government and elsewhere for them. It was through Banks and his work on the *Endeavour* that the Admiralty began routinely to include a naturalist on all its expeditions, which was how Charles Darwin came to sail on the *Beagle*. He persuaded the king to employ professional collectors for Kew. He transformed Kew from a royal pleasure park to the centre of an international agricultural exchange; he superintended a network of botanic gardens that ran from St Vincent in the Caribbean to Calcutta and Ceylon. He brought flax and spinach from New Zealand to Britain; he advocated the planting of tea in India and breadfruit in the West Indies; he sent wheat to Australia; all of which demonstrated how much his own interests focussed on *economic* botany and how botany could contribute to the greatness of the empire, a point he was not slow to make in the right

⁹ Banks was a man of close and enduring friendships and what we would call an assiduous networker. Few contemporaries were able to match him for useful contacts not just within Britain and the empire but across Europe and America. He is estimated to have written 100,000 letters in his lifetime, of which about 20,000 survive.

circles. Crucial to this remarkable role was his relationship with government, especially his closeness to George III.

Banks's role as a public man of science would be quite impossible today, but things were very different in the late 18th C. Then government had only three functions: to conduct foreign policy, wage war (when necessary), and maintain domestic order. These functions required only, by our standards, the most minimal of public services. There was no income tax. If the government had a problem in NSW, who was there to consult other than Banks? If the government had issues of a scientific or cultural kind, who was there to consult other than Banks? In both cases, the answer is, 'hardly anyone' and especially 'hardly anyone who was at hand and with whom ministers could converse easily as social equals'. For much of his life there was no Colonial Office to run the empire. At least Banks had been to Botany Bay. At least he had the scientific knowledge required for sensible advice on scientific questions or he could use his contacts to find out what ministers needed to know. So Banks was able to exercise a considerable (though largely undefined) influence over policy towards NSW and in this sense there was a grain of truth in the description of him as the 'Father of Australia'.¹⁰ As to the larger picture, all over Europe science was becoming much more important to governments. Banks personified that process in the UK. He has been called the founder of science policy in Britain.¹¹

¹⁰ With regard to NSW, Gascoigne tells us, Banks exerted his influence in favour of firm and effective government, economic self-sufficiency, and a thorough mapping of both its coastline and its resources.

¹¹ Banks raised the profile of science with government by a series of telling arguments, which, briefly, were that science added prestige to a country, assisted its claims to new regions, facilitated the exploitation of resources, and assisted trade. (See Richard Drayton's *Nature's Government* in the bibliography.)

However, attitudes were changing, as the controversies that swirled around Banks in his later life showed. In this process of change Banks was by no means an entirely obstructive figure. Banks *was* very much a man of his class and time. For example, he was a conscientious and improving landowner; he kept a close eye on Lincolnshire even when he was in London; and he womanised and drank as shamelessly as his fellows in this ‘Age of Scandal’ (T.H. White). Had he not shared most of the traditional attitudes and practices of his group, he could not have been so successful.

But he was also a man of his time in another sense. This was the age of the European Enlightenment. Newton died just sixteen years before Banks was born. Linnaeus, the great botanical systematiser, was a contemporary. Jeremy Bentham, the philosopher, jurist and author of the doctrine of utilitarianism, was another. All were dedicated to what at the time was a relatively new doctrine: that social, governmental, scientific and other arrangements should meet the test of reason, that institutions should serve some useful public purpose instead of being supported merely because they ‘were there’. So, without being a radical or a revolutionary, Banks continually sought improvement: science, he believed, should add to the well-being of mankind rather than be just a hobby for talented and wealthy individuals. And he wanted efficiency. Unlike Bentham, he was no democrat, but he did expect both science and government to work, and work effectively, for the benefit of the nation as a whole.

So, as John Gascoigne tells us, Banks was in some ways an anachronism: a man firmly rooted in the old order of patronage, personal contacts,

amateurism and sinecures who at the same time worked quietly and determinedly for the modernisation of government processes most obviously where these impinged on science but more generally as well. In his own way he too stood for professionalism and efficiency, just as his critics did.

So there is Banks: fat, rich, a gentleman not a peer, a collector more than a researching botanist, a public man of science and a transitional figure between pre-industrial and modern society.

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