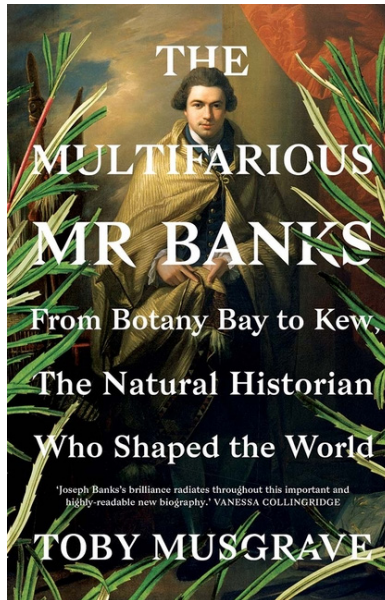


# The Multifarious Mr Banks

## From Botany Bay to Kew, The Natural Historian who Shaped the World

Toby Musgrave  
 Yale University Press. 2020  
 368 pages. Hardback. ISBN 978-0-300-22383-5  
 €27.50



A multiplicity of books has been written about Joseph Banks, most recently by Patrick O'Brien (1997), although for many years after his death he was all but ignored. Joseph Banks (1743-1820) was a botanist, explorer, President of the Royal Society and one of Australia's founding fathers. From an early age he pursued his passion for natural history through study and extensive travel. This year is the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death, so hence this new book by Dr. Toby Musgrave which reveals the extent of Banks's multifarious contributions to science. Musgrave is an authority on garden history and is the author of ten books including *The Plant Hunters*, *An Empire of Plants* and *The Head Gardeners*.

Joseph Banks introduced acacia, mimosa, eucalyptus and *Banksia*, a genus named after him, to Britain. *Banksia* is a genus of about 170 species of Australian wildflowers in the *Proteaceae* family. Almost 80 other species of plants were named after him

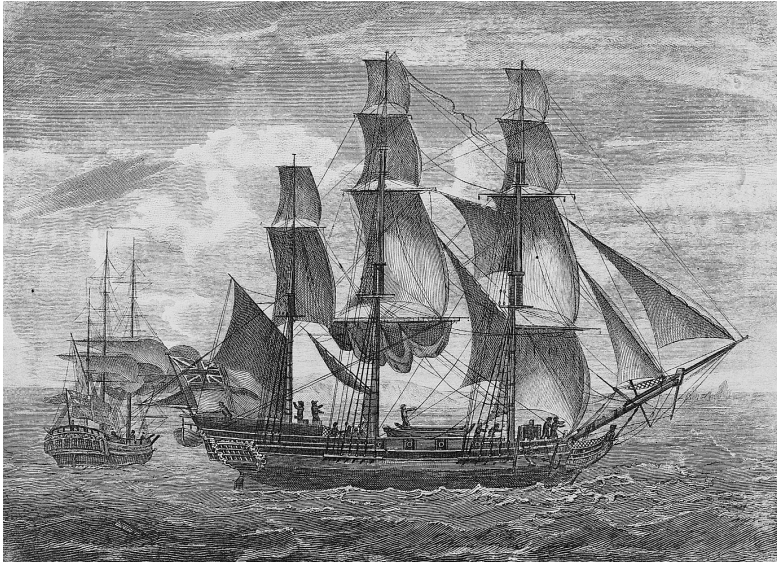
including Jack pine *Pinus banksiana* Lamb., which hybridises regularly with its close relative lodgepole pine.

The son of a wealthy Lincolnshire landowner, he was educated at Harrow and Eaton. These prestigious private schools specialised in the classics which he detested. However, he managed to matriculate at Oxford and this appears to have been the only exam he ever passed. While at Oxford, his income was £400 per annum which is equivalent to approximately €100,000 in today's money. At Oxford he again detested classical studies and paid a Cambridge lecturer to lecture on botany at Oxford. Like many of his social class, he left Oxford without a degree and proceeded to immerse himself in the natural sciences. His first voyage of discovery brought him west to Labrador and Newfoundland where he made many important discoveries.

His most famous voyage was to the South Pacific in 1768 aboard HMS *Endeavour* (Figure 1) which was led by Captain Cooke and lasted for three years. He was twenty-five years old at the time and led a research team of nine but, unfortunately, five of his team did not survive the voyage. The death toll on this ill-fated voyage was forty-one - three by drowning, three from TB, three from alcoholic poisoning, one from epilepsy and thirty one from malaria and typhoid. It was to be Banks's last long voyage as he had serious problems with sea-sickness. Surprisingly for such a long expedition, the HMS *Endeavour* was only 97 feet (30 metres) long and while remarkably strong and capacious it was flat-bottomed with a shallow draft, though this made it possible to sail close to shore in shallow waters and to be beached while loading or being repaired. Bank's only other voyage was to Iceland, although he arranged many plant hunting expeditions after that.

Banks kept a diary of the voyage to South America, Tahiti, New Zealand and the eastern coast of Australia, New Guinea and the Cape of Good Hope. He was alleged to have had an affair with the 'queen of Tahiti' and he jilted his fiancée on his return. However, he still found time to discover 1,400 new species and on their return to England the reception accorded to Banks's overshadowed that given to Cooke. Banks retained a keen interest in Australia and recommended that Botany Bay be the site of a penal settlement.

While stationed in Tahiti in 1769, during his quest for cheap, high-energy food for the unfortunate slaves in British colonies, Banks quickly saw the value of breadfruit, *Artocarpus altilis* (Parkinson) Fosberg, as a highly productive food source. This discovery prompted colonial administrators and plantation owners to call for the plant to be brought to the Caribbean. As president of the Royal Society, Banks provided a cash bounty and gold medal for success in this endeavour, and successfully lobbied his friends in government and the Admiralty for a British naval expedition. In 1787, William Bligh was appointed captain of HMS *Bounty* and ordered to set sail for the South Pacific to collect breadfruit plants; this voyage was interrupted by the infamous mutiny and the plants never arrived. In 1791, Bligh commanded a second expedition with HMS *Providence* and HMS *Assistant*, which collected seedless breadfruit plants in Tahiti and transported them to St. Helena in



**Figure 1:** *HMS Endeavour and Captain Cook setting out in 1764 on the voyage to the south Pacific. Image courtesy of the Wellcome Trust Library, London.*

the Atlantic, and St. Vincent and Jamaica in the West Indies. Although Bligh was awarded the Royal Society's Gold medal for his efforts, the introduction was not entirely successful as most of the slaves refused to eat the new food.

Banks many discoveries helped to make the Botanical Gardens at Kew a garden of international importance and he continued to send plant hunters to the colonies to collect plants. The work was not just altruistic, it was also driven by commerce since plants like tea and hemp were important from a commercial point of view. While Banks had no official position at Kew, he had huge influence because he was a close friend of King George III and was President of the Royal Society, a post he held for 41 years. Banks was so successful that by 1800 almost every ship sailing to Britain from the colonies carried plants destined for Kew. When the plants arrived, the gardeners raced to ensure that they were on public display ahead of any other European garden.

Banks was a savant, a dedicated improver in the true Enlightenment sense and a firm believer in the Baconian model of scientific discovery. David Attenborough described him as "the great panjandrum of British science" and who could be better placed to make such an assessment. Banks's date of birth has long been the subject of query and debate. This arose because he was born when Britain was using the old Julian Calendar which was replaced by the Gregorian Calendar in 1752, as the author remarks, in order to align Britain with the rest of Europe ...*a task which continues to this day, a cynic might add!*

*John Mc Loughlin.*