

## *Introduction*

In his will Joseph Banks decreed that ‘my body shall be interred in the most private manner in the Church’ and exhorted his family to remember that ‘I earnestly request that they will not erect any Monument to my Memory’.<sup>1</sup> Posterity has followed the spirit of these injunctions with inappropriate fidelity. For a man who once bestrode the wide world of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century British Empire like a colossus, monuments to his presence in the past are few. His name may have been scattered around the world’s geography and the botanical lexicon but for most he remains merely a name, since the historical record of the period on which he left such a deep imprint has little to say about his manifold activities. The image of Banks the long-lived President of the Royal Society, the *de facto* director of the Royal Gardens at Kew, the Privy Counsellor, the confidant of the king and the adviser to government on a whole host of scientific and imperial issues (including the addition of Australia to Britain’s imperial possessions), can generally only be fleetingly and fragmentarily discerned in the accounts of his age. It is ironic, for example, that a man who left such a documentary treasure trove should not have been the subject of a biography until 1911,<sup>2</sup> a work reluctantly accepted by Bodley Head, after drastic abridgement, following twelve rejections by other publishers, who were not persuaded that there was much public interest in Banks.<sup>3</sup> A fully-researched biography of Banks did not appear until 1988.<sup>4</sup>

A number of considerations help to explain why Banks has received such scant attention. In the first place, the sheer bulk of his papers deterred some of the early would-be biographers who might have been able to draw more fully on contemporary recollections of Banks. Secondly, some of his descendants regarded this carefully constructed and catalogued collection as little more than a source of spare cash, with the result that much

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of it was scattered about the globe and, in all too many cases, lost to scholarly scrutiny.<sup>5</sup> Together with such practical considerations the vagaries of historiographical fashion have played a role in consigning Banks to the shadows of the past. Though a scientific statesman of enormous significance, Banks's contribution to the store of published scientific disciplinary knowledge was slight. It was a point that the great Cuvier conceded in his *éloge* on Banks: that he published only a 'few sheets' and that 'their importance is not greatly superior to their extent'. However, Cuvier, who had experienced Banks's determination not to let Anglo-French hostility stand in the way of scientific progress, hastened to add that, despite such meagre publications, 'his name will shine with lustre in the history of the sciences'.<sup>6</sup> For Cuvier could recognise that science depends not only on its practitioners but also on its organisers and entrepreneurs—roles that Banks pioneered, shaping institutions and practices which were to become part of the established terrain of British science. Historians of science have been slower subsequently to acknowledge this and Banks has languished at the outer portals of the scientific pantheon because he added little to the scientific publications of his day. Moreover, historians of science, like historians generally, are naturally attracted to periods of dramatic change. Banks, however, embodied the old unreformed order, particularly in the world of scientific institutions. Studies of the Royal Society, then, have tended to bypass Banks, either by going back to the stirring beginnings of the Society in the late seventeenth century, or by focusing on the early nineteenth-century reformers for whom Banks and his institutional legacy represented what they regarded as being in need of change and revitalisation.

Banks, however, is too large an historical presence to be comfortably ignored. Of his many different activities his role in the foundation and maintenance of Australia as a European settlement has done most to keep his memory alive. In a nation in need of founding fathers Banks has rather intermittently played such a part. The most active promoter of Banks in such a role was J.H.Maiden, Government Botanist in New South Wales and Director of the Sydney Botanic Gardens from 1896 to 1924. The title of his book, *Sir Joseph Banks: The 'Father of Australia'* (1909), aptly conveys his conception of the role that Banks should play in Australia's historical consciousness. Thanks to Maiden's efforts, too, a memorial fund was established which, after many delays and misadventures, eventually produced two durable documentary monuments to Banks in the form of Beaglehole's authoritative edition of Banks's *Endeavour* journal and Carter's meticulous edition of Banks's sheep and wool correspondence. This fund was also among the sponsors of Lysaght's splendid edition of Banks's journal of his trip to Newfoundland and Labrador in 1766.

The persistence of the Banksian legacy in Australia and particularly in the Mitchell Library in Sydney (the repository of many of the Banks papers sold off by his descendants) helped to awaken the interest of Carter in Banks's work. His efforts, together with those of Dawson in compiling his monumental calendar of Banks's correspondence in British archives,

have done much to undo the prodigal scattering of Banks's papers. Thanks to such work, the full extent and wonder of Banks's multifarious activities have become more apparent, and it has become possible to follow the rich and detailed documentary trail left by Banks. With the documentary base thus established, the first task—which Carter has recently brought to a full and authoritative fruition—was to establish a biographical record of Banks's life. But the vast archive generated by Banks, and now being edited for publication in the British Museum of Natural History under Carter's direction, lends itself to many other uses. Banks was so much at the centre of the scientific, institutional and imperial concerns of his day that his voluminous correspondence provides a way of understanding not only Banks himself, but also the broader currents of his age. The aim of this study, then, is not to provide a biography of Banks—a task already completed by Carter—but rather to relate Banks and his circle to some of the major movements of the period. Thus only Chapter One, 'Joseph Banks: A Biographical Sketch', devotes itself explicitly to a short account of Banks's career and character in order to provide some background for the contextual studies that follow.

In the body of the work, the connecting fabric which is used to give shape and direction to Banks's bewildering array of activities is the Enlightenment in its English guise—subject to the limitations dictated by Banks's personality, social position and political concerns. For in England—in contrast to France—enlightened opinion was, at least until the dark shadow of the French Revolution passed over the land, generally seen as providing a defence for the constituted order in Church and State. For one such as Banks, anxious to promote the improvement of his country and of its empire through the rational use of the study of Nature, the currents of thought associated with enlightened opinion provided a way of understanding the world and society which gave scope to rational and improving goals without threatening the social order of which he, as a broad-acred gentleman, was a beneficiary. However, as Chapter Two, 'The Limits of Enlightenment', attempts to show, such enlightened sentiments could be in tension with other social imperatives such as the maintenance of hierarchy or the advancement of empire.

Chapters Three and Four explore the way in which the cultural ideal of the virtuoso collector—the origins of which stretch back to the Renaissance—fused with the Enlightenment belief that the study of Nature should form part of the polite culture of the age. As the title of Chapter Three, 'From Virtuoso to Botanist', suggests, however, the cultural ideal of the virtuoso did not readily lend itself to the specialisation and rigour of such emerging scientific disciplines as botany, a transformation encapsulated in Banks's own career. For, though Banks demanded both of himself and his scientific clients the attention to system and order which characterised the beginnings of botany as a scientific discipline, as distinct from the more generalised pursuit of natural history, he never entirely lost the breadth of interest and delight in collecting which were legacies of the culture of the virtuoso. Like the virtuoso, too, Banks naturally

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coupled together the study of the human settlement of an area with an investigation of its flora and fauna, an attitude of mind which helped to stimulate his interest in the infant discipline of anthropology—hence the title of Chapter Four, ‘From Antiquarian to Anthropologist’. His interest in anthropology also owed much to the Enlightenment’s quest to extend the study of Nature and Nature’s laws to human society and its laws. And the detailed observations of Banks and other Pacific explorers—including a number of Banks’s later protégés—was to do much to promote this quest for a ‘Science of Man’.

For Banks, as for the Enlightenment generally, science was above all applied science—a source of knowledge which could transform society for the benefit of humankind, lifting it above the bleak Hobbesian reality of life being ‘nasty, brutish and short’. Just as the French Encyclopedists enlisted science in the quest to achieve what their mentor, Francis Bacon, had termed ‘the relief of man’s estate’ so, too, Banks attempted, wherever possible, to apply science to the cause of increasing the yield and diversity of the earth and the products that could be derived from it, both within Britain and its Empire. The primacy of agriculture in this quest for what, in eighteenth-century Britain, was known as ‘improvement’ is reflected in the title of Chapter Five, ‘The Principles and Practice of Improvement’. For, as this chapter attempts to show, the faith in the possibilities of improvement was first nurtured by agriculture and then extended to manufacture and eventually to the improvement of society more generally.

The last chapter, ‘The Waning of the English Enlightenment’, aims to show how many of the familiar landmarks of Banks’s Enlightenment-tinctured cultural terrain were subject to increasing pressure around the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the first place, the annexation of enlightened rhetoric by many of the leaders of revolutionary opinion, both in France and elsewhere, shook the confidence of the English Establishment in the natural consonance between enlightened opinion and a defence of the established order in Church and State. Secondly, the growth of scientific specialisation challenged the way in which Banks conceived of science as being primarily a civilising and improving influence. Science might continue to serve such ends, but increasingly scientists were demanding that science’s own needs for disciplinary specialisation and detailed research for its own sake, rather than for some hoped-for direct application, should be addressed. Banks’s role in maintaining the Royal Society as a clubbable institution in which gentlemen of greatly varying scientific competence could learn and profit from the findings of their fellow members came under increasing attack. The Enlightenment view that science should be part of the polite culture of the age became harder to maintain in the face of increasing specialisation, while the belief that science was chiefly an agent for social improvement did not combine readily with a research ethic that pursued scientific truth as an end in itself. The death of Banks in 1820, then, symbolised the eclipse of many of the features of the enlightened culture of the eighteenth-century elite, which had helped to sustain and promote an interest in science and its

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diffusion but which was something of an obstacle in meeting the different scientific demands of the nineteenth century.

The theme of the Enlightenment and its limitations, therefore, provides a thread through much of the labyrinth of Banks's activities although there are many aspects of Banks's life and work which a book of this size has had to ignore. In particular, as Mackay has shown in his *In the Wake of Cook. Exploration, Science and Empire, 1780–1801* (1985), Banks did much to intertwine his scientific interests with the activities of government and, in particular, with its imperial policies—a field that this book barely touches on (though I hope to address it in a subsequent study). This role as a scientific adviser to the British State was a role well in keeping with the Enlightenment's confidence in the possibilities of rational government to reshape society to realise more fully the fruits of science and enlightened opinion.

## CHAPTER ONE

*Joseph Banks (1743–1820):  
A Biographical Sketch*

## PUBLIC LIFE

Like Francis Bacon, Banks's importance lies not in his own scientific contributions—which were few and slight—but rather in his ability to publicise the possibilities of science when linked with sympathetic patrons, particularly government. For, to Banks, science above all meant useful learning which could, as Bacon had put it, contribute to 'the relief of man's estate'. The origins of Banks's belief in the possibilities of science as an agent for improving the wealth of nations and the welfare of humankind more generally lie in the cultural ambience of his age and class rather than in the influence of any specific institution or individual—though the long-term influence of the Baconian tradition was doubtless an important, if imponderable, factor. Banks received little systematic scientific training at Harrow (1752–6), Eton (1756–60) and Christ Church, Oxford (1760–3), where he was educated in a manner fitting his social status as the heir to a considerable landed estate. However, these institutions exposed him to the values of a society where science, and rational discourse generally, were accorded respect as natural allies of the cause of true religion and sound government. Moreover, at Oxford particularly, Banks's wealth and status enabled him to pursue his own interests, including his early enthusiasm for natural history. In time-honoured fashion, too, these educational bastions of the Establishment laid the foundation for life-time friendships with men who would later open many useful doors, among them Lords Mulgrave and Auckland who greatly assisted Banks in his later endeavours to link science with the workings of government.

When Banks left Oxford in 1763 (his social position sparing him the tiresome necessity of having to take a degree), he could enter London



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society as a man of fortune in his own right since his father had died in 1761. Thus he succeeded to the Revesby estates which had been built up over the century by a line of Bankses who had an eye both to the possibilities of agricultural improvement and advantageous marriages. Banks carried on both traditions; his whole career, both in his capacity as a private landowner and as a scientific statesman, was characterised by zeal for the promotion of improvement and he had the prudence to marry an heiress, who brought with her an estate in Kent worth three thousand pounds a year. By 1807 it was said that he was worth fourteen thousand pounds a year, with eight thousand coming from the Revesby estate, three thousand from the Overton estate in Derbyshire (which he had inherited from his uncle, Robert Banks-Hodgkinson, in 1792) and three thousand from his wife's estate.<sup>1</sup> By the time of his death in 1820, his income had risen to around thirty thousand pounds per annum.<sup>2</sup> Thus had the Banks family, which had begun its rise with an earlier Joseph Banks (1665–1727), an attorney with a good eye to a profitable investment in land, ensconced itself in the landed oligarchy that largely determined the nation's affairs.

The young Banks's wealth enabled him to indulge his scientific interests and to establish the beginnings of his vast collection which eventually became the nucleus of the British Museum of Natural History. London society, with its many convivial clubs and opportunities for those with similar interests to gather together, helped to stimulate Banks's interests in science, antiquities and other learned pursuits. London also provided him with some of his scientific collaborators of whom far and away the most important was the genial Daniel Solander, whom Fanny Burney described in 1780 as being 'very sociable, full of talk, information, and entertainment . . . a philosophical gossip'.<sup>3</sup> This Swedish botanist greatly strengthened Banks's links with the system and methods of Linnaeus, Solander's teacher, and it was Banks's confidence that Linnaeus's system offered a guiding thread through the labyrinths of nature which helped to give his earlier investigations into natural history direction and focus. His youthful interests were also given a disciplined and systematic form through his experience as a scientific observer on board HMS *Niger* on its expedition to Newfoundland and Labrador in 1766, a voyage prompted by Britain's recent victory over the French in Canada. Banks's presence on board was made possible by his long-standing friendship with Constantine Phipps (later Lord Mulgrave) who served on board the *Niger* under its commander, Sir Thomas Adams.

The experience thus acquired was in turn to serve Banks well when he undertook his epochal voyage on board the *Endeavour* from 1768 to 1771—a voyage that catapulted him to prominence among natural historians both within Britain and in Europe more generally. The attention that the *Endeavour* voyage brought him also laid the foundation for his long friendship with George III, which was to do so much to enable Banks to incorporate his scientific projects into the fabric of government. Indeed, within two years of the return of the *Endeavour*, he was made virtual

director of the Royal Gardens at Kew—an institution which, under Banks, began its long career as a forcing-house for turning the fruits of botanical exploration to imperial advantage.

However, the adulation that Banks received in the wake of the *Endeavour* voyage, which in some ways exceeded that accorded to Cook himself, appears to have given him rather too high an estimate of his importance. For in 1772 he was to discover that the Royal Navy—always suspicious of civilian involvement—drew the line at his attempt to reshape the character of Cook's second great Pacific voyage in order better to accommodate the needs of himself and his large party. Hence the complaint of the Navy Board to the First Lord of the Admiralty that 'Mr Banks seems throughout to consider the Ships as fitted out wholly for his use; the whole undertaking to depend on him and his people; and himself as the Director and Conductor of the whole; for which he is not qualified and if granted to him would have been the greatest Disgrace that could be put on His Majesty's Naval Officers'.<sup>4</sup> And on this occasion the First Lord of the Admiralty, the Earl of Sandwich, who had done so much to facilitate Banks's inclusion on the *Endeavour* voyage, sided with the Navy.

After withdrawing from the *Resolution* voyage in high dudgeon, Banks occupied the second half of 1772 with an expedition to Iceland. The trip was occasioned both by his desire to provide employment for his followers who had loyally stood by him during the *Resolution* fiasco, and by a wish to explore an island which (as he himself put it) 'had been visited but seldom & never at all by any good naturalist to my knowledge'.<sup>5</sup> It was a voyage that laid the foundation for Banks's continuing interest in the affairs of that island, which ultimately bore fruit in his successful intervention with government during the Napoleonic War to remove the naval blockade of the island (a dependency of Denmark which was allied to France), which threatened to result in the mass starvation of the Icelandic people. The voyage to Iceland was, however, a poor substitute for the great Pacific voyage which Banks had to forgo because of his lack of diplomacy in dealing with the Navy. His journal of the voyage reflects something of this disappointment with the last entry listlessly recording 'Idle Tird resolve to go away fair or foul'.<sup>6</sup> And, despite various plans that Banks entertained for other scientific voyages, the Iceland voyage was to prove his last. It was, indeed, his last trip outside England apart from a brief visit to Holland in the following year.

The three overseas voyages—to Newfoundland, to the Pacific and to Iceland—together with a number of excursions within Britain, ensured for Banks a position as one of the country's foremost naturalists. The hoped-for scientific publications from these voyages, and above all from the *Endeavour* voyage, did not materialise in Banks's lifetime, though the riches he had accumulated were available to the scientific world in his home-cum-research institute at Soho Square. The voyages also created a tradition of linking scientific research with naval exploration which Banks did much to perpetuate—thus laying the groundwork for such



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nineteenth-century expeditions as the *Beagle*, the *Rattlesnake* and the *Commander*. More and more, however, the hitherto itinerant Banks redirected the focus of his scientific energies away from collecting in the field to promoting the public uses of science.

The most obvious institution for such ends was the Royal Society of which Banks had become a fellow in 1766 having earned his early scientific spurs with the voyage to Newfoundland. After his return from Iceland in 1772 Banks devoted himself more actively to the affairs of the Society, becoming a member of the Council in 1774. When Sir John Pringle resigned as President in 1778 Banks was a natural successor, largely because of his good relations with the king, with whom his predecessor had clashed politically in the heated atmosphere generated by the war with the American colonies.<sup>7</sup> During the election there were some indications of the split between the followers of the natural and the physical sciences which was to mar Banks's early presidency, for Pringle made it apparent that he favoured Alexander Aubert, governor of the London Assurance Company and a keen astronomer, as his successor.<sup>8</sup> However, in the absence of a suitable nobleman Banks was, as the naturalist, the Reverend Sir John Cullum, put it, 'elected unanimously to appearance by 220 votes'.<sup>9</sup> Along with his election as President another indication that Banks's travelling days were behind him was that in the following year finally, at the age of thirty-six, he bowed to social convention by marrying a suitably broad-acred bride.

Banks's position as President of the Royal Society was the hub around which his other public functions revolved and it gave him a distinction which lifted him out of the ranks of other country squires to the position of a confidant of the king and his ministers. Accordingly its duties received the first claim among Banks's multifarious activities: despite the gout that blighted his later life Banks presided at 417 of the 450 Council meetings held while he was in office.<sup>10</sup> But, although he was to be the Society's longest-serving president, he faced much opposition in the years soon after he took up office.

Such opposition derived from a number of sources. Firstly, Banks was young and therefore, no doubt, in the eyes of his opponents inexperienced—whereas previous presidents had usually been aged between forty-five and sixty-five, Banks was a mere thirty-five when he was elected.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, and more significantly, he was a naturalist in a Society the presiding deity of which was Newton, the greatest of mathematical scientists. Moreover, Banks had published nothing at the time of his election and added little to the *Philosophical Transactions* or, indeed, any other scientific journal thereafter. Such considerations had not prevented his election by an overwhelming margin but they exacerbated the ill-feeling generated by his early attempts to exert his authority over the Society and its affairs. In particular, Banks incurred the enmity of the existing office-holders when he attempted to curb their authority and to reshape the Society's

administration. The Secretaries, for example, had hitherto enjoyed the right to nominate new fellows with the expectation that they would be elected unopposed—Banks, however, let it be known that any such candidates he considered unsuitable would be opposed.<sup>12</sup> It was later alleged, too, that Banks judged candidates not only on their scientific worth but also on their social standing, and that some candidates nominated for their abilities in the mathematical sciences were rejected because they were of humble birth. Since its foundation the Royal Society had been at pains to seek the support of well-born patrons who could provide it with both financial and political support and Banks appears to have seen himself as carrying on this tradition. Thus Kippis, in his *Observations on the Late Contests in the Royal Society* (1784), described the Society as consisting of three categories: ‘the real philosophers’, ‘the men of general literature’ and ‘the nobility, and gentlemen of rank and fortune’. Writing of this last group, Kippis defended their ‘numerous introduction . . . into the Society’ under Banks on the grounds that ‘They give as well as receive honour; and their contributions serve to carry on the valuable purposes of the Society. They stand forth as the patrons of philosophical knowledge, and have means of promoting it, which do not fall to the lot of common individuals’.<sup>13</sup>

These underlying tensions began to surface in 1783 as Banks became more assertive in his dealings with the Society’s Secretaries, Paul Maty and Joseph Planta, and also its Foreign Secretary (or, as the office was then officially termed, the Assistant to the Secretaries), Charles Hutton.<sup>14</sup> In April 1783 Banks’s attempt to persuade Planta, Secretary of the Society, of the need to revise the rules governing publication of papers presented to the Society resulted in an acrimonious exchange. This culminated in Banks’s refusal to enter into any more correspondence with Planta, leaving it to the Council to ‘answer the charge of arbitrary injustice’.<sup>15</sup> As a Secretary to the Society since 1776 and Assistant Librarian at the British Museum since 1773, Planta was not without allies. By September Blagden, who was to act as Banks’s eyes and ears in the Royal Society disputes of 1783–4, reported to Banks ‘that Mr. Planta has been going about this summer among his friends, especially of the Society, complaining of the ill treatment he received from you & the Council, & shewing his correspondence with you as a proof’.<sup>16</sup>

Banks, however, was not to be deterred in his quest to reform the Society’s internal administration, his next target being the office of Foreign Secretary which, since January 1779, had been filled by Dr Charles Hutton, Professor of Mathematics at the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich. Banks’s discontent with Hutton had been evident as early as January 1782 when the Council established a committee ‘to determine accurately the duties of the Foreign Secretary’ on the grounds that it had ‘been represented to the Council that the Foreign Correspondence was not carried on with sufficient punctuality’. Hutton swallowed his pride sufficiently to accept the recommendations of the committee when it reported in April 1782 but plainly Banks and the Council were determined