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Keep him as a curiosity

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The Multifarious Mr Banks: From Botany Bay to Kew, the Natural Historian Who Shaped the World
by Toby Musgrave.
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Joseph Banks owed his fortune to land and his celebrity to the sea. Born in 1743 to a wealthy landowning family, he was sketchily educated at Harrow, Eton and Oxford. His father died when he was 18, and he came into his inheritance three years later, living for the rest of his life off the rents from large estates in the Lincolnshire fens, Derbyshire and Staffordshire. Banks had about £6000 a year when he started out, and, through aggressive fen-draining, enclosure, improvements in sheep husbandry, and a prudential marriage in 1779 to an heiress with holdings in Kent, was worth £30,000 per annum at his death in 1820. That made him one of the richest men in England; he could do what he liked; and what he liked to do was to travel and collect.

The usual late 18th-century itinerary for polite travelling and collecting was the Grand Tour, but the young Banks had a different idea. ('Every blockhead does that,' he said. 'My grand tour shall be one round the whole globe.') At Eton, he had discovered a love of botany (as one does). He followed Linnaeus's new programme of systematic classification; and he looked for ways to spend a lot of time exploring and collecting plants. Around 1766, an opportunity presented itself that would allow Banks to combine heroic natural history with the most unusual and grandest of all tours. The Royal Society was lobbying the Admiralty to send a ship to reach the South Seas in 1769, in order to observe the Transit of Venus, the passage of the planet across the face of the Sun. Competent observation of this event would enable accurate determination of the distance between the Earth and the Sun, and of the size of the solar system. There would not be another Transit of Venus until 1874. The navy agreed that the voyage would be worthwhile (the measurements would help with map-making), and it emerged that there was a secret government plan to find out whether the long-speculated Terra Australis Incognita – the great undiscovered Southern continent – really existed; if it did, to take possession in the name of King George III; and if it didn't, to plant the flag on

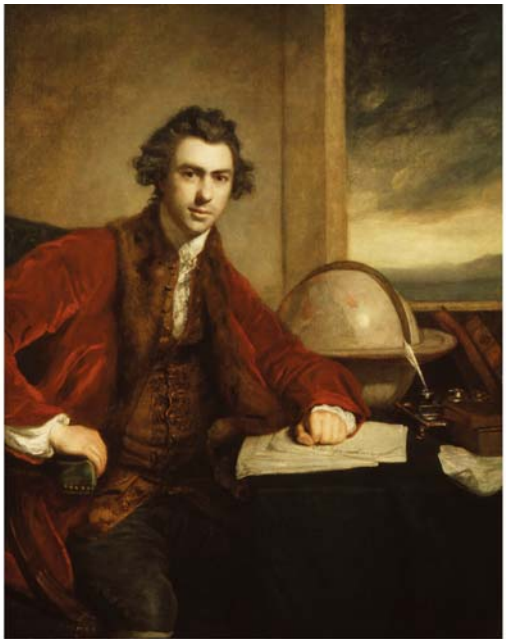
whatever still unknown lands were encountered in the circumnavigation.

The Royal Society would organise the astronomy, securing a grant from the king to pay for it; the navy would be responsible for the ship, commander, crew, stores and victualling. The vessel was the bark *Endeavour*; the commander was the bluff, 39-year-old Yorkshireman James Cook, who was also an able astronomer. No one had thought to add natural history to the workload, but Banks got wind of the plan and thrust himself forward. He secured his place on the *Endeavour* by pulling strings – Lord Sandwich, a former first lord of the Admiralty, was a friend, a fishing companion and Fenlands neighbour – and by spreading money about. Banks's personal paid-for entourage for the voyage included the talented Swedish botanist Daniel Solander; a Finnish draughtsman and cataloguer; two artists (to make drawings and paintings of specimens and landscapes); and four servants from his Lincolnshire estate (two of them black). His luggage included a pair of greyhounds, a dog and a bitch called Lady (for hunting); a skiff (for netting marine specimens); a vast quantity of paper (for dried plants); glass cases, boxes and bottles; high-end optical instruments; fishing nets and tackle; a small arsenal of pistols, rifles, shotguns and ammunition (for sport and science); and supplementary food and drink up to gentlemanly standards – beer, porter, wine, apple pies, an excellent Cheshire cheese. The sum Banks laid out for salaries, supplies and kit was enormous – perhaps between £6000 and £10,000 – about £2 million in current money. He always travelled in style. On a later – and much shorter – jaunt to Iceland, Banks assembled a team of 17, including three liveried servants, a Malay he had brought back from the *Endeavour* voyage, a gardener, a French chef and two French horn players. A new set of Wedgwood Queen's Ware china was packed for onshore entertainment.

During the three years of the *Endeavour*'s voyage, planting the flag and tagging the plants co-existed. The Transit of Venus was observed in Tahiti on 3 June 1769. The mathematically challenged Banks had little part in the observation, though an engraving produced later was captioned: 'Mr Banks shows the Indians the Planet Venus on the Sun.' Islands west of Tahiti were mapped and claimed for the Crown; later, Aotearoa ('New Zealand' to the pakeha) and the east coast of Australia were added to the imperial inventory (the naming of 'Botany Bay' indexed the joined-up enterprises of natural history and empire-building). The tropical botanising was everything Banks had hoped for. He returned to London with a haul of more than thirty thousand plant specimens, many then unknown to European science, and a thousand – less successfully preserved – fish, birds, molluscs, insects and other animals. What later came to be called ethnographic materials were also haphazardly collected: cartloads of cloaks, weapons, utensils and assorted 'rarities', picked up all along the way from Tierra del Fuego to the Indian Ocean.

There was very often a scientific purpose to the collecting – it's always good to find new species – but there is no missing the sheer delight Banks took in going about it. Banksian collecting involved tramping, climbing, shooting and fishing. He was a plant *hunter* as much as he was a collector. Later in life, Banks would get fat and gouty, but in his twenties he was a fit and active sportsman. He also collected people. Departing Tahiti, he took onboard the Tahitian Tupaia and his young companion Tayeto. Tupaia was a highly skilled open-sea

navigator, an invaluable Polynesian go-between, and the kind of man whom Banks recognised as the local version of a gent – 'certainly a most proper man, well born'. Cook didn't want him on board, but Banks decided to take him at his own expense. 'Thank Heaven,' Banks wrote in his journal, 'I have a sufficiency, and I do not know why I may not keep him as a curiosity as well as my neighbours do lions and tygers at a larger expence than he will ever probably put me to.' In the event, his Tahitian curiosities didn't make it back to Britain; they both died of malaria in the East Indies.



Portrait of Joseph Banks by Joshua Reynolds (1773)

In 1774 another British voyage to the South Seas returned with a striking Ra'iātean called Mai (known to the English as 'Omai'). Banks introduced him to London society, and he soon became a must-see metropolitan attraction. Joshua Reynolds painted his portrait and William Parry did an ensemble piece of Mai, Solander and Banks. Mai met the king, Dr Johnson and Fanny Burney; a play about him was performed at the Theatre Royal; he learned to play chess and backgammon, and many agreed with Mrs Thrale's comment about the 'savage's good breeding'. Banks delighted in showing him off: an aristocratic friend commented that Banks seemed 'to keep him as an object of curiosity, to observe the workings of an untutored, unenlightened mind'. Mai indicated that he would like to learn to write, but Banks made no effort to oblige him. After Mai returned home, Banks carefully reclaimed his hospitality costs from the government: £317 11s 11½d.

When Banks returned to London in 1771, he was a very great celebrity. He had been around the world and brought much of it home, where you could ask permission to see it at his house in Soho Square. Within months of his return, his uncle commissioned two fine portraits. The American expat Benjamin West painted him wearing a splendid Māori flax cloak, standing among a striking assortment of South Sea trophies, and his friend Joshua Reynolds underlined the point by posing the romantically unwigged young Banks with a globe and a

seascape in the distant background. His left hand rests on a pile of letters, the uppermost bearing an inscription from Horace: 'Cras Ingens Iterabimus Aequor' ('Tomorrow we'll sail the vasty deep once more'). Everybody wanted to meet Banks; everybody wanted to see the spoils of his voyage. He had been elected to the Royal Society even before the *Endeavour* voyage and now he was admitted to its inner circles. There were sparkling dinner parties; he became a member of the taste-defining Society of Dilettanti and the Society of Antiquaries; and he was presented to the king, soon becoming a royal favourite and trusted adviser to the agriculturally obsessed 'Farmer George'.

Banks came back a cad as well as a hero. Botany in the Linnaean mode was already considered a louche science in the late 18th century – all that unwholesome prying into the sex lives of plants – and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* announced that 'obscenity is the very basis of the Linnaean system.' London satirists drew cartoons of Banks as a foppishly affected 'Botanic Macaroni' and as 'The Fly Catching Macaroni', while Gillray produced 'The Great South Sea Caterpillar, Transform'd Into a Bath Butterfly'. But Banks brought a special frisson to the figure of the botanising voyager. There was talk in London about the obligingness of Tahitian women and about Banks's sporting ways, which his *Journal* did little to deny, bragging that 'he had tasted Womans flesh in almost every part of the Known habitable World.' Later, he reported that in Tahiti 'Love is the chief occupation' and that 'Both the bodies and souls of the women are moulded in the utmost perfection for that soft science.' London wits responded with ribald satire. One series spoofed his presumed relationship with the queen of Tahiti – though his *Journal* insisted that he much preferred her younger companion – and the anonymous poem 'Mimosa', dedicated to Banks, played on the idea of his 'sensitive plant', growing in stature in tropical conditions: 'The plains of *Otaheité* … rear this *plant* to an amazing height':

> Food of the plant, you doubtless know
> The *land* wherein they thrive, and grow
> To exquisite perfection:
> O say, in what dear clime they bear,
> By nature blest, the greatest share
> Of *Essence*, and *Erection*.

The historical career of the notion of the natural-living, free-loving, noble savage passes through Tahiti, from Rousseau by way of Banks and the besotted crew of HMS *Bounty* to Paul Gauguin.

And there were much gossiped about passages of dodgy behaviour on home soil. Departing on the voyage to the South Seas, Banks left behind a young lady, Harriet Blosset, so convinced he had made a promise to marry that she spent three years knitting waistcoats for him. On his return, Banks did not hurry to see her and, her family inquiring what was up, explained that he didn't feel quite ready for marriage. He apparently settled on the unhappy Blossets a sum rumoured to be about £5000 – plus reimbursement for waistcoat materials. The bad behaviour persisted. Before his marriage to the heiress, there was at least one long-term

mistress, an unacknowledged child, and a string of casual engagements with prostitutes patronised by other members of the libertine Hellfire Club. In 1776, David Hume reported that Banks and Sandwich had gone fishing, joined by 'two or three Ladies of pleasure'. Everybody knew this sort of thing about Banks, and there's no evidence that he much minded the satires or that they did him any damage. Wealth has its privileges.

Banks was chronically seasick, but he was keen nonetheless on a repeat performance, lobbying to join Cook's second expedition to the South Seas in 1772. Full of himself, he pushed hard for upgraded accommodations, an even larger entourage and bulkier baggage. This time, he pushed too hard: the Admiralty baulked, and Cook left without him, stopping at Madeira to pick up a travelling companion Banks had arranged to meet there. The companion – identified as a 'Mr Burnett' – was surprised that Banks wasn't onboard, and Cook too was surprised, straightfacedly judging that 'Every part of Mr Burnett's behaviour and every action tended to prove that he was a Woman' – as it happened, one of Banks's mistresses, who then had to beat a retreat back to England. Apart from a hastily arranged expedition to Iceland and a trip to the Netherlands, Banks remained on land for the rest of his life.

THE PERIOD immediately following his return from the circumnavigation was the great inflection point of Banks's career. Toby Musgrave, in his new biography, marks that point by telling the story differently before and after. From Banks's birth to his return on the *Endeavour*, the mode is chronological and the manner is heroic narrative. Afterwards, the story is thematically organised – accounts of the various projects in which 'the multifarious Mr Banks' was involved and the institutions with which he was associated until his death in 1820. That seems about right. Banks was 29 years old when he left off voyaging, and the rest of his life was something very different from what it had been.

Banks's life and works have been well documented. (Musgrave says that he is 'a curiously neglected figure in his native country', but that's not quite true.) There was a thorough biography in 1988 by the scientist Harold Carter; Patrick O'Brian's Life, published a year earlier, was a well-researched and ripping yarn, as you'd expect from the author of the 'Aubrey/Maturin' *romans fleuves*, in which a character based on Banks appears; two excellent accounts from the 1990s by the historian John Gascoigne situated Banks in the context of the English Enlightenment and the empire; Neil Chambers in 2007 contextualised Banks in the history of collecting; Patricia Fara has a rollicking go at Banks as an exploitative imperialist in *Sex, Botany and Empire* (2003); Banks gets a chapter to himself in Richard Holmes's much praised *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (2008); and there is another shelf-full of standard biographies and popular treatments going back to the 19th century. As well as biography, there are accounts of Banks's expeditions, his administrative and institution-building roles, his activities as an improving landowner and as a Crown servant.

The Australians have kept Banks (and Cook) close to the centre of their historical sensibilities. If history had taken a slightly different turn, the Lucky Country (and not just the plant genus) could have been known as 'Banksia' – a suggestion seriously made by Linnaeus's

son. There has been a Royal Society conference devoted to him, and recently he has been a focus of wide-ranging academic discussions about the importance of writing the history of globalised science, of exchange relationships, and of the development of connections between science, commerce and statecraft. The many followers of Bruno Latour recruit him to illustrate the notions of 'cycles of accumulation', 'centres of calculation', the global circulation of 'immutable mobiles' – maps, charts, paper representations of plants and animals – and the extension of power by collapsing the distant world to the dimensions of a table-top.

Musgrave comes to Banks from a background in garden design and garden history, and his book's centre of gravity is Banks's role in plant collection, exchange and transplantation. What *The Multifarious Mr Banks* lacks in pizzazz and historiographic ambition it makes up for in detail, enthusiastic admiration of its subject and commitment to repairing a calumny-damaged reputation. It relates exactly how many species Banks collected at each point in his travels and from those whose travels he later sponsored, how many of these were hitherto unknown, how many proved to be 'type specimens', how much Banks laid out (to the shilling) in supporting his network of plant hunters, the – actually, quite fascinating – techniques he devised for getting potted plants from one end of the Earth to another, and, despite his best efforts, how frustratingly often everything was lost. (Moving paper representations around the world was hard; moving seeds and, especially, living plants was infinitely harder. Even bringing back dried plant specimens wasn't easy: Banks and Solander brought along bulk quantities of printers' waste proofs of Addison's *Notes on 'Paradise Lost'*, preserving plant samples between its loosely bound pages.)

Against the charge that Banks had unpleasant racial views, Musgrave offers a range of defences: Banks had, on the whole, sympathetic relations with native people (he was fascinated by tattooing and almost certainly got himself tattooed on Tahiti); he was, Musgrave says, a sympathetic 'ethnographer', who gave a 'detailed anthropological account' of Polynesians; the occasional shootings of Tahitians, Māori and Australian aboriginal people were the result of 'misunderstandings' and 'cultural differences', unfortunate accidents, some of which the diplomatic Banks tried to prevent; when he himself was compelled to use 'lethal force' against the natives, he felt bad about it, being 'a compassionate man with a strong moral conscience'; the reason for his commitment to colonisation was basically 'philanthropic'; and the disastrous effects of contact between Europeans and native people – about which Musgrave has only the barest minimum to say – are, in the event, not to be held against any individual.

In some of these defences, Musgrave has a point: there's little reason to think that Banks was worse, in certain respects, than the European average. Some of the others, however, are a stretch. In pressing hard for penal settlements in Australia, he claimed that the land was 'thinly peopled' by an 'extremely cowardly' population of a 'timid Disposition'; their interests and concerns were not elsewhere considered. Musgrave concedes that Banks's remark about keeping Tupaia as a pet and 'curiosity' was 'crass', 'culturally insensitive' and (as we now say) 'inappropriate', but adds that this was just the way many 'upper-class British males' then

thought about 'a remote island culture'. Banks evidently believed that slavery was a bad idea, but the arguments against it did not rest, he insisted, on moral or religious principles, 'which are in my opinion incapable of being maintaind in argument, but on Commercial ones which weigh equaly in moral & in immoral minds'. Slavery would eventually die a natural death on economic grounds, though Banks reckoned that it persisted because black people were 'endowed with a much less proportion of mental vigor than the whites'; they would work only when coerced; and, anyway, a slave well treated is happier than a free person with a 'choice only of bad masters or none'.

'When at sea, sail; when on land, settle,' the proverb has it, but, his travels finished, what would Banks settle down to do? He would arrange and house his collections; he would preside over the London residence where the objects now lived and manage access to them; he would correspond extensively with interested parties, sometimes writing fifty letters a day; he would improve his Lincolnshire estates and increase the rents; and he would marry someone suitable. But along the way, he would figure out how to turn his networks, and his financial and material assets, into a way of life that spanned the globe, that built and expanded imperial power.

Banks's London life and his global reach were shaped by the metropolitan institutions he influenced or controlled. After his return from the South Seas, and then Iceland in 1773, Banks said that 'I livd in no particular station till … I was elected President of the Royal Society.' He had made known his interest in the position; he secured it in 1778, aged just 35; and he ruled for the next 42 years – the longest serving president ever. 'Banks was not a leading scientist,' Musgrave writes; indeed, you could say that he was not a 'scientist' at all. He knew a lot about plants and animals, but he published little; his much awaited *Florilegium* – a picture book of plants collected on the *Endeavour* expedition – was continually promised and continually put off, the British Museum producing a complete edition only in 1990 (an affordable selection appeared in 2017). Musgrave gently scolds Banks for his 'deplorable failure' to complete botanical projects and to publish results. He never wrote anything in the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions*, but the fellows knew what they were doing when they elected him. A French flatterer said that Banks was an academy all by himself, but the relevant point isn't how much knowledge Banks had but how many knowledgeable people he knew and knew how to recruit. He was a great fixer, an enabler, a patron, a networker, an organiser and an administrator.

His *Endeavour* celebrity was cash in the bank for that career; he was in correspondence with a worldwide web of naturalists; he was generous with his own funds; and he was extremely well connected at court. (Banks successfully lobbied for a baronetcy after securing the Royal Society presidency; in 1795, the king insisted that he become a knight of the Order of the Bath, the red sash of which he delighted in wearing when taking the Royal Society chair; and in 1797, he entered the inner circle of Crown advisers as a privy councillor.) He left behind a trail of acrimony over his despotic tendencies, and resentment from physicists and mathematicians about undue influence by amateurs, mediocrities, utilitarians and 'Macaronis'. But his regime effected long-lasting ties binding all sorts of science to state

power. When he died, an obituary observed that Banks had given 'science a home in the courts of greatness'.

Banks exchanged youthful adventure for project management, a life of excitement for one of worldwide consequence. The big project was mercantilist imperialism. A species of economic importance was discovered in one part of the world, then brought back to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, the powerplant at the centre of a growing network of colonial botanic gardens, of which Banks was the de facto director. If an exotic plant could thrive in Britain, that was good, but if it couldn't, the plant might be moved to other parts of the far-flung empire and its products imported to the home islands. Botany would do as much as any other science to make Britain Great. New Zealand flax could become a source of naval cordage and Australasian timber could be turned into naval masts; grapevines and citrus trees could be moved from Europe to New South Wales, making the colony self-sufficient or even a source of supply for Britain; seeds from Peruvian cinchona trees could be grown in British India to ensure a steady supply of quinine, with which to fight malaria. Banks thought up one of the earliest British plots to steal tea plants, and abduct skilled tea-workers, from China and ship them to British Assam where an imperial tea industry could be started up and the drain of silver from the Exchequer to China plugged.

The most celebrated instance of Banksian imperial botany was the large-scale transfer of Tahitian breadfruit trees to the West Indies, there to feed plantation slaves more efficiently and at lower cost than the plantain and yam diet they were used to. Captain Bligh sailed off to Tahiti in the *Bounty*, where the crew were predictably enchanted and yearned to stay on. Bligh heroically survived the mutiny, but the breadfruit trees – thrown overboard – did not. Undeterred, Banks pressed for a second expedition and the Tahitian trees were successfully delivered to Jamaica and St Vincent, where they flourished – though the slaves found the taste unpleasant.

Some of Banks's projects to change political and economic realities by moving living things around the world were striking successes. He arranged for the theft of fine-wool Merino sheep from Spain: the result transformed Britain's flock and laid the foundations for the huge Australian sheep industry. Other projects bore fruit only after his death, and some never came to anything. But the intentions became institutions of scientific statecraft and the global transfer of living things did indeed 'shape the world'. A friend once flattered Banks: 'Wide as the world is, traces of you are to be found in every corner of it.' Some of those traces are Banks-branded places, geographical features, plants – towns in Australia, islands in the South Pacific and Canada, mountains, headlands, peninsulas, bodies of water, 173 species of the *Banksia* genus, which once grew only in Australia but are now in domestic gardens all over the world, and the 'Big Bad Banksia Men' of May Gibbs's children's books, which have infiltrated the ids of generations of Australians. Global Banks marks the extent of once global Britain. The man himself lies in an unmarked grave – which he requested – in a church under the flight path to Heathrow. And the definitive Chantrey-sculpted statue stands in the Natural History Museum in South Kensington – where it belongs, and where it's safe.