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Sir Joseph Banks

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SIR JOSEPH BANKS • BOTANIST - EXPLORER - ADMINISTRATOR

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Sir Joseph Banks was born into wealth that he would inherit at an early age. This allowed him to pursue his interests in botany and exploration. He was the botanist on Captain James Cook's first voyage around the world. He became a confidant of George III, served as the unofficial director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, and was a dominant figure in the scientific establishment of England. He was the President of the Royal Society for many years. He was a skilled diplomat who strengthened the bonds between science, trade, and his government. He was also the target of criticism for his administrative style and his personal habits, including his extravagant dress.

T I M E L I N E

- 1743 Born in London to William Banks and Sarah Bate (24 February)
- 1752 Enters Harrow
- 1756 Enrolls at Eton
- 1760 Enrolls as gentleman-commoner at Oxford; hires Cambridge tutor in botany
- 1761 Father dies, leaving him an enormous estate
- 1764 Leaves Oxford without a degree
- 1766 Elected to the Royal Society
- 1766 Explores Newfoundland and Labrador aboard H. M. S. Niger; collects 340 plants
- 1768 Begins exploration with Captain Cook on the Endeavour (26 August)
- 1768 Endeavour crosses the equator (25 October)
- 1768 Arrives at Rio de Janeiro (13 November)
- 1768 First port of call at Madeira; collects 700 plants
- 1769 Arrives in Tahiti (13 April)
- 1769 Arrives in New Zealand
- 1769 Endeavour departs Tahiti (9 August)
- 1769 Endeavour arrives at Tierra del Fuego (11 January)
- 1769 Banks & Solander go ashore
- 1770 Landfall on the eastern coast of New Holland (Australia) at a site Cook would name Botany Bay
- 1771 Sydney Parkinson, artist and friend, die (26 January)
- 1771 Endeavour returns to London (13 July)
- 1771 Begins work on his *Florilegium* by having 738 copper plates made from Parkinson's watercolors
- 1771 Banks and the Earl of Sandwich tell James Cook of his promotion to Commander
- 1772 Explores Iceland and Hebrides, his last botanical exploration
- 1772 Lampooned as "Botanic Macaroni" in a cartoon by Matthew Darly
- 1773 Plan to go on Cook's second voyage rejected by the Admiralty; too grandiose
- 1773 Elected foreign member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences
- 1773 Appointed acting unofficial director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew by George III
- 1774 Presents Omai, a Tahitian man, to George III at Kew
- 1773 Tours Holland (12 February to 22 March)
- 1774 Becomes member of the Dilettante Society
- 1778 Becomes President of the Royal Society and remains in that position until his death
- 1778 Marries Dorothea Hugesson
- 1778 Makes an unsuccessful offer to buy the Linnean collection and library from Linnaeus' widow
- 1779 Leases Spring Grove, a 34 acre estate that he will convert into a botanical garden
- 1779 Recommends to the House of Commons that Botany Bay be the site of a penal colony
- 1780 Oversees the move of the Royal Society's office to Somerset House on The Strand
- 1781 Becomes a baronet; still a commoner but allowed to use the prefix "Sir"
- 1787 Appoints William Bligh to command the *Bounty* to transplant breadfruit to the Caribbean

- 1787 Suffers his first disabling attack of gout
- 1788 Elected Honorary Foreign member of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences
- 1788 Founding member of the Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa
- 1794 Becomes High Sheriff of Lincolnshire
- 1794 Becomes a trustee of the British Museum
- 1795 Awarded Knight of the Order of the Bath
- 1795 Publishes "Plants of the coast of Coromandel" (with W. Roxburgh)
- 1795 Lampooned by James Gillray as "The Great South Sea Caterpillar"
- 1797 Becomes a Privy Councillor
- 1790 Meets Baron Alexander von Humboldt
- 1800 Publishes paper on the effects of horsetails on drains
- 1803 Proposes a revision of *Hortus Kewensis* – quite controversial at the time
- 1804 One of the founders of the Royal Horticultural Society
- 1805 Publishes paper on the causes of blight in corn
- 1808 Purchases Spring Grove
- 1809 Publishes paper on the description of a Roman vault
- 1810 Final visit to George III at Windsor Castle
- 1810 Appoints Robert Brown as the Keeper of his herbarium and library
- 1812 Publishes paper on determining when the potato was introduced into the United Kingdom
- 1812 Publishes paper on forcing-houses of the Romans
- 1814 Publishes paper on inuring of tender plants
- 1814 Dines with Aimé Bonpland at Kew.
- 1815 Awarded Knight Grand Cross (GCB)
- 1817 Publishes paper on the apple tree insect
- 1819 Chairs House of Commons committee on banknote forgery
- 1819 Chairs House of Commons committee on systems of weights/measures
- 1820 Dies at Spring Grove (19 June); buried at S. Leonard's Church in Heston

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HIS TITLES

- Bart. • 1st Baronet
- G. C. B. • Order of the Bath
- P. C. • Privy Councillor
- F. R. S. • Fellow of the Royal Society
- P. R. S. • President of the Royal Society
- K. C. B. • Knight Commander of the Bath

PORTRAITS & CARTOONS

- John Mortimer (1771) – Banks with Cook, Solander, Hawkesworth, and the Earl of Sandwich
- Matthew Darly (1772) – cartoon of Banks as "Botanic Macaroni"
- Matthew & Mary Darly – cartoon of Banks as "The Simpling Macaroni"
- Sir Joshua Reynolds (1773) – Banks as a young man
- Benjamin West (1773) – Banks in a Maori cloak
- William Parry (ca. 1775) – Banks with Omai and Solander
- James Gillray (1795) – Cartoon of Banks as a caterpillar
- Rembrandt Peale (1802) – Formal portrait
- Thomas Phillips (1808) – Banks as President of the Royal Society
- Francis Chantrey (1818) – Bust of Banks
- Thomas Phillips (1820-1821) – Banks in his full presidential attire

SOME MISCELLANY

- ✧ Sir Joseph Banks was, perhaps above all else, was a man of varied interests, activities, and influence. He was a patron of the natural sciences on an international scale. He was a commanding figure in Georgian England who knew or corresponded with everyone of importance and they knew him.
- ✧ *Banksia*, a genus of about 170 species in *Proteaceae*, is named after Sir Joseph. So are about 80 plant species, such as the red spider flower (*Grevillea banksii*) and a seaweed called Neptune's necklace (*Hormosira banksii*). Linnaeus suggested that what we now call Australia be called Banksia.
- ✧ Banks was especially interested in economic botany. He introduced eucalyptus, acacia, and *Banksia* to western world, along with the mangosteen and many fruits from Ceylon and Persia.
- ✧ His publications have been described as "comparatively trifling." He never finished his proposed book on the voyage of the Endeavour.
- ✧ On the other hand, he was a prolific letter writer. About half of his estimated 100,000 scientific letters survive in various collections.
- ✧ His productive period of plant exploration was 1766 to 1772.
- ✧ On his Endeavour voyage, Banks collected about 3000 plants; 110 of them new genera and about 1300 new species.
- ✧ He was famous for the detailed instructions that he gave to his world-wide network of plant collectors.
- ✧ About 7000 plant species were introduced into cultivation during the reign of George III, primarily from Bank's collectors.
- ✧ Banks was not without his critics. In at least two cartoons, Matthew Darly pictured him as a Macaroni – young, effete gentlemen who adopted ridiculous styles of clothing, including swords, but whose mannerisms suggested they would not know how to use them. Samuel Johnson wrote of him as "... an elephant, quite placid and gentle, allowing you to get on his back and play with his proboscis."
- ✧ One of the members of the Royal Society said that he was sick with "the lust of domination;" others that he could be extremely autocratic, even despotic. Another noted that "*His knowledge and attention is very much confined to one study, botany: and his manners are rather coarse and heavy.*" He was accused of being secretive about the plants at Kew.
- ✧ Banks was also involved with the British Museum, the Royal Observatory, and the Board of Longitude.
- ✧ Perhaps based on his own discovery that the botany professor at Oxford hadn't delivered a lecture or published in many years, Banks was also committed to improving teaching at English universities.
- ✧ When he died in 1820, Banks left behind a well organized, comprehensive archive. His library, herbarium, other specimens, drawings, paintings, and manuscripts were donated to the Natural History Museum in London. The Sutro Library in San Francisco is the home of the Sir Joseph Banks Collection, which contains about 10,000 documents. Another important collection is in the State Library of New South Wales, the Sterling Memorial Library of Yale University, and the National Library of Australia.