

## SYDNEY PARKINSON(1745-1771) Quaker Artist with Cook's *Endeavour* Voyage.

Although his name appears on the Quaker Tapestry's 'Quaker Botanists' panel (D8), few Quakers are much aware of Sydney Parkinson. They should be. In paintings and words, Parkinson recorded the flora and fauna on Captain James Cook's first epic voyage.

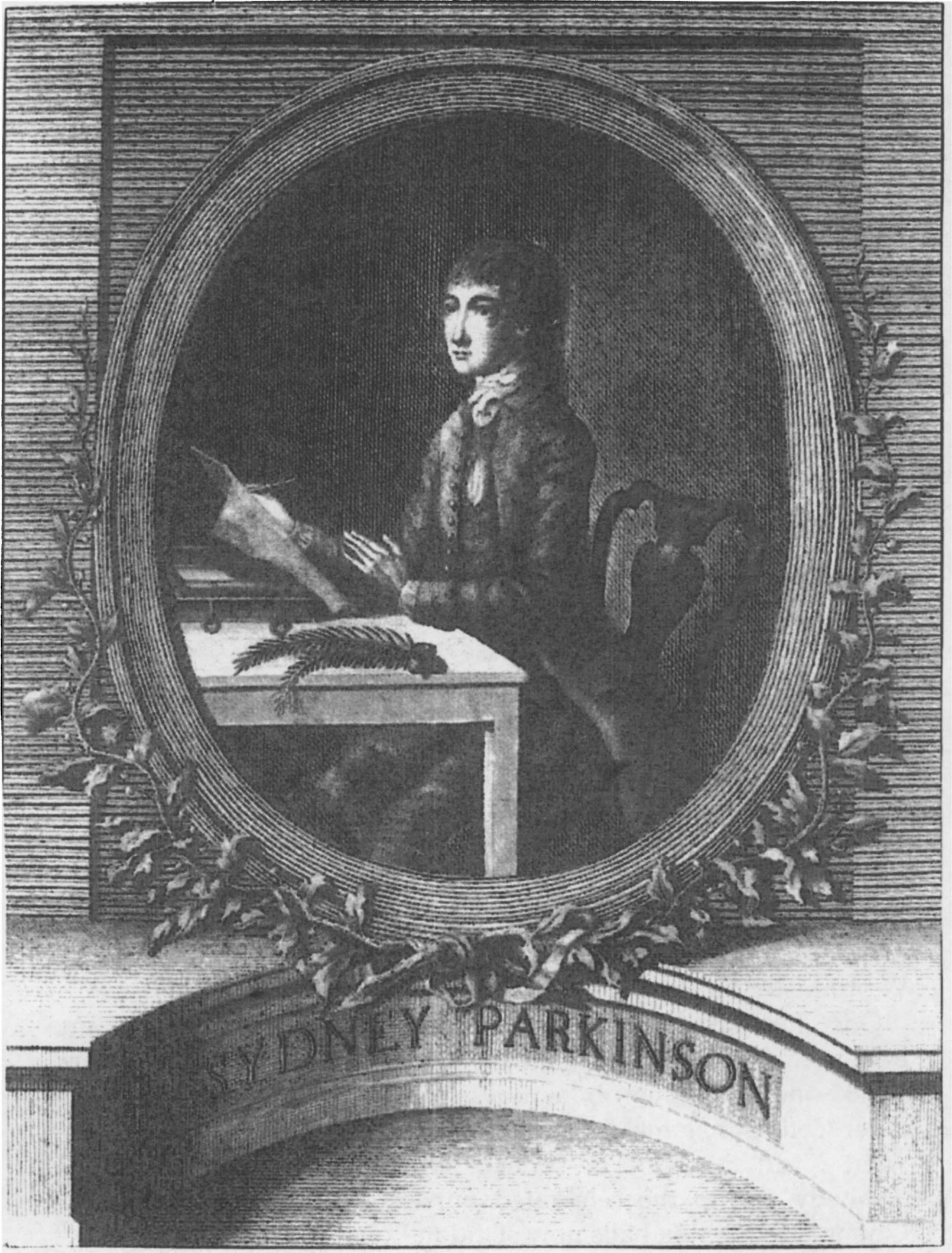
Parkinson was the first artist to set foot on Australian soil, to draw an authentic Australian landscape and to portray Aborigines from direct observation. He was also the first to make accurate drawings of the kangaroo.

But it would be his botanical drawings that excited most attention. Observing and recording accurately the minute details of new plant specimens required genius, and the young Parkinson was simply blessed with it. Although he never returned to England with Cook's *Endeavour*, he left a remarkable legacy: some 276 finished and 676 unfinished drawings of plants, 83 finished and 212 unfinished drawings of animals and perhaps 100 or so other drawings of people, scenery and boats which remain largely at the Natural History Museum in London.

Parkinson's Quaker background and links are interesting. His father, Joel Parkinson, was a Quaker brewer in Edinburgh and the father of three children: Stanfield, Sydney and Britannia. Joel and Elizabeth Parkinson were members of Edinburgh Meeting, and fortuitously so was John Fothergill who studied at the university. Later in London, the Parkinsons and Fothergill would be members of Westminster Meeting.

Once he started practicing medicine, Dr John Fothergill became both wealthy and influential. He also established at Upton Park, Essex, one of the finest botanical gardens in Europe. As a friend of Peter Collinson, James Lee and the Bartrams, Fothergill was part of what I call the 'Quaker connection' in botany. Lee with Lewis Kennedy set up the celebrated nursery the Vineyard where the Olympia Exhibition halls now stand in London.

John Gascoigne, the historian, has commented that 'a disproportionate number of British naturalists were Quaker.'<sup>1</sup> This Quaker connection certainly aided Parkinson. It was Lee in 1767 who introduced Parkinson to Joseph Banks, the wealthy British naturalist and explorer who both chose and paid for thirteen supernumeraries



This engraving by an unknown artist appeared as the frontispiece in the 1773 *Journal* of Sydney Parkinson. It was published by James Newton

who accompanied Cook on his voyage to the South Seas. Parkinson was one and acted as Banks's botanical artist. Banks paid £10,000 to ensure his place on the *Endeavour* and it would be the naturalist discoveries for which the voyage became famous rather than the initial *raison d'être*- observing the Transit of Venus at Tahiti. Unknown to all except Captain Cook were secret instructions from the government to further explore the regions around Australia and New Zealand.

By the time Parkinson was introduced to Banks he had exhibited some flower paintings in London, but it is not known how the young man learned his art. One suggestion has been that he had been a pupil of William de la Cour, a gifted French artist in Edinburgh.

The *Endeavour* set sail from Plymouth on 26 August 1768. While at Plymouth, members of the expedition were entertained by William Cookworthy, a Quaker chemist who knew both Cook and Banks and pioneered true porcelain manufacture in England. James Cook was no stranger to Quakers as his early master in Whitby had been the Quaker shipowner, Captain John Walker.

From England Cook sailed to Madeira and then to Brazil. The *Endeavour* entered the Pacific at the end of January 1769 and continued to Tahiti where Banks's other artist, Alexander Buchan, died. This greatly increased Parkinson's workload. Added to that working conditions were often grim: flies pursued him constantly and devoured his paints as soon as he put them to paper. But the artist persevered, frequently staying up all night drawing or writing in his journal; his observations are considered to be the best for the voyage.<sup>2</sup>

Parkinson was described as slight and dark, and also as 'a young man of the highest moral standards'.<sup>3</sup> In Tahiti he was shocked to see the crew shoot a native for taking a musket. In New Zealand he protested when a Maori in a canoe was shot for making off with a large piece of cloth: 'what a severe punishment of a crime committed perhaps ignorantly.'<sup>4</sup>

Also in his *Journal* as they were leaving Cape Horn, Parkinson expressed a love for nature: 'How amazingly diversified are the works of the Deity within the narrow limits of this globe we inhabit, which, compared with the vast aggregate of systems that compose the universe, appears but a dark speck in the creation.'<sup>5</sup>

Upon his return to England, Banks was planning to publish a book of engravings of the plants collected on the voyage and painted by Parkinson. As it turned out Parkinson would not be involved, and because many of his sketches were not finished works, partially

coloured originals were later copied and completed by other artists.

The unlucky chain of events began when the *Endeavour* struck the Great Barrier Reef in Australia and was damaged. The ship had to set sail to Batavia (present-day Jakarta) for repairs—a ten-week stopover that proved to be fateful.

Until they landed at Batavia, Cook's men had been healthy, being fed fresh foods whenever in port and kept clean, dry and warm on board. Nobody had counted on "Batavia fever", a term for the effects of malaria and dysentery contracted from the city's numerous dirty canals. By the time the *Endeavour* reached the Cape of Good Hope in 1771, almost a third of the men had died. Among the first was Parkinson, aged just 26.

One of his last letters was to Fothergill. He wrote: 'Time won't allow me to enter any particulars, besides I am so confus'd and flutter'd about at present that my mind is not settled for such a task.'<sup>6</sup>

Parkinson's legacy—his journal and drawings—faced confusion as well. The irrepressible Joseph Banks considered all the botanical efforts of the *Endeavour* voyage his preserve, Parkinson's drawings and journal included. After all, he had paid £10,000 as proof of his commitment to the voyage.

But Parkinson's mentally unstable brother, Stanfield, viewed the drawings and writings as his inheritance. Banks gave him £500 for the paintings, sketches and unpaid salary, but in 1773 Stanfield still published a distorted version of his brother's journal. Stanfield's health deteriorated and he died three years later. Dr Fothergill tried to sort matters out with Banks but died in 1780, leaving his Quaker colleague and botanist, John Coakley Lettsom, to make a suitable publication of the journal in 1784.

The publication of Parkinson's botanical (and zoological) art had an even more despairing future. Banks's plans to publish 740 engravings from Parkinson's scientific drawings never materialised. It was not until 1983 that Parkinson was properly recognised in a volume of his art edited by D J Carr and published by the Natural History Museum. In it, Wilfrid Blunt says: 'With all his other preoccupations, Parkinson yet found time to make vocabularies of the languages of the various countries visited. So did Banks and Cook: but Parkinson's are much more extensive...'<sup>7</sup>

It is said that Banks and his naturalists brought back 3,600 plants from the voyage; 1,400 of which never before had been classified. Today we know of Australian *Banksias* (hundreds of them), and Banks bestowed honours upon his friends by naming other plants after them.

Parkinson helped collect and catalogue many of these but in a sad footnote to his history, only one plant now bears his name, *Ficus parkinsonii* and that only occurred in modern times by someone who felt the necessity of remembering his legacy.

Geographically, the situation is even sadder for Parkinson. Everywhere the *Endeavour* went, you now find Banks and Cook's names attached to various places-as well as some of their friends. Even a cabin boy, Nicholas Young, who first sighted New Zealand is remembered with 'Young Nick's Head' on the North Island.

According to the Hector Library, Museum of New Zealand, there was once a Parkinson's Island not far from Poverty Bay at the North Island. I have seen it once on a map in the 1784 edition of Parkinson's *Journal*. Then it disappears. New Zealand Quakers tell me the designation vanished long long ago.

As often is the case in scientific endeavour, the glory goes to the famous-to Banks and Cook-and other heroes-such as Parkinson, remain uncelebrated.

*David Sox*

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

There is only one volume dealing specifically with Sydney Parkinson and that is mainly about art:

Carr, D J (ed,) *Sydney Parkinson: Artist of Cook's Endeavour Voyage*, (London, 1983).

The foregoing article is based on my recently published book: *Quaker Plant Hunters: from North America's Early Frontier to the South Pacific*, (York, 2004).

I have also published an article in *Gardens Illustrated*: 'An unsung Genius' (February 2004).

<sup>1</sup> Gascoigne, John, *Joseph Banks and the English Enlightenment: Useful Knowledge and Polite Culture*, (Cambridge, 1994), p. 77.

<sup>2</sup> Parkinson's *Journal* is hard to come by. A reduced size version of the 1784 *Journal* was published by Caliban books in 1984 but is now out of print and the publisher no longer exists.

<sup>3</sup> Beaglehole, J C (ed.), *Life of Captain James Cook*, (London, 1974), p. 145.

<sup>4</sup> Parkinson, *Journal*, p. 104.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pp. 10-11.

<sup>6</sup> This letter is at Friends House library.

<sup>7</sup> Carr *Sydney Parkinson*, p. 28.