Robert Brown (1773-1858)

In the early June 1858 in a corner of Soho Square, London an old man died in the house where he had lived and worked for nearly half a century. There had been some doubt how much longer he could stay there, and then illness intervened. His closest friend and doctor, Francis Boott, could have prolonged his life with drugs, but he chose to do without them. With a calmness and clearmindedness which had characterized his long life, Robert Brown faced the end, sustained by visits from Dr Boott and other close friends, though the physical comforts were, as always, rather low. A week after his death, Darwin received the famous letter from Wallace on the evolution of species.

Robert Brown had always kept silent on his own religious views. This was part of his naturally reticent personality. Son of a clergyman, James Brown, in Angus, he grew up in an atmosphere of continuing religious turmoil, with memories of the "killing times" still fresh. His great great grandfather, John Brown, a farmer in Bolshan (pronounced Bo'shun and deriving from the French 'beau champs') died around 1700. Robert Brown's grandfather, also John, Elder of the Established Church, supported Charles Stewart in the Forty-five Rising and, using Kinnell Kirkyard as a rendezvous, he recruited Jacobites, as a Captain in Lord Ogilvie's regiment. He died at Culloden and his son, James refused allegiance to the House of Hanover. After Prince Charles death, James was the only clergyman publicly to pray for the House of Stewart - a strange position as Charles' successor, Henry Stewart, was a Cardinal. James Brown's cousin, James Brown of Cononsyth, great great great great grandfather of the writer, was a leading figure in the Scottish flax-spinning industry. This work was carried on and expanded by his four sons. The eldest, also James, became Provost of Dundee in 1844, some years after the visit of the eminent botanist James championed liberal causes like workers' education and parliamentary reform. He visited America and one of his sons eventually settled there.

Originally destined for a medical career, Robert Brown assumed the post of Assistant Surgeon with the Fife Fencibles in 1795 and in this capacity served in Ireland. It seems to have been a not particularly onerous post, leaving him plenty of time for 'botanizing' and it soon became clear that this was his real interest. During a visit to London in I798 he made the acquaintance of Joseph Banks and this probably altered the course of his life. He was particularly interested in Banks' herbarium and, because he had already acquired something of a reputation as a botanist, he was allowed free access. He was also nominated a member of the Linnean Society, a link maintained for the rest of his life.

He returned to Ireland the following year. At this time he kept a diary detailing his daily life, down to the amount of drink, quality and type of food - even his bedclothes! Despite a French landing in Killala, Co. Mayo, his was a relaxed and leisurely life. Like Darwin, his pupil in microscopy before setting out on The Beagle, Brown seems to have had intermittent, though perhaps minor, illnesses most of his life. Not that this interrupted his frequent botanizing trips during his time in Ireland.

Rivalry between the major European powers in colonizing various parts of the globe was already strong. When the news reached London that a French expedition had set off for the Pacific, the Admiralty was keen to send off a similar venture and, inevitably, Banks was involved. At the end of 1800, Brown received a letter while in Ireland from Banks asking if he would serve as naturalist on the trip to survey New Holland. Not surprisingly he accepted with alacrity. After the humdrum routine of military life, such a voyage must

have seemed like the proverbial 'dream come true' to a man of 28, offering not only adventure, but more important the opportunity to collect, observe and classify species new to the world of natural history.

The captain of the aptly named *Investigator* was Matthew Flinders, whose son was to become the egyptologist, Flinders Petrie. While awaiting the completion of all the preparations necessary for such an expedition, Brown worked at Soho Square. One wonders if he ever thought that after this momentous trip to the remotest part of the globe, much of the rest of his life would be spent in this same spot. During the delays in refitting the ship, he studied the specimens brought back by the previous expedition under Cook. In the middle of June 1801 he went down to Portsmouth and a month later, at 11a.m. on 18 July *The Investigator* set sail.

The routine of army life must have helped him adjust to life at sea, though there were of course fewer opportunities for escaping on botanizing trips. There was ample time, on the other hand, for preparation and detailed diary entries. They called in at Madeira and he began his collecting, many specimens of which would be reproduced by Bauer. They went on to the Cape, where he botanized on Table Mountain. In early December they sighted the coast of New Holland.

In the course of many trips on land as they passed along the southern coast of Australia, Brown made an enormous collection of both plant and animal species. He and his companions met parties of aborigines and these encounters were for the most part peaceful though there was some violence.

This must have been a very strenuous time, physically, both the sea voyage itself and the trips inland, not to speak of the risks involved in exploring land - about which little or nothing was known. The mental stimulus and challenge of all the wealth of new material would have left little time for apprehension, and one assumes explorers generally feel that they are superior culturally and technologically to any humans they are likely to meet. A risk of a different kind was posed by the presence of a French vessel, which Flinders boarded with Brown acting as interpreter, despite the fact that England and France were at war. He (Brown) was scathing about their botanical collections, but one imagines that natural history was perhaps lower down in the French list of priorities. They were, however, busy naming geographical features after various Gallic luminaries.

As the voyage continued, there was much illness on board and some deaths occurred, but Brown, despite his apparent infirmities, must have been constitutionally strong. While Flinders was detained by the French on Mauritius, *The Investigator*, with Brown on board, under the new captain William Kent, made its way home, via Cape Horn. There was much for Brown to do, observing, classifying, preserving, but even so, some specimens were damaged, mainly by damp, to add to the losses sustained when the *Porpoise* was wrecked. The material which was finally unpacked. must have been, however, real triumph for him personally, and greatly pleased Banks and all associated with the endeavour.

The rest of his life was passed in studying all the items, drawing conclusions and generally enlarging the boundaries of botanical knowledge. Although he travelled frequently to the continent until he was in his seventies, in between these forays his life must have been one of concentration, routine and painstaking application, punctuated by the various

controversies which characterize human affairs even in academic circles - perhaps one should say especially in academic circles?

Many friendships with fellow naturalists, both in Britain and abroad were formed and maintained over the years, among the most interesting of which was that with the Scottish family, MacLeay. They were a large family group associated also with the Linnean Society, and with Australia - in fact, finally settling there. As a bachelor, Brown may well have found with them the family warmth and liveliness which was lacking in his own life. One member, who died young a few years after she arrived in Australia, a talented artist and linguist seems to have engaged his particular affection. There was an age gap of over 20 years between them, otherwise something more than friendship might have developed. His natural reticence might have made him reluctant to express his feelings. Most important, he was all his life financially insecure, managing with difficulty to support his widowed mother in Scotland. It is difficult to imagine his feelings on receiving a letter from the father of Fanny MacLeay, a few years after her death, recommending the bearer of the letter to Brown. He was no other than Fanny's widower. One can only assume that neither the writter of the letter nor the bearer knew of Brown's attachment, though Fanny's mother seems to have.

Brown's regard for the MacLeays and loyalty to them over the years is shown by his part in arranging a tribute to William MacLeay, first speaker of the Australian Parliament, in the form of a silver candelabrum. The tribute followed his death some 20 years after the family had left for Australia, but there had of course been regular correspondence in the intervening years.

There are few other hints of a sentimental link, apart from references to 'L' probably his housekeeper, for whom he made provision in his will. Perhaps, as he could not support a wife, he saw no point in pursuing any possible relationships.

His friendships, on the other hand, were warm and despite his reserve, he seems to have been held not only in high esteem but also in genuine affection by a wide range of people. One of the most enthusiastic was Martius, whose correspondence is positively lyrical in parts. It is interesting to speculate on what a phlegmatic Scot made of such extravagant language as the following description of a planned expedition in the Alps when Brown was about to visit Switzerland (the more so since the envelope was addressed to "Monsieur Robert Brown anglais"): "we will make our way through the Alps in high spirits and with celestial happiness because you will find the scenery very beautiful and Endlicher and I will enjoy of your conversation like the Arabs in the Desert and enjoying the dew of heaven". This letter sent from Munich reached Brown in eight days.

The career of Robert Brown demonstrates several features which are fairly typical. Like many Scots, or people from any provincial centre for that matters, London proved to be the gateway to advancement. He did visit his homeland and was interested in trying to trace his family roots, deep in the religious and political conflicts of l7th and l8th century Scotland. But by far the largest part of his 85 years was spent in London, and he did not accept invitations to occupy two academic posts in Edinburgh and Glasgow. In coming to London he had not only moved into a freer, more liberal, environment, but also met Sir Joseph Banks, and without this connection his life might have taken an altogether different course. Personal recommendation was even more important in those days of less formal methods of promotion. His career came at an important stage in the development

of science, when it was becoming more professional and less the past-time of dilettantes, however, enthusiastic and knowledgeable. Scientific method, in particular, was advancing, as equipment such as the microscope improved. However, the financial arrangements seem to have been rather basic and as Brown had no private means, his way of life was always modest.

Unassuming, shunning the limelight and preferring the company of people he knew well, he would have been easy to underestimate. His tendency to delay must have been exasperating to colleagues, but he showed himself helpful to younger men, in the way that Banks and others had been helpful to him. The photograph taken within a year of his death shows a kindly expression, and his closest friend, Francis Boott particularly emphasized this aspect of his personality. One imagines that he was not at all demonstrative, so this would probably have been expressed in oblique ways.

As a young man in Ireland, he chided himself in his diary for being indolent yet his unremitting devotion to botany, his powers of observation and deduction - surely the fruit of intense and prolonged concentration made an enormous contribution to the development of natural history. In this work he tended to hoard and amass, particularly specimens but also information – one writer describes him as being like a spider at the centre of a gigantic web. If so, he had none of its malevolence, but was rather a kindly, gentle spider, going at his own pace, listening to a different 'drummer'. The same writer assets that nearly every group of flowering plants today bears the mark of his genius, and that Brown's most important discoveries "were almost nonchalantly announced – in parenthesis as it were - " such as the existence of the cell nucleus and the movement, which bears his name, of small particles suspended in liquid.

Jung has said that nature is not so liberal with her gifts as to endow in any one individual both head and heart, but in a few instances, such as Darwin, both qualities do come together. Perhaps, also in Robert Brown. Those who gathered in Soho Square on 15th June 1858 to accompany him on his last journey to Kensal Green cemetery would, I think, have agreed.

Miss M.F. Brown

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