

Robert Brown 200: Introduction

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Mabberley, D. (Nationaal Herbarium Nederland, University of Leiden, The Netherlands, and Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain Trust, Sydney, NSW Australia 2000) 2002. Robert Brown 200: Introduction. Cunninghamia 7(4): 613–615.

This issue of *Cunninghamia* includes a number of papers presented at **Robert Brown 200**, an international conference celebrating Robert Brown's time in New South Wales and his contribution to science. This conference, held at the Royal Botanic Gardens Sydney on 8–10th May 2002, was one of a series around Australia, to celebrate the successes of Matthew Flinders' voyage, two hundred years after the *Investigator* touched various points in its circumnavigation of the Australian coast. Robert Brown (1773–1858) was selected by Joseph Banks as naturalist for the voyage and in May 1802, arrived in Sydney Cove: he was to spend much of the next three years based in New South Wales (for biographical details of Brown see Mabberley 1985).

Brown's lasting contribution to the study of the Australian flora was considered on Day 1 of the Conference and relevant papers will be published in the Royal Botanic Gardens journal of plant systematics *Telopea*, volume 10(2) in 2003. For ecologists his work is perhaps most familiar in being reflected in the species authority 'R. Br.', the standard abbreviation for his name. Indeed, here in Australia we tend to grasp to us Brown, like George Bentham later, for his work on our flora, but they both worked on the plants of other parts of the world. Brown's next greatest contributions were probably on the flora of Africa — notably the Congo basin, but also west Africa and Ethiopia, besides Madeira and the Arctic. This work had a major influence on von Humboldt, but also Lyell and through him Darwin.

On Day 2 some of the places Brown visited on his fieldwork around Sydney were visited and Day 3 looked at what has happened to Australian vegetation, particularly that of the Sydney Basin, and what we are doing about it. The importance of New South Wales in his subsequent work can be gauged from an examination of the relative numbers of gatherings Brown made in the state compared with the rest of the country (Figure 1).

Brown was interested in documenting the diversity of the Australian flora and fauna but did not gather 'ecological vouchers' in that if he had a good collection of a particular species he was not going to spend a lot of time collecting it over and over again from different localities. However, he did make important *florulae* or 'mini-floras' of places where he spent a good deal of time and these are benchmarks for our ecological knowledge of vegetation at the beginning of the nineteenth century. These are now printed with his diary, recently transcribed (Vallance et al. 2001), but it must be admitted that he has tantalisingly little to say on the clearing of the vegetation by Europeans, though he does remark on it in the Hunter Valley, where cedar-getting was well-advanced. The two artists on the voyage, William Westall and Ferdinand Bauer, perhaps recorded more in this respect; the drawings of the landscape artist, Westall, notably those of the Hawkesbury area, are very important documentary records. Brown's botanico-horticultural assistant Peter Good made some useful observations and these, too, have been published (Edwards 1981).

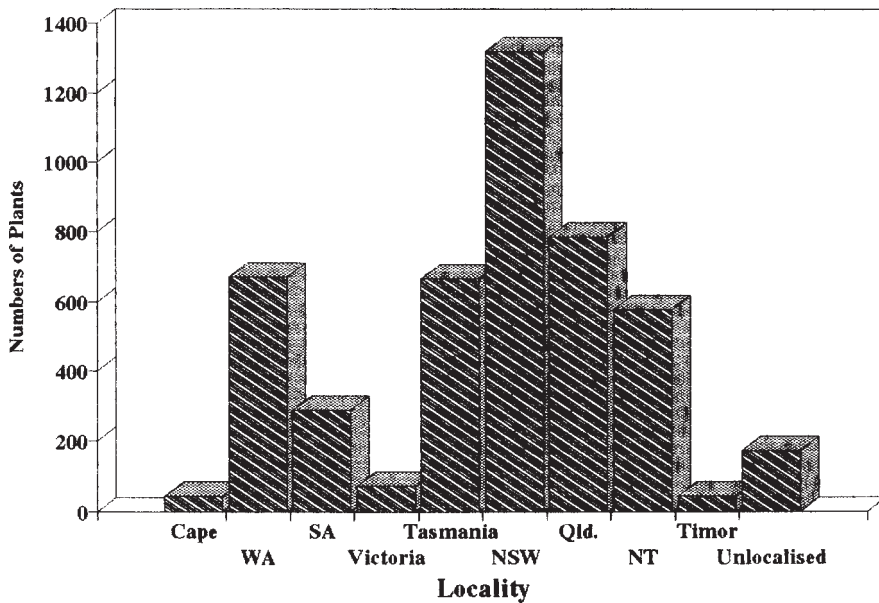


Fig. 1. Brown's plant collecting, 1801–1805, on the *Investigator* voyage (from Moore & Groves 1997, reproduced with permission from *Archives of Natural History*).

In 1802 Brown spent ten weeks in New South Wales before setting off northwards in the *Investigator* for Flinders's circumnavigation of the continent: during this time he visited Parramatta and the Windsor area, meeting Banks's resident collector, George Caley. He also collected at Botany Bay and the original mouth of Cooks River.

On the return of the *Investigator* in June 1803 he was here for some six months. Besides working in the Hawkesbury area, he also did fieldwork along the Georges River and near Camden, the *Cowpastures* as it was then called, and collected on the Sydney's North Shore as well as at South Head.

During his third stay in NSW from August 1804 until the patched-up *Investigator* left for England in 1805 to take him and his materials back to Europe, he sailed for *King's town*, present-day Newcastle; there in the coal, he probably collected the fossil *Glossopteris*, now bearing his name, *Glossopteris browniana*. He surveyed up the Hunter to the Morpeth–Maitland area and ascended Mt Hudson. He also worked the courses of the Williams and Paterson rivers ascending Mt Johnstone. He completed a *Florula* of the Lower Hunter area as he knew it, and, after more fieldwork near Windsor, he also produced a *Florula* of the Grose River area.

The Robert Brown 200 conference was not about looking back for its own sake: it saw Brown's time here as a benchmark and the papers presented here deal with issues from that perspective: the spread of exotic species into a new continent (Groves page 623), the changes that have taken place in the Cumberland Plain in western Sydney (Benson & Howell page 631) and the concept of rarity and the conservation of rare species (Adam page 651).

References

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