

# Robert Brown (1773 – 1858)

**R**obert Brown, son of the Reverend James Brown and his wife Helen Taylor, was born in Montrose, Scotland, on 21 December 1773. He was educated at Montrose Academy, and from 1787 attended Marischal College, Aberdeen, as a Ramsay scholar. When his family moved to Edinburgh in 1789 he studied medicine at the university. He did not take a degree, but showed a keen interest in natural history. In 1795 he was commissioned in the Fifeshire Regiment of Fencibles as surgeon's mate, and served in Ireland until 1800, but found the pursuit of botany more to his liking than soldiering. In London on recruiting service, he met Joseph Dryander, librarian to Sir Joseph Banks, and through him became an associate of the Linnean Society in 1798. He became a friend and protégé of Banks who obtained for him the position of naturalist, with Ferdinand Bauer and Peter Good, on Matthew Flinders' Terra Australis expedition.

Before joining the *Investigator* in December 1801, Brown studied the Australian and other plants in Banks's collection, and during his three and a half years in Australia he made extensive collections of more than 3000 specimens, more than half of them new to science. However, the major part of his material from the south coast was lost when the *Porpoise* was wrecked en route to England in August 1803. On the *Investigator's* return voyage in 1805 the collections were threatened by constant damp. Back in England, Brown spent the next five years working on the botanical results of the survey, and in 1810 published his major work *Prodromus Florae Novae Hollandiae et Insulae Van-Diemen*, the first systematic account of the Australian flora. Over half of New Zealand's orchid genera were first described in the *Prodromus*.

In 1810 Brown succeeded Dryander as the third and last of Banks's librarians (the first was Solander), and when Banks died in 1820 he inherited his library and herbarium. This was transferred to the British Museum in 1827 when Brown was appointed keeper of the Banksian botanical collection, a position he held until his death. He refused the offer of university chairs in Edinburgh and Glasgow, but maintained close relations with the Linnean Society, of which he was elected a fellow in 1822, and held office throughout his remaining years.

Held in high regard by his contemporaries, Brown received numerous academic honours and made several major discoveries in his field, including molecular agitation, now called "Brownian movement". He also observed in orchid cells an opaque spot, which he named the nucleus. He was

an early supporter of Jussieu's natural system of plant classification rather than the more rigid system of Linnaeus. Tall in stature, with a generous nature and dry wit, Brown was awkward in company other than that of close friends, and to younger botanists seemed remote and uncommunicative. He died at Soho Square in London on 10 June 1858.

Robert Brown is commemorated in the Australian herb genus *Brunonia* and numerous Australian species, a small New Zealand tree *Pisonia brunoniana* and a moss *Tetradontium brownianum* that he discovered at Roslin, near Edinburgh, when a student. Brown's River, south of Hobart, Tasmania, and Mt Brown in British Columbia, are also named after him.



## ***Pisonia brunoniana***

*Pisonia* is a genus of 35–40 species of shrubs or trees with opposite to slightly whorled leaves, found mainly in Australia, and one species in New Zealand. *Pisonia brunoniana*, parapara, is a quick-growing, spreading, multi-trunked and freely coppicing tree up to 6 metres or more tall, its large, thin, glossy green leaves tending to hang down. Panicles of small greenish flowers appear throughout the year, the five calyx lobes, joined with the appearance of petals, containing fruit. These turn black and sticky as they ripen and sometimes trap small birds, hence the name, bird-catcher tree. In New Zealand, the species grows in coastal forest on the offshore islands of the Auckland coast and scattered along mainland shores as far south as the Bay of Plenty.