

Philibert Commerson (1727 – 1773) and *Ouris*

Philibert Commerson (or Commerçon) was born on 18 November 1727 at Châtillon-sur-Chalaronne, a small town north of Lyon, France, where his father Georges-Marie was the town lawyer. His parents were from families of farm workers and traders who had acquired wealth and social standing through hard work and strategic marriages. Philibert, the eldest of their seven children, was assured a good education. He was first taught by a local priest, and at the age of 13 sent to the Jesuit College at Bourge-en-Bresse, 30 km away, where field trips with Father Garnier endeared him to botany. He began medical studies (which included botany) at Montpellier University, but spent most of his time at the botanical garden, graduating in 1754 – with a reputation as a compulsive collector!

Instead of setting up in practice he botanised in France and Switzerland, made himself known to other botanists and established botanical gardens in Châtillon and elsewhere. Eventually, on 17 October 1760, he married 40 year-old Antoinette Beau, a lawyer's daughter, and agreed to settle down as a doctor in Toulon-sur-Arroux. Three days after the birth of their son on 16 April 1762, Antoinette died. Already employed as a servant, Jeanne Baret became Commerson's full-time housekeeper and the infant's nurse. Twenty-one years old, the daughter of day labourers, Jeanne had learned to read and write, and as a herb woman was interested in Commerson's botanical work; she sorted his papers and plants and became indispensable.

In 1764 they left for Paris and rented an apartment near the Jardin du Roi. When pleurisy kept Commerson in bed, Jeanne nursed him, and during his recovery he read, wrote, and maintained his scientific contacts. Two years later he was appointed doctor and botanist on Bougainville's voyage of circumnavigation, and Jeanne, disguised as a boy, accompanied him as his valet. They collected copiously, and Commerson paid his willing and capable workhorse tribute by naming a shrub genus *Baretia* after her. He commemorated family, friends and even himself in his plant names, notably the showy *Bougainvillea* from the environs of Rio de Janeiro. Landfall was also made in the Strait of Magellan and the South Pacific, but the French were unwelcome in the Dutch East Indies and unable to obtain the spice and other plants of economic value they sought. Leaving the expedition at Île-de-France (Mauritius), Commerson botanised there and in Madagascar until his final illness and death at Flacq on 13 March 1773, aged 45.

Most of his notes and specimens reached France, and many new genera, including *Ourisia*, were published by Antoine-Laurent de Jussieu in *Genera Plantarum* (1789). Commerson's faded handwritten label for *Ourisia Miltopsis* indicates it was collected on an island in the Strait of Magellan in October 1767 and named after Oury or Ouris, a retired official of the Malouines (Falkland Islands) with an interest in natural history.

Rene-Andre Oury, clerk/secretary of the company set up by Bougainville to finance and organise the French settlement, left the Falklands for South America when the colony was handed over to the Spanish. He joined Bougainville's expedition from there, but stayed behind with Commerson and others at Mauritius. Jean-Francois Oury, aid-pilot and engineer on Bougainville's voyage, also worked for the colony in the Malouines and stayed on to assist the authorities at Mauritius. *Ourisia* could have been named after either, neither or both.



Ourisia macrophylla* subsp. *macrophylla

Ourisia are herbaceous or slightly woody plants that occur in South America, Tasmania and New Zealand from sea level to 5000 metres. They have five fused corolla lobes ranging from white to pink, lilac or red, but species in Australasia are white only. *Ourisia macrophylla* subsp. *macrophylla* ('large-leaved'), a mountain foxglove previously considered a Taranaki/Mt Egmont endemic,