

# Johann Reinhold Forster (1729 – 1798)

In 1772, one year after the return to England of the *Endeavour*, James Cook left on a second voyage of exploration. Two ships were to sail from west to east: Cook in the *Resolution* to lead the voyage, with Tobias Furneaux in command of the *Adventure*. Joseph Banks had planned to take part, but withdrew due to difficulties over the extra space required for his retinue of fifteen. At short notice Johann Reinhold Forster accepted the position of naturalist on the voyage, with his 17-year-old son George as his assistant and illustrator.

The Forsters were descendants of a Yorkshire royalist who was dispossessed by Cromwell's forces around 1642 and settled in Polish Prussia, where he married a Scottish emigrant. The name Forster is probably a corruption of Forrester. Johann Reinhold Forster was born in Dirschau (Tczew) in Poland on 22 October 1729. He showed an early aptitude for languages, and studied a wide range of subjects at grammar school in Berlin and as a theology student at the University of Halle. He was ordained in 1753 and during his twelve years as a parish priest in Nassenhuben, near Danzig, devoted much of his time to scholarship and correspondence. In early 1754 he married his cousin Elisabeth Justina Nicolai, and on 26 November 1754 George, the first of their seven children, was born.

His young son's interest in plants rekindled his own interest in natural history, and he dedicated himself to the boy's education. In 1765 he took George, then ten years old, as his botanical assistant on an inspection tour of the German colonies on the Volga. In mid 1766 they set off, nearly penniless, for London where Johann made useful contacts that initiated tutoring and translating work. His translation of Bougainville's *A Voyage Around the World* received a glowing review, and despite a tetchy and obstinate disposition that made him difficult to get on with, he was considered one of Britain's best read, most discerning and leading naturalists.

When the *Resolution* arrived in Dusky Sound in March 1773 after four months in Antarctic waters, it was late in the season. Fish, birds and sandflies were plentiful, but only a few plants were in flower or mature fruit. One was a subalpine herb, *Forstera sedifolia*, collected by Anders Sparrman, a young Swedish naturalist who had joined them in Cape-town. Three sojourns at anchor in Queen Charlotte Sound between exploratory cruises yielded more new plants – but not as many as hoped, for the area had already been searched thoroughly by Banks and Solander. When the *Resolution* reached England on 30 July 1775, the botanists had a book almost ready

for publication. This work, including a number of hand-coloured plates, was published in London the following year. It contains the first published descriptions of New Zealand plants. Johann Reinhold's own scientific and philosophical observations on the voyage came out in 1778. He spent the next two years on further writing before taking up a professorship at the University of Halle in 1780, and died at Halle on 9 December 1798.



## ***Forstera tenella***

It is suggested that Linnaeus senior provided the name *Forstera* before his death in 1778, after receiving the manuscript from J R Forster in 1775 with a request that it honour both father and son. Five species are recognised in New Zealand, all reaching the alpine zone. *Forstera* are small perennial herbs with short, ascending shoots closely covered by overlapping tough, scale-like leaves. In late summer wiry erect flower stems arise from among the terminal leaves, each bearing at the tip 1-3 white flowers, yellowish towards the centre or with an orange to red "eye". A recent (2009) revision recognised two new species, and merged *Forstera bidwellii* with *Forstera tenella* ('delicate') as a single variable and widespread species of damp montane to subalpine forest margins or openings, scrub, and tussock-herbfield, 500–1680 m, in North, South and Stewart Islands, from the Raukumara Range southwards.