

Charles Fraser (1791 – 1831)

The baptism of Charles Fraser on 18 April 1791 and the names of his parents, James Fraser and Wilhelmena Rattray, are recorded in the parish register for Blair-in-Atholl, Perthshire, Scotland. Blair was the name of the estates of the Dukes of Atholl, and from 1779 to 1800 James Fraser was a tenant at Old Blair, in the castle precinct. In 1787 Robert Burns visited nearby Bruar Falls and addressed a poem to the fourth Duke of Atholl, pleading for "tow'ring trees and bonnie spreading bushes" in the bare gorges. Shortly afterwards, "Planter John", as he came to be known, began the planting of millions of trees, mainly European larch, for timber to supply the British navy. The young Charles Fraser began work as a gardener at Blair Castle, where even the kitchen garden had been landscaped; he was acquainted with and perhaps trained at the Edinburgh Botanic Garden, where he would have seen the Australian collection, and he knew and later corresponded with Stewart Murray, the first curator of the Glasgow Botanic Gardens.

Prospects were bleak for rural tenants, and Highland regiments were being recruited to face possible Napoleonic invasion. Fraser first went to Sydney in February 1814 with the 46th Regiment of Foot; he returned to England and enlisted in the 56th Regiment, but was transferred, and on 8 April 1816 arrived in Sydney on the convict transport ship *Guildford*, with 221 male prisoners under the guard of the 46th Foot Regiment. He was not on the regiment's payroll until later, but evidently did little soldiering. His interest in botany attracted the attention of Governor Macquarie, and in June 1816 he was appointed to take charge of the newly proclaimed Sydney Botanic Garden, at a salary of £200 per year. Three years later, when he was

referred to as colonial botanist, he made a formal request for botanical books, including Robert Brown's *Prodromus*. Between 1817 and 1819 he made three exploratory journeys in New South Wales with Surveyor-General John Oxley, and on one of these was joined by Allan Cunningham. Hundreds of new plants were collected, and three cases of the most rare and choice were sent by Macquarie to England. In 1821 Fraser was formally appointed colonial botanist, and in 1823 his position as superintendent of Sydney Botanic Gardens was made official. His main responsibility was the cultivation of vegetables and fruit for the military, but his interest was in the Australian plants. In 1825–26 he visited Tasmania, Norfolk Island (where the ship's boat overturned and he lost his precious *Prodromus*), and the Bay of Islands, New Zealand, where he collected intensely during his few hours ashore. He was on Captain James Stirling's 1827 Swan River expedition, and the next year, on a journey to design new botanic gardens at Moreton Bay, Cunningham named Mount Fraser and Rattray Plains for his colleague.

After two months collecting in the Bathurst region, Charley F (as he was familiarly known) had a stroke and died at Paramatta on 22 December 1831. He was 40 years old, and is thought not to have married or had children. He was industrious, hardworking and an avid collector, and 31 species of Australian native plants have been named in his honour. In New Zealand he is remembered not only through two plants Allan Cunningham named after him – a prostrate flowering shrub *Leucopogon fraseri* (pātōtara), and the fern *Blechnum fraseri* – but also for the large collection he made in his very short time at the Bay of Islands.

Blechnum fraseri

The Blechnaceae family, comprising about five genera of mainly terrestrial ferns, is widely distributed, and within it, the genus *Blechnum* ('fern') contains about 200 species, mainly in the Southern Hemisphere. About 18 species are found in New Zealand. *Blechnum fraseri* has a creeping underground rhizome that frequently elongates into a slender, woody trunk up to a metre high, topped by dark green leathery fronds with distinctive triangular projections along the midrib. It can form large colonies, especially in kauri forest, and is abundant in other dry lowland forest north of Taranaki and in the northwest of the South Island. It is native also to Indonesia and the Philippine Islands.

