

Henrik Gahn (1747 – 1816)

Born on 1 January 1747 in Falun, Sweden, Henrik Gahn was the son of Hans Jacob Gahn, property owner and treasurer in the nearby village of Voxna, and his wife Anna Marie Schulze, the daughter of a regimental surgeon. Henrik was the second surviving son in their family of thirteen, three of whom died in infancy. Members of the Gahn family made their mark in medicine, chemistry, mineralogy, industry, architecture and politics, and a military officer, Carl Pontius Gahn, was ennobled in 1809 with the name Gahn of Colquhoun. Descent from the Scottish Colquhoun and Irish Cahun clans has been claimed but not verified.

Voxna's proximity to Uppsala, 188 km to the southeast, and the friendship of Linnaeus with Henrik's father, were conducive to Henrik becoming a student there, and in 1762 he began his life-long study of medical science. As a guest at Linnaeus's country home Hammerby in the summer of 1766, he worked on and subsequently defended Linne's *Dissertations Fundamenta Agrostographiae*, a classified list of around 850 species of grasses of economic importance, preceded by a history of earlier studies of grasses.

After gaining his licence to practise medicine in 1770, Gahn set off on a scientific journey to Germany, and attended several professional lectures in Göttingen. He continued to London and made contact with Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander concerning the understood sharing of

their Cook's voyage collections with Linnaeus. He was invited to join Banks and Solander on Cook's next expedition in 1772, but declined. When Banks withdrew from the venture for logistical reasons, Johann Reinhold Forster and his son George were appointed to replace him, and another Linnaean student, botanist Anders Sparrman, was engaged at Capetown. Meanwhile, Gahn travelled through Britain, and in 1772–73 practised medicine in Edinburgh; remarkably, both his travelogue and many of his case studies were written in English.

During his absence he had graduated doctor of medicine, and on his return to Sweden in 1773 he was appointed town doctor in Gävle. He also accepted public service duties with the Admiralty and the medical college, but later gave these up as his private practice grew. In 1775 he married Eva Catharina Svedenstierna, the daughter of Captain John Svedstierna and Anna Catharina Appelberg; they were to have five children: a daughter and four sons. He helped found the Swedish Society of Medicine in 1807, and in 1813 he was awarded a gold medal for pioneering in Sweden Edward Jenner's method of vaccination against smallpox. Henrik Gahn maintained his quest for medical knowledge and kept up with new developments until his death at Stockholm on 6 February 1816, aged 69. The genus *Gahnia* was named in his honour by J R and G Forster in *Characters Generum Plantarum* (1776).



Gahnia procera

Gahnia are large sedges of the Pacific region; with five of the six species in New Zealand endemic. *Gahnia procera* (Latin *procerus* 'tall, long', referring to the elongated filaments) is a large tussock up to one metre tall, with glossy green, in-rolled foliage and drooping flower stems. The nuts are bright or brownish orange, and dark-tipped, characteristically entangled in the greatly elongated filaments of the stamens, which form fawn-brown tassels. Montane to subalpine, usually in forest and scrub, *Gahnia procera*, tātaki or tītaki, is known from the Coromandel Peninsula south to Stewart Island, where it also descends to sea level, and is recorded as having been used for thatching on round whare on Titi Islands.