Johan Ernst Gunnerus (1718 – 1773)

Johan Ernst Gunnerus, the son of a renowned Norwegian doctor, was born in Christiania (Oslo). [Largely destroyed by fire in 1624, Oslo was rebuilt as Christiania by the Danish-Norwegian King Christian IV. Its original name was reinstated in 1924.] Gunnerus matriculated with high marks, and in 1737 was sent to Copenhagen to study theology, as Norway had no university at that time. He went on to take philosophy, history, law, mathematics, chemistry and physics at German universities in Halle and Jena. Ordained in Copenhagen in 1754, he worked mainly as a lecturer until 1758, when he was appointed bishop in Trondheim.

Gunnera prorepens

Gunnera is a genus of about 40 species of rhizomatous perennial herbs, mostly from the southern hemisphere. The five small New Zealand species are in marked contrast to the giant Chilean *Gunnera tinctoria* that has become naturalised in parts of the country. *Gunnera prorepens* (Latin *pro* 'forward'; *repete* 'to creep or glide like a snake') is a creeping and rooting plant forming mats. The ovate leaves are bronze-green to purplish-green in colour, and have long petioles. Male and female flowers are on separate inflorescences, and in summer bright red fruits clustered on spikes up to 10 cm tall stand above the foliage. *Gunnera prorepens* occurs in damp places in forests, grassland and herbfields in lowland to subalpine regions, from the lower Waikato southwards, mainly west of the Main Divide.

The following year his keen interest in natural history took him on a journey north to Nordland and Finnmark. From his travels there and in central Norway, he accumulated a large collection of specimens, which he proceeded to organise and study. In 1760, with two historians, he founded the Trondheim Society. Publication of the society's journal began the next year, and in 1765 Gunnerus contributed his description of a basking shark, giving it the scientific name *Squalis maximus*. In 1767 the society received royal recognition and became the Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences and Letters. Due to the enthusiasm of Gunnerus, vice president and director from 1767 to 1773, it was commonly known as "The Bishop's Society".

The reputation of the Swedish botanist Linnaeus was well known among Norwegian naturalists. He had visited the country twice, some of his students went there to collect and study plants, and several Norwegian students studied with the master at Uppsala. Gunnerus initiated contact with Linnaeus in 1761, writing modestly of his own natural history work and seeking answers to questions. It was the beginning of a long correspondence between them, and although the two learned men never met, a close friendship developed. In 1766 Gunnerus was elected a foreign member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences.

In 1771 Gunnerus went to Copenhagen to discuss the formation of a separate Norwegian university, but after a year of disappointment he returned tired and disheartened. He lost interest in his work and considered moving away from Trondheim. During a journey to western Norway he developed a fever, and died in September 1773, at 55 years of age.

His work in natural science – botany, ornithology, zoology and astronomy – was without parallel in Norway. His best known work *Flora Norvegica,* published in two volumes 1766–1776, treated more than 1100 species using both their Latin and Norwegian names. The first of its kind, it remained in use for around a hundred years. In 1767 Linnaeus named the plant genus *Gunnera* in his honour. More recently, in the northern spring of 2006, the Norwegian research vessel, R/V *Gunnerus,* also named after Johan Ernst Gunnerus, was put into operation, the second ship of that name to be used for scientific research in the Trondheimsfjord.