

Joseph Dalton Hooker (1817 – 1911)

The second son of William and Maria, Joseph Dalton Hooker (often referred to as “J D”) was born at Halesworth, Suffolk, in 1817. When he was three years old the family moved to Glasgow where William had been professor of botany for nearly a year. Joseph was brought up in a botanical environment and was already a keen botanist when he attended Glasgow High School. At 15, he entered Glasgow University and in 1839, at the age of 21, he graduated with a medical degree, with no apparent intention of becoming a doctor.

A few months later he was appointed assistant surgeon and naturalist on the *Erebus*, one of two ships used on Sir James Ross’s Antarctic expedition, which was to last four years. Extended stays were made at Cape of Good Hope, Kerguelen Islands (home of the Kerguelen “cabbage” which Cook had found useful in preventing scurvy) and Tasmania, and there were also short visits to Auckland and Campbell Islands – all wonderful opportunities for the botanist. In Antarctica the precise bearing of the South Magnetic Pole was determined, and a peak subsequently named Erebus was discovered.

Three months of 1841 were spent at the Bay of Islands in New Zealand, getting suitable kauri spars for the ships. Hooker met missionary printer, school inspector and botanist, William Colenso, who accompanied him on botanical trips, each benefiting from the knowledge and experience of the other. Hooker named *Colensoa physaloides* after him. David Lyall, Hooker’s counterpart on the *Terror*, also helped to collect and press plants, and for a while they were joined by another navy surgeon and naturalist, Andrew Sinclair, visiting from Australia.

On his return to England in 1843 Joseph Hooker, with the government’s financial assistance, worked at Kew, collating and publishing his findings in his six-volume *The Botany of the Antarctic Voyages*. As his fieldwork had been in only a small part of the country, much of the New Zealand section, *Flora Novae-Zelandiae*, (1852, 1855) was based on the collections of others, with beautiful colour plates done by Walter Fitch from Hooker’s original drawings or dried specimens. Publication of his two-volume unillustrated *Handbook of the New Zealand Flora* followed, in 1864 and 1867.

Joseph Hooker went on to make natural history explorations in several other parts of the world. He became assistant director at Kew and succeeded his father as director in 1865, and when he retired at the end of 1885, aged 69, his son-in-law William Thiselton-Dyer was promoted to the position.

Joseph Hooker had many honours bestowed upon him, two happy marriages (but to his regret, none of his eight surviving children became botanists), and lifetime friendship with Charles Darwin. He continued his research and writing, and was still working on the taxonomy of a difficult plant group a few weeks before his death on 10 December 1911 at the age of 94. On his commemorative plaque in Kew Church are portrayed five plants from five countries that particularly interested him. One of them is a large daisy, *Damnania vernicosa*, from New Zealand’s subantarctic Auckland Islands.



Bulbinella hookeri

Bulbinella ('little bulb') is a misnomer, for the plants have only swollen roots. New Zealand has six endemic species, the only ones in the genus outside South Africa. *Bulbinella hookeri* is a robust plant 20–50 cm tall. In spring its storage roots send up tufts of erect strap-like brownish-green leaves up to 3 cm wide and 30 cm or more long. In early summer spikes of yellow flowers overtop the leaves, making splashes of colour on wet montane and low-alpine tussock grasslands. Commonly known as Māori onion or bog lily, it grows on the Volcanic Plateau and Taranaki/Mt Egmont in the North Island, and the northern South Island mountains from Nelson and Marlborough to North Canterbury.