

Jacques-Julien Houtou de La Billardière (1755 – 1834)

The ninth of fourteen children, Jacques-Julien Houtou de La Billardière was born in Alençon, Normandy, France, where his mother was a lacemaker and his father a lace merchant. From 1791 Jacques-Julien used only his grandfather's estate name shortened to Labillardière in his signature and publications. He excelled in his early education at the Collège Royal d'Alençon, and studied medicine and botany at the Universities of Montpellier and Reims. After graduating in 1779 he moved to Paris, where he pursued his interest in natural history at the Jardin du Roi, and collected specimens for the professor of botany at the gardens, Louis-Guillaume Le Monnier. Sent by Le Monnier to England to study the exotic plants in cultivation there, he established friendships with Joseph Banks, Aylmer Bourke Lambert and other eminent botanists, and stayed almost two years. He then botanised widely in the French Alps, and in 1787 and 1788 travelled through the eastern Mediterranean studying "the plants of the ancients." Although only 55 of the estimated 1000 specimens that he collected were described in his *Icones Plantarum Syriae Rariorum* (1791), many plants he found still carry the Latin epithets he gave them.

In 1791 Labillardière was selected one of four naturalists on the expedition sent under the command of Bruny d'Entrecasteaux, in *La Recherche* and *L'Espérance*, to undertake scientific work and to determine the fate of the La Pérouse expedition. He collected assiduously, not only plants but also insects, animals, fish and birds, and made valuable observations of the lands and indigenous people of the places visited. Near Cape Maria Van Diemen, Māori approached in canoes with bundles of New Zealand flax (*Phormium tenax*) and other items to trade. Although exchanges were made, Labillardière was frustrated by the lost opportunity to collect flax plants to cultivate in Europe for the manufacture of naval cordage. An island group to the north was named after Huon de Kermadec, the ailing captain of *L'Espérance*, who died two months later. The search for La Pérouse was unsuccessful, and the death of d'Entrecasteaux on 20 July 1793 was another blow. The expedition, severely affected by sickness and exhaustion, made its way to Java, where the royalist officers surrendered the ships to the Dutch. The natural history specimens were impounded, and suspected republicans detained. Labillardière eventually arrived back in France in 1796 to find that his collections had been taken to England as prizes of war. With the intervention of Sir Joseph Banks, they were returned.

In 1799 Labillardière married twice-widowed Martha Goudes Desfriches from his hometown, Alençon; childless, they later separated. His account of the voyage with d'Entrecasteaux was published in 1800 and became an international best seller. *Novae Hollandiae Plantarum Specimen* (1804–1806) is recognised as the first comprehensive description of the flora of Australia. His final major work, published in 1824–1825, was on the flora of New Caledonia. He died of a stroke at his Paris home on 8 January 1834, in his 79th year. A staunch republican, he experienced the traumas of revolution, war and the untimely death of many friends. He was a complex person, said to have been difficult and obstinate, with a sharp tongue, but also generous, compassionate, jovial and witty. He is remembered in several geographic place names, the Australian plant genus *Billardiera*, and a large number of plant species, a few of which also occur in New Zealand.



Notogrammitis billardierei

Members of the genus, commonly known as finger ferns or strap ferns, are recognised by their narrow undivided fronds with the sori forming a herringbone pattern on the underside. A fairly common fern in New Zealand and Australia, *Notogrammitis billardierei* (Greek *noto* 'southern' and *gramma* 'line') grows as a low epiphyte on trees and tree ferns, rocks or occasionally on the ground, in lowland forest to subalpine scrub.