

Sydney Parkinson (1745 – 1771)

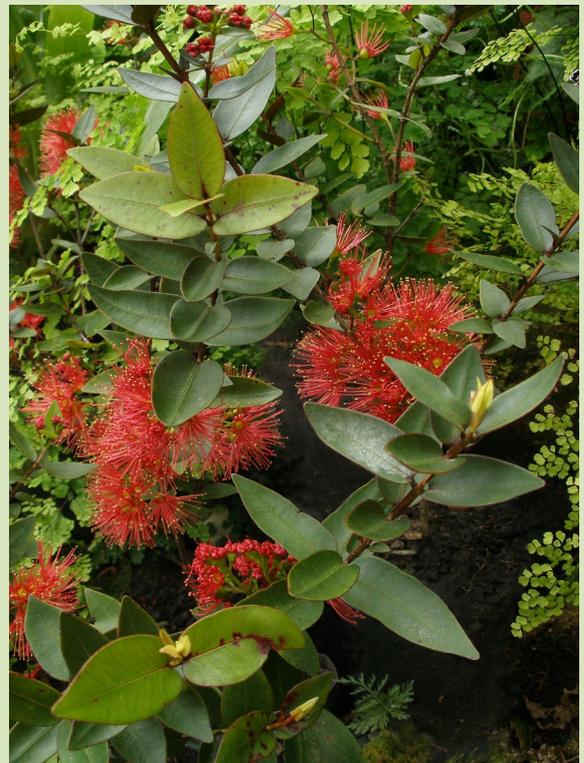
Sydney Parkinson, the botanical artist on Cook's first voyage to New Zealand, was born around 1745, the second son of Joel Parkinson, a respected brewer and Quaker of Edinburgh, Scotland. He was apprenticed to a wool draper, and his familiarity with the classics and the quality of his artwork suggest he received a good education and expert art training. He may have attended classes at De La Cour's drawing school in Edinburgh, which had been set up mainly to improve the quality of design in textile manufacture. In his spare time he painted watercolours, especially of flowers.

When his father died in about 1765, leaving considerable debts, Sydney and his mother moved to London, where some of his flower paintings were exhibited. The celebrated Hammersmith nurseryman James Lee, a fellow Quaker, Scot and family friend, employed him to give drawing lessons to his 13-year-old daughter Ann, and also helped with introductions. James Lee was a friend of Joseph Banks – his ward Harriet Blosset became engaged to Banks shortly before Cook's voyage. Parkinson was introduced to Banks, who then commissioned him to illustrate some of the material in his collection, and two years later offered him the position of natural history artist on the voyage.

Parkinson illustrated the many specimens collected at the first ports of call, but his workload increased with the sudden death in Tahiti of fellow artist Alexander Buchan, whose task had been to record landscape and people-related subjects. Parkinson was no longer able to finish all his illustrations, but aided by assistant naturalist Herman Spöring, he always included enough detail for them to be completed after the voyage. Nor did he have the time to indulge in the usual excesses of seafarers ashore. However, in New Zealand he obviously enjoyed the five days the naturalists were able to have at Tolaga Bay, and wrote favourable impressions of the countryside and vegetation.

He made watercolours of nearly 200 of the 360 plants collected in New Zealand, working quickly and sometimes all night, under the watchful eyes of Banks and Solander checking for scientific accuracy. As the *Endeavour* made its way up the east coast of Australia on the homeward journey she was badly holed on the Great Barrier Reef and had to call at Batavia (now Jakarta) for repairs. Disease was rife in the filthy port town, and during the three months there, nearly all the men became ill. Seven died, and before they reached England there were a further 27 deaths, including that of Sydney Parkinson, in his 26th year, on 26 January 1771.

During the voyage Parkinson, under very difficult conditions, made 955 botanical drawings, 280 of them in colour. Although most were incomplete, the detail they included enabled them to be finished by skilled artists and engravers hired by Banks after the voyage. Parkinson's journal was published posthumously. When Henry Travers discovered a new rātā in the hills near Collingwood in 1882, botanist John Buchanan named it in honour of Sydney Parkinson. The *Banks' Florilegium*, which includes 183 prints in the New Zealand section, was finally published in the 1980s. Complete sets are held by a few New Zealand museums, and in late 2011 New Plymouth's Puke Ariki was gifted the 48 prints that featured in its "Shadowing Venus" exhibition.



Metrosideros parkinsonii

Metrosideros (Greek *metra* 'womb, core'; *sideron*, 'iron') refers to the dense heartwood of the genus, which contains around 54 species spread across the Pacific Ocean. Of New Zealand's twelve species (all endemic), six are trees, and the remainder lianes or woody climbers. In its natural habitat *Metrosideros parkinsonii* grows as a shrub to small spindly tree up to 10 metres high, with a slender trunk and leathery leaves 25–75 mm long. The flowers are bright crimson with prominent stamens, and usually appear from below the leaves during September and October. Capsules are five-ribbed. Thought for nearly 40 years to be confined to the western side of the South Island, it was later found growing on the high ridges of Great and Little Barrier islands – an unusual distribution!

