

Thomas Pennant (1726 – 1798)

Thomas Pennant was born at Downing, the family home in Flintshire, North Wales, on 14 June 1726, the son of David Pennant and Arabella (née Mytton). He attributed his passion for natural history to a book by Francis Willoughby on ornithology, given to him by a relative when he was twelve years old. After his early education at a school in Wrexham, he received further tuition in London, and at the age of 18 entered Queen's College, Oxford. Although he was there for several years, like many of his contemporaries he left without completing a degree. His liking for cataloguing flora, fauna and antiquities was confirmed, however, and from a tour he made in Cornwall in 1746 or 1747 came a strong interest in geology and discovery of the joys of travel.



Pennantia corymbosa

Pennantia contains three Australasian species. Both New Zealand species are endemic. *Pennantia corymbosa* (Latin *corymbus* 'wreath' or 'cluster') is a tree 10 metres or more in height with 3–10 cm long irregularly toothed alternate leaves. The juvenile stage is a shrub of slender intertwined branches with distinctive small, often three-lobed "duck's foot" leaves. The fragrant white flowers are in terminal clusters, male and female on separate trees. The male flowers have unusually long stamens. The fruit, a one-seeded black glossy drupe, is a favourite food of the bellbird, from which the tree gets its Māori name, kaikōmako. The tree was important to pre-European Māori, who used the wood for firemaking. It is found in lowland forest in the North and South islands.

In subsequent years he travelled widely in the British Isles and on the European continent. The accounts of his journeys in Scotland, London and North Wales are among his best literary works and are invaluable records of relics that have since perished. His principal zoological work, *British Zoology*, appeared in four volumes between 1761 and 1777; he also wrote on the zoology of India and the Arctic. His most ambitious literary undertaking was *Outlines of the Globe*, but only four of the 22 manuscript volumes have been published. Although meticulously researched, and with high quality illustrations, the majority by his full-time artist Moses Griffith, his natural history works contributed little that was new.

His learned circle of friends and correspondents, among them Linnaeus, Banks and Solander, responded generously to his commissions and requests. Although Pennant knew little Welsh, depending on others to translate and research from original sources, his respect for the language, people, history and landscape of Wales is evident in his writing. He also had the foresight to collect material for his publications while in the regions he visited. He was an avid collector and a prolific writer – in his famous autobiography *The Literary Life* (1793) he states that he sometimes marvelled at his own industry. Most of the information known of Thomas Pennant is from this book.

Pennant married twice. His first wife Elizabeth was the daughter of James Falconer of Chester, and Ann, his second wife, was the daughter of his neighbour Sir Thomas Mostyn, another keen antiquarian and collector of manuscripts. Each of his wives bore him a son and a daughter. After five years of declining health, Thomas Pennant died at Downing on 16 December 1798, aged 72, and was buried in the church of his native parish, Whitford.

Of the many honours, both foreign and British, that Pennant received, the one he valued most was his election in 1757 as a member of the Royal Society of Uppsala. Botanically, he is remembered in the genus *Pennantia*, described in 1775 by the Forsters, father and son, who during Cook's second voyage collected (probably at Queen Charlotte Sound) a plant they named *Pennantia corymbosa*. An earlier collection by Banks and Solander on Cook's first expedition, and an uncompleted watercolour by Parkinson (now in the Natural History Museum, London), had not been followed up by publication of a formal description.