

John Richardson (1787 – 1865)

John Richardson, the eldest of Gabrielle Richardson and Anne Mundell's twelve children, was born on 5 November 1787 in Dumfries, Scotland, where his father was a prosperous brewer, provost for a term, and magistrate. John attended Dumfries Grammar School and at the age of 14 was apprenticed to his uncle, James Mundell, a Dumfries surgeon. From 1801 to 1804 he studied medical and other subjects at the University of Edinburgh. After two years as house surgeon at Dumfries and Galloway Royal Infirmary, he completed his qualification at Edinburgh, and in 1807 began a career as surgeon in the Royal Navy. He saw action in several campaigns during the Napoleonic wars, and at the end of hostilities returned to Edinburgh to complete his doctorate, graduating in 1816. He practised briefly in Leith, and in 1818 married Mary Stiven.



Hibiscus richardsonii

The genus *Hibiscus* (the Latin name for marsh mallow) contains about 200–220 species of flowering herbaceous plants, shrubs and small trees throughout the world. Puarangi, the New Zealand native *Hibiscus richardsonii*, is an annual to short-lived perennial herb up to 1 metre tall. Unlike the naturalised *Hibiscus trionum*, to which it has been erroneously referred, *H. richardsonii* has uniformly white, cream to very pale yellow flowers, sometimes with pale reddish-pink striations near the base of the petals. Strictly coastal, in recently disturbed habitats, it is found in northern New Zealand and a small area of eastern Australia. Our other indigenous species, *H. diversifolius*, is a prickly shrub with dark purple-centred yellow flowers.

Richardson's Arctic service began in 1819 when he was assigned to John Franklin's first expedition as surgeon and naturalist, and continued on his second, more successful, expedition a few years later. The natural history discoveries of the expeditions were recorded in two major works. *Flora Boreali-Americana* (1833–40), edited by William Jackson Hooker, dealt mainly with the collections of Richardson and assistant naturalist Thomas Drummond. Richardson's *Fauna Boreali-Americana* (1829–37), in four volumes, with William Swainson as collaborator on birds and William Kirby on insects, established him as one of the foremost biologists of his time.

For ten years he was chief medical officer at the Melville Hospital, Chatham, and there, after the death of his wife, he married Mary Booth of Stuckney, England, a niece of Sir John Franklin. In 1835 he was assigned senior physician to the Royal Navy Hospital at Haslar near Portsmouth. Under his guidance it became an important centre for natural history studies as well as medical research, and he became well known as an ichthyologist, and mentor to younger naturalists. His second wife died in 1845, leaving seven children, and two years later he entered a third marriage, with Mary Fletcher of Edinburgh. He was knighted in 1846.

In 1848, when he was 60, he made a last trip to the Canadian Arctic to search for Franklin's missing ships *Terra* and *Nova*. Although nothing was found until several years later, valuable information was obtained about the region and described in *An Arctic Searching Expedition* (1851). After 48 years as naval surgeon, he retired in 1855 and lived his last ten years in the Lake District. He continued to write and publish, but isolated from resources, he eventually gave up natural history and became a reader for what became the *Oxford English Dictionary*. He died at Grasmere, Westmoreland, England, on 5 June 1865.

At least one of the many animal and plant species and Canadian physical features named in honour of Sir John Richardson has New Zealand links: Mount Richardson, east of Lake Louise, was named by Sir James Hector on the Palliser expedition of 1857–1860. *Hibiscus richardsonii*, an annual herb found in New South Wales, Australia, and northern parts of New Zealand, commemorates his contemporary but less known namesake John Matthew Richardson (1797–1882). [See *Common Ground: who's who in New Zealand botanical names - Supplement*, p 39]