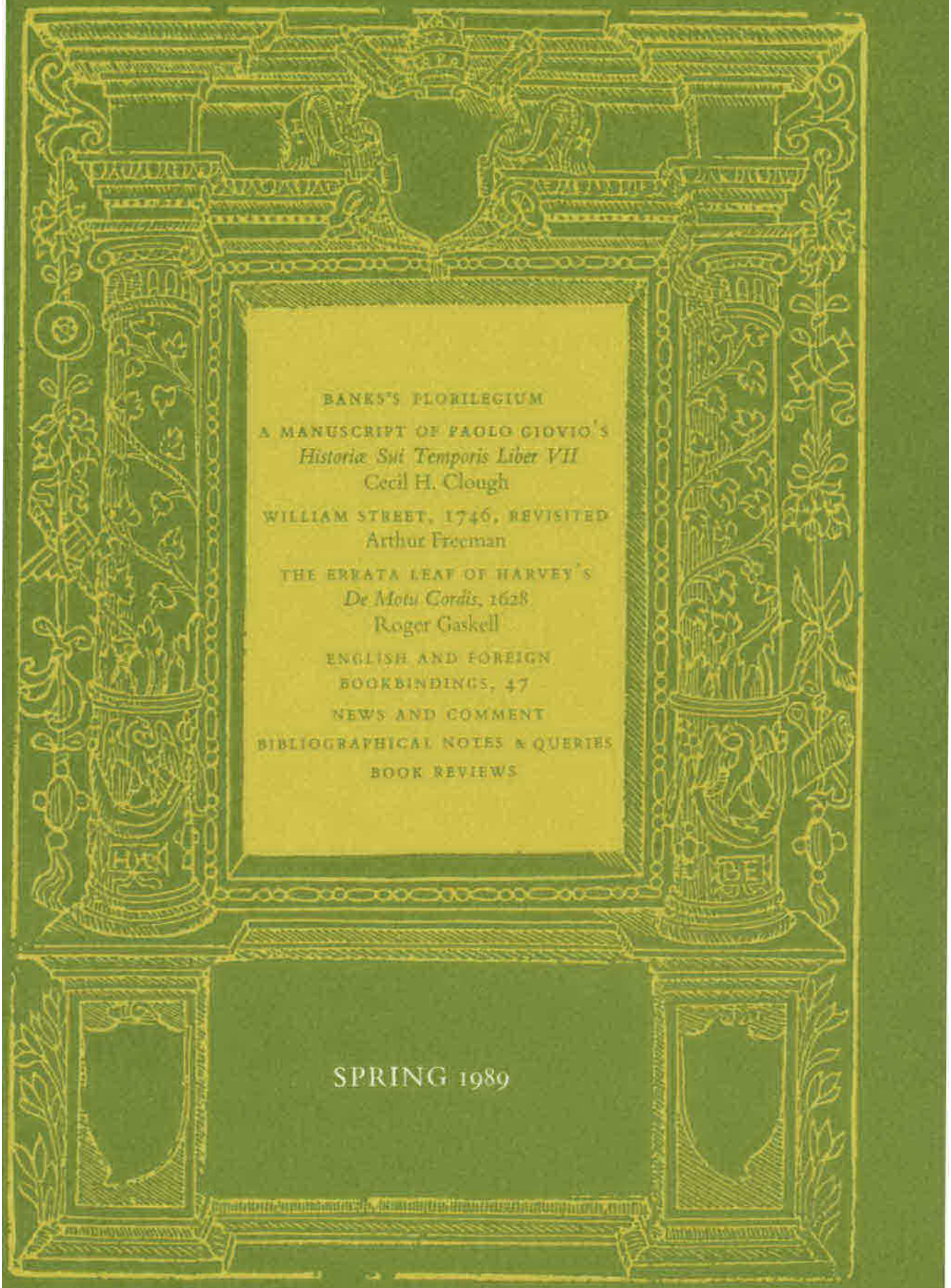
The Book Collector



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THE BOOK COLLECTOR

BANKS'S FLORILEGIUM

It is now just over ten years since the great scheme to print the Florilegium began: ten years later, and 100 sets of 738 plates, each print individually coloured, have come into existence.[1] It is a triumph on many scores: a triumph of imagination, to conceive such an enterprise; a triumph of aesthetic sensibility, to realize that plates originally intended to be printed in black could be rendered in colour with such magical beauty, yet truth to nature; a triumph of technical skill, to restore the tarnished plates and print them with unerring precision, maintaining the same high standard from first to last; a triumph of salesmanship, to persuade collectors and institutions (the latter predictably harder to catch than the former) to invest in an enterprise that would take so long to bring to fruition; a triumph, above all, of tenacity to bring such a colossal enterprise, through ups and downs (for there have been set-backs in its progress), to a final successful conclusion. The printing of the last plate, this very month, offers the occasion to look back over the chain of events, not ten but more than 200 years long, that ends in March 1989.

According to Banks (but the tale was first told two years after his death), he was smitten spontaneously with a passionate interest in nature when he was a school-boy. In fact, it was a gift inherited from his mother, and (perhaps even more important) it was in the air. It is hard to recapture now the European enthusiasm and veneration for Linnaeus, successor of Newton and predecessor of Darwin as the centre of an intellectual fashion that spread beyond his subject. Just as Newtonian physics seemed to offer a new range of explicable phenomena to the universe, so Linnean classification, the biological filiation of natural phenomena, made another aspect of nature comprehensible. Linnaeus's travels in boreal Lapland, exotic in themselves, gave an added interest to the extension of Linnean classification to the flora of unknown parts of the world.

1 *Banks' Florilegium*, published by Alecto Historical Editions in association with the British Museum (Natural History), was completed in March 1989.

The story of Banks's persuasion of the Royal Society (and the Royal Society's of the Admiralty) to add the needs of natural history to those of astronomy in Captain Cook's first voyage of exploration needs no repetition. As John Ellis wrote to Linnaeus: 'No people ever went to sea better fitted out for the purpose of natural history', and Gilbert White expressed the general expectation:

> May we hope that this strong impulse, which urges forward this distinguished naturalist to brave the intemperance of every climate, may also lead him to the discovery of something highly beneficial to mankind? If he survives, with what delight shall we peruse his Journals, his Fauna, his Flora?[2]

Besides Daniel Solander, pupil of Linnaeus and Banks's closest friend, were the two artists, Alexander Buchan, the topographical draughtsman, and Sydney Parkinson, of whose skill as a botanical artist Banks already had experience. Banks's journal shows that the methodical habits for which he was to become famous were early applied. Every day, specimens were preserved and recorded, by Banks's secretary Heinrich Spöring in words and by Parkinson in drawings. Animal specimens were preserved in glass jars and plants pressed between waste sheets of Joseph Addison *Notes upon the twelve books of Paradise Lost, collected from the Spectator* 1738 acquired by Banks for the purpose, an oddly apt choice.[3] Books also made a more conventional part of the expedition's equipment. Besides nautical manuals, such as Blanckly

2 Letter to Thomas Pennant, 8 October 1768.

3 The reason for the availability of these sheets can be surmised. Addison's *Notes* had been extracted from *The Spectator* and first printed in 1719 in 12mo, clearly uniform with the tenth edition of *Paradise Lost*, printed in the same year. Jacob Tonson held the copyright in both works, which were much pirated, principally in Holland, a fate that overtook the fifteenth edition of *Paradise Lost* (which, with the *Notes*, was printed in 1738) in 1739. The *Notes* were not again legitimately reprinted, probably due to the success of Thomas Newton's 'new edition' of *Paradise Lost* in 1749. But the 1738 *Notes*, if out of date, were not forgotten or unavailable, and in 1765 again attracted the attention of pirates. In that year, another edition appeared, on very cheap paper, printed by H. Taylor at Berwick-upon-Tweed, and with two different imprints: 'London, Printed for A. Millard in the Strand, and R. Dorsley in Pall-Mall, MDCCLXV' and 'London, Printed for B. Millar in the Strand, and P. Dodsley in Pall-Mall'. The real A. Millar and R. Dodsley were presumably guiltless on both counts, but this invasion, so soon before Banks's departure, no doubt induced Tonson to part with the surviving sheets of the 1738 edition of the now obsolete *Notes*.

A naval expositor 1750, and the works of Linnaeus, were the latest books on the Pacific, Charles de Brosses *Histoires des navigations aux terres australes* 1756 and Alexander Dalrymple's *An account of the discoveries made in the South Pacific Ocean, previous to 1764*, 1767 (Banks had an early copy), to which Parkinson added Hogarth's *Analysis of beauty* 1753, with Pope's Homer, Ovid, Shakespeare and *Don Quixote*.[4]

There was much about the journey that affronted Parkinson's Quaker sensibilities, but he achieved a poetry in the composition of his drawings which survived his own death and their transformation into engravings. Poetry in botanical art is a quality that has always been closely associated with innovation in botanical science, and one would have to go back to the unknown artist of Besler *Hortus Eystettensis* 1613 to find a parallel in quantity, innovation and artistic skill for what Banks had in mind. Parkinson's method was the familiar one of making a rapid sketch of the plant from nature (often against time, before a picked specimen had time to wilt), with a patch or two of colour and written notes on colour. These he would later convert into finished drawings. By the time of his death in January 1771, in the dreadful aftermath of the *Endeavour*'s sojourn in Batavia, he had produced 955 drawings, of which 280 had been converted into full colour drawings with botanical notes.

There is no evidence that Banks had intended a more substantial or permanent record of the expedition's botanical discoveries, at least until 1773 when he went with his cousin Charles Greville to Holland. There he visited Pierre Lyonnet and met Gerhard Sibelius, who was to become one of the engravers of the *Florilegium*. Linnaeus, fearful that Banks and Solander might sail again with the *Resolution* and the drawings be neglected, wrote to Ellis:

> Consider, my friend, if these treasures are kept back what may happen to them. They may be devoured by vermin of all kinds. The house where they are lodged may be burnt. Those destined to describe them may die . . . By all that is great and good I entreat you, who know so well the value of science, to do all that in you lies for the publication of these new acquisitions that the learned world may not be deprived of them.

Banks's first task was to complete the watercolour drawings. John Frederick Miller and his brother James, John Clevely and Thomas

4 See D. J. Carr, 'The books that sailed in the *Endeavour*', *Endeavour*, N.S. VIII (1983), pp. 140–4.

Burgis added 213 drawings to the 280 Parkinson had completed, and the task was completed by Frederick Polydore Nodder who made 271 drawings. The engraving of the illustrations began at the same time. In October 1773 Benjamin Franklin noted that Banks was employing ten engravers: 'He is very curious so as not to be quite satisfied with the expression given by either the graver, etching or mezzotint, particularly where there is a woolliness or a multitude of small points on a leaf'. Banks's curiosity went back to May 1767 and an earlier journey through Wales with Charles Greville and Paul Sandby, soon to become chief drawing master at the Royal Military Academy, when Greville introduced Sandby to the aquatint process. As in so many other respects, Banks mastered the details of an art that would serve his scientific purposes: his correspondence with Peter Perez Burdett, the Liverpool pioneer of aquatint, in the winter of 1773–4 shows him considering the light line in Knorr's *Deliciae naturae selectae*, 1766–7, which made delicate hand-colouring possible, and rejecting it in favour of fully detailed engraving. Three main engravers accounted for two-thirds of the plates, Daniel MacKenzie (251), Sibelius (195) and Gabriel Smith (118), while another fifteen engravers were responsible for the rest. Progress was necessarily slow and the work was still incomplete in November 1784 when Banks wrote to Ellis: 'All that is left is so little that it can be completed in two months, if only the engravers can come to put the finishing touches to it'. Perhaps three sets of proofs were taken, one of which survives at the British Museum (Natural History) with a group of twenty-eight, probably sent to the Akademie der Wissenschaften in Berlin, where it remains. Altogether, 743 plates were engraved.

By now, Banks had many other concerns. Already in 1773 he had become director of the Royal Gardens at Kew, and in 1778 President of the Royal Society. In 1789 Solander died untimely, and with his death went the last chance that Banks might find time and means to publish the plates, with an appropriate text. In 1791, Banks was still hopeful that it would appear, with Solander's name on the title-page as well as his own:

> While he was alive, there was hardly a passage composed on which he was not represented. Since all the descriptions were made when the plants were fresh, nothing remains to be done, except to fully work out the drawings still not finished, and to record the synonyms which we did not have with us or which have come out since.

Nothing more happened to the plates during Banks's lifetime, and they passed on his death with his library and other collections to the British Museum, the main object of his generosity during his lifetime. Banks's last librarian, Robert Brown, remained in charge of the collections until his death in 1858. It was not until the 1890s, by which time their scientific novelty had been superseded by later writers, Brown himself, Bentham and Drake del Castillo, that interest in the plates revived after the natural history collections of the British Museum had been transferred to South Kensington. Then William Carruthers, Keeper of Botany, urged publication of the plates to the Trustees, and his successor, George Murray, arranged for the publication by James Britten of the 318 plates of Australian flora, printed not from the original plates but by transfer lithography, between 1900 and 1905, as *Illustrations of Australian Plants collected in 1770*.

The plates were not, as sometimes suggested, lost to science in the interval, but they were not easy to consult; they were stored separately, and represented a formidable mass, in volume and weight. The original prints, each together with Parkinson's original sketch and the corresponding finished drawing, with, for the Australian subjects, the lithographic copies, were arranged in geographic order and bound in eighteen substantial volumes. In 1963, Dr William Stearn, of the British Museum (Natural History) Botany Department, arranged for some of the plates to be proofed at the Royal College of Art near by to test the quality of the engraving and the state of the plates. They were found to be in much better state than had been expected, and a set of thirty, chosen for artistic rather than botanic reasons, were printed at the College. It took a long time, and it was not until 1973 that *Captain Cook's Florilegium* (as it was called, for bicentennial reasons) appeared from the College's Lion and Unicorn Press, in an edition of 100, with introductory texts by Wilfrid Blunt and William Stearn, at 150 guineas. This pioneering work set the scene for what was to follow; unfortunately, five plates were lost during the process. The work was subscribed long in advance, and was therefore sold out on publication, which somewhat diminished its impact on the world at large.

Although Editions Alecto did not become formally involved in publishing the plates for another five years, their interest in them went back to the earliest years of the company (incorporated in 1962). The print making at the Royal College of Art was done by Mick Rand, who had previously run Alecto's first etching studio. A proposal by

the company, then fully engaged in producing prints by modern artists, that they should print and publish the plates was rejected by the Natural History Museum. Editions Alecto had its ups and downs in the years that followed, but in 1975 they were engaged to publish the sequence of 306 aquatint plates (out of an original 308) of William Daniell's *A voyage round Great Britain* (1814–25), an amazing survival discovered by Iain Bain, Head of Publications at the Tate Gallery, at the ancient firm of Thomas Ross, then in the Hampstead Road. The ninety sets were soon sold out, and Editions Alecto had discovered a new market for historic prints.

Their eyes turned towards the *Florilegium* plates for a number of almost accidental reasons. Nigel Frith, one of their salesmen, was a neighbour at Kew of Chris Humphries of the Botany Department at the Museum. At the same time, John Hawkins, a Sydney antique dealer, had suggested the reproduction of Thomas Watling's early views of Sydney (now in the Natural History Museum) as a possible project, which Alecto had rejected, not being then (this was before the great Domesday project) in the facsimile business. All this revived the idea of a more substantial publication of the *Florilegium* plates. The Museum was approached with a proposal for an edition of 'perhaps 300 plates printed in black' and 150 copies, as a joint publication, in September 1978; a smaller edition of some of the plates, coloured by hand, was also discussed.

While this was under consideration, on the night of 5–6 December 1978, the Editions Alecto studios at 27 Kelso Place in Kensington were burnt down, a calamity which had an immediate and, in the long term, perhaps even beneficial impact on the project. Among those retained to salvage and restore the stock was Edward Egerton-Williams, a student of the Winchester College of Art, who had joined the firm in September 1977 and had already done some work on the Daniell plates. Egerton-Williams began to explore the possibilities of colour printing. Banks had corresponded with Peter Perez Burdett about this. Hand colouring the plates direct had already been used in 1728 for Elisha Kirkall's mezzotints after Jacob van Huysum for the *Historia plantarum variorum* of John Martyn, professor of Botany at Cambridge, who found Banks his first instructor in botany, but the majority of the eighteenth-century natural history books were coloured with water-based pigments painted on to each print by hand. The knowledge that plates were to be coloured allowed the engraver to reduce the amount

of detail depicted in engraved line. As Franklin noticed, Banks rejected any such simplification and demanded all the detail that engraving could supply. Egerton-Williams was now given some of the *Florilegium* plates to try out, working mostly by himself in a temporary studio.

Egerton-Williams's first experiments showed that the plates could be printed, and without too much difficulty. Adding colour to monochrome prints, however, was a failure: it was too slow, and the colour obscured the engraved detail. So colouring *à la poupée*, with a cotton dolly, was tried. The results were markedly better, and Paul Hulton of the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum warmly endorsed the proofs he was shown: 'if Banks could see these proofs this is the way he would have had them done'. So Editions Alecto, with no clear understanding then of the implication of time and money, announced that it would publish all 738 plates in full colour, and an agreement was duly signed with the Natural History Museum on 6 October 1979.

Almost immediately, Joe Studholme of Editions Alecto and his wife set off for Australia. They found considerable interest among institutions there, but it was Kerry Packer, to whom they were introduced by John Hawkins, who put the whole enterprise on a firm footing. He not only bought two sets (thus becoming the first person to put down money for the *Florilegium*), but offered to underwrite the whole of the part of the edition (forty sets) allocated to Australia. The enthusiasm they discovered convinced Editions Alecto that an edition of 100 was possible. Egerton-Williams was appointed master-printer for the project and premises for a stock room and studio, with a good north light, where up to twenty people could work, were taken at 15 Appold Street, in the east of the City of London. Work began in May 1980, just as Editions Alecto itself moved back to Kelso Place, no longer (after eighteen years of work) its studio, but still its office. In August, the prospectus was issued; in October, the project was officially launched at a party at Kelso Place, to which representatives were invited from all the countries where Banks and Solander collected; in November, a press reception was held at the Natural History Museum, and in December, another launching party for the U.S.A. was held at the Grolier Club in New York.

It is important to record at this stage the continuing complexity of the task undertaken by Egerton-Williams and the studio. The plates

themselves, though miraculously free from damage, needed careful preparation. The effects of 'foul-biting' – damage caused by acid adsorbed over 200 years by the paper wrappings and transferred to the metal – had to be carefully burnished out. Old ink from the first proofs had set rock-hard in the incised lines, and needed repeated application of solvents and washing to remove. The surface had to be smoothed and burnished with specially chrome-coated tools. Once the perfect printing surface had been recovered, it had to be protected from the risks of damage caused by repeated inking. Steel-plating was not strong enough, nor was commercial chrome-plating; pure chrome, the quality used in hydraulic presses (and for the burnishing tools), was essential.

The paper, too, a dense but lightly sized 300 gsm mould-made stock from the St Cuthbert's mill in Somerset, required careful handling. Each sheet had to be individually scrutinized on a light-box for flaws, and the rejection rate has been high. The inks were specially made up most by Charbonnel in Paris, anything up to twenty needed for each plate, although in general no more than ten were used. They were applied not only with the traditional lint-free tarlatan dabbers (the *poupées*), but sable brushes, scrim, and box after box of cotton-wool buds. The plate was proofed and reproofed until an acceptable image was achieved, and the final proof checked against the drawing – and sometimes, if the drawing was defective, against the plant itself, using the R.H.S. colour charts as a reference. All the colouring information was recorded on the final proof, which only then was stamped by Chris Humphries as *bon à tiré*, 'bat' for short.

Depending on the range and complexity of the colours, the printing could take a mere twenty minutes for each impression or go so slowly that only three prints would be achieved in a day. Before each plate was declared finished, each print was examined and any that did not come up to standard rejected. The spoilage rate averaged over 20 per cent; the 'run' allowed for 116 impressions, increased for difficult subjects. Each run was handled by the same artist, in the interests of absolute uniformity. It was tedious work, and the average work-span of the printers (mostly drawn, like Egerton-Williams, from art schools) was one year, although a nucleus stayed with the project from its inception.

Maintaining this standard of materials and workmanship over ten years was fraught with difficulties. To achieve absolute precision, the

paper was only lightly damped and the ink left thick; this required very high pressure on the press-cylinders which sometimes cracked under the strain. The supply of sable for the brushes from Kashmir was interrupted by war, as was that of lapis lazuli for the cerulean blue from Afghanistan. The chrome-plating firm went bankrupt (mercifully to be restarted), and so did the suppliers of tarlatan. The lease on the premises at Appold Street was terminated and the whole Egerton-Williams studio had to be transferred to similar old warehouse premises with a good north light at Earl Street, near by.

The few defects in the plates have been made good with scrupulous care. In one case (Plate 94, *Acacia humifusa*), the engraving of the plate was left unfinished, the completed area only was printed in colours, and the *un*finished in sepia. The five missing plates are being re-engraved, using the black proofs pulled in the eighteenth century as a guide. These 'new' plates have been printed in the same way, and numbered in sequence with the original plates. No drawings were made for the New Zealand ferns, which must have been engraved direct from specimens. Here the colouring was taken from living specimens.

All these and others difficulties have now been surmounted, and each series, one each for Madeira and Brazil, three for Tierra del Fuego, four for the Society Islands, eight for New Zealand, fifteen for Australia and two for Java, is encased in separate boxes, thirty-four in all for each set. Within each box is a list of plates, and the botanical, geographical and historical information that goes with each print, with the names of the artists and engravers, is printed on a window mount. All this has been designed and printed letterpress by Ian Mortimer of I. M. Imprimit. The boxes themselves are, appropriately, Solander cases, made by G. Ryder and Co. Ltd. Altogether, 116 sets have been made, 100 for sale, ten *hors commerce*, three to the printers, and three sets to be used (and abused) for exhibition purposes.

This elaborate and exacting process could not have reached its triumphant conclusion without the interest and support of its subscribers, private collectors and institutional collections. Some, a few, have fallen by the wayside, but the vast majority have stood by an investment that has grown from £45,000 a set to £150,000 today (but only two sets are still for sale). Among them are thirty-nine institutions, seven in Britain (the Natural History Museum, the Royal Society, the National Libraries of Scotland and Wales, the University Library,

Cambridge, Birmingham City and Belfast Central Libraries), ten in Australia, fourteen in the U.S.A. (but none in South America), two each in Sweden and Japan, and one in New Zealand, France, Germany and Canada. It is a remarkable record of perseverance on the part of the subscribers as well as the publishers.

The interest that this represents has been stimulated by a much wider public curiosity. An important element in this was the 13th International Botanical Congress at Sydney in July 1981. In preparation for it, Sailorman Films made a documentary on the production process of the *Florilegium*, and Studholme and Egerton-Williams attended, to lecture and demonstrate the printing process. The Mitchell Library put on a special exhibition of Banksian material. It was at this Congress that they met Brian Adams, a freelance television producer and writer, when the idea of a film about the *Florilegium*, from beginning to end, was first broached. The film, 'The Flowering of the Pacific', was made and first screened at the Natural History Museum on 13 June 1984, and Adams's book, with the same title, was published in March 1986. American public interest was captured for it by the 'Flowering of Science' exhibition, which opened in April 1983 as part of the Britain Salutes New York Festival and then went on a three-year tour of North America under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institute Travelling Exhibition Service.

Many more people, thus, have come to hear and see some of the splendours of Banks's *Florilegium* even before the printing is complete. One by-product of the success of the venture, in particular, has testified to this interest. On 3 March 1988 Sotheby's held an auction at the Natural History Museum at which 120 plates (from the seventh *hors commerce* set) were sold for over £50,000 on behalf of the 'Banks Alecto Endeavour Fellowship', a scheme to promote research in natural history by young scientists in any country (not the recipient's own) visited by the collectors of the *Endeavour*. Other auctions for this laudable purpose are planned in Australia (two), New Zealand, and the U.S.A.

And so, in March 1989, the last print is ready, with an index and seven plates proofed in black as a final *bonne bouche* for each subscriber. When Editions Alecto first issued its prospectus of the *Florilegium*, it described the venture as follows:

Banks' Florilegium has been published in the firm belief that from the combined points of view of science, history and the art of botanical engraving there is no satisfactory substitute for a comprehensive printing from the original plates. The historical interest and aesthetic quality of these engravings speak for themselves. From the scientific point of view the engravings are highly relevant to the correct application of a number of botanical names. They have the advantage of depicting species from the dried specimens. *Banks' Florilegium* will facilitate comparisons between the earliest graphic depictions and subsequent written descriptions.

All this is true, but how much less than the whole truth! It needed faith in these objectives in the first place, true enough, but without the technical skill and indefatigable perfectionism of Edward Egerton-Williams, without, most of all, the determination of Joe Studholme, faith alone would have not been enough. The technical expertise deployed in a task so 'labour-intensive' as to defeat or at least deter the wealthiest and most powerful promoter of natural history in the eighteenth century, when manual skills were relatively cheap, makes this perhaps the most important achievement in the graphic arts of this century. What made it possible was skilful promotion by a master of the soft sell, a genius at finding subscribers in unlikely places and maintaining their faith for the best part of a decade.

It is an achievement to be proud of, and one of which we should all be proud. The voyage of the *Endeavour* was a landmark in the deployment of British nautical and scientific skills, one which inspired and made possible the other later and now perhaps better known voyages of the *Resolution*, the *Bounty*, down to the *Discovery*. It is not too much to assert for the final publication of its work a place beside the great discoveries themselves. No doubt Editions Alecto will find new fields to conquer, but never one which combines so much graphic, scientific and historical importance in one great venture such as this.