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# Histories

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## The Climb of the Ancient Mariner

In 1871 Sir Leslie Stephen acknowledged the work of eighteenth century British poet James Thomson in shaping new attitudes towards appreciating the mountains.<sup>1</sup> Later, as editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* he wrote about the life and work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, unaware that there already existed a link between these two poets and the ascent of a mountain nearly one hundred years before, on the other side of the world.

Members of the 1998 Mt Sparrman Expedition have returned from Fiordland National Park confident in the knowledge that they have retraced the route of New Zealand's first mountain climbing trip undertaken by Europeans, 225 years ago. If mountain climbing is deliberately seeking to get to the top of a significant peak where some sort of skill and stamina are required, then this is it.

Although we failed to find any hard evidence to determine which mountain was climbed, we can assume it was the mountain named 'Mt Sparrman' on contemporary maps. The topography of the area corresponds with the account of the first ascent and seems to eliminate other nearby mountains. The name first appears on a map published in 1872 using details collected by the survey party from the *Acheron* in 1850-51. From this we can infer 'that the name was given by someone in the Hydrographic Office, presumably the Hydrographer Admiral Beaufort, who had a well developed historical sense'.<sup>2</sup>

The mountain was named after Anders Sparrman (1748-1820) the son of a Swedish clergyman. As a precocious youth of nine he was enrolled at Uppsala University, and began his medical studies as a lad of fourteen. At seventeen he went to sea as a ship's doctor on a voyage to China lasting two years. He eventually became one of the leading students of Sweden's great naturalist Linnaeus, the man who gave the world the binomial system of classification. In 1772 he went to the Cape of Good Hope to undertake a botanical survey for the Swedish Government. While the *Resolution* was there taking on new provisions, Johann and George Forster met Sparrman and invited him to join them. They were aware of their lack of botanical knowledge and were under pressure to live up to the precedent established by Banks on Cook's first voyage.

[Sparman] saw not just plants, animals and rocks, but the landscape as a whole and appreciated its great beauty. 'Even the beauty of the mountains, that his contemporaries were so inexplicably blind to, made an impression on him; as far as I know the feeling that lies behind his description of the view from Table Mountain is quite unparalleled in eighteenth century literature.' He was young, adventurous, exuberant and obviously enjoyed any challenge. When the *Resolution* reached 71 degrees 10 min south and was forced north by the ice, Sparman placed himself as far to the south on the boat as he could, and was later able to boast that he had sailed farther south than anyone else. He disembarked at the Cape of Good Hope where he undertook a long overland journey in southern Africa. Later he became professor of natural history and pharmacology in Stockholm.<sup>3</sup>

The first ascent of Mt Sparman started in the early hours of 23 April 1773 from where Captain Cook's *Resolution* was moored at Pickersgill Harbour in Dusky Sound.<sup>4</sup> This was St George's Day, a day when the routines of shipboard life may have been eased to provide rest and relaxation for the crew. The decision to leave the area had been made, and they were waiting for favourable winds enabling them to sail through what is now known as Acheron Passage to the open sea.

Cook's records show that a party 'went to Cascade Cove in order to clime one of the Mountains, the Summit of which they reached between two and three o'clock in the afternoon as we could see by the smoak of the fire which they had made'.<sup>5</sup> Along with Sparman were Richard Pickersgill, Joseph Gilbert and one other who could have been an able seaman to act as porter. George and Johann Forster, naturalists on the voyage, were to have 'accompanied them on this excursion, but a violent flux attended with gripes'<sup>6</sup> confined them on board. This was attributed to the carelessness of their cook.

Their clothing and footwear were designed for a sea voyage and would have been used expeditiously on this occasion. The officers had 'an everyday uniform of frock jacket with breeches and stockings ... while the seamen wore blue frock jackets, checked shirts, red waistcoats and canvas trousers'.<sup>7</sup> On this occasion they may have worn their 'Fearnought jacket and trowsers' issued by the Admiralty for their voyage through Antarctic waters.<sup>8</sup>

Ahead of them was a four kilometre row to the foot of the climb in one of the ship's small boats. They had 'Pretty fine weather considering the Place but mostly Cloudy with now and then a shower'.<sup>9</sup> Their route led up 'beside a large magnificent waterfall'. They had visited this waterfall several times before, and from their vivid descriptions, and William Hodges' celebrated painting of it (*Cascade Cove, Dusky Bay*) we can assume the scene held some significance for them. 'Here, and only here during the whole voyage, Hodges sought to evoke a mood that may be called, with confidence and precision, romantic.'<sup>10</sup>

Beyond the waterfall, Sparrman records,

I managed to clamber to a high mountain ridge, though with much difficulty ... After a few hours' effort we found ourselves at two o'clock on the peak of the mountain; here owing to its greater height, it was free of forest ... To mark our successful climb we set fire to the extremely dry grass there before descending.<sup>11</sup>

George Forster wrote,

the ascent had been fatiguing enough, ... but the descent was also dangerous, because of many precipices which they met on their way, and along most of this they continued to slide down by the help of trees and bushes ... In the evening we went to meet our travellers in Cascade Cove, and after searching the woods for some time ... we brought them on board with us. At night the fire had spread in a bright circular garland all round the summit of the mountain.<sup>12</sup>

April in Dusky Sound provides only ten hours of daylight, leaving little time to botanise on such an ambitious trip. Johann Forster wrote, 'at a considerable height they found 3 or 4 Cabbage-Palm-trees, one of which they cut down and used for refreshment. The leaves of this tree, which Mr Sparrman preserved, were lost in the dangerous descent; for it was necessary to make all possible haste, for when they reached the boat it was dark night.'<sup>13</sup> We found a small group of Mountain Cabbage trees (*Cordyline indivisa*) growing on the ridge above the tree line. Sparrman did return with some new plant specimens, including the Common South Island Forstera (*Forstera sedifolia*) and a verbal description of the view from the summit which was repeated accurately in more than one journal.<sup>14</sup>

It would be easy to say that the motive for such an ascent was simply exploration, but after four months at sea a day spent in the mountains might be considered as recreation. Cook states their aim, 'to clime one of the mountains' and Sparrman declares 'success' when they reach the summit. From all accounts there was an informal atmosphere during their time in Dusky Sound. Lieutenant Clerke refers to a hunting trip as a 'days sport'<sup>15</sup> and on another occasion William Wales describes an excursion as a 'Days Amusement'.<sup>16</sup> Historians tell us that they were 'able to enjoy five weeks of rest, fresh food and recreation'<sup>17</sup> and that they 'entertained themselves with hunting expeditions'.<sup>18</sup> Captain Cook even 'relaxed a little ... [and went on] an aesthetic excursion.'<sup>19</sup>

Against this background Mt Sparrman was climbed (or 'mounted'<sup>20</sup> to use Johann Forster's quaint expression) and, with scant regard for the inhabitants or the environment, consummated with a fire on the summit, so all could see the birth of New Zealand mountaineering. The fire was still burning two days later.

Our ascent, to celebrate the 225th anniversary of this long-forgotten historic climb, started from the relative comfort of the *M. V. Tutoko*, moored in Cascade Cove. Here we could listen to the latest weather forecast while breakfast was prepared for us, and study the most recently published contour maps of the area in preparation for the climb. Our flight into Cascade Cove the day before had given us a fleeting view of what lay ahead and our clothing, packs and footwear had the benefit of the last 225 years of evolution. We were ready; but it was raining.

Determined to make the ascent on the same day as the original climb, we motored to the foot of the mountain under low cloud, hoping that the weather would improve during the day. Moving up past the waterfall we could recognise Hodges' painting and Sparrman's description. There could be no mistake that this was the route taken in 1773. Beyond the waterfall we continued in steady rain and poor visibility, entering a hanging valley after avoiding some bluffs. From here we found our way to a ridge, presumably the one described by Sparrman, using an ill-defined spur. Having gained the ridge, brief glimpses through swirling mists revealed a potential view west beyond the coastline and north across Resolution Island. The 1773 party had fine weather on the mountain, and they would have returned from this point had their intention been only to gain a view. We continued along the exposed ridge passing through sub-alpine vegetation and eventually open rocky ground, arriving at the summit at 1pm after a five-hour climb.

Unfortunately, visibility was limited on the summit and the weather was deteriorating rapidly. We made a quick search of the summit area with a metal detector in case anything of interest remained, but got no reading. After the obligatory expedition summit photo, a bite to eat and a cursory inspection to ensure we were on a summit and not a bump on the ridge, we beat a hasty retreat down to the protection of the trees. From there we were reminded of Sparrman's account. 'The descent of the mountain was much quicker but much more dangerous; sometimes we were stopped by numerous climbing plants, sometimes perilous ravines barred our way.'<sup>21</sup>

Towards the end of the descent we lingered at the waterfall described by several who kept journals on the voyage.

As official artist, Hodges was employed 'to give a more perfect Idea than can be formed by written description',<sup>22</sup> and his painting did more than document the scene before us. According to art historian Bernard Smith:

Hodges could put his hand to anything. Navigational views, plants and animals, portraits, landscapes and something rather new, a sequence of drawings depicting historical events on the voyage ... He sought to combine the documentary art of the scientific voyages with the classical art of the academies.<sup>23</sup>

In an exhibition catalogue Hodges stated his aim was to give 'dignity to the landscape'.<sup>24</sup> His painting of this waterfall was first sketched during an 'aesthetic excursion' on 11 April, and finished in London two years later.

We can now confirm that the summit of Mt Sparrman is depicted on the skyline of the painting, even though it cannot be seen from the base of the waterfall, as Hodges has shown.<sup>25</sup> Nor was the Maori family, posing beside the waterfall, seen here but elsewhere in Cascade Cove. Hodges used the sublime setting of the waterfall to display recent noteworthy incidents, like the ascent of Mt Sparrman and meeting the Maori family in a style that 'reflected his interest in light and atmosphere'.<sup>26</sup> Sir Joshua Reynolds, in dictating the artistic taste of the day, said 'paintings could be contrived from diverse elements, provided they were harmonized by the controlling imagination'.<sup>27</sup>

Other paintings which include Mt Sparrman were sketched from the *Resolution* as it entered and exited from Dusky Sound. These coastal views were drawn for the benefit of future mariners so they could recognise the area from the sea. Richard Pickersgill and Joseph Gilbert drew or copied these views, and when compared with Hodges' faithful representation, a vertical height exaggeration is seen, and some background omitted to accentuate the ridge we climbed.<sup>28</sup> This is not unlike the cropping and tilting of photographs practised by some mountaineers in more recent years.

When William Wales, astronomer and meteorologist on the voyage, saw the mountain and waterfall, he described it as 'one of Nature's most romantic scenes'.<sup>29</sup> Wales took up teaching mathematics after the voyage and among his pupils was Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who described his teacher as 'a man of uncommonly clear head'.<sup>30</sup> They were in contact for at least thirteen years. Bernard Smith has written a convincing essay showing how this, Cook's second voyage, was of crucial significance for understanding the imaginative origins of Coleridge's poem, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'.<sup>31</sup>

Further study has revealed that a connection exists between Coleridge's poem and Mt Sparrman. A full explanation is long and tedious, and includes lines from 'The Seasons' written by James Thomson in 1730. Sir Leslie Stephen wrote:

It is proper to admire Thomson's 'Seasons' ... The mountains are, so to speak, still in the background ... He sees huge forms in the distance, almost beautiful when lit by the setting sun, but more often looming in vague sublimity through a distinct haze, and gathering storms about their mysterious summits.<sup>32</sup>

From a distance, on the deck of the *Resolution*, Wales saw the mountain and its sublime waterfall free-falling through a narrow opening to the valley below surrounded by mists which formed a rainbow. The summit was no longer mysterious, since his colleagues had been there several days before.

With some alterations, to include the rainbow, Wales quoted sixteen lines from Thomson's poem in his journal that day. J. C. Beaglehole, Cook's biographer, originally assumed the lines were quoted from memory with inaccuracies. Nine years later, wondering about what literature Cook had on the *Resolution*, Beaglehole asks 'Did his friend William Wales sprout Thomson's *Seasons* to him in Dusky Sound, or offer to lend him that well-thumbed book? We do not know.'<sup>33</sup> J R Forster described the waterfall as having an 'impetuous current'<sup>34</sup> suggesting a well-thumbed copy of Thomson was on board. Among the lines Wales chose to quote were,

In one impetuous torrent, down the Steep  
It thundering shot, and shook the country round.  
(*The Seasons*, 'Summer', lines 592-3)

Several days later they experienced a violent storm. Wales wrote, 'In the Night we had Thunder and lightning attended with Hail and in the Morning we saw the Tops of the Hills all round us covered with Snow.'<sup>35</sup> Coleridge who obviously had access to Wales' verbal and written accounts of these events, and every opportunity to see Hodges' painting, wrote:

The thick black cloud was cleft, and still  
The moon was at its side:  
Like waters shot from some high crag  
The lightning fell with never a jag  
A river steep and wide.  
(*'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'*,  
lines 322-326)

Dr Gordon Spence, head of English at the University of Canterbury, has written:

I think you are right about line 324 of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' when you suggest that it is derived from Wales' Journal ... as Coleridge had Cook and Wales in mind when he wrote it.<sup>36</sup>

Coleridge had a passion for climbing hills and scaling mountain peaks. On one occasion while descending Scarfell in 1802, one of his biographers tells us, 'He was in the situation that all rock climbers have experienced at some time or another; he was committed to going down, the slightest slip would mean death and his "limbs were all in a tremble" from exertion.'<sup>37</sup>

Peaks and hill tops are frequently given mystical significance in his poetry ... The panoramic view from a peak often brings moments of intense vision. Moreover, the urge to climb out of civilisation, to get above and beyond may suggest a sort of intellectual claustrophobia,

a longing to free himself not merely from the constraints of domesticity, but from a narrow English culture. He climbed, as it were to see across the whole of Europe. It is also true that the cult of mountain tops, of spiritual communing with nature in her remotest places, becomes a characteristic of Romanticism as a whole. ... This Romantic mountain tradition infiltrates deep into nineteenth century English feeling, producing consequences (such as) the foundation of the British Alpine Club.<sup>38</sup>

It was still raining as we left the waterfall and made our way down through the forest to be picked up on the shore. Our party of thirteen had taken over nine hours to complete the round trip in adverse weather conditions. There were no tracks with orange markers, or computer numbered bridges to pave the way. No receding glaciers had changed the landscape. Isolation and seclusion had preserved the integrity of the first ascent. It was as if we had climbed through Hodges' canvas with a 1773 guidebook, and re-emerged tired, hungry and wet through, despite our post-modern mountain equipment. Our day's amusement on some high crag was over and we were in admiration of those who did the ascent exactly 225 years earlier.

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- 3 Personal correspondence with Stanley Bloom in Sweden. The quote is from a biography of Sparrman by Sten Selander, translated by Bloom. See also A Sparrman, *A Voyage Round the World in HMS Resolution*, Hale, London, 112, 1953.
- 4 The Maori name for the area is Tamatea, after the captain of the early voyaging canoe Takitimu. Cook named it Dusky Bay on his first voyage as it was dusk when he sailed past the entrance. This was later changed to Dusky Sound. The Maori name for Pickersgill Harbour is Whetuu (see Salmond, *Beteen Worlds*, Viking, 45, 1997).
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- I James, *The Source of the Ancient Mariner*. Cardiff, 1890.
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- 33 J C Beaglehole, 'Cook the Man' in G M Badger, *Captain Cook Navigator and Scientist*. Australian National University Press, Canberra, 27, 1970.
- 34 J R Forster, *The Resolution Journal of Johann Reinhold Forster 1772-75*, edited by M E Hoare, 4 vols, London 1982. Vol 2, 784.
- 35 J C Beaglehole (ed). Vol 2, 784, 1955-74.
- 36 Personal correspondence. Another poem by Coleridge which may be connected to the area is 'A Wish' written in 1792.
- 37 R Holmes, *Coleridge Early Visions*, 330, 1989 and J Beer (ed), *Coleridge's Variety. Bicentenary Studies*, 11, 1974.
- 38 R Holmes, page 283.