
Sir Joseph Banks Collection, 1770-1812

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California State Library. Sutro Library

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Descriptive Summary

Title: Sir Joseph Banks Collection, 1770-1812

Dates: 1770-1812

Collection Number: 000183472

Creator/Collector: Banks, Joseph, 1743-1820

Extent: 38 linear feet (85 manuscript boxes, 2 flat boxes, and three bound manuscripts)

Repository: California State Library. Sutro Library

San Francisco, California 94132-4030

Abstract: This collection contains approximately 10,000 documents by and relating to Sir Joseph Banks. These items document the immense scope of Banks' activities during a pivotal point in British history.

Language of Material: English

Access

Please contact the Sutro Library to arrange a time to research the collection.

Publication Rights

The library can only claim physical ownership of the collection. Users are responsible for satisfying any claimants of literary property.

Preferred Citation

Sir Joseph Banks Collection, 1770-1812. California State Library. Sutro Library

Biography/Administrative History

The Sutro Library houses one of the largest concentrations of documents by and relating to Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820), a man who had a profound influence on the nature and momentum of British exploration, science, and discovery during the latter part of the eighteenth century. In fact, Banks may, by virtue of his tireless commitment to its promotion, be rightly considered the first Minister of Science in Britain. A botanist, diplomat, ethnographer, explorer, Knight Commander of the Bath, Privy Councillor, longest serving President of the Royal Society, and facilitator of some of the most important and infamous (i.e., Captain Bligh's trip on the HMS Bounty) voyages of exploration during his lifetime, Banks' historical role has been studied by a relatively small number of scholars. At age 18, Banks inherited a massive fortune which he used to satisfy his curiosity of the natural world. Unlike other young elite British, who as a rite of passage took the Grand Tour, Banks' instead aspired to more dangerous travels, ones that would fulfill his innate passion for botany. To this end, he spent thousands equipping himself to serve as official botanist on the HMS Endeavor, and in 1768 set sail with Captain James Cook on a three year voyage circumnavigating the globe. The trip had far-reaching consequences that deeply affected the trajectory of Banks' career. When Banks returned to London, his exploits and his trip on the Endeavor were a public sensation. Oxford awarded him an honorary doctorate and newspapers glorified his adventures. On the voyage he managed to collect over 1000 species of plants that were unknown to the Western world at the time, as well as numerous native artifacts and animals. His public role was fixed and in 1778, at the age of 35, he was appointed President of the Royal Society, a position which he held until his death in 1820. It was here that Banks devoted his life to supporting research, science, and discovery and sat "at the hub of scientific and technical progress during a most active period of geographical discovery, war and revolution," and while Banks "wrote few papers and no books...his influence was immense, and was exercised in no small part through his correspondence." Among other notable and rich collections of Banks' materials and documents are the Mitchell Library, Sidney; Yale University; Royal Society, London; Department of Western Manuscripts at the British Library; and the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. References Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008), 58. Harold Carter, "Introduction," in *The Letters of Sir Joseph Banks: A Selection, 1768-1820*, ed. Neil Chambers (London, UK: Imperial College Press, 2000), xvii.

Scope and Content of Collection

These materials reflect Sir Joseph Banks global involvement in science, technology, and exploration. Items include broadsides, maps, handwritten notes, correspondence, and ephemera.

Indexing Terms

Royal Society (Great Britain)

Cook, James, 1728-1779

Bligh, William, 1754-1817

[Banks Collection Shelf List](#)