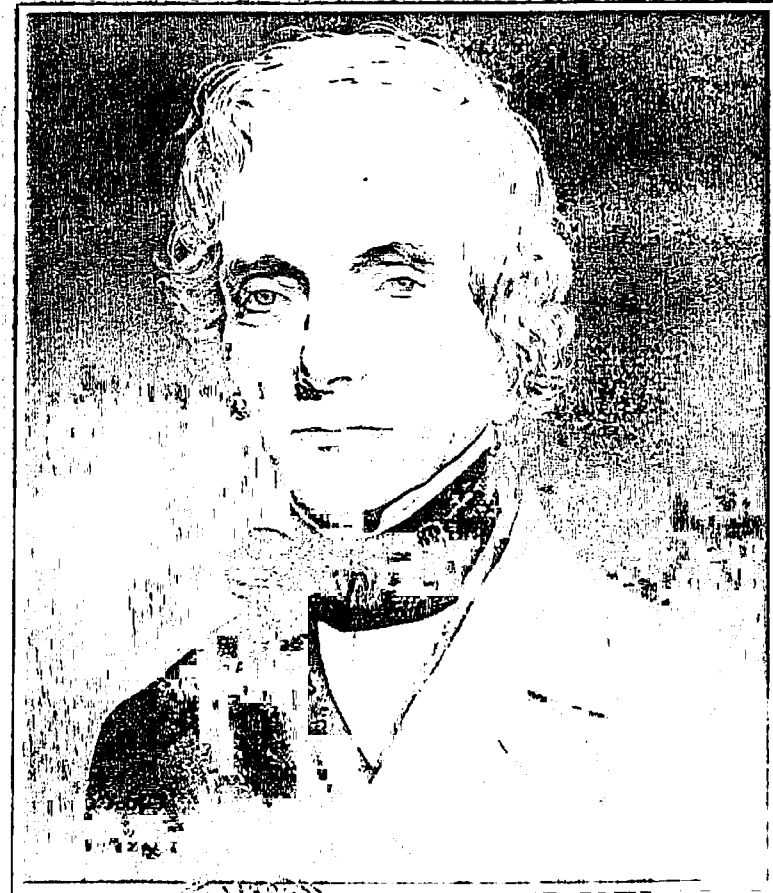


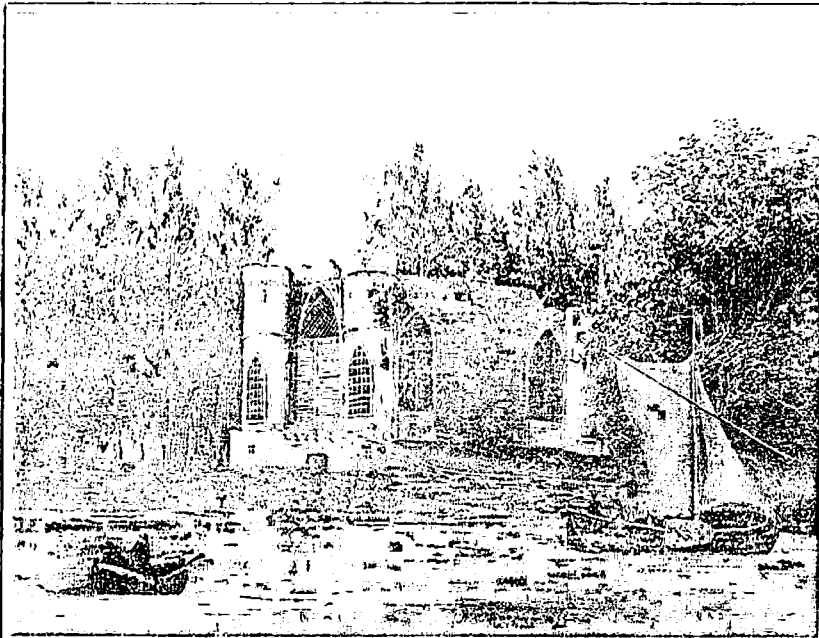
A Short Biography

W. J. BURCHELL

SPECIAL AGENT OR NATURALIST



Los Cleverly



"Thames of Hammersmith" painted by Burchell at the age of Seventeen.

By Courtesy of Mrs D. Naude

WILLIAM JOHN BURCHELL (1781 – 1863)

FRONT COVER:

Portrait of W. J. Burchell by Denis Murphy, 1987
 Courtesy of Mr. F. B. Burchell.

This little book is dedicated to
 my wife VALMAI (née Burchell)
 for her support and patience
 during weeks of research.

Published 1985

The abridged biography
 has been prepared to co-
 incide with the opening of
 the William John Burchell
 Museum at MPONGO
 PARK, near East London.

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Many people would have given information. However, special thanks are due to:

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 some of Burchell's original drawings.

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 printing.

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 original painting.

Frederick Burchell for the portrait appearing on the cover.

Mrs. C. Stoltz for patiently proof reading the material and suggesting
 changes.

Just over two hundred years ago a child was born in Fulham,
 London, who was to have a profound effect on the emerging
 science of botany and the almost unknown country that was
 to become the Republic of South Africa. Yet he was not a status
 seeker or a noted giant among academics. That person was William
 John Burchell who was to become "by far the most scientific
 and the greatest of early African explorers, and one of the most
 learned and accomplished travellers of any age or country." Yet
 in a letter to an acquaintance he merely signed himself "WJB,
 an African traveller".

Burchell was an extremely versatile man being a great scientist,
 naturalist, explorer and an artist of considerable merit. He could
 have earned a living as a science professor, an arts master, a linguist
 or a music teacher. Today his discoveries are to be found in
 several continents, his name in most botanical or ornithological
 text books, his paintings and sketches constitute a substantial
 part of the Africana Museum in Johannesburg and the Gubbins
 Collection at the University of the Witwatersrand, yet his name
 is practically unknown to most South Africans, and his contri-
 bution even less so.

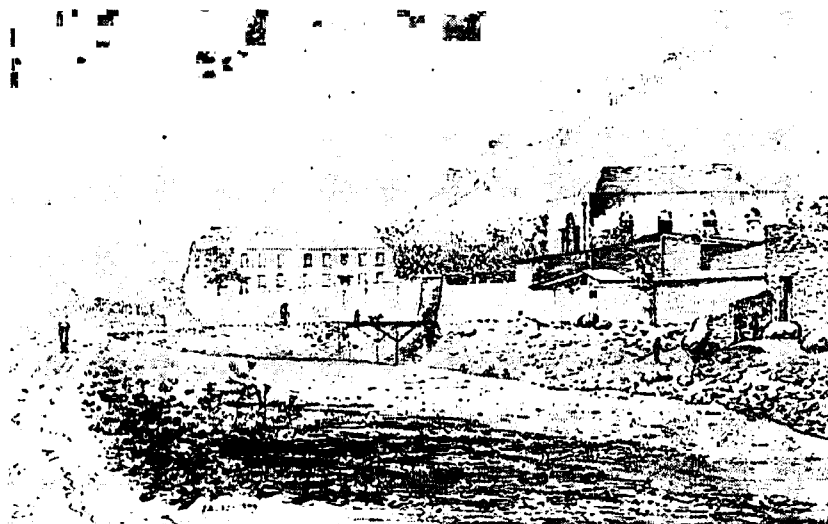
William John Burchell was born on 23rd July 1781 at Fulham,
 London. He was the eldest (but not the only) son of Matthew
 and Jane (née Cobb). The family can be traced back to the time
 of the Crusaders and the 7th Century, and was of French extrac-
 tion. It was ultimately a large family and a well-to-do one. The
 family home for several generations was Churchfield House,
 Fulham. As the name implies it bordered on All Saints Church,
 Fulham in which grounds many of the family were later buried.
 Many of the graves are prominent to this day. The house also
 bordered the Bishop of London's palace at Fulham.

The family business was established in the reign of George I and
 is usually referred to as "nurseryman" but the proper title was
 "The Fulham Nursery and Botanical Gardens" which accounts
 for Burchell's early and lasting interest in botany. The business
 occupied some seven and a half acres on the south side of Kings
 Road, Fulham. The business was a very profitable one and gained

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THE MARKET PLACE AT HORSHAM - 1837



JAMESTOWN - 1809
Courtesy of Africana Museum Johannesburg

from, and contributed to, neighbouring Kew Gardens, in exchanging specimens and research findings.

Burchell and his younger brother were given an expensive education at Raleigh House Academy in Mitcham, Surrey. His parents soon realised they had produced a prodigy, and his academic accomplishments were excellent. He had very high intellectual ability and was equally gifted in languages, science and art – a rare combination. His incredible talents unfolded throughout his life, yet he remained a humble man – small in stature yet a giant in character!



Fulham Church

Early in his schooling he asked his parents to stop his pocket money as there was nothing to spend it on. At 13 he was introduced to botany by his Latin master, and he asked special permission to go on nature walks. He asked to be sent a number of advanced books, including Linnaeus' "System of Botany". At the age of 15 he was given special coaching in art and aquatinting by Merigut, and by a topographical draughtsman John Claude Matts, both eminent in their field.

Their influence is clear in the texture and draughtsmanship of his sketches and paintings in his 30's. Early works show his appreciation of classical art and his versatility.

He continued his botanical studies at Kew Gardens where many of his specimens of exotic plants were later to be housed. His portrait and many of his botanical paintings are still hanging there. He met many prominent botanists there from various parts of the world. He travelled widely throughout England, Wales and Scotland botanising and painting. It is conjectured that he was in Tibet in 1800 as four paintings of Tibetan landmarks have been found. They are heavily notated with information on the reverse side which suggests an intimate knowledge of each, including the latitude and longitude of the location.

There is a gap in his flow of English paintings and sketches in mid-1800 which is best explained by his absence abroad but no reference to this has been found in his large number of painstakingly kept notebooks. There is also a possibility that he produced these water colours from someone else's rough sketches and annotated them from a book published at the time.

At the age of 22 he was made a Fellow of the Linnean Society, an unheard of honour at this age. His eminent sponsors merely stated that "he was well versed in botany"! – somewhat of an understatement even at that age!

His father expected him to join the family business after his training at Kew, particularly following his elevation to Membership of the Linnean Society but his appetite for travel and exploration had been whetted. He declined to join his father on the grounds that it would be unfair to profit from his father's hard work when he had himself contributed very little to it. Offers to travel and exciting pictures of opportunities abroad continued to pour in and at the age of 24 he decided to follow his interests elsewhere.

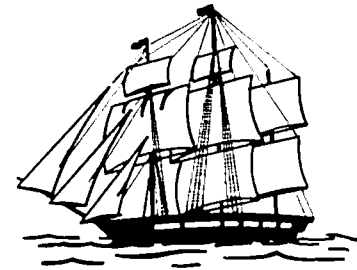
ST. HELENA (1805 – 1810)

His father was very displeased that his eldest son had declined to join him in his nursery business, and he made it very clear to his son that he must earn his own living after such an expensive education. Burchell had heard a great deal about the flora of distant countries while at Kew and he decided to visit some of them. He had received many invitations from prominent botanists and was flattered by them. St. Helena and the Cape Colony were high on his list of desirable places, but the latter was unsettled because of the sympathy for Napoleon there.



Oxalidaceae

He entered into a formal contract with William Balcombe of Essex Street, Strand whose firm of Balcombe Traders was operating very successfully buying from ships calling at St. Helena and re-consigning a variety of goods to various parts of Europe. The island was ideally placed for this purpose being some 2000 kilometers from Cape Town and 7000 from Southampton. Balcombe was official purveyor for the island to the East India Company (and later to Longwood the house to which Napoleon was exiled).



In August 1805 and in company with Balcombe he sailed from Cork on the Northumberland, a ship belonging to the East India Company. However he was listed as a Midshipman, a term normally restricted to the Royal Navy. The ship was one of a convoy of 61 under

the command of Sir Home Popham which was being despatched to the Cape Colony to annexe the territory from the Dutch before Napoleon did so. The Battle of Blouberg was the direct outcome. He was listed as having been left invalided on the island but both this and the assumed rank were probably part of the elaborate subterfuge to secure a passage at a time when Napoleon was very active and sea passages difficult to obtain. His destination was given as the Cape of Good Hope although it was clear he intended disembarking at St. Helena, and he landed there illegally. The possibility of Burchell having been an agent in the pay of the British Government will be referred to later.

After six months the partnership was dissolved. Each accused the other of breaking the terms of the agreement. Burchell wrote to his parents that he was "sick through anxiety over failure of the business and fatigue in managing it" in June 1806.

Burchell was a learned man and it came to the knowledge of the Governor, Colonel Robert Patton that he was "a gentleman of very superior qualifications, whose capacity and character have been vouched for by the most reputable authority". At a local meeting it was agreed that Burchell be approached and offered the appointment of "Schoolmaster, to teach ancient and modern

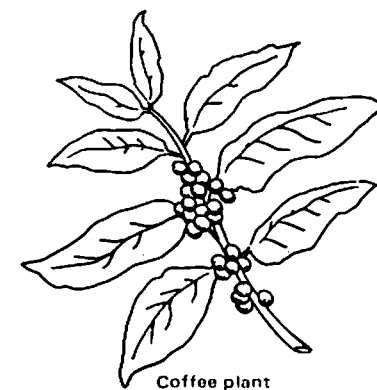
languages, and the science of mathematics in its various branches, and the art of drawing – which would prove an essential advantage to the young men of the island who are to bear military commissions". In his letter to London seeking such authority the Governor said, "He is proficient in Natural History and an excellent Botanist with a competent knowledge of Chemistry, and I am assured his moral conduct is correct and his manners are mild and unassuming." His nominees included Colonel Cocks, Lieutenant Barnes the Military Surveyor and Captain George Colbrooke, a prominent mathematical scholar and an accomplished draughtsman. While awaiting for formal approval Burchell accepted the temporary appointment on 29th June 1806 but due to ill health only took up the post on 3rd September 1806. The appointment was confirmed by the Board of Governors in January 1807 at a salary of £80 per annum. The letter of appointment ends with a reprimand on his having set foot on the island without permission!

The day after this appointment the Governor asked Burchell whether he was prepared to give special coaching in mathematics and drawing to all those intending to enter the Royal Military College at Woolwich as Cadet Officers. He readily agreed of course and proved very capable in the position. The previous incumbent, the Rev. Mr. Wilkinson had left the post summarily after a dispute with the Board over several issues but mainly his inability to combine this post with that of Garrison Padre. He was accused of "indecorous behaviour". As a protest for his having been sacked from the post he refused to vacate the school-house and Burchell was without the use of this for several months. Such was the confusion that no rental was fixed for Burchell's use of the accommodation at the time – a point which was to result in a court case at a later date.

He was very successful as a Schoolmaster but his first love was still botany and he busied himself with a study of the flora of the islands. His spare time activities came to the notice of the Governor and he was appointed to the management and superintendence of the official garden and for "securing and preserving exotic plants from hot countries". A letter was sent to his employers in London on 31st January 1807 but crossed the one confirming his appointment as Schoolmaster. Whilst in this

position he carefully recorded his observations of flora on the island and these were contained in his Catalogus Heleniana.

There are a number of his drawings of plants and shrubs in the University of the Witwatersrand. He also reported in September 1808 in a letter to a friend that the island is well adapted to the growing of cotton and coffee. He asked for seeds of both to be sent from Peru and Calcutta. Cotton he sowed in April 1807 and it was successful, but coffee planted in August of that year was a failure (mainly it was discovered later because of its deterioration during its journey from India.)



Coffee plant

He also sent samples of coloured earths to England for analysis and evaluation, in June 1807. These were examined by Sir Joseph Banks but rejected for the manufacture of china. (However they were re-examined in the 1930's and found to have limited commercial use as ochres which Burchell had suspected). During his investigation of the various minerals he found on the island he penned a few verses to Lot, a basaltic rock on the island – a place he chose to describe as "where Spring and Health and Nature ever smile", however he concluded his poem with:

*"of Truth I hear the mountain echo round
Morality has fled this place prophane (sic)
And love of God is chased by love of gain"*

As Helen McKay said fifty years ago, "It can be gathered from these sentiments that Burchell was not attuned to the military spirit of the Island!"

Later that year Col. Patton was replaced by an Acting Governor, Lt. Colonel Lane, and for a year Burchell enjoyed the encouragement of authority, particularly in his research into the natural resources of the island. In the middle of 1808 Major

General Batson was appointed Governor of St. Helena and the climate began to change.

It had been recommended that Burchell be appointed the East India Company's Naturalist for St. Helena and that he remain Schoolmaster until a successor arrived, at which time his salary would be increased to £200 a year. It was acknowledged that this sum was inappropriate to a man of his education and talents particularly as the Governor's salary was £9000 of which £400 a month was for food. Burchell wrote a long letter in September 1808 appreciating the honour particularly as he "had arrived illegally", but that the salary seemed inappropriate to the position. (He was already earning considerably more than this as Schoolmaster to which special coaching fees were added! He said that his present post was "less congenial but more lucrative").

He accepted the new position, however, hoping the Board of Directors would see his point and reward him more liberally. Furthermore it enabled him to follow his real interest, botany, and various allied sciences. He reported to his employers that there was the likelihood of "deriving advantages not previously looked for". "The island", he said "might become profitable instead of being an expensive possession". He mentioned at this stage his experiments with cotton, coffee and other crops, as well as his mineral discoveries. He was appointed officially as Botanist in June 1809 at a salary of £200 but had to give up his position as Schoolmaster — the position being assumed again by the Garrison Chaplain.

With the arrival of Governor Batson relationships had steadily deteriorated. After a short time little or no mention was made of Burchell and his research. Batson regarded the development of the coloured soils as his own preserve. As Helen McKay said "Both men were sincere but their methods of working did not harmonise. Burchell the researcher was up against Batson the military man." Soon after his arrival Batson instructed that the tropical garden be given over to the cultivation of grapes. As forecast the vines soon took over from the exotic plants.

Burchell complained bitterly about this and from then on relationships between him and the Governor deteriorated to the point

where Burchell wrote to the Board saying he no longer knew what was required of him.

At the time there was a dearth of cultural and intellectual activity on the island, and for a single man little outside his profession to interest him. He had made quite a number of friends from among the islanders and no doubt was welcomed as a very entertaining dinner guest. Furthermore he was considered by many matrons to be a most suitable companion for their unmarried daughters. Burchell declined many social invitations and did not enamour himself to everyone, on this account.

Furthermore, before leaving England he had become engaged to someone few investigators have been prepared to name. An agreement to give a Miss Green the sum of £200 had been entered into on 16th November 1807. In several letters Burchell says "give my regards to Lucia and Mrs. Green and it is to be assumed that his fiancée was Lucia Green. Initially his parents had been against such a relationship because of the disparity of intellectual and social levels. However, shortly before he left England his parents had agreed to them being engaged. The sum of £200 was evidently to pay her passage to St. Helena and to complete her trousseau. Shortly after she embarked for the long seatrip to St. Helena, where the two of them were to agree on their ultimate destination. Burchell secretly hoped it might be Tristan d'Acunha of which he had heard so much.

News quickly circulated through the island that Mr. Burchell's fiancée was coming, arrangements were made for the wedding and guests invited. They made ready to welcome her and Burchell was waiting to greet her. Imagine their chagrin when on arrival she informed him that she had changed her mind and was to marry the ship's captain instead. Burchell was greatly hurt and had the sympathy of most of the islanders.

Burchell was deeply troubled by this experience. He did not mention her again except to deplore her behaviour in one of his letters to his parents. As far as is known he never again formed a serious relationship with any women. But the experience did influence his later behaviour, especially perhaps the lonely journeys he was to make into several countries, and ultimately

it may have accounted for his demise. Lucia Green's loss was to be South Africa's gain!

The troubled nature of his mind is depicted in a prayer recorded in his diary:

"Ob God! in this world of wickedness and depravity, protect me who feels there is no release but upon Thee. Oh merciful God, be to those who are weak and oppressed a kind of heavenly Father! Suffer us as weak children turning astray but desirous of going right. To implore not in vain the Divine and of Thy Holy Spirit that is able to bear us through all the damages and ills of this short life. Yes even now as I write I feel something tell me that I pray not in vain. Oh, incomprehensible Power and Goodness who art everywhere and knowest everything even our thoughts as they be in our hearts. Oh most great and only God how is my weak heart subdued at the contemplation of Thy Glory! I scarce can presume to address Thee in the middle of Thy Holiness but Thy mercy and kindness give me courage to ask the protection of my Maker and assure me that Thou wilt not reject my feeble hallelujah."

In addition to his serious mindedness there was also a mischievous streak in him. He had secured some seeds of chenopodium ambrosioides from Madeira which he distributed on St. Helena. He was delighted when some years later another botanist listed these plants as indigenous to St. Helena!

Throughout his stay on St. Helena Burchell made numerous acquaintances many of which were to prove very valuable later. He met botanists and scientists from various parts of the world and exchanged findings with them. His work was widely reported in Europe and he had numerous invitations to visit places in the Far East, India, Australasia, South America and Europe.



Some of the friendships proved to be life-long. He also met a number of influential persons from the Cape Province, among them General Janssens the retiring Dutch Governor of the Cape and Dr. Lichtenstein a naturalist by choice but acting as Physician on General Janssen's staff. Lichtenstein was later to be appointed Professor of Natural History at Berlin University, but remained a life long friend of Burchell.

An offer was made to Burchell to become Botanist of the Cape Colony but from his experience on the island he declined, and decided to take up some of the other offers to visit the Cape. Since he was no longer to be married, and having some funds of his own he decided to explore the continent of Africa travelling north from the extremity of the Colony and hoping to reach the West Coast somewhere in the latitude of St. Helena, at his own expense.

One of his contacts was the Rev. C. H. F. Hesse of the Lutheran Church at the Cape and it was he who had conveyed to Burchell the offer from Earl Caledon to be official botanist at the Cape. He was a keen naturalist and had sent Burchell a variety of seeds and plants, and an encouraging account of the flora. Burchell wrote to him in April 1810 saying that he had resigned and intended to proceed

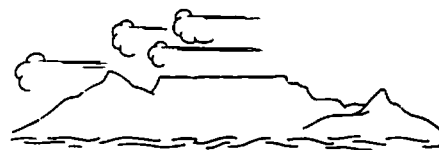


Table Mountain

by the next available ship to the Cape. In fact his departure was delayed for six months for a variety of reasons including a dispute over the non-payment of rent for the school-house which he had retained after relinquishing the position of Schoolmaster. The matter was taken to court and a heavy fine imposed. However on review the fine was greatly reduced and Burchell seems to have left the island on the American brig Harriet on 10th October 1810 without malice on either side. His contribution to botany in general and St. Helena in particular had been considerable.

IMPRESSIONS OF CAPE COLONY (1810 – 1811)

Throughout his adult life Burchell kept meticulous records of all that he saw, the people he met and what was discussed, the plants he discovered and frequently collected, geological finds, experiments he made and so on. The next

four years were to be memorable in this regard and some of his experiences are splendidly set out in two volumes of his "Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa" published in 1822 and 1824. These and his notebooks have proved invaluable to various travellers, botanists and biographers.



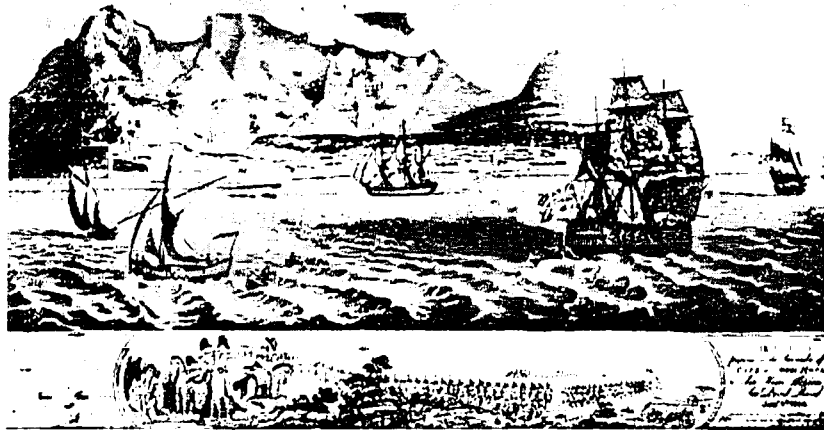
Groot Constantia

"Travels" begin with the sighting of Table Mountain on 13th November 1810 and the first dozen pages deal with the hazards faced in trying to berth the ship at the primitive jetty. This part of the memoirs is graphically, even excitingly written and underlines the quality of his attractive prose. He finally set foot in Africa, (he says for the first time, thus disproving the notion that he had reached St. Helena from Cape Town) thirteen days later on the 26th November having had an alarming encounter with the "Cape Doctor", the South East gale, which disrupts Cape Town from time to time.

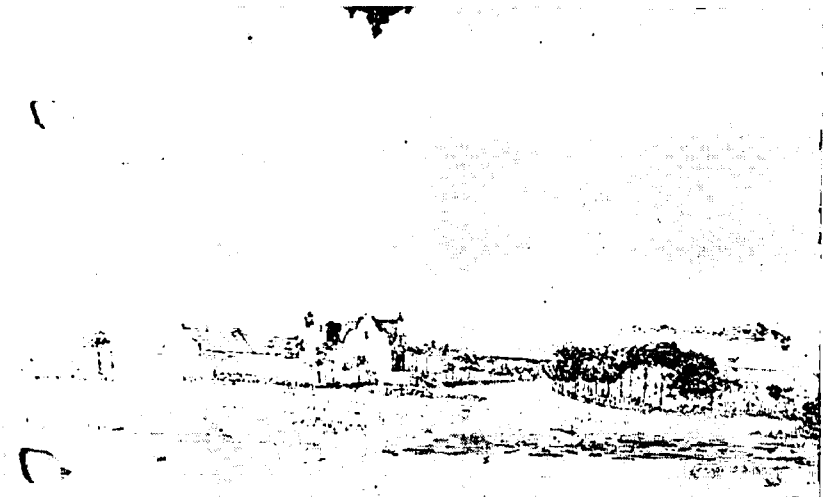
He was greeted at the landing stage by the Rev. C. H. F. Hesse, the fellow botanist with whom he had been corresponding. He was to spend several months with the Lutheran Minister at the Pastorie, at 28 Strand Street, now Martin Melck House. He was soon to remark on the "cleanliness and good appearance of the houses in Cape Town and the mag-



Rust & Vreugd
Cape Town House / Street



ARRIVAL OF CONVOY AT TABLE BAY
PRIOR TO BATTLE OF BLAAUWBERG - 1806
Courtesy of Africana Museum Johannesburg



VILLAGE OF TULBAGH - 1811
By W. J. Burchell
Courtesy of Africana Museum Johannesburg

nificance of the surrounding mountains". Later he was also to comment on the "orderliness of the streets" as seen from a vantage point, "running as it were at right angles to one another in a geometric pattern."

He immediately paid his respects to the British Governor of the Cape, the Earl of Caledon. Subsequently he had numerous meetings with the Governor and soon secured permission to travel northwards to the boundaries of the Colony; some 600 miles away. No record seems to have been kept of these discussions. It is conjectured that he agreed to carry out specific reconnaissance at the behest of the British Government and that he was in effect one of the first British secret agents.

The territory was inhabited by potentially hostile people. Except in the vicinity of Cape Town English was not understood (and as he commented in 1821 when he was publishing his memoirs, later in Algoa). Accordingly one of his first tasks was to study the Colonial Dutch patois with which to communicate with the early settlers, the Hottentots, Bushmen and various indigenous tribes. Being an excellent linguist this gave him little trouble.

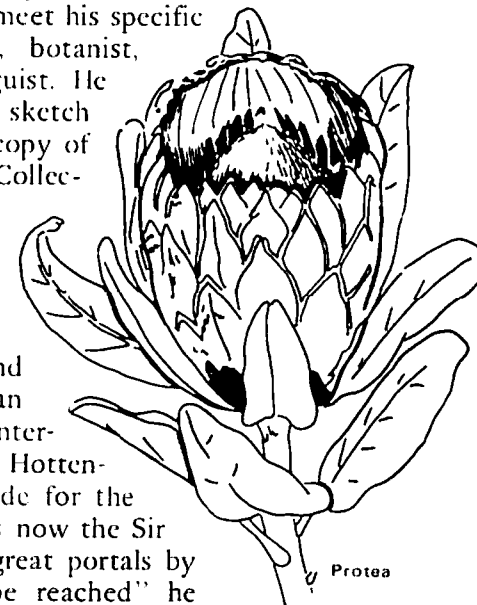
The information he received locally about the interior was scanty, and generally lurid. However, he had read Barrows short "Travels in the interior of Southern Africa – in 1803", on the voyage to Cape Town. He had also learned a great deal from his fellow naturalist Lichtenstein while in St. Helena. Lichtenstein had travelled as far north as Prieska and then east to the coast in 1806.

On the day after his arrival, Hesse took him on a walk to Lions Head. He soon discovered that the flora was even more abundant and spectacular than Hesse had led him to believe. He recorded that in the space of a mile, and in four and a half hours he collected 105 different specimens, and that at other seasons he may well find another hundred in the same area. He also found shrubs and plants which he had laboriously tried to grow in England, flowering in abundance. Some days earlier a "tiger" (actually *felus leopardus*) had been seen in the vicinity.



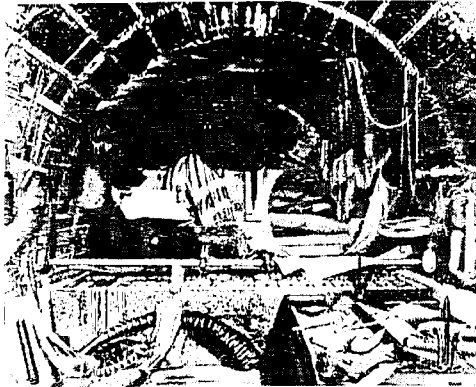
On the third day he climbed Table Mountain by way of Platteklip Gorge – in a time of three hours from the town to the summit. He was even more impressed by what he found there and his interest in Southern Africa was truly aroused. He also made several excursions along the peninsula. He remarked that Rondebosch, Wynberg and Constantia reminded him of the rich cultivated scenery of England.

Working from the information he had received and "assisted" by an old Dutch map (which he later described as inaccurate and totally useless) he began to plan his journey into the interior, scheduled to last about two years. He commissioned the building of an elaborate wagon to meet his specific requirements as traveller, botanist, geologist, painter and linguist. He later prepared a detailed sketch of the wagon, a coloured copy of which is in the Gubbins Collection in the Africana Library at the University of the Witwatersrand.



On April 8, accompanied by Polemann a Dutch friend of Hesse he set off on an exploratory tour of the hinterland. Travelling through the Hottentots Holland Berge he made for the interior by way of what is now the Sir Lowry Pass "one of the great portals by which the interior may be reached" he writes. He found a multitude of flowering plants including proteas which he had previously seen only at Kew, on his way to "a spot which had just been fixed upon – for the site of a village, since named Caledon," and from thence to the mineral springs at Zwarteberg, near Genadendal. They then travelled north to Tulbagh which he chose as the point from which he would leave civilization on his main travels. He returned to Cape Town by way of Paarl and Stellenbosch, both of which fascinated him. He was very encouraged by all that he saw and resolved to leave Cape Town by June, the earliest practical time because of the seasonal winter rain.

The wagon was now practically ready and he set about furnishing it. Inside the wagon he had fitted five large chests which were to contain tools, water casks, food and clothing, medicines, books, arms and ammunition. He also included articles for bartering with the indigenous people such as tobacco, snuff, knives, beads, buttons, material, as well as spare ropes, whips, fishing equipment, bedding and of course his painting and sketching accessories.



A detailed sketch of the interior of the wagon
Courtesy of Africana Library
University of the Witwatersrand

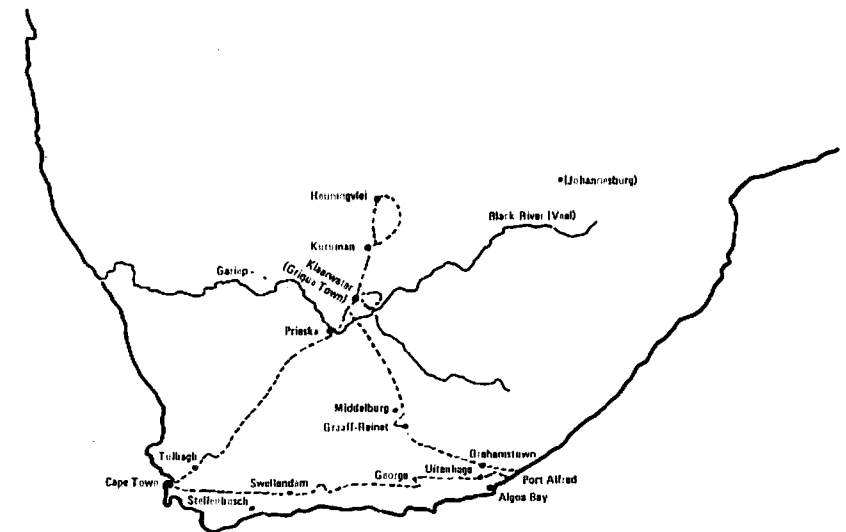
He also recruited a team of coloured and black people to man his expedition, and after some difficulty chose ten to be his only companions. A trip of many months into the hostile interior boded many ills. Later he was persuaded to join up with a team of missionaries returning to Klaarwater — beyond the boundaries of the colony.

On June 2nd, when they were nearly ready to leave Burchell experienced his first earthquake. All was chaos. "Houses were rent and rendered unsafe, people panicked." "All," he says, "had fled out of their houses with the utmost precipitation without hats or bonnets, just as they happened to be dressed at the moment." Anyway Burchell and his party were unharmed and on the 19th June 1811 they set off for what turned out to be a four-year epic journey of discovery, danger and excitement.

"My undertaking was generally looked upon as an imprudent attempt after the failure of an expedition in which every precaution had been taken to ensure its success," he wrote in his note book before setting off. The reference was to the ill-fated expedition of Dr. Cowan and Capt. Donovan of the Cape garrison, three other Europeans and fifteen Hottentots who set off from Cape Town in September 1808 for Mozambique. They were not heard of again after they were in the vicinity of Klaarwater!

While in Cape Town Burchell met Rev. Mr. Anderson a missionary returning to Klaarwater, his immediate destination, who warned him that "a large band of Caffres were moving across the country" and that for this reason the two parties should join forces. Burchell was reluctant at first but eventually agreed that they would keep in touch with one another on the long journey.

APPROXIMATE ROUTE OF BURCHELL'S SOUTHERN AFRICA JOURNEY 1811 – 1815



INTO THE INTERIOR (1811 – 1815)

On the 19th June 1811 Burchell set off on the first stage of his epic journey, to meet Anderson and his party at Tulbagh. This part of the journey was much more difficult than he had contemplated. The journey even now over the southern tip of the Drakensberg is taxing enough for the modern car but for his heavily laden ox-wagon it proved nearly impossible. With little real knowledge of the difficulties the long journey ahead would present Burchell decided on a second wagon to be made ready for him at Tulbagh.

Although the family in Fulham were quite well off, Burchell's funds were limited. Nevertheless, that such an expensive journey into the interior could be contemplated caused many to ponder where the funds came from unless the British Government was secretly sponsoring the project. After all they were interested to know the reaction of the inhabitants to their take over of the Colony and were keen to know the potential of what was to become the Crown Colony of Bechuanaland within a few decades. His main wagon made to strict specifications and elaborately fitted out had cost him £1000. And now there was to be a second but less elaborate wagon.

It was arranged that the two parties would travel independently but not far from one another. They finally left Tulbagh on the 4th July for far distant Klaarwater, with the assistance of special teams of oxen provided by the Veldt-Cornet. Although Anderson had first gone to Klaarwater in 1799, there was little to define the precise route to be taken across rugged mountain ranges and near-waterless desert land. Burchell relied on a rough Dutch map which proved misleading, a compass and a count of the number of wagon wheel rotations to measure distance.

Burchell admitted later that he had never previously spent a night out of doors. In the eyes of the local inhabitants he was not physically fitted for such a venture. He was warned constantly up to leaving Tulbagh not to attempt the journey.

Burchell, the naturalist, was enthusiastic from the beginning. He collected specimens of whatever interested him, observed

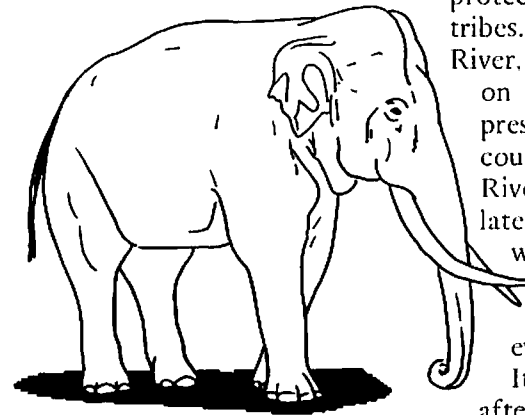
nature's ever unfolding peculiarities, sketched, painted and recorded all in a series of notebooks which were to form the basis of his later "Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa." The specimens he forwarded to Cape Town whenever the opportunity offered, later to be shipped to England. Burchell mentions only one package of material as having gone astray, that collected in the Roggeveld area.



Burchelia Capensis

On the 6th August they crossed the Roggeveld Mountains and were making their way across lower dry country towards Prieska. Waterless the area may have been but it was richly endowed with flora to the experienced eye. Burchell marvelled at the various devices nature used to protect each type of plant. The laws of survival and natural selection were manifest everywhere. Many years later he was to meet Darwin and no doubt regaled him with countless examples of the way plants adapted themselves for survival.

Near Karoo Poort he first saw ostriches in their natural habitat. A little later he met two bushmen riding ostriches returning from Tulbagh where they had petitioned the British Government to



protect them from marauding tribes. They reached the Zak River, the border of the Colony, on the 4th September and pressed on through uncharted country to reach the Gariep River (the Orange) twelve days later. Fortunately the river was not in flood but nevertheless represented a hazardous crossing being even then 930 feet wide. It was a wonderful sight after, miles of dry, arid desert.

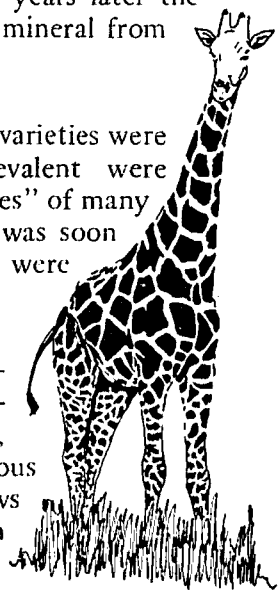
The crossing was made without untoward incident and Burchell celebrated by sketching and painting the heavily treed area. Fearful for the effect the climate

would have on his paintings Burchell preserved many of them by coating them with a fine layer of asbestos dust which he had found a few days before at Prieska. Many years later the Cape Asbestos Company was to mine the mineral from this area.

The area abounded in animal life and many varieties were faithfully recorded by him. Very prevalent were elephants, as well as multitudes of "antelopes" of many varieties. Their supply of food and water was soon replenished, and a number of specimens were collected for later despatch to England.

On the 30th September they reached Klaarwater (now Griquatown) and were welcomed by missionaries and their families, surprised that they had made the hazardous and arduous journey and keen to have news of the Cape. They were the only whites in this part of Southern Africa and they celebrated together with a feast equal to anything the Cape could supply — or so it seemed! Apart from Governor Lord Caledon few at the Cape had taken seriously his intention to travel so far. Here he was an asthenic, sensitive man of only 5'4", brought up in London, with no experience of living in the bush, now shooting for the pot, having travelled through some 800 miles of most inhospitable territory.

He made several excursions in the area of Klaarwater, camping at one time at the confluence of the Gariep and the Black Rivers (the Orange and the Vaal) near the present-day town of Douglas. This area, too, teemed with game and abounded with exciting flora. He observed that the local people were wearing cowrie shells which he conjectured must have been bartered all the way from the River Niger, thousands of miles to the north on the West Coast. Maybe, he thought he was at last on the track of the legendary Monamatapa! This persuaded Burchell to plan to travel further north still, but he met with great resistance from his party.



The disappearance of the Cowan party not many years before was common knowledge but rarely discussed, even there was considerable evidence of the party having been in the immediate vicinity. His helpers refused point blank to venture further and Burchell contemplated returning to Cape Town for additional assistance.

In the end he decided to make the 600 mile journey to Graaff-Reinet, the nearest civilized settlement. Before he left, Mrs. Kramer, the wife of one of the missionaries died and became probably the first white person to be buried north of the Gariep. He was warned again of savage tribes and hostile bushmen, and he was implored not to go. Nevertheless on the 27th February he recrossed the Gariep, swollen now by seasonal rains. He was obliged to leave his wagon at the river but carrying what he could he and a few trusted (at this stage!) servants left on oxen and a horse he



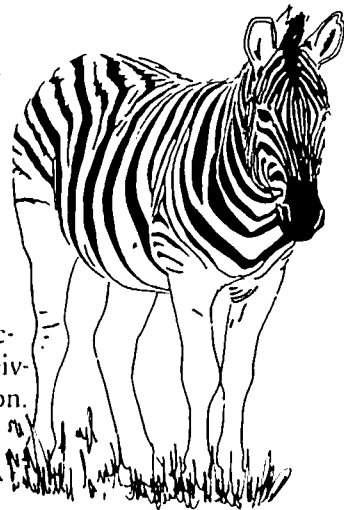
had been lent. He met many bushmen and their families and was amazed at their ability to eke out an existence from the impoverished land, especially their ability to extract water from a variety of plants and roots. In return for their friendship and willingness to impart some of their knowledge and skills, he offered them tobacco, snuff, trinkets and sugar.

Nearing Graaff-Reinet he sensed hostility and apprehension. He was met by the Acting Landdrost Paul Maré and a posse of armed burghers, who demanded to know the purpose of his journey. He was later to find out that Landdrost Stockenström had been murdered in this area shortly before. His purpose being explained, he was well received by the inhabitants but somewhat suspiciously by the authorities. In view of the unsettled situation they refused to supply any labour until authority had been received from Cape Town. Messages were sent to the Governor who readily gave consent and a month later on the 25th April Burchell set off again for Klaarwater with his newly recruited assistants.

They followed a slightly different route and enjoyed fresh experiences including standing face to face with lions at a distance of a few paces! They arrived back at Klaarwater on the 24th of

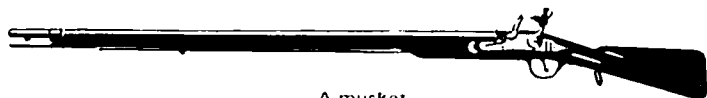
May to a very cool reception. The missionaries had not forgiven him for making the dangerous journey to Graaff-Reinet, and eager as they were to have news of the Colony, the matter was not discussed again.

Burchell recognised an entirely new species of zebra and in fact three varieties. Later biologists reduced these to two, the EQUUS BURCHELLI of the plains, and the EQUUS MONTANUS. He also encountered many giraffe, including the largest ever recorded. So large in fact that the British Museum refused to acknowledge its existence until they received the skeleton from Burchell, in London.



Now a trip to the north could be planned but even the newly recruited Hottentots, heeding the warnings of the locals, agreed to go only to LITAKUN, one of the capitals of the BACHAPINS. The other was KURUMAN which was occupied alternately to make attack by their enemies more difficult. They reached the Great Plains of Litakun on 10th July 1812, and the town of 5000 inhabitants, three days later.

They exchanged gifts with the Chiefs for food and milk but found them to be very devious and untrustworthy. In several exchanges with the Bachapin Chiefs they found them to be primarily concerned with acquiring muskets for use against their traditional enemies. They finally seized one by trickery, without realising that they also needed ball and powder with which Burchell was reluctant to part.

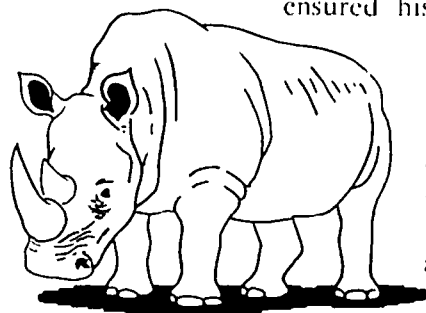


A musket

Here too there was evidence of the visit by Cowan's party including a black notebook, but little information was forthcoming.

On Sundays, Burchell became the local missionary, holding services on somewhat orthodox lines. At any time he became the local medico and performed many staggering feats by the use of medical herbs (and much thumb-sucking) including on one occasion the restoration of a hand that had been shattered by the malfunctioning of a musket. This demonstrated how much medical science relied at that time on natural remedies.

In spite of Burchell's kindness to his team and the indigenous people of the area, neither group demonstrated much loyalty. He had to contend with a mutiny from some of his team on two occasions, and only contained it by setting up court on truly British lines for the benefit of onlookers. On several occasions Burchell suspected that a false move on his part would have ensured his following the fate of Cowan.



White Rhino

Such was his power of perception and discernment that about this time Burchell perceived a variety of rhinoceros not hitherto identified – the Burchell Rhinoceros, later to be known as the square lipped or White Rhino.

He finally persuaded a number of his latest recruits to accompany him further north still. They reached the CHUI SPRING (Honey Vlei) in the MADAJI Mountains on the 4th October 1812, roughly in the same latitude as Johannesburg and some 400 miles to the West. His book ends at this point. Nothing more has been published and neither have his notebooks been found, although undoubtedly they were meticulously kept by him at the time. But he did leave us with a map showing the return journey.

Since no help could be obtained to accompany him on his travels towards the West Coast, and since his tropical specimens, his zoological, mineral and ornithological exhibits were now numbered in thousands, he decided to journey back to the Cape by way of an eastern route. His return route took him through the areas now known as Hopetown, Colesburg, Middelburg, Graaff-Reinet

to the Fish River Mouth. He spent a month in and around Grahamstown, and was very impressed by the nature of the area and its potential for farming. Journeying via Uitenhage, Algoa, Mossel Bay, Riversdale, Swellendam and Stellenbosch he finally reached Cape Town in the middle of April 1815, almost four years and 4500 miles after leaving.

While waiting for a ship back to England he busied himself packing his 50 000 specimens. He records that he collected and classified these specimens:

In and around Cape Town	4 000
Cape To Litakun	5 024
Litakun to Algoa	10 507
Algoa to Cape Town	20 840

Little wonder that the last leg of his journey later became known as the Garden Route! In addition to these classified specimens he had approximately 10 000 others, bringing the total of packed specimens to around 50 000 contained in forty-five packages.

It says something for his ingenuity that many of the packages were not opened for several years yet the specimens were substantially undamaged. Those in the Kew Library are well preserved to this day. Similarly his zoological exhibits, including his collection of snakes and birds, were examined in England much later and found to be intact. To preserve his watercolours he had coated them with fine asbestos dust gathered near Prieska and these too have survived.

A DECADE IN ENGLAND (1815 – 1825)

Burchell finally sailed from Cape Town on the KATE on 25th August 1815. Three weeks later he landed at St. Helena and stayed there for two weeks. One of his first tasks was to revisit the scenes of his botanical experiments and he was very encouraged by what he saw. He was especially gratified by the progress of the plants he had introduced to the island from elsewhere including the chenopodium ambrosioides. The coffee bushes were laden with berries and he felt the area would be ideal for an intensive coffee industry.

He met old acquaintances and visited some of his old haunts particularly Longwood which was within two weeks to become the residence of exiled Napoleon. (There is no evidence that the two ever met, although his erstwhile partner Balcombe became purveyor to Napoleon's entourage). He sailed again for England and arrived in London on the 11th November 1815.

Few people in England except prominent botanists knew him but he was well received by the family who were still at Churchfield House. The nursery business had been sold to Whiteleys two years before but there were large grounds at the family home. Here and at the nursery he planted South African seeds and bulbs. In the following three-year period he introduced twenty new bulbs to horticulture. Doubtless he had close contact also with Kew Gardens staff.

He complained that he did not have sufficient room at Churchfield House to do justice to his collection of plants. A record of his work, the Hortus Fulhamensis, is now lodged in the Library of the Herbarium at Kew.

He was much sought after by fellow botanists, and a number of prominent persons journeyed to Fulham to meet him, including Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, Lord Carnarvon, the Hon William Herbert, and Lord and Lady Caledon who no doubt were pleased to be reminded of flora of the Cape, then in bloom in Fulham. Another visitor was the Rev. C. I. Latrobe of the United Brethren's Mission to the Heathen, newly returned from a visit to the Cape, who brought news of Hesse, Polemann and other

friends there. Later Latrobe wrote "The Journal of a Visit to the Cape", illustrating with plants and shrubs to which Burchell had given the scientific names.

Latrobe's publication may well have given Burchell the impetus to write his own book for it was during 1818 - 1823 that he compiled his two volumes *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*, lavishly illustrated with his own drawings of plants from his herbarium. By 1819 Burchell was well known to many prominent horticulturists but so far as is known he never became a Member of the Horticulture Society. His fame was however considerable.

As a distinguished traveller in Southern Africa he came to the attention of members of parliament. England was faced with considerable unemployment and much poverty. The Napoleonic Wars were over and servicemen were returning to England to extend the ranks of the needy.

Henry Nourse who had had connections with the Cape since its re-occupation in 1806 was due to address a Select Committee of Parliament on the suitability of Southern Africa for settling a number of British subjects. He enlisted the aid of Burchell who reluctantly agreed to present his views. Henry Nourse retired and Burchell was left to face a barrage of searching questions. He answered with sincerity that the area beyond the North-East of the Cape Colony, a District called Albany, was indeed suitable to receive a considerable influx of settlers. "I am confining my observations to an emigrant who is leaving this country from poverty. I am not making a provision for his enjoying luxuries, but merely living comfortably." He also referred less enthusiastically about the land immediately beyond the northern boundary of the Colony which he said could also one day receive a number of colonists, and the Colony extended.

It was largely as a result of evidence given by Burchell and Nourse that the British Government voted £50 000 towards the 1820 Settlement Scheme. He also wrote a pamphlet *Hints on Emigration to the Cape of Good Hope* for the guidance of those contemplating emigrating. Nourse and his family were among those settlers and a younger brother of Burchell, James Edwin Llewellyn

Burchell arrived in 1821. A second brother Charles arrived in Algoa a year later and it is from these two brothers that most of the Burchells in South Africa are descended.

A rival, thought to have been John Barrow who had explored parts of Southern Africa at the beginning of the century, ridiculed the idea and wrote acrimoniously in the *Quarterly Review* of November 1819. He chose to decry the secondary proposal to settle people in the area of the Orange River and ignore the main recommendation of settlement in Albany. Burchell was incensed and issued a further pamphlet in defence of his proposals. He later included the article in his *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*, and several times attacked the critic. Barrow also accused Burchell of "culling plants indiscriminately" which was considered by fellow botanists to be totally unfair to someone who had so painstakingly recorded valuable information for posterity.

From 1819 to 1823 Burchell was completing his manuscripts whilst still lecturing widely on a variety of topics relating to his travels. The first volume was published in 1822 and the second in 1824. A third intended volume describing his journey from Klaarwater to Cape Town by way of the eastern districts was never written or it might have thrown a lot of light on the Eastern Cape before the arrival of the Settlers.

His trial plantings at Fulham were the subject of a number of articles and proved invaluable to horticulture. He was frequently in touch with Kew and enjoyed the confidences and experiences of many learned men.

Later Burchell wrote:

"I am convinced that many incorrect and absurd things which have been written about this colony would never have been said had the writer been sufficiently acquainted with the language, and conversed with every class of inhabitants. To be qualified for judging of the characters of these inhabitants it is not enough to have mingled with the better parts of society; the Boers, the Hottentots, the slaves - all must be heard."

THE DECLINING YEARS (1831 – 1863)

“Declining” is of course a relative term, for by any standards the last thirty years were anything but leisurely. There were family matters to attend to, learned societies and meetings to address, enemies to counter, and thousands of specimens to classify and relate.

He arrived back in England having lost practically nothing from the parcels he had despatched. The thought of having packed green and living material under tropical conditions worried him but opening a few test packages showed him he had little to fear. In fact the bulk of his collection was not opened for some twenty years. Even 140 years later most of the material housed at Kew is still intact and of great value to students and researchers. Dealing with his Brazilian collection at the rate of up to thirty specimens a day he did not complete his task until 1850.

He published nothing at this time but he did address a number of meetings, and he painted a little. His work was plagiarized and leading botanists of the period frequently reproduced what he had said almost verbatim and as their own work.

In a letter from Fulham he established his task as “15 000 species to classify, describe and arrange, the majority from Brazil”. There were also a large number of plants and seeds to propagate. He envisaged extending his already large home for he was now resident at Churchfield, or buying a larger property. In a letter to Hooker he regretted that he could not afford the services of a curator or librarian to assist with the task. He offered a number of rare plants and shrubs to King George IV and these were graciously accepted.

About this time rumours were circulating that he had received a substantial legacy from someone in the Cape Colony, or that he was still being sponsored by an unknown patron. According to his letters both were very unlikely but he had been appointed Executor to the estate of a friend RA Salisbury for which he received £8,000, and a lot of extra work. His main source of income at this stage was of course from the family estate but this too entailed considerable work and expense. There is evidence

that his sister Anna though one of his greatest admirers, was exceedingly difficult. Another of his sisters had returned widowed from Van Diemensland (Tasmania). His mother was still alive but ailing.

Burchell did include several trips to Oxford in his itinerary to attend meetings, and of course to contribute. It is well known that with the exception of geology the natural sciences were neglected there, especially botany. His visits stimulated new interest. In 1832 he was made a Life Member of the Association for the Advancement of Science, having served as an active member of the section dealing with zoology, botany, physiology and anatomy for some years. In May 1834 Oxford University recognised his contribution to science and conferred on him the highest degree it was possible for them to award, that of Doctor of Civil Law, *Honoris Causa*. From then onward botany and allied sciences took on much greater significance at Oxford.



Queen's College
Gateway

Dr. Burchell was in great demand in Europe and numerous invitations to visit friendly botanists and prominent botanical centres were received. One of the most persistent was from his friend Lichtenstein, now Professor of Natural Sciences at Berlin University. He was also offered a position by the King of Prussia on condition that he took his entire herbarium there. But as a patriot (and bowed down with family responsibilities) he declined. In the company of Mary or Anna, his sisters, he did make a number of trips to the continent each meticulously planned and adequately described in his notebooks.

He was received by Tesius in Leipzig (he had not seen him since his St. Helena days), in Hanover by Olaf Hesse the son of his friend from Cape Town, in Vienna by Archduke John and Endlicher the Professor of Botany. From there he visited Italy and sailed to France. In all he was away for ten months. He returned to England to numerous family problems and the possibility of a law suit.

His mother died in 1841 and was buried at All Saints Church, Fulham. He grieved the loss of his mother more than that of his father. Anna now moved back into the family home. People around him seemed to be ageing fast and he even calculated that the average age of the family servants was $49\frac{2}{3}$. His erstwhile friend (now Sir William) Hooker was appointed to the position of Director at Kew. Although they had much in common and had until then exchanged many experiences, their paths do not seem to have crossed again and jealousies arose between them.

Burchell was still actively working on his herbaria and still had close contact with Oxford and various societies during the last fifteen years of his life, but the strenuous journeys of his earlier life were now beginning to take their toll. His last visit to Oxford was to attend a discussion on the controversy that had arisen between the Bishop of Oxford and Huxley over Darwin's Origin of Species. Burchell could have added much to this topic but whether he did so is not recorded. His views on the topic would have been most interesting! He was often quoted by Darwin.

His health was failing and after an illness of two years he died by his own hand on 23rd March, 1863, at the age of 82. The jury investigating his death recorded a verdict of "suicide during a temporary fit of insanity," and added, "it was not their duty to investigate the causes which resulted in this great man taking this step." Because of the nature of his death, as was customary at that time, he was not afforded a churchyard burial.

His sister Anna in spite of her unpredictable behaviour had been one of her brother's greatest admirers. She campaigned actively on his behalf for two years, until his "lifetime of service to his country and to science" was reconsidered. He was after some years pardoned and laid to rest in the graveyard of the family church, All Saints, Fulham.

After her brother's death, Anna presented his entomological specimens to Oxford University.

Of the rest of the family not a great deal is known. Clearly none of them was as illustrious as William John. A younger brother James Edward Llewellyn came to South Africa in 1821 apparently at his instigation and was granted land at Albany although it appears he was farming for only a short time. His profession was apothecary and he established a practice in Port Elizabeth. He had had extensive training in curative medicine and although he had not qualified as a medical doctor he was soon known as such in the area and was referred to as Doctor Burchell.

His eldest son of the same christian names was married to the daughter of a rich local farmer, Hester Muller, and they farmed on neighbouring Valley Farm. Between him and his father-in-law they owned practically the whole of what has become the Port Elizabeth suburb of Walmer. They had a large family and it is from these that the vast majority of the South African Burchells are descended, including Mr. Frederick Barry Burchell who is currently establishing the Burchell Museum at Macleantown near East London.

James senior returned to London on news of the illness of his eldest brother and remained there for nearly twenty years before returning to his children and grandchildren, now firmly established in South Africa.

At the time of William's illness Anna had returned to the family home as companion to her brother, but she had proved quite difficult. Unbeknown to him she had refused permission to friends and family to visit him. Having travelled all the way from Algoa to see him James found himself denied entry to Churchfield House. He complained to his brother-in-law, W. Gordon Jackson husband of eldest sister Harriet. It was only after William's death that a servant admitted that he had a letter addressed to James from his brother welcoming him to the home.

Anna appears later to have relented, however. She had been left most of William John's personal effects in his will. She in turn bequeathed them to James together with all of William's sketches, paintings and notebooks, as well as other family art works for both she and Mary were also painters. On returning to South Africa James brought most of these with him to distribute among

his children. Some of these are still in the Africana Library at the University of the Witwatersrand or in the Johannesburg Africana Museum. A few of these are illustrated in this booklet.

Another brother Charles had been a source of worry to his parents. At the behest of his father he applied for and was granted land in Tasmania. He set off for Van Diemens Land in 1821 but on reaching Cape Town decided rather to visit his brother James in Albany. Later that year he returned unannounced to London and was accepted back into the family. He featured in his mother's will of 1843.

One of the sisters Sarah married John Hunt Butcher and they went to Tasmania in 1822. She was widowed in 1839 and returned to the United Kingdom. However it is thought that she returned to Tasmania and that she died there in 1872. Many descendants are still in Australia. Brother George married Susan Butcher and they farmed in Surrey, but their daughter also went to Australia.

In conclusion we must ask "What was Burchell?" To say he was a gentleman of leisure would be to do him a great injustice. 'Gentleman' yes, but 'of leisure' never! Clearly he had enough money to meet his daily needs, and enough left over most of the time to follow whatever his interests dictated.

It is unlikely that he was a Secret Agent in the modern sense of the word, but he may well have had a few special assignments for the British Government at different times. In a letter to Henry Alexander, Esq., Colonial Secretary, Cape of Good Hope dated 5th April 1813 he gives what information he then had on the circumstances surrounding the disappearance of Dr. Cowan and his party, "as requested by the Governor, the Earl of Caledon." The letter is from Graaff-Reinet and perhaps indicates why, against all advice he was prepared to undertake the dangerous journey. It has been said that "whereas Lichtenstein influenced de Mist of the Batavian Republic, Burchell influenced the British."

It is said of him in the Dictionary of National Biography:

"His work as a Naturalist has never been equalled. His careful preparation execution and completion of his objective, detailed annotation and brilliant appreciation of nature set science a goal seldom achieved."

Swainson was even more laudatory:

"He must be regarded as one of the most learned and accomplished travellers of any age or country, whether we regard the extent of his acquirements in every branch of physical science or the range of countries he explored. Science must ever regret that one whose powers of mind were so varied and so universally acknowledged throughout Europe, was so signally neglected in his own country."

The Book "Spoor of Blood" contains a fascinating account of Little Mr. Burchell and says, "To this day Burchell remains unrewarded for his work. That is why I hope that South Africa will recognise his genius and raise a statue to his memory – the national botanical garden at Kirstenbosch might be the appropriate spot."

A large painting of seventeen of the Burchell animals by the well known animal artist, Denis Murphy, hangs in the Burchell Museum, East London.

Burchell was a modest God-fearing man, greatly appreciative of the orderliness of nature. In a letter from Dresden dated 1st November, 1837 he said:

"One of the most important results of travelling with a view to the contemplation of nature in different regions of the globe is an overwhelming conviction of the unity of design in the creation and an increased admiration and reverence of the stupendous Power and Wisdom which is displayed, not only in the structure of each object considered singly, but in the universal harmony of the different modes and circumstances of existence, conducing so beautifully in the upholding of a well balanced, unalterable and perfect system."

He may well have added, "Praise be to God!"