

Book review

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Book review

Henderson P.: James Sowerby: the enlightenment's natural historian. – Kew: Royal Botanic Gardens, 2015. – ISBN 978-1-84246-596-7. – 25.3 × 19.5 cm, 331 pp.; hardback. – Price: GBP 17.50. – Available at <http://shop.kew.org/kewbooksonline>

In the introduction to her book *Picturing plants: an analytical history of botanical illustration* (ed. 2, London, 2009), Gill Saunders very rightly stated “In the works of those illustrators most admired by botanists and by writers on illustrations, almost the entire burden of the publication may be carried by the pictures.” One of those who shouldered that burden was James Sowerby (1757–1822), the subject of this very fine, fully illustrated biography; he did so for others, but also for his own publications.

The main challenge in writing this book was no doubt the extremely broad spectrum of activities of its central figure. Very appropriately the Prologue states “James Sowerby was not a ‘gentleman’ nor was he in paid employment. He was an artisan who had purpose and a strong dedication to that purpose. He was ... an engraver but he was much more than that. He was an artist, a scientist especially in natural history, an author, a father of an already creative family ... a publisher and something of a businessman.” Unusual was the breadth of his scientific interests to which he contributed – ranging from botany, mycology, algology, zoology, paleontology, mineralogy and geology to crystallography and optics. As a consequence, only a biographer with a similarly broad background could deal with the life and work of James Sowerby, or rather the Sowerby family. Paul Henderson, formerly Director of Science at the Natural History Museum, London and Honorary Professor of Earth Sciences at University College London, was precisely the man to do this job, and he was wise enough to collect information from specialists in fields in which he was less competent. The end result is a nicely balanced account of a remarkable man, probably best known for his share in the engraving and colouring of the 966 folio illustrations accompanying *Flora Graeca* and, in Britain, for his part in the preparation of the imagery of *English Botany*. However, the two projects varied considerably: in the former Sowerby had the pre-existing watercolours by Ferdinand Bauer as the basis for his work, whereas in the latter he himself had to prepare the watercolours, transfer them onto copper plates and arrange for the printing and colouring processes. In other cases, like Sowerby's *Flora Luxurians* and his contributions to the *Transactions of*

the Linnean Society, he was responsible for both text and illustrations. The hard core of this kind of factual information is summarized in Appendix B *Works authored by James Sowerby* (pp. 305–306), and Appendix C *Works by various authors, with illustrations by James Sowerby* (pp. 307–310), with both appendices providing all the necessary bibliographical details.

Henderson's book, which carries on the spine and the back of the title page the logos of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew and the Natural History Museum, London, is nicely structured: Acknowledgements are followed by Prologue (pp. 8–13), Chapters 1–14 (pp. 14–291), Epilogue (pp. 295–301), Appendix A *James Sowerby – genealogical tree* (pp. 302–303) and appendices B and C (see above), ending with Notes and citations (pp. 311–321), Bibliography (pp. 322–326) and Index (pp. 327–331). In addition, great care has been taken to choose appropriate illustrations, mostly works to which Sowerby contributed in one way or another, plus a few portraits of himself and his first wife Anne. Some of Sowerby's commissioners are also represented, among them William Aiton, William Curtis and Sir James Edward Smith, as are a few of his contemporaries like Sir Joseph Banks, Dawson Turner and Alexander I, Emperor of all the Russias. The quality of the illustrations is excellent, but the legends are not entirely satisfactory – they are often too short, they lack the year of production of the respective drawing, watercolour or print, they sometimes do not indicate from which of Sowerby's works they were taken and, furthermore, the repository of the objects is not indicated. An example may illustrate this point: the legend to Fig. 2/8 reads “The beautiful *Sprekelia formosissima* ... One of many watercolours by James Sowerby of plants in John Lettsom's garden at Grove Hill.” It is difficult to imagine that Henderson delivered such incomplete information and I suspect that his legends were truncated to fit a pre-existing layout for the book. Furthermore, it would have been a good idea to precisely refer from the text to the individual illustrations, although this may seem old-fashioned to some.

Chapter 1 *Precarious start* and Chapter 2 *Rising reputation* deal with Sowerby's social background, his early years off Fleet Street in London, and his changing occupations until he focused on the representation of natural history objects, notably plants, under the guidance of William Curtis, then demonstrator to the Society of Apothecaries and effectively running the Chelsea Physic Garden. Chapter 3 *The distant suburb* focuses on Sowerby's marriage to Anne De Carle, which brought him not only a wife but

also a house and home – 2 Mead Place, Lambeth, south of the River Thames, which became the centre of his activities until his death. Chapter 4 *The two James* and Chapter 5 *Sowerby's Botany* deal with Sowerby's most important commissioner and partner – James Edward Smith – and their complex relationship. Although they clearly had complementary skills, neither of them was prepared to accept it, with Sowerby for *English Botany* turning “the usual accepted procedures and social etiquettes on their heads. Instead of the writer commissioning and paying the artist Sowerby commissioned and paid the writer.” Needless to say this led to a conflict with Smith, the founder and first President of the Linnean Society of London, a man of considerable “self-importance” as nicely worded by Henderson continuing “This was a disagreement of its age. Artists were not given the same status as people who wrote words. Niceties over the use of the term ‘author’ were important but the term ‘editor’ also failed to give a true indication of Sowerby's role.” Chapter 6 *Models and museum* shows Sowerby as founder of a private natural history museum in the back yard of his house open to the public upon subscription as well as his role as maker of models representing fungi, some of which are still kept in the Natural History Museum, London. Interestingly, unbaked pipeclay was used as material with Sowerby applying the same artistic skills to their design as he did for his drawings and prints. Chapter 7 *Troublesome exotic floras* is devoted to Sowerby's share in the slowly progressing *Flora Graeca* project and his dissatisfaction at not being permitted by the executors of John Sibthorp's will to sell the extremely expensive folio work in ten volumes at 2 Mead Place. Smith's *Exotic Botany*, a project without clear profile and limited success, was another collaborative undertaking for which Sowerby prepared all illustrations. Chapter 8 *Sowerby's whale*, Chapter 9 *Minerals, crystals and colours* and Chapter 10 *Meteorites and a 'sword from heaven'*, the latter a gift of Sowerby to Alexander I and now in the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg, are largely outside the focus of *Willdenowia* and not dealt with here in any detail. However, this is not so for Chapter 11 *A lot of rot*. Sowerby, deeply interested in mycology, was asked by the Navy Board to inspect His Majesty's Flagship *Queen Charlotte*, sick with dry rot and moored at Plymouth, and to propose a cure. He found *Fibroporia vaillantii* (DC.) Parmasto, *Perenniporia medulla-panis* (Jacq.) Donk, *Serpula lacrymans* (Wulfen) P. Karst. and *P. pulverulenta* (Fr.) Bondartsev, referred them to the illustrations in his *Coloured figures of English Fungi*, measured the humidity and advised to have good circulation

of the air in the ship, not to paint wet wood and not to use heating to dry wood for the subsequent construction of ships. Although Sowerby's recommendations were put into effect and proved highly beneficial for the Navy as a whole with enormous financial and military consequences, he was treated shabbily by the Navy Board receiving a tiny lump sum, and that only after remonstrance. Chapter 12 *Mineral conchology* and Chapter 13 *Societies philosophical and chemical* are again of little relevance here, while Chapter 14 *Passing the baton* describes Sowerby's final years, overshadowed by family conflicts, in particular with his second son, and the continuation of some of his projects, among them *Flora Graeca* and *Genera of recent and fossil shells*, by his first and fifth sons.

Henderson's prose is a joy to read, his style excellent and so are his insights into the nature of science with his statement in the Prologue “authors wrote for the cognoscenti as well as some reflected glory” (p. 12) as an example. Although Henderson is not a plant taxonomist, his treatment of the many botanical works to which Sowerby contributed is flawless, with the exception of the statement that “Linnaeus's classification of 1753 is well served by botanical illustration” (p. 27); in fact, the Linnaean system had already been published in 1735. Only a single redundancy was spotted in the text, quite an achievement considering its length – the reader is told twice (pp. 251, 297) that Sowerby's *Mineral Conchology* experienced pirated editions. However, these are very minor points; what is much more relevant is Henderson's approach of looking at Sowerby as illustrator-cum-scientist, as founder of a family business and of a private museum, as collector and entrepreneur, in the latter activity comparable only to Pierre Joseph Redouté, his Paris-based colleague.

In short, this is an excellent work that contributes significantly to our understanding of the natural science in Georgian England in general and to the complexities of scientific illustration in particular.

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