



Robert Plant (1818–1858): A Victorian plant hunter in Natal, Zululand, Mauritius and the Seychelles

Author:

Donal P. McCracken¹

Affiliation:

¹Centre for Communication, Media and Society, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa

Correspondence to:

Donal McCracken

email:

mccrackend@ukzn.ac.za

Postal address:

Centre for Communication, Media and Society, Memorial Tower Building, Howard College campus, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban 4041, South Africa

Dates:

Received: 18 July 2010

Accepted: 26 Nov. 2010

Published: 01 Mar. 2011

How to cite this article:

McCracken DP. Robert Plant (1818–1858): A Victorian plant hunter in Natal, Zululand, Mauritius and the Seychelles. *S Afr J Sci.* 2011;107(3/4), Art. #359, 7 pages. DOI: 10.4102/sajs.v107i3/4.359

In the 1850s Robert William Plant collected plants and other natural specimens in what is now KwaZulu-Natal. This one-time Englishman compiled a dictionary for gardeners before emigrating to Natal in 1850. There he worked as the agent for Samuel Stevens, the London dealer in 'curiosities of natural history'. Though Plant collected mainly plants, he also sent consignments of beetles, butterflies, bird skins and shells back to Britain. He published the first scientific paper on Zululand and was requested by the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew to write the first *Flora natalensis*. It was while collecting for this never-to-be-completed treatise that Plant contracted malaria in Maputaland. He died in St Lucia in 1858 and in doing so became South Africa's martyr to botany. What emerges from this study is a picture of the difficulties faced by plant hunters in mid-19th-century South Africa, the sort of plants they collected and the necessity for them sometimes to diversify into other natural history products to survive.

Introduction

One of the very few professional plant hunters operating in mid-Victorian Natal and Zululand was Robert William Plant, the naturalist whom the American missionary in colonial Natal, Rev J. Tyler, described as 'hardy, strong and resourceful' and whom the eminent gardener Sir Joseph Paxton termed 'a zealous and industrious experimental cultivator and nurseryman'¹.

There is uncertainty concerning Robert Plant's background. He may have been part of a family which ran a nursery at Cheadle in Staffordshire in the midlands of England in the first half of the 19th century. His parents were Robert Benjamin Glyndon Plant and Ann Caroline Plant. Parish registers show that he was baptised at St Mary the Virgin in Lewisham in Kent on 03 May 1818. We know that Plant had a sister called Louise, who was baptised on 25 February 1820; a brother Charles, baptised on 18 November 1821; another sister called Jane, baptised on 01 May 1825, also at St Mary's; a brother called Henry, baptised on 27 January 1828; and a considerably younger brother, Frederick, born on 25 December 1833 and baptised in Lee in Kent on 09 February 1834. There was said to be another brother about whom we know practically nothing.² According to William Hooker, Robert Plant had a brother with the initial N who collected plants in South America.^{2,3} Robert Plant Senior died in Lewisham in December 1846.

In the 1840s, R. Groombridge and Sons in London published Robert Plant Junior's 300-page book, in three parts, entitled *The new gardener's dictionary; or, Catalogue of all the really good flowers, fruits, trees, and shrubs, cultivated in Great Britain. In three parts. On an entirely new plan, by which the list, through embracing every valuable plant known, is restricted, so as to exclude the worthless. Accompanied by concise, yet ample, descriptive and cultural notes, collated from personal observation or the best authorities.*^{4,5}

It was probably William Wilson Saunders (1809–1879) of Wandsworth, London, the prominent amateur naturalist, treasurer of the Linnaean Society and secretary of the Royal Horticultural Society, who suggested to Plant that he join one of the Byrne Settler parties and immigrate to Natal, and that he make it his base for collecting along the east coast of Africa and in the Comoro Islands. The plan was that plants sent back to London would be first identified by the eminent botanist George Bentham. Botanists would subscribe and receive plants in proportion to their contribution.

At that time, Natal had been visited by few botanists, which remained the case for many decades. As one of them later remarked in the 1880s, 'Natal, like Ireland, is not sought after as the abode of the Anglo-Saxon'⁶. The region also had a bad reputation for being unsafe. As a magistrate in the 1890s was to observe, 'foreign botanists have a natural dislike of plunging amongst savage life – that is, in localities where possibly instead of collecting, they might be collected'⁷.



On 16 January 1850 Plant wrote to the director of Kew Gardens, Sir William Hooker, concerning his planned adventure to Natal and indicating that he would be prepared to meet with Bentham if requested to do so and asking if it would be possible to get a small tent from the government.⁸ It is doubtful if Plant received his wish, though he did take plants out with him from Kew Gardens. The family sailed from Gravesend on board the *Lady Bruce* on 16 February 1850. At this time, Robert and Dolly had three children, five-year-old Robert Junior, and the very young Anne and Alice. Also on board was Henry Plant, Robert's brother. He planned to farm near Greytown in Natal; he died in 1872.^{9,10} Though they had only two double bunks, the captain, John Burns, was friendly, the crew were jolly and the voyage went well enough.¹¹ They arrived at Durban three months later, on 09 May 1850 and landed on 12 May, when began Plant's 'strange, eventful history'.

Early career in Natal (1850–1854)

Robert Plant was to live for nearly eight years in the 'garden colony'.^{12,13,14} His mandate from William Saunders and Samuel Stevens was clear enough: he must travel in and beyond the colony, collecting plants and such saleable curiosities as shells, insects and butterflies. In reality, Plant was Stevens' agent in south-east Africa. Stevens ran a flourishing trade in natural-history products from his desirable residence at 24 Bloomsbury Square in London. He acted as a conduit, passing on specimens to Saunders, the Royal Horticultural Society, the Chelsea Physic Garden, to John Smith, the curator of Kew Gardens, and to anyone else who cared to buy. Stevens already had contact with Natal through the very eccentric Wilhelm Gueinzius, who had been the first naturalist to live in Natal, having arrived in 1838. He lived in a small house in a wood along the Umbilo River with a pet python, whose skin he sold, possibly to Stevens, when it died.^{15,16} So Stevens had some idea what treasures the region contained. It is also possible that Stevens had links with Mark McKen, the sometime curator of the Durban Botanic Gardens and celebrated plant hunter. Certainly Plant had an agreement with McKen in 1853 by which McKen, who had an interest in butterflies, appears to have supplied Plant with bulbs and insects, no doubt for shipment on to Stevens.¹⁷

Plant's was a commercial enterprise. The sums gained through such collecting endeavours could be substantial. A consignment often netted £35 for the naturalist. On one occasion Plant received a draft for £100. So as long as he could keep up the supply of such material, in flowed the cash. Stevens helped Plant as best as he could, even supplying him with large pins for use in mounting insects.¹⁸

Plant got on well with these London traders in exotic specimens of nature. On one occasion he wrote to Stevens,

I must repeat there are no letters I receive which give me so [much] pleasure as yours and those of Mr S [Saunders] – to whom please give my best [wishes?] to and should like to know if he succeeded in raising plants of the extraordinary *Stapelia* of which I sent him seeds. I have plants here which have borne flowers 16 inches [40 cm] across!^[19,20]

He asks Stevens for some natural history books, including *The Admiralty manual or Maunder's treasury* for a youngster as 'I lost all the books I brought here – the white ants devoured them'¹⁸. This youngster was possibly Edward Hamp (1840–1917) from Lambert in London, who had recently emigrated to Natal and whom Plant had requested to bring with him to the colony a Wardian case.²¹

Plant hunting expedition to Zululand

In about June 1851, just over a year after the Plant family arrived in Natal, Robert Plant set out on his first epic journey. With African helpers, a wagon and oxen, he moved into Zululand. All did not go well. From Ongoya forest, which he loved, he pressed on to St Lucia. But he did not encounter the wagon he had sent ahead. Then his oxen began to die. Turning inland, he ran straight into a Zulu civil war. Perhaps panicking at the sight of Mpande's warriors, Plant jettisoned most of his precious collection and hurried back to Natal.²² It is interesting to note that Plant's time in Zululand in part overlaps with William Baldwin's hunting expedition there from December 1851 to March 1852. Baldwin, however, did not panic and as a result had a successful and lucrative expedition.²³

The abortive trip, however, had two positive repercussions. First, it produced the first botanical account of Zululand, 'Notes of an excursion in the Zulu country; by MR R.W. PLANT, Naturalist. (Communicated by Mr. Stevens.)' in *Hooker's Journal of Botany*, volume 4, 1852, pages 257 to 265. Clearly Stevens spoke to Sir William Hooker and ensured the account's publication. It was the first botanical paper by a Natal resident in any scientific journal, though truth to tell there was not a great deal of botany in the article, descriptions of the journey and of wildlife taking up much space.²⁴ The second repercussion of Plant's trip was the introduction to science of the greatest of the stapelias, *Stapelia gigantea*.²⁵ In 1858, after Robert Plant's death, his plant was given to Durban Botanic Gardens by his widow. Two years later it flowered and in 1862 the gardens' curator, Mark McKen, sent a specimen to Kew Gardens. However, it would be another 15 years until the plant was named at Kew by N.E. Brown.¹⁴ In 1853 Rev Armitage observed,

Mr Plant found this kind [of stapelia] in the Zulu country as large as the top hat, and calculated to inspire as much horror by its appearance as the subject of a large serpent might be supposed to occasion²⁶.

Visit to Mauritius

Robert Plant was back in Durban in February 1852. He appears to have stayed in Natal for the next 18 months, but the wanderlust was not dead and about 09 August 1853 he set sail for a collecting trip on the island of Mauritius, arriving in Port Louis on 25 August. Soon his usual pattern set in: Plant longed for the life of the collector, but when away from Dolly, he was lonely. Be that as it may, Plant made good use of his time after escaping from the capital, where he was 'something of a phenomenon'. He comments



to Dolly, 'You know I hate to be stared at'. He visited James Duncan, the enthusiastic director of the already 116-year-old Pamplemousses Royal Botanic Gardens. Duncan had done much to revive the gardens since he had arrived on the island in 1849. Plant's comment was that the botanic gardens at 'Pamplemousses is the beau ideal of a tropical collection'²⁷. The following year Duncan sent Plant a letter agreeing to send plants to the Durban Botanic Gardens if this action was reciprocated, 'You will excuse me being so plain with you', he wrote, 'but the fact is I have had so many firm and fair promises from Port Natal already', probably a reference to Mark McKen and possibly to William Gerrard also.²⁸

On 12 September 1853 Plant sailed on to Mahé in the Seychelles, where he arrived on 20 September. These islands enthralled him. Indeed so engrossed was he that he fell down a precipice in attempting to grasp a pitcher plant, 'I had not', he wrote, 'been [so] nigh a catastrophe since I stood across an alligator at Sea Cow Lake [beside the Umgeni River near Durban]'²⁹. Those pitcher plants were bad travellers and made it only as far as Pamplemousses, where Duncan was meant to tender them and send them on. They all died.³⁰

By 16 October 1853, Plant was collecting shells, 'a new game' on a beautiful beach on the island of Praslin. He was paying his workers a shilling a day plus a bottle of rum. Writing in pencil in his small notebook for Dolly to read in the future, he enthused,

Another Sunday and I am unable to write to you except among the notes – but someday you will read them and [thrill?] that I am still what I ever was to you – seated as I am on a beach of one of the smallest as well as one of the most remarkable islands in the world. 'Twould be strange if my attempts did not revert to you – I am now among those extraordinary plants, the double coco-nut of which they have only a few specimens of nuts in Europe and no plants.

Interestingly enough, in August 1854 we find Plant sending Stevens from Durban a case of 'Zulu insects', a case of orchids, *Stangeria*, land shells and '6 Dble cocoa nuts'. Plant successfully planted a coco de mer (*Lodoicea seychellarum*) in the Durban Botanic Gardens in 1854, which died in 1864. In fact it was only in the 1890s that a coco de mer was grown successfully at Kew Gardens and in Le Jardin des Plantes in Paris.²⁷

Plant was meant to have visited Madagascar and the Great Lakes area of east Africa, but the evidence would suggest that he never got there. The *Natal Mercury* of 15 April 1858 made a passing reference to such a trip and in one notebook Plant has written words in the Malagasy language. There is also an undated draft of a letter, presumably to Stevens, in which he discusses the details of a trip to both Madagascar and the Great Lakes region, and talks of the advance he would require for an adventure.²⁴ But while in Port Louis, on 29 August 1853 Plant writes to Dolly in Natal, the 'dearest place on earth', that 'the Madagascar business is at an end for the present at least. I shall go on to Seychelles this week.' The trip was off in part because the indigenous ruler of the island had prevented missionaries from landing and Plant

felt that the queen 'will hardly distinguish between me and a missionary'. The whaling-ship captains he approached about the matter of visiting east Africa or Madagascar also 'thought I must be mad' because it was the fever season.²⁹ It is nearly certain, therefore, that Plant never visited Madagascar. In volume 5 of *Refugium Botanicum*, published long after Plant's death, Saunders includes a plant listed as *Phryniump unilaterale*, said to be indigenous to Madagascar, as sent to him by 'Mr Plant'.³¹ But there may well be both confusion and error here. The plant most likely came from Brazil and not Madagascar. And the Mr Plant referred to might either be the mysterious brother of Robert Plant, N. Plant, who collected in South America and who is mentioned in *Hooker's Botanical Journal* in 1852, or it might be the F. Plant who collected natural history specimens in Madagascar in the 1860s (correspondence between Baijnath H and Phillipson PB, 2010, Nov 15; and correspondence between Baijnath H and Wahlert GA, 2010, Nov 17).

Before returning to Port Louis, Plant visited a mountain forest on the beautiful Seychelles Island of Silhouette. The voyage from the Seychelles back to Mauritius took three weeks (20 October to 12 November 1853). To himself Plant noted, while on the Indian Ocean islands, 'Decidedly I am altogether unfit for further communication with wat [sic] is called civilised life. I am become a savage'²⁹. But on 07 December 1853 he had at last turned for home and was on a steamer heading back to Natal and Dolly. We know that he sent Stevens at least one collection of orchids from Mauritius. These 45 healthy plants were packed in a barrel. These appear to have been lost by the shipping company and legal threats from Messrs Stevens and Saunders gained compensation.^{19,30,32} In a letter dated 27 November 1855, Plant promises Stevens that in future he shall always declare a value to his consignments when sending them off by ship, an interesting indication of the professional nature of the trade.

Curator of Durban Botanic Gardens (1854–1856)

While Robert Plant settled into the life of a collector of 'curiosities of natural history', the *Natal Mercury* of 12 July 1854 recorded the appearance at Durban Botanic Gardens on the Berea of a lion, which roared nightly. Two days later Plant was appointed curator of that wilderness, the fourth person to fill the position.³³ With the mandate to lay out the gardens, for £60 a year, plus the promise of a house which was yet to be built, the affable Plant started the difficult task of laying out the lower part of the gardens from the old entrance on the vlei.³⁴ This he began by designing a series of serpentine paths with one to the upper bush, which yielded a great view of the town of Durban and the harbour of Port Natal. This was made possible by the allocation in September 1854 of an additional 10 hectares of land to the botanic gardens. The upper section of the gardens still had a part of the old Berea forest containing 'some fine trees'³⁵.

It looked as if Plant was at long last settling down. A two-room house (6 m x 3 m) with yellowwood plank walls, mangrove uprights, a brick or stamped-clay floor and a



thatched roof was constructed. Kew Gardens despatched a Wardian case to the Durban Botanic Gardens in August 1854. Plant returned this to them, arriving on 19 May 1855 with 7 of the 20 plants dead, and the living described as 'none of them of much interest'. On 23 November 1855 Kew received a second Wardian case from Plant. This was much more interesting, containing '8 fine stems of *Stangeria paradox* [sic] + 4 bulbs and drawings of an apparently new genus with a flower like *Zephyranthus*'³⁶.

In 1888 the *Kew Bulletin* claimed that tea was first shipped to Natal from Kew in 1850 and was grown 'by R.W. Plant in the Durban Botanic Gardens'. The Wardian case mentioned before, which Plant had asked young Edward Hamp to bring out to Natal, was also said to be filled with tea plants.¹⁶ Certainly, Kew sent some tea plants to Natal with Mark McKen in 1850 as they did some seeds with Plant himself. However, it is likely that a second consignment from Kew in 1855 was what was successful and laid the basis for Plant's later private small tea plantation, which in turn was the prelude to the long and slow growth of the industry in the region.³⁷

Plant remained at his post in his new job throughout 1855, during which he produced the first catalogue of plants growing in the gardens. This catalogue was published in the sixth annual report of the gardens and contained a list of 249 species. Funds were raised by selling plants to the public, £34 alone from pineapple plant sales. The annual agricultural show in the gardens was a great success. For the first time, meteorological records were kept in the gardens. And the number of members of the Natal Agricultural Horticultural Society, which owned the gardens, rose to a record 119 subscribers, raising £95, who received in exchange 7519 free plants. The management were delighted and spoke of the 'talented curator, who has so successfully exerted himself during the year'. And on 26 April 1856 the *Natal Mercury*, referring to the fact that it lay beyond the great eastern marsh or vlei, spoke of the Durban Botanic Gardens as 'that Eastern Paradise'³⁸.

But the life of an English nurseryman did not suit the ever-restless Robert Plant. In 1855, after a period as curator of the Durban Botanic Gardens, he was to write back to Britain 'I find so quiet a life getting irksome. Remaining stationary so long is too nearly the existence of an oyster to meet my erratic taste'¹⁸.

Use of African helpers

During his time at the Durban Botanic Gardens, Plant continued to send consignments overseas. To his patrons, he talked of giving up his prestigious but poorly paid job, of building a wagon (he already had the wood for this) and setting out into the remote bush again. He did manage a 17-day expedition during this period up the north coast to the Umvoti River, where 300 plant specimens were collected. Later, in the new year of 1856, once he had completed organising the annual agricultural show in the gardens,

Plant explored Ongoya forest, where he hunted wild animals as well as plants, and southern Zululand. Also, and significantly, Plant went to considerable trouble to train African staff to go out on their own to collect plants. These he sent far and wide and no doubt, as with other 19th-century plant hunters, many a plant specimen collected by an African employee was credited to the European botanist. These men had to be paid, so it was important that they knew to collect those plants which were commercially valuable. Moreover, collecting was as dangerous for these African collectors as it was for their White 'masters'. Plant recorded of one such helper that 'I sent to St Lucia last year has never returned – probably died of coast fever. He was one of my best hands and I regret his absence very much'. This said, Plant soon had another African assistant collecting for him up in Zululand.³⁸

Specimens collected

And yet, Robert Plant played something of a double game with Kew Gardens. On 27 November 1855 he confided in Stevens, 'On the whole plants are not so satisfactory as other things and yet entail much more trouble'. And a few months later, he enthused to Stevens, 'And now for the insects, my especial favourites too'^{19,20}. Yet the prospect of earning £50 or £100 from the great London nursery firm of Veitch, for whom Stevens worked for as a middleman, for a single plant of *Gnidia* prompted Plant to put 25 specimens in a Wardian case and despatch them post-haste. Also in the case were 10 specimens of 'a new and very handsome *Thunbergia*' which grew to a height of about 60 cm, with a deep bright blue flower and the

throat a dazzling yellow – the habit of this plant will always render it remarkable and when growing on an elevated spot the flowers are so abundant and bright it may be seen for half a mile³⁰.

A request for more orchids elicited the response that 'I know a ravine where a wagon could be filled with them in mafses [masses] as large as a man could lift'¹⁹.

The consignment lists which Plant sent abroad make for interesting reading. For example, in April 1856 he sent Stevens 400 land shells and two cases containing 850 insects. Their declared value was £30. In August, Plant sent a consignment which consisted of a barrel containing 36 *Stangerias*. Plant probably did more than anyone else to ensure a regular supply of *Stangeria* to Britain. Another box for Mr Saunders contained 15 specimens of wood 'Utumbu', 'Piam', 'Tambesi', *Polygala*, sarsaps and 'Maundi', all valued at £25.

Other exotic commodities shipped out by Plant included seaweeds and sponges, the latter being found among the rocks at the coast of Maputaland. The big consignments of plants contained a good many species of bulb. While *Stangeria* featured regularly, there is only one general reference to cycads being sent. In the notebook of specimens sent to Stevens in London between 1851 and 1858, Plant writes the following names: 'Achatuma; Agapanthus; Anomatheca; Asphodelea; Bouvardiso; Brunsvigia; Bulimus;



Cyclastonia; Cyrtanthus; Drimia; Gastronema; Gladiolus; Gloriosa; Gnidia; Helix; Haemanthus; Hypoxis; Iris; Ixia; Leucojusu; Lyumea; Natal lily [*Haemanthus?*]; Oxalis; Palystzia; Planvibis; Pupa; Scroph.; Sparaxis; Stangeria; Thumbergia; Tridea; Tritonia; Vitrima; Watsonia; unnamed cycad, fern, orchid and succulent species; and edible plants from Amatongaland' [Maputaland].¹⁷ It was Plant who first introduced to science, via William Saunders, the beautiful *Streptocarpus saundersii*.³⁹

In 1856 a pay increase to a mere £75 a year annoyed Plant. The management committee's decision to concentrate on introducing to Natal via the botanic gardens plants of possible economic value cannot have pleased him either. He attempted to negotiate, serving half his time as a curator and half as an independent collector. The management's offer of a £10 annual salary increase for this package settled the matter. But the truth was, as Plant had written to Saunders on 16 August 1855, 'I prefer the delightful excitements of travelling'. Plant finally resigned as curator in August 1856. An invitation from an old friend to join him in Port Elizabeth did not tempt Plant.

Farming and freelance collecting (1856–1858)

Robert Plant's time at the Durban Botanic Gardens had been beneficial in three respects. Firstly, to his health, secondly, to his finances and, thirdly, for his family, which now included five children, Robert Junior, Anne, Alice, Harry and Lucy. Dolly's desire for an independent and settled life for her husband probably resulted in Plant buying from Philip Dykes in late 1856 or early 1857 a 59 ha farm called Vaalhoek near Tongaat, adjacent to the Esidumbeni mission station. This had recently been part of William Cowie's 288 ha farm. The purchase was finalised in October 1857.⁹ Of Vaalhoek John Sanderson, the strong-willed president of the Natal Agricultural and Horticultural Society, observed that it was 'a delightful place, a little tongue of land between two streams where he [Robert Plant] was naturalising ferns from all quarters, besides planting coffee, tea, arrowroot etc.'⁴⁰ And it was Plant's tea plantation on a mere dozen acres which was to be the early beginnings of the region's tea industry.

But Plant was not finished with collecting. First he turned to trying to sell plants to Natalians, but the occasional £5 here or £3 there did not compensate for the effort put into collecting. Yet plants were more difficult to collect than beetles, butterflies or shells and what was wanted overseas were rarities and novelties. In an outburst of frustration Plant wrote to Sir William Hooker, the director at Kew, 'insects are more portable and, permit me to add, more profitable'⁴¹. This said, at the end of the day Robert Plant was a 'plantsman' and the ever-diplomatic and kindly Sir William soon had him won round with a new project. In 1857 Hooker proposed that Plant undertake the first-ever *Flora natalensis*. In his reply, Plant wrote,

I am so wedded to this beautiful colony that nothing would give me greater pleasure than to assist in making its richness known

... I beg to place myself unconditionally at your disposal for the purpose named^{41,42}.

In one of Plant's notebooks are 11 closely pencil-written pages of the beginning of his unfinished 'The Flora of Natal and NE Coast'.

Vaalhoek became an expedition headquarters. Areas were set aside to grow indigenous plants, preparing them for export; in another place dried specimens were prepared and great piles of these were to be found. Any hopes that Dolly had of her husband settling down to a quiet life as a north-coast farmer were dashed. New plants had to be discovered and Zululand beckoned.

The last expedition

On 21 January 1858 Plant said farewell to Dolly and the children and set out with four African helpers on an epic trek which was to take him deep into northern Maputaland. Moving as fast as he could, he stopped at Ongoya forest before moving on to Imfolozi, where the wagon was left and the five men pressed on on foot, moving down the river to its mouth at St Lucia. Here they waded across with the water up to their chests and one of his dogs had to be carried across. 'The number of hippopotami is astonishing', recorded Plant. They shot one and found the heart 'oily but delicate in flavour'. Moving along the eastern shores of Lake St Lucia, Plant was thrilled by the large number of land shells in the coastal forest, which he said included five or six new species of tree.

Pressing north, Plant recorded in his notebook the great hunting pits and the Tsonga huts laid out around a tree 'like an English village'. Because he was collecting plants, the locals, not unreasonably, thought Plant – the 'Melongu' [White] – was a doctor, 'Megua', which resulted in all the sick coming to him for assistance.

Five days on through the bush and hot white sand, they encountered large numbers of elephant and two of the African assistants stayed on to hunt. Beyond the Pongola River, the bush was full of elephant, rhino, zebra, buffalo, waterbuck, baboon and the nyala buck, recently discovered for science. How far they got is unknown. Their collection of plants grew so great that local inhabitants had to be recruited to help carry them. Especially exciting was a wood Plant discovered where the trees were festooned with orchids.

Finally, they turned for home. And then things started to go badly wrong. The locally recruited labour became uncooperative and neither payment nor threats would right matters. One by one they slipped away into the bush. This meant Plant and his two assistants had to carry the plants in relays, which meant constantly having to retrace their steps to retrieve what plants had been left behind. In the Pongola district Plant went down with fever and was immobile for three days. Finally he recovered somewhat and the little group made their way slowly down to the coast and to a welcome sea breeze. Plant then hurt his knee and the pain



further reduced the speed of the three men. It was terribly hot. They were in sight of St Lucia when the fever struck Plant again. Making it to Mkumbe's kraal, he collapsed. After three days in a stifling hot hut, he was carried outside and placed beneath an acacia tree. His assistants pressed him to write a final message to Dolly, but he did not. Instead, he wrote in his notebook a prayer that he would be spared to return home to his farm. Six years before, Plant had written prophetically of the St Lucia area,

Elephants seem in great plenty all over this district, as we frequently saw herds of them. There are but few inhabitants of this part, which argues little for its healthiness².

Martyr to botany

Robert Plant sat for nine days and nights under the large acacia before dying. It was as dawn broke, probably on 15 March 1858, that he died. His two assistants buried him and enclosed the grave. Rev Tyler later wrote in the *Natal Mercury* of 15 April 1858 that Plant's grave would 'long prove a beacon of warning to those who, for love of science, gain or curiosity, attempt imprudently to traverse that fatal country'. In November 1842 Joseph Hooker, who was later to succeed his father as director of Kew Gardens, had written to George Bentham, 'Have you botanists not killed collectors a-plenty in the tropics?'⁴³ Robert Plant can be added to that list.

Taking Plant's personal effects, gun, notebook and his plants, the two Africans set off for Tongaat. Once there they approached either the young Edward Hamp or probably Rev Tyler, one of whom in turn told Dolly. The last pages giving the account of Plant's struggle down to St Lucia are missing from the notebook.

Robert Plant was not the greatest plant hunter in colonial Natal, but he probably was the most enthusiastic and the most pleasant of that breed which included Mark McKen, William Gerrard and John Medley Wood. Plant was also the pioneer of botanic exploration into Zululand and is interesting because the diversity of his collecting and his trade tells us much about how the London market in natural-history products operated, what the London traders' relationship was with the collectors and how much they paid. Today Robert Plant is commemorated in the names of several plants including the fern *Lastrea plantii* T. Moore.

Dolly, widowed aged 43, and Robert were very close, as is clear from the tone of his letters to her. One such ends,

We must take care that our Boy (or Boys eh Dolly) has a smattering of modern languages instead of bothering him with Latin and such stuff. Good bye dearest. Kiss all the little ones for me and tell them to think of Daddy. ... May God bless and keep you all your own⁴⁴.

Dolly sent her husband's plants to Samuel Stevens, including specimens listed as *Gladiolus plantii* and *Gloriosa plantii*, Stevens remitting to her two payments of £30.¹⁸ To Kew Gardens, she sent dried specimens.⁴⁵ In 1901, it was recorded that 106 of Robert Plant's collections were in the Kew Herbarium.⁴⁶

In a famous speech, the great Swedish botanist Linnaeus observed:

If I look back upon the fate of naturalists, must I call madness or reason that desire which allows us to seek and examine plants? The irresistible attraction of nature can alone induce us to face so many dangers and troubles. No science ever had so many martyrs as natural history ...

Linnaeus then proceeded to name some of these martyrs. A good case can be made to consider that Robert Plant would have qualified as one, as a martyr to botany. Indeed, perhaps, South Africa's only true martyr to botany: he was a professional collector, he was a botanist able to identify plants, he died in Zululand because he was determined to save his plants – he put them before his own personal safety, he died in the bush and he was buried in the bush.

Dolly Plant

An attempted petition to the Natal government to gain a pension for Dolly was rejected by seven votes to eight on the grounds that the Colonial Secretary in London had decreed that no such grants could be made without his permission.^{47,48} An example of the tea she grew at Vaalhoek was exhibited in 1862 at the London International Exhibition, or what was also called the Great London Exposition, on what is now the site of London's Natural History Museum. She won a Certificate of Merit. It was Dolly who provided James Brickhill with his first ten tea plants, out of which, after many twists and turns, would grow the Natal tea industry. Robert Plant Junior became a famous inspector for African schools, in which position he strongly advocated better facilities and standards for African education. He wrote a book called *The Zulu in three tenses. Being a forecast of the Zulu's future in the light of his past and his present* (Pietermaritzburg, 1905).⁴⁹

In one of Robert Plant's notebooks Dolly wrote a prayer asking to be united with Robert in death. She had a long wait, finally dying in 1908, aged 93 – 50 years after her beloved husband.¹⁷

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Mrs Joan Reed for allowing me access to her collection of papers relating to her ancestor Robert Plant. These are cited as Plant family papers. I am also grateful to Prof Himansu Baijnath of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Peter B. Phillipson and Dr Gregory A. Wahlert of Missouri Botanical Garden, and, in particular, to Dr Shelagh O'Byrne Spencer for their expert advice.

Note on sources

Robert Plant has a short entry in Glen and Germishuizen's *Botanical exploration*, and another in Ray Desmond's *Dictionary of British and Irish botanists and horticulturists*. Early references can be found in Plant's Sixth Annual Report of the Natal Agricultural and Horticultural Society, Durban, 1855 (copy in Kew Gardens Library); the minute books of the Natal Agricultural and Horticultural Society in the Durban



Museum; *Hooker's Journal of Botany*, volume 4, 1852, pages 222 and 257 to 265, and volume 5, 1853, page 225; *Kew Bulletin*, 1899, page 55; and Report of the Natal Botanic Gardens, 1901, pages 22 to 23. Known manuscript material relating to Robert Plant consists of Plant's letters to Kew Gardens in the Kew Archive; lists of plants exchanged with Kew Gardens by Robert Plant, in the accessions volumes in the Kew Archives; a small notebook of Plant's in the Killie Campbell Library of the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban; and a collection of Plant's papers owned by his descendant Mrs Joan Reed of Pietermaritzburg. This last collection contains a number of notebooks, some of which were used as diaries and have itineraries of several of his travels. They also contain interesting sketches of shells, plants and insects, some in colour.²² Robert Plant was an accomplished technical artist. There is an almanac book used in part as a ledger, some contemporary newspaper cuttings, as well as a number of draft letters Plant wrote to his patrons in London, Samuel Stevens and William Saunders. No known portrait of Robert Plant has apparently survived.

References

1. Hereman S. Paxton's botanical dictionary. London: Bradbury, Evans and Company, 1868; p. 446.
2. Plant RW. Notice of an excursion in the Zulu country; by Mr. RW Plant, naturalist (communicated by Mr. Stevens). *Hook J Bot*. 1852; 4:257–265.
3. List of Mr. Plant's Natal ferns by Mr. Thomas Moore. *Hook J Bot*. 1853;5:225–229.
4. Desmond R. Dictionary of British and Irish botanists and horticulturists. London: Taylor and Francis and the Natural History Museum, 1994; p. 555.
5. White A, Sloane BL. The Stapelieae. Pasadena, CA: Abbey San Encino Press, 1937; p. 102 and p. 107.
6. Kew Archives, South African letters, volume 189, 1865–1900. Col. JH Bowker to JD Hooker, Natal, 21 April 1885.
7. Kew Archives, South African letters, volume 189, 1865–1900. Albert B Allison to JD Hooker, Natal, 16 May 1892.
8. Kew Archives, African letters, volume 54, 1844–1858. Robert Plant to Sir WJ Hooker, 16 January 1850.
9. O'Byrne Spencer S. British settlers: A biographical register in Natal, 1824–1857. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2001; p. 6.356.
10. Dr Shelagh O'Byrne Spencer, Pietermaritzburg, to Donal McCracken, 9 June 2010.
11. Dr Shelagh O'Byrne Spencer, Pietermaritzburg, to Donal McCracken, 6 June 2010.
12. Harvey W. Flora capensis. London: Hodges, Smith and Company, 1863–1865; p. 3.406.
13. Hutchinson J. A botanist in southern Africa. London: PR Gawthorn, 1946; p. 643.
14. McCracken DP, McCracken PA. Natal: The garden colony. Victorian Natal and the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Johannesburg: Frandsen Publishers, 1990; p. 5–9.
15. Bourquin S. Wilhelm Posselt: The story of his labours among Xhosa and Zulu 1815–1885. Durban: Bergtheil Museum, n.d.; p. 110 and p. 129.
16. Plant family papers. Robert Plant to Samuel Stevens, Natal, 25 August 1855.
17. Plant family almanac book (used as notebook, letterbook and ledger).
18. Plant family papers. Robert Plant to Samuel Stevens, Natal, 16 April 1855.
19. Plant family papers. Robert Plant to Samuel Stevens, Natal, 12 March 1855.
20. Plant family papers. Robert Plant to William Saunders, Natal, 16 August 1855.
21. Robert Plant to William Saunders, 25 February 1855 [unpublished letter].
22. McCracken DP. Saving the Zululand wilderness: An early struggle for nature conservation. Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2008; p. 97–100.
23. Baldwin WC. African hunting and adventure from Natal to the Zambezi. Reprint. Bulawayo: Books of Zimbabwe Publishing; 1981.
24. Glen HF, Germishuizen G. Botanical exploration of southern Africa. 2nd ed. Pretoria: South African National Biodiversity Institute, 2010; p. 342.
25. *Stapelia gigantea*, t7068. *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* 1889.
26. Armitage E. Some observations on the botany of Natal. In: Chapman J, editor. Travels in the interior of South Africa 1849–1863. Cape Town: AA Balkema, 1971; p. 2.463.
27. McCracken DP. Gardens of empire: Botanical institutions of the Victorian British empire. London and Washington: University of Leicester Press/Cassells, 1997; p. 48–49.
28. Plant family papers. James Duncan to Robert Plant, Mauritius, 4 December 1854.
29. Killie Campbell Library, Durban, ref. KCM 1867. Robert Plant notebook; circa 1853.
30. Plant family papers. Robert Plant to Samuel Stevens, Natal, 28 December 1854.
31. Saunders WW. *Refugium Botanicum*, or, figures and descriptions from living specimens, of little known or new plants of botanical interest. 1873;5:t312.
32. Plant family almanac book. Robert Plant to William Saunders, 16 August 1855.
33. McCracken DP. A new history of Durban Botanic Gardens. Durban: Durban Parks Department, 1996; p. 19–21.
34. Durban Museum [unpublished minute book]. Natal Agricultural and Horticultural Society 1855–1864, ref. 1130B.
35. Sixth Annual Report of the Natal Agricultural and Horticultural Society. Durban: Natal Agricultural and Horticultural Society, 1855; p. 11–13.
36. Kew Archives, inward exchange book, 1848–1858; ff.320 and ff.348.
37. Twentieth century impressions of Natal. London: Lloyds Greater Britain Publishing Company, 1906; p. 306.
38. Robert Plant to Samuel Stevens, Natal, 16 April 1855 [unpublished letter; property of Mrs J Reed].
39. *Streptocarpus saundersii*, t5251. *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* 1861.
40. Kew Archives, African letters, volume 54, 1844–1858. J Sanderson to WJ Hooker, Natal, 31 October 1858.
41. Kew Archives, African letters, volume 54, 1844–1858. Robert Plant to WJ Hooker, 15 April 1857.
42. Kew Archives, African letters, volume 54, 1844–1858, Robert Plant to WJ Hooker, 24 May 1857.
43. Huxley L. Life and letters of Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker O.M., G.C.S.I. based on materials collected and arranged by Lady Hooker. London: John Murray, 1918; p. 1.167.
44. Plant family papers. Unpublished notebook; c.1853.
45. Kew Archives, African letters, volume 54, 1844–1858. Isabella Plant to WJ Hooker, 29 June 1858.
46. A list of the collections whose plants are in the Herbarium of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, to 31 December 1899. In: *Bulletin of Miscellaneous Information*. Kew: Royal Botanic Gardens, 1901; p. 53.
47. Death of Mr. Plant, the naturalist. *Natal Witness* 1858 Dec 10.
48. Votes and proceedings of the Legislative Council 1858. 3rd series. Pietermaritzburg: Natal Government, 1858; p. 3.28.
49. Leverton BJT. Robert Plant [Junior]. Dictionary of South African biography. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1981; p. 4.464.