



Scots who made their mark on.....

The History of Africa 1: Mungo Park



"To Boldly Go....."

The name "Mungo Park" fascinated me as a primary schoolboy, *writes Jeff Dugdale*, because I believed he was a man named after a place. However, my Primary 7 teacher inspired me with amazing stories about this extraordinarily brave Scot whose pioneering mission came to an end in a quite appalling manner the detail of which will thankfully never be known.

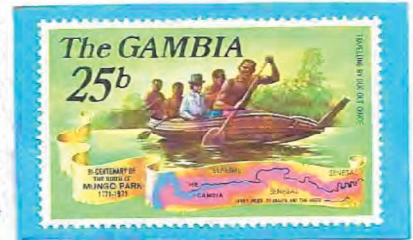
Mungo Park was born near Selkirk in 1771, the middle child of 13, was well educated as his tenant farmer father had some money and he was brought up in strict Protestant tradition, which influenced him all his life. After leaving the local grammar school he began to train as a surgeon under the guidance of Thomas Anderson, whose daughter he would later marry.

When he was 17, Park began four years of study in medicine and botany at Edinburgh University, qualifying as a surgeon in 1793 and within a month was heading for the Far East as an assistant ship's surgeon aboard the *Worcester*. His patron and mentor in this first expedition was the co-Founder of The London Linnean Society Sir Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society who had been a member of Captain Cook's 1768 expedition to Tahiti. (Banks' fellow Founder was London based botanist, James Dickson, brother-in-law to Park). The *Worcester* arrived in Sumatra, where Park put his previous botanical training to good use, particularly repaying Banks by returning with previously unknown (to the West) species of flora and fauna including over half a dozen "new" fish which Park soon lectured on to The Linnean Society and some "rare" Sumatran plants which he donated to Banks.

Some of Park's finds from the far East are referenced on stamps, particularly the fish *Balistapus undulatus Mungo Park* and the *Parkia Speciosa* tree. The former, commonly known as the Orange-lined Triggerfish, was named in Park's honour in 1797. The latter (also known as the stink bean plant, as it smells a bit like methane gas) produces long edible beans with green seeds sometimes labelled Yongchaak or Sataw, which you may have consumed in a Thai green curry. *See issues from Belgium 1968 and Singapore 1996 below.*



In 1794 Park was engaged by the African Association to continue the work they had commissioned on discovering the source of the River Niger and by early Summer of 1795 he had progressed 200 miles inland following the course of the River Gambia. Then from the established British outpost of Pisania accompanied only by two guides he headed into territory never before explored by a European. Unsurprisingly he encountered immense challenges, including an prolonged period of capture by and escape from a Moorish chief. When—entirely isolated now—he eventually reached part of the Niger he followed it in the "wrong" direction for 80 miles and then explored and mapped its course in the other direction for 300 miles.



Gambia 1971 depicts Park and four natives in canoe, though on his first expedition he had only two guides and for his second his canoe was over ten metres long and two wide. The map beneath charts his progress along the River Gambia

After becoming too ill to progress and therefore marooned for most of 1797 he made it back to Pisania and returned home just before Christmas, much to the amazement and joy of local people in The Borders, who had given him up for dead. The fine detail of his journeys we know from his own journals published as *Travels in the Interior of Africa*. What is truly remarkable about his first foray into the African jungle and deserts is his resolute stubbornness, tenacious courage and endurance and, in a word, his "indefatigability".

Following a five year period of domesticity, in which time he married Allison Anderson and worked as a doctor in Peebles, which naturally he found relatively unchallenging after his African experiences Park agreed to return to the problem of the source of the River Niger (wrongly suspecting it ran into the River Congo) a decision which was to prove fateful for over three dozen of his party.



Park against the rolling Border hills

Leaving the South of England in late January 1805, an expedition many times the size of his first took over some six months to make it back to the Niger, by



○—source of River Gambia
●—source of River Niger

x—point of Niger's discharge into the sea

The Niger

The river is some 2,500 miles long, running through territories we now know as Guinea, Mali, Niger, Benin and Nigeria and discharging in the gulf of Guinea via the massive Oil Rivers delta.

Its shape is rather like a boomerang and accordingly puzzled European cartographers for many centuries. The Romans thought it was part of The Nile and in medieval times it was thought to flow West into the River Senegal.

Possibly it was once two different rivers which converged into a no longer extant lake and then changed course over many years.

Stamps from modern territories showing some of the native wildlife Park's party may well have observed on their expedition.



which time fever and dysentery had cut its size by two thirds to under a dozen Europeans. Park now set out to map a previously uncharted section of the river with all local permissions established, finally leaving in mid-November.



Gambia 1988 clearly shows an older Park with the starting point of his second expedition at the mouth the River Gambia shown on the map.

With very few fit men, even fewer of whom he could really trust and his old student friend and brother-in-law Alexander Anderson dead, Park realised his expedition was now in very considerable trouble. He spent some time recording where he had got to and the perilous state of his project ensuring that news of his predicament was prepared for transmission home, but rather than concede defeat he struck out again.

Park's records continued to show his discoveries of native West African species of flora the recording of which he was devoted to and one of these is the most

referenced on stamps with at least seven showing *Parkia biglobosa*, the African locust bean or monkey cutlass tree. Depending on which country it grows in—from Senegal through Cameroon and as far away as Sudan- this multi-purpose and abundant West African savannah tree which can grow to about 60 feet in height is known as houille, enokay, dawadawa or nere. Its hard white timber can be used for fuel and tool handles and other parts for purposes such as dyeing, making soap and in medicines. Its golf-ball sized fruit is usually pink, orange or red. See for example Tchad 1969 and Mali 1982.





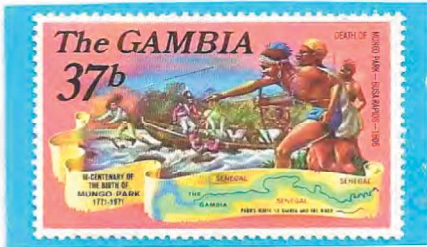
An issue from Burkina Faso in 1993 shows another tree named after Park—the Ou Karite or Shea, whose Linnean name is *Butyrospermum parkii*. The fruit of this tree is pulpy and at the

centre lies large oil-rich seed from which can be extracted shea butter which can be used locally as a food and medicinally but in the West it is used in cosmetics.

Park's proud words about his likely fate also recorded in these messages home are eerily reminiscent of Scott of the Antarctic 100 years later, knowing he would not survive....*"fixed resolution.....perish in the attempt.....I will persevere in the object of my journey"*

Reports of his terrible death reached British outposts in The Gambia several months later. The guide he had entrusted with his papers was commissioned to discover what had actually happened to his courageous leader. It appears that the well equipped Park had travelled, incredibly, over a thousand miles by canoe but had not attempted to make contact with any natives who had observed his party as they passed by on the river. However, this aloofness, perhaps regarded as discourtesy, had led to several attacks all of which were beaten back via the gun power on board responding to spears and arrows. But Park's luck was to run out and on the Bussa Rapids his long and

shallow boat constructed from two canoes stuck fast and became a sitting duck. Natives congregated and fired salvo after salvo of primitive weapons at the strangers.



Gambia 1971 depicts Park's last moments as his boat comes under the final attack.

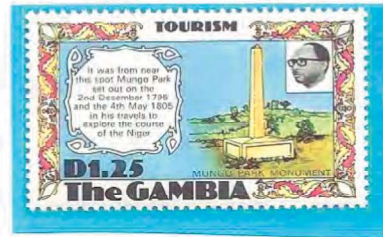
Rather than be captured for some appalling fate, Park and the few others who could move abandoned their craft but inevitably perished in the rapids or were captured—we just do not know, as Park's possessions were lost in the chaos.

Some twenty years later, Park's son Thomas put together an expedition to discover if by any chance his father was indeed captive but died of fever within a few weeks of setting out into the interior.

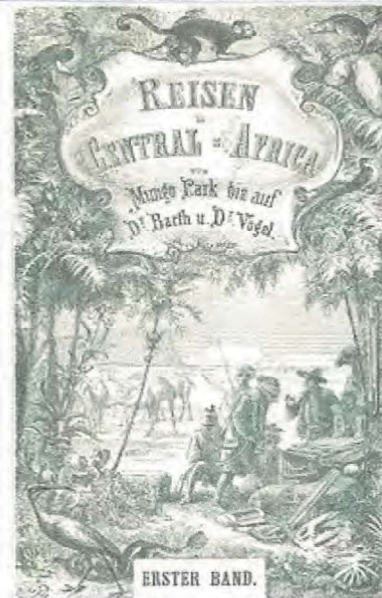
Mungo Park is thus the epitomé of the enterprising, initiative taking Scot — brave, tenacious, resolute, never beaten and his life which is richly detailed in several publications is one which demands admiration and wonder.

His contemporary Robert Burns, who died at much the same age ten years before him might well have written proudly of Park's achievements had he lived long enough.

Park is commemorated by an obelisk in The Gambia as shown on this 1977 stamp, the wording on which says, "It was from near this spot Mungo Park set out on the 2nd December 1795 and on the 4th May 1805 in (sic) this travels to explore the source of the Niger".



The most recent issues celebrating Mungo Park have come from Nigeria where two stamps issued in 2006 show a memorial to him situated at the town of Jebba in Kwara State on the south bank of The Niger and him against a river background.



Title illustration of *Reisen in Central-Afrika - von Mungo Park bis auf Dr. Barth u. Dr. Vogel* (1859)

(First published in *Scottish Stamp News* Autumn 2008)