

# Foreword

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The correspondence of Sir Joseph Banks (1743–1820) comprises a major primary source for understanding the history of the revolution in social, economic and political fields in western Europe, and its spheres of influence, through the turbulent period spanning the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries. At his death, Banks left a vast correspondence, of which some 20,000 letters survive. More than 3000 correspondents appear in these letters, including heads of state, government ministers and people prominent in science and the arts, agriculture and public life. Not only is this correspondence the tangible result of a network permeating the society of its day, but it demonstrates the historical and literary worth of Banks's writing, which has been examined by Neil Chambers in his paper, 'Letters from the President: the correspondence of Sir Joseph Banks', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, 53 (1), 27–57, 1999.

But the Banks correspondence was broken up and sold. Occasionally, material appears on the open market, but most is now scattered throughout the world, preserved in collections both public and private. The Banks Archive Project was set up in 1989 as the initiative of my predecessor as Honorary Director, Harold B. Carter, A.O., and Dr. Desmond King-Hele, F.R.S., who has been chairman of the Executive Committee from the outset. The aim of the project is to re-assemble the collection through copying and cataloguing the letters. Only in this way can an invaluable research tool become available once more. The Archive is housed in the Department of Library Services in The Natural History Museum in London, but is an independent entity, co-sponsored by the Museum and the Royal Society. It raises its own funding from public and private sources. This volume, for example, has been supported by a donation from the Pilgrim Trust, support for which we are most grateful.

Since the appearance of Carter's biography, *Sir Joseph Banks* (1988), substantial progress has been made in preparing the correspondence for publication. Carter himself published *The sheep and wool correspondence of Sir Joseph Banks 1781–1820* in 1979 and, now, the letters associated with Iceland, 1772–1820, are to appear shortly. The aim of the project is to produce the remainder of the correspondence in similar thematic volumes. Work is now active on other letters referring to Australia and the Pacific, to China and Japan, and to the Banks Estates in England. Neil

Chambers is currently preparing the Scientific Letters for publication, and is also researching Banks's career as President of the Royal Society.

With such a large project in progress, it seemed appropriate to the Project's Executive Committee to offer the general public a preview, by publishing a selection of letters to demonstrate the breadth and depth of Banks's involvement in British life, and to show how this involvement was not that of a dilettante, but of a hard-headed pragmatic man, whose influence was felt throughout the society of his day.