

EKATERINA HEATH

## Sowing the Seeds for Strong Relations: Seeds and Plants as Diplomatic Gifts for the Russian Empress Maria Fedorovna

### ABSTRACT

*The article examines the role of botany in diplomatic relationships between Britain and Russia around the turn of the nineteenth century by looking at three gifts of exotic seeds and plants sent by different British diplomats and officials to the Russian Empress Maria Fedorovna, wife of Tsar Paul I. Gifts of live plants were a new category of diplomatic presents fuelled by the rapidly growing popularity of botany across Europe. These gifts represented British imperial ambitions and desire to build a self-sufficient economy. They also indicated an element of Britain's anxiety about its navy's dependence on Russian natural resources and later on about Russia's successes in the exploration of the Antarctic regions. Empress Maria Fedorovna displayed these plants in a prominent part of her garden at Pavlovsk, next to the plants from North America that she had procured independently. This was a deliberate strategy that worked to boost her prestige at court by showcasing her international relationships.*

### Sowing the Seeds for Strong Relations – the gift of 1795

The Russian Empress Maria Fedorovna was given Pavlovsk Park as a gift from her mother-in-law Catherine II in 1777.<sup>1</sup> From this date she was closely involved in all aspects of the park's development, from suggesting designs for pavilions to her architects, to informing her gardeners of the best ways of preserving plants in

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<sup>1</sup> The *Estimates of the Account* document kept in the Manuscript section of the Pavlovsk palace reads: 'The village of Pavlovskoye was founded and building works were started on twelfth of December 1777. The place for Pavlovsk was chosen according to the presented plan on the fourth of December 1777. The house of his Majesty was started to be built on the twelfth of the same year and month.' PDM, *Smeta Po Schetu*. Author's own translation. "Asnovano i zachato stroit' selo Pavlovskoye v 1777 godu v dekabre dvenadtsatogo chisla. Mesto oprobovano po podnesennomu planu i setuatsiya pod Pavlovsk v 1777 godu v dekabre chetvertom chisle. Dom ego visochestva nachato stroit'sya togo zhe godu i mesyatsa dvenadtsatogo chisla.'

winter. By the second half of 1790s visitors to the Russian Empress Maria Fedorovna's estate at Pavlovsk, on the outskirts of Saint Petersburg, could walk down an expansive *allée* that lead from the palace to two hothouses built near the Aviary pavilion.<sup>2</sup> The proximity of the hothouses to the palace indicated an essential relationship between the empress' botanical collections and court ceremony.<sup>3</sup> The hothouses were strategically built in the section of the park where Maria Fedorovna styled herself as the goddess Flora. An unknown artist's *General Plan of the Pavlovsk Park* (dated between 1793 and 1799, Saint Petersburg, Pavlovsk Museum) (Fig.1) suggests that they were built on both sides of the Aviary pavilion where the empress 'spent her mornings' and which in the evenings was used as a 'cosy dining room'.<sup>4</sup> The space between the hothouses was occupied by flower beds with exotic plants and a statue of Flora in the middle.<sup>5</sup> By building the hothouses so close to the palace Maria Fedorovna ensured that they were visited by most people who came to the park. Rather than hiding utilitarian buildings from view, she made them significant features of her garden.

One of these hothouses displayed plants from North America and another contained unique plants in clay pots identically marked 'GR', in reference to George III of Great Britain.<sup>6</sup> The plants had never been seen before in Russia.<sup>7</sup> Sizeable in number and unusual in look, the plants were arranged in an orderly fashion, with wooden sticks indicating their exotic names. This would have created a profound effect upon visitors.<sup>8</sup> The opportunity to see such rare and precious species from the Southern Hemisphere in one of the coldest capital cities in Europe was testament to Maria Fedorovna's powerful international connections and the skill of her gardeners. At the same time, the diverse plants in this hothouse confirmed the vast reach of the British Empire.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Maria Fedorovna dedicated fifty years to developing her favourite estate at Pavlovsk. It became one of the largest and one of the most picturesque landscape gardens in Russia. Semevsky, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> The majority of hothouses were located in the south-western section of the garden near the Church of Saint Mary Magdalene. Some of these designs have been published in the Lameko, 2011, pp. 150-54, figs 238-245. This article will focus on the content of the hothouse that was located literally on the doorstep of the Pavlovsk palace – near the Aviary pavilion built by Charles Cameron.

<sup>4</sup> 'Provodit utrenniye chasy', 'uyutnuyu stolovuyu' as translated in Storch, 2004, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> The first guide book to Pavlovsk published in 1803 described this section of the park in detail. See Storch, 2004, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> SL, Banks MS Ru I: 50.

<sup>7</sup> RBGK, Banks Correspondence 2.130

<sup>8</sup> SL, Banks MS Ru I: 50.

<sup>9</sup> Chandra Mukerji argues that a similar display in the Versailles gardens is a reference to the French colonial empire's power and ambition. See Mukerji, 2004, pp. 19-33.

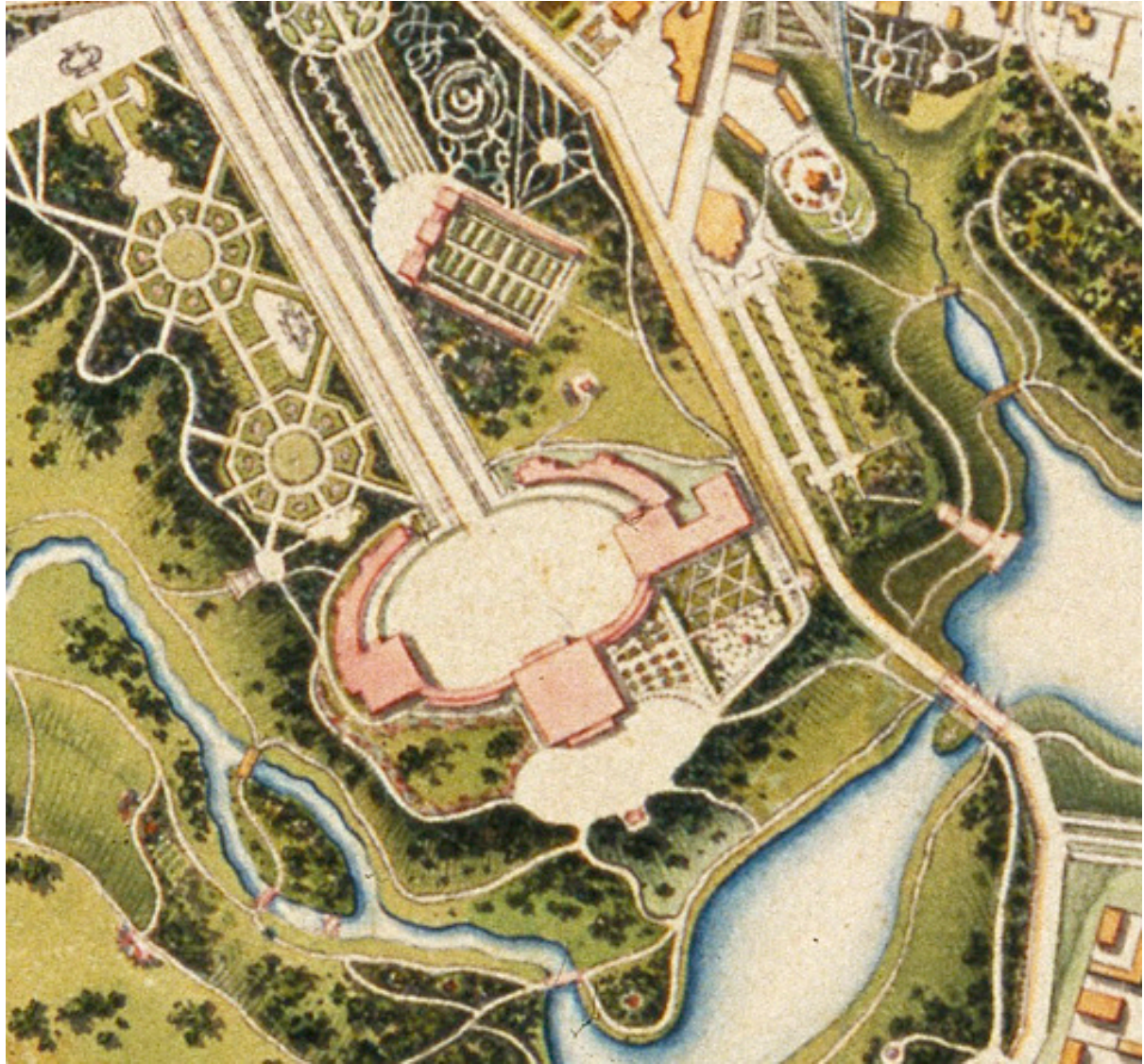


Figure 1 Unknown Artist, *Fragment of the General Plan of the Pavlovsk town*, 1799. Pen, Ink, Watercolour, Saint Petersburg, Pavlovsk Museum (Copyright: Pavlovsk Palace-Museum, akg images).

The display of such a symbol of British imperialism in the garden of Maria Fedorovna, the Empress of Russia, would have appeared surprising and therefore significant. These plants were sent to Pavlovsk as a diplomatic gift from Britain in 1795. The display of diplomatic presents of seeds and plants played an important role in Pavlovsk Park. It signified Maria Fedorovna's political views and connections with the royal houses of Europe. The empress consciously displayed her diplomatic ties with countries like Britain to boost her prestige at court and to project an image of herself as an intelligent ruler and not just as a mother of tsars. It is also an example of how European governments, especially Britain, used rare and exotic



plants as a means of creating long-term political ties with selected members of royal families.<sup>10</sup>

Maria Fedorovna received several important diplomatic gifts of plants from the British diplomats and officials over a period of almost thirty years. The first gift in 1795 contained more than 200 species,<sup>11</sup> almost all of which were entirely new to Russia, while the second British gift in 1814 contained 100 species.<sup>12</sup> The difficulty of transporting fragile plants via sea made these exchanges rare. In order to avoid delivering dead or sickly plants, diplomats usually opted for more durable presents like jewellery or porcelain.<sup>13</sup> These gifts of plants were therefore unusual and significant in terms of the number of plants and the effort therefore required in order to preserve them during the long transit.<sup>14</sup>

The first gift was initiated in 1793 by Sir Charles Whitworth, a British ambassador in Saint Petersburg, and it signalled an improvement of diplomatic relationships between the two countries.<sup>15</sup> Russia and Great Britain had been on the verge of war following the Ochakov crisis just two years earlier when William Pitt, the British Prime minister, attempted to force Russia into giving the Ochakov fortress back to Turkey.<sup>16</sup> Pitt had perceived Russian successes in the former Turkish territories as threats to British trade interests in the Baltic Sea, but, he was quickly forced to withdraw the ultimatum as the idea of war with Russia was unpopular among the British public. Relationships between the two countries improved because of a shared antipathy for revolutionary France, which entered into war with Great Britain in 1793. That same year, the British government wanted to persuade Catherine II to join the coalition against France and send Russian troops to the battlefields.<sup>17</sup> The

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<sup>10</sup> Sir Joseph Banks sent plants to Weimar, Austria, Württemberg, Bavaria and other countries on behalf of the British government. RBGK, Goods Outward Registers 1805-1836.

<sup>11</sup> This collection of letters was misidentified by Harold Carter as pertaining to the delivery of plants to Catherine II, instead of Maria Fedorovna. See Carter, 1974. This article represents the first attempt to analyse the content of these letters in relation to Maria Fedorovna and her garden in Pavlovsk.

<sup>12</sup> RBGK, Goods Outward Registers 1805-1836, fols 71-73.

<sup>13</sup> These gifts are currently displayed at the Armory museum in the Moscow Kremlin and the Hermitage museum, Saint Petersburg. See Dmitrieva, 2006 and Rappe, 2014. Regarding the types of gifts generally given by English ambassadors, see Jansson, 2005, pp. 348-370.

<sup>14</sup> Gifts on such a scale became possible due to the involvement of Sir Joseph Banks, a nominal director of Kew, who brought to the job his experience of transferring plants from different parts of the globe to the gardens at Kew.

<sup>15</sup> It is not known why Charles Whitworth initiated the gift. It is possible that fund 6 ("The Top Secret Issues") of the Archiv Vneshnei Politiki Rossiyskoi Imperii (AVPRI), which contains the perusal of Charles Whitworth's reports to the British Government, can hold some answers. Unfortunately, the archive has been closed for renovation during the period this article was being prepared.

<sup>16</sup> Ehrman, 2013, p. 130 and Black, 1994, p. 285.

<sup>17</sup> Horn, 1967, p. 232. See also Martens, 1895, p. 483.

British ambassador in Saint Petersburg also wished to facilitate the signing of a long-term Russo-British trade agreement that would give British merchants Baltic trade preferences similar to the ones that had been granted to them according to the 1766 treaty.<sup>18</sup>

In the light of these historical circumstances, the fact that the plants were sent to the Grand Duchess Maria Fedorovna instead of the Empress Catherine II, who was widely known for her botanical interests, is surprising. During this period, Maria Fedorovna was not an active participant of the political life of the country.<sup>19</sup> Her perceived lack of power at court has caused scholars to assume that the gift was meant for Catherine II.<sup>20</sup> References to the Grand Duchess and her estate at Pavlovsk in Banks' correspondence have been previously overlooked or disregarded.<sup>21</sup> The suggestion that the plants were sent to Pavlovsk in order to please the empress are difficult to support. As the British ambassador resident in Saint Petersburg, Whitworth would have been well aware of the hostile attitude of Catherine II to her son's family and their estate. She hardly ever visited Pavlovsk during this period and discouraged others from doing so.<sup>22</sup> It seems that this gift was not motivated by a desire for immediate diplomatic gain, but, was instead focused on long-term gain, intended to cultivate a relationship with the future Empress of Russia, Maria Fedorovna. Catherine II's advancing age was evident and the ambassador was looking for ways to ensure that British interests would be perceived as important by the next tsar and tsarina.

Plants were ideal as a series of gifts that would initiate and sustain a positive relationship with the future rulers of the Russian Empire. Sir Joseph Banks, the nominal director of Kew and a major patron of botany, was at the heart of this venture. In his letters to James Burges he indicated that he was planning to

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<sup>18</sup> Martens, 1895, p. 242.

<sup>19</sup> Catherine II's botanical interests in the 1780s were well known in Europe. For example, in 1784 she became one of twelve recipients of Earl of Bute's Botanical tables along with Queen Charlotte and Joseph Banks. See Desmond, 1998, p. 32. Catherine II was also an intended recipient of a botanical gift from Denmark – the Flora Danica porcelain set decorated with botanically correct depictions of plants from Denmark. Flora Danica was commissioned by Danish Crown Prince Frederik on behalf of King Christian VII in 1790. The set was finished after Catherine's death and was never sent to Russia. See Howes, 1971, pp. 14-15.

<sup>20</sup> Carter, 1974. See also, Gascoigne, 1998, p. 163. Peter Hayden has been the only scholar to connect this transaction with the name of Maria Fedorovna. Hayden, 1987, p. 17.

<sup>21</sup> Carter, 1974, p. 352.

<sup>22</sup> For example, on fourteenth of August 1792 in her correspondence with Baron Grimm Catherine II wrote that she was planning to bypass her son and leave the throne to her grandson Alexander: 'At first my Alexander will get married, then after some time will be crowned with all possible ceremonies.' Catherine II, 1878, p. 574.

continue sending plants to Maria Fedorovna in the years to come.<sup>23</sup> As a long-term strategy, the length of time that passed between the conception of the gift in 1793 and delivery of the plants to Pavlovsk in 1795 was inconsequential.

The choice of plants rather than jewellery also reflected a shift in Britain's understanding of itself and its role in the world. Maija Jansson has argued that diplomatic gift exchange in early modern Europe was based on the natural riches and artistic developments of different countries.<sup>24</sup> In the second half of the eighteenth century a new focus on science and economics found its reflection in Britain's gift-giving rituals. People like Joseph Banks were keen to use botany and agronomy to increase the prosperity of the British Empire. Banks is well known for his efforts and achievements in this area.<sup>25</sup> The gifts of plants can also be explained by George III and his wife's interest in botany and agriculture. Sometimes George III was referred to as 'farmer George' and his reign brought an unprecedented growth in agricultural production in Great Britain.<sup>26</sup>

The choice to send plants in pots rather than in seed form, although much riskier, must have been dictated by the desire for visual impact; the sight of two hundred fully grown exotic plants can hardly be compared to the impact of a box of seeds. The plants were delivered in peak form, when they were close to flowering, would have provided instant gratification, as opposed to waiting for years for the plants to germinate and grow. It seems clear that Banks wished to surprise and overwhelm the Russian courtiers with the sight of many plants that had arrived unscathed from a long and perilous journey—standing as a tribute both to the achievements of British gardening and its merchant navy. This visual demonstration of labour attached to creating a gift was meant to make the present more valuable and magnificent.<sup>27</sup>

Gift exchange is burdened by mutual obligations.<sup>28</sup> A present from Great Britain bound Maria Fedorovna to a certain pattern of behaviour in response, and she chose to display this openly. This aspect of the exchange was especially pertinent because her position as a Grand Duchess meant that, unlike Catherine II, Maria Fedorovna was not able to reciprocate with a similarly magnificent gift to George III, due to the financial constraints she was under at the time, as a result of her

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<sup>23</sup> SL, MS Ru I: 17.

<sup>24</sup> Jansson, 2005, p. 349.

<sup>25</sup> More information on this aspect of Joseph Banks activity can be found in Gascoigne, 1998.

<sup>26</sup> Ernle, 1961, p. 207.

<sup>27</sup> Mauss, 2002, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Derrida, 1992, p. 29.

subordinate role in the imperial court.<sup>29</sup> The gift she sent back to Kew was comprised of '25 plants and 180 different seeds ... but most of them ... already in England excepting the *Rhododendron chrysanthemum*.'<sup>30</sup> Her desire to reciprocate equally can be seen in the fact that the total number of plants plus seed species sent was close to the number of plants received by her from Kew.<sup>31</sup> To the extent possible, she included Siberian species, as a reference to Russian imperial power.<sup>32</sup> Although in quantity this counter-gift was close to the one she had received, the plants she sent to Kew were mostly in seed form, promising no visual impact upon arrival in Great Britain. Moreover, the value of the gift was undermined by the fact that the plants had been previously introduced. The importance of equal value of the reciprocal gift was well-known in Great Britain, where it was customary to keep special books that listed the value of gifts received by ambassadors. This ensured that British Ambassadors reciprocated with gifts of similar value, thereby avoiding accusations of bribery.<sup>33</sup> An unequal exchange of gifts signifies that the British gift of plants was an investment in a long-term relationship with a future Empress of Russia; a relationship based on common interest that could potentially benefit both parties. It can also be interpreted as a veiled desire, on the part of Britain, to acquire power over an apparently pliable member of the royal family in readiness for the time when she would become an empress (which she did a year later, in 1796).

Banks' desire for visual effect is confirmed by the addition to the gift of images of some of the plants. This was done to make sure the Grand Duchess knew how the plants would look at their peak.<sup>34</sup> The images *Strelitzia Reginae* (1787, London, The British Museum) and *Phaius Tancarvilleae* (1787, London, The British Museum) (Figs 2 and 3) that Banks sent to Maria Fedorovna had been drawn by James Sowerby in 1787 and then engraved and hand-coloured by Daniel Mackenzie. These coloured engravings were special for Joseph Banks; a contrast to the black and white images

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<sup>29</sup> Multiple letters from Maria Fedorovna and Paul Petrovich mention their shortage of money. For example, on the ninth of April, Grand Duchess wrote to Kiukhelbekker: 'I am sending you all the money that I have, I no longer have any money left. I am hoping they will create a miracle.' Author's own translation. 'Je vous envoie tout l'argent que j'ai, je ne possède pas un liard de plus.' Semevsky, 2011, p. 414.

<sup>30</sup> This fact can be explained by the relationship established between Joseph Banks and Simon Pallas, explorer of Siberian flora and fauna. Chambers, 2007, p. 196.

<sup>31</sup> Maria sent 205 species and received 226. SL, Banks MS. Ru I: 33-34 and Ru I:49.

<sup>32</sup> SL, Banks MS. Ru I: 49. During this period Siberia symbolised Russian colonial expansion much like Australia for Britain. Bassin, 1991, pp. 763-794.

<sup>33</sup> Jansson, 2005, p. 363.

<sup>34</sup> 'A coloured copy of the engraving of this plant [*Strelitzia Reginae*] published in the *Hortus Kewensis*, another of *Limodorum tankervilleae* and a few drawings and colourful engravings.' Carter, 1974, p. 346.

that appeared in the *Hortus Kewensis*, a scholarly compendium of plants in Kew gardens published a year later. Sending coloured engravings that had been issued in a limited edition increased their value. It is also notable that two plants pictured in these engravings were the only ones that had been solely named by Sir Joseph Banks. The images had special significance for him as evidence of his scholarly achievements, as well as of his capability to grow the exotic species himself, since they had been modelled on the plants from his garden at Spring Grove. As well as sending the engravings to Maria Fedorovna, he also promoted his achievement by sending these two coloured plates to the leading botanists of Europe, including as Antoine de Jussieu in Paris. Their names communicated his prominent place at court and powerful connections and by sending these two images to Maria Fedorovna, Banks was clearly attempting to display his status and to establish a personal relationship with her.<sup>35</sup>

The scientific character of these engravings is evidenced by the depiction of diverse parts of plants and their cross-sections in one image. This was an appropriate way to promote Kew's contribution to botanical science. These prints are less striking than other images of the same plants produced around this time. For example, Sowerby's engraving, in comparison with Edward Donovan's *Strelitzia Reginae* (1790, St. Louis, Missouri Botanical Garden) (Fig. 4), neither focuses on the plant's spectacular flower, nor does it feature its distinct shape. Instead, this engraving is an accurate depiction of its parts, and seems intended to provide information for a botanist, rather than for a gardener wishing to imagine how the plant will look in his or hers estate.<sup>36</sup> In sending such images to Maria Fedorovna, Joseph Banks, who knew about the Grand Duchess's interest in the study of botany from the ambassador Charles Whitworth, was clearly appealing to her as a student of botany.<sup>37</sup>

The gift's prominent place in the Grand Duchess' garden was a demonstration of gratitude and a long-term commitment to collaboration between the royal families of the two countries, with this diplomatic meaning activated immediately through public presentation.<sup>38</sup> By showing the plants to 70 courtiers on the day the gift arrived in Russia, Maria Fedorovna was making a statement about her passion for botany and her desire to play an important role in international politics. This was her

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<sup>35</sup> Mabberley, 2011, pp. 475-477.

<sup>36</sup> Another example of this the *Strelitzia Reginae* by Michael Guilfoyle published in *Botanical Magazine*, 1787, pl. 119.

<sup>37</sup> The letter from the fifteenth of November 1793 indicates that Maria Fedorovna had a good idea of Kew garden's collection. Carter, 1974, p. 329.

<sup>38</sup> Cutler, 2008, pp. 79-101.



way of overcoming the marginalised position in which she found herself at the Russian court during this period.

Everything in this gift became a symbolic demonstration of the importance of Russia to Britain's foreign policy. No detail was too small to escape the attention of Banks. His letters from June 1795 indicate that even the choice of the ship to transport the plants to Russia was to be symbolic. Originally, Banks was planning to engage the famous Captain Bligh with his *Calcutta* ship in the gift's delivery. Banks noted that 'his name will add not a little to the Compliment'.<sup>39</sup> The inclusion of Bligh, a person who was crucially important for the British slave economy, was another way of communicating the significance of the gift for Great Britain.

On the sixth of May, Banks wrote that he received 'the King's commands to select as compleat a collection of exotic plants as can be possibly spard'.<sup>40</sup> The novelty of plants sent to Russia was a vital element of the gift. They needed to be 'in the early state of cultivation'<sup>41</sup>, to ensure that these were the new plants recently discovered by the British plant collectors, which would represent the latest achievement of British horticulture. In this way the gift was a symbol of the knowledge-based rational approach to economy that the British government was willing to share with Russia. The plants that were sent came from all parts of the world where the British Empire was present, with the majority of them coming from two territories of critical importance to Great Britain's imperial expansion and accumulation of natural resources: the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa and Australia.

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<sup>39</sup> AIM, B.2.

<sup>40</sup> ATL, No. 112.

<sup>41</sup> Carter, 1974, p. 329.



Figure 2 James Sowerby, *Strelitzia Reginae*, 1787. Watercolour, London, The British Museum, Banksian MS. No. 17. (Copyright: Natural History Museum).





Figure 3 James Sowerby, *Phaius Tancarvilleae*, 1789. Watercolour, London, The British Museum, Banksian MS. No. 17. (Copyright: British Museum).

The gift included a large collection of South African plants that just fifteen years prior had transformed the look of British gardens. The list of plants includes a wide variety of *Ericas* (heaths), *Proteas* and, most important of all, *Pelargoniums*. James Edward Smith, the founder of the Linnaean Society, wrote about the pleasure he experienced in 1779, just four years after the plants collected by Francis Masson in the Cape of Good Hope arrived in Britain: 'the novel sight of an African Geranium [*Pelargonium*] in Yorkshire and Norfolk ... Now every garret and cottage window is filled with numerous species of that beautiful tribe, and every greenhouse glows with innumerable bulbous plants and special heaths of the Cape.'<sup>42</sup> *Pelargoniums*, commonly known as geraniums, became popular pot plants from Scotland to Provence. The inclusion of such plants shared with Maria Fedorovna the latest trends in gardening and introduced affordable and useful plants to Russia.

Several plants within the shipment were singled out by Joseph Banks as especially symbolic. He specifically discussed these plants in his letters and Maria Fedorovna would have understood their special purpose because they were given emphasis either by their prominent position in the list or by their practical application rather than decorative purpose.<sup>43</sup> One of these was *Strelitzia reginae*, named in honour of Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, the Queen Consort of George III and a famous botanist and supporter of Kew, which was placed at the top of the list of plants to be given to the duchess. This plant had been introduced to Britain by Francis Masson from South Africa in 1772 and Joseph Banks named it after Queen Charlotte, so as to ensure that his future botanical trips would be well-funded.<sup>44</sup>

This plant was placed at the top of the list for several reason. First, it attempted to make a connection between Maria Fedorovna and Queen Charlotte, a fellow German princess who was passionate about botany. Second, this plant was particularly rare and therefore precious. Banks wrote to the government official Thomas Burges that:

at the head of the list you will find the *Strelitzia reginae* which on account of the difficulty of increasing it is here considered as one of the most rare and certainly is one of the most beautiful plants in Europe. I know of one plant of it that has lately been procured by purchase, which was imported

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<sup>42</sup> Smith, 1832, pp. 118-9. See also, Saltmarsh, 2003, pp. 225-244.

<sup>43</sup> BM, Dawson Turner copies of the Banks correspondence, 9.221-226.

<sup>44</sup> Mabberley, 2011, pp. 475-477. Later it became a symbol of the Mecklenburg-Strelitz family as is described in the Queen of Prussia's memoirs, 'twelve young girls presented their Majesties with a poem. The covering was beautifully embroidered with a wreath of evergreen foliage round a flower, very uncommon at that time, which came from the Cape of Good Hope, called 'Regina Strelitzia'. The motto was 'eternal youth shall bloom around thee, Strelitzia.' Richardson, 1849, p. 147.



from Holland last year and this ... is said to have cost the proprietor Forty Pounds Sterling.<sup>45</sup>



Figure 4 Edward Donovan, *Strelitzia Reginae*, 1790. Engraving, 'Botanical Review, or the Beauties of Flora', 12, 1790, Harvard, The Arnold Arboretum (Copyright: The Arnold Arboretum).

Two other plants that Joseph Banks singled out to be the focus of the gift were New Zealand flax (*Phormium tenax*) and *Brucea antidysenterica*. New Zealand flax

<sup>45</sup> BM, Dawson Turner copies of the Banks correspondence, 9.221-226

was first seen by Banks during Captain Cook's circumnavigation.<sup>46</sup> It was important because its strong natural fibres were much better than other types of flax produced at that time and Banks believed that by introducing this plant into Great Britain, he would improve the British economy because it would no longer have to depend on Russian flax.<sup>47</sup> Banks did his best to send these plants to other colonies to ensure that the British navy would get high-quality ropes and sails. Indeed, one of the main objectives behind the colonisation of the South Pacific and Australia in particular was to obtain naval materials. One of Governor Philip's first orders was to settle Norfolk Island and to set up the manufacture of *Phormium tenax*.<sup>48</sup> The British Government hoped to establish a plant nursery on Norfolk Island and to use New South Wales as a 'flax farm', with Australia serving as a strategic supply point offering materials desperately needed by the British navy at the time. The efforts to turn *Phormium tenax* into a mass manufactured flax (which had been unsuccessful) continued during the time the gift was delivered to Maria Fedorovna.<sup>49</sup>

On the surface, sending such an important plant to Russia was an obvious gesture of good will and readiness to share knowledge on the part of Great Britain. In his letters Banks expressed hope that this plant would become 'an article of commerce' in the extensive regions of Russia. A peculiar statement when one considers that Russia was already a dominant player in exporting flax to the European market.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Bulletin of Miscellaneous Information (Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew), 1919, p. 169.

<sup>47</sup> Britain tried to end its dependency on Russian flax and hemp several times by trying to forge an alliance with German states and Poland in 1791, but these attempts came to nothing. Horn, 1967, p. 223. The British navy around the turn of the nineteenth century was severely hampered by the undersupply of masts, cordage and canvas. Frost, 1985, p. 395. There is plentiful evidence of just how pressing the issue must have been. The East India company chairman wrote to the Bengal officials that 'if considered only commercially, we are aware that no successful [competition] can be set up against the Russians; but as a plentiful supply of these articles from every possible quarter is of the Highest importance to the wellbeing of the British nation, we recommend this object to your very serious notice'. NA, PRO BT 6/101. The search for an alternative source of naval supplies continued into the nineteenth century, when Liverpool wrote to Glenbervie: 'I am far from thinking that we should relax in our endeavour to obtain this most important article of naval stores from some other country besides Russia.' NA, PRO BT 6/100.

<sup>48</sup> In fact, the settlement of the Norfolk Island was triggered by the potential of the French gaining access to it and being able to grow New Zealand flax which was potentially dangerous for the balance of power between the two countries. Nepean noted that: 'the cultivation of the Flax Plant seems to be the most considerable object' behind the First Fleet settlement. PRO, HO 100/18: 371-372. One of Governor Philip's officers wrote about Norfolk Island: 'The Flax plant grows all around the sea coast in the Greatest Luxuriance so that Cordage and clothing cannot be wanting.' NLA, Australian Joint Copying service, reel M970.

<sup>49</sup> Philip King took some of the manufactured *Phormium tenax* samples to England in 1795. Alan Frost, 1980, p. 152-153.

<sup>50</sup> Sullivan, 1960, p. 2. Some flax trade numbers can be gleaned from the Schumpeter, 1960 and Horn, 1967, p. 215.

Banks was fully aware of this fact, and it was the reason why he had initiated the efforts to grow New Zealand flax in the British colonies. If successful, this could have potentially terminated Russian exports of the plant to Great Britain. The gift of this plant was therefore also a statement that the British navy wanted to cease its dependence on the Russian Empire for flax.<sup>51</sup>

That the special significance of the plant was understood by the duchess and her husband is underlined by the fact that she received the plant in the palace (instead of in the garden with the rest of the plants). In his notes Banks wrote that 'she [the Grand Duchess] had ordered him [Gardener Noe] into the drawing room to shew the Botany Bay flax'.<sup>52</sup> To emphasise the plant's importance, Banks ensured that it was presented to Maria Fedorovna and Paul Petrovich both as a living specimen and in the form of a finished product ('a small bundle of this Flax manufactured by the Indians is sent', which were accompanied by a drawing.<sup>53</sup> The complete gift demonstrated Banks' wish that the plant's practical purpose be understood correctly by the Russian duchess, so that she would correctly interpret the potential implications for the world economy.

Another plant included in the gift that it was worth noting for its potential usefulness to Russia is *Brucea antidysenterica*. It was considered to be a cure for dysentery due to its astringent properties. This disease was particularly dangerous for soldiers and sailors on military campaigns, and therefore, given the scale of Russian military activities in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, the plant was of considerable value and, arguably, had the potential to increase the might of the Russian military.

Originally, Banks had planned to include another significant plant, the breadfruit tree, but as there was only one sample of it left in Kew gardens, decided against it.<sup>54</sup> Breadfruit was a cheap and high-energy food source and Banks had high hopes of this plant becoming the food staple for slaves in the southern parts of the British Empire. It was thought the plant would transform the profitability of the British West Indies, making this colony more successful than neighbouring colonies that belonged to the French and the Spanish. The British race to introduce the plant into the Caribbean ahead of the French highlights the strategic value of the plant for the British economy.<sup>55</sup> The importance of the plant was so high that Banks promised a

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<sup>51</sup> Horn, 1967, p. 225. Frost, 1980, p. 325.

<sup>52</sup> SL, Banks MS. Ru I: 50.

<sup>53</sup> BM, Dawson Turner copies of the Banks correspondence, 9.221-226.

<sup>54</sup> BM, Dawson Turner copies of the Banks correspondence, 9.221-226.

<sup>55</sup> Drayton, 2000, p. 109.

cash bounty and a gold medal for the task of its introduction. It took four years and two attempts, but the task was successfully achieved in 1791, just four years before the gift to Maria Fedorovna.<sup>56</sup> The willingness to share this plant with Russia underscored the absence of Russian competition within the tropical regions where this plant was likely to be of the most benefit. At the same time, it underlined the importance Britain placed on developing and maintaining a friendly relationship with Russia. Banks did not completely abandon his plan of sending the plant to Maria Fedorovna, writing to James Burges that 'Her Imperial Highness will, whenever she thinks fit to ask for it, be furnished with whatever number can be spared.'<sup>57</sup> The range of plants included in this from the beautiful and the rare to those useful plants, which had the potential to control disease, improve nutrition and aid the economy, made this one of the most effective diplomatic presents to Russia in the eighteenth century.<sup>58</sup>

## The 1814 gift

The original gift from Kew was considered a success by both sides.<sup>59</sup> The archives at Kew reveal a total absence of gifts of plants to any European royal house between 1805 and 1814, which can be explained by the Napoleonic wars and an unstable maritime situation.<sup>60</sup> Maria Fedorovna was the first European royal to receive a gift of plants sent on behalf of Queen Charlotte in July of 1814, as soon as the war came to a temporary halt. This demonstrated a special relationship forged between the two countries through the original gift.

Plants were used to strengthen the ties between the members of the anti-Napoleonic coalition ahead of the Congress of Vienna in September of 1814. Between 1814 and 1820, Kew supplied seeds and plants to Britain's major anti-

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<sup>56</sup> Ellis, 1775.

<sup>57</sup> BM, Dawson Turner copies of the Banks correspondence, 9.221-226. The breadfruit plant was sent to Pavlovsk from Kew sometime before 1802. Andrei Storch noted it among the plants displayed by Maria near her palace in the same hothouse as the original gift from Britain: 'One of the hothouses that close off the garden is dedicated to exotic, whereas the other one is dedicated to American plants. You can find the breadfruit tree among the other botanical miracles.' Storch, 2004, p. 17.

<sup>58</sup> The plants were still in existence a year after the gift's presentation and some of their progeny were later transferred into Tsaritsino, Catherine II's former estate near Moscow. RGIA, f. 493, op.1, ed. kh. 158, l.6 'Sadovomu masteru Vizleru za kuplennoye proshlogo goda dlya ukladky iz Anglii privezennyi raznykh dorogikh proizrasteniy pyatnadsaty pudov sena vydano try rub pyat' copeek.' [Accounts book of Grand Duchess Maria Fedorovna for 1796] Folio 6 contains the following note: 'Garden master Vizler received three rubles five kopecks for putting fifteen puds of hay around the diverse costly plants brought from Britain.'

<sup>59</sup> Bladen, 1895, p. 538-539 and SL, MS. Ru I: 11.

<sup>60</sup> RBGK, Goods Outward Registers 1805-1836, folios 37-145.



Napoleonic coalition allies like Prussia (two shipments), Austria (four shipments), Bavaria (five shipments) and even Wurttemberg with four shipments to Maria Fedorovna's daughter, Queen of Wurttemberg, who had travelled to Britain on several occasions during the Congress of Vienna.<sup>61</sup> The purpose of the Congress was to create a balance of power in Europe that would maintain peace and stability as well as divide certain European territories like Poland among the victors. Britain wished to retain control over new colonial territories like Ceylon, the Cape of Good Hope, and Trinidad, which were necessary for its trade and commerce. It also needed the continued support of its allies like Russia in containing France within its borders. No doubt these are the political aims Banks had in mind when he sent a shipment of plants on behalf of Queen Charlotte to Maria Fedorovna. By this time, Maria had become a Dowager Empress, this position made her into the most influential woman in Russia. One of the purposes of this shipment was to express gratitude for Maria Fedorovna's strong support of Russia's alliance with Britain, as well as to strengthen the ties with Russia in general.<sup>62</sup>

The contents of the 1814 shipment shared a few similarities with the 1795 gift. For example, the list of plants included *Strelitzia reginae*, a direct reference to Queen Charlotte herself who sent this gift to Maria Fedorovna. The present contained multiple types of acacias, which were the Dowager Empress' favourite plants.<sup>63</sup> The choice of these plants was meant to ensure an extra favourable response from Maria Fedorovna. At the same time, in many ways this gift differed from the shipment of 1795. It did not contain any plants that could be used for practical purposes, which was unusual for Joseph Banks, who made 'economic botany' his hallmark policy. One potential explanation of this difference is that Maria Fedorovna was unlikely to rule Russia at this point and thus sending her economically useful plants was no longer suitable.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> RBGK, Goods Outward Registers 1805-1836, folios 37-145.

<sup>62</sup> Maria's decision to cancel her ball on the day she received the news of George III's death is one example of this: 'a courier brought us the news of the death of the King of England so out of consideration for the King and his nation I had to cancel the ball.' (Maria's letter to her daughter Anna Pavlovna, 4 February 1820). Jackman, 1994, p. 16.

<sup>63</sup> Maria encouraged her gardeners to plant a lot of acacia in her garden. For example, in one of her notes to herself she wrote: 'Order the gardener to intensively plant acacia in my private garden and in the Grand garden.' PDM, *Perepiska Marii Fedorovny i Pavla s Kiukhelbekkerom*, l. 61, inventory number 1732/1.

<sup>64</sup> RBGK, Goods Outward Registers 1805-1836, f. 70-72. In contrast, some European courts received economically useful plants like tea, guava and *Brucea antidysenterica*. For example, in August 2014 Duke of Saxe Weimar was sent a pomegranate and Hannover Botanical garden was sent guava, tea, passion fruit, cinnamon and *Brucea ferruginea*. RBGK, Goods Outward Registers 1805-1836, f.67, 72-73, 80.

The 1814 gift included a substantial number of decorative plants primarily from Australia, indeed these were the main focus of the gift. This represented a radical change from the previous shipment and coincided with the increasingly rapid exploration of Australia by the British. In 1814 the plants chosen for the gift came from different parts of the continent, rather than primarily from New South Wales as had been the case in 1795. Australian plants were considered exotic and precious and were considered the best way to communicate the exclusive and special relationship that the gift was trying to convey. In addition, Australia was not a zone of potential conflict between Russia and Britain, unlike parts of North America or Asia where Russia was constantly growing its presence.<sup>65</sup> The choice of exotic and decorative plants with no potential for controversial political meanings sent a message of gratitude to Russia before the Congress of Vienna, where the countries would need to work together to create a new order in Europe.

## The 1822 gift

In 1822 Maria Fedorovna received a very different from gift of plants directly from Australia. They were sent by the Governor of New South Wales Lachlan Macquarie, not Joseph Banks, and arrived on Russian naval vessels that had just returned from exploring the western parts of America in search of a passage from the Pacific to the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>66</sup> During this voyage the ships *Otkritiye* and *Blagonamerenniy* had stopped at Port Jackson in February 1820 where the crew was welcomed by Governor Macquarie and his wife. Captain Mikhail Nikolaevich Vassilieff was invited to their house and during the visit the conversation turned to Maria Fedorovna's interest in plants. Macquarie seized this opportunity to forge a relationship with the Russian empress. The note that accompanied the gift reads:

In February of 1820, in Port Jackson in New Holland, its Governor Major-General Macquarie, having found out from the conversation that the Empress Maria Fedorovna likes botany offered f [Captain-Lieutenant] to gather in his garden the best plants of that land and to deliver them in a small box to ... Her Majesty.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Vinkovetsky, 1981 and Morgan, 1981.

<sup>66</sup> McNair, 1992, p. 21.

<sup>67</sup> RGIA, f. 493 op.1 d. 9354. 'Capitan Leitenant Vasiliev mezhdru prochim pishet chto vo vremya bitnost'ego v fevrale sego 1820 goda v Port Zhaksone, chto v Novoi Gollandii. Gubernator onogo General Maior Maquarie, uznay iz razgovora chto Gosudarinya Imperatritsa Mariya Fedorovna lyubit zanimat'sya botanikoi, totchas predlozhit emu Vasilyevu sobrat'v svoem sadu lyuchshiye rasteniya tamoshnego kraya i vsled za sim dostavit oniye v nebolshom yashike, prosya ubeditel'no pri sem preprododit'sii rasteniya k Eya Velichestvu.' Author's own translation. The document's placement in the collection of documents dedicated to the management of Pavlovsk supports the supposition that

Governor Macquarie, like Joseph Banks used plants to win and keep the support of powerful people like European royal families and used the fledgling Sydney Botanic Garden for this purpose. For example, in 1818 he sent a shipment 'of the most admired rare and choice Flowers, Shrubs and Plants of the Country' to the Emperor Francis I of Austria, Prince Leopold of Belgium and Queen Charlotte, wife of George the III.<sup>68</sup> In fact, Governor Macquarie's desire to provide his correspondents with exclusive access to the most rare of Australian plants was the reason behind his conflict with Joseph Banks. He even went as far as sabotaging Alan Cunningham, Banks' plant collector's efforts to gather plants in New South Wales.<sup>69</sup> Australian plants were of high importance to the British Empire, and were used as bartering tools to gain access to power and influence both in international and domestic contexts.

Governor Macquarie was familiar with Russia as he had visited in 1807 as a part of a naval exchange program.<sup>70</sup> His gift of plants was an opportunity to secure a connection with the mother of the most powerful monarch in continental Europe. At the same time, Australian plants given by the Governor were a reminder that Australia belonged to the British Empire.<sup>71</sup> Such an affirmation of land ownership through seemingly neutral gestures of diplomatic gift-giving was not new. In a similar move, the Chinese emperor Qianlong sent Catherine II a collection of coins common in the formerly contested territory of Tarim Basin, which had just been conquered by China, as a way of laying claim on those territories.<sup>72</sup> These coins communicated a message of the Chinese empire's growth and prosperity and desire to compete with Russia in the Far East. These Australian plants, chosen by the British colonial Governor, were intended to affirm imperial land claims over the Australian territory at a time when there was anxiety over the increasingly frequent visits of the Russian navy to the South Seas. This gesture openly stated that Australia was a British colony which harnessed its natural resources for the benefit of the

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the gift was delivered to Pavlovsk and the seeds were planted there. Further research is needed to establish whether the seeds were planted in the hothouses near the palace or in the newly established Botanical garden in the depth of the park.

<sup>68</sup> Endersby, 2000, p. 319.

<sup>69</sup> Endersby, 2000, p. 319.

<sup>70</sup> Massov, 2008, pp. 45-50.

<sup>71</sup> The first Russian ship, the *Neva*, arrived to Port Jackson in 1807, followed by a second ship, the *Suvorov*, in 1814, and then four more: *Blagonamerenniy* and *Otkritiye* on their way to Alaska and *Vostok* and *Mirnyy* on their way to discover the Antarctic continent) in 1820. When the Russian military vessel *America* came to Australia in 1832 and again in 1835, even contemporary press expressed their concern about the increasing frequency of Russian visits. Barratt, 1979.

<sup>72</sup> Rappe, 2014, pp. 162-163.

British Empire.<sup>73</sup> Macquarie further communicated the British identity of Australia by extending an invitation to Captain-Lieutenant Vasilieff, asking him to visit his garden, now the Royal Botanic Garden Sydney, rather than just presenting the guests with a box of seeds. The men were meant to walk around this area and see the newly laid out gardens in the English landscape style before viewing the selected Australian plants integrated into the framework of the English landscape park. Through this process Macquarie communicated the British power over the continent and its ability to use Australian natural resources according to its designs.

Australian plants had special significance in the context of Russian gardens.<sup>74</sup> In 1820, the artist Pavel Nikolaevich Mikhailov arrived at Port Jackson on board a Russian military ship *Vostok*, just two weeks after the departure of Vasilieff with Maria's botanical present. One of the watercolours Mikhailov produced during this visit conveys how Australia was perceived by Russians during the early nineteenth century as a land of exotic plants inhabited by naked 'noble savages'. In Mikhailov's *View of Sydney in Port Jackson* (1820, Saint Petersburg, State Russian Museum) (Fig.5) colonial buildings are largely diminished in size and barely visible. There are no flags that mark the land as belonging to the British Empire. Mikhailov instead sought to depict the 'authentic' Australia of the Russian imagination by staging the scene. He asked Aboriginal people to undress for the sitting.<sup>75</sup> Mikhailov's view sits in contrast to Joseph Lycett's *North View of Sydney, New South Wales* (1825, Canberra, National Library of Australia) (Fig. 6) While, Mikhailov's image successfully captured the arid nature of Australia and the difference between Australian and European foliage, his watercolour represents an attempt to depict an exotic 'other', rather than to capture the prosperity of the new British colony, or, the process of Europeanisation of the indigenous population. Mikhailov focused on the harsh growing conditions for the plants that constituted a major obstacle for the first settlers, Lycett, on the other hand, ignored this more difficult side of the colony's life. His images instead present an idealised view of life in Australia: the grass is green, the plants are lush, and the colony is growing. Mikhailov's depiction of Sydney also suggests that he believed the Russian Empire was expecting information about the exotic plants and people of Australia rather than details about the British Empire and its development in the South East. The artist chose the imagined position of an observer of the pre-colonial life of the indigenous people. He avoided the depiction of a growing colony in the background as a sign of the

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<sup>73</sup> Casey, 1821, p. 93.

<sup>74</sup> The document that concerns Governor Macquarie's present ended up in the folder dedicated to seeds and plants of Pavlovsk, which confirms that the plants were indeed received in Russia.

<sup>75</sup> Karskens, 2011, p. 28.



imminent obliteration of the indigenous civilisation. Large-scale European ships are set in sharp contrast to the small, plain Aboriginal boat in the foreground. In this context it seems likely that the Australian plants in Maria Fedorovna's Pavlovsk Park would have been understood as representing this remote exotic land where native people still lived in harmony with nature, while also representing the Russian Empire's growing interest in Pacific and Antarctic exploration.



Figure 5 Pavel Mikhailov, *View of Sydney in Port Jackson*, 1820. Watercolour, 27.1 x 37.5 cm, Saint Petersburg, State Russian Museum, P-29277 (Copyright: State Russian Museum).





Figure 5 Joseph Lycett, *North View of Sydney, New South Wales*, Engraving, 23 x 33 cm, 1825, published in *Views in Australia or New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land*, delineated in fifty views, with descriptive letter press, Canberra, National Library of Australia.

Botanical diplomatic gifts to Maria Fedorovna relied on the well-known notion that plants in gardens acted as prompts for thinking about the sender and wishing him or her well.<sup>76</sup> The prominent placement of these plants in the gardens were a reminder of Russia's powerful and knowledgeable ally – the British Empire. Moreover, the garden setting minimised the specific political and economic connotations that the gifts carried at their moment of presentation, leaving instead a general impression of peace and the cultivation of relationships between countries.

The plants delivered to Maria Fedorovna through these various diplomatic gifts were likely to be seen by her guests not just in the Pavlovsk hothouses, but also in her palaces around Russia in the form of drawings executed by the empress and her

<sup>76</sup> Hallock, 2005, p. 697.

children.<sup>77</sup> This grew the potential audience of people who could see the riches of Pavlovsk Park's botanical collection, thus extending the power of the gifts beyond their initial impact in the garden's hothouses. In 1795 Maria drew the flowers of the plants that came from Britain and it is highly likely that she did the same for her other gifts, although unfortunately her botanical drawings do not survive.<sup>78</sup> By accepting botanical gifts from foreign countries and publicly displaying them in her palace gardens, Maria Fedorovna was promoting herself as a person interested in botany and thus moral and intelligent, which strengthened her position within the Russian court.

**Ekaterina Heath** is a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney. Her doctoral dissertation is titled 'Russian Empress Maria Fedorovna and Her Influence on the Pavlovsk Park (1777-1828)'. It examines how Maria Fedorovna's personality shaped one of the most influential landscape parks in Russia through analysing the way she promoted her experiences like Grand Tour and interests in botany and charitable giving in the space of her park to grow her prestige at court.

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<sup>77</sup> GARF, f.728, op.1, d. 2619, l.189.

<sup>78</sup> SL, Banks MS. Ru I: 50.

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## Illustrations

**Fig. 1.** Unknown Artist, Fragment of the *General Plan of the Pavlovsk town*, 1799. Pen, Ink, Watercolour, Saint Petersburg, Pavlovsk Museum (Copyright: Pavlovsk Palace-Museum, akg images).

**Fig. 2.** James Sowerby, *Strelitzia Reginae*, 1787. Watercolour, London, The British Museum, Banksian MS. No. 17. (Copyright: Natural History Museum).

**Fig. 3.** James Sowerby, *Phaius Tancarvilliae*, 1789. Watercolour, London, The British Museum, Banksian MS. No. 17. (Copyright: British Museum).

**Fig. 4.** Edward Donovan, *Strelitzia Reginae*, 1790. Engraving, 'Botanical Review, or the Beauties of Flora', 12, 1790, Harvard, The Arnold Arboretum (Copyright: The Arnold Arboretum).

**Fig. 5.** Pavel Mikhailov, *View of Sydney in Port Jackson*, 1820. Watercolour, 27.1 x 37.5 cm, Saint Petersburg, State Russian Museum, P-29277 (Copyright: State Russian Museum).

**Fig. 6.** Joseph Lycett, *North View of Sydney, New South Wales*, Engraving, 23 x 33 cm, 1825, published in *Views in Australia or New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land, delineated in fifty views, with descriptive letter press*, Canberra, National Library of Australia, NLA.OBJ-135700355. (Copyright: National Library of Australia).

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