

# Captain Walter Synnot and his book of Cape plants and flowers

Dorothea Rowse

Botanical illustration is one of the most attractive of the scientific art forms and innumerable volumes of wonderful plant studies exist which instruct and enchant. The flora of the Cape of Good Hope is no exception to this and from the 17th century onwards examples appeared in botanical publications. Many volumes of pictures of Cape plants have been published over the past century and a half. It was, therefore, surprising to find an unknown manuscript volume of watercolours of Cape plants, created in 1822 and 1823, which undoubtedly contained species new at the time, in the Library of the University of Melbourne.<sup>1</sup> The author of this work was Captain Walter Synnot (1773–1851), an Irish artist and plant collector.<sup>2</sup>

The volume is folio size and contains 176 plates of watercolours, each of a flowering plant or shrub, some done to life size. The drawings follow a traditional botanical format, with the whole plant depicted from root to flower, sometimes with the soil line indicated when it is obviously unusual. The main painting is sometimes accompanied by smaller scientific drawings such as cross-sections through the stem or seed. Most plates have a heading indicating the plant's Linnaean

classification. Four additional watercolours have been mounted onto linen and tipped in. A single sheet which gives a numbered table of contents is also tipped in at the beginning. The spine has an embossed label, 'Cape Plants and Flowers' above a faded ink version, 'Cape Plants and Flowers By Capt. Walter Synnot'. On the inside front board of the book is Captain Synnot's bookplate and notes regarding its history.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the plants for which locations are given have a Clanwilliam provenance (north of Cape Town). A few indicate that Synnot roamed further afield, into the Cedarberg mountains.<sup>4</sup> The contents list and notes on the early plates give some idea of Synnot's botanical expertise. Although occasionally he knew the precise scientific name, more commonly he used a generic name such as *disa* or *watsonia* and, of course, *ixias*. He must have picked up some information from his Cape Dutch neighbours and used vernacular names such as '*wag 'n bietjie*' (wait a bit) for a thorn bush. However, for many plants he used broad descriptors such as 'coral bush' or 'poison lily' or 'graveyard plant'. Some of the plates have pencilled identification, seemingly

added at a later date. It is possible that Synnot showed the volume to expert nurserymen in England, who gave him some idea of the possible identification. He seems to have read the natural history volume of James Bruce's *Travels to discover the source of the Nile*, as he makes two references to it, but no books relating to the Cape itself are mentioned.<sup>5</sup> He clearly enjoyed painting the unusual plants such as the stapelias and the showy flowers such as the amaryllis lilies, which feature on the extra-large pages. However, he seems to have been particularly drawn to the smaller plants: *ixias*, geraniums, and gladioli. They would have been the most common flowers occurring in the dry, hot region of Clanwilliam.

The paintings are quite beautiful, consisting of light pencil outlines and carefully coloured flowers and foliage. On one plate Synnot notes his frustration at not being able to replicate a particular shade of bright pink for the petals. The content of the plates changed over time. The first 30 plates were given the most detail in terms of description, either at the foot of the page or on the facing blank sheet. He became quite lyrical about some of the plants: 'This superb heath is rare at Clan William it has no scent. The corolla shines & is extremely brilliant.'<sup>6</sup>



*Triandria monogynia*, plate 47 from Walter Synnot, 'Cape plants and flowers', bound volume of 176 watercolours of flowers in the Clanwilliam district of South Africa, painted c.1822–1823, 43.5 x 27.0 x 6.0 cm. Gift of M.S. Synnot, 1954, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne. Now known as *Synnotia variegata*, a member of the Iridaceae family, this plant was named after Walter Synnot by Robert Sweet in 1826.

Walter Synnot was born in 1773, the younger son of Sir Walter Synnot of Ballymoyer, county Armagh, a man of wealth and position who became County Sheriff of Armagh in 1783. Joseph Wright of Derby's iconic 1781 portrait of the three Synnot children—Marcus, Walter and Maria—is now in the National Gallery of Victoria.

As the younger brother, Walter made his career in the British Army. He became an ensign in the 66th (Berkshire) Regiment of Foot in 1793 and was promoted to the rank of captain in 1797. The regiment was based at Gibraltar for about two years from 1793 before seeing service in the West Indies and Haiti (Santo Domingo), Newfoundland and Nova Scotia.<sup>7</sup> Walter travelled with the regiment and seems to have painted and sketched as he went, even under the most trying of circumstances. His painting *Crossing the torrent of La Manche in Newfoundland ... between Ferryland Harbour and St Johns in 1800* depicts the rigours of service, with a soldier on hands and knees making his way across a makeshift bridge, high above a flooding river.<sup>8</sup> Presumably Synnot was there and made the crossing! Later, in a contribution to his wife's scrapbook, he drew a sketch of a naval transport which can

For plates 30 to 58 the descriptions become sparser and the detailed Latin botanical descriptions are largely missing. Plates from no. 59 to the end may have abbreviated notes attached, the smaller detail drawings are often absent and some of the paintings

seem to be unfinished. At the foot of each page is a reference to an index volume, which presumably accompanied this volume, and is now missing. It certainly included more detail for all the plates, e.g. for plate 79 'described on Page 55 of the Index'.

barely be seen in the towering seas. The sketch was taken from a 'ship which sprang a leak & put back to Gibraltar in a very shattered state'—on which Synnot presumably was travelling.<sup>9</sup> He was serving with the 89th Regiment when he went on half pay in 1803.

Walter married and settled on the family estate shortly after going on half pay. However, when an official emigration scheme to the Cape of Good Hope was announced in 1819, he applied to take out a 'Party' of 28 people, noting that his goals were 'with a desire of promoting civilization amongst the surrounding savage tribes and providing for my children a permanent subsistence'.<sup>10</sup> Twenty-one ships transporting 4,000 settlers were on their way south soon after Christmas 1819.

While most settlers were sent to the Eastern Cape, the Irish Parties were sent to Clanwilliam, north of Cape Town. In a despairing letter to his brother Marcus on arrival in June 1820, Walter wrote that the land allocated to his Party was:

situated under a vast chain of mountains as wild and rugged as nature could form them [the Cedarberg] ... I do not think the plot of level ground [part

of his allocation] contains more than one hundred acres and a very small proportion of that is of good quality ... if I had been aware of the circumstances of this place I would never have come here.<sup>11</sup>

The Irish settlers, as a whole, tried the patience of the Cape administration with their quarrelling and insults, but Captain Synnot was regarded with considerable favour. He was made Deputy Landdrost (magistrate) for the Clanwilliam area in late 1821, a position he held until his departure in 1825.<sup>12</sup> His landholding was increased and he later noted that his property, at the junction of several roads, was developing as a village. In spite of all this, towards the end of 1825 the family returned to Ireland.

Despite his rejection of this land as a place in which to settle his family, he was obviously fascinated by the flora of the area. It is clear that he had always thought of the possible inclusion of some of these plants in a garden: 'The lively colouring and agreeable scent would render this plant an acquisition in the Flower garden—it thrives in rich soil.'<sup>13</sup> Walter must have been aware of the interest in

foreign fauna and flora in England and took a large consignment of bulbs, dried roots and seeds back to Ireland. He presented 'a very large collection of new and rare bulbs' to the Royal Dublin Society, but not to Kew, the pre-eminent collecting botanical garden of the period.<sup>14</sup>

He also sold a collection to Colvill's Nursery in Chelsea, presumably to try and recoup some of the costs of his venture to the Cape. The nursery, which belonged to a father and son, both called James Colvill, was located in the King's Road in London from about 1783 to about 1834.<sup>15</sup> Colvill was noted for being one of the few people in the trade who was prepared to pay for botanical novelties brought back by travellers, a fact presumably well known in London.<sup>16</sup>

The collection which Synnot sold to Colvill was given quite lavish treatment by Robert Sweet, an employee at the nursery. Sweet was the author of a number of descriptive botanical publications which were not only a contribution to horticultural science but were also advertising for the nursery and the plants it had for sale. Ten of Synnot's plants were featured in the second volume of Sweet's *The British flower garden*.

*Tetrandria monogynia*, plate 79 from Synnot, 'Cape plants and flowers'. This protea was tentatively identified as *Plumosa* but the picture is not sufficiently distinctive to make a positive identification.

Each plant was given a careful scientific description, accompanied by a beautiful full-colour illustration and planting notes for those readers who might like to purchase the species.<sup>17</sup>

Synnot's collection was highly regarded by the staff at the nursery, both for its size and its interest. Sweet, referring to Synnot, noted that 'From the same gentleman we have received seeds and roots of several other curious Geraniaceae which we hope soon to flower ... Mr. Colvill has also purchased from him a fine collection of bulbs ... we believe there are some curious new genera.'<sup>18</sup> Sweet frequently commented on the rarity of the plants Synnot had collected; some had been seen in London before 'but had been lost to our collections for many years'.<sup>19</sup> Others, such as the plant they named after him, *Synnotia variegata*, were 'quite new to Europe'.<sup>20</sup> Plate 47 (illustrated on page 27) is possibly Synnot's own painting of that plant, which he called a blue gladiolus: 'This beautiful plant has no odour. It is rare in the vicinity of Clan William and only found on Butler's Hill—opposite the Drostdy in rich dry soil.' The plant is confined almost exclusively to the Clanwilliam district and varies from purple marked with yellow south of Clanwilliam to pale mauve and yellow north of the town.<sup>21</sup>



In 1836 Walter (then aged about 63), his third wife Mary Jane and eight of the children from his second marriage emigrated, this time to Tasmania. He continued to paint plants and insects, and the numerous studies of Tasmanian flowers included in an album belonging to his wife are similar in style to those in 'Cape plants and flowers'. His fascination with moths shows in the many small studies of moths dotted throughout Mary Jane's album, which also contains a beautiful study of a leaf mantis which 'became quite domesticated at Invermay V.D. Land 1839'. He painted some charming miniatures of landscapes and flowers inside the heavily embossed borders supplied to some pages in the album. The same volume contains some rather sentimental poetry, copied 'for my darling Mary'.<sup>22</sup> He spent the rest of his life in the vicinity of Launceston and died in a house in Canning Street in December 1851.

The flowering plants at the Cape of Good Hope had been studied by visitors from continental Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries. Early in the 19th century the Cape became a British possession and a new group of explorers arrived. Plant collectors such as William Burchell (at the Cape c.1810–1814) and James Bowie (at the Cape 1814–1823),

who collected plants for the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, were just two of those involved in the scientific study of Cape flora. Synnot's collection, by comparison, was probably quite modest and fairly amateur in scope. However, it was formed within a relatively narrow geographical area and undoubtedly included items new to the herbaria and commercial nurseries in England. The fact that he left the volume in England with his son Robert in 1836 suggests that he may have hoped that it might get wider publicity. It was never published and remains an exquisite manuscript record of a rather difficult period in the life of its creator, Captain Walter Synnot.

**Author's note:** I should like to acknowledge most gratefully the assistance of staff of Special Collections at the Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne; the State Library of Tasmania; the State Library of New South Wales; Herbarium Library, Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne; the Herbarium, Library, Art and Archives, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew; South African Library of Parliament, Cape Town; the William Fehr Collection, Cape Town; and Helen Doxford Harris.

**Dorothea Rowse** is an Honorary Fellow of the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies at the University of Melbourne. She was Sciences Librarian at the University for ten years, during which time she started her research on this manuscript.

- 1 Walter Synnot, 'Cape plants and flowers', bound volume of 176 watercolours of flowers in the Clanwilliam district of South Africa, painted c.1822–1823, 43.5 x 27.0 x 6.0 cm. Gift of M.S. Synnot, 1954, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne. A reference in *Dictionary of Australian artists online*, www.daa0.org.au, mentions a further volume of botanical material but this has not been traceable.
- 2 Biographical sources on Walter Synnot include: Alfred Gordon-Brown, *Pictorial Africana: A survey of old South African paintings ... with a biographical dictionary of one thousand artists*, Cape Town: Balkema, 1975, p. 228; Mary Gunn and L.E. Codd, *Botanical exploration of Southern Africa*, Cape Town: Balkema for the Botanical Research Institute, 1981, p. 340; and Helen Doxford Harris, 'Walter Synnot', *Dictionary of Australian artists online*.
- 3 Robert Synnot, named on the title page, was Walter's second son, who remained in London when the rest of the family emigrated to Tasmania. The volume eventually became the possession of his son Charles Synnot, who brought it to Australia in the 1860s. M.S. Synnot Esq. presented the volume to the University of Melbourne in 1954. He was probably Walter's great-grandson, descended from his son Monckton Synnot.
- 4 Synnot, 'Cape plants and flowers', plate 17; the Cedarberg is the mountain range to the east of Clanwilliam.
- 5 E.g. Synnot, 'Cape plants and flowers', plate 55; James Bruce, *Travels to discover the source of the Nile ...*, 5 vols, Edinburgh: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1790. Vol. 5 was devoted to natural history.
- 6 Synnot, 'Cape plants and flowers', plate 82, illustrated opposite.
- 7 J. Percy Groves, *The 66th Berkshire Regiment: A brief history of its services at home and abroad from 1758 to 1881*, Reading: J.J. Boocroft, 1887, pp. 8–9.
- 8 Synnot family albums. PXD 353, folio 17, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales (SLNSW). PXD 353 contains eight

*Octandria monogynia* (detail), plate 82 from Synnot, 'Cape plants and flowers'. This unidentified Cape heath is a member of the Ericaceae family.

large, signed watercolours by Walter Synnot including several of Newfoundland and one of Annapolis Royal in Nova Scotia, all dating from c.1790s–1800; one of a funeral at Ballymoyer (1827); one of moths in June at Ballymoyer; and one landscape done in the year of his death. Folio numbers on these pages suggest that they were originally part of another volume.

- 9 Synnot family albums. PXA 1278/1, Mitchell Library, SLNSW. PXA 1278/1–2 is a scrapbook which belonged originally to Walter Synnot's wife Mary Jane. Works by Walter Synnot in vol. 1 include many Tasmanian flower and insect studies; a South African bird; a study of the 1843 comet over Tasmania; a drawing of a storm at sea off Africa; and a small landscape in Haiti. Vol. 2 contains two signed miniatures.
- 10 Walter Synnot, Letter to Earl Bathurst, 28 July 1819, in George McCall Theal (ed.), *Records of the Cape Colony [from 1793 to 1831], copied for the Cape Government, from the manuscript documents held in the Public Record Office, London*, 36 vols, London: Printed by William Clowes & Sons for the Government of the Cape Colony, 1897–1905, vol. 12, p. 271.
- 11 Walter Synnot, Letter to Marcus Synnot, 9 June 1820, in Theal (ed.), *Records of the Cape Colony*, vol. 13, p. 158.
- 12 A large, signed watercolour by Synnot of the farm at Jan Disselsfontein, Clanwilliam (the home of the Deputy Landdrost) is in the William Fehr Collection, Rust en Vreugd House, Cape Town.
- 13 Synnot, 'Cape plants and flowers', plate 40.
- 14 Kevin Bright, *The Royal Dublin Society, 1815–1845*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004, p. 42; I am indebted to the staff at Kew who checked their in-house indexes for any evidence that Synnot had corresponded with the Gardens.
- 15 Ray Desmond, *Dictionary of British and Irish botanists and horticulturists, including plant collectors and botanical artists*, London: Taylor and Francis, 1977, p. 162.



- 16 John Claudius Loudon, *The Gardeners Magazine and Register of Rural and Domestic Improvement*, vol. 6, 1830, p. 377.
- 17 Robert Sweet, *The British flower garden, containing coloured figures and descriptions of the most ornamental and curious hardy flowering plants ...*, drawings by E.D. Smith, vol. 2, London: Simpkin and Marshall for the author, 1825–1827, plates 148, 150, 152, 156, 160, 161, 165, 178, 179 and 187; see also series 2, vol. 1, London: James Ridgway, 1831, plates 39 and 84; and series 2, vol. 3, London: James Ridgway, 1835, plates 122 and 129.
- 18 Robert Sweet, *Geraniaceae*, vol. 3, London: James Ridgway, 1824–1826, plate 273; see also vol. 3, 1824–1826, plates 273 and 286; vol. 4, 1828, plates 306, 318, 327 and 342.
- 19 Sweet, *The British flower garden*, vol. 2, plate 187.
- 20 Sweet, *The British flower garden*, vol. 2, plate 150, which Sweet called *Synnetia* as he often spelled Synnot's name incorrectly.
- 21 G.J. Lewis, 'Revision of the genus *Synnotia*', *Annals of the South African Museum*, vol. 40, 1956, p. 15.
- 22 Synnot family albums. PXA 1278/1, Mitchell Library, SLNSW. Other surviving works from Synnot's time in Tasmania are: Walter Synnot, *Sketch of a comet as it appeared on the evening of the 4 March 1843 ...*, 1843, watercolour, 23.0 x 33.0 cm. Print room C7 DR15, Allport Library and Museum of Fine Arts, State Library of Tasmania, Hobart; and Walter Synnot, *View of Tinder Box Bay, the northern part of D'Entrecasteaux Channel, residence of Joshua Fergusson Esq.*, 1840, watercolour, 32.0 x 49.0 cm. Store SCR 3B 30, Allport Library and Museum of Fine Arts, State Library of Tasmania, Hobart. The album mentioned in *Dictionary of Australian artists online* as being in the Allport Library and Museum of Fine Arts is not held there. It may be PXA 1278/1 in the Mitchell Library, SLNSW (see note 9 above).