

# MUNGO PARK— SURGEON AND EXPLORER

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THE first European who went to seek the river Niger, found it, and returned to tell the tale was the young Scottish surgeon, Mungo Park (Fig. 1). Later he returned to that river and perished in it late in 1805 or early 1806. The border town of Selkirk, near which Park was born, paid tribute to his memory on the 150th anniversary of his death. On 10 November 1955 the Selkirkshire Antiquarian Society with the patronage of Selkirk Town Council arranged a memorial lecture and for an exhibition of some Park relics. The lecture was delivered by Professor Ronald Miller, of the Chair of Geography at Glasgow University, and the relics shown included Park's sword, pocket-book, cuff links, some letters, and a first edition of his *Travels* (1799). On Sunday, 13 November, a commemorative service was held, followed by the laying of wreaths on the handsome memorial to Park in the town's High Street (Fig. 2). This memorial, unveiled in March 1859, stands opposite the house formerly occupied by Mr. Anderson, Park's father-in-law, and which is now the municipal buildings. Park is represented holding a sextant in his right hand and a scroll in his left. At each of the four corners at the base of the memorial stand bronze figures of Africans—mother and child, a musician, a slave girl, and Mumbo Jumbo. Two bronze panels at each side depict scenes from Park's travels, while on the front is the inscription:

MUNGO PARK

Born at Foulshiels

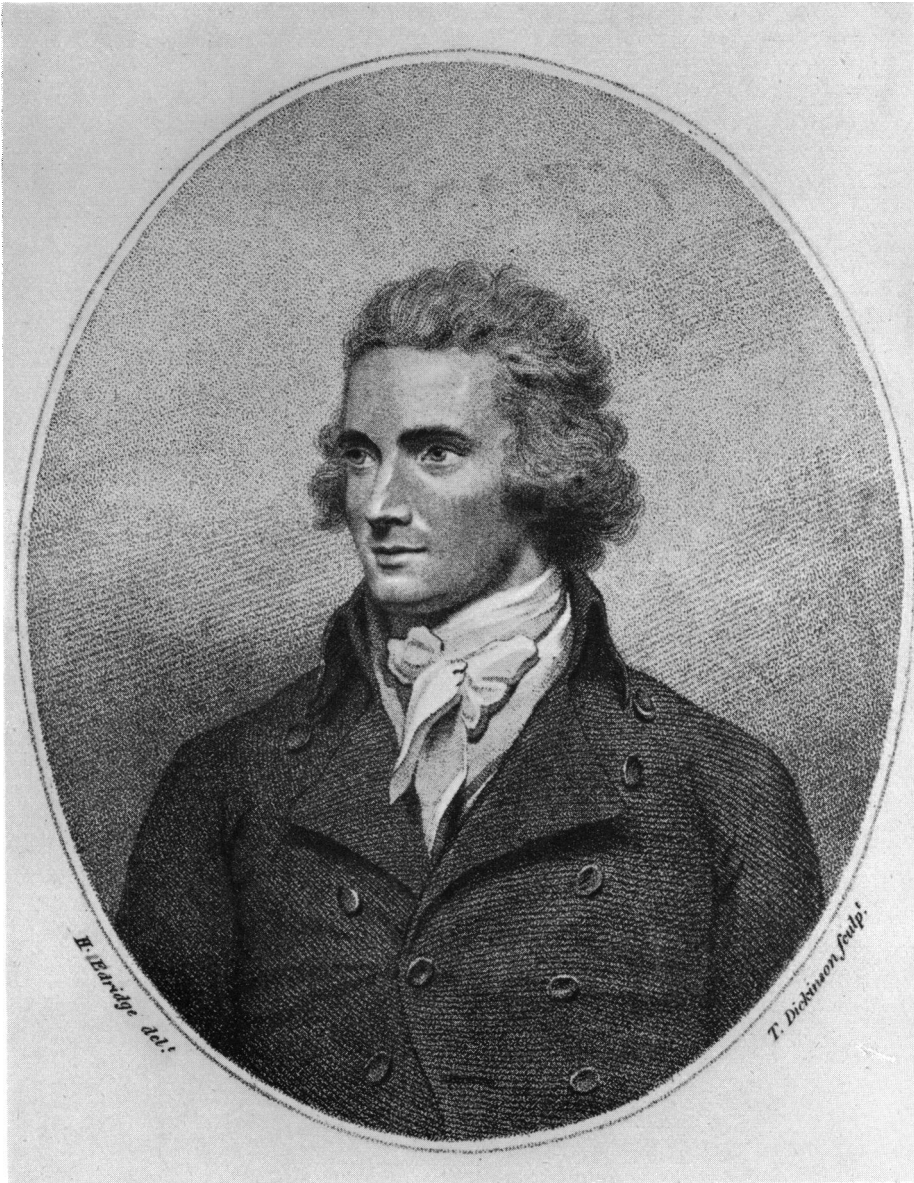
Selkirkshire

10th September, 1771

Killed at Boussa on the

Niger Africa, 1805

On the back panel of the memorial is an inscription to Park's two Selkirk companions on his second ill-fated expedition, Alexander Anderson and George Scott.



**MUNGO PARK**  
(Frontispiece to his *Travels*, 1799.)





Mungo Park's Monument, Selkirk.

## Mungo Park

The small farm of Foulshiels in the Yarrow valley, about four miles from Selkirk, is now a ruin, though efforts are being made to keep what remains in some state of repair. Mungo's father was a humble yeoman farmer and tenant of the Duke of Buccleuch. The Park family was large, Mungo being the seventh of thirteen children though, characteristic of the period, five died young. From an early age Mungo must have had to fend for himself, a valuable preparation for his later life. Though far from being in affluent circumstances, the father employed a resident tutor for his surviving children, an example of the value placed on education by the common folk of the period. In due time, Mungo attended school at Selkirk, where he was remarked as silent and thoughtful and of a studious turn of mind, a state of affairs which persuaded his father to prepare him for the Church. But Mungo chose medicine and so, at fifteen, he was apprenticed to Mr. Thomas Anderson, 'a respectable surgeon in Selkirk', with whom he stayed three years before going to Edinburgh to complete his studies. There Mungo remained for another three years, matriculating but never graduating. Leaving Edinburgh in 1791, he sought his fortune in London, where he lodged with his brother-in-law, James Dickson, a distinguished botanist and intimate of Sir Joseph Banks, who thus came to know Mungo and who was soon to exert such a profound influence on that young man's career. Through Banks's patronage Mungo was appointed assistant surgeon on the *Worcester* East Indiaman and made a voyage to Sumatra in 1792–93, where he collected botanical and natural history specimens. On his return to London, Mungo gave a paper to the Linnaean Society of which he became an associate (1794).

At this time there was great interest in African exploration and the African Association (founded 1788) was foremost in sponsoring expeditions to the Dark Continent. It was especially interested in determining the rise and course of the Niger, but its first three expeditions ended in failure. At this dismal stage of the Association's activities, Park, who had 'a general passion for travelling', offered his services, through Banks, to the Association in 1794 and his offer was accepted. He set sail from Portsmouth on 22 May 1795, on the brig *Endeavour*, and arrived a month later on the river Gambia. He set up his base at Pisania, a small trading-post on that river, where he lived with Dr. Laidley for six months during the rainy season, learning the Mandingo language and gathering information about the peoples and countries he proposed to visit during his exploration. Here he suffered his first attacks of malaria, from which he made slow recovery.

Park's instructions from the African Association were clear. He records that he was 'to pass on to the river Niger. . . . That I should ascertain the course, and, if possible, the rise and termination of that river.' He was also instructed to bear himself as 'a traveller of good temper and conciliating

manners, who has nothing with him to tempt rapacity'. He was, in other words, literally to proceed empty-handed into hostile territory, giving and taking no offence (Miller, 1955). This deliberate policy of the Association, apparently accepted by Park, explains his meekness in accepting the insult and injury so frequently meted out to him during his subsequent wanderings. But it is somewhat extraordinary that Park, like so many explorers of his time and later, clung so tenaciously to the European fashions of the day which were so obviously unsuitable for African travel. When he started out on his journey Park wore a tall beaver hat, a blue frock coat with brass buttons, and trousers. These made him at once conspicuous, whereas if he had been clad in Arab or Moorish fashion he might have travelled without undue notice or opposition. It was also incredible to the African ruler that a stranger, and a white man, should come seeking only a river. Indeed Park, when he did reach the Niger, was asked by the local king if there were no rivers in his own country and whether one river was not like another. More likely the stranger was a spy, and as a spy Park was often regarded and so treated.

On 2 December 1795, when the season was most favourable, Park set out from Pisania with light baggage, 'consisting chiefly of provisions for two days; a small assortment of beads, amber and tobacco, for the purchase of a fresh supply, as I proceeded; a few changes of linen, and other necessary apparel, an umbrella, a pocket sextant, a magnetic compass, and a thermometer; together with two small fowling pieces, two pairs of pistols, and some other small articles'. No mention is made of any medicines being carried but Park did take his lancet. Obviously, before long he was going to be reduced to the role of beggar, humbly seeking his way and dependent upon the charity and goodwill of the natives and their rulers. He was accompanied by two servants and as all three were mounted this did not proclaim him as a man of few possessions. Quite the contrary was obvious, for soon after bidding farewell to his English friends, who 'secretly thought they should never see me afterwards', Park and his party were progressively plundered of their few possessions. At Jarra, Park's negro servant, Johnson, was to leave him and return to Pisania and to him Park committed his memoranda which in time reached safety. In spite of continuing perils and hardship, imprisonment, and ill-treatment, which reduced Park to sore straits, he finally reached Segou on 20 July 1796, where he 'saw with infinite pleasure the great object of my mission—the long sought for majestic Niger, glittering to the morning sun, as broad as the Thames at Westminster, and flowing slowly to the eastward'. The river's direction was no surprise to him as he had 'received from Negroes, of different nations, such clear and decisive assurances that its general course was towards the rising sun, as scarce left any doubt on my mind'.



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But Park had paid a heavy price for his success, for now his health was bad, though his spirit still great. He attempted to follow the river downstream, but realizing the folly of pursuing this course as the spreading floods of the river rendered movement difficult and dangerous, he slowly retraced his steps and after much suffering he reached Kamalia on 16 September 1796. There he presented a sorry picture. His clothes were in rags, his beard long, and his skin yellow from continued sickness. He was indeed critically ill and remained so for five weeks, and if he had not received great kindness at the hands of a friendly slave trader, Karfa Taura, he must surely have died. He remained with Karfa for seven months, regaining his strength and studying the people, their customs and habits, and the diseases from which they suffered, as well as making observations on the slave trade. Leaving Kamalia with Karfa and a slave caravan in April 1797, Park reached Pisanía on 10 June, meeting Laidley again, who regarded him 'as one risen from the dead'. Unable to get a British boat home, he obtained passage on an American slave-ship and finally, after voyaging via the West Indies, Park landed at Falmouth on 22 December 1797 after an absence from this country of two years and seven months.

He reached London before daybreak on Christmas morning, and walking about the streets till it should be time to go to Dickson's house, he slipped into the garden of the British Museum, where, to the astonishment of both, he met Dickson. The news of Park's safe return spread rapidly and excitement was intense. To allay impatience among the subscribers to the African Association, an abridged account of his travels was prepared with the help of the Association's secretary, Bryan Edwards, and was issued for private circulation in 1798. Preparation of this detained Park in London for about six months. Returning to Foulshiel in June 1798, he spent the summer and autumn there, preparing a full account of his travels, which was published in May 1799 under the title *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa in 1795, 1796, and 1797*, with an appendix by Major Rennell. The book was received with great enthusiasm and three editions were called for the same year. After publication, Park returned to Foulshiel, became engaged to Alison Anderson, daughter of his old chief, and married her on 2 August 1799. For more than two years he resided at Foulshiel with his wife and his mother. But the nightmare of his African privations haunted him, and he was sorely tried by terrifying dreams in which he thought himself once more in desperate situations.

Gradually recovering strength, he set up as a surgeon in Peebles in October 1801, but he did not care for the life and returned to Foulshiel with his family in 1804. Government was now interested in the Niger for possible trade and settlement projects, and Park was sounded on these. In

the autumn of 1804 he prepared a memorandum in which he set out his proposals for another expedition. These proposals included determination of the safest route for transporting merchandise to the Niger, the military protection needed to guard such a trade route—hence he proposed that such an expedition should be fully armed—and a survey of the river to ascertain, if possible, where it ended. The basis of an expedition then began to be formed with Park as leader. He chose his brother-in-law, Alexander Anderson, also a surgeon, as second in command, and George Scott, a fellow Selkirk man and an artist, to record sketches of the expedition. Park's aim was to reach the Niger where the waters were navigable and there build boats in which his party would sail downstream, hoping to reach the coast. After several delays, Park, his two companions and four or five artificers sailed in the transport *Crescent* from Portsmouth for the Gambia on 31 January 1805. Commissioned a captain, Park was given permission to recruit military personnel from the garrison at Goree. On arrival there he selected Lieutenant Martyn, who later was to prove of little use to him, and thirty-five privates and two seamen. Asses were obtained as pack animals for equipment and merchandise, but it was significant that 'no inducement could prevail on a single Negro' to accompany the party. The reason was obvious. Owing to the expedition's late arrival on the coast, it would be dangerous to start into the interior in the hot season with the rains imminent. Park was in a dilemma, but he proceeded with his preparations, and though his letters home were cheerful and confident enough he must have had serious misgivings.

The expedition finally set out on 27 April 1805, from Kayee on the Gambia, a few miles below Pisania, accompanied by Isaaco, a Mandingo priest, as guide. Trouble began almost at once. The asses refused to carry their packs, the heat affected the soldiers, and the convoy began to straggle. Dysentery appeared among the men and as the numerical and physical efficiency of the party diminished, it became a prey to the depredations of the natives, but somehow the convoy struggled on. By June the rains had broken and these added to the difficulties, death continuing to reduce the ranks, and when the party finally reached the Niger on 19 August only six soldiers and one carpenter survived out of the thirty-four soldiers and four carpenters who left the Gambia with Park. George Scott also died before the Niger was reached. Park himself, on reaching the river, fell victim to fever and dysentery, 'and as I found that my strength was failing very fast, I resolved to charge myself with mercury. I accordingly took calomel till it affected my mouth to such a degree that I could not speak or sleep for six days. The salivation put an immediate stop to the dysentery, which had proved fatal to so many of the soldiers'. By generous propitiation of the king of Sego, difficulties from that source were removed and Park

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chose Sansanding as the best place to prepare for his navigation of the river, and he reached that town on 27 September. After much delay Park obtained two canoes, partially rotten, which, with the aid of a soldier, 'and with eighteen days hard labour, changed the Bambarra canoe into His Majesty's schooner, *Joliba*; the length forty feet, breadth six feet; being flat bottomed, draws only one foot water when loaded'. The name *Joliba* was that given to the Niger by the natives and meant Great Waters. On 28 October, Park lost his old friend Alexander Anderson, whom he had nursed for three months and whose death cast such gloom over him.

By mid-November preparations for the voyage downstream had been completed. Isaaco was paid off, his contract fulfilled, and to his care Park committed his journals and his last three letters, to Banks, Lord Camden the Colonial Secretary, and Alison, his wife. These Isaaco safely carried back to the Gambia, from whence they were transmitted home. Of the party of white men, forty-four strong, who set out from the coast, only five now remained—three soldiers (one insane), Lieutenant Martyn, and Park himself. On 19 November this pathetic group, with a new guide, Amadi Fatouma, and three slaves set sail from Sansanding on their last perilous adventure. No further news was expected for a considerable time, but next year (1806) rumours reached the Guinea Coast that Park's party had all been killed. After long delay, Colonel Maxwell, Governor of Senegal, enlisted the help of Isaaco, who set out in January 1810, and he found by great good fortune Amadi Fatouma, from whom he obtained a report, the truth of which has never seriously been challenged. After several skirmishes the party had stopped at Yaour, a riverside village, to land Amadi whose contract was now completed. Park sent presents to the local chief for transmission to the king, but in reply to the chief's question if he would return Park sent the answer that he could return no more—a tactical error with fatal consequences. The chief retained the presents and reported to the king that none had been given. The king therefore sent an army to intercept Park at Boussa where the river narrowed. There during a fierce fight Park and his companions perished by jumping into the rapids and drowning.

Park achieved a great feat in itself by navigating the Niger for about 1,000 miles from his starting-point, and he failed by only some 700 miles to reach his goal. At least another ten leaders of later expeditions, including three medical men, were to pay the heaviest price men can pay before the riddle of the Niger was solved. Finally, in 1830, the brothers Lander followed the lower Niger from Boussa to its outlet on the Guinea Coast, while the French explorer, René Caillié, added most to complete the knowledge of the Upper Niger. On the island at Jebba an obelisk has been



erected to the memory of the Niger's pioneers. On a brass plate is the inscription:

To MUNGO PARK, 1795  
and RICHARD LANDER  
1830, who traced the course  
of the Niger from near its  
source to the sea.  
Both died in Africa for Africa.

A tall, handsome man, Mungo Park had a reserved manner, and society held little attraction for him. Quiet and seclusion were for him when he was at home, where he presided over a happy family circle. In the interval between his two African adventures he became closely attached to (Sir) Walter Scott. Indeed, to a small circle of intimate friends only did he unbend. He never seems to have been keen on medicine as a profession, and after his first Nigerian journey he was unsettled, doubtless due to the proposals made to him about further expeditions, and when the final call did come he accepted almost at once though the wrench from wife and children was trying. His journals contain, however, some interesting medical and surgical observations. He noticed the swarms of mosquitoes which came from swamps and creeks and whose stings raised blisters on his legs and arms, which made him very feverish and uneasy, but he did not realize that these insects might spread the malaria from which he suffered. When a prisoner among the Moors in Ludamar he noticed that the chief diseases were intermittent fever and dysentery, both usually left to nature to cure. Smallpox he was informed occurred among the Moors, from whom it spread to the negroes farther south, and Laidley told him that the negroes of the Gambia practised inoculation. Among the Mandingo negroes, fevers and fluxes were the commonest disorders, the former treated during the cold stage by steam baths and the latter by powdered bark of different trees. Yaws, elephantiasis and leprosy, of a particularly severe form, were noted among the negroes, while guinea worm infestation was common in certain regions, especially at the commencement of the rainy season. The negroes attributed this disease to drinking bad water, stating, as is quite true, that those who drank from wells were more liable to infestation than those who drank from streams. Goitres were likewise attributed to impure drinking water. In the interior countries Park saw gonorrhoea, but never confirmed syphilis. Fractures and dislocations were effectively treated by simple splints and bandages, while abscesses were opened by the actual cautery, cupping

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being applied to other forms of local inflammation. He noted also the fondness of negroes for bloodletting, though on one occasion when he offered to bleed a negro king the offer was politely refused.

Park's character and knowledge of Mandingo and Arabic brought him into close contact with the people over a vast area of unknown Africa, and made it known to Europe. His description of Mumbo Jumbo soon led to the general use of that term in our language to describe superstitious observance. The French explorer Dubois, following Park some ninety years later, found that three things about 'Big Beard', as Park was known to the natives, had impressed them and had been handed down in legend to their children. These were his strength, his courage, and his gentleness.

But Park has been subjected to some criticism. His navigation during his first journey was mostly by dead reckoning, and so his new map of the Nigerian area, though a great advance on previous ones, was still far from accurate. This was the only technical criticism, the others were directed at his moral character. Deeply religious man though he was, Park's observations on slavery contain no word of protest. He accepted man's inhumanity to man as a matter of course—he himself had suffered much. His description of slavery did, however, provide powerful ammunition to the anti-slavery movement in Great Britain. Park has been severely criticized for alleged withholding of medical treatment of his party during the second expedition. The basis of this criticism is that he recorded only treatment of himself for fever and dysentery, using calomel with which he 'charged' himself to such an extent that he was unable to speak or sleep for six days. Though calomel in small to moderate doses had been recommended for tropical fevers by Lind (1768), Lysons (1771), Wright (1794) and Winterbottom (1805), none advocated large doses of a drug which was probably ineffectual in any case. It seems rather that Park took heroic doses as a last resort and recorded this fact as it proved successful. Certainly McWilliam (1843) in a later Niger expedition cautioned against large doses of the drug. Park is hardly likely to have left untreated men, including his brother-in-law and fellow surgeon. The inexperience of the men, the conditions under which they travelled, and the ineffectiveness of the drug were the probable causes of the high death-rate.

As a lone-handed explorer he was successful in spite of all difficulties. As the leader of a large expedition which ended in failure with tragic loss of life, Park is open to criticism. The plan was his and the execution of it in his own hands, but government by its tedious delays prevented Park from setting out at the optimum time. Yet there is no suggestion in his letters or journals that he cautioned delay till the season was opportune. This in spite of his knowledge of the dangers to which his expedition would be exposed, and his admitted difficulty in recruiting negroes. But Park's honesty led him

to commit a tactical error at Yaour, which resulted in the deaths of his remaining companions and himself at Boussa.

Mrs. Park was granted a pension but cherished the belief till her death in 1840 that her husband was still alive. Thomas, her second son, shared his mother's belief, and in 1827 sailed for the Gold Coast, hoping to get news of his father, but he died soon after his arrival there. 'And so fatally ended the connection of the Park family with the exploration of the River Niger, and thus closed the first great chapter in the history of the opening up of Inner Africa' (Thomson, 1890).

Today all traces of the once important trading station of Pisanía on the banks of the river Gambia have vanished. Only a white obelisk, slim but impressive, marks the site where Laidley lived and worked and from which Park set out on his journeys. The obelisk was erected by Sir Edward Denham when he was Governor of the Gambia during 1930-33.

I am grateful to E. R. Edwards and Son, photographers at Selkirk for Fig. 2.

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