

WILLIAM BURCHELL BIOGRAPHY

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Burchell, Dr William John (1781–1863)—to South Africa in 1810, a multi-skilled succulentist of wide-ranging knowledge, discovered the first Lithops known to botanical science in 1811.



Born in Fulham, London, England on 23 July 1781, the eldest son of a wealthy nurseryman, William Burchell became a traveler, explorer, naturalist, ethnographer, entomologist, ecologist, geologist, geographer, natural philosopher, meteorologist, cartographer, draughtsman, talented linguist, botanist, zoologist and artist. Burchell's primary interest was natural history, in particular botany. He studied botany at his family's Fulham Nursery and Botanical Gardens and at the Royal Gardens in Kew.

In his thirst for knowledge and desire to travel, Burchell made his way to South Africa in 1810 and by June 1811 he left Cape Town botanizing his way on an expedition into the interior of South Africa. By the time he returned to Cape Town in April 1815, he had travelled some 7,200 km (4,500 miles), mostly by ox-wagon with six Hottentot servants, and had collected over 50,000 specimens. His ox-wagon was custom-designed by him and when it shortly became overloaded on his overland journey, he purchased a regular Cape wagon—which with these 2 wagons became his mobile home, laboratory, library and art studio. With over 48 crates of specimens Burchell sailed on the ship "Kate" back to Fulham in November 1815. His extensive collections when he reached Fulham included plants, animal skins, skeletons, insects, seeds, bulbs and fish with good notes on every specimen, detailing habitat and many drawings and paintings of landscapes, portraits, costumes, people, animals and plants. He was commemorated in (a) Burchell's zebra (*Equus quagga burchellii*), large wild herds thought to have disappeared by 1910 can now be found in smaller herds in KwaZulu-Natal, an eastern Province in South Africa, and in Etosha National Park in Namibia, and (b) Burchell's Coucal bird (*Centropus burchellii*) ranging along the southeastern coast of Africa.

Of interest to the succulentist are the succulent plant species named in Burchell's honor: *Aizoon burchellii* in 1908, *Macropetalum (Brachystelma) burchellii* in 1844 (1996), *Rhipsalis burchellii* in 1923 and *Lithops lesliei* ssp *burchellii* in 1988.

He discovered a number of succulent plant species in his south African travels: *Aloe claviflora* in 1811, *A. cooperi* in 1814, *A. striatula* in 1813, *Euphorbia bubalina* in 1813, *E. macella* in 1812, *E. micracantha* in 1815, *E. rectirama* in 1812, , *E. tenax* in 1812, *Mesembryanthemum (Nananthus) aloides* in 1812, *M. (Lithops) turbiniiformis* in 1811*, *Systrepha (Ceropegia) filiformis* in 1822, *Tithymalus (Euphorbia) ecklonii* in 1815.

A few species were described by Burchell: *Aloe claviflora* 1822, *Bauhinia (Tylosema) esculentum* 1824, *Cotyledon (Adromischus) trigynus* 1824, *Ipomoea (Turbina) suffruticosa* 1824, *Mesembryanthemum (Mestoklema) arboriforme* 1822, *M. (Ruschia) campestris* 1822, *Paschanthus (Adenia) repanda* 1822, *Systrepha (Ceropegia) filiformis* 1822.

Burchell wrote a book "Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa" in 2 Volumes: (a) 1822 Volume 1 with 582 pages and 50 woodcuts plus 10 color plates and (b) 1824 Volume 2 with 648 pages and 46 woodcuts plus 10 color plates. There must have been a 3rd Volume planned since the 2nd Volume ended way before he completed his journey.

Burchell also travelled through Portugal and Tenerife of the Canary Islands to eastern Brazil from 1825 to 1830, collecting many specimens, mostly insects and bird-skin species.

William Burchell was regarded as one of the most scientific collectors of his time. He received an honorary doctorate degree from Oxford University, England in 1834.

With his travels exhausting his personal fortune, Burchell withdrew from society and gradually became an isolated and disillusioned man. After suffering several years of ill health he took his own life on 23 March 1863. He never married.

*He discovered the first Lithops known to botanical science on the 14th of September 1811. In his book he wrote: "On picking up from the stoney ground, what was supposed a curiously shaped pebble, it proved to be a plant, but in color and appearance bore the closest resemblance to the stones between which it was growing."

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