

David Lyall M.D. (1817 - 1895)



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What is the connection between HMS Trincomalee and a giant buttercup?

The answer is Dr David Lyall, surgeon with the Royal Navy whom was given a home appointment to HMS Trincomalee in 1868.



David Lyall

David Lyall was born in Auchenblae, Aberdeenshire, 1st June 1817, in the same year that HMS Trincomalee was completed. After he had been granted a Licentiate of the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh, he finished his medical training in Aberdeen, and then to improve his medical knowledge he became the surgeon on a whaling ship bound to Greenland.

In 1839 he entered the Royal Navy, his whaling ship experience no doubt contributing to him being immediately selected for service under Sir James Ross in his scientific expedition to the Antarctic. Dr Lyall was appointed assistant-Surgeon of HMS Terror (the consort of HMS Erebus) under Commander Crozier. When Captain James Ross visited Port Ross for twenty days in November 1840, Dr Lyall with the botanist Joseph Hooker, collected 80 flowering plants, released sheep, poultry and rabbits, and planted a variety of vegetables and garden fruits. His botanical duties continued during the voyage which did not return to England until late in 1842, by which time he had formed an important herbarium of no less than 1500 species. For the five winter months of 1842 the ships remained in Berkeley Sound, East Falkland, and Dr Lyall made a 'beautiful collection of interesting algae'. His conduct was officially reported to the Admiralty as 'meriting the highest commendations.'

After his return to England, late in 1842, Dr Lyall served as assistant surgeon in several commissions in the Mediterranean, until in 1847, on the recommendation of Sir William Hooker, he was selected as surgeon and naturalist to accompany Captain Stokes in HMS Acheron on a survey of the coast of New Zealand. Here he amassed another extensive herbarium, which included the discovery of the 'monarch of all buttercups', the gigantic white-flowered *Ranunculus lyallii* (The 'water-lily' of the New Zealand shepherds). He also published a paper on the habits of the New Zealand bird, the kakapo, noting that 'The kakapo is esteemed a great delicacy by the natives; but its flesh has a strong and slightly stringent flavour.'

His attention was given to the Northern hemisphere in 1852 with his appointment as surgeon and naturalist to the 'Assistance' sent out to the Arctic region, under Commander Belcher, in search of Sir John Franklin. During this service he received an acting order as lieutenant in command of one of the sledges employed in the search. He also used the opportunity to amass the largest herbarium ever formed in the American Polar Islands, exclusive of Greenland, exceeding the sum of all previous expeditions in the same regions.

In 1855 David Lyall was present at the bombardment of Sveaborg in the Baltic Campaign whilst appointed to the 'Pembroke' however he was to return to his botany later. In 1858 he amassed a further magnificent herbarium whilst accompanying the Land Boundary Commission's survey of the boundary line between British Columbia and the United States possessions, from the Gulf of Georgia to the summit of the Rocky Mountains. On his return to England he was borne on the books of HMS Fishguard at Woolwich, allowing him to reside at Kew for the purpose of arranging, reporting on, and distributing his collections, and also allowing him to marry Miss Rowe of Haverfordwest with whom he had three children.

It was in 1868 when Dr Lyall accepted the home appointment to HMS Trincomalee and he appears in the national census of 1871 as being resident on HMS Trincomalee in West Hartlepool. This was followed with a home appointment on HMS Daedalus until he retired in 1873. He died in Cheltenham in 1895 with the rank of Deputy Inspector-General of Hospitals and Fleets.

Amongst several plant species his name is remembered by are 'Anemone lyallii', the little mountain anemone, and trees such as the mountain ribbonwood 'Hoheria lyallii' and the subalpine larch 'Larix lyallii'.

The Lyall Islands lying just outside to Yule Bay, Victoria Land, Antarctica were named after him after their discovery in 1841 by Captain James Ross.

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