

A QUARTET OF “PLANT HUNTERS”

This month I decided to write about four books based on the same theme. Plant hunters, especially those living (and dying) before the age of modern medicine and transportation, are (were) an astonishingly motivated group of people – almost all men, but a few women. Sometimes from humble backgrounds, often affluent, some in already poor health, the hunters were motivated by many things – duty, adventure, career, knowledge and, yes, money but not very often.

“The Plant Hunters” by Tyler Whittle (1970), which is in the club library, is a comprehensive, slightly academic but not dry account, from pre-Renaissance times to the turn of the 20th C. This book more firmly places the hunters in the historic events of their time than the others. Risks galore were encountered by plant hunters - such as those by George Forrest in 1904. “...But with Scottish obstinacy and British sang-froid and the average plant hunter’s indifference to outside concerns, he refused to be worried by the threat of Tibetan guerrillas...”. Within a year, 68 of his 80 person expedition would have been horribly massacred and his escape would make the basis for a gripping adventure movie.

“Flower Hunters” by Mary and John Cribbin (2008) follows the broad path of Whittle, but is written in an easier style. The authors limit themselves (in cricket parlance) to a first (best) XI, from the 17th to the 19th centuries. Unfortunately, this ruled out Ernest “Chinese” Wilson – see below. Thoroughly researched and well told, the Cribbins bring the hunters’ activities and adventures to life. Danger and hardship were constant companions. Connection to the present day is neatly achieved at the end of each chapter - “In The Garden”. Here a number of the plants discovered by each hunter and still commonly found and popular in many modern gardens are noted. Available in the public library.

“The Plant Hunter’s Garden – The New Explorers and Their Discoveries” by Bobby J. Ward (2004). Ward’s approach is quite different from the preceding accounts – here the modern day plant hunters are private individuals who are making a living collecting, propagating, promoting and selling their finds and the off-springs. The hunters’ activities are recounted, but the emphasis is very much on

the plants themselves – all favourites of the hunter - which are usually for sale at their nursery. Thirty-two plant hunters, who hail from around the world, feature in the book which is generously illustrated with colour photographs. Although written for the serious plants person it is still a delight to browse through, even if you are not inclined to read all the text. Available in the public library.

“Seeds of Fortune – A Gardening Dynasty” by Sue Shepherd (2003). The Veitch family was in the nursery business in the UK for five generations from the mid-18th C. to the 20th C. and this was the largest family run nursery business in Europe for much of that time. Shepherd’s book is written from the perspective of the plant hunter’s employer and complements the books above. The relationships between nursery owner and hunter are interesting and radically different in many ways from modern times – not least with respect to danger and hardship, let alone remuneration. The evolution and long survival of the Veitch business was remarkable in a notoriously fickle and competitive business, where a new shipment of exotic plants by a competitor (and his plant hunter) from a “secret” source could lead to ruin without an adequate response. A special business acumen was required by both nursery owner and his plant hunters to succeed. The success of the Veitch family was due, in part, to the exclusive retention of numerous plant hunters, including some of the most famous ones such as “Chinese” Wilson and the Lobb brothers, many of whose exploits are recounted by Shepherd. The nursery was sold in 1969 and survived another twenty years under its new owner. The book is now out of print, but if anyone wishes I would be happy to lend my copy.

If I was to suggest only one account of plant hunting it would be “Flower Hunters” by the Cribbins.

Reviewed by David Broomhead