



Flower Hunters Mary & John Gribbin

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This is not a book about plants. It is about some of the people who collected them, and the experiences they also gathered. The subjects are all British, except the Swede Linnaeus, and all are men, except for Marianne North, whose exuberant oil paintings were housed at Kew in 1882. The story starts two centuries earlier, with John Ray's interest in local floras and pioneering work in systematic classification. It ends with Joseph Hooker, who gave science a *Flora Antarctica* and gardeners a plenitude of Himalayan rhododendrons, and who was Assistant Director, then Director, of Kew from 1855 to 1885.

The Gribbins are good at popularising, though a little too generous with incidental family details. The value of their book for *Hardy Plant* readers is the clarity with which it shows us – often through the adventurers' words in diaries and letters – the alarming tribulations and privations that attended what appears, superficially, to be 'the Gentle Art of Botanising'. I recommend it as reading when snowstorm, drought, or invading hornets preclude engaging in that 'Gentle Art'. When, later, you are in your own or some other garden, admiring its treasures, reflect on the enthusiasm/recklessness/madness of those who brought them back for us.

As you admire that herald of spring, *Ribes sanguineum*, thank David Douglas, whose North American conifers, especially, 'changed the shape of forests, country estates and ... private gardens' – but only because he was tough as well as plant-mad. When you covet the latest *Phormium* cultivar, recall Joseph Banks discovering new worlds in the South Seas with Captain Cook. And as you genteelly sip your cup of English tea, remember how recently (the 1850s) the Indian black tea industry was established with the plants and know-how Robert Fortune had surreptitiously stolen from the Chinese.

Of course, these adventures were a long way from all being stress and setbacks. Many of the garden plants Fortune is to be thanked for were bought in Chinese nurseries. Some collectors even managed to retire back home. But I am constantly in awe of the stamina, and the amount of work some people manage: in his retirement, Richard Spruce settled down to such things as preparing vocabularies of the native languages he had learned, and the writing of a monumental paper on liverworts: the *Hepaticae of the Amazon and the Andes of Peru and Ecuador* (1885). Sanity has an unclear boundary... **Martin Spray**

