

## Book Review

*Robert Fortune—Plant Hunter* by David Kay Ferguson. 2017. Anhui University Press: Hefei, PRC. 438 pp., plus a small CD-ROM containing two files: 213 screen pages of notes to the chapters, and 100 screen pages of literature cited (“References”). Available from John Edmondson, Acanthophyllum Books, Long Chase Farm, Holywell, Flintshire CH8 7BH, Wales, UK. (abooks@mac.com). 44 British pounds including shipping.

If you are addicted to the macchiato coffee at Starbucks in the morning, then this book might not be of much interest. But if you prefer the soothing yet awakening experience of a morning cup of tea, or afternoon tea and cookies, then this book should be worth reading and studying. How were Chinese tea plantations organized? How were the tea leaves prepared so that they yielded such a high quality beverage? Who was responsible for development of the British Indian tea plantations? These questions and numerous others are answered authoritatively in this new book by David Ferguson, and they all connect to the activities of the plant hunter, Robert Fortune (1812–1880).

Fortune was a British gardener who successfully investigated tea cultivation and harvesting methods in China and brought back plants for their establishment in the hills of British India. In employ of the East India Company he infiltrated Chinese tea gardens and work rooms and learned the techniques for production of high-quality teas. Because these areas were off-limits to foreigners, Fortune dressed up as an aristocratic Chinaman complete with robes and braided hair, and in this manner was able to make pertinent observations. He learned, for example, that green and black tea come from the same species of *Camellia sinensis*, differing only in the methods of preparation of the leaves. This and other valuable information, plus many Chinese tea plants, were shared with the British plantations in India. As a result, England was able to develop its own tea industry and avoid the Chinese monopoly. This also lessened the economic burden of having to purchase increasing levels of Chinese tea as the thirst for the beverage continued to rise in the British Empire.

Fortune is also well known for his numerous introductions of eastern Asian plants to British gardens. His first trip to China in 1843–1845 was in the service of the Horticultural Society of London, and he was dispatched for the purpose of bringing back whatever might be suitable for cultivation in Great Britain as well as obtaining information on gardening, agriculture, and climate. Through many hardships, Fortune was very successful in meeting the objectives, bringing back numerous cultivars, some collected from the wild and others taken from established gardens. Over his five trips to China that extended through 1861, Fortune successfully introduced more than 130 accessions that thrived in the climate of the British Isles. He also made herbarium collections and took copious notes. Much of what Fortune accomplished was recorded in four books (Fortune, 1847, 1852, 1857, 1863), essentially at five-year intervals and all with the London publisher John Murray. This represents more than 1640 pages of detailed observations and commentary about China. Fortune also published a number of journal articles on his travels, a few in the *Journal of the Horticultural Society* but most in the *Gardeners’ Chronicle*.

Less well known is that Fortune, after his work with the East India Company, was contracted by the U.S. Commissioner of Patents, Joseph Holt, to travel to China and bring back seeds in Wardian cases. The objective was to develop tea plantations in the southern part of the country in the Carolinas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, and California. Fortune left England on 4 March 1858 for China and collected seeds of different quality tea cultivars, returning to England a year later. Many thousands of viable seeds were dispatched successfully to Washington, D.C., but Fortune was not invited to the USA to continue supervising the project. Tea plants were grown successfully from the seeds, and 26,000 young plants were distributed to different areas of the country. The Civil War soon intervened and that, plus difficulties with climate and labor costs, resulted in eventual failure of the enterprise.

To be able to achieve so much, we learn in this new book that Fortune was very energetic and probably ambitious, traits which served to support him during his first trip to China when he did not know the language, geography, or culture. He was focused as a plant collector, and he was persistent in achieving his goals, overcoming whatever bureaucratic or other obstacle that might have stood in his way. However, he could be light-hearted and friendly, and this he showed to all persons of whatever station in life. This worked in his favor when dealing with expatriates in

important positions as well as with Chinese assistants and ordinary people whom he encountered during his travels.

The author of this biography, David Ferguson, is a paleobotanist, presently an emeritus professor of the University of Vienna, Austria, and highly qualified to write on the topic of tea, flora, and Fortune. Ferguson’s interest in the Chinese flora developed through research in China and other countries of Eastern Asia, during which time he visited many of the important localities where Fortune lived and worked. This experience in China also has given him a deep understanding of the customs and linguistic dimensions of the Chinese language, details of which are demonstrated in the book, particularly in the notes. It is this background that has enabled Ferguson to dig deeply into the life and times surrounding Robert Fortune. Furthermore, the author really knows plants and speaks authoritatively about them throughout the book.

The book consists of eleven chapters in 438 pages. The chapter titles give an overview of the contents: From childhood to manhood in Scotland; Early professional career; Fortune’s first visit to China; Chelsea interlude; In the service of the East India Company; Intermezzo: moving up in the world; Working for the Americans; Two trips to Japan; A final farewell to China; Out of the limelight; and Epilogue. All of the chapters (except the Epilogue) are subdivided (e.g. 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, etc.), from two to twelve subdivisions in each, which makes for an orderly arrangement of the topics. This technique, however useful, gives the book a feel of a textbook rather than a unified biography. But then again, this is not a typical biography, it is a very detailed in-depth analysis of the life of Robert Fortune and his times. In addition to the text, the book also contains a lengthy Index to place names (pp. 314–360), an Index to persons, firms, and vessels (pp. 361–399), and an Index to plants and animals (pp. 400–432; the plants Fortune introduced given in bold). Due to the copious use of many photographs (nearly all in color), there are also six pages of Illustration credits (pp. 433–438).

Somewhat unconventionally, all the notes and literature cited (“References”) in Ferguson’s book are contained in a small CD-ROM. There are two files: one with the explanatory notes and author and year of literature citations (213 screen pp.), and the second with the full literature cited (100 screen pp.) in alphabetical order. The notes are given by number, which repeats within each chapter, and some refer to explanations to the text, but most refer to references, sometimes listing several citations. Specific page numbers from the citations are also given, as well as numerous Wikipedia listings, all of which provide a deep level of documentation for all points offered in the text. The literature cited, given in a second file, is listed alphabetically in normal bibliographic fashion, and the chapter, part of chapter, or box where cited is given for each. This editorial approach with CD-ROM was to me frustrating, because one cannot flip to the back of the book to check a particular explanation or reference; one needs to have the computer files open to follow the documentation of the text. Admittedly this approach unclutters the text, but I prefer to learn something about who published what as I read along, and I am not in the habit of reading a book while having my computer screen handy. On the other hand, one cannot scoff at the added efficiency: use of the CD saves 313 screen pages, which was doubtless the reason for adopting this format.

Frequent use of the box technique for adding additional information adds to the heaviness of the volume, but there is no question that this is extremely informative, although at times distracting. For example, in Chapter Two, it is written that Fortune was hired as a gardener in the London Horticultural Society, and the well-known botanist, Professor John Lindley, was the Vice-Secretary at the time. This leads to box 2.1 that explains considerable about Lindley, his birth and death years, the names of his parents, and details on his life. The box takes up about one page and is very interesting, but it does distract from the focus on Fortune. A few sentences later a mention is then made on the First Opium War, and this takes us to another box that spans 2.5 pages. One has to admit that the details on these distractions are very impressive and informative, but they do divert the reader’s attention from the main theme of the book.

This book is not light reading, it is a challenging view of Robert Fortune, his life and times. In some ways it is more of a reference book or textbook than a simple biography. Ferguson must be congratulated for getting so deep into his subject, keeping careful notes as he went along, and then sharing these facts with the reader. For readers who want a more easy approach to Fortune and the development of the British tea industry, the work by Sarah Rose (2009) might be more palatable. She herself admits that “...this is a work of popular history, not a scholarly undertaking...”