BOOK REVIEWS

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“Gentlemen don’t need mistletoe” said the Christmas whiskey billboard I saw recently in Florida, a garish reminder of how much mistletoe lore is embedded in western society. Mistletoe The Genus Viscum, one in the series of medicinal and aromatic plants for industry and academic researchers, centers on the mistletoe in this advertisement, the common European industry and academic researchers, centers on the mistletoe in this advertisement, the common European mistletoe, Viscum album. There are helpful discussions on African, Asian, and Argentine mistletoes and their uses but the corpus of the book deals with V. album.

Viscum album, considered sacred by the Druids, is no doubt the most widely used parasitic angiosperm for various health concoctions. As a result, much has been learned about its biochemistry and pharmaceutical potential. A great deal of the work on the culture and utilization of V. album has been done by investigators at Institute Hiscia Center for Cancer Research in Switzerland where votaries of Rudolf Steiner’s distinct form of homeopathy have used mistletoe extracts ("Iscador") for many years in cancer treatment. Mistletoe collected from less common hosts are considered to have greater efficacy in preparation of Iscador. As a result, there is a helpful chapter on culturing V. album which is not as difficult as might be imagined for an obligate parasite.

Most of the chapters deal with the medicinal aspects of mistletoe including toxicology, clinical aspects, chemistry, and biochemistry emphasizing the lectins which are one of the more desirable compounds produced by the parasite. I found the treatment by Büssing (Biological and pharmacological properties of Viscum album L.) helpful because it reviews the link between folk and modern medicine. However, several relevant papers were omitted which are included in a recent excellent review of mistletoes (Watson 2001).

Like many books with a diversity of authors, the quality of chapters varies. Obviously produced as a reference volume, Mistletoe lacks an extensive index. Especially aggravating is the lack of an author’s index, limiting the value of the book for anyone looking for specific papers. These days, $70 for a hardbound monograph is reasonable. Color images are well-produced but some of the black and white figures are blurry in my copy. This volume will be of value to ethnobotanists, anyone interested in alternative medicines, and students of mistletoes and parasitic plants.

LITERATURE CITED


Arriving more than ten years since its debut is this second edition of what most paleoethnobotany graduate students refer to as, “the Bible.” Paleoethnobotany: A Handbook of Procedures has been revised to include recent advances in phytolith analysis and growth in paleoethnobotanical literature. Furthermore, in response to reviews of the first edition, this edition is more global in scope (versus heavily weighed toward New World examples) and includes an important chapter on integrating biological data into paleoethnobotanical analysis.

The book contains six chapters followed by references and an index. The first five chapters introduce paleoethnobotany, discuss macroremains and techniques used to recover, identify and interpret them, and go on to cover pollen and phytolith analysis. These chapters lead up to Chapter 6, “Integrating Biological Data,” that comes in two parts covering: indicators for diet and health and the interplay of dietary indicators. This chapter is followed by a bibliography and general index. Black and white figures and tables appear frequently throughout the text to illustrate the concepts discussed therein.

Dr. Pearsall has succeeded to comprehensively outline the approaches and techniques of paleoethnobotany all the while making it accessible to anthropologists and botanists. This book should form the foundation for introductory paleoethnobotany classes for a long time to come.

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