
Humans have cultivated apples for millennia, and there are thousands of cultivars. This joins similar books for the general reader: the time is ripe for an update on the origin of the sweet apple, currently called Malus pumila. Earlier books in this genre antedate recent developments.

The bibliography is best part of the book, 390 entries, with 58 pre-1800 entries, and 75 from 2000 onward. Sloppy editing mars it, however: German capitalizations are botched, some authors’ names are misordered. British editions of some recent titles are cited, which may make finding them difficult in U.S. libraries, e.g., Browning (1999) is titled Apples in the U.S. and dates from 1998; Sanders (1988) is The Apple Book.

Nice features are the abundant, long quotes from earlier literature and translations: e.g., grafting from Qi Min Yao Shu, a Chinese scroll from the mid-sixth century B.C.E.

The index disappoints: it contains only English and Latin names for animals and plants, but is incomplete, e.g., Pomoideae, Sorbus terminalis, S. florentina inter alia are missing. About one-third of the index lists apple cultivars, most receiving just passing mention in the text.

The text itself contains enough surprising or incorrect statements to make one suspicious of the whole. “The honeybee . . . may indeed have originated in the area,” i.e., Tian Shan (p. 26). Though A. mellifera subsp. pomonella, not mentioned here, was recently described from there, the honeybee originated in Africa. In a list of cultivars “. . . British examples include . . . ‘Stark’s Earliest’ . . .” (p. 67), from Idaho fide at least two of the authors’ references. “Grafting was not widely practiced [sic] in the Americas in the 17th and 18th centuries . . .” (p. 157). Yet many cultivars, which would have had to be grafted, were widely planted by the early 1700s, e.g., Rhode Island Greening. Confusingly, the authors noted this (p. 151). Mesopotamia is mislabeled on Map 8. “[V]ery few American apples were listed specifically for cider making” (p. 157), yet one in six cultivars in the seminal American pomona (Coxe 1817) are cider apples.

The book is marred by the inclusion of irrelevant or highly speculative sections: the long discussion of camels concludes that their efficacy in distributing apple seeds is dubious (p. 78). Regarding dung beetles, although “nothing seems to be known” about their occurrence in the Tian Shan, or for that matter their involvement in the dispersal of apple seeds, there is a long discussion of them (p. 78–80).

The core of the book is Origin of the apple (Chap. 2). Summarizing that “morphological, biochemical and molecular variation within [the] wild apple indicates that the earliest selections of domesticated apples could have come directly from the wild apple, without the involvement of other species.” This is contrary to earlier hypotheses, which postulated extensive, early hybridization. The quote is from Harris et al. (2002:429), which, though listed in the references, appears without attribution in large part (p. 53). Surprisingly, large parts of the first few pages of Chap. 2 are taken verbatim or nearly verbatim from Harris et al. (2002), though without comparing the texts, one would not know this.

The story of the apple continues to unfold. Unfortunately, this does not tell it well. Harris et al. (2002), whose bibliography is repeated, with one omission, here, is a better update. Juniper (2007) supplements Harris et al. with more geological and evolutionary information.

Literature Cited