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Book review

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Willdenowia
Annals of the Botanic Garden and Botanical Museum Berlin-Dahlem

Book review

Wörz A.: Der Esslinger Botanische Reiseverein 1825–1845. Eine Aktiengesellschaft zur Durchführung naturkundlicher Sammelreisen. – Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2016 (= Stuttgarter Beiträge zur Wissenschafts- und Technikgeschichte 9). – ISBN 978-3-8325-4211-5, ISSN 2199-403X. – 24 × 17 × 1.1 cm, 211 pp.; paperback. – Price: EUR 46.50. – Available also as an e-book at http://www.logos-verlag.de

"U. i." is an abbreviation which many herbarium curators have come across, but only some know that it stands for "Unio itineraria". However, I guess that even fewer will know that this was a joint-stock company based in Esslingen, then in the Kingdom of Württemberg, founded to support collecting expeditions undertaken by naturalists. At the same time it was a vehicle for distributing large quantities of herbarium duplicates, which are kept today by many botanical institutions worldwide. This book tells the story of this unconventional company, which came to an end only two decades after its beginning in 1825. Arno Wörz, curator at the Department of Botany of the Museum für Naturkunde in Stuttgart, is singularly qualified to write this text – he is based in Württemberg, is curator of the phanerogam collections of an institution that received a particularly fine set of specimens gathered with support from the U. i. and is a connoisseur of the history of botany. The result is an excellent in-depth account on this company to a considerable degree based on unpublished sources (as a rule quoted verbatim), among them the Lhotsky letters kept in the archive of the Regensburgische Botanische Gesellschaft in Regensburg and the Martius letters kept in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in München.

In his introduction Wörz stresses that the U. i. was right from the beginning an idealistic undertaking with no economic aims. It counted among its early supporters people like the famous publisher Johann Friedrich Cotta in Tübingen, the long-reigning Wilhelm I, King of Württemberg, and Leopold, Grand Duke of Baden. The second chapter deals with the foundation of the U. i. and its leading figures, i.e. E. G. Steudel and C. F. Hochstetter, who also determined the greater part of the vast botanical collections that passed through their hands to shareholders and were sold to individuals and institutions. The meat of the book is the third chapter: it consists of eighteen biographies of the naturalists supported, among them key figures like C. F. Ecklon and C. L. P. Zeyher collecting at the Cape of Good Hope, G. W. Schimper searching for the sources of the Blue Nile, J. Lhotsky exploring the Australian Alps, Hochstetter and H. J. Guthnick collecting on the Azores and, most importantly, C. G. T. Kotschy bringing back extensive materials from the Nile countries and later from the Near East. Several of these collectors are today regarded as pioneers for the respective region, e.g. Kotschy, Lhotsky and Schimper. For good reason Wörz does not sweep the problems connected with the eccentric if not mentally deranged Schimper under the carpet, problems that were decisive for the financial collapse of the joint-stock company. Other disasters, like a shipwreck on the coast of Cephalonia leading to the name *Carex naufragii* or the death of C. G. Bertero at high sea between the Society Islands and Chile, had lesser financial consequences. The names of numerous taxa are based on specimens gathered by these U. i.-supported collectors, e.g. *Mariscus schimperi* from Ethiopia, *Bellis azorica* from the Azores, and *Eryngium kotschyi* from Turkey, while *Welwitschia mirabilis* was discovered in Angola by F. M. J. Welwitsch (previously also supported by U. i.) only in September 1859, when the company had already failed.

Coverage of the extensive literature is excellent: the reader will find in the bibliography, e.g., A. Hrabetová-Uhrová's paper on Hochstetter's work in Moravia, just like V. Kruta's account on Lhotsky published by the Australia Felix Literary Club and Schimper's report about his imprisonment in Ethiopia. A total of 56 illustrations are included, mostly photographs of herbarium specimens, portraits of the key figures involved and maps showing the major collecting sites. The pertinent legends are perfect and so are the ample biographical data on all the very many people involved. Wörz's text is nicely structured and almost free of typographical errors – one of the few the reviewer was able to spot is K. F. [Ritter] von Schreiber (instead of Schreibers) on p. 121. Diacritical signs in Czech toponyms, like Těšín on p. 138, always a good criterion for an author's accuracy, are consistently correct. In short, this book is a good read and an excellent account on the realities of collecting natural history material in the first part of the nineteenth century. The only regret is that this fine text was not published in English.

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