

Book Review

The Cabaret of Plants; Botany and the Imagination

by Richard Mabey

We can sometimes get rather solemn about botany, and assume that the compilation and publishing of endless species lists is the be-all and end-all of the discipline. Well, Richard Mabey, author of numerous books on botany and natural history, has come along to remind us that it's OK to smile over botany and the study of plants in general.

This book, also published in the USA under an alternative title '*The Cabaret of Plants: Forty Thousand Years of Plant Life and the Human Imagination*', takes a rather lighthearted but detailed look at plant life and its peculiarities. Many of the anecdotes related in it come from the 19th Century, when maybe people had a greater capacity for wonder than we do in our current blasé age. Certainly the more educated portions of the European general public were of a mind to celebrate the new marvels of nature being discovered from around the world. In his foreword the author comments: "Plants are also fun and feisty, and I hope this book celebrates that, as well as their gift to us of different models of being alive."

The starting chapter is titled "Symbols from the Ice: Plants as Food and Forms", and looks at the depiction of plants as seen in prehistoric times, or rather, the lack of it, as the author is only aware of one possible plant being depicted in cave art, a sprig of something that is probably billberry, or crowberry or another ericaceous relative. From there, he moves on to present a variety of chapters each devoted to a particularly interesting plant or plant family, such as Primulas, Yews, and numerous others such as:

Baobabs (there is a wonderful photograph of an avenue of baobabs in Madagascar)

Sequoias (the 'Big Trees' of the USA)

'Methuselahs': Bristlecones and Date Palms (trees or seeds that live to a great age)

'Near Extinction' (Woods Cycad (*Encephelartos woodsii*))

'Workhorses' (Oaks, of some 400 to 600 species throughout the Northern Hemisphere)

'The Panacea' (Ginseng)

'A Sarawakan Stinkbomb: The Titan Arum' (*Amorphophallus titanum*)

'Jewels of the Desert' on stapeliads

and also other topics such as:

The shock of the real: Scientists and romantics' (dealing with the impact of Linnaeus)

'The Victorian Plant Theatre (the invention of the Wardian Case – that godsend for early botanists)

'The Butterfly Effect: The Moonflower' (*Selenicereus* and the botanical painter Margaret Mee)

and a final chapter:

'Plant Intelligence: Mimosa' (describing *Mimosa pudica*'s ability to 'remember' disturbance).

To convey something of the spirit of this book I have taken the liberty of extracting one (longish) paragraph from the chapter titled 'Provenance and Extinction: Wood's Cycad':

“Worries about the individuality of ancient plants are especially acute with trees. Their age and singularity give them something of the aura of living artworks, and provenance and authenticity become issues. In America the seniority of coniferous Methuselahs is fiercely contested. In Britain communities make claims and counterclaims about whose oak a displaced monarch or fleeing dissenter once hid in. The trees themselves are fenced and proclaimed on ornamental plaques like military heroes. Hybrids between native rarities and more vigorous intruders are despised and sometimes destroyed because, from a niggardly view of biodiversity, they are diluting the genetic purity of the original. It is as if individual trees with character and rich biographies can continue to have an existence only through the pickling (by cloning, for example) of their unique genetic identity; and that being carried forward by the eddying, unpredictable stream of reproduction, as all other organic life is, would obliterate their authentic essence. As a principle guiding our treatment of nature as a whole, this, it hardly needs saying, would have stopped life on earth in its tracks. We too often forget that trees have been successfully negotiating all the processes to which we subject them – mutation, evolving adaptations to changed circumstances, cross-breeding, self-planting, regenerating – entirely of their own accord for millions of years.”

The review copy came from the Rotorua Public Library under the Dewey classification 580 MAB.

Available from good booksellers at \$49.99 (hardback) and \$27.99 (softback). Highly recommended – a most interesting and thought-provoking read.

Nick Miller