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"A Region of Astonishing Beauty": The Botanical Exploration of the Rocky Mountains by Roger L. Williams

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BOOK REVIEW

“A Region of Astonishing Beauty”: The Botanical Exploration of the Rocky Mountains. 2003. Roger L. Williams. Rinehart Publishers, Lanham, Maryland. \$19.95, paperback (alk. paper), 209 pp. ISBN 1-57098-397-6.

If you have ever wondered who Engelm., Wats., Nutt., Rydb., or Pursh were or from whom the eponyms of *fendleri*, *drummondiana*, or *geyeri* were derived, you are probably a botanist and will find this book by Roger L. Williams very fulfilling. If you are interested in 19th century explorations of the Rocky Mountains by Long, Fremont, Hayden, and others, you will see them from a scientific viewpoint and gain a peek into the origins of American plant science. You will become acquainted with C.C. Parry, who was the first to comment on the monotony of the lodgepole pines in Yellowstone National Park. You will also gain an understanding of the personalities that shaped the development and pathways of botanical understanding in the Rocky Mountain region.

The Lewis and Clark expedition in 1805–1806 marked the beginning of botanical exploration in the Rocky Mountains. Other European explorers of the region mentioned unfamiliar plants in their narratives, but Lewis was the first to collect and preserve plants with scientific intent. During the rest of the century, various groups exploring the Rocky Mountains usually included a physician or naturalist who gathered new species, which were then examined by experts back home. Known species were identified and new ones were described and published. Eventually, even individuals would explore the environs of the new settlements springing up in and near the mountains. By the beginning of the 20th century, unexplored collecting grounds were nearly nonexistent. Aven Nelson, who established the

Rocky Mountain Herbarium at the University of Wyoming, was among the last to hitch his team to a wagon and strike off into the wilderness to find new plant species.

This book consists of short biographies of men and women who participated in the botanical exploration of the mountains of southern Alberta and eastern British Columbia, Montana, Idaho, Colorado, Utah, and parts of Arizona and New Mexico. Williams covers every serious collector who spent even part of their collecting time in the Rocky Mountains. He explains their progress from childhood to collector, as far as can be ascertained, and follows through their lives and interactions with other botanists.

Each chapter discusses either a single major collector or a small group of lesser-known collectors chronologically through the century. Williams reviews each collector’s parentage, early childhood, and education, and then discusses contacts with, and influences of, the established botanists of the time. Toward the end of each biography Williams discusses the botanists who received the collection and provides a list of new species published with the publication citations and the current names if the species have been moved to a different genus or have changed in taxonomic level. Names of new taxa honoring the collector are also mentioned.

In his introduction Williams discusses the “traditional conviction that botanists are by nature an exceptionally quarrelsome lot . . .” Throughout the book, threads of the origins and development of the controversies of lumper versus splitter, eastern versus western, and closet- versus field-botanists are carefully intertwined with the narrative of the collectors’ exploits and contributions.

Williams is eminently suited to undertake this task. He was born in Colorado and grew up in the Rocky Mountains gaining familiarity

with, and appreciation for, natural history. He is a well-known historian of 18th and 19th century Europe and has published historical works on other botanical figures. He wrote a book about Aven Nelson and is a research associate of the Rocky Mountain Herbarium. He also revised a popular plant identification book on Rocky Mountain flora that was first published in 1953 as "Plants of Rocky Mountain National Park" by Ruth Ashton Nelson, greatly increasing the number of species covered and expanding the keys. His knowledge of nomenclatural rules and plant taxonomy shows in this book, along with his excellent research into the many characters who searched for new species in the Rocky Mountains.

There is 1 minor drawback. Those who expect the instant gratification of knowing the sources of particular pieces of information will experience frustration. First we must look for

a tiny superscript number on 1 of the words; then we must turn to the list of notes near the end of the book, then back to the 1st page of the chapter where we were reading to obtain the chapter number, and then back to the list to find that chapter and finally be referred to the "Bibliography." If our finger has not slipped out, we can go back to where we left off and look for that tiny number again and continue reading. It's a bit annoying, but the information is there. I have read very few books twice, but this one may be added to the list.

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