

PALM LITERATURE

L'ÉPOPÉE DES PALMIERS. Frédéric Tournay. Opera Editions, Haute-Goulaine, France [www.editions-opera.fr]. 2009. ISBN 978-2-35370-054-7. Price 25€. Softcover. Pp. 189. (In French)



The history of palm horticulture too often goes undocumented. In rare instances, the discovery of a palm and its introduction into cultivation are well documented, but more often than not, details of the introduction – the who, the when and the where – are obscured by the passage of time. Enter Tournay's *L'Épopée des Palmiers* [The Saga of Palms], which tells the many stories of how exotic palms first arrived in France. The book is in French, but even readers with a minimum of French vocabulary can appreciate the scope of this book. It is a fascinating book for lovers of both garden history and palms.

The subtitle of this work is "*Histoire de leur acclimatation en France*" [History of their Acclimatization in France]. Acclimatization was a scientific paradigm firmly rooted in the colonial ambitions of Europe (Osborne 2000). Acclimatization of plants outside their native habitat was a movement that reached its peak in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, when Europeans, especially the French and British "acclimatization societies," engaged in heroic efforts to "enrich" plant communities both home and abroad. European plants (and animals) were shipped to overseas colonies (sometimes with catastrophic results for the native flora and fauna), and plants, especially tropical plants, were introduced in gardens in the warmest parts of Europe, such as the Canary Islands and the French Riviera. There was some hope that tropical plants might gradually adapt (acclimate) to these northern way stations, permitting their introduction to wider areas of Europe. The enthusiasm with which the French embraced acclimatization resulted in the introduction of many species of palms into southern France, and these new palms were documented by the horticultural and scientific press. Tournay was fortunate in

having a rich vein of magazine articles to mine for information of the first introduction, the first flowering and the first fruiting of exotic palms in French gardens. Were it not for the enthusiasm of 19th century acclimatization societies, Tournay's source material would have been much diminished.

This work is unlike most of the palm-related books reviewed in this journal, in that it is at its core a history of horticulture. The format of the book is an account of 36 species, from *Brahea armata* to *Washingtonia robusta*. For nearly every species, Tournay meticulously recounts synonyms, natural distribution, discovery by botanists and introduction to horticulture. A brief description of each species and cultural notes are given, along with "testimonials," brief synopses of the culture of palms in France as noted in period horticultural press. It is worth mentioning that not all of the palms profiled in the book are 18th or 19th century introductions; modern introductions, such as those of *Trachycarpus princeps* and *Guihaia argyrata*, are also documented. Species accounts are illustrated with reproductions of vintage postcards and photographs, 19th century engravings and deft drawings by the author. A section of color photos of palms in French gardens appears in the middle of the book. The book is chock-full of interesting historical firsts, often vividly recounted in the writings of the pioneering horticulturists of the day. It is a book ideally suited to dipping in and sampling chapters at random.

The author is the curator of collections at the botanical garden of the University of Strasbourg, and his love of history and palms is everywhere evident in this remarkable book. There is no other book like it. After reading it, I could only wonder, Who will write the history of palm horticulture in other countries?

Literature Cited

Osborne, M.A. 2000. Acclimatizing the world: a history of the paradigmatic colonial science. *Osiris* ser 2. 15: 135–151.

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