



Book review: Noltie N. J., Indian forester, Scottish laird. The botanical lives of Hugh Cleghorn of Stravithie

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H. WALTER LACK¹

Book review: Noltie N. J., Indian forester, Scottish laird. The botanical lives of Hugh Cleghorn of Stravithie

Noltie N. J., Indian forester, Scottish laird. The botanical lives of Hugh Cleghorn of Stravithie. – Edinburgh: Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, 2015. – ISBN 978-1-910877-10-4. – 17.3 × 24.5 cm, xiv + 324 pp., many illustrations, hardback. – Price: GBP 15.00.

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This is the companion volume to *The Cleghorn Collection: South Indian Drawings, 1845 to 1860* by the same author, published in Edinburgh in 2016. The book here reviewed is a comprehensive and complete analysis of the life and work of Hugh Francis Clarke Cleghorn (1820–1895), the commissioner and owner of these anonymous botanical illustrations which ended up in the library of the Royal Botanical Garden Edinburgh (RBGE). In a sense this biography, the result of fifteen years of work, is an offshoot of the author's contributions to *Flora of Bhutan*, which brought him in contact with herbarium specimens collected by Cleghorn, the botanical illustrations mentioned above and his pertinent publications. Chronologically arranged and nicely structured this is a good read for all those interested in nineteenth century botany in the broad sense with a focus on Scotland and the Indian subcontinent.

As very appropriately pointed out in the Foreword “Cleghorn had one life, but many lives: lecturer in medical education and in botany, plant collector, forester in India, economic botanist, leading member of the Botanical Society of Edinburgh, confrère to men and women who shaped Britain's empire in the nineteenth century and not least Scottish estate owner” (p. vii). Clearly the forte of Henry's book is his broad approach dealing with the very many aspects of Cleghorn's life, among them his religious interests, his wife Marbel Cowan and her remarkable family, his financial affairs, the running of the Stravithie estate in Fife and his travels on the European continent. There is no focus on what is conventionally understood as career, the reader is rather introduced in epic form to the story of a highly diverse life, which stands in the tradition of the Scottish surgeons active for the East India Company (EIC), like Alexander Gibson or Robert Wight,

both previously studied by Henry. It should also be noted that there is no emphasis on plant taxonomy in its strict sense. In addition, Cleghorn was no “major” figure, but rather what Henry rightly calls “a foot-soldier of applied science” (p. x); therefore his biography helps to understand what he calls “the groundswell of what was going on along (*not* beneath)” (p. x) the major figures in botany during his time, e.g. Sir William Hooker, the first director of the Royal Botanic Garden Kew, and John Hutton Balfour, Regius Keeper of the RBGE.

More pages than usual are dedicated to strictly private matters, in particular Cleghorn's religion. Henry offers the reader a good introduction to the more arcane aspects of dissent within the Church of Scotland, i.e. the Disruption, the Deed of Demission, the Act of Separation, resulting in the end in the establishment of the Free Church to which Cleghorn subscribed. Considerable attention is also given to the numerous societies to which Cleghorn was affiliated in some form or other, among them the Botanical Society of Edinburgh, the British Association for the Advancement of Science, the Linnean Society of London and the Royal Society of Edinburgh to name a few.

Henry's style is brilliant and a joy to read. An example may illustrate this point – in October 1845 Hugh's father had sent his calotype portrait from Scotland to his son in India and “one can only imagine Cleghorn's sense of wonder at receiving a precise, if delicate, image of his father's features, five thousand miles away, examined under a brilliant Indian sun. A “hard-copy” of a piece of world-altering technology, perched on a cliff above the waters of the North Sea [an allusion to St Andrews where this technique had just been developed], halfway across the world to one of the more remote, tropical corners of

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an empire approaching its zenith” (p. 38). There are numerous little gems like the “self-imposed rustication of Hugh’s father” in Stravithie (p. 5), Balfour’s “unedifying rivalry with Joseph Hooker” (p. 35), “prickly characters” (p. 36), “Provost (*Anglice* Mayor)” (p. 36) or “the classical invalid Victorian spinster whose final years were spent between Rome and Naples, eking out a £ 200 annuity from the Stravithie estate” (p. 215).

A wealth of botanical information, in particular on plants of economic importance, is embedded in the text. Examples include the EIC’s successful attempt to persuade Indian farmers to grow long staple, tetraploid New World cottons instead of the indigenous diploid species previously cultivated, since the former were “suitable for spinning and weaving in Manchester – to be sold back to India in the form of woven cloth” (p. 25); sending objects, in particular non-timber forest products, to Balfour’s Museum of Economic Botany in Edinburgh and Hooker’s slightly older Museum of Economic Botany at Kew (pp. 46–49). However, more important were Cleghorn’s activities as adviser in forest matters which resulted in Sir John Lawrence, the Viceroy of India, in calling the former the “father of Forestry Conservancy in India” (p. 171). Naturally the latter’s extensive travels over many years in what is now India, Myanmar and Pakistan are dealt with in great detail, when literally everything of interest, and not just deforestation and economic plants, was recorded by Cleghorn in his letters and reports. These indeed were strenuous tours with Cleghorn writing to Balfour on his Punjab travels e.g. “the rugged ascents and descents of the Tibetan Alps [i.e. Himalayas] – [suited only to] goats and monkeys” (p. 146). Needless to say Henry’s biography is at the same time a mine of information for the history of the Forest Department of India, of several botanical gardens in India and, in particular, the RBGE.

The present reviewer was able to spot a tiny number of minor mistakes, e.g. the names of two palaces in Rome are incorrectly spelt – “Palazzo Colonnae” instead of Palazzo Colonna and “Palazzo Raspiglioni” instead of Palazzo Rospigliosi (p. 202). It may also be questioned if some historical details of minor relevance for the main story, e.g. the background of institutions like the Madras College, St Andrews which Cleghorn had attended for a brief period in his youth (p. 7), should not have been better omitted.

The illustrations (all in black and white) have been carefully selected from a broad spectrum of sources including the Edinburgh herbarium, private collections, Henry’s plant photographs taken in India and elsewhere plus his photographs of sites of interest in England, Malta and Scotland; they are mostly provided with full legends. The book is solidly bound and has been printed on rather stiff, high-quality paper. At the end we find References (pp. 287–292), Endnotes (pp. 293–304), a bibliography of Cleghorn’s publications including obituaries (pp. 305–312), Cleghorn eponymy (p. 313) and an extremely detailed index listing the names of persons, plants, localities and general terms (pp. 314–324).

Three aspects of Henry’s book stand out: firstly the broad scenario depicting the life of a botanist/forester in full detail, which reminded the present reviewer of novels like Thomas Mann’s *Die Buddenbrooks*, though – in contrast to Mann – definitely not describing the downfall of a family; secondly the vivid description of a social class focused on developing India and making money out of it, with its members almost commuting between Britain and India; thirdly the fundamental importance of family connections and patronage networks for a career and a decent life in nineteenth century Britain.

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