

Simon Grant: Part 5 of *The Explorers*
David Douglas in the Land of Giants

In the last *Operculum* we covered two Scotsmen supported by Joseph Banks on their enduring voyages. Banks encouraged many others, including the infamous Captain Bligh and several important persons in Australia's history, such as Matthew Flinders and the early Australian botanists, George Calley and Allan Cunningham. In 1804 Banks, at the suggestion of John Wedgwood (son of Josiah) and five others, created the Horticultural Society of London which would go on to become the Royal Horticultural Society. As Kew Gardens entered a period of decline, it was this society that next encouraged further exploration around the world, hoping to introduce new and exciting plants to its gardens. Again two more Scots were willing to embark on these risky endeavours.



David Douglas

The first was David Douglas (1799-1834) and in particular his journeys to the Pacific North West. The potential for new species from the New World was already known. There had been a trickle over the preceding two centuries as we have seen, by a variety of people including the Tradescants (part 1) and Menzies (part 4). When the new American nation procured, through the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, vast tracts of land extending westward, the potential increased even more. The very next year Thomas Jefferson sent Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to explore the new territories and find a way to the Pacific. On their way they did discover new plants but that was only secondary to their main objectives, exploration and mapping. And so it was left to the Horticultural Society of London to develop an experimental garden at Chiswick and send out their own plant hunters, amongst them Douglas.

David Douglas was born in Scone near Perth, the son of a stonemason. At the age of eleven he became an apprentice gardener at Scone Palace and from the beginning impressed his supervisors. He persuaded them to teach him elementary botany and tell him tales of plant hunting in the highlands. By the time he had moved to the gardens at Valleyfield, designed by Sir Humphry Repton in 1801, his enquiring mind encouraged its owner, Sir Robert Preston Bart, to give

him access to his extensive library. This enabled Douglas to secure a position at the Botanic Gardens of Glasgow two years later. It was here in 1820 that his path crossed that of William Hooker, the newly appointed Professor of Botany (later first official Director of Kew). The two quickly became friends, with Hooker teaching Douglas botany on field trips into the Scottish hills and Douglas regularly visiting the Hooker home. In future years Douglas would become an inspiration to the young Joseph Hooker, who would go on to become perhaps the greatest botanist of the 19th century.

In 1823 Hooker recommended Douglas to the Horticultural Society and, because of political unrest in China, Douglas went as a botanical collector to the East coast of North America. As I have said before, the dangers and discomforts experienced by plant hunters can be hard to believe, and even then in this context Douglas stands out. On his first trip, a relatively benign affair, he travelled from New York to Lake Erie and back via Niagara Falls. It nearly didn't happen. When he arrived in the USA he was so dishevelled, permission to land was denied by the immigration officials until he had purchased new clothes.

On his four-month journey he was put at risk twice—a horse bolted on one occasion only stopping when commanded in French and his boat nearly sank on Lake Erie when caught in a storm. Despite those incidents (and someone running off with his possessions), he returned to London with a collection including American-bred malus, prunus and grape varieties as well as veronicas, helianthums, asters and even acorns shot down with his gun from tall oaks. So pleased was the Horticultural Society that they then sent him to the Pacific North-West. He arrived in April 1825 and set up his base at the small trading post Fort Vancouver on the banks of the Columbia River, Oregon. On all his journeys he kept a meticulous journal detailing every event in an unemotional, matter-of-fact manner. The crises and near crises sound more like the fiction of Indiana Jones than a true account and in the space available I can only include a few examples.

As his plant collection grew, his accommodation progressed from a tent to a deerskin lodge and finally to a bark hut. On his field trips things were rougher: "The luxury of a night's sleep on a bed of pine branches can only be appreciated by those who have experienced a route over a barren plain..." At first he travelled with white traders and trappers. He developed a rapport with the Native Americans, who called him "Grass Man" because of his plant collecting, and used them as guides to the coastal regions of Oregon and further east along the Columbia River and its tributaries. Though unable to travel during the harsh winters, Douglas still covered over 3350 km by foot, horse and canoe in 1825, a mammoth 6300 km in 1826 and achieved a 1590 km transcontinental trek with the Hudson Bay Company Express to the east in 1827, a total of more than 11,000 km over three years. The trip was a spectacular success with Douglas sending back not packets of seed but chests of them.



The Douglas fir (Pseudotsuga menziesii)

The bounty included the Douglas fir, the madrona, *Acer circinatum*, *Garrya elliptica*, pine trees and several species of *Penstemon*, phlox and lupins including *Lupinus polyphyllus* (a parent of the popular Russell lupins). But the harsh environment took a physical and mental toll with episodes of starvation, exposure, dangerous interactions with the natives, an attack by a grizzly bear, extreme exhaustion and mild snow blindness whilst climbing one of the mountain peaks.



Lupinus polyphyllus

On several occasions, severe weather storms left him saturated, without cover and at risk from falling trees. Despite all that, after a brief visit to England, he was back for more in 1830—though his later journeys would not be as successful. Because of trouble between the Native Americans and the settlers, he sailed south to San Francisco, after sending back seed from two more firs growing in the Columbia Cascades. From San Francisco he sent back seed from the noble fir (*Abies procera*), *Pinus radiata* and re-found Menzies' coastal redwood. In total 670 species were dispatched back from California.

In 1832 he returned to Fort Vancouver and embarked on an ambitious journey, this time to the north into Canada. This trip would end in near disaster on the Fraser River—his canoe smashed on rocks and Douglas was thrown into the rough water and caught in a whirlpool for more than an hour. Not only was he nearly drowned, he lost his collection and journal, so less is known of this trip. Dispirited and now blind in one eye, he returned to San Francisco before his final trip to Hawaii in 1834. There he climbed both Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa. In July that year whilst out walking he fell into a pit used to catch wild cattle. His body, gored and trampled, was later recovered.

Douglas' importance is twofold. To the timber industry he introduced the Sitka spruce, the Douglas fir and the Radiata pine. To the gardener, his hundreds of new species reached a new market moving on from the natural landscape style of "Capability" Brown to those of John Claudius Loudon who advocated "a certain degree of cultivation or improvement". As a result, flowerbeds, theme gardens with new exotic specimens and collections such as arboreta gained fashion with plants introduced by Douglas and much sought after.

Simon Grant

References and Further Reading:

Toby Musgrave et al, *The Plant Hunters* (Ward Lock, 1998)

Miles Hadfield, *Pioneers in Gardening*

Hugh Johnson, *International Book of Trees*

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