

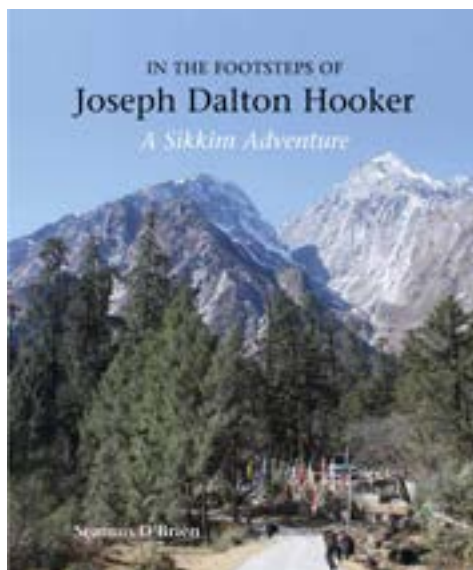
In the Footsteps of Joseph Dalton Hooker A Sikkim Adventure

Séamus O'Brien

Kew Publishing. 2018

324 pages. Hard back. ISBN 978-1-84246-656-8

£40.00



This is the second monumental work from Séamus O'Brien. His first *In the Footsteps of Augustine Henry and his Chinese Plant Collectors* was reviewed in *Irish Forestry*, Vol. 69 in 2012. Séamus O'Brien is one of the best-known contemporary plantsmen and has travelled extensively throughout the world to study plants in their native habitats. He received his horticulture training at the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin and holds an International Diploma in Botanic Gardens Management from the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Séamus has grown plants enthusiastically since his early childhood in Baltinglass, Co. Wicklow and has wide ranging interests, but plants from warm-temperate and temperate areas of the world are his focus. He manages the National Botanic Gardens, Kilmacurragh, Co. Wicklow. Kilmacurragh is an 18th century garden which was previously owned by the Acton family (the most recent of whom was the late Charles Acton, music critic of the Irish Times). The Actons were friends of the Director of Glasnevin's Botanic Gardens, Dr David Moore and his son and successor Sir Frederick Moore, and they were quite happy to let their large garden

with its mild, moist climate and deep, acidic soil serve as an experimental outpost of Glasnevin. Here, Hooker's plant introductions flourished, forming one of the best private collections of Himalayan rhododendrons in Europe by the turn of the 20th century. Today, many of the rhododendrons planted during that era have grown as large as those in their native land.

Joseph Dalton Hooker (1817-1911), like Augustine Henry, was a medical doctor. His first expedition, at 22 years of age was in 1839, to Antarctica as a ship's surgeon. This ship was called the HMS *Erebus* and Michael Palin, of *Monthy Python* fame, published a book in 2018 on the discovery of the remains of this ship in the Northwest Passage where it disappeared in 1846. During the course of a year and a half on the trip to the South Pole, he managed to collect many plants en route and send them to Kew where his father was director. According to Palin his father used his considerable influence to get him on the expedition and it turned out that the only position available to him was as assistant surgeon, and to this end he rapidly qualified as a doctor (remember he was only 22; this is astonishing in today's world where medics spent half their working life studying!). Hooker was a great hero of Palin's and he uses his image at the beginning of his book¹. Joseph, like his father, was later to become the director of Kew Gardens. He was a contemporary, friend and close confidant of Charles Darwin.

Hooker lived in an age when the British Empire was at its most expansionist and the international trade in plant-based commodities – examples include tea, opium, cotton, tobacco, spices, indigo and timber – was so lucrative that it had allowed the British East Indian Company to effectively colonise large parts of the world including India. In 1847 Hooker embarked on an expedition to Sikkim, an Indian state in the eastern Himalaya, where he would discover a significant number of botanical treasures previously unknown in the West. A scientist of extraordinary ability, Hooker ranks as the greatest botanical explorer of the 19th century and is perhaps the greatest of the lauded Directors of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew. In this fascinating travelogue, author Séamus O'Brien retraces Hooker's footsteps in Sikkim, following four trips accompanied by some of Ireland's best known gardeners and plants people. He brings alive the adventure, dangers and discoveries that Hooker and his companions experienced in the mid-19th century. Séamus describes how his determination to undertake this expedition came from a yearning to see in the wild the plant discoveries made famous by Hooker, who described the region as "a perfect microcosm of the Himalaya." Following in Hooker's footsteps, the author describes vividly how these places compare with the descriptions of Joseph Hooker 170 years previously. In fact, O'Brien was intrigued by how little Sikkim has changed over the

¹ *Erebus: The Story of a Ship* by Michael Palin was published in 2018 by Random House Books.

course of time. Hooker was also a highly skilled geographer and cartographer, and in Sikkim he created the first comprehensive map of the kingdom, highlighting mountain passes that would be of enormous strategic value in the decades to come. Some of these maps are reproduced in this book along with Hooker's original sketches of the region and plants. This handsome publication is illustrated throughout by the author's stunning photographs. It is a wonderful celebration of one of the great adventures of one of history's greatest scientists. It is a "must read" for those with an interest in the flora and history of the region.

Hooker returned from the Himalayas in 1850 with the magnificent Sikkim rhododendrons and reported, amongst other trees, the biggest of all magnolias, *Magnolia campbelli*. Seeing this tree in full bloom in Killmacurragh in spring time is a joy. Hooker also discovered Himalayan birch, *Betula utilis* and a variety of this species *B. utilis jecquemonti* which is now planted extensively here for its white bark which will brighten up any garden in the dark, dreary days of winter. An extremely rare inhabitant of the lower hills, the dwarf-screw pine *Pandanus unguifer* was one of Hooker's more remarkable finds. Indeed, there are numerous plants which are named after Hooker and his fellow collectors and friends.

A veritable treasure trove of fascinating information, this book features an entire chapter detailing the many Irish people living and working in this part of the Himalayas during the colonial era as civil servants or soldiers who also sent home plant material – apparently at one time no less than 45% of the British army stationed in India came from Ireland. Further compelling proof of this country's pioneering role in the world of international horticulture. As the author states, "if Joseph Hooker had never visited India and the Himalayas, our gardens would undoubtedly be duller places today".

This book is magnificently presented and is illustrated with stunning photographs taken by the author. It contains extremely useful appendices which record Hooker's collections of rhododendrons and the various plants he encountered on his expeditions. There is even an appendix of placenames. Indeed, the entire 324 pages of the book are packed with surprises and rare gems of knowledge. Anyone with an interest in plants should rush out and get a copy.

John Mc Loughlin