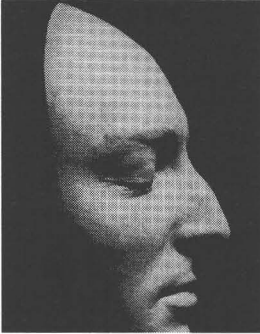


Book Review

A Man who can Speak of Plants

*Death mask of
Dr. Thomas Coulter.*



A Man Who Can Speak of Plants
(Dr. Thomas Coulter 1793-1843)
E. Charles Nelson & Alan Probert
Soft back. Pp192. 52 black and white
illustrations, 8pp colour plates.
Price IR & UK £15. ISBN 0 9524847 0 6

John Anderson

This book offers a detailed account of one of Ireland's great unsung heroes of his generation. I have only briefly encountered Dr. Thomas Coulter through his horticultural merits, of which there are many. Although he was a doctor of medicine – he graduated from Trinity College Dublin in 1820 – he was by all accounts a botanist at heart. This pursuit in the plant world brought him into contact with some of the most eminent people of his generation.

This is more than a book on the life of Coulter. It delves into life around Coulter and the people who most influenced him like Dr. Romney Robinson

and Professor A. de Condolle. Coulter will live on for ever in Irish gardens with the wonderful perennial plant of *Romneya coulteri* a Californian poppy which adorns the summer months, with large white flowers appropriately named the “fried egg plant”. In forestry terms Coulter may not have shared the same fame as David Douglas the renowned Scot, who discovered so many of the forest trees we cultivate today. Coulter is commemorated with discovering the “big cone pine” *Pinus coulteri* around the time Douglas was collecting in California. Specimen trees of *P. coulteri* are well represented in Irish gardens. The two men were good friends and spoke highly of each other. In a letter to Dr. William Hooker, Professor of Botany in the University of Glasgow, Douglas praised Coulter “as a man full of zeal and a pleasure to find me a good man who can speak of plants”.

In his final years, Coulter had moved to Trinity College and became curator of the herbarium and was to take over the chair in botany, but after a prolonged period of poor health Dr. Thomas Coulter died on 28th November 1843.

The book is excellently written and researched, giving detailed references on the life of Coulter. I hope this is only the beginning of a much needed library of extraordinary Irish botanical scholars who should be brought to the fore. This book is printed privately by E. Charles Nelson.