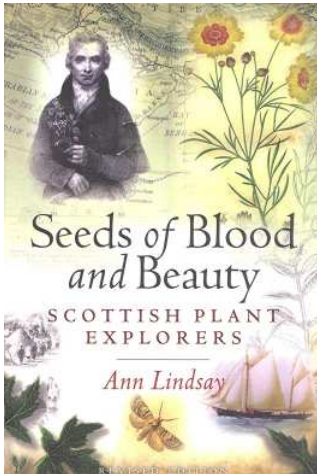


# BOOK REVIEW



## Seeds of Blood and Beauty

### Scottish Plant Explorers

Ann Lindsay

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This is a book of exciting travel, and discovery – exciting for the reader that it - for the explorers themselves it must have been hell on earth at times. Like being dropped off in a snow field without tent or supplies, being attacked frequently, robbed and cheated by their guides, or falling into pits – such an occurrence ending in death for David Douglas. These were men of physical and mental resources, way beyond any gardener at home – Scotland. They were sent off to foreign countries, the new Americas, China, Canada to find new plants and seeds by stay-at-home members of Horticultural Societies and rich men who grumbled in their clubs about how long it was taking to get any results. And they paid a pittance too.

The explorers, a description perhaps more accurate than ‘hunters’, are men fascinated by plants. They may have been botanists or gardeners, but they were most often doctors and surgeons. Professions which would get them onto ships to travel to their destinations, earning their way by caring for the crews. They collected plants and seeds by the hundred, packing them up and arranging transport. Ann Lindsay spends more time on the people and the travel than the plants, although the main discoveries of each explorer are listed. This is not surprising – we can feel her excitement as she quotes from letters or find biographical facts. She will turn aside to give potted biographies of fellow-travellers and their antecedents.

This book is an excellent picture of the times as well as the explorers; especially the sea travel through Napoleonic wars, storms, and pirates. It tells the curious stories of how the explorers come into established civilisations like China, or new towns such as in America; how seeds could be bought from others, and how later explorers were travelling in similar areas to the early ones, and how sometimes they met each other.

Lindsay tells of fourteen men from 1691 – 1880; from Philip Miller, who ‘imported’ many of the men to London as gardeners and then introduced them to the explorers’ trade, to Robert Fortune. All Scottish. I especially liked Thomas Drummond, ‘who gazes eagerly out from his portrait, looking for all the world like an exuberant young spaniel, with irrepressible bounce and a youthful conviction that he is immortal.’ Drummond was the one left in a snowfield in the depth of winter and was attacked by a bear. He had a wife in Scotland, who saw him once or twice, and who obviously fended for herself, and their children. He dreamed of buying land and settling in America. However in June 1835, instead of seeds, a death certificate arrived. He is remembered through the *phlox drummondii*.

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