

Book Review

Ward, Daniel B. 2017. Thomas Walter and His Plants. The Life and Works of a Pioneer American Botanist. Memoirs of the New York Botanical Garden, Vol. 115, Heritage Series, Number 2. Bronx, New York. 220 p. Hardbound. \$59.99. ISBN 978-0-89327-539-6.

Thomas Walter (1740?–1789?) is a mystery man in many respects. His birth place and date are uncertain; the year of his death is in doubt. His supposed portrait is that of another man. Yet, Walter is an important figure in American botany. Walter's *Flora Caroliniana* (1788) is the earliest regional flora using Linnaeus' binomial nomenclature and sexual system of classification. Many well-known flowering plants were first described in Walter's *Flora*, including *Aesculus parviflora*, *Carpinus caroliniana*, *Cypripedium reginae*, *Fraseria caroliniensis*, *Magnolia fraseri*, *Sarracenia rubra*, and *Utricularia inflata*—all Walter's coinages.

Daniel B. Ward (1928–2016) weaves Walter's biography from the very few strands of historical certainty known about his subject. Ward adds to this matrix an appropriate measure of speculation. Walter apparently was an Englishman with a classical education that allowed him to use the works of Linnaeus and other contemporary botanists. By 1769 he owned a rice plantation along the Santee River in what now is Berkeley County, South Carolina. This section of the Carolinas was populated largely by Huguenots, who were Protestant refugees from religious persecution in late 17th century Catholic France. The Huguenot community was tight-knit, yet Walter found a home, friendship, and three wives among them. Through the day-to-day business of his plantation and through the turmoil of the Revolutionary War period, Walter made careful notes and observations on the flora in his gardens and in the region about the Santee. There is no evidence, however, that he maintained a personal herbarium.

Enter an adventurous Scot, John Fraser, who would serve as the catalyst for Walter's observations to be turned into a printed volume. Fraser (1750–1811) had been botanizing with André and François André Michaux, father and son, throughout the Coastal Plain

and Piedmont of the Carolinas and Georgia before striking out on his own for the Appalachians. He stopped at Walter's plantation in 1786 on his way back to the Michaux's botanical garden in Charleston, South Carolina. It appears that Fraser and Walter quickly became good friends, since Fraser stayed on the Santee for nearly a year. One can only imagine the joy and excitement felt by the two botanists as they shared their discoveries with each other. When Fraser left the Santee, he carried a large collection of plant specimens and Walter's manuscript. Upon returning to London, Fraser saw the *Flora Caroliniana* through the press and paid for the printing himself.

The bulk of Ward's book catalogs the species and genera listed in Walter's *Flora*, matching those species with modern binomials. Ward also assesses the evidence that proves that the specimens in the Fraser/Walter Herbarium (now in the Natural History Museum, London) were collected by Fraser, not Walter. Ward details the present state of the herbarium with great thoroughness. The material often is scrappy and difficult or impossible to determine accurately. Walter named about 400 new vascular plant species in the *Flora*. Some of those names, if lectotypified properly, might unseat longstanding epithets. Ward succinctly discusses this nomenclatural problem. The book concludes with a few short chapters covering miscellaneous topics related to Walter. These include eponyms, *Viola walteri* House, for example, and unresolved issues surrounding the publication of the *Flora*.

This book is extremely well written. The intertwined history of Walter and Fraser is easy to follow, as is the nomenclatural discussion of the names in the *Flora*. I feel compelled to point out, however, that *Magnolia fraseri* is not "found only in the mountains of western North Carolina and South Carolina" (p. 90); Fraser's

magnolia occurs in the Appalachians from Georgia to West Virginia.

I wish Ward had summarized the subsequent botanical career of John Fraser. After 1788 Fraser botanized from the West Indies to Russia and all points between, and made several more journeys to the southeastern United States. He was even shipwrecked on a coral reef while sailing from Havana to Charleston. Fraser's death in London at the age of 60 was attributed to the physical toll from a fall from a horse suffered some years before combined with sheer exhaustion from his constant travels. No wonder Fraser's contemporaries dubbed him "The Indefatigable" (Simpson, Moran, and Simpson 1997). Such a distinguished career surely deserves a brief prologue in this book.

In this posthumous publication, Daniel Ward ably outlines Walter's life and legacy. On the

title page of the *Flora Caroliniana*, Walter unassumingly styled himself "Agricola" (farmer). Now we can appreciate just how modest he was.

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LITERATURE CITED

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