



Monkey Puzzle Man: Archibald Menzies, Plant Hunter

James McCarthy

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Archibald Menzies was one of a legion of intrepid Scots plant collectors in the 18th and 19th centuries who roamed the world and, by a combination of toughness and knowledge, established the foundations of the botany of the British Empire. This is a fascinating tale of how he brought the monkey puzzle to England for the first time and provides an insight to international plant collecting in the 18th century. Based on his diaries, the author recounts how Menzies, whilst on a classic voyage of exploration in which he circumnavigated the world twice, is the only naval surgeon to be placed under arrest for insubordination - and all because his precious plants were washed away! He is also the only man to have pocketed his dessert at a foreign presidential banquet, which subsequently resulted in the introduction of one of the most curious trees to Britain's parks and estates. The author tells a tale of high adventure on land and sea in the latter part of the 18th century, from a surgeon's grisly work at the Battle of the Saints in the West Indies to the seductive allure of Tahitian maidens and plant collecting in freezing Alaska. Menzies was the first to ascend the fiery volcano of Mauna Loa in Hawaii, where the natives aptly described him as 'the red-faced man who gathered grass and cut off men's limbs'. An acclaimed naturalist, Menzies made major botanical discoveries during the epic journey of HMS Discovery under Captain George Vancouver along the north-west coast of America in the early 1790s, discovering many plants which now adorn British and continental gardens. He also described the Californian condor and made important early anthropological observations on the native peoples of North America. In this highly readable book, the author recounts the story of how a young Scots gardener from humble origins became a distinguished plant pioneer who changed the face of gardens throughout Europe by his botanical discoveries.



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