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References


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Book notices

These two books both have something to offer the palaeo(ethnobotanist and may well be of interest to all environmental archaeologists.


Although published in 1989, this useful addition to Collins' generally excellent field
The **Field Guide** series has only recently come my way (if it must be said, very much less than the recommended retail price, via the shelves of a National Trust shop). Comparisons will inevitably be made with *The Oxford book of foodplants* (Oxford University Press, 1969), now rather hard to obtain. However, the **Field Guide** aims to cover only Britain and Europe (preeminently Britain was not part of Europe in 1899), whilst the *Oxford* book includes foodplants from all parts of the world; the **Field Guide** deals with all kinds of crops (from fibres to drugs) whilst the *Oxford* book restricts itself to edible plants. Moreover, the *Oxford* book was evidently largely a vehicle for Barbara Nicholson's extraordinarily good colour illustrations (the accompanying text being somewhat skimpy), whereas the text of the **Field Guide** is more comprehensive and as supported by excellent colour plates (by Elisabeth Rice and Elisabeth Dowle).

Entries in the **Field Guide** are dealt with alphabetically by family (beginning somewhat surprisingly, with Annonaceae, the custard apple family—these plants from tropical S. America are grown on a small scale in S. Spain, at least). For each species there is a description of the plant, a list of vernacular names in the main European languages (Russian names being transliterated), a discussion of the plant's uses and of its origins, distribution and cultivation. Lastly mention is made of similar plants, principally those with which the crop plant in question might be confused in the field. One cannot help but think that this handy tome would be essential reading for the checkout staff at supermarkets whose training appears not have reached to the accurate identification of the bulk of the fresh fruit and vegetables they are handling.


Another ‘field guide’ and certainly much more like Collins’ *Field Guide* of a decade or two ago in its overall appearance. The scope of this book is remarkable. As well as the plants one would expect (and the coverage is worldwide, so the familiar wool, madder and greenweed of N. W. Europe are complemented by a bewildering range of tropical dyewoods, for example), there are lichens, fungi and insects, the last group including the termites and coelomal insects of which Mme Cardon has made a special study.

The ‘botanical order’ for this book, by contrast with the last, is biochemical, at least for the plants. Thus the first section in the body of the book deals with all those plants giving red dyes—the basis for the colour lies with the presence of quinones (such as allarin in madder), so there is more sense to this approach than a strictly family-by-family scheme. Descriptions of the plants are followed at the end of each section, with a brief survey of the organic chemistry. Here can be found such delights as helminthosporin (diglycyclamine) and metanorfol, not to mention cucurmin I, II and III.

Besides descriptions of the organisms furnishing dyes or tannins, and some brief recipes for obtaining the colours, the entries give a history of the extraction and use of the colouring matter, sometimes with delightful asides. One such is the comment under the entry for dog whelk (*Nucella lapillus*, a source of a sort of ‘poor-man’s Tyrian purple’), with the heading ‘patriomone’ (the author is, after all, French). I translate: in England in the 17th century it was sold, boiled on the market in Hastings under the rather engaging name of man-suckers.

The book carries a very useful bibliography of references (including the source of Joe aside about dog whelks), rather more detailed than one is perhaps used to find in a *field guide*, which make this a very important work for anyone interested in the history of dyeing and in particular in the use of plants, fungi, lichens and animals. There is no doubt in my mind that the book (which is, of course, entirely in French) would find a considerable market in the U.K.; the publishers, I understand, have no intention to commission an English translation, however. A pity, but all I shall struggle on with my rudimentary French, so much is there to glean from this excellent guide.

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