

Christmas and Stories

Christmas has always meant new books. I haven't decided if it is better to give than to receive. It is probably a toss up because I read the ones I buy to give away. Don't you think that sensible in case the recipient may wish to have a conversation about it?

One Christmas long ago "Heidi" was under the tree. The library was where we went for books so to have one's very own copy was an event. Our small town bookstore was mostly office supplies with books had 'on order.' When "Heidi" was discovered to have duplicate pages with an equal number missing it was a crisis! A long wait for a new copy meant back to the library.

The handsomely endowed public library built in late 19th C Romanesque Henry Hobson Richardson style of red rough-faced masonry is now on the National Registry of Historic Places. It was not historic when I worked there as an 8th grader, 10 hours a week for \$.08 an hour. Such wealth! There were books for little children in a charming basement section but once in school you were expected to 'just read', although occasionally the librarian would ask if your mother knew you were taking out a certain book. Parental objections were more likely of a "put down that book and clean your room" variety.

Children also gathered at the dime store counter where 'big little' books were displayed. They were adventure stories in a 5-inch square, 2-inch thick format with a ten-cent price, a match for our allowances. Love for stories is universal and although the mode of delivery may change, we are always happy to hear 'Once upon a time'. This year I didn't have to wait for Christmas for an adventure story. A friend sent "Flower Hunters" by Mary Gribben and John Gribben. The book is published by Oxford University Press and the authors have all the proper credentials for history/science/plants.

In "Flower Hunters" I learned that there really was a Mr. Spruce. Spruce has been a tree, a Christmas tree, and I find it startling to see a photograph of a bewhiskered gentleman in a stiff black coat and high white collar labeled Richard Spruce. No connection with the Christmas tree but there is a moss named in his honor, 'Sprucea'. Richard Spruce did love bryophytes, mosses, above all others.

A passionate, self-taught botanist, Spruce was a schoolmaster's son so lacked the money for a university education. In 19th C England it was difficult to break through the barriers of custom and class but several eager botanists were able to finance their excursions into the wilds by sending specimens back to wealthy collectors in England. Fortunately it was an era when the desire for natural history collections was phenomenal.

Spruce landed near the mouth of the Amazon river in what is now Belem on 12 July, 1849. He was 31 years old and would not leave South America until he was 46. He

had soon added Portuguese to his ability in Spanish and French and was eventually able to acquire a working knowledge of several native languages.

Hundreds of miles up the Amazon and into the jungle, life was not easy. In June, 1853 Spruce wrote in a letter, "we think ourselves well off at San Carlos when we can eat once a day...a country without priests, lawyers, doctors, police, and soldiers is not quite so happy as Rousseau dreamt it ought to be..." Among the hazards were stinging ants, whirlpools, tiny blood-sucking bats, civil wars, and malaria. Masses of mosquitos made malaria almost inevitable since the connection between their bite and the disease had yet to be established.

Malaria was thought to be the result of bad (mal) air (aria). Fortunately it can be cured by quinine, made from the bitter bark of a tree growing in the Andean rainforest. Linnaeus attributed the discovery to a Spanish Condesa de Chinchon so named the tree Cinchona. The remedy was actually discovered by Jesuits in Peru in the 17th C, the powder made from the bark taken back to Rome. As European countries established colonies where malaria was prevalent, the demand for quinine soared and it was essential that additional plantations of the cinchona be established and a supply assured. Richard Spruce is credited with obtaining the seeds and plants that resulted in the first successful plantation in India.

Spruce had worked his way so far west in Brazil he was near Ecuador having reached the eastern side of the Andes in Peru when he undertook the final search for cinchona. What should have been acclaim and a secure future as a reward for his heroic success did not happen. He arrived home poor and penniless, broken in health. He lived in a tiny cottage in Yorkshire barely able to move between bed and table but managed to complete his 600-page "Hepaticae." When we read the words, spruce up, and spruce tree, we need to remember and be thankful for the work of Richard Spruce.