

BOOK REVIEW

Willis's Third Offspring.* *The plant-book* by Dr David Mabberley is a direct descendant of *A dictionary of flowering plants and ferns* by J. C. Willis, first published in 1897. Willis himself saw that remarkable work through six constantly revised editions, the last appearing in 1931. Throughout, Willis kept to his original objective: the provision of a compendium of useful information for all those who dealt with plants. His provision of brief synopses under subject headings made it a double carriage-way to knowledge; for instance, the entry under 'oils' gave a list of oil-producing plants, while the entry under the plant name told if it produced oil. There were also important articles acting as a glossary. In later editions the number of plant names was increased, but the title was always rather a misnomer; 'Willis', as everyone called it, was a botanist's vademecum. After the author's death in 1958 a new edition was planned and this was undertaken by the late H. K. Airy Shaw: but the pattern was changed. Willis now became a dictionary of family and generic names of unrivalled completeness. However, the space taken up by so many new names meant the abandonment of economic information, vernacular names and explanatory articles. All the entries were plant names: it was a one-way highway (as indeed is *The plant-book*).

Botanists warmly welcomed the new work, but nevertheless many regretted the restrictions in its coverage. On the economic side the late Dr F. N. Howes based *A dictionary of useful and everyday plants and their common names* on the information in Willis, ed.6, although this needed a great deal of updating. Howes reinstated Willis's dual carriageway by retaining the synoptic articles, and he also gave the vernacular names as well as uses: but, of course, the total coverage was much less.

Dr Mabberley has put back into *The plant-book* the economic information and vernacular names lacking in Shaw's seventh and eighth editions of Willis but has retained entries for all genera and families in current use. He has made space by omitting old synonyms, orthographic variants and many minor families that were recognized by Shaw but not by Cronquist, whose system Mabberley has taken as his guide. This was a very sensible move as Cronquist's system now stands above its rivals by having the backing of full family descriptions (see Cronquist, *An integrated system of classification of flowering plants*, 1981): it is therefore beyond doubt the best system for reference, whether or not one agrees with details of the arrangement.

The plant book will be immensely useful to those who handle plants and literature about plants but find themselves sometimes confronted with unfamiliar names, whether scientific or vernacular, or plants of unknown usefulness. A new feature is the inclusion of a reference to a recent revision where one is available—its frequent absence points the weakness in modern taxonomic research which is more often floristic than monographic.

The compilation of *The plant book* involved a massive amount of literature scanning, as well as many difficult decisions on what to accept. Dr Mabberley has held a very practical middle-course; he has also retained his sense of humour. Under *Aegopodium* (the pernicious gout weed) we find 'cv. Variegatum (inexplicably) cult. widely in US', and under *Leucanthemum* its culinary qualities are summed up 'ed. (just about)'.

Of course, a compilation is only as good as its sources and no one could expect the author to check back every entry to original data: so there are mistakes. But they are few and those I have spotted mostly concern minor entries: there is no need to detail them here. *The plant book* can be warmly recommended for the desk-side reference bookshelf, with the admonition not to forget an occasional browse over a cup of coffee: it contains some fascinating information.

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*Mabberley, D. J. *The plant-book*. A portable dictionary of the higher plants. Pp. xii + 706. ISBN 0 521 34060 8. Cambridge University Press. Price £20.