

PALM LITERATURE

THE PALMS OF ODOARDO BECCARI. Piero Cuccuini & Chiara Nepi. *Dipartimento de Scienze Botaniche dell' Università di Palermo*. 2006. Pp. 251, many photographs.

Odoardo Beccari was the most important palmologist of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His published oeuvre is astonishing, ranging from papers published in botanical or horticultural journals to massive folio works illustrated by drawings and crisp black and white photographs. He monographed many genera and had a worldwide interest in the family, although his major interests were undoubtedly in the palms of Asia, Malesia and the West Pacific. It comes as something of a surprise to realise that his own fieldwork was limited. However, the time he spent in Sarawak in the 1860s was to instil in him an enthusiasm for tropical plants, especially palms.

Once he had returned to Italy, Beccari began to work up his collections and once his expertise in palms was established, botanists began to send palm material from all over the world to Beccari in Florence for his judgement. His enormous collection of dried pressed palms, separate fruit and material stored in alcohol was deposited eventually in the Herbarium of the Botanic Institute in Florence, which, consequently, holds one of the premier palm collections in the world.

The Palms of Odoardo Beccari could easily have been produced as a bare listing of names and collections. Instead it is much more and thus of much greater appeal. The volume contains a brief introduction explaining the two major herbaria collectively catalogued – the Erbario della Malesia consisting of Beccari's own collections from Sarawak, Sumatra, the Moluccas and New Guinea, and the Herbarium Palmarum containing the material accumulated by Beccari from other collectors. The Malesia herbarium comprises 405 herbarium specimens and 28 carpological (fruit or seed) specimens, while there are 6800 dried specimens, 214 carpological collections, 1205 illustrations and 1368 photographic plates in the Herbarium Palmarum.

The authors provide a synopsis of Beccari's life, his interest in palms and the events relevant to the accumulation of the Herbarium Palmarum. This magnificent herbarium was in fact Beccari's own personal herbarium. On his death it was donated by his children to his

disciple, Ugolino Martelli. Martelli bequeathed Beccari's collections to the University of Florence, where botanists of today can enjoy the beautifully curated herbarium and the wonderful Renaissance city!

The authors describe the current status of the collections, illustrating the cupboards and bundles of palms, and providing samples of original drawings, carpological collections and one of the large photographs that were included in many of Beccari's sumptuous monographs. The herbarium specimens are then catalogued by the scientific names under which they are stored.

The volume also includes biographical notes on the collectors of the specimens included in the Herbarium Palmarum with cross references to the genera collected and also a listing collectors by genus. Finally there are geographical listings of taxa and lists of types including a separate list of all the types recognized in the herbarium by Harold E. Moore Jr. There are also many reproductions of annotation labels.

The catalogue refers to the palm specimens by the name under which they have been filed in the herbarium, which is often the name used by Beccari himself. There has been no attempt to bring the nomenclature up to date. In fact this is probably the most useful way of presenting the data, as the palm taxonomist who consults the Florence Herbarium will most likely to want to see the types of the Beccari names.

The authors have provided an essential reference for the serious palm taxonomist, while the general reader who dips into the publication may find much of interest in the general introductory notes on Beccari. Congratulations to the authors on a most worthwhile publication.

To obtain a copy, send an amount corresponding to the shipping charges by a postal order (Italy) or an international postal order (other countries) to the following address: Dr. Piero Cuccuini, Sezione Botanica, Museo de Storia Naturale, Via La Pira 4, I-50121, Firenze, Italy. For Europe (Including Mediterranean Africa and the Middle East) – Euros 6.00; For Africa, Asia and the Americas – Euros 8.50; For Oceania – Euros 11.50.

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