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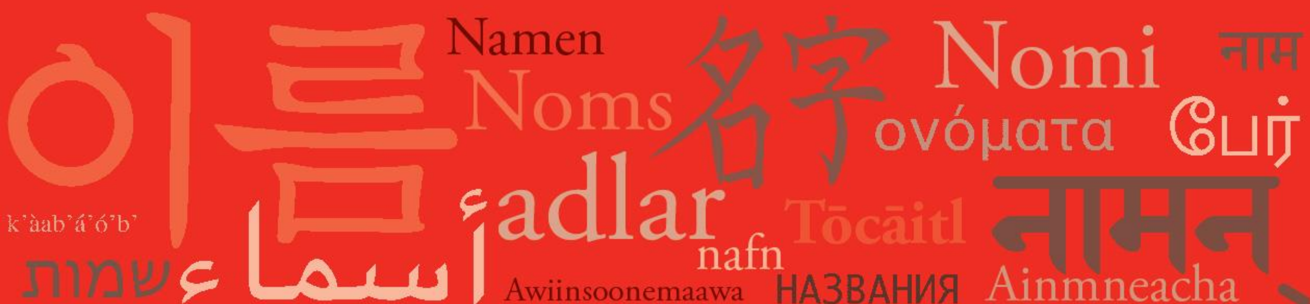

Book Review

In the Name of Plants: From Attenborough to Washington, the People behind Plant Names. BY SANDRA KNAPP. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022. Pp. 192 (Hardback). $25.00. ISBN13-978-0-226-82430-7.

With unique examples from around the world rendered in text and a hundred color photographs, including prints and drawings from the collections of the Natural History Museum in London, Sandra Knapp invites readers to what her publisher, University of Chicago Press, calls a "vividly illustrated meeting with thirty plants and their inspiring namesakes" from botanical history (2022). In just 192 pages, concluding with a 3-page index, five pages of "Plant Phylogeny and Bibliography", and a page of acknowledgments and picture credits, Knapp covers more than 250 years of botanical naming with the dedication of a committed scholar and field researcher.

Past president of the Linnean Society of London (2018–2022) and Director of Research at the city's Natural History Museum, Knapp has been elected to the British Royal Society and named an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for her work in botany and public science. *In the Name of Plants* grows out of her forty-year career, where she specializes in *Solanum*, the nightshade genus that includes eggplants, potatoes, and tomatoes. Collating the biographical stories that compose the book extends her reach into botanical history, where, she acknowledges, "[m]any more plant genera are named for men than for women or for indigenous people" (10), an imbalance that prompts her to include as many underrepresented name-sakes as possible in her collection.

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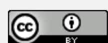
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As Knapp details in her Introduction (6–11), while plants around the world are known locally and informally by common names, official botanical naming dates to 1 May 1753, when Carl Linnaeus published *Species Plantarum* (9). Thus began the practice of binomial naming, with the genus in uppercase followed by the species in lowercase, both in italics (New York Botanical Garden). The *International Code of Nomenclature for algae, fungi, and plants*, a successor to Linnaeus' work, is now continuously revised. Knapp herself co-edited the 2018 Shenzhen Code, which followed the Nineteenth International Botanical Congress (IBC) held in China and which has now been superseded by the 2025 Madrid Code, following the Twentieth IBC held in Spain (International Association of Plant Taxonomy).

Knapp's title teasingly hints at the book's organization, with selections arranged not by taxonomy or chronology but alphabetically. Each of her thirty sections serves as micro-chapter, five or six pages long, named for a genus, from *Adansonia* (12–17) to *Wuacanthus* (178–183), the title for each section a plant, not its namesake. Under this structure, the *Attenborough* of the title appears not in the first section but 100+ pages later, in *Sirdavidia* (132–137), which describes a rainforest tree named after zoologist Sir David Attenborough, knighted by Queen Elizabeth II for his genius in research and in bringing science before the public. A British media celebrity, he has had numerous plants and even a long-extinct plesiosaur, *Attenborosaurus*, named for him (133). The title's *Washington* surfaces in the second-last chapter, *Washingtonia* (172–177), which chronicles the story of a fan palm native to northern Mexico and the US Southwest named for him by the nineteenth-century German botanist Hermann Wendland.

If Knapp keeps to other guideposts than the straight arrow of history, certainly some aspects of botanical study lend themselves to achronological presentation. Names of plants are not codified until recorded or published, sometimes decades after they first come to scientific attention. Additionally, the chosen name may reach back into history and across national borders, as *Washingtonia* does. On the other hand, some plant names in Knapp's collection are strikingly contemporary, like the fern genus *Gaga*, named for Lady Gaga, whose green dress with puffs of high rounded sleeves at the 2010 Grammy Award ceremony looked—at least to some botanists—uncannily like a giant fern gametophyte and whose stage name, more scientifically, matches the GAGA gene alignment found in this cheilanthoid fern (64).

The book's non-chronological structure, combined with its short entries, might tempt a reader to dip into its pages in random order. Someone might take up *Eastwoodia* (46–50), named for plant collector Alice Eastwood, who rescued irreplaceable specimens when the 1906 San Francisco earthquake destroyed the California Academy of Sciences building, before *Agnesia* (18–22), a Brazilian grass named for Agnes Chase, a field botanist and illustrator for the US Department of Agriculture. A browser can delight to come upon *Megacorax* (103–107), a member of the evening-primrose family, its name a play on words honoring Peter Raven (*mega* 'great' and *korax* 'raven'), who dedicated his career at Stanford University and the Missouri Botanical Garden to "'stav[ing] off the massive losses of biodiversity'" (106) that threaten plants worldwide. In addition to *Washingtonia*, readers will find *Franklinia* (56–61), a camellia chosen for the book's front cover, named by William Bartram for his father's friend, Benjamin Franklin. As well, they will recognize *Magnolia* (98–102), which honors French botanist Pierre Magnol, and the elegant bird of paradise, *Strelitzia* (144–149), named, perhaps more cryptically, for Sophia Charlotte of Mecklenberg-Strelitz. In terms of giants, there are *Rafflesia* (120–125), which produces the largest flowers on earth, although to attract the flies that pollinate it, it smells like rotten meat, and the night-blooming *Victoria* (166–171) water lily with its six-foot leaves, named in 1837 not for the legendary Tupi chieftain's daughter who threw herself into the Amazon's waters but for the newly crowned Queen Victoria.

In story after story, *In the Name of Plants* traces several recurring themes. Perhaps the most important of these derives from Knapp's awareness of the fragility of the biosphere. She closes her Introduction with a warning: "The twin drivers of climate and land-use change are irreversibly altering our world, and the plants upon which we so depend" (11). In *Linnaea* (92–97) she notes, for example, that the famed botanist's signature plant is especially vulnerable to environmental change because an entire population, propagated clonally, may consist of only a single plant. In *Esterhuysenia* (51–55), named for Ester Huysen, one of South Africa's most prolific collectors with almost 40,000 specimens to her credit, Knapp warns readers that the Cape Floristic Region, home to the richest floral diversity on the earth, stands "seriously under threat" (51) due to agricultural land conversion, invasive plant migration, and global warming.

Equally central to Knapp's objectives for the collection is her determination to bring attention to the contributions of marginalized and even persecuted namesakes. *Vavilovia* (155–160) honors the work of Nikolai Valilov, one of Russia's earliest geneticists, whose scientific beliefs put him at odds with the Stalinist regime and who, despite a lifetime devoted to improving agricultural production, died of malnutrition as a political prisoner in the wartime famine of 1943. *Quassia* (114–119), a wood with quinine-like bitterness used to treat malaria, carries the name of the enslaved "'servant Quassi'" (114), who, as Knapp ambivalently reports, brought the medicinal plant to the attention of colonizers in Suriname and then earned his freedom by hunting their escaped slaves. In *Sequoiadendron* (126–131) she marks the life of Sequoyah, a Native American who wrote an early-1800 Cherokee syllabary and whose name lives on in the "Big Trees" of the US West Coast and the Sierras.

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The record of *Sequoiadendron*'s naming illustrates another of Knapp's themes, the ongoing revision of botanical categories and, with it, of botanical names. When the towering tree was first collected by the Royal Horticultural Society in 1853, John Lindley, who reported it, thought to call it *Wellingtonia* after Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington, who had died the previous year (126). However, that name had already been given to a flowering plant from Asia. US botanists lobbied for *Washingtonia*, but, as they dithered, that name was claimed for a fan palm (see above). Meanwhile, specialists debated whether the redwoods of the Sierras and those of the coast were truly two separate genera. Ultimately, it was decided that the coastal redwoods, *Sequoia sempervirens*, were distinct from those of the Sierras, and the latter were named *Sequoiadendron*, combining the former's generic name with the Greek word for "tree" (128).

Details like these mean that the histories in *In the Name of Plants*, despite their appealing brevity, present challenges to the non-specialist. Colorful illustrations notwithstanding, this is not a coffee-table book. Few of the collection's genera are readily recognizable; many would be unknown to the casual reader, those of us who are not synantherologists, agrostologists, or palmographers, all of whose fields are noted in various chapters. Knapp incorporates granular descriptions of the phenotype, genotype, and habitats of her subjects. Her histories include the role of plate tectonics in plant diaspora and the combination of DNA sequencing and morphology by which taxonomists classify and reclassify specimens. At the most basic, those who read as onomasticians rather than botanists would have benefited from a sketch of the framework of plant taxonomy, from domain through species. Knapp does supply explanations for certain scientific terms and processes. She writes, for example, that among ferns cross-fertilization and the resulting genetic variation "can happen between gametophytes from spores from the same sporophyte (selfing), or between gametophytes derived from spores of different sporophytes (outcrossing)—the possibilities are endless" (66). A lay reader, however, might find that such explanations give either too much or too little information to be entirely helpful.

Throughout, Knapp's approach is unapologetically classical. Acknowledging the hegemony of Western science, even with its efforts to compensate indigenous people for their traditional knowledge (118–119), she presumes basic agreement on the value of Linnean structure. For insight into the sociocultural effects of its strict taxonomy, *In the Name of Plants* might profitably be placed alongside a work like Banu Subramaniam's *Botany of Empire: Plant Worlds and the Scientific Legacies of Colonialism*, which calls into question a system that ultimately categorizes culture as well as scientific knowledge. Michel Nguessan, reviewing Subramaniam for *Names*, lays this foundation: "European botanical classifications—especially Latin nomenclature and Linnean taxonomy—functioned not merely as technical tools but as global infrastructures of power that defined legitimate knowledge, authoritative knowers, and possessable landscapes" (83). At the very least, Nguessan suggests in assessing Subramaniam, a field that continuously renames genera and species in light of new scientific evidence should be willing to rename specimens that bear the onomastic legacies of aggressive colonialism.

By bringing philosophy, critical theory, and environmental humanities to bear on science, the interdisciplinary field of critical plant studies is reexamining humankind's relationship with plants, including their exploitation in colonial history and today. Inviting dialogue between the vegetal and the human, it opposes an anthropocentric view with the recognition of vital interdependence, even the utter human dependence on green plant life, what Heather Sullivan calls the "florosphere" (Sullivan 2021, 94). Through the lens of literature, Berthold Schoene highlights this perspective in his analysis of Murray Bail's botany-rich *Eucalyptus* (1998), winner of Australia's Miles Franklin Award. The novel opens with a fairy tale-like and very patriarchal premise, a father promising his daughter to the first man who correctly identifies every eucalypt growing in his collection, a formidable task given that the genus—or, botanists argue, possibly three genera—would include over 800 species. By the novel's end, as Schoene observes, the botanical "zoo" (Schoene 2025) that the father had hoped to create is reverting to the wilds, and his daughter has escaped not with the presumptive botanist-suitor but with a mysterious storyteller who woos her with tales of the trees and their names.

As she demonstrates in *In the Name of Plants*, Sandra Knapp is enough of a storyteller herself to appreciate the wild reaches of the plants she collects, literally and metaphorically. With the breadth and depth of her botanical knowledge, she offers her audience a landscape of plant and human history interwoven. The book is her testament to the world's plants, "essential for human survival" (6), named by and for humankind.

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