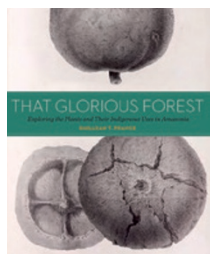


Adventures in loveable science



That Glorious Forest: Exploring the Plants and Their Indigenous Uses in Amazonia

by Ghilleen T. Prance.

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With a life's work spanning over five decades, Sir Ghilleen (Iain) Prance is one of the greatest botanists of our time and has shaped Linnæus's *scientia amabilis*, or loveable science, in the twentieth and twenty-first century like few contemporary botanists. He is well known for his work as Senior Vice-President of Science at New York Botanical Garden, and Director of the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew — where he led the establishment of the Millennium Seedbank — as well as the leading figure behind the innovative Eden Project in Cornwall, UK. Like other giants of science, Prance's life has been covered in various biographical articles and books, outlining his professional achievements, but conveniently passing over all the hardships and dangers experienced during years of collections, especially in the Brazilian Amazon. In *That Glorious Forest: Exploring the Plants and Their Indigenous Uses in Amazonia*, Prance finally presents an autobiographical account of his almost 50 years of exploration in the largest river-system on earth.

The book's title is biblical, taken from Isaiah chapter 10, verse 19: "Of all that glorious forest, only a few trees will survive—so few that a child could count them!" It illustrates Prance's own development from a botanist trying to find and describe new species, via an ecologist striving to understand one of the most complex ecosystems on earth, to a conservationist, realizing that the preservation of this system is not achievable without understanding, and working together with, the people who have for millennia lived in and shaped the Amazon and its glorious forests.

The structure of the volume continues the line of expedition accounts known from explorers like von Humboldt, Spruce,

Wallace and Bates, and thus connects to the almost lost tradition of great scientists writing more popular accounts of their time in the field. Over 224 pages Prance provides a deeply personal, but scientifically concise account of the daily joy and hardship during 39 expeditions in the Amazon and Orinoco basins, starting with his first expedition that led the young researcher to Suriname in 1963, and ending with a last trip to Ilha de Marajo, a freshwater island as large as Switzerland in 1987.

Weaving through his experience from being a novice botanist in one of the richest ecosystems on the planet, to an expert in the area, Prance manages to capture the reader by combining exact accounts of scientific discovery, with rich descriptions of the challenges of travel and expedition life; muddy roads, fallen bridges, overturned boats, almost-plane wrecks, encounters with anacondas and other wildlife, as well as the threat of tropical diseases. All that will be easily recognizable to every colleague who has participated in or organized expeditions. Prance however has one more challenge to add — moving his family to the Amazon, and having them participate in his fieldwork.

He depicts his conversion from a regular botanist to somebody deeply caring not only about the plants, but also the ecosystem he is working in.

Each of the seventeen chapters follows a specific expedition route, essentially in the style of a field diary, and lets the reader experience different aspects of work across a wide variety of Amazonian ecosystems. Prance excels in describing plants, landscape and people, as well as the challenges to ensure a long-term preservation of the ecosystems, and the traditional knowledge held by the local population. In good scientific style, each chapter ends with a list of collection numbers made during the trip, and new species described from the respective material.

What makes the book unique is not only the personal style in which Prance manages

to convey his experiences, but also the way he depicts his conversion from a regular botanist to somebody deeply caring not only about the plants, but also the ecosystem he is working in and especially the indigenous and local people he encounters and works with in his travels. With each chapter it becomes clearer to the reader that Prance is greatly concerned about threats like illegal gold-mining, deforestation and timber extraction, that are affecting both local people and their environment. Unlike other scholars, Prance quickly converts this concern into action, starting with classes in botanical taxonomy, ecology and conservation for local Brazilian scientists, later culminating in the Eden Project — educating new generations of botanists and conservationists for the new millennium.

That Glorious Forest is not your typical coffee table book; readers expecting a colourfully illustrated account of the Amazon will be disappointed. The book does feature 178 photographs, all of them taken in the field under expedition conditions. Instead of trying to give a superficial view of a 'paradise in danger,' Iain Prance has carefully selected images that illustrate all aspects of scientific collection, travel, landscapes and people. Many of the pictures are in black-and white, and most of the full-page photographs are excellent sepia-tone prints, imbuing a timeless quality.

This is a volume that will delight any reader interested in botanical exploration and conservation of the Amazon basin. They will certainly enjoy the expedition accounts, and many a botanist, including this reviewer, will be reminded of the joys of fieldwork. It is to be hoped that Ghilleen Prance's book will challenge other colleagues to produce popular accounts of their own journeys. In the long tradition of Humboldt and Wallace, such tales will entice the public to learn more about science, more about people and the ecosystems they live in, and so will contribute to the long-term survival and conservation of glorious forests everywhere. □

REVIEWED BY RAINER W. BUSSMANN

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