

A TOUCH OF THE OLD WEST

DAVID DOUGLAS

LABOUR I WILL . . .

BY PETER STEKEL

Cranky, cantankerous and difficult to get along with; rude, insolent and ungrateful was how his contemporaries described David Douglas. But he also contributed more to our knowledge of West Coast botany than anyone before or since by collecting and documenting the flora of Oregon Territory from 1825 to 1833. To understand these discrepancies would be to appreciate Douglas and his times.

Born in Scotland, in 1799, Douglas so annoyed his parents with his rebellious behavior that he was apprenticed to a gardener at age 11. Gardening in those days didn't involve mowing lawns and clipping hedges. Gardeners were employed to maintain the large estates that became the model for New York's Central Park. Enamored of plants, Douglas' early interest became a man's consuming passion.

In the stratified society of 19th-century Britain, Douglas rose rapidly. Through his patron, William Hooker, Douglas was chosen for a solo expedition in 1823 to collect eastern North American fruit tree varieties for propagation at the newly established London Horticultural Society. Encouraged by his success, in 1824 the Society sent Douglas to Columbia River country.

Under the protection of the Hudson Bay Company, Douglas spent the next three years traveling nearly 10,000 miles by boat, horse and foot. His assignment was to document the flora of the Pacific Northwest and send home samples of plants worthy of propagation for English gardens. Douglas was successful beyond the Society's wildest dreams. Proceeds from cultivating just one plant, the red-flowered currant, more than paid for Douglas' expedition.

Plant collecting was exciting, exhausting and dangerous. Three times Douglas almost drowned while boating rapids on the Columbia and Fraser rivers. While collecting samples of sugar pine, he was set upon by natives intent on theft, or worse. One evening, Douglas fell asleep while boiling water.

Awakening the following morning he discovered his kettle had melted. Douglas found solace, however, in heating just enough water in his tinder box for a spot of tea.

Returning home in 1827, Douglas became a celebrity. But he was a reticent oddball in society — dour and unable to mix socially. Douglas alienated co-workers who abused his collections. He had risked his life for these plants, and many had been shunted to forgotten corners, where they became moth-eaten and useless.

Two years of London was enough. In 1829 Douglas sailed back to the New World, never to see the Old again. Previous hardships told on the young man; his eyesight began to fail and

he was described as prematurely old. His spirit still strong, but his constitution broken, Douglas wandered the Columbia region, botanized central California, returned north, and lost his extensively detailed journal and most of his plants while descending Canada's Fraser River.

His curious death on the big island of Hawaii, in 1834, continues to mystify and intrigue historians. Douglas was trampled to death when he fell into a deep pit used to capture feral cattle. Ex-convict Edward Gurney lived nearby, and his police record led

some to suspect murder. Others, aware of Douglas' failing eyesight, believe he fell into the pit reaching for one last blossom. Today there are others who suspect suicide because Douglas is now known to have angrily severed ties with his employers, and his journals reflect a mind shattered by too many years of suffering and hard travel. The mystery may never be solved, unfortunately, because the only witness to Douglas' death was his Scottish dog.

David Douglas lived during a time when what you did was worth doing right. In 1826 he wrote to a friend, "Most cheerfully labour I will for this year without remuneration." Douglas was devoted to botany, and while he gave his life in pursuit of what he loved, his name lives on in the majesty of the Douglas fir and in several dozen other plants of the Northwest. **AW**



David Douglas.

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