

David Douglas

Plant Hunter and Pacific Northwest Explorer

by Peter Stekel

Most contemporaries believed that David Douglas was humorless, cantankerous, impolite, and stubborn. Yet Douglas accomplished more during ten years of exploration and botanical collection than any other plant hunter while the peripatetic employee of the Horticulture Society of London visited North America during the 1820s and 30s.

David Douglas was born in Scone, Scotland, in 1799 where his parents provided a repressive life of rigorous discipline. The boy grew up sullen, withdrawn, non-social, and was truculent and truant at school. At the age of seven, to remove David from the house, his parents apprenticed Douglas to the gardener of the Earl of Mansfield, in Scone.

Wealthy landowners employed gardeners to maintain the large estates that became the models for Central Park in New York or Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. Douglas flourished while learning how to grow rare tropical plants in the damp Scottish climate, cultivating wild plants from the highlands, and reading anything available on the subject of botany.

When he was 17, Douglas ended his apprenticeship and found a position at Valleyfield, near Dunfermline. Two years later Douglas succeeded in

securing a position at the Botanical Garden at Glasgow. In 1823, he caught the eye of botanist Professor William Hooker who recommended him to Joseph Sabine, secretary of the newly formed Horticultural Society of London.

For his first assignment, a "shake-down" cruise of sorts, Douglas was sent to eastern North America to study and bring back samples of fruit trees. He traveled overland from Philadelphia to New York, journeyed up the Hudson River, crossed to Lake Erie via the Erie Canal and sailed to Detroit. Along the way, Douglas botanized, returning to London with dried, pressed specimens, and an accurate record of his expedition.

The Horticultural Society had been created by influential Londoners to expand the limits of scientific knowledge as well as turn a profit in garden plants. The assortment of marketable fruit tree varieties brought by Douglas satisfied the Board of Directors and the collection of new North American plants delighted the botanists.

Secretary Sabine then assigned Douglas to collect plants for the Society in the Pacific Northwest.

His main concern would not be documenting the flora, but in introducing profitable new species to cultivation in England. The landed gentry demanded ever more exotic plants to grow in their greenhouses and estates; fortunes could be made by the successful introduction and propagation of new plants.



Courtesy of Gentry Books

During his travels in North America, which included three trips to the Pacific Northwest, David Douglas discovered over 150 species of plants not yet known in Europe.

Douglas set out the summer of 1824 aboard the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) ship, *William and Ann*. Ship's Doctor, John Scouler and Douglas became fast friends and spent the voyage collecting specimens at every port of call and discussing natural history. Modern accounts suggest this played more to Scouler's talents. When a sailor was injured, the doctor botched the surgery and left the poor fellow in worse shape than when he had begun.

In April, 1825, the ship crossed the treacherous Columbia River bar and sailed up river some 100 miles to the HBC post at Fort Vancouver. Douglas got right to work. His early journal entries

are rapturous in depicting the still undefiled forests of Oregon Territory. His first view of Salal, of which he'd read in Archibald Menzies' journal from Vancouver's 1792 Pacific Coast exploration lead Douglas to effuse, "So pleased was I that I could scarcely see anything but it."

Douglas traveled extensively throughout the Columbia Basin. He moved about the country by canoe and horse, but mostly on foot, sometimes covering 50 miles in a day. His indefatigable energy constantly amazed the French-Canadian engages whom he accompanied. He unsuccessfully

searched for the Quamash mentioned by Lewis and Clark as being an important food of the Indians. "After a laborious route of twelve days along the shore north of Cape Disappointment, I was obliged reluctantly to return without being fortunate enough to meet it..." Another time, while camping, exhausted, in the rain, he fell asleep while

boiling water for tea. When he awoke, his kettle had melted but Douglas found joy in being able to heat just enough water in the scoured out lid of his tinder box for a hot drink.

Like other plant collectors during the opening of the west, Douglas was viewed as being something of an eccentric; touched in the head, some thought. By virtue of his unconventional behavior, Douglas was tolerated and even humored by his companions. Indians employed to carry his equipment spread word up and down the Columbia that the "Man of Grass" possessed strong medicine.

In the fall of 1826 Douglas had the kind of life threatening experience that had become old hat. A year earlier he had seen large seeds of a pine tree that a Indian carried around in a shot pouch. "After treating him to a smoke, which must be done before any questions are put, I enquired and found it grew a little south on the mountains," in present-day southern Oregon. When Douglas found himself in that area he remembered the large seeds of the tree we now call the Sugar Pine.

Slowly he made his way into the mountains, following Indian and game trails through tangles of ceanothus and manzanita into unfamiliar country. In the Umpqua River Valley he finally saw the Sugar Pine but needed his rifle to shoot down cones from trees he estimated to be 215 feet tall. The sound of gunfire quickly brought eight very unfriendly-looking Indians.

Recognizing trouble, Douglas offered tobacco and conveyed his desire to have more Sugar Pine cones, letting it be known he would be willing to give presents. The Indians began to string up their bows. Cocking his gun, Douglas leveled it at one of the Indians while covering another with a pistol. "I was determined to fight for life," his journal notes. The stand-off lasted ten minutes whereupon the leader asked for tobacco and agreed to find more cones. "They went, and as soon as they were out of sight, I picked up my three cones and a few twigs, and made a quick retreat..."

Through injury, illness, fatigue, and hunger, Douglas did his work. He began to experience a blinding irritation to his eyes but complained only in his journal. "I had suffered so much that little hope was left for me being able to do much good for this season, at least in botany." He was heroic at times. "...traveled 33 miles, drenched and bleached



The Douglas Fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) is one of many plants & trees named after David Douglas.

with rain and sleet, chilled with a piercing north wind; and then to finish the day experience(ing) the cooling, comfortless consolation of lying down without supper or fire. On such occasions I am very liable to become fretful." Another time he wrote, "I am now here, and God only knows where I may be next. In all probability, if a change does not take place, I will shortly be consigned to the tomb."

April, 1827, Douglas included an itemized account of his mileage since arriving in North America. "I shall just state as near as possible their extent," he wrote. "In 1825: 2105 miles. 1826: 3932. In 1827, to date: 995, for a total of 7032 miles." Douglas then left the Northwest and began the long journey home by crossing Canada on foot in four months. In Hudson's Bay he boarded an HBC ship and sailed for England where he arrived a celebrity in October.

It was during the next two years that Douglas picked up the poor reputation that history has supplied us. The son of a stonemason simply didn't fit in with the glitterati of London. As fame passed from fad to notoriety Douglas became increasingly unhappy with his station. His rustic manners didn't fit in with the silks, "Your Lordships," and dainty manners of the fair sex. Douglas cast about for ways to escape into familiar work and, in 1830, convinced the Horticultural Society to return him to North America.

On this second expedition Douglas found much had changed in the Northwest. The site of Fort Vancouver had been moved down from the hills and onto the coastal plain to be closer to the river and shipping and the white population on the southern side of the Columbia had risen. The biggest difference came in the attitude of the Indians. Measles and other diseases had swept through the tribes, reducing the Indian population of Oregon by three-quarters. All whites were looked upon with suspicion and it was no longer safe for the "Man of Grass" to travel alone. Finding the Indian problems untenable and detrimental to his work, Douglas set sail for California in December of 1830 and didn't return for 19 months.

Douglas was mightily unimpressed with the Californios and their shiftless work ethics. All anyone seemed to do was drink wine and ride horses. The Mexican governor in Monterey distrusted all foreigners and forced Douglas to sit six

months awaiting permission to travel the interior. Inactivity didn't suit him well and there is some suggestion that he was as boorish in Monterey as he had been in London.

He didn't like the weather either, particularly the heat. In his letters he complains bitterly about the shortness of the field season. "My whole collection of this year...may amount to 500 species...This is vexatiously small, I am aware; but when I inform you that the season for botanizing does not last longer than three months...such is the speed with which spring advances...the plants bloom here only for a day. The intense heat sets in about June, when every bit of herbage is dried to a cinder." He bridled at having to wait for an HBC ship to take him back to familiar climes.

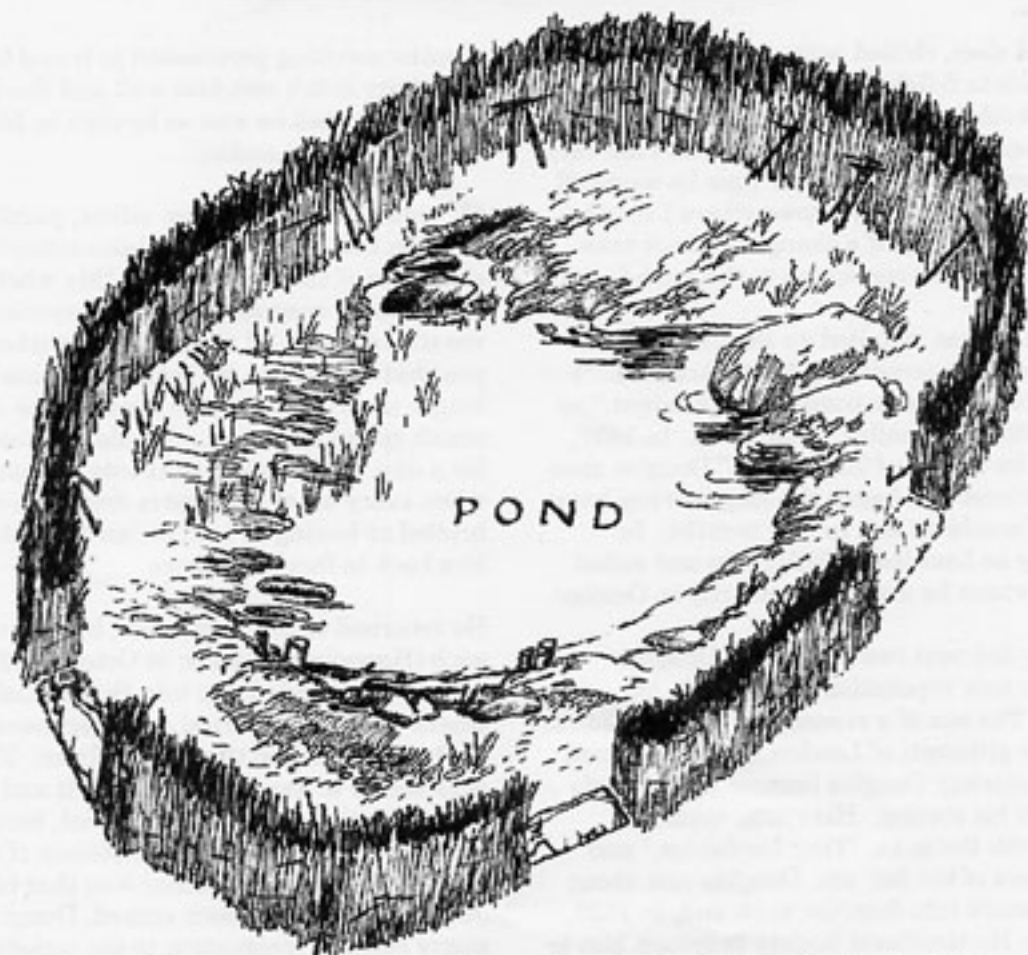
He returned to the Northwest, by way of the Sandwich (Hawaiian) Islands, in October, 1832 and made one extended trip into British Columbia where he lost his journal and specimens when his boat overturned on the Fraser River. The experience seems to have killed his spirit and he began to wander without purpose after that, becoming increasingly irritable and suspicious of other people. When word reached him that his mentor, Joseph Sabine, had been sacked, Douglas wrote an angry letter of resignation to the society and departed *persona non grata* in October, 1833 for Hawaii.

During the remaining months of his life, Douglas tried to salvage something of his work while his eyesight deteriorated dramatically. No longer in the employ of the Horticultural Society, he guiltily still drew upon their credit. He collected haphazardly for several months throughout the Islands, staying with missionaries, and blundering through the hot Hawaiian vegetation.

On the morning of July 12, 1834, Douglas asked directions of Edward Gurney, an English expatriate living along the Hilo trail, on the big island of Hawaii. Gurney invited the botanist to breakfast and following the meal walked a ways with him. They parted and Gurney pointed Douglas on the correct path, warning him of pits dug to catch feral cattle. Douglas was never seen alive again.

His body was found by some Hawaiians later that day. How Douglas had come to fall into the bull pit

Courtesy of Gentry Books



With the natural or man-made ponds as bait, pits were dug to trap feral cattle on the islands. A fence constructed around the watering hole had openings for the cattle to pass. A pit was dug at each opening and camouflaged. The pits were six feet deep to insure that the cattle could not escape after falling into the trap.

and be trampled is unknown and conjectures continue to this day. Some felt it was murder, Douglas purportedly carried a purse stuffed with money. Others feel the death was accidental, that the mostly blind Douglas stumbled into the pit. A third school of thought holds that the Scotsman was destitute of mind, body, and finances. Could he have thrown himself into the pit to escape the shame and disgrace of returning home emptyhanded?

It would neither be fair to judge Douglas, the man, by modern standards or the comments of 19th century Londoners. A sense of duty pervaded his work, it is plain by reading his journal and letters. After all, Douglas was born in an era where what was worth doing was worth doing well. Working alone, and in a hostile environment, Douglas

accomplished more in ten years than most modern field scientists can do in a lifetime.

Today, science honors Douglas by naming dozens plants after him, notably the Douglas-fir. So, it is through his work that we know and appreciate him best. He was undoubtedly a complex man, tortured at times by high expectations. As Douglas commented in his journal, "I now know that such objects as I am in quest of are not obtained without a share of labour, anxiety of mind, and sometimes risk of personal safety." We, who at times seem in need of heroes, might think of David Douglas.

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