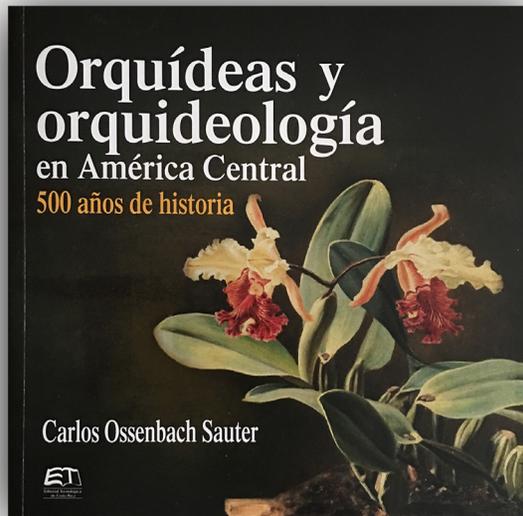


BOOK REVIEWS

Orquídeas y orquideología en América Central: 500 años de historia

Carlos Ossenbach Sauter. Editorial Tecnológica de Costa Rica, Cartago. Primera edición, 2016. ISBN 978-9977-66-364-7, in octavo volume (21.5 × 21.5 cm), 624 pp., 273 illustrations in colour and black and white, paperback. In Spanish. Available through the printer at editorial@itcr.ac.cr.



When, back in 2009, our journal published Carlos Ossenbach's *magnum opus* on the history of orchids in Central America (Ossenbach 2009), a tremendous amount of deeply researched information on virtually any individuals and institutions who collected and studied orchids in the region was revealed for the first time to the readers. Furthermore, Ossenbach framed their stories and activities into a general historical and economic perspective of the concerned region, which made the work of primary interest also for the historian and those scientist and enthusiast readers interested in the historical perspectives of plant exploration and collecting in the American tropics, and the history of biology as well. Made easy to browse by Indexes to "persons and institutions," and to "scientific and common names of plants", and completed by a rich iconographic support, *Orchids and orchidology in Central America: 500 years of history* quickly converted into a classic, and has been since quoted in

virtually any scholar work devoted to the orchids of the American isthmus.

Now another public University in Costa Rica, the Tecnológico de Costa Rica, took the initiative through its press to made this fundamental work available also to the Spanish reader. In its elegant square format and substantial paperback binding, which is made up by classical fascicles giving to the book a feeling of solidity, the Spanish edition of the history of orchidology in Central America is further enriched by a great number of large illustrations (some of them full page), mostly in colour and mostly never published before, which far exceed those included in the original *Lankesteriana* edition. Orchid plants sketched by Thaddeus Hanke and plates prepared from the specimens collected by Louis Néé during the Malaspina's expedition to the Pacific (1789–1894), the orchid illustrations prepared in the course of Sessé and Mociño's Mexican expedition (1787–1803), portraits of famous and less famous

collectors and travelers, engravings and paintings of early Central American landscapes, are worthy alone the price of this beautiful book.

As its English seebing, the volume stars defining the geographic and historic limits of the treatment, and giving short but useful insights on the political history of Central America, and the biodiversity and phyto-geography of the isthmus. Then the body of the work is organized chronologically into four parts and eleven chapters, moving from pre hispanic times and running to seconf half of twentieth century (but excluding living individuals), in a sliding and intruiging prose which would surely fascinate and absorbe the Spanish reader. In a timeline along which the author tells the story of the orchids in Central America tells us, he selected a series of important events related to the theme (which gives name to the chapters of the book) and subdivided each one in a few related stories. This approach resulted in 74 essays, which cover such different topics as the history of vanilla, the first Spanish scientific expeditions, the born and development of botanical gardens and orchid societies, national and international policies that had an impact on the development of a local botany, and biographic reviews of those individuals who took a part on the orchidology of Central America.

Las orquídeas en las culturas maya y azteca (Orchids in the cultures of Mayas and Aztecs), *El viaje de Thomas Gage por México* (The journey through Mexico of Thomas Gage), *John Lindley y el herbario de Lambert* (John Lindley and the Lambert herbarium), *La fiebre del oro en California y el canal intraoceánico* (The California gold rush and the interoceanic canal)

El Gabinete de Historia Natural de Guatemala (The Cabinet of Natural History of Guatemala), *La conexión germano-belga* (The German-Belgian connection), *La comisión Científica Española al Pacífico* (The Spanish Scientific Commission to the Pacific), *La Estación Botánica de Belice* (The Botanical Station in Belize), *Costa Rica: los años de Doña Amparo* (Costa Rica: the years of ‘doña’ Amparo), *Henry Teuscher y el Jardín Botánico de Montreal* (Henry Teuscher and the Montreal Botanical Garden), *Clarence Klaus Horich: el último aventurero* (Clarence Klaus Horich: the last of the adventurers), are just a few of the fascinating narratives, placed in the historical context of Central America and the entire American continent, showing how apparently distant and unrelated events (like the gold rush to California or the Mexican-American war) influenced and gave shape to the history of botanical exploration and the knowledge of orchids in the region.

On the front of workers, virtually no single collector, scientist or enlightened gardener who visited Central America escaped Ossenbach’s attention, and the book represents a true encyclopedic work on the botany of the isthmian region.

For both the interested in a general view about the topic and the search of information onspecific details, the book is a “must have” for any avid Spanish reader of history, botany, and orchidology!

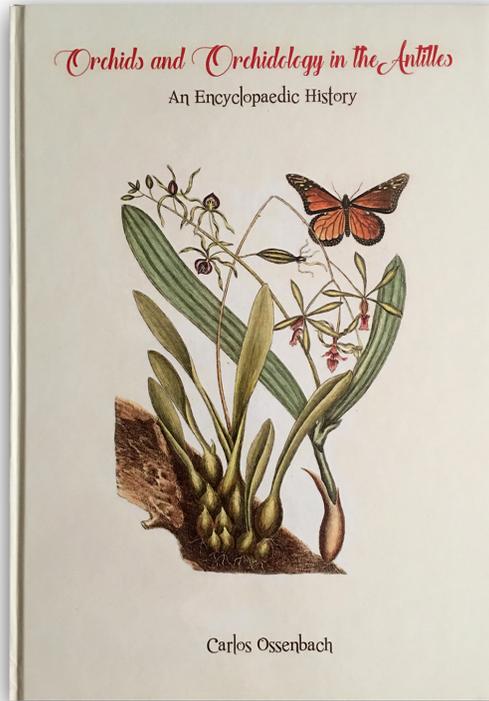
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- Ossenbach, C. (2009). Orchids and orchidology in Central America: 500 years of history. *Lankesteriana*, 9, 1–268.

Orchids and Orchidology in the Antilles. An Encyclopedic History

Carlos Ossenbach. Koeltz Scientific Books, Oberreifenber, Germany, 2017. ISBN 978-3-946583-01-1, in quarto volume (30.5 × 22.0 cm), xxi, 723 pp., 352 illustrations in colour and black and white, numerous tables, hard-bound. In English. Available through the printer, 228.00 Euro, ca.US\$ 250.00.



This great and heavy book (it weights a few grams less than three kilograms!) is the logic continuation of the author's ongoing project, which began in 2009 with the publication of *Orchids and orchidology in Central America: 500 years of history* (Ossenbach 2009; for a review of the recently released Spanish edition, see this issue, pp. 105–106). And, to be true, it is a superb continuation of the work.

As the title itself promises, the book is a real encyclopedic treatment (the “Table of contents” alone occupies 21 pages) of the workers – pioneers, scientists, explorers, gardeners, conservationists, growers and experimenters, as well as their institutions – who revealed the orchid diversity of the Antillean islands and presented it to the world. As the author claims in the introduction to the book, “this work has become a difficult hybrid between a traditional historical narration and an encyclopaedic dictionary of persons and biographies”. To which extent this hybrid succeeded

in its ambitious scope is perhaps best visualized by a synoptical table of 42 pages, enlisting chronologically the main publications on Antillean flora by 622 persons in a temporal arch extending from 1640 to 2015. Another 44 pages of bibliography testify to the amplitude, deepness and completeness of Ossenbach's effort as to the sources consulted and studied to shape the work.

The encyclopaedic character of the work does not detract from the fondness of the author in portraying the historical, cultural, and economic landscape of the West Indies and the Governments and scientific academies interested in their flora, as they changed and evolved through a five-centuries period. As Ossenbach previously did in his account on the orchid hunters in Central America, also in this book he organizes the facts relative to the discovery, use, commerce, study and conservation of orchids within the historical perspective not only of the Antilles, but of

the countries that were involved in the “colonization” and exploitation of the West Indies. A useful chronological table (pp. 15–17) on the colonization of the Caribbean by European powers helps framing the narration within the historic events that gave shape to the actual political identity of the archipelago.

The book is chronologically arranged, covering the years from the landing of Columbus at Guanahani to the present days (differently from his work on Central American orchidology, the author includes here also contemporary, living persons), but the narration is preceded by a short review of the limited information available on the orchids in the life of the indigenous tribes that settled in the Antilles before the Spanish conquest. The main work is then organized in six parts: “From the Spanish Conquest to Carlos Linnaeus”, “From the Age of Reason to Spain’s ‘Ominous Decade’”, “The Golden Age of Antillean Orchidology”, “The ‘Imperial Era’”, “From war to war (1914–1945)”, “The second half of the XX century and the new Millennium”. The first chapter also includes a few introductory pages with an overview of the geology, climate and vegetation in the Antillean region, as well as a note on Antillean orchid diversity. Two Appendixes (“Antillean orchidology and related botany: a timeline of travelers, plant collectors, botanists, and persons otherwise of interest to this story” and “The Antillean islands and regions in the names of their orchids”), the Literature and the Acknowledgments complete the book. Each one of the six chapters is then subdivided into main headings (I counted 62), under which are presented the narrations of individual and institutional biographies, as well as those prominent historical facts that affected the orchidology in the region.

The personal, free, and pleasant prose of the author immensely helps if following the *file-rouge* of a narration that spans over 475 years and an apparently endless series of actors who lived – and sometimes died – for plants and orchids.

The author has been very successful in showing how the history of orchidology in the Caribbean profoundly differs from that of Central and South America, mainly due to the character of the respective actors. As the Antillean orchid flora lacks some of the showiest elements – like the species of *Cattleya*, *Odontoglossum*, *Masdevallia* – that the European orchid nurs-

eries were mainly interested in, commercial collectors and true “orchid hunters” were almost absent from the Antillean scene. Botanists, but also horticulturists, who visited and traveled through the Caribbean islands during the last five centuries, rarely had material interests. Instead, the interest in the secrets of nature or in finding new ornaments for the King’s gardens and the glory of their scientific societies, by the Plumiers, the Jacquins, the Swartzs, the joy of learning and transmitting their knowledge by people like Humboldt and Bonpland, Woodford and Lockhart, Knowles and Westcott, the love of science by Urban, Cogniaux, Britton, and their modern followers, Carabia, Liogier, Stehlé, right into the contemporary work of Garay, Nir, Zanoni, Ackerman and its school, Bocourt, Mújica: these were the main impulses under which the Antilles were explored and their orchid diversity revealed.

A well-conceived and well-realized book, *Orchids and Orchidology in the Antilles* do not let much space for criticisms. The iconographic support to the texts is extraordinary, with a lot of previously unpublished material, and it is a pity the graphical decision of writing the captions *inside* the illustrations. For some of the illustrated plants the basionym is sometimes adopted (i.e., *Angraceum funale* for *Dendrophylax funalis*, *Edpidendrum altissimum* for *Oncidium altissimum*, *Epidendrum bradfordii* for *Encyelia bradfordii*), while in other cases the species are named accordingly to current classification (i.e. *Brassavola nodosa* for *Epidendrum nodosum*, *Broughtonia sanguinea* for *Epidendrum sanguineum*, *Psychilis kraenzlinii* for *Epidendrum kraenzlinii*). Finally, indexes of personal and plants names would have surely helped the reader to find the appropriate reference pages within such a large book, filled with so many characters.

I personally consider this work a monument to the history of orchids in the Caribbean Islands, and an extraordinary tribute to the people that made it possible. To be sure to own a copy of the book, I would buy mine today.

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- Ossenbach, C. (2009). Orchids and orchidology in Central America: 500 years of history. *Lankesteriana*, 9, 1–268.