

**Book Review:** McCarthy, James. 2008. **Monkey Puzzle Man, Archibald Menzies, plant hunter.** Whittles Publishing & Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh, Scotland. 223 pp. (paperbound). ISBN 978-1904445-61-6. Price: £25.

This is the first biography of Archibald Menzies, 1754–1842, a Scotsman who traveled around the world with early British voyages of discovery and commercial exploitation, botanizing in the new lands visited, and collecting seeds and plants for introduction to Great Britain. His achievements are many and his name deserves to be better known and for those reasons this book is welcome and long overdue. But like the old story about the curate's egg, the book is not all that it could be and while it is 'very good, in parts' as the curate said to the bishop, there are some bits that are not so savory.

The book reads well — chapters are short and extensively referenced through endnotes, linked to a bibliography of published and unpublished sources. I found each chapter engaged my interest and I wanted to know what would happen next — who knew the biography of a man dead for 165 years could be such a page-turner?

Menzies lived a fascinating life and was the first to record impressions of peoples and lands that had scarcely been explored before. The extensive passages quoted from his journal make for fascinating reading and it is in these parts the book makes for engrossing reading. One problem with the citation of "Menzies Journal" which is cited extensively in the chapter endnotes is that, when you check the bibliography, it turns out there are several pieces of the journal (or perhaps several different journals by Menzies), housed in six libraries and archives as distant as London, Edinburgh, and Australia with no distinction made as to which of these is being cited in the endnotes.

Menzies' early life and education are covered briefly and then the voyages around the world in more depth, but focusing primarily on the Pacific Northwest coast of North America, first (1786–1789) with Capt. James Colnett on fur-trading commercial expeditions, and later (1791–1795) with Capt. George Vancouver of the Royal Navy over three years to chart the Pacific Northwest coast, search for the fabled Northwest Passage, and to make such terrestrial investigations as could be accommodated in the course of what was primarily a naval hydrographic mission. The last part of the book provides a synopsis of Menzies' life after these great adventures: later naval assignments in the Caribbean; declining health and his retirement from the Navy; marriage and private practice as a medical doctor in London; the struggle to write up his journals for publication (which never happened), and an overview of the many plants Menzies introduced

to horticulture, some of which were to reshape the landscape of the British Isles. Five appendices conclude the book, each summarizing some aspect of his life, career, and contributions.

If one were to read quickly through the book just for the big picture of Menzies' life and achievements and then put it down, this would make for an enjoyable story. But as has rightly been said, the devil is in the details. And it is in the details that this book falls short. Errors of fact and interpretation are to be found in the parts of the Menzies story best known to me, and if that is so, then what does it imply about the other chapters, dealing with regions and historical events less familiar?

For practical reasons, this review concentrates on the Hawaiian portions of the Menzies story and the problems detected in the chapters, endnotes, photographs, and bibliography concerning that epoch of his life. It will be up to other readers, better versed in the histories of the Pacific Northwest of America, Pacific exploration, and Scotland itself, to decide whether those portions of the book are the good part of the curate's egg or not.

The photos, of which there are many black and white images scattered throughout the book and eight unnumbered pages of color images between pp. 98–99, are one area where some serious overhaul is needed. A full list of criticisms has been sent to the publisher in the hope that the worst howlers can be corrected in a future printing. A few points worth noting: the photo on p. 99 of King Kamehameha is stated in the caption to be the one at Kapa'au, which is a small village located on the Island of Hawai'i. Yet the roofline clearly visible behind the statue is that of Ali'iolani Hale in downtown Honolulu, on the island of O'ahu. The portrait of Queen Kaahumanu (p. 104) is said to be "by an unknown artist of the time" but is surely a copy based on the famous portrait by Louis Choris, artist on von Kotzebue's expedition from Russia. And sadly, the plant depicted on p. 105 as "taro" (more correctly *kalo* in Hawaiian, scientifically *Colocasia esculenta*) is another species entirely, most likely a kind of *Xanthosoma*.

Among the color images that of the double-hulled canoe has several problems: firstly it is not attributed, but is almost certainly the work of a living artist in Hawai'i who is renowned for his contemporary paintings of historical events. Did the author or the publishers receive permission to reproduce this painting in the Menzies book? Secondly, the caption is so muddled that it is hard to know what event the painting is meant to represent. The caption reads: "A painting showing Chief [sic] Kamehameha in a canoe, sailing out to meet Captain Cook on arrival in Hawaii in 1789." Well, for starters, Kamehameha was not a chief, in the Hawaiian sense of that word; he was a noble who usurped power and battled his way to

becoming supreme ruler, and thereafter “King” of the Hawaiian Islands. Secondly, Capt. Cook was killed at Kealakekua Bay in February 1779, so it seems unlikely he was the one being received in 1789, unless there is a typo in the date. But perhaps what the author meant is that Kamehameha was sailing out to meet Capt. Vancouver in 1789, although this year does not agree with the chronology to be found in Appendix 2. It really isn't possible to know what is intended here.

Turning to the text, it is a simplification, to put it mildly, to state that “Kamehameha ...eventually overcoming the chiefs of all the other islands. He did this through the power of firearms obtained from western ships...” In fact, Kamehameha, having already bested his rivals on the largest island, Hawai‘i, managed to battle his way to supremacy on the islands of Maui and O‘ahu, the latter just barely, due to the rapid decimation of the Hawaiians by diseases introduced by Europeans. But Kamehameha never managed to win Kaua‘i by military might. Instead, the wily chief of that island, Kaumuali‘i, struck a bargain with Kamehameha and voluntarily ceded his island to him, in return for which Kaumuali‘i was permitted to continue to govern his traditional lands. A smaller point is that the Hawaiian personal and place names are a mish-mash, sometimes rendered as Menzies spelled them (e.g. Wha-ra-rai), other times given in the contemporary forms (Hualalai), but usually without a cross-reference. The misspellings of the same name that appear on one page (such as Kauai and Kai on p. 107, for example) should have been caught by a copy editor and corrected. Other spelling errors: Wimea (for Waimea) Bay; kappa for *kapa*; Haiwai‘iloa (for Hawai‘iloa); and Don Jose Mozino (for Moçino).

Turning to a few botanical faux pas, the statement (p. 91, note 23) that “...hepatics, which include the lichens.” would have old Menzies sitting up in his grave and wailing in protest. As someone who had a lifelong fascination with cryptogamous plants (e.g., the non-flowering plants such as mosses, liverworts, and ferns that reproduce by spores), Menzies himself appreciated that lichens are a completely separate group from hepatics, and while the nature of lichens was not well understood in his time, we know today that lichens are not plants at all but fungi that have developed a symbiosis with one or more algae! The shaddock trees mentioned in the text and depicted in a color photo are correctly known as *Citrus maxima*, and not *C. grandis*, which is a synonym. It is a shame that the text was not reviewed by one of the Royal Botanic Gardens botanists, who would certainly have detected these and other botanical lapses and corrected them.

These few examples suffice to demonstrate that this biography is not the scholarly and rigorously researched tome that a man such as Archibald

Menzies deserves; instead this is more like the screenplay for a Hollywood movie about the man that captures the broad brush strokes defining his life but falls short in accurately delineating its details. Those who are nit-pickers will no doubt find material not mentioned here to satisfy them, and those who want a fast-paced read will find a tale that is surprisingly enjoyable, if one can manage to suspend disbelief for just a little while. While I can not offer my wholehearted congratulations to the author for the book he produced, I can sincerely thank him for bringing Menzies' life and accomplishments into greater prominence. He has been long overlooked and it is clear that there is more to be written about this remarkable Scot.

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