

BOOK REVIEW

The Wardian Case. How a Simple Box Moved Plants and Changed the World by Luke Keogh

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A shipping container for plants might seem an unpromising topic for scholarly research, but Luke Keogh demonstrates how simple technology revolutionised horticulture in the 19th Century. The author relates how Nathaniel Bagshaw Ward, an east London surgeon-apothecary and amateur naturalist, accidentally discovered that plants and insects could grow in closed glass containers. With the help and encouragement of botanist and horticulturist colleagues, Ward's container developed into a range of substantial wooden glazed cases which were used to safely transport live plants by sailing ship.

The book not only documents many examples of the use of the Wardian case to move plants around the world but also features ornamental domestic versions (similar to modern terraria) that became popular in Victorian parlours.

Wardian cases were used to transport economically important plants such as tea, coffee, bananas, mangos and rubber. The unauthorised transportation of quinine-containing *Cinchona* plants from South America to India, "one of the most infamous acts of biological espionage in world history", will be of special interest to medical historians.

The plants that were shipped in Wardian cases included exotic flowering species such as jasmine, fuchsias, chrysanthemums and rhododendrons destined for the botanical gardens and great houses of the British Empire. Keogh discusses the use of Wardian cases world-wide and presents some fascinating data on the movement of cases to and from Kew Gardens.

The final part of the book deals with biosecurity and the problems that led to the decline and eventual abandonment of Wardian cases for plant transportation. The soil in the cases frequently harboured plant diseases and invasive species. Coffee leaf rust was transferred to Africa from Ceylon and various species of invasive flat worms travelled the world in Wardian cases. By the 1920s, strict international regulation put an end to the movement of plants in soil and most of the remaining Wardian cases were burned.

This book covers a broad sweep of the history of economic botany. It is well-written, beautifully illustrated and will appeal to a wide readership, including medical and pharmaceutical historians.

Chris Derrett,
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