

JAMES BATEMAN AND HIS  
*ORCHIDACEAE OF MEXICO*  
& *GUATEMALA*

By DORIS M. REED

The 1830's and '40's have been called a time of "orchidomania" in England and on the continent of Europe. Though the orchid had been known to European botanists for many years prior to these decades, misconceptions as to its culture had delayed other than sporadic ventures at its cultivation. In the early years of the nineteenth century, however, systematic attempts to discover the secret of orchid culture began to bear fruit, and the period of "orchidomania," when an epiphyte house became "an almost indispensable adjunct to a place of any consideration," can be said to date in England from the reading of a paper, "Upon the Cultivation of Epiphytes of the Orchis Tribe," by John Lindley, first professor of botany at the University of London, before the Horticultural Society on May 18, 1830, and its publication in Series 2, Volume I of the *Transactions* of the Society in 1835.

Among the early collectors and cultivators of orchids in England there was none more enthusiastic than James Bateman. The only son of a landed family, he was relieved of the necessity of making his way in the world and was indulged in his chosen interests by his father, John Bateman of Knypersley Hall in Staffordshire and Tolson Hall in Westmoreland. Horticulture early claimed the attention of James Bateman, and, while yet a very young man, he



experimented with the cultivation of tropical fruits and succeeded in bringing to maturity for the first time in England the *Averrhoa carambola*, an East Indian tree, cultivated for its very acid fruit, which, according to Bateman, "possessed qualities of the first order when made into a preserve." As a gentleman commoner at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he had matriculated on April 2, 1829, at the age of seventeen, orchids aroused his interest, and he embarked upon his career as a collector by the purchase of a plant of the species *Renanthera coccinea*, which laid the foundation of the fine collection which he was to assemble at one of the paternal estates, Knypersley Hall. The story is told that in making this purchase he was detained at the nursery beyond the time permitted for absence from the college and as a penalty was required to copy half "The Book of Psalms."

Though orchid plants were for sale in England and in other parts of Europe at this time, the more enthusiastic collectors were not satisfied to acquire only such species as were available there and were stirred by tempting visions of the vast number of species yet unknown to their epiphyte houses.

The orchid tribe is one of the largest in the vegetable kingdom, and the habits of growth of the numerous species are so varied that they are found disseminated over practically the whole of the earth's surface, with the exception of the Arctic regions and the arid portions of the continents. However, the principal genera sought by collectors and commercial growers are those native to tropical regions, including in the Western Hemisphere, Mexico, Central America, the northern part of South America, and the neighboring islands, and in the Eastern Hemisphere,



tropical Asia, particularly parts of China, India, and adjacent islands.

In order to add to his collection species then unknown in Europe, Bateman, who, according to his own words, was "impatient of the tardy rate at which new species crossed the seas," followed the example of other collectors of his day, who sent agents to those parts of the world particularly rich in orchid species to collect plants for them. In 1833, a year before he received his bachelor's degree from Magdalen College, he sent to British Guiana a nurseryman by the name of Colley to search for orchids. Though Colley's "success fell short of [Bateman's] expectation," through his efforts sixty species reached England alive, of which a third were then unknown there.

In 1834, a fortunate chance provided Bateman with a collector, whose enthusiasm and persistence in the pursuit of the orchid were to add immeasurably to the contents of his epiphyte houses. In that year he heard accidentally that some insects had been received in Manchester from G. Ure Skinner, a Scotchman, "owner of extensive estates in Guatemala, and the partner in a flourishing mercantile firm in the same country." At that time, Guatemala was still a *terra incognita* to European orchid collectors, who, nevertheless, believed that it must be a rich storehouse of the plants, in view of the known wealth of species in Mexico and Panama. In the hope that it might be possible to interest Skinner in the search for orchids, Bateman wrote to him. The response he received is recounted in these words:

From the moment he received our letter, he has laboured almost incessantly to drag from their hiding places the forest treasures of Guatemala,



and transfer them to the stoves of his native land. In pursuit of this object, there is scarcely a sacrifice which he has not made, or a danger or hardship which he has not braved. In sickness or in health, amid the calls of business or the perils of war, whether detained in quarantine on the shores of the Atlantic, or shipwrecked on the rocks of the Pacific, he has never suffered an opportunity to escape him of adding to the long array of his botanical discoveries! And, assuredly, he has not laboured in vain, for he may truly be said to have been the means of introducing a greater number of new and beautiful Orchidaceae into Europe, than any one individual of his own or any other nation.

In less than ten years, through Skinner's efforts, the finest of the Guatemalan orchids were in cultivation in England, having first flowered at Knypersley.

Bateman was not content only to introduce and grow orchids. In addition, he wrote a number of books and articles on the orchid and its cultivation. During the years in which new species were coming to him in a steady stream from Skinner, Bateman was issuing (1837-1843) his *opus magnum*, *The Orchidaceae of Mexico & Guatemala*, a handsomely illustrated work in eight parts of elephant folio size, which has been described as "the most remarkable series of coloured plates which had up to that time appeared, each of the plates costing over £200." Only 125 copies were printed and sold by subscription at £2 2s. for each of the eight parts. A fine set of this work in its original parts has recently been presented to the Indiana University Library by Mrs. Perry O'Neal of Indianapolis.

In view of the complexities of arrangement of this copy, a somewhat detailed description of it may be of interest. The title page reads: THE/ ORCHIDACEAE/



OF/ MEXICO & GUATEMALA/ BY/ JA.<sup>s</sup> BATEMAN,  
ESQ.<sup>RE</sup>/ “———— LIKE RESTLESS SERPENTS,  
CLOTHED/ IN RAINBOW AND IN FIRE, THE  
PARASITES,/ STARRED WITH TEN THOUSAND  
BLOSSOMS FLOW AROUND/ THE GREY TRUNKS  
————”/ SHELLEY./ LONDON, FOR THE AU-  
THOR ACKERMANN AND C.<sup>O</sup> EXCT. JA.<sup>s</sup> RIDG-  
WAY & SONS/ J. Brandard Delt. et Lith. Printed  
by J. Graf. 1. G.<sup>t</sup> Castle S.<sup>t</sup>/. This is surrounded by an  
ornamental border with the arms of Mexico at the top  
and those of Guatemala at the foot, the rest of the design  
being based largely upon Mexican monuments in the British  
Museum.

The contents may be listed as follows:

Eight parts in seven, Parts 7 and 8 being issued  
together.

Part 1. Title page; pp. [1]-4 of “Introductory  
Remarks”; Plates I-V.

Part 2. Pp. 5-6 of “Introductory Remarks”;  
Plates VI-X.

Part 3. Plates XI-XV.

Part 4. Plates XVI-XX.

Part 5. Plates XXI-XXV.

Part 6. [1] p., Dedication (verso blank); Plates  
XXVI-XXX.

Parts 7 and 8. Plates XXXI-XL; pp. [9]-12  
of “Introductory Remarks”; [2] p., “Synopsis  
of all the described Species of Orchidaceae  
hitherto discovered in Mexico and Gua-  
temala”; [1] p., “Century of the best Orchi-  
daceae Cultivated (Ann. 1843) in British Col-  
lections”; [1] p., Drawings of plans of the  
“Epiphyte-House in the Gardens of Sigismund



Rucker, Esq., Wandsworth," and the "Epiphyte-House in the Gardens of the Rev. John Clowes, Broughton Hall, Manchester"; [1] p., "List of Subscribers"; [1] p., "Index to the plates"; [1] p., "Preface"; [1] p., Vignette; pp. 7-[8] of "Introductory Remarks"; "Addenda et Corrigenda" on narrow strip (verso blank).

Each plate is followed by an unnumbered leaf with descriptive letterpress on both sides, except that those following Plates XV, XVII, XVIII, XXI, XXV, XXVII, XXIX, XXXII, XXXIII, XXXIV, XXXVII, and XXXIX carry letterpress only on the rectos, the versos being blank.

Parts 1-6, inclusive, and Parts 7 and 8 (in one) each have front and back covers and front and back flyleaves, which are blank except for the rectos of the front covers, which carry titles, imprints, prices, and ornamental borders.

A description of the work is not complete without considering the various parts of which it is composed: the dedication, the introduction, the plates and vignettes, and the descriptive letterpress.

The dedication in its grace bespeaks the age in which the author lived and the class into which he was born: "TO/ HER MOST GRACIOUS MAJESTY/ QUEEN ADELAIDE/ THIS WORK/ DESIGNED TO ILLUSTRATE A PORTION OF/ A TRIBE OF PLANTS/ WHICH IN THEIR NATIVE COUNTRIES ARE THE/ FAVOURITE EMBLEMS OF DEVOTION/ AND/ THE CHOSEN ORNAMENTS OF ROYALTY/ IS WITH PERMISSION DEDICATED/ BY HER MAJESTY'S MOST HUMBLE/ AND DEVOTED SERVANT/ JAMES BATEMAN./"



The text of the work in the "Introductory Remarks" and in the descriptive letterpress for each plate reviews the history of the knowledge of the orchid and its cultivation, gives much information on British collections, on the owners of those collections, and on those hardy collectors who searched for the orchid in its native haunts, and sets forth the leading points in orchid cultivation. In addition, in the letterpress descriptions, more detailed information on the habitat and culture of the species under discussion is given, as well as a botanical description, and, in many cases, an indication of the source through which the first specimen of the species was transmitted to British growers.

The illustrations, which form such an important part of the work, are of two sorts, the plates and the vignettes, which for the most part serve as tailpieces to the leaves of descriptive letterpress. With three exceptions, the forty plates in color, drawn in almost every instance from specimens of the species flowering at Knypersley or in other British collections, are the work of Mrs. Withers and Miss Drake. At the same time that she was preparing plates for *The Orchidaceae* . . ., Miss Drake was performing a similar task for Professor Lindley's *Sertum Orchidaceum* . . . which was issued in ten parts (1837-1842).

The vignettes are one of the most charming features of the work and give to it something of the flavor of those countries from which the orchids came. Some of them represent orchids; others that archenemy of the orchid, the cockroach. There are representations of altars of Mexican churches and wayside crosses with orchids growing over them. Tropical forests and plants are depicted; birds, the hieroglyphical calendar of the Aztecs, men and women of Mexico and Guatemala in native costume, the floating



gardens of Mexico, shells, an example of the gold and silver filigree work of Latin America, and some archaeological finds of Mr. Skinner. Of the illustrators, by far the best known is George Cruikshank, to whom the work is indebted for two characteristic woodcuts. One, forming the tailpiece to the letterpress for Plate IX, depicts a newly-opened box of orchids from overseas from which two gigantic cockroaches have escaped. They are being pursued by a gardener and three assistants, armed with rake, hoe, spade, and pitchfork, while the gardener's wife stands in the background poker in hand. The other, which stands alone on p. [8] of the "Introductory Remarks," shows *The Orchidaceae of Mexico & Guatemala* being hoisted by ropes into a tripod by a number of men, some of whom are sprawling on the ground, knocked down by its weight, while several small devils dance around. Bateman's sense of humor shows itself, not only in some of the vignettes, but also in some of the quotations from Latin and English writers which are found below many of them. These vignettes were published separately in London in 1844 under the title, *Vignettes from . . . Orchidaceae of Mexico & Guatemala*.

Bateman was the author of three other works on orchids besides *The Orchidaceae . . .*, and of several theological pamphlets, as well as being a contributor to horticultural journals of his day. His *Guide to Cool-Orchid Growing* appeared in London in 1864; *A Monograph of 'Odontoglossum,'* a genus of the orchid tribe, 1864-1874, in four parts with thirty colored plates; and *A Second Century of Orchidaceous Plants, selected from the Subjects published in 'Curtis' Botanical Magazine' since the Issue of the 'First Century'* in 1867. The latter contains 100 colored plates



accompanied by descriptive letterpress. The so-called "First Century" had appeared in 1849 under the title, *A Century of Orchidaceous Plants, selected from Curtis's Botanical Magazine, consisting of a Hundred of those most worthy of Cultivation, systematically arranged, and illustrated with coloured Figures and Dissections . . .*, as the work of Sir William Jackson Hooker, Director of the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew.

The orchid was not the only plant in which Bateman interested himself. In the middle years of the nineteenth century the gardens of his estates, Knypersley and Biddulph Grange, were famous all over Europe for their Chinese garden "in which the scheme of a Willow-pattern plate was reproduced," their Egyptian court, their avenue of Sequoias, their groves of rhododendrons, their bulb gardens, rose gardens, dahlia gardens, and pine groves, as well as the fine orchid collection. In his later years, Bateman presented the latter to the Horticultural Society, of which he had been a devoted member for more than half a century, and to which he had lectured for many years. No more fitting place could have been chosen for his collection than in the epiphyte houses of that society, which in Bateman's youth had been a pioneer in experiments on the culture of the plant, which was to give him his chief claim to recognition as a horticulturist.

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