

# Book Review: *... of men and orchids...* - Part 1

Authored and published by Rudolf Jenny (2015)

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In 2003 Bill Bryson published his book *A Short History of Nearly Everything*.

**T**he publication this year of Part 1 of an anticipated trilogy entitled *... of men and orchids ...* must surely rate as the start of what might otherwise have been entitled *A Short History of Nearly Everything Relating to Aspects of Orchid Collectors, Taxonomy and Etymology*. I suspect that's why the author went with *... of men and orchids...*

Having been afforded the pleasure of reading the book for review, it was my intention to read a few pages before bedtime each evening. So absorbing is the book, that I found within four nights (albeit four very late nights) that I had read it from cover to cover. One cannot help but admire an author who is able to take what could potentially be a collection of rather dry facts and skilfully work them into a fascinating tale of orchid exploration, academic pursuit and general orchid history.

The book is well illustrated, often with images from obscure publications, giving us a rare glimpse of the people behind the names and naming of some well-loved orchids and these portraits are fleshed out with biographical details of their lives as gleaned from correspondence between themselves and others, or as reported by colleagues, kin and (occasionally) co-conspirators.

One must, even begrudgingly, respect the mettle of the early collectors. This

**..of men  
and orchids..**



**Rudolf Jenny  
2013**

**Part 1**

**Cover of *... of men and orchids...***

book makes it quite clear that despite the negative environmental effects of their endeavours, these gentlemen literally risked life and limb to secure orchids for the trade and many of the species that we enjoy as hobbyists today were initially collected by them from jungles



Photographer: L. Grobler

***Lockhartia parthenocomos***: Commemorating David Lockhart (x - 1846), a British born botanist.



Photographer: L. Grobler

***Comparettia speciosa***: Dedicated to Andrea Comparetti (1745 x 1801), an Italian botanist, explorer and plant physiologist.



Photographer: L. Grobler

***Sievekingia colombiana***: Commemorating Friedrich Sieveking (1798 – 1872), a German physician, Bürgermeister of Hamburg and a friend of Reichenbach.



**Dr Rudolf Jenny.**

located far from their countries of birth. Travel was difficult and conditions were often appalling. And yet this was the Golden Age of orchids, when nearly every plant that came back from the jungle was potentially a new species.

Orchid collectors, taxonomists, patrons and purveyors all receive the attention of this book which contains 41 chapters, each dealing with a stand-alone orchid tale. A number of chapters are dedicated to exploring an orchid genus or species and its namesake, such as *Acineta beyrodtiana* and Otto Beyrodt, *Lockhartia bennettii* and David Lockhart, and *Sievekingia jenmanii*, Friedrich Sieveking and George Samuel Jenman. Some of these orchid personalities will be well known to growers, others perhaps less so despite their contribution to

orchidology. I wonder how many people know that Alberto Manuel Brenes has 18 orchid species which carry his name – certainly, I didn't. Equally compelling chapters include those entitled: The house of Loddiges, and The Wendland dynasty and a famous orchid collection.

The length of the chapters varies from about three to around ten pages. The brevity of some no doubt belies how long it must take an orchid historian to collect the facts on which the chapter is based. This book is without a doubt a labour of love, but perhaps not unexpected if one considers by whom it is authored.

Dr Rudolf Jenny is a Research Associate at the Jany Renz Herbarium, University of Basel and has worked with orchids for more than 40 years, travelling in Central and South America in connection with his studies in pollination ecology and taxonomy. He has published some 450 articles in many of the world's leading orchid journals and published monographs of the genera *Gongora*, *Stanhopea*, *Paphinia* and *Sievekingia*. He lectures regularly at conferences around the world and owns one of the most complete private orchid libraries. In addition, he maintains BibliOrchidea, the world's largest free-access database for orchid literature with more than 175 000 entries.

This fascinating compendium of orchid history would not have materialised overnight as it is a goldmine of facts and figures that would have taken some time to collate. Let's hope Part 2 and Part 3 are not too long in the making. In the meantime, perhaps I shall re-read Part 1 from the beginning while I eagerly await the next instalment. \*

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