

## **Interview with Marilia Piccone about “The English Botanist”**

**Both main characters are very interesting and I loved them both. How did you get to know about Robert Fortune? Did you understand immediately that he could give you a good story to write about?**

During the research for my second novel “Heaven over Darjeeling”, I had already come across the historical anecdote of an Englishman smuggling tea seedlings from China to India. Interesting enough to take up this fact for that novel, but somehow, I didn’t care to dig deeper and find out who this nameless Englishman might have been.

It was only some years later, while looking out for new ideas, that I stumbled over this anecdote again. This time, I learned not only that his name had been Fortune, Robert Fortune, but also that he, a born Scotsman working as a gardener in England, disguised himself as a Chinese merchant on his mission. Which sounded completely insane to me. This could have never worked, I thought, not in a hundred years. History proves that it actually did, and this was definitely a story I wanted to tell.

When I read that, in addition, he introduced the kiwifruit to Europe and so many plants more we take for granted today, oblivious of their origin, I was completely hooked.

**Lian: she fascinated me even more. I had never read anything about Jianghus- did you make her a woman-warrior to create a balance with Fortune’s slightly feminine sensitivity?**

Absolutely, yes.

When I first thought of a female counterpart to my botanist, instantly a woman with a sword popped up in my head. Maybe because I’ve always loved wuxia movies like “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon”, “House of Flying Daggers” or – above all - “Hero”. Rewatching them again for the novel, I started to research the historical background and ended up completely flabbergasted by the material about jianghus, male and female, that I found. In a rigid society like Imperial China almost unbelievable. Maybe it’s not surprising that they’ve become the stuff of legends.

That was my starting point to think about fixed gender roles, both in East and West. About crossing boundaries and limits, and entering the unknown, which became some sort of red thread for the novel. I enjoyed the idea of a woman toughened by life discovering unexpectedly her softer side and unburying her hidden emotions.

**Are you a botanical expert? I have no green thumbs but I was spellbound by your descriptions. Was it difficult to make researches about Chinese flora?**

I don't have a green thumb either. The fact the Ficus benjamina I got for my seventeenth birthday still continues to thrive in my apartment, more than thirty years and several relocations later, seems to be more due to the durability of this plant than my own achievement.

I once read somewhere that novelists have to be gifted dabblers. In my case, this is definitely true. Which each novel, I become an expert in new fields, but only within the scope of the respective novel. That's one of the things I love most in being a writer: to immerse myself into new material, learn new things.

But of course I love flowers, who doesn't. Nature in general, I am endlessly fascinated by the ingenuity of the natural world. For this novel, I had the best consultant in Robert Fortune himself, who chronicled meticulously his findings in his travel accounts. In addition, I was lucky to find a vast compendium of the Chinese flora to fill the remaining gaps.

**And was it hard to follow Robert Fortune's footsteps?**

Again, the travelogues of the historical Robert Fortune left me with a detailed account of the places he had been, what he saw and heard and experienced there. But I quickly realized that I had to tighten his actual journey in order to make a novel out of it. To decide which locations, which episodes to pick for the route he takes in my story was the hardest and most difficult part.

**Did he succeed in 'stealing' the tea seeds in the end? Where did the English grow them?**

He did. After a few rounds of trial and error, he managed to send viable seeds and seedlings to India. Together with the know-how Fortune acquired in China, the British were able to start growing and manufacturing their own tea, first in Assam, later in Darjeeling, creating there the “champagne of teas” still famous today.

**There are three threads in the novel, Robert's, Lian's and Jane's: did you write them in the order as we read them now, that is alternating them? Or did you follow another method? Was there one of them which you found more difficult to write?**

Robert's and Lian's respective parts were written in the same order as they are now in the finished novel. Jane's part was an exception: I wrote her perspective more or less as a continuous story of its own and later inserted the single chapters in the manuscript. Of the three paths the story takes, Jane's was by far the easiest. It felt as if I heard her voice inside my ear, dictating the pages to me.

**I also loved all the inserts, the language of flowers in particular: did you invent it?**

Although using flowers to express sentiments or to convey a message is about as old as mankind, the language of flowers had its heyday in the Victorian era. The meanings of flowers captioning the different parts of the novel are taken indeed from several works of the nineteenth century. But as all these works were printed in the years after Fortune's journey, I decided to invent a fictional compendium containing the meanings of flowers the Victorians actually used.

**You often use Fortune's name as a joke, but *nomen est omen*, wasn't he really lucky to survive illnesses and dangers in China? Many of his contemporaries were not so lucky...**

He was extremely lucky, over and over again, on all his travels through China, to the Philippines and Japan: his accounts read like an adventure series. Yet he wasn't an adventurer, no jack-of-trades. Not originally. But he learned to be one, in China, and this development intrigued me.

With ongoing research, I gained the impression that the historical Robert Fortune absolutely needed to live two lives, one in Europe and one in Asia, as almost two different persons.

That he was unable to return to China later in life, first because of another war there, then by lack of means, finally by his failing health, broke him. And this is what touched me most about the historical Robert Fortune: the strong feeling that he definitely left his heart in China.

**Was Robert Fortune a sort of hero? People remember conquerors' names, while other kind of conquerors are usually not considered or forgotten.**

It is no exaggeration to say that Robert Fortune changed the world. Because it was the tea from India that made the British Empire so rich that it was able to expand to its vast size, gaining this immense power whose effects are still visible today.

Even on a smaller scale, Robert Fortune's life and work has had a lasting impact. I still think about that a lot, every flowering season anew. The forsythia we see in spring is the descendant of a variety he brought from China. Our roses, our peonies have these shapes, these colors because some of their ancestors arrived in his luggage. At least the kumquats at our fruit stalls bear his name in their botanical denomination, fortunella. But nothing amazed me more than to learn that the bleeding heart, which is so typical for a German cottage garden, was introduced from China by Robert Fortune.