

## E. H. WILSON'S FIRST TRIP TO CHINA

*Davidia involucrata*, the Dove Tree, is a plant which has captured the imagination of the gardening public as few other plants have. It was originally discovered in 1869 by Abbé Armand David, a French missionary travelling in China. Abbé David found it "near Moupine, Western China . . . growing at an elevation of between 6,000 and 7,000 feet." The Abbé sent dried herbarium specimens to Paris and it was described as a new genus and species by Henri Baillon in 1871. In that same year a leaf and a bract were sent to the herbarium at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew.

In 1889 Dr. Augustine Henry found a single tree in the South Wushan district of Szechuen. From this he collected both flowering and fruiting specimens for the herbarium at Kew. This was illustrated and discussed by Dr. Daniel Oliver, Keeper of the Herbarium and Library at Kew. Oliver commented at the end of his description "*Davidia* is a tree almost deserving a special mission to Western China with a view to its introduction to European gardens. . . ."

M. Maurice de Vilmorin, of the famous French nursery firm of the same name, was much taken by the newly described plant and asked his correspondents in China to be on the look-out for it. In June of 1897 Vilmorin received a shipment of 37 fruits, collected by Père Farges, another missionary, in Se-tchwen (Szechuen). The next year Farges sent 3 fruits collected in "Eastern Tibet" or Moupine.

Of the 40 fruits only one from the first shipment germinated in 1899 two years after sowing. In 1901 Vilmorin made four cuttings and layered a branch. Only two of the cuttings survived one going to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, the other to the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. The layer was sent to Professor Sargent at the Arnold Arboretum in 1904 and is still thriving. In 1906 this original plant in Vilmorin's nursery produced its first flowers, only 7 years after germination.

G. P. DEW.

When E. H. Wilson was sent to China in 1899 by the nursery firm of James Veitch and Sons to collect the seeds of *Davidia involucrata*,\* he was instructed by them to consult the botanist Augustine Henry as to the exact location of this tree. Henry's enthusiasm for the flowering of the tree had been caught by his correspondent Sir William Thistleton-Dyer (1) at Kew and spilled over to the people in the nursery firm. Evidently the tree was as rare as it was beautiful. Also, as it grew in the

\* "In the spring of 1899 Sir William Thistleton-Dyer of Kew was kind enough to select a young man from the staff of the Royal Garden

mountains of Central China, it was likely to take kindly to the climate in an English garden. James Veitch & Sons had financed many profitable journeys to obtain and introduce new plants. Henry's find would recoup another.

The *Davidia* that Wilson was to seek grew in hilly forested tracts where the Chinese provinces of Szechuen and Hupeh meet, on the northern side of the last awe-inspiring gorges of the Yangtze river. Henry had seen only a single specimen (2) in the course of his several expeditions from the neighbouring port of Ichang into an extensive area of mountain and valley, along the right bank of the Han river. This area is often held to be the richest of China's wild gardens. Henry had been able to make extensive botanical explorations there, the first westerner to do so on this scale, thanks to generous allocations of leave from his employment as port medical officer and Indoor (i.e. administrative) assistant in the Customs establishment at Ichang. It may be of interest here that among Henry's contemporaries in this Service were the historian Hosea B. Morse and the sinologue Dr. F. Hirth, men of international reputation, and — by reason of birth and nationality in the one case, and of professional residence in the other — of special significance in the United States.

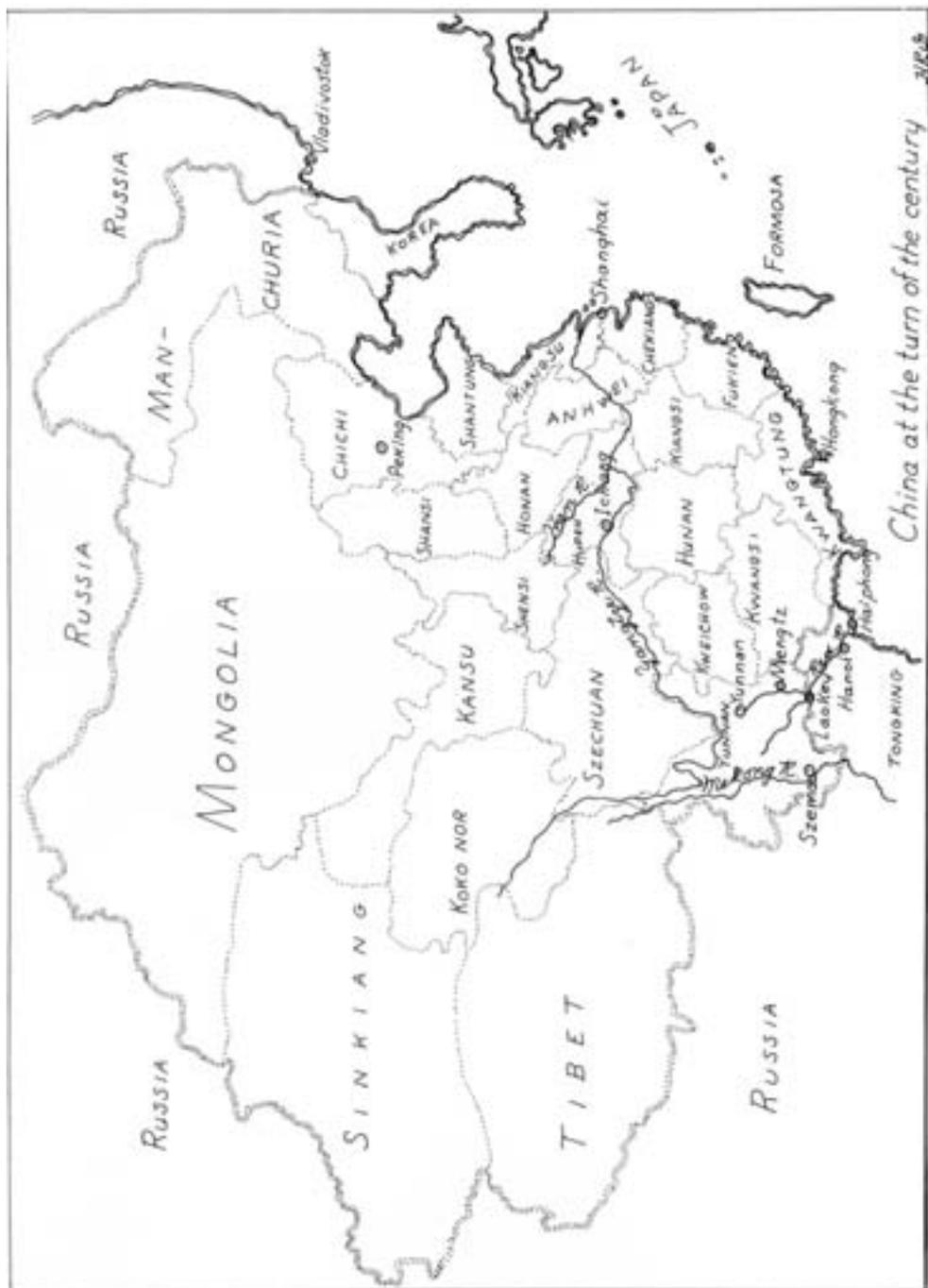
Ichang, nearly a thousand miles by river-steamer above Shanghai, was the only possible base for a plant-collector operating along the Middle Yangtze, where Wilson could find an expert guide and counsellor at his elbow whenever he returned from the field.

However, Henry had found his *Davidia* in 1889, and within a few years he had left Ichang on a series of official transfers which brought him ultimately to Mengtze, a town in southern Yunnan, situated just east of the Red River and near the Tongking (now North Vietnam) frontier. It was reached at that time only by steamer to Haiphong, then by launch up the trade route of the Red River (vessels that became progressively less comfortable as the one-time bandit stronghold of Manhao, at the head of cargo-boat navigation, was neared), and finally, at

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who possessed, as far as could be judged, the necessary qualifications for undertaking a prolonged journey in certain districts of China." (3)

"E. H. Wilson, . . . , was born in Birmingham, and received part of his early training in botany and horticulture in the Botanic Gardens of that town. . . He afterwards entered the Royal Gardens at Kew as a young gardener, and when an application was made to Sir W. T. Thistleton-Dyer, the late Director of the Gardens, for a man likely to prove suitable to undertake a prolonged journey to China, the late Director suggested Wilson for the post." (5)



the frontier itself, by pack-road for four days over the mountains, by mule-back, pony-back, mountain-chair, or one's own feet.

But in January 1898, when Veitch was considering his plans, Henry was off to Szemao in the far south-west of the province, as Commissioner of Customs there. Send your man on to Szemao for a talk, was the gist of Henry's advice to Veitch, — quicker than letters and cheaper than telegrams.

A less committed traveller than Henry, and yet one having some knowledge of the country, might have taken a less light-hearted view. If Mengtz was not easily accessible, the Shan states of the remote border with Laos whereon Szemao lies were even less so.

For Veitch, the hunt for *Davidia* was taking on the excitement and the twists and turns of a detective chase. He had the faith that derives from zeal supported by topical ignorance, and the expectation, based on past form in other expeditions, that the rewards would amply cover the costs of whatever detours were suggested. So in the spring of 1899 Wilson, his 23rd birthday just passed, set out from England, immediate destination Szemao.

Wilson went to China by way of Boston, Mass.,\* where he stopped off for a few days to call on the Director of the Arnold Arboretum. Though C. S. Sargent was to play a major part in Wilson's later life, he comes into this story because he was already a friend of Augustine Henry's, in close and continuous correspondence with him on botanical matters, and much interested in the flora of southern Yunnan. He was thus an early and direct link with the man Wilson was on his way to see.

To reach Szemao in those days (and indeed until aeroplane and helicopter and roadmakers could change the nature of travel), the overland part of the journey really began at Mengtz. Wilson made good time as far as the Tongking frontier with Yunnan, on the Red River. There he stuck. Surveys for the railway from Hanoi to Yunnan had been in progress, and anti-foreign feeling had been sparked off. There had been riots

\* "Wilson sailed from Liverpool in April 1899. Traveling by way of America, he visited Professor Sargent, the well-known authority on ligneous plants at Boston, and consulted him respecting the trees and shrubs likely to be found in China.

"The information obtained, Wilson proceeded, and arrived at Hong Kong on June 3rd, 1899.

"Before leaving for the interior it was considered advisable that Wilson should consult Dr. Henry and benefit by his unrivaled knowledge of the Chinese flora." (5)



*Town of Ichang Fu. Photo E. H. Wilson 1907-09.*

in Mengtsz, and foreigners' houses had been burnt. Wilson was lucky not to have reached the frontier a week earlier. He might then have met the blast while in the mountains, and his first journey could have been his last. So he sat things out in the French frontier post of Laokay, the 'Old Market', hot, feverous, and rumour-rife, and after a couple of months the usual calm after storm permitted him to go on to Mengtsz. His employer was to write later that "The journey to Szemao *via* Tonkin proved arduous, and at one time the chance of reaching Dr. Henry by this route seemed hopeless; but the steadfast purpose of the young Kew student, of which on this as on other occasions he gave ample proof, enabled him to reach his destination." (3)

At Mengtsz Wilson had the help of Henry's colleagues in the Customs, in hiring muleteers, engaging a cook, and making other arrangements, and was able to leave the place on the 8th of September. The road from Mengtsz to Szemao runs westward through the tropical south of the province. During the 70 years or so in which Europeans and Americans might travel along it, it involved a journey at caravan pace, and no wheeled traffic; up one range and down another, and over

spurs that seemed to run in any direction; with the Red River and the Black River and some lesser waters to cross, and mules to carry the baggage and the cooking gear. The average speed was two to two-and-a-half miles an hour, for seven or eight hours a day, and the voyage might last seventeen or eighteen days, perhaps marginally less if the traveller were experienced enough to dominate his muleteers. Altitudes along the road range from a few hundred feet above sea level at the Red River near the Tongking border, to about 7,500 feet over the Mekong-Black River divide. Hence the flora, in the usual south-west Yunnan switch-back, swings between the tropical and the temperate. Orchids provide some colour, in forests which are less flamboyant than the Indian equivalent. Monsoon rainfall is heavy, and ferns are numerous. Leopards, monkeys, barking-deer, and elephants in the remoter depths, are among the larger animals. Yunnan is a thinly-populated province, wherein the Chinese are the latest-comers, and live in the small towns, and terrace the hill-sides for rice, at the medium altitudes. The higher ridges and the depths of the forests are the haunts of various separate peoples of Mongoloid descent, hunters mostly, who practise also the primitive agriculture of burn, plant, reap and move on. The more numerous Shans, or Thais, who once ruled Yunnan, live as peaceably as they may in the lower valleys, growing rice and worshipping Buddha.

Wilson did the journey in seventeen days. Daylight was perhaps more agreeable than dark, for the night's accommodations were found in dirty Chinese inns or a tribesman's hut. He could, in fact, have saved that leg of the journey. For when he arrived in Szemao, he found that Henry, although still there, had been transferred again, by a telegram re-appointing him to Mengtsz. The two travelled back there in company, for Wilson at last to make for Ichang, and reach the town on the 28th of February, 1900, nearly a year after leaving England.

From Mengtsz, in early November, one successful garden plant went to England. In his *Aristocrats of the Garden* (4) Wilson remarks "During my journeys in Yunnan I collected a number of interesting plants and among them *Jasminum primulinum* which has achieved widespread popularity in Europe and in this country". Veitch was proud of the acquisition, which he states (5) that Wilson collected "upon his return from Szemao". The handsome 2-inch clear yellow blossoms won it a First-class Certificate from the Royal Horticultural Society in 1903. (6) It was described and illustrated in the *Gardeners Chronicle* (7), and in Curtis's *Botanical Magazine*. (8)

Wilson's other plants from Yunnan did not much interest Veitch. There is no mention of them in *Hortus Veitchii*, nor in his notes of 1902 on *Recently Introduced Trees, Shrubs, etc. from Central China*, published in Journal No. 28 of the Royal Horticultural Society. They appear to have passed out of record. Their despatch may have owed something to Henry. Clearly the collection of the jasmine did. Henry had found it near Szemao, as well as in the vicinity of Mengtsz, where another botanist, William Hancock (1847-1914), like Henry an official in the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service, had found it a few years before. Henry regarded it as an escape from cultivation.\* The name given to it when Hancock sent the first specimens from Yunnan masks an earlier finding still. In April 1880 one of Dr. J. F. Hance's band of amateur collectors, W. Mesny, discovered it in the province of Kweichow, which adjoins Yunnan on the north-east. Hance published it in the *Journal of Botany* (vol. xx, p. 367) under the name *Jasminum Mesnyi*, Hance. When the first Mengtsz specimen was sent to Kew by W. Hancock it was described in Hooker's *Icones Plantarum* (4th Ser. Vol. IV, pl. 2384, 1895) as *Jasminum primulinum* Hemsl. Since that time either name has been in use.

Few westerners had been to Szemao before Wilson. After exploration of the lower Mekong had brought the Francis Garnier expedition to Yunnan, in 1867, some of its members had gone eastwards from Szemao to the Red River. Subsequently, there had been perhaps a score of western travellers, and all within the couple of decades preceding Wilson's journey. Their routes had varied slightly. Interests, and the time available to pursue them, had varied more. But each traveller, whether an army officer surveying for the dream of a Burma-Yunnan railway, a customs official proceeding on duty, or a missionary priest, was in a country of which little was known to the west, which the wheel age had not yet overtaken, and of which published personal impressions of its great attractions were few. Yet Wilson's description of this his first and very considerable journey, is confined, so far as I can discover, to one remark:

\* Although Wilson first sent back living plants, Augustine Henry had collected herbarium material for Kew earlier. Henry commented about the plant as follows: "I found the plant both at Szemao and Mengtsz, in the Province of Yunnan; but I am of opinion that it occurs always, in the districts where it has hitherto been found growing cultivated or as an escape from cultivation. The shrubs were seen in gardens, or more frequently in hedges or amidst other shrubs, in the vicinity of villages, and never were met within woods or forests." *Botanical Magazine*, Vol. 130, 1904.



*Above: Jasminum mesneyi. Longwood Gardens photo.*

*Right: Cargo boat of 60 tons, built almost entirely of Cypress wood. Yangtze River, Western Hupeh. Photo E. H. Wilson, 1910-11.*



*Hostel of Che-tsze-kow Western Hupeh.  
Photo E. H. Wilson 1910-11.*



“Being unable to speak any Chinese, I travelled very much as a parcel and enjoyed the trip.” (9)

Species brought back from the wilds have usually been collected arduously, sometimes in conditions of physical danger, and always under an eye trained to discern the potentially useful or delightful. Though the tracks the collector went by are unexplored, or have remained unfamiliar, it is no part of the bargain that he should describe them.

Well, Wilson’s pen on subsequent trips left records of sacred mountains in Szechuen, and of the ranges and river-valleys along the Tibetan border, and of much else that took his fancy during his travels in the provinces immediately north of the Yangtze. Ignorance of the Chinese language — for he never did learn it — was no bar there. But on Yunnan, with all its romantic appeal, there was near silence. I find that a puzzle, and am teased by it.

Admittedly, September is a little early for the best sight-seeing. The tracks have not then fully recovered from the summer monsoon, and a curtain of rain is still a possibility. (Indeed, had Wilson not been delayed at Laokay, he might have set out sooner and then fared worse.) Yunnan must have offered a bewilderingly strange first taste of the interior of China, to this young man of 23. The interpretative powers of his servant, more likely to have been based on *petit-nègre* French than on pidgin-English, were not likely to illuminate, say, the distinctions between the several tribes encountered, and their customs, or the sudden sounds in the usually silent and empty-seeming forests through which the caravan passed, or the niceties of such manoeuvres as a river-crossing by ferry, and negotiation of a crumbling cliff-edge track, when conducted at the top of many voices at once. His instructions were to press on to meet Henry, and then locate Davidia. Tropical flora did not interest Veitch much, — and Henry rather less. (10) Orchids were out.

Yet neither strangeness nor haste seem adequate as explanations. I observe that Wilson’s habit was to publish nothing in a hurry. Only on his second visit to China (to find *Meconopsis integrifolia*) did he start contributing regularly to the periodical press. His book describing his journeys, “*A Naturalist in Western China*”, is an amalgam of all four visits to the country, those for Veitch and those for the Arnold Arboretum. Perhaps it was knowledge that interested him even more than impressions; and his relative ignorance of the Yunnan in which he spent three months silenced him.

None of the flora along his way there had had more than casual sampling. Even today this is, botanically speaking, the least explored segment of Yunnan — unless the hills of the Wa head-hunters now count as part of the province. The divides which the Mengtsh-Szemao route crosses, one of them high enough to receive snow in winter, contain what are probably the most southerly stations of some of the robust species of the eastern Himalaya, and, for good measure, the location of a genuine *wild* tea plant. (11) They may concern the plant geographer more than the horticulturist's plant-collector; for it may be taken for granted that they are less rich in the number of asters and deutzias, gentians and lilies, and primulas and rhododendrons, than the mountains further north. Yet to the traveller with a road to pass along, and little opportunity to linger off it, the species that will be visible are a matter of the luck of the time of the journey, and of proximity to the road itself. So southern Yunnan may contain many species still to be discovered. And while the area remains a delicate one for scientific expeditions, they are likely to remain unknown. As, of course, are Wilson's reasons for topographical, even more than floral, reticence on the journey when he travelled as a parcel.

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Notes:

1. Director, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.
2. *Kew Bulletin* 1907, p. 302.
3. *Journ. Roy. Hort. Soc.* vol. 28, p. 57.
4. E. H. Wilson: *Aristocrats of the Garden*, Williams and Norgate Edition, London, 1938, p. 284.
5. James H. Veitch: *Hortus Veitchii*, London 1906, p. 93.
6. *Journ. Roy. Hort. Soc.* vol. 28, lii.
7. 1903, no. 848, p. 197, fig. 83.
8. t. 7981 (1904).
9. Wilson: *op. cit.*, p. 284.
10. *Kew Bulletin* 1898, p. 289.
11. *Kew Bulletin* 1897, p. 100.

As indicated, one of Wilson's principal objects on his first trip was to secure seed of *Davidia*. In May 1900 he found "a considerable grove" of trees. From this grove in November of the same year he collected "a quantity of fruit which produced some thirteen thousand plants." Wilson collected more seed in 1903 and 1904.

Contrary to the original speculation concerning the rarity of *Davidia* in the wild, Wilson commented as follows: "This remarkable tree is fairly

common in moist woods throughout western Szechuan between altitudes of 1600 and 2500 m. . . . The tree grows to the height of 20m ( $\pm$  60 ft.) with a girth of trunk of 2m ( $\pm$  6 ft.); the branches are ascending-spreading and the tree is of a loose pyramidal habit similar to that of the common wild Pear. On old trees the lower branches are wide-spreading. The bark is dark gray, rough, with corky lenticels and exfoliates in thin, small flat irregularly oblong flakes. The wood is white, tough and heavy. . . . When in full flower the tree is more conspicuous on dull days and in the early morning and evening than when the sun is shining. . . ." E. H. Wilson in Sargent, C. S. — *Plantae Wilsonianae*.

G. P. DEW.

*The editor of Arnoldia has chosen photographs from Wilson's later trips to China to illustrate this article, showing the kind of terrain and the conditions of travel that would have been seen and experienced by young Wilson on the trip described here.*

#### Errata

On page 82 of the March, 1972, Arnoldia the illustrations above Fig. 48 Alder and Fig. 50 Witch Hazel were incorrectly transposed.

*Right: Podophyllum peltatum (May Apple) at the Case Estates in Weston. Photo P. Bruns.*

