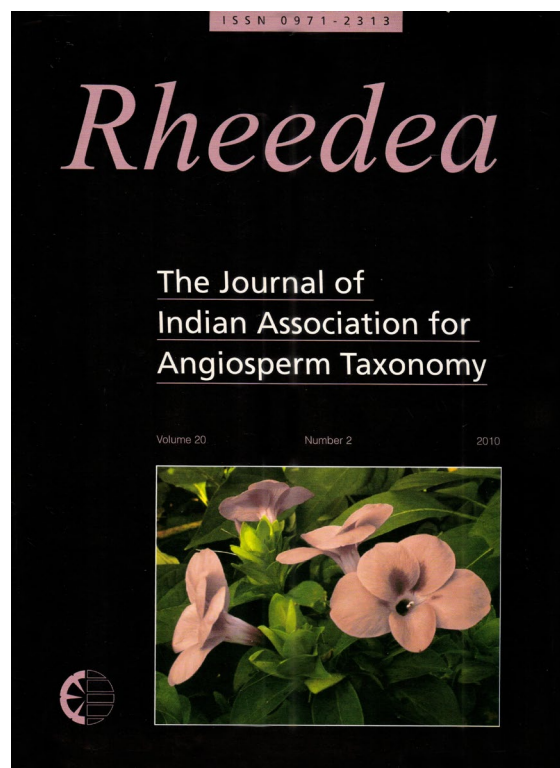




A Centennial Remembrance of Two Great Botanists

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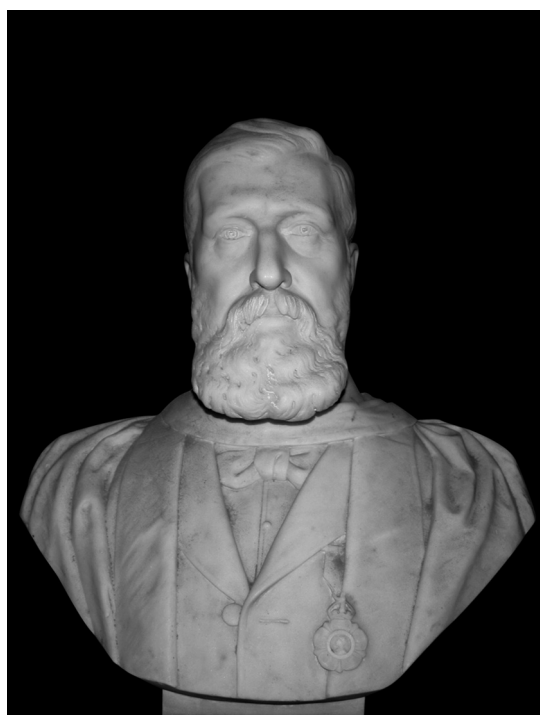
A Centennial Remembrance of Two Great Botanists

Both Theodore Cooke and Robert Pantling passed away in 1910. Both did wonderful work on the botany of two regions of India and even after a century no work surpassed their magnum opus. Both were British and served India. One was stationed in the west and the other, east. One was a successful engineer who was behind building of the great iron bridge at Bassein connecting Surat. The other was in charge of a big Cinchona establishment in Mungpo near Kalimpong. One wrote beautiful descriptions of plants of the then Bombay presidency and the other drew beautiful sketches of the orchids of Sikkim. The engineer botanist died at the age of 75, while artist botanist died young at 55. Students of botany, especially taxonomists of western India cannot think of any other Flora than Cooke's while students of orchids of eastern India have no other option than King & Pantling's *Orchids of Sikkim Himalaya* published in 1898. This is the success story of two botanists and their great works.

Dr. Theodore Cooke (1836 – 1910)

Dr. Theodore Cooke was born in 1836 as the eldest son of the Rev. J. Cooke. He graduated from Trinity College, Dublin in 1859 with distinction in being Hebrew Prizeman, first Honoursman and Senior Moderator and Gold Medallist in experimental and Natural Sciences in the University and with additional certificates in Mechanics and Experimental Physics, Chemistry, Mineralogy, Mining and Geology in the Engineering School. He came to India as an engineer in 1860 working in Bombay, Baroda and Central Indian Railway. In 1865 he became the Principal of the Civil Engineering College, Pune. Despite his talents in administration, engineering skills and bridge building, Cooke was keenly interested in the flora of the then Bombay Presidency, which he seriously undertook when botanical survey operations in western India was initiated with the establishment of Botanical Survey of India (BSI). He promptly approached Dr. George King, the then Director of BSI to support the preparation of the *Flora of the Presidency of Bombay*. Though King supported the idea, it materialized much later when he returned to England after retirement. Accordingly, *Flora of the Presidency of Bombay* was published in two volumes in eight

parts (1901 – 1908). In terms of descriptions, keys and utility this Flora still remains the best in India. Cooke was chosen to do the *Flora of the Presidency of Madras* which he could not undertake due to his ill health. He died on 5 November 1910 at his residence, Portswood House, Kew Gardens Road. He was 75 at the time of his death. *Nature* (85: 82) carried the news of his death on 17 November 1910 with great regret stating that his wide and varied knowledge, with which were associated much tact and great administrative gifts, enabled him to fill the post as Principal of the Civil Engineering College, Pune with signal success until he retired from India in 1893.



Bust of Theodore Cooke at College of Engineering, Pune.
(Courtesy: Dr Mahesh Shindikar)

Robert Pantling (1856 – 1910)

For extensive cultivation of Cinchona a separate department was established at Mungpo near Kalimpong where Alexander Gammie was the first officer. Robert Pantling who had a Kew training background came here to see its flourishing.



Together with this work he was greatly attracted to the orchids which he collected in large numbers and cultivated at Mungpo. As and when they

flowered, Pantling made drawings and prepared descriptions. These were taken to Royal Botanic Garden, Calcutta where George King was the Superintendent, and under whom Pantling worked as a Curator for a short period. Finding it difficult to cope with the climate of Calcutta, Pantling came back to Mungpo to regain his health and resume his work. By the time he had the good faith of Dr. King who offered him every encouragement which resulted in the publication of three important papers (King & Pantling, 1895, 1896, 1897) which established Pantling's accuracy in scientific observations describing several new genera and species of orchids from Sikkim, Malaya and Burma. By this time Pantling's collection of orchid paintings of Sikkim had reached a grand level which prompted King to issue a separate volume of the Annals of the Royal Botanical Gardens, Calcutta (King & Pantling, 1898). This joint work depicted descriptions and illustrations of 448 species in 91 genera. This work was lauded as a great work on Indian orchids which depicted orchids in colour. Constant use of lens in delineating small flowers of orchids failed Pantling's eyesight considerably and on a trip back home to regain health he died near Suez in December 1910. He is commemorated by the genus *Pantlingia* Prain.

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