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## Wilson's China: A Century On

West Sichuan in Ernest Wilson's day and today – a fascinating comparison in words and photographs

Anyone interested in gardening, or in studying temperate genera, will be, or will become, familiar with plants introduced by Edwardian plant collector, Ernest Henry Wilson (1876–1930). Following the lead given by Armand David and Augustine Henry, he chased after plants first found by these amateur botanists – Père David a French missionary, Henry a medic-turned-customs-officer who finally became Professor of Forestry at Trinity College, Dublin. As a professional collector he traversed a wider region than they could, spending half his time in Hubei and half in western Sichuan. Up to a quarter of the plant species in British gardens hail from China, and most were introduced by Wilson.

Previous historical records of what Wilson did have generally omitted one aspect – his glass plate photographs, particularly for the Arnold Arboretum (USA) expeditions between 1907 and 1911. This book primarily records the authors' efforts to revisit the places depicted in Wilson's photographs, resulting in some amazing 'then' and 'now' sets. One that I particularly like is Wilson's picture of a pair of ancient balsam poplars (*Populus suaveolens*); the new photograph of the sole survivor clearly shows the same tree, with the same branch structure, and looking fit to last another hundred years yet.

The book contains many other colourful modern photographs, including herbaceous plants and people aplenty. The text is evocative, enjoyable and up to date – altogether a most interesting book.

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• See also pp258–259 for more about plant collector Ernest Henry Wilson