

## An Early Canadian Herbal

By Alfred Van Peteghem  
Montreal antiquarian bookdealer

The first Canadian plant book is generally accepted to be *Iac[obus] Cornvti doctoris medici parisiensis canadensivm plantarvm, aliarumque nondum editarum historia ...* printed at Paris (Simon le Moyne) in 1635. Indeed, it is the first book *exclusively* devoted to Canadian plants. Cornut was never in Canada<sup>1</sup>, and antiquarian bookdealer Lathrop C. Harper in his *Catalogue of Americana, part IV*, 1943<sup>2</sup>, states that "it is said that as there was no one in Canada capable of writing this book the Jesuit fathers collected all the specimens and shipped them to France." A comment by Trömel indicates that "a large number of the plants are described here for the first time".<sup>3</sup>

Likely the first botanical "book" relating to North America was published in 1620. It is entitled *Histoire des Plantes, Nouvellement trouuées en l'Isle Virgine, & autres lieux, lesquelles ont esté prises & cultiuées au lardin de Monsieur [Jean] Robin Arboriste du Roy. Non encore veuës n'y Imprimées par cy deuant. ...* also printed at Paris<sup>4</sup>. The entire work consists of a title-page and 14 engravings, and is variously listed in Sabin as 16mo (32024) or 32mo (72042). I recall seeing a copy of it in 1975 or 1976, and to the best of my recollections it was no more than about 8 cm. high by 6 cm. wide. While it claims to describe plants "of the Virgin Islands and elsewhere", one of the plates is called the "Lillium canadensis."

Shortly after Robin's *Histoire des Plantes* was on the market, I acquired Pietro Castelli's *Exactissima descriptio rariorvm qvarvndam plantarvm, que continentur Rome in Horto Farnesiano: Tobia Aldino [pseud.] Cesenate avctore. Illustr.<sup>mi</sup> et rev.<sup>mi</sup> Principis et cardinalis Odoardi Farnesii medico chimico, et eiusdem horti præfecto.* published at Rome, by Jacob Mascardus, in 1625. This folio volume bound in contemporary "wallpaper"-style (block-printed) boards consists of [6] preliminary leaves, 100 p., 1 l., and a [6] p. Index. There are 22 full-page illustrations, as well as 5 text illustrations (copper engravings). I later sold this volume to McGill University.

Being "of extreme rarity", I was unable to trace the whereabouts of the copy of Robin that I had seen. Sabin lists two copies: John Carter Brown and Harvard. *National Union Catalogue* also gives the Library of Congress as a third holding. There are no less than 17 locations for the Castelli in *National Union Catalogue*, indicating the book is not nearly as rare. The Library of Congress gives as its authority for the author's name Tiraboschi's *Letteratura italiana*. A manuscript note on verso of the "Typographvs lectori" leaf in the McGill copy supports this assertion. The note reads "Huius operis verus auctor fuit Petrus Castellus Medicus Romanus, ut pater ex litteris maiusculis simul collectis, quæ sunt in hæc epistola" (The true author of this work was Petrus Castellus, Roman Doctor, ...). Indeed, the capital letters of the "Typographvs Lectori" leaf spell out his name.

Nobody, however, appears to have noticed the book's Canadian content. The standard *Canadiana* and *Americana* bibliographies do not point out the fact that several plants are of North American origin. Among the American plants illustrated there is the "Panis Hyiuccæ Mexicanæ", the "Aloes Americana florida" and the "Ricinus Americanus" (Figure 1), with leaves that look suspiciously like the maple leaf.

Furthermore, another three plates depict a "Canadian" plant: "Hyivcca Canedana" (Figure 2), "Flores Hyivccæ Canedanæ", and "Radix hyivccæ canadana". Webster's *Dictionary* defines *yucca* [from W. Ind. (prob. Taino) native name] as a plant of the lily family, having stiff, sword-shaped leaves and white flowers in a single cluster, found in the southwestern United States and Latin America.

The plant illustrated by Castelli is similar to the "*Yucca recurvifolia*", also known as *yucca pendula* and *yucca recurva*,<sup>5</sup> which is said to be "a native of coastal regions of Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi ... allied to *yucca*

RICINVS AMERICANVS.



Figure 1. "Ricinus Americanus."  
(Department of Rare Books and Special Collections)

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Rariores Plantæ

HYIVCCA CANEDANA.

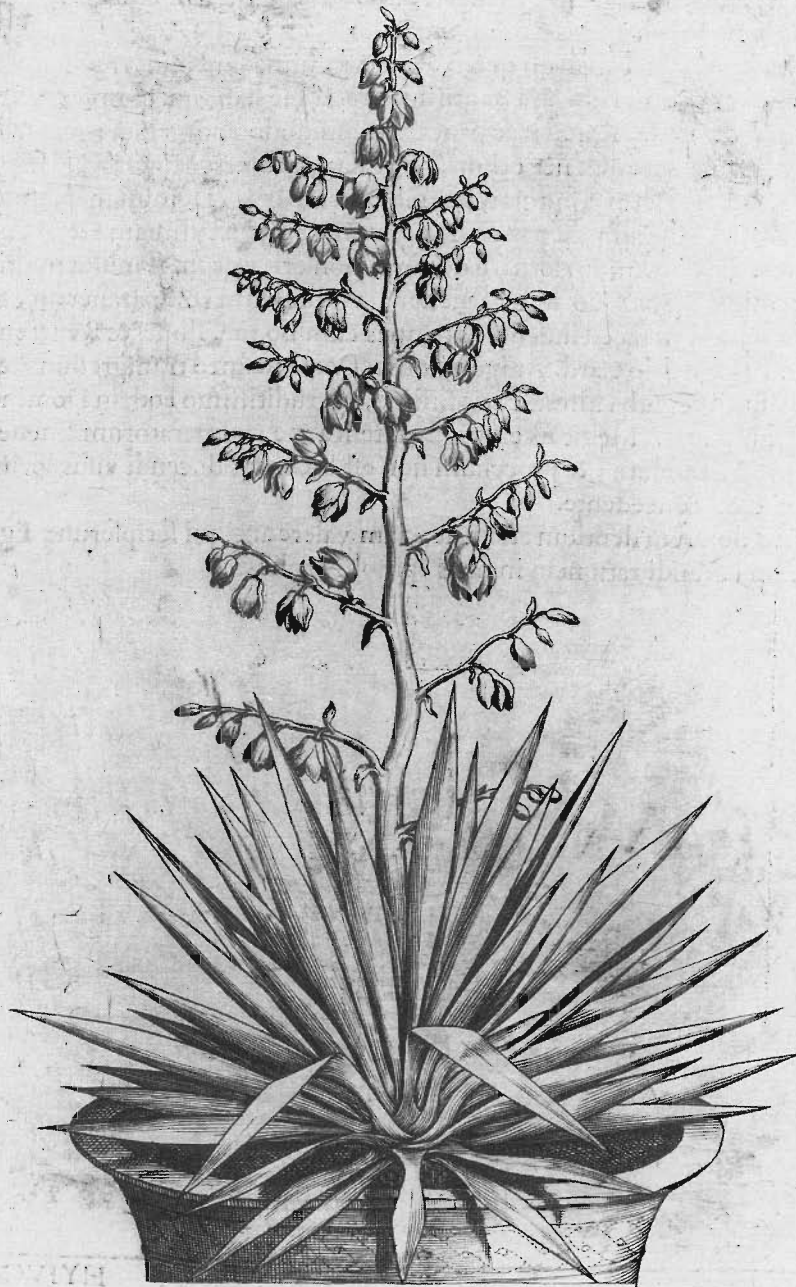


Figure 2. "Hyivcca Canedana."  
(Department of Rare Books and Special Collections)

### Notes and Comments

*gloriosa* and as an intermediate between the two species, *yucca recurvata* is occasionally found; some botanists regard *yucca recurvifolia* as a variety of *yucca gloriosa*. Introduced into Britain in 1794, it is quite hardy and is occasionally seen in private gardens, and, for example, grows at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Its gracefully recurved leaves are quite thin and flat on the upper surface for most of their length. *Yucca gloriosa*, a native of coastal areas from North Carolina to Florida, has thicker, stiffly erect leaves. Some forty species of *Yucca* occur in the southern United States, Mexico and the West Indies. They differ from *Agave* in having perianth segments and stamens which are inserted at the base instead of the top of the ovary, as in *Agave*".<sup>6</sup>

Castelli himself states that the descriptions of *yucca* vary considerably: "Missa nobis est planta ex Canada regione Hyiuccæ nomine, quam conferentes cum Hyiucca, seu Yuccaab aliquibus descripta, tam variat ab ea, quàm ij descriptores inter se, vt Monardes, Gomara, Ouiedus, Cardanus, atque Scaliger." (It is our aim to compare common factors between this plant from the Canadian regions which is called Yucca, with Yucca elsewhere described, as much as the variations in descriptions is concerned, as the degree in variations between authors, such as Monardes, Gomara, Oviedus, Cardanus, and moreover Scaliger). He insists the plant is a *yucca*, and of Canadian origin: "... nostram Hyiuccam legitimam esse certo pronunciare iure dubitaremus (cùm eas regiones, vbi spontè, & satiuè nascitur, & eam colunt certis tantum, & per somnium viderimus) nisi Indi quidam, & alij etiam, qui Hyiuccam in India viderunt, & commederunt, nostram aspicientes plantam testati essent, ipsam legitimam esse Hyiuccam ex qua panem Indi conficiunt." (Our Yucca certainly, beyond any doubt, genuinely originated only in certain parts of the Indies, and exists still elsewhere, — in those regions, where they sprout spontaneously, and as cultivated plants; though they are certainly more often grown; we examined them in dormant state — but the Yucca which is found in the Indies, and is eaten there, prove, by the plants we examined, precisely why it is truly the Yucca with which Indian bread is made).

The French, by 1625, had not yet made their inroads into the Mississippi region; the only French settlement in New France at the time was Quebec (Trois Rivières was not founded until 1634, and Montreal in 1642). Castelli might have referred to plants brought back from Florida during the voyages of Laudonnière, Ribault, and Gorgues, who visited Florida in 1561-67.<sup>7</sup> However, in that case he would not have insisted on their Canadian origin, because the "Aloes Americana Florida" is identified as originating there, and not in Canada. Since the plant was "introduced into Britain in 1794, ... is quite hardy and ... grows at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew",<sup>8</sup> could these have been specimens legitimately brought back from Canada? Was the plant still growing here in the early 1600s but completely wiped out by some extremely cold and long winter? It is not illustrated in Cornut's *Canadensivm plantarvm*, ten years later. Cornut, however, must have been aware of Castelli's work: the *Exactissima descriptio* ... is dedicated to Cornut and, therefore, Castelli would have given him a copy.

However, Castelli may well have examined more than one species of plant and erred when he assumed them to be one and the same; no bread is made of the "yucca"; the plant Castelli examined in its "dormant state", evidently was nothing but an ear of corn.

### Notes

1. Toronto Public Library, *A Bibliography of Canadiana, First Supplement*, Toronto, 1959, no. 4663, quoting (bibliographer, librarian, book collector, dealer?) Trömel from Sabin, *A Dictionary of Books relating to America from its Discovery to the Present Time*, vol. IV, 1871, no. 16809.

2. *Op. cit.*

3. *Op. cit.*



### *Notes and Comments*

4. Sabin, *op. cit.*, vol. XVII, no. 72042, stating this is the corrected title of No. 32024; vol. VIII. No. 32024, has the footnote "of extreme rarity. Not mentioned by Rich or Ternaux." Jean Robin, 1550-1629, was Henry IV of France's gardener.

5. Morley, Brian D., et al. *Wild flowers of the world. A thousand beautiful plants painted by Barbara Everard.* (London: Ebury Press and Michael Joseph, 1970), plate 168.

6. *Op. cit.*

7. These voyages are described in René Goulaine de Laudonnière's extremely rare *L'histoire notable de la Floride sitvee es Indes Occidentales, contenant les trois voyages faits en icelles par certains Capitaines & Pilotes François* ..., Paris, 1586.

8. Morley, *op. cit.*

## **In Touch with History The Archival Collection of Professor Thomas Henry Clark**

**By Jason Pan**

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### **MCGILL CENTENARIES**

The year 1993 marked two historic centennial observances; the festivities marking the 100th year of Redpath Hall, and the celebration of Emeritus Professor Thomas Henry Clark's 100th birthday, acknowledging his seventy years of distinguished service at McGill.

Redpath Hall is reserved in its usual serene and tranquil composure to the witnessing of McGill history through the ages. Professor Clark is also a living link to the past century of history. This paleontological centurion is a gentleman scholar from another time and age; yet he is still vigorous and active in academic and intellectual pursuits.

After graduating from Harvard, Thomas Henry Clark came to McGill in 1924 as an assistant professor in the Department of Geology. He was Logan Professor in Paleontology from 1931-1962, and was the head of the department from 1952-1959. Clark also undertook other important appointments; working as geologist for the Geological Survey of Canada 1926-1931, Curator of the Redpath Museum 1932-1952, and geologist for the Quebec Department of Mines 1938-1963.<sup>1</sup> He has been an Emeritus Professor at McGill since 1962, and also an Advisor in Geology at the Redpath Museum from 1964 to the present day.

In professional circles, Clark is highly regarded and esteemed for his outstanding contributions in the geosciences. He is recognized by his colleagues and peers to belong to a very exclusive and select company, as one of the top Canadian scientists in the 20th century. He has been elected to some of the highest professional offices: he was President of the Geological Society of Canada, and Head of the Geology Division of the Royal Society of Canada. In 1971, the Geological Association of Canada (the professional body of the geoscience community) granted him its highest award, the Logan Gold Medal. This award, named after Sir William Logan, the founder of the Geological Survey of Canada, acknowledged Clark's distinguished contribution and his major accomplishments in the advancement of geoscience in Canada.