About Our Cover

The fruit on our cover is a citron. The one on the coin on the upper left is an 'Etrog', a citron that was the fruit offering at the ancient Jewish Feast of the Tabernacles. This is the first contact between citrus, which came from the Far East and is now the world's most extensively grown tree fruit crop and Western Civilization. The Citrus Industry, from which this illustration of the 'Etrog' coin is taken, has a brief, but most informative, dissertation on the early references to citrus fruits, including the evidence that the citron was indeed the "hadar" mentioned in the Hebrew text of Leviticus.

This coin represents a lot of history. It is a Jewish coin of the time of the First Revolt against Rome in the year 66-70. Here horticulture, history, and ultimate defiance of insuperable odds, are epitomized in one small piece of metal. Few today, reading Jesus' injunction (Luke 20:25), "Render, therefore, unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's and unto God the things which be God's" realize the bitter ignominy to the Jews in having to handle coins bearing the "graven image" of Caesar, a purported divine ruler. To mint their own coin with their 'Etrog' substituting for Nero's imperial visage was a gesture of fanatical, reckless defiance to a Rome that rewarded rebels with wholesale crucifixions and other imaginative and unpleasant ends. The hopelessness of their cause is indicated by the second coin shown on our cover. On it a Roman legionary stands guard over a disconsolate Jewish woman sitting under a palm tree with the inscription, "Judaia Capta." These were minted while a heroic group of Jewish Zealots still held out on the fortress rock of Masada. But that, as Kipling was wont to say, is another story.

The romance of the 'Etrog' fascinated John McPhee when he visited the Citrus Experiment Station at Lake Alfred researching an article on the citrus industry. Originally, he intended to write no more than a "profile" for the New Yorker magazine. It grew into a two-part article entitled "Oranges" and then into a charming and literate book of that name. McPhee was a new phenomenon to us, a writer from the popular press who, while writing with style and wit, was fanatic on getting every technical detail correct. Few of us who work with oranges have visited groves in so many countries and read so many of the ancient writers who mention oranges.

The result is apparent in this unusual and informative little book which can be recommended to all who appreciate graceful writing and have respect for the history and practice of horticulture. McPhee's coverage suffers from a geographical bias in that, although he had visited the major orange growing areas of Europe, he did not visit the citrus districts of California until after writing this book. Having drawn attention to this omission, it can be said that the information he presents is accurate, often surprisingly detailed, and written with a wry wit that is seldom found in horticultural writings. This is particularly apparent in his comments on the early history of the orange. One quote will suffice. McPhee describes how one Johannes Volckamer of Nuremberg in an 18th century treatise states that a woman's touch was fatal to citrus trees, describing how a valued orange tree died, almost overnight, because a woman sat on one of its branches. McPhee goes on to say: "Later writers have guessed that Volckamer was ignorant of the effects of frost. My own belief is that science erases what was previously true. The earth was the center of the universe until Copernicus rearranged it. Life began in Eden before Darwin restyled it. In the early 18th century in Nuremberg, a woman did sit on the branches of an orange tree and kill it to the ground."

It was frost that frustrated John McPhee in his wish to hold history in the form of a "living, breathing 'Etrog'" in his hand. The severe freeze of 1962 had wiped out our variety block; and such varieties were then unavailable. But now, they are fruiting again; and some fruits have been sent to John McPhee to "hold history in his hand." While doing so, it seemed a good idea to take this opportunity to brighten science with history; and once again draw attention to two books meriting a place on the bookshelves of all who enjoy horticulture, history, and good writing.

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