



Invasive Aliens

The plants and animals from over there that are over here

Dan Eatherley
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This is a well-researched and engagingly written overview of the effect invasive plants and animals have had on the British Isles. The author refreshingly has placed equal weight on both invasive plants and animals (pathogens also feature).

The general approach that Eatherley takes is to explore the history of how plants and animals reached our shores and how they might have thrived. He navigates through this complex world by looking at the way man has altered his environment over the millennia, with chapters on the Neolithic, Roman Britain, the Age of Discovery, right up to the present day with its international trade in horticultural plants. The race to find economically important plants from around the world in the early 19th century, orchestrated by Kew Gardens, is particularly telling.

So often his accounts reveal a catalogue of human error, short-term thinking and naivety. It seems William Robinson’s *The Wild Garden*

(1870) has a lot to answer for in that it encouraged wealthy estate owners to populate their pleasure grounds with naturalistic plantings of rhododendrons, Japanese Knotweed and Giant Hogweed, only to have them later abandoned following shortages of labour after World War One. We have been trying to manage the consequences ever since.

In order to better understand some of the work involved in controlling these species, Eatherley meets up with teams dealing with the likes of Indian Balsam and Japanese Knotweed. He is good at digging out memorable tales of woe, such as the tourists that had to be rescued by helicopter after becoming lost in a vast Rhododendron jungle in Killarney National Park. The numbers involved are often pretty staggering, and at times his easy narrative sounds a little like Brian Cox as he reels off the money involved: £70 million to eradicate Japanese Knotweed from the Olympic Park in London; £20 billion knocked off the value of the UK property market in 2018 by the same plant.

The author has been thorough in his coverage, even including a section on the history of wool aliens in the UK, including a trip out in south Devon in search of a relict population of *Cotula australis*. A day at a caravan park would have provided a new dimension to this story.

His information seems to be right up to date, with several sections on the latest attempts at control. I was particularly taken by his excursion to Exmoor to witness the extermination of

some Japanese Knotweed, with a chap called Trevor wielding a high-voltage lance, that sounded like something out of Star Wars. The information that *Crassula helmsii* may be setting viable seed which could be increasing its spread was news to me.

Despite all the wisdom of hindsight, are we really any more careful today? The current fashion for instant ‘meadows’ sown along roadsides and in city parks is surely asking for trouble. The ‘half a billion pounds’ worth of live ornamental plants imported every year into the UK, with a Government keen on deregulation (despite the excellent work of the Non Native Species Directorate), means that we could still be seen as an open goal when it comes to new threats.

The end of the book explores the future, with the effects of a warming climate a prime concern. Right at the end, having terrified us with innumerable stories of loss of control, Eatherley poses the question, voiced elsewhere by Ken Thompson and others, that maybe we should not be so worried, as it could be argued that we ought to embrace these new arrivals and learn to accept them as part of new, perhaps more robust, ecosystems.

Despite the nature of the subject, Eatherley approaches his task with good humour and an eye for the absurd. If you want to understand how we have ended up with so many species from around the world sharing our small archipelago, then this is for you.

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