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***Rosa spinosissima* - aspects of its natural history and associations with people from prehistory to the present day**

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Rosa spinosissima - "The Small White Rose of Scotland"

We all know that a rose can evoke emotions that are dependent on your personal associations with that particular rose – whether it is that type of rose or that individual shrub. You may just appreciate the appearance or scent of the rose but the same rose will mean so much more if you are emotionally involved with it because you associate it with a particular person, place or time in your life. That rose has a heritage that is personal to you!

However, a rose also has its own heritage and some rose species or cultivars have a longer and more complex history than others. Awareness of that heritage can add another dimension to one's enjoyment of that rose.

Rosa spinosissima (*R. pimpinellifolia*) has been associated with the lives of people for thousands of years. It is the only species in the Section *Pimpinellifoliae* that occurs naturally in Europe; compared with it being only one of about 18 species in the *Pimpinellifoliae* that occur in China (Cuizhi and Robertson, 2003). It is thought that *R. spinosissima* probably evolved in China as it the centre of diversity for the *Pimpinellifoliae*.

However, it is not known when *R. spinosissima* evolved. The genus *Rosa* evolved at least 34 million years ago (De Vore and Pigg, 2007). The genus is confined to the Northern Hemisphere as a wild plant and fossil remains attributed to *Rosa* have been found in North America, Europe and Asia. However, the fossil remains are fragmentary and usually they only occur as an individual leaflet or prickle, rarely a complete leaf - let alone the combination of stem, leaves and flowers that one would expect to use in identifying a living species of rose.

R. spinosissima may have evolved before the Northern Hemisphere glaciations of the Pleistocene, during one of the lengthy interglacial periods or after retreat of the continental ice-sheet and amelioration of the climate about 12,000 years ago. As far as the author is aware, the earliest fossil or sub-fossil remains of the species are post-glacial but lack of preservation or identification does not mean that the species did not exist because plant remains are only preserved under quite unusual circumstances.

The continental ice-sheet and associated tundra conditions did not extend as far south in Asia as they did in Europe during the last glaciation. Therefore, more plant taxa were able to survive in the south to repopulate the northern areas and diversify than in Europe. If *R. spinosissima* had already evolved and spread westward before the last glaciation, it is possible that it survived in 'glacial refugia' in southern Europe from whence it was able to move north as the ice sheet retreated. It may have been able to take advantage of lowered sea-level and extensive sandy coastlines before the sea-level rose again as the ice-sheets melted. Its hardiness, ability to spread by suckers (root-shoots) and tolerance of salt-laden winds could have allowed it to take advantage of those newly available habitats in a pioneering role.

The spread of *R. spinosissima* may have preceded the migration of Stone Age people along the coastline and such hunter-gatherers could have benefited from its fruits as a food resource in late summer and they may have discovered its medicinal properties. Juice from the hips might also have been used to add colour to the objects that they made or their own skins. Early people might even have helped in the spread of the species, carrying whole hips with them as they walked but disposing of the seeds several kilometres from where they had been collected.

Now, thousands of years later in the 21st century, *R. spinosissima* occurs naturally from the western fringes of Europe to parts of northwest China and southern Siberia (Mayland-Quellhorst et al, 2012). Its natural distribution is limited to Europe and Asia except for part of the Atlas Mountain Range in North Africa. However, if the species did evolve in China, the spread has been almost entirely westwards because of environmental barriers to the north and east. *R. spinosissima* grows from sea-level to an altitude of over 2,700 metres and it has the widest natural distribution of any rose species except possibly the circumpolar Arctic Rose (*R. acicularis*) which can withstand lower temperatures than *R. spinosissima*.

Its wide distribution has meant that it has been associated with mankind for thousands of years. Over the last few hundred years, people have also carried it to North America and the Southern Hemisphere where it has become

naturalised in some situations.

R. spinosissima has been known by many different local names and it has attracted its own folklore. In some places, people have given it a vernacular name based on the resemblance of the leaves to a Burnet (*Sanguisorba*) and therefore, for example, called it the Burnet or Pimpinell Rose in English or Rose Pimprenelle in French. In other places, it was the prickly stems that caused it to be known as Bodicasti Sipek in Slovenia, for example, or Piikkiruusu in Finland. In Iceland, it has the name Þyrnirós which literally means ‘Thorny Rose’ but the same Icelandic word means ‘Sleeping Beauty’ and may refer to its early flowering – the beautiful rose waking up after the long dark Icelandic winter! In Norway, this rose is called ‘Trollnype’ - associating it with the trolls of Norwegian folklore. Elsewhere, it is named after the coastal sand-dunes where it grows so, for example, it is Klitrose in Denmark, Duinroos in The Netherlands or Dünen Rose in Germany.

R. spinosissima is not native to Finland but it has gained a special cultural significance there and in Sweden where it is a native wild species but quite rare. A double white cultivar of *R. spinosissima* is Juhannusruusu (Saint John’s Rose) in Finland because it is associated with St. John’s Day (24th June) - celebrated as Midsummer.

Folktales about this rose probably exist in several countries but they have not necessarily been published. One of the folktales that has probably survived from Mediaeval times, through an oral tradition, is the story of ‘La Rose Pimprenelle’ from the Ardennes region of Belgium and France. Although *R. spinosissima*, plays a key part in the story, as the object of a quest, it is a variant of a folktale found in many different countries, known by folklorists as ‘L’os qui chante’ (‘The singing bone’) because some versions of the story feature a flute made from a human bone. La Rose Pimprenelle seems to have been recorded in print for the first time in 1891 (see Monseur, 1891). It has been published since then in various versions, including those of René Daumal (Sigoda, 1993) and Jean-Paul Vaillant (Vaillant, 1949) who were both children in the Ardennes, and anonymous online versions. In the ‘modern’ versions of

this story, it is not explained what special magical or other properties made *R. spinosissima* (the Pimpinell Rose) an appropriate object of a quest. This was presumably known by children who were told the story in the past! The present author has translated several versions from the original French or Walloon. In the tradition of such folktales, he has retold the story in his own words and with his own embellishments as ‘The Prince and the Pimpinell Rose’ (see Appendix below).

In some versions of La Rose Pimprenelle, the hero in the story adopts the Pimpinell Rose (*R. spinosissima*) as the emblem of his family. In Scotland, *R. spinosissima* is the plant emblem of the Clan Keith, which dates back to the 11th century. George Keith, the 4th Earl Marischal (c.1553-1623) founded Marischal College in Aberdeen, Scotland (later to become part of the University of Aberdeen of which the present author is a graduate). In April 2005, *R. spinosissima* was chosen as the official plant emblem of the City of Aberdeen. The author does not know if it was chosen because of the Clan Keith association or because the rose grows wild near the city.

A white rose has been chosen, in one form or another, as the emblem of other families including The House of York in the 15th century and the Royal Stuarts. It was the badge of the Jacobites who wanted to restore a Stuart monarch to the throne of Great Britain in the 18th century. It was not always the same type of white rose that was employed! Therefore, although the names “White Rose of York” or “Jacobite Rose” often refer to the hybrid cultivar *R. x alba*, the same names have been applied to the small white-flowered *R. spinosissima* in other contexts. “The Small White Rose of Scotland” (*R. spinosissima*) was often more appropriate than *R. x alba* because of the particular association with Scotland.

“The Towton Rose” or “Battle Rose” was a wild form of *R. spinosissima* although it is associated with the House of York through the 15th century so-called “Wars of the Roses”. It used to grow abundantly on the site of the Battle of Towton in Yorkshire. The author has described its story in detail elsewhere (Boyd, 2010 and 2011) but a brief account of the history of this rose is included here because it is so pertinent to the theme of this article.

The Battle of Towton took place between Yorkist and Lancastrian forces on 29th March 1461. About 28,000 men were killed in the bloodiest battle that ever took place on British soil. There was snow on the ground and the white snow became stained red with blood of the dead and wounded.

The Towton Rose was a form of *R. spinosissima* with its white petals ‘tinged’ or ‘streaked’ with red. It still grew on the site of the battle in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Superstitious people believed that the colouring of the roses had been caused by the blood shed on the battlefield. Some people thought that white roses growing on the battlefield had been literally stained with blood and had produced such flowers ever since. Others believed that the roses symbolised the red blood shed on the white snow at the time of the battle or that white roses planted on mass graves after the battle produced flowers tinged with red, representing the blood of Lancastrian men (whose emblem was a red rose) on the white Yorkist rose.

Different local people will have had their own version of the story but the earliest published account that the author has found is that of Townsend (1848). Many accounts of the Towton Rose myth appeared in academic and popular publications after that and it generated many poems. Lord Ravensworth (1859) gave one of the accounts of the myth and identified the rose as “the small wild Scotch rose” (*R. spinosissima*):

“When, or by what hand, planted, or how they came, is not known, but in the field where the bones of the brave thus repose, white and red roses grow in great abundance. They are the small wild Scotch rose. The owner of the field has repeatedly tried to get rid of them by burning and mowing, but in vain; they still spring up again. According to popular belief, these roses will not bear transplanting, but refuse to grow on any soil except that consecrated by the remains of those valiant men, who there fell the victims of a senseless national quarrel”.

The myth that attributed failure of the rose to grow anywhere except on the battlefield probably arose partly from people digging it up when it was in

flower (when failure might be expected) and, in part, because some people wanted to discourage removal of the roses because they considered them sacred!

Lord Ravenworth followed his account with a poem. It is one of the more rousing examples, if it is read with the right rhythm:-

*Oh, the red and the white Rose, upon Towton Moor it grows,
And red and white it blows upon that swarthe for evermore -
In memorial of the slaughter when the red blood ran like water,
And the victors gave no quarter in the flight from Towton Moor:
When the banners gay were beaming, and the steel cuirasses gleaming,
And the martial music streaming o'er that wide and lonely heath;
And many a heart was beating that dreamed not of retreating,
Which, ere the sun was setting, lay still and cold in death:
When the snow that fell at morning lay as a type and warning,
All stained and streaked with crimson, like the roses white and red
And filled each thirsty furrow with its token of the sorrow
That wailed for many a morrow through the mansions of the dead.
Now for twice two hundred years, when the month of March appears,
All unchecked by plough or shears spring the roses red and white;
Nor can the hand of mortal close the subterranean portal
That gives to life immortal these emblems of the fight.
And as if they were enchanted, not a flower may be transplanted
From those fatal precincts, haunted by the spirits of the slain;*

*For howe'er the root you cherish, it shall fade away and perish
When removed beyond the marish of Towton's gory plain”.*

Of course, ‘poetic license’ is evident here! The roses would not be in flower on the anniversary of the battle in March. They would probably not even be in leaf in most years at the latitude and altitude of Towton and the rose would not flower until May or June.

By the end of the 19th century, the Towton Rose had become rare because people dug up plants as souvenirs and farmers did their best to get rid of it because they considered it a weed in their fields. Local people also sold plants of it to tourists and, as it became rarer, some unscrupulous vendors seem to have sold the more spectacular *R. gallica* ‘Versicolor’ [‘Rosa Mundi’] as The Towton Rose and may even have planted it on the site of the battle to support their claims. The true Towton Rose may still exist in a garden somewhere but it was finally made extinct on the battlefield in the 1940s when its stronghold ‘Bloody Meadow’ was ploughed up.

According to the local tradition, the Towton Roses had arisen from the bloodshed and flourished particularly on mass graves on the battlefield. In fact, the main burial mounds on ‘Bloody Meadow’ where the roses flourished were probably ancient tumuli, hundreds of years old at the time of the battle and nothing to do with it. Also, the Towton Roses themselves probably grew there for hundreds of years before the battle! Local populations of *R. spinosissima* with pink or red marked flowers have been found in several other parts of Britain but those places are not associated with battles.

Like the White Rose of York, the white rose of the Jacobites in the 18th century was not always the same type of rose. It should be remembered that the Kingdoms of Scotland and England were independent until 1st May 1707 when the Acts of Union created the Kingdom of Great Britain. The role of the white rose in the identity of the Jacobites and Scotland as a nation should be understood in this context.

The Jacobite movement was named after *Jacobus*, the Latinised form of James. King James II of England was also James VII of Scotland. He had ascended the throne in 1685 but Parliament was suspicious of his attempts to give religious liberty to Roman Catholics and non-conformist Protestants and his belief that the monarch should have absolute power. His first son, James Francis Edward Stuart (Prince of Wales) was born on June 10th 1688. Parliament was frightened by the prospect of a Catholic dynasty and King James was deposed. He was exiled to France and when he died, still in exile, in 1701 his son James Francis Edward Stuart (later to be called “The Old Pretender”) claimed the right to the thrones of England and Wales, Scotland and Ireland. His cousin, Louis XIV of France supported him in this claim. James’s son Charles Edward Stuart (“Bonnie Prince Charlie” or “The Young Pretender”) was born on 31st December 1720. Later, he was to lead Jacobite forces in support of his father’s cause in the 1745 Rebellion.

In the Christian religion (particularly Roman Catholicism) the white rose has often been used to symbolise the Virgin Mary so that in whatever manner a white rose symbolised support for the Stuarts, it also symbolised support for the Roman Catholic faith in the minds of some people.

Although the white rose was apparently already the adopted symbol of the Jacobites, there are several traditions that associate the first use of the white rose with Prince Charles Edward Stuart (“Bonnie Prince Charlie”) and the 1745 Rebellion. The Prince landed at Glenfinnan on the west coast of Scotland in 1745 where he “raised The Standard” to rally an army of supporters on 19th August. As he and his men travelled inland towards Invergarry Castle, he stopped overnight on 23rd August at Fassfern [Fassafern] House, on the shore of Loch Eil. It is a tradition that before he left Fassfern in the morning, he picked a white rose from the garden and fixed it in his bonnet (hat). Some writers believe that this was *R. spinosissima* and indeed, in August, it could have been a late flower which caught the attention of the Prince. The white rose plucked at Fassfern is said to be the origin of the “white cockade” (made from white ribbon) worn by Jacobite supporters. Incidentally, the climbing white rose which grows on the wall of Fassfern House today (sometimes claimed to

be the original from which the Prince picked the rose) does not show in 19th century photographs of the house so it cannot be the bush from which the white rose was picked in the early 18th century!

Mary McMurtrie (1998) recounted a story involving a double white form of *R. spinosissima*. The rose that she described, supposedly originated from one that Charles Edward Stuart wore on his coat at a Reception in Holyrood Palace, Edinburgh after the Battle of Prestonpans on 21st September 1745.

Although no doubt exists about the existence of the double white Scots Rose that Mary McMurtrie was given, there must be some doubt about the romantic tradition attached to it. However, it is not impossible that *R. spinosissima* was flowering at the end of September as the present author has had such late flowers on Scots Roses in his collection. It is also possible that a double white Scots Rose existed in 1745 although the earliest published record of a double white Scots Rose that the present author has found is in *The Lady's Magazine* of 1784. Lack of a published record in a nursery catalogue or elsewhere does not mean that a "Double White" Scots Rose did not exist because it is quite likely to have arisen naturally (like other double forms of wild flowers) at an early date but not necessarily have entered commerce.

After some early successes, the Jacobite rebellion of 1745 eventually ended in failure at the Battle of Culloden on 16th April 1746 after which Charles Edward Stuart fled to France. However, the Jacobites continued to hope that a Stuart monarch would be returned to the throne.

The white rose remained a symbol of the Jacobite cause and its supporters wore a white rose on "White Rose Day", the 10th June, the birthday of James Francis Edward Stuart ("The Old Pretender"). The white rose that was likely to have been available to pick and wear on 10th June in Scotland was *R. spinosissima*.

The white rose was one of several symbols depicted on objects owned by 18th century Jacobite supporters. These objects included wine glasses engraved with roses. In some cases, the roses depicted on the glasses are stylised, in others they resemble *R. x alba* but in others they appear to depict *R. spinosissima*.

James Stuart (“The Old Pretender”) died in 1766 and Charles Stuart (“The Young Pretender”) died, without heir, in 1788. With their deaths, any realistic hopes of another Stuart on the throne of Great Britain died as well.

Whatever the uncertainties regarding the identification of some “Jacobite roses” there is no doubt that the white rose in later Scottish literature and poetry is *R. spinosissima* where it is often called “The Little White Rose of Scotland”, “The Sma’ [Small] White Rose of Scotland” or “The Wee White Rose of Scotland” as well as Scots Rose or Scotch Rose.

“The Little White Rose of Scotland” was the symbol of independence for the Scottish Nation chosen by Scottish Nationalists in the 20th century. The National Party of Scotland was founded in 1928. Several poets and other creative writers joined the Party. Compton Mackenzie (1883-1972) and Christopher Grieve (1892-1978) [better known by his pen name, Hugh MacDiarmid] were leading supporters of this resurgence in national identity and Scottish cultural activity. They felt that Scotland had been dominated by England for too long. In November 1929, Mackenzie used *R. spinosissima* in a BBC radio broadcast, as a symbol of ‘Scottishness’. His speech was printed in the December issue of *The Scots Independent* (the newspaper of the National Party of Scotland) from which the following is part:-

“Let us turn to our own background and forsake utterly the enticement of an alien and for us unnatural culture. We have grafted ourselves upon the rich rose of England. It has flourished on our stock. We have served it well. But the suckers of the wild Scots rose are beginning to show green underneath. Let them grow and blossom, and let the alien graft above, however rich, wither and die. You know our wild Scots rose? It is white, and small, and prickly, and possesses a sharp sweet scent which makes the heart ache”.

His friend, MacDiarmid adapted these words and sentiments (with acknowledgements to Mackenzie) for a short poem called ‘The Little White Rose’ first published in 1931 (Grieve, 1931):-

The rose of All the World is not for me.

I want for my part,

Only the little white rose of Scotland

That smells sharp and sweet - and breaks the heart.

This short verse became very popular and has been frequently quoted as an emblem of Scotland and Scottish independence over the last eighty years. Indeed, it was one of the texts chosen to adorn a wall of the Scottish Parliament building in Edinburgh, officially opened by Queen Elizabeth II on 9th October 2004.

In 1991, the Little White Rose of Scotland *R. spinosissima* was chosen to symbolise ‘independence’ for the Isle of Eigg in the Inner Hebrides of western Scotland. The rose grows abundantly on the island. The present author knows it well because he carried out geological research there for several years in the early 1970s. Although the main human inhabitants were crofters, the island had been owned by seven generations of landlords – some of whom had not even lived on the island or understood the lives and needs of the crofting community. The Isle of Eigg Trust was formed in 1991 to campaign for ownership or management of the island by the community itself. The islanders gained support from many organisations and individuals all over the world that enabled the island to be purchased by the community in June 1997. The island is now managed by the Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust, which includes representatives of the island residents, the Highland Council and the Scottish Wildlife Trust.

Cultivated garden forms of *R. spinosissima* have also been closely associated with Scotland since at least the end of the 17th century. A cultivar in the Edinburgh Physic Garden (the precursor of The Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh) was recorded as the “The lesser Scottish Burnet, or Pimpinel-Rose with fine-stript flowers” (Sutherland, 1683). By 1730, this cultivar had become known as the ‘Striped Scotch Rose’ (Miller, 1730) and by the late 18th century,

every cultivar of *R. spinosissima* sold by nurseries in Britain seems to have been called a Scotch or Scots Rose and included “Scotch White-flowered Rose”, “Double White Scotch Rose”, “Red Scotch Rose”, “Striped-flowered Scotch Rose”, “Pale Yellow flowered Scotch Rose” (The Lady’s Magazine, 1784).

By the 1820s, hundreds of single, semi-double and double Scots Rose cultivars had been raised by Robert Brown, Robert Austin and others in a wide variety of colours (Boyd, 2008 etc.). Their popularity outside Scotland was partly due to the number of Scottish head gardeners and nurserymen of Scottish descent in England! Initially, many Scots Roses were expensive to buy and could only be owned by rich landowners but, gradually, they were dispersed far and wide to be grown in many cottage gardens because they were so easy to propagate.

Scottish men and women took them to their hearts and carried Scots Roses with them to many other parts of the world including Canada, the United States and New Zealand during the 19th and early 20th centuries. So did immigrants from Sweden and other Norse countries where cultivars of *R. spinosissima* had also become part of their cultural heritage.

As a result, *R. spinosissima* and Scots Roses were often been planted on graves in cemeteries around the world - to act as a memorial to family members or friends who originally came from Scotland or Scandinavia or who were descendants of those who had. *R. spinosissima* and old Scots Rose cultivars have often survived in such situations.

Accounts of such burials even appear in several works of fiction. Lucy Maud Montgomery (1874-1942) came from a long line of Scots-Canadians. She wrote the novel *Anne of Green Gables* on Prince Edward Island in Canada (Montgomery, 1908). Her reference to the Scots Rose reflects the affection for these roses that was common among immigrants from Scotland:-

"I took a slip of the little white Scotch rose-bush his mother brought out from Scotland long ago; Matthew always liked those roses the best - they were so small and sweet on their thorny stems. It made me feel

glad that I could plant it by his grave - as if I were doing something that must please him in taking it there to be near him. I hope he has roses like them in heaven. Perhaps the souls of all those little white roses that he has loved so many summers were all there to meet him”.

These “little white roses” could have been the single white *R. spinosissima* or one of the very popular old double white cultivars.

Although these roses were planted on individual graves, there is also a local tradition that *R. spinosissima* was planted on a mass grave at Inver on the Dornoch Firth, near Tain, about 25 miles north of Inverness in Scotland. In the 1830s, the disease cholera spread through Britain, killing thousands of people; not only in towns and cities but also in small villages. In 1832, cholera reached the small fishing community of Inver and by the end of September at least 53 people (possibly half of the population) had died from the disease. The victims were buried in a common grave where *R. spinosissima* now grows on the grave but it also grows wild on the nearby sand dunes.

Intentional planting of the roses could have taken place on the common or mass graves at Towton and Inver. However, where *R. spinosissima* occurs naturally in the neighbourhood of the mass graves, the roses may have grown naturally from suckers (root-shoots) in the turf or soil disturbed when the graves were dug and re-deposited when soil and turf was mounded up over the bodies - effectively replanted. They might have even grown better and more thickly on the deeper, better-drained soil on the graves compared with the surrounding ground – giving the appearance that they started on the graves! There was a particularly good chance of survival of the roses if the graves were dug when the roses were becoming dormant in late September (Inver), during the winter or when just coming out of dormancy in March (Towton).

R. spinosissima was initially grown in gardens for its herbal properties and it was one of the first roses described and illustrated in 16th century herbals of Northern Europe. Its hips and leaves have been used to make a tea and, in some places (particularly Denmark) a liqueur is still made from its hips. In recent

years, it has been the subject of intense research to investigate its special pharmaceutical properties. The chemical constituents have recently been summarised by Mayland-Quellhorst et al (2012). Its dark purple or black ‘fruits’ (heps) are high in vitamins and antioxidants.

Artistic depictions of *R. spinosissima* have been made, like those of other roses, to assist identification in herbals or specialist rose books. Therefore, *R. spinosissima* and its cultivars are depicted by artists in all the well-known illustrated rose books such as those of Lawrance (1799), Redouté (1817-1824), Andrews (1805-1828), Willmott (1910-1914) and McMurtrie (1998).

No doubt, many artists also depicted *R. spinosissima* in paintings created for other than descriptive identification purposes but depictions of this rose became a characteristic element in the pictures of one professional artist. Edward Atkinson Hornel (1864-1933) was one of a group of Scottish artists known as ‘The Glasgow Boys’. His early paintings are much admired today but they were considered ‘challenging’ by a late Victorian public and they did not sell well at the time that he painted them. Therefore, Hornel was forced to develop a more commercial ‘decorative’ style to support himself and his sister (Smith, 1997). Many of these later paintings depict young girls arranged in innocent poses among flowers by the seaside or in woodland - such paintings having been commissioned by the children’s parents. A favourite location for these paintings was Brighthouse Bay, near Hornel’s home in southwest Scotland, where dwarf-growing *R. spinosissima* grew on the sand dunes and formed a carpet of white blossoms in May or June. This carpet of roses is a feature of several paintings (e.g. ‘The Captive Butterfly’ of 1905 [Lady Lever Art Gallery, Liverpool], ‘Brighthouse Bay, Wild and Burnet Roses’ 1923 [Broughton House, Kirkcudbright]).

R. spinosissima appears on postage stamps designed for the postal services of several countries but the rose does not always have any special association with the country that the stamps represent. However, they are sometimes significant such as those for Finland, including the Finnish Åland Islands which has produced some decorative postage stamps or postage labels of its own. The iconic double white “Midsummer Rose” or “St. John’s Rose” of Finland is

depicted on several stamps.

The association of *R. spinosissima* with island communities as Eigg and Åland is reinforced with postage stamps or postage labels for Guernsey in the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man and Iceland.

The depiction of *R. spinosissima* on some 18th century Jacobite wine glasses has already been mentioned. It has also been depicted on ceramics including one of the porcelain plates from the dinner set featuring illustrations from Flora Danica, ordered by the Danish Crown Prince Frederik in 1790. Copies of the set are still sold by the Royal Copenhagen Porcelain Manufactory. *R. spinosissima* is beautifully depicted in this example because it follows the original botanical drawing of Flora Danica but the depiction of the rose is rather superficial in some modern designs produced by other manufacturers. For example, the black hews of *R. spinosissima* on the lid of a round trinket box made by the German manufacturer Villeroy & Boch are unmistakable (even if it was not labelled *Rosa pimpinellifolia*) but the species is not accurately represented in another design on plates, cups and other items by the same company. Similarly, although the British manufacturer Royal Worcester Porcelain issued rather charming three dimensional 'figures' designed by Dorothy Doughty depicting 'Wren and Burnet Rose' (issued in 1966); items from a dining set produced at about the same time bear poor depictions of the rose.

In Denmark, Gerda Bengtsson (1900-1995) used flowers and berries in many of her cross-stitch embroidery designs and depicted *R. spinosissima* in several of them.

Although *R. spinosissima* is still locally abundant today as a wild plant, it was far more widespread and abundant in the past than it is today. One can conjecture that it was usurped in early times from places that became the natural location for permanent human settlements or agriculture. Populations of the species have undoubtedly been destroyed by urban development, agricultural activities and other mechanisms ever since. The decline in occurrence of the species can be clearly demonstrated in countries where wild

plant records have been kept.

In 1597, Gerard stated that it was common on the outskirts of the City of London in villages such as Knightsbridge and Fulham. Those villages are now part of the Greater London conurbation. One can imagine that many coastal villages and towns were originally developed in places where *R. spinosissima* grew and many natural coastal sand-dunes have been replaced with sea-walls, golf courses or other tourist developments over the last two centuries. Inland, calcareous grasslands (such as at Towton) where *R. spinosissima* grew have been ploughed up for arable crops or the roses have been destroyed by herbicides to maximise grazing. In Britain, *R. spinosissima* has probably declined most from inland sites over the last hundred years.

The species is now being threatened in some of its native sand dunes in northern Europe through competition with the more robust *R. rugosa* that has escaped from gardens and flourishes in the sand-dune habitat which is very similar to the habitat in which it evolved in its native Japan.

R. spinosissima is also threatened in a more surreptitious way by alien 'genetic pollution'. It is a very variable species but, locally, a population may have its own unique genetic character with characteristics that suit local conditions. Such localised 'gene pools' may be in danger of genetic contamination from 'alien' *R. spinosissima* genes. The present author has observed that most of the seed-grown *R. spinosissima* sold in Britain and mainland Europe for hedging and municipal planting and possibly sometimes planted on nature reserves comes from larger-flowered, taller clones than the native variants. The plants have probably been imported from mainland Europe or grown from seed sources in mainland Europe that include southern Europe variants or even Asian variants such as 'Altaica'. If such plantings of *R. spinosissima* take place near native populations, contamination of unique local 'gene pools' may become a concern. This might be compared with the concern in Britain for contamination of the native English Bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*) by hybridisation with the more robust Spanish Bluebell (*Hyacinthoides hispanica*) grown in gardens. Wissemann and Ritz (2005) have demonstrated pollution

of *R. spinosissima* gene pools in Germany where the species is very local in its distribution and has a “near threatened” status.

Within the main range of the species in Europe and Asia, even though *R. spinosissima* is widespread it may be very ‘local’ - confined to nature reserves or places where urban or agricultural pressures have not reached it. Its distribution is more scattered than undoubtedly it was in the past. Wild populations of *R. spinosissima* are particularly vulnerable at the edges of its natural distribution. At the extremes of its distribution, populations are widely separated and often consist of only a few plants that may only flower or set seed in some years. Human interference or natural disaster in such locations can easily make such populations extinct.

In some cases, human interference may be of an unexpected kind. In Iceland, *R. spinosissima* may be at the western edge of its natural distribution or it may have been introduced by Christian or Viking settlers from Europe over a thousand years ago. Its habitats can be vulnerable to volcanic activity in Iceland but its occurrence has unexpectedly declined at some localities since the 19th century and it has been suggested that superstition may have led to its decline at some of the Icelandic sites. Apparently, some Christians in Iceland considered that any prickly or spiny plant should be destroyed because they associated it with the ‘Crown of Thorns’ placed on the head of Jesus Christ at his crucifixion (Hallgrímsson, 2007). Fortunately, today, most Christian and other inhabitants revere the rose and wild populations are protected.

Scots Roses and other cultivars of *R. spinosissima* have become more popular again in recent years as their beauty and resilience have become ‘rediscovered’. There is a resurgence of interest in the old cultivars and *R. spinosissima* itself as garden plants that are able to thrive in conditions that are difficult for other roses. There is also interest in *R. spinosissima* as a parent of new hardy, disease and drought-resistant hybrids. Therefore, it is sad that the wild species may be under increasing threat in some parts of its range through human activity.

This article has only touched on some of the ways that *R. spinosissima* has played a part in human culture. The author has attempted to include elements

that he thought might be unfamiliar to many people. He has placed the emphasis on *R. spinosissima* itself rather than Scots Roses and other cultivars which he has written about previously.

The botany, history, identification and culture of Scots Roses as well as the cultural elements introduced here will be explored fully in the book 'Scots Roses, *Rosa spinosissima* and other Pimpinellifolias' (provisional title). At the time of writing this article, the book is very close to completion and it is due to be published by the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh and The Royal Horticultural Society in Spring 2013. Unfortunately, illustrations that will feature in the book cannot be used to illustrate this article - for copyright reasons. However, online versions of many of the author's previous illustrated articles about Scots Roses can be seen on his website at www.peterboyd.com/scotsroses.htm.

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Appendix

The Prince and the Pimpinell Rose

By Peter D. A. Boyd

[based on translations (from the original French or Walloon) of several different versions of the traditional folktale "La Rose Pimprenelle"]

Note: Pimpinell Rose (old English name) = Burnet Rose = *Rosa spinosissima*

Once upon a time, a long time ago, there was a king who had three sons. As the king grew older, he worried about which of the three princes should succeed him to the throne. He had decided that he did not want to divide the kingdom between his sons (as that would be bad for the stability of the realm) and that his successor should be the most worthy son and not necessarily the oldest. He wanted to choose the son that would make the wisest ruler. He wondered how he should make the right choice.

As the old king walked among the roses in the palace garden, an idea occurred to him - he would set his sons a quest that would test their characters and abilities.

He gathered his sons together to make his announcement:

“The first of you to bring me a Pimpinell Rose, will inherit my kingdom”.

The three sons agreed, thinking that it would be a simple task to find the rose

and win the crown but the wise old king knew that it would not be a simple quest to find this special rose. They would have to search far and wide and might only find it if they were able to get help from someone who knew where it grew.

The three young men set off from the palace in different directions. They searched far and wide for many months – without success.

The spring and summer had passed and it was now early autumn when the three princes arrived, from different directions, on the fringes of the Ardennes Forest.

The first one entered the forest and met an old woman trying to carry a large load of firewood to her cottage. She greeted him and asked if he would help her to carry the wood. The young prince spoke to her rudely and refused because he was too busy searching for the Pimpinell Rose. The old woman told him that he would never find the mystical rose unaided. The young man walked on.

Sometime later, the second prince came across the same old woman - still struggling with her load of wood. She greeted him and he was asked if he would kindly help her to carry her load. This young man also answered her rudely and refused because he was too busy searching for the Pimpinell Rose. The old woman told him that he would never find the magical rose unaided. The young man walked on.

A little time later, the third and youngest prince entered the forest and met the same old woman struggling with her load of firewood. He greeted her kindly and offered to carry the wood back to her cottage. She thanked him and when they arrived at her cottage, she asked him where he was going when they met. He explained that he was searching for the Pimpinell Rose to take back to his father. The old lady told him that she would show him where the rose grew because he had been so kind to her.

The old woman led the young prince through the trees to a clearing where there was a tumble of large rocks, bathed in sunshine. It was a magical place and the prince thought to himself that it might have been an ancient place of worship or burial. There – growing among the stones – was the much sought Pimpinell

Rose – with a few sweetly scented white flowers shining among its autumnal black fruits!

The prince picked a sprig of the rose and pushed it into a buttonhole in his jacket. He also wanted to collect a young plant or piece of the rose so that his father could grow it in the palace garden. After asking the old woman if he could, he carefully dug up a small rooted piece of the special rose with his sword, wrapped it in damp moss and placed it in his leather bag. The young man thanked the old woman for her help. She smiled and handed him a little flute made from elder wood. The old woman told him that it would look after him on his journey. He wondered what she meant by that but he thanked her again.

As he was leaving the forest, the young prince met his two brothers and showed them the sprig of Pimpinell Rose fixed to his jacket. His two elder brothers knew that if he succeeded in returning to their father, their young brother would be the one to inherit the kingdom. At first, they hid their jealousy but then they lost self-control and killed him. They dragged his body away from the path, took the sprig of Pimpinell Rose from his jacket and covered his body and bag with leaves and tree branches.

The wicked brothers did not notice that a little flute had fallen onto the ground near where they had buried their brother. Even if they had noticed, they would not have bothered with an old wooden flute. They left the forest and made their way to their father's palace. On the way, they agreed to divide the kingdom between them when their father was dead, even though that was not what their father wanted.

When they arrived at the palace, the eldest brother showed the sprig of Pimpinell Rose to his father and claimed the right to inherit his kingdom. The brothers had claimed that they had not seen their younger brother but the king was suspicious of their behaviour and he was worried about his youngest son, who was his favourite. He said that he could not make a decision about the throne until he knew what had happened to his third son. The two sons were angry.

Several months later, in the following spring, a shepherd-boy called Pierre was searching for some sheep that had become lost in the Ardennes Forest. After much searching, he found the sheep deep in the forest. As he was making his way back to the path, he noticed a shaft of sunlight illuminating a little flute lying on the moss near a mound of leaves and branches. He picked up the flute, wiped it on his sleeve and put it to his lips. He blew into the flute but he was amazed to hear it ‘sing’ to him instead of emitting a musical note:

“Blow, blow, little Pierre.

My brothers killed me in the Ardennes Forest.

Had I not found The Pimpinell Rose?

Had I not won my father’s crown?”

Pierre quickly made his way out of the forest with his sheep. He went to the palace and asked to see the king because he had news of his son. He told the king his story and handed him the flute. The king blew into the flute and it sang again:

“Blow, blow, my father.

My brothers have killed me in the Ardennes Forest.

Had I not found The Pimpinell Rose?

Had I not won your crown?”

The king called his two sons to him and asked each one to play the flute. Each time, the flute sang:

“Blow, blow, you traitor.

You killed me in the Ardennes Forest.

Had I not found The Pimpinell Rose?

Had I not won my father's crown?"

The king was heartbroken and furious. He immediately banished the wicked princes from the kingdom. Then, led by Pierre, he rode to the forest with a contingent of his men. Pierre showed the king where he had found the flute. The king's men pulled the branches and leaves away from the body of the young prince. It was miraculously preserved! The old lady appeared from among the trees, approached the dead prince and touched him gently with her hand. The young man started to breathe again and opened his eyes.

Through tears of joy, his father told his son what had happened. After a few minutes, the prince was able to stand up. He embraced his father and thanked Pierre for leading his father to him.

The old lady asked the prince if he still had the magical Pimpinell Rose. He picked up his bag from among the leaves, opened it and found that the young rose was not only still alive but it had sprouted in its blanket of damp moss. The prince turned to his father and said:

"Father - you see that I did find the Pimpinell Rose and earned the crown but I also brought you a new rose for your garden!"

Then he turned to the old woman.

"I could not have found the Pimpinell Rose if you had not helped me and your flute saved me. It was your touch that brought me back to life. How can I possibly repay you?"

The handsome young prince hugged the old woman and kissed her on each cheek. There was suddenly a flash of brilliant light. Standing before the prince was not an old lady but a beautiful young princess who had been under a spell.

Now the spell was broken. She told him that he had repaid her in full!

They all returned to the King's palace where the shepherd-boy Pierre was given a generous reward. He was also allowed to keep the flute. He played beautiful tunes on it but it never 'sang' again.

A few weeks later, the Prince and Princess were married and chose the Pimpinell Rose as their family emblem. When the old king died, the Prince succeeded him as a kindly and wise king - ruling with justice. Every spring (and sometimes in the autumn), the Pimpinell Rose bloomed in the palace garden, reminding the couple how they had first met.

They lived happily ever after.

See [Scots Roses and other Pimpinellifolias](#) for other papers on Scots Roses by
Peter Boyd