

THE amazing life story of one of Britain's greatest explorers is set to be told properly for the first time.

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Work is under way on a major new book paying tribute to George Forrest, the celebrated Falkirk-born plant hunter. Forrest is world renowned thanks to his expeditions in the Himalayas and Western China in the early 20th century. He risked his life several times to bring back tens of thousands of plant specimens to Britain. But there has never been any attempt to document fully his extraordinary life, the famous expeditions he undertook and the legacy he left behind until now.

A research assistant at the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh, where Forrest launched his career in botany, is writing a comprehensive account of his career.

Brenda McLean, who has already spent years on "detective work", hopes the book will be published by 2004 - the 100th anniversary of his first expedition. A major exhibition on Forrest's life and work is planned at the botanic garden that year.

Brenda said: "Forrest was one of Britain's greatest plant hunters and is extremely well known in botanical circles. He was a great adventurer, travelling independently to many areas which were unmapped at the time."

"Forrest risked his life on several occasions and was nearly murdered on his first expedition when he was chased by a hostile Tibetan tribe."

Born in Grahams Road, Falkirk, in 1873, Forrest was the son of local businessman George Forrest, the owner of a drapery business in the High Street, and his wife, Mary Bain. It was when the youngster, said to have a "roving disposition and a love of adventure", left school and found work in the shop of a pharmaceutical chemist that he first became interested in botany.

But life as a potential chemist held little attraction and Forrest - who had gradually built up a large and valuable collection of British plants - left Scotland to live in the Australian hush. Forrest tried his hand prospecting and working on a sheep station hut, after several years, returned to his native land and began his amazing career.

In 1922 he found work in a poorly-paid post as an assistant in the herbarium of the botanic garden.

Forrest, who kept fit by walking the six miles from his home to work and back, was able to scrutinise thousands of specimens from all over the world and gain a sound knowledge of plants.

Forrest was meticulous, well-organised and had a keen eye for plants. It was these qualities -

together with his physical fitness and pioneering spirit - which impressed his boss Bayley Balfour so much that when a wealthy cotton broker asked him to recommend a plant collector, Forrest sprang immediately to mind.

Cheshire-based Arthur Bulley was interested in obtaining plants new to cultivation and, on the advice of Balfour, Forrest was dispatched to Western China. When he returned home in 1907, the expedition had been successful beyond all expectations. He brought home thousands of herbarium specimens, along with many pounds of seeds, and his first trip was followed by six further visits.

The plants from Forrest's seeds - more than 30,000 specimens - would go on to completely change the face of gardening in Britain and many of today's finest gardens were planted in this era. Almost everything Forrest collected went first to the botanic garden, where it was sorted and classified along with the notes he had taken.

Forrest did not restrict his activities to plants, collecting birds, insects and butterflies as well. He was also well-respected by the Chinese and used the medicinal skills he had learnt as a chemist to treat locals for a variety of illnesses.

Forrest received numerous honours for his work, among them the Victoria Medal of Honour from the Royal Horticultural Society.

Sadly, despite his fitness regimes, Forrest succumbed to ill health and in 1932 he died of heart failure in Yunnan, in the upper Mekong River. He was laid to rest in the mountains.

Brenda is keen to speak to any surviving relatives of George Forrest, who had three sons with his wife, Clementine. She can be contacted c/o the library at the Royal Botanic Garden, 20a Inverleith Row, Edinburgh, EH3 5LR.