



Londa Schiebinger, Claudia Swan, eds. *Colonial Botany: Science, Commerce and Politics in the Early Modern World*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. 346 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3827-3.



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Plants, Politics, Power and Profit

This is not a book to be read in a hurry, but one rather to be slowly savored for its diverse case studies that offer rich detail, multidisciplinary perspectives and innovative insights into botanical trade and commerce in the early colonial period. It challenges some of the existing historiography and suggests fresh research directions. Its editors are two academics based in the United States. Londa Schiebinger, Professor of History of Science at Stanford, is the author and/or editor of numerous books focussing on the gender dimensions of the history of science while Claudia Swan, Associate Professor of Art History at Northwestern University, researches the relationship between aesthetics and science and the methods, techniques and the ideologies of collection. Together they have assembled sixteen scholars—British, French, German and Spanish—each well established in their respective fields, who have contributed a wide range of chapters. Like many other collective works, this publication has its origins in collegial discussion on mutual interests that was followed by a conference (“Botany in Colonial Context,” Potsdam, 2001).

Colonial botany is defined here as “the study, nam-

ing, cultivation and marketing of plants in colonial contexts” (p. 2). The three aims of the book—as stated in the editors’ introduction—are to “chart the shifting relationship between botany, commerce, and state politics” between 1550 and 1800; to explain how botany at this time “both facilitated and profited from colonialism and long-distance trade”; and to analyze the link between “botany and Europe’s commercial and territorial expansion” (p. 3).

There are four parts to the book, each arranged around a specific theme. Keeping their gaze within a European framework, the authors of the first (four chapters) cover issues of governance and botanical practice. Chandra Mukerji first looks at how, under the influence of a strong French king and state, plants from abroad influenced the physical as well as the intellectual landscape of France. Staffan Muller-Wille goes on to explain how different (with respect to botany) Sweden was from the rest of Europe and he explores some of the reasons why Linnaean nomenclature was so acceptable to the rest of the Western world. The other chapters in this part move away from Europe to deal with the infusion of European

botanical ideas into colonial space. Michael T. Bravo's contribution builds on Muller-Wille's by investigating how Linnaean botany was expressed in the mission gardens of Greenland, while Andrew J. Lewis identifies the mechanisms that determined how local botanical structures and institutions arose in a colony of settlement, in this case North America.

The second part (five chapters) brings together the botanics and botanical understandings of European, indigenous and Creole peoples. There are three chapters that each investigate one particular, significant primary source. Daniela Blechmar delves into the Sevillian physician Nicolas Monardes's *Historia Medicinal*, Harold J. Cook into Dutchman and VOC (Dutch East India Company) employee Jacob Bontius's books on diseases in the East Indies and Jorge Canizares-Esguerra investigates the extra-European sources of Alexander Humboldt's ecological understanding. The other two chapters in this section have a wider canvas. Londa Schiebinger contributes a fascinating chapter that explores the politics of early colonial bioprospecting in the West Indies, employing the metaphor of "biocontact zones" to peer into the different theoretical frameworks of local (or indigenous) botanical worldviews in contrast to those of the Europeans. The limitations to transcultural exchanges are particularly well drawn. In a similar way, but dealing only with Creole elites, Antonio Lafuente and Nuria Valverde show how the Linnaean system was contested outside of Europe where it did not have the same kind of rational purchase.

The very different chapters that follow in part 3 speak to the issue of cash crops in a trio of environmentally discrete parts of the world. Judith Carney argues convincingly for the African origin of the North American rice plantations, drawing on the transmission of the techniques of growing this crop to the Americas by slaves from the "Rice Coast" of West Africa. Emma Spary's accomplished contribution is to show how European botanical politics played out in colonial situations: she details the rivalry in Mauritius between Pierre Poivre and Jean-Baptiste-Christophe Fusee Aublet to prove which of them had "ownership" of the "genuine" species of nutmeg. Julie Berger Hochstrasser takes the reader on a journey into the history of art by analyzing a number of Dutch paintings that valorize the botanical imports that came to the Netherlands as a result of its vast trading empire.

The fourth and final part (four chapters) ends the book with the technicalities of botanical accumulation

and collection. Claudia Swan explains the manner in which the VOC kept stock and records of its widening ecological footprint; Anke te Heesen deals with the accounting processes; Kapil Raj, the technicalities of making the *Jardin de Lorixa* ("Flora of Orissa") authored by a certain L'Empereur, an outstanding work consisting of 725 double-folio paintings of 722 plant species; and Marie-Noelle Bourguet concludes with a most interesting account of the development of instruments for temperature and humidity measurement and control that underpinned the practicalities of botanical collection.

Informative as these individual chapters undoubtedly are, the contribution of this book is greater than the sum of its parts. Historiographically it is significant because it indicates that the history of science-botany in particular—is moving from the margins of the historical field to take center stage in critical processes such as globalization, colonization, international politics and acculturation. In addition, the essays presented here all take issue with what Emma Spary in her chapter ("Of Nutmegs and Botanists") calls "big histories" of colonial botany (p. 187) to engage with more detailed research on the "highly contested, complex procedure" of botanical interchange. It says much for the scholarship that it has evolved to the stage in which case histories, such as those presented here, have an historiographical context into which they can fit, with which they can argue, and to which they can add so much value.

There are, however, two aspects of this book that are unsettling because they are not directly, or even briefly, addressed and thus appear unresolved. The first is that no reasons are provided as to why the focus is placed on the Dutch, Spanish, Swedish, French and German early colonial enterprise. While it may be appropriate to have a corrective, or perhaps an alternative, non-anglophone colonial perspective, simply ignoring Britain's botanical global reach at this time seems a little odd. The issue worries the reader throughout the book because there is no explanation in the introduction or elsewhere as to why the contributions omit Britain. Was it deliberate editorial policy? Was it determined by the research agendas of the contributors and/or for instance the five kilometers of VOC archives? Or was there something about the British early colonial empire that the authors considered made it inappropriate for this discussion? It would have been helpful to have some thoughts in this regard. It would also have been helpful to have had some overall comment on whether this European colonial perspective had anything in common with, or indeed that might distinguish it from, other empires, particularly those that

were continental (for example, Ottoman, Chinese, Russian) rather than maritime. Moreover, a case study that contrasted the different Western botanical and scientific priorities and perspectives vis-a-vis Britain and Europe, would have been informative and added considerable value. One thinks, for example, of the bankruptcy and collapse of the VOC in 1795 and the transfer of the Cape of Good Hope from that Company, with its mercantile and monopolistic principles, to Britain with its expectations of a new colony of settlement. How did this change of colonial ownership affect botanical knowledge and exploration?

Secondly, as well as providing insights into a period before Western disciplinary specialization took hold, this book deepens our knowledge of Europe during this period considerably. But our understandings of the botanical worldviews of the colonized do not benefit to anything like the same extent. The colonial world remains marginalized by an overriding Eurocentric focus, albeit a focus that incorporates some of the plants and a few of their uses and applications that originated with “the other.” While this bias is, of course, inherent in the written sources, perhaps the time is ripe for an analysis of other sources—anthropological, architectural, ethnographic, oral and pictorial—for their hidden histories and veiled worldviews. In this regard, the work of Kolb (1675-1725) on the ethnobotany of the Khoekoen of the southwestern Cape of South Africa, would, for instance, be helpful.[1] However, like most Europeans of that period upon meeting a culture so different from their own, Kolb expressed racial and chauvinistic prejudices that require mediation—there seems to be little point in castigating these early modern travelers for being people of their own time, rather than of ours (in this regard, see p. 79.) Of all the chapters in this book, that by Cook on Jacob Bontius comes closest to providing a window into a pre-colonial culture. One also hopes that someone will pick up the thread of the variety of local knowledges that later came into existence, not only those that operated in pre-colonial times. This is a tantalizing and exciting subject as recent preliminary work in South Africa about the worldviews of Boer women during the South African War of 1899-1902 with regard to herbal and other

medicines—an amalgam of European and locally derived ideologies—bears witness.[2]

Finally, what adds to the fascination and appreciation of *Colonial Botany: Science, Commerce and Politics in the Early Modern World* is that it resonates with issues that remain current in our own time. The rivalry between African and Australian botanists for nomenclatural ownership of the genus *Acacia* (an African and Australian genus that is now being split between the two flora of the two continents, the name, exceptionally, not remaining with the type specimen) is merely the rivalry between Poivre and Aublet over naming the nutmeg writ large.[3] International botany is still very often regulated by politics, not science. The vexed question of bioprospecting and the status of indigenous knowledge and intellectual property rights is also very much a question of the moment, with multinational pharmaceutical companies flexing their commercial muscle just as the VOC did. And the paradoxes, ironies—and inequities and injustices—of the commodification of crops, once imported into the West from far-flung corners of the world, that are being re-exported today to those former colonies in expensive, genetically modified forms that could not ever have been imagined by the people who appear in this book, are never far from the reader’s mind.

Notes

[1]. P Kolb, *Caput Bonae Spei Hodierum, das ist* (Nürnberg: Conrad Monath, 1719); *Naaukeurige en uitvoerige beschryving van de Keep de Goede Hoop* (Amsterdam: Balthazar Lakeman, 1727); *The Present State of the Cape of Good Hope* (London: W Innys, 1731; reprint, New York: Johnson Reprint Corp, 1968).

[2]. See, for example, Elizabeth van Heyningen’s chapter entitled “Women and Disease,” in *Writing a Wider War: Rethinking Gender, Race and Identity in the South African War, 1899-1902*, ed. Greg Cuthberton, Albert Grundlingh and Mary-Lynn Suttie (Athens, Ohio and Cape Town: Ohio University Press and David Philip, 2002).

[3]. <http://www.worldwidewattle.com/>

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