

ESSAY REVIEW

THE WORLD OF PLANT COLLECTING: AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY OBSESSION

by

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Andrea Wulf, *The brother gardeners: botany, Empire and the birth of an obsession*.  
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This book is thoroughly researched, covers a broad subject authoritatively and does so in a highly readable way. Andrea Wulf tells the fascinating story of the British obsession with gardens and plants and how this obsession flourished during the eighteenth century, becoming a global enterprise with plant collectors being sent from Britain to every quarter of the globe. The change was remarkable. Having initially been in the ornate shadow of continental gardens, by the end of the century British garden designs were increasingly admired and copied across Europe. Moreover, the number and variety of plants arriving in Britain from America, Africa, Asia and Australia had increased enormously, transforming the appearance not only of the country's stately parks and estates but also the more modest gardens of the middle classes. In the second half of the eighteenth century the growth of empire, allied to the understanding that plants could be used not only to adorn parks and ornamental beds but also for economic purposes in trade and manufacture, such as with tea, hemp, cotton and breadfruit, gave powerful impetus to the British lead in plant collecting and exchange around the world.

Wulf's is therefore an absorbing and important story brought to life through vivid accounts of the careers and relationships of some of the major figures central to these developments. Using a wealth of archival and contemporary printed sources, she shows how the obsession of a series of determined and sometimes idiosyncratic individuals with cultivating and classifying plants drove British horticulture and botany forward. Most knew one another, and they exchanged ideas and specimens freely. This is a central point, for the book is really about the networks and correspondence between men in different places that enabled the enormous expansion in knowledge of the plant world to take place. Philip Miller at Chelsea Physic Garden stands as a formidable example because he, as Wulf explains, set himself the task of ensuring that Chelsea would 'outvie all the Gardens of that Kind in Europe'. Eventually forced from his post after a lifetime in which he made Chelsea the foremost garden in Britain by deploying an extensive network of contacts to obtain plants and seeds, Miller also produced the influential *Gardeners Dictionary* (1731). An immediate best-seller, the dictionary became an indispensable reference work for gardeners, who could use it when tending their own gardens or discussing plants.

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This was true for gardeners at home and abroad. Miller's dictionary was, for example, used in the American colonies, which at the start of Wulf's book were still in British control. There the intrepid and likeable Quaker, John Bartram, acted as a collector for British enthusiasts and patrons. Wulf reveals how Bartram's relationship with Peter Collinson, also a Quaker and a successful London merchant, endured the years and how both men established a lucrative trade in living plants and seeds. Travelling from his farm on the outskirts of Philadelphia, Bartram risked life and limb on trips into the American wilderness in search of new or rare plants, sending those he collected back to England in his 'plant boxes'. Somewhat like the colonies themselves, Bartram steadily grew in confidence, becoming quite essential to the trans-Atlantic transfer of plants in this period. On the British side, Collinson drummed up business and obtained payments from wealthy aristocrats, such as the young Lord Petre at Thorndon in Essex. Notwithstanding various vicissitudes, Bartram's and Collinson's is a tale that sees the British landscape so altered that in places it came to resemble that of America with naturalistic plantings of evergreen American cedars, white pines, balsam fir and tulip trees as well as rhododendrons, kalmias and magnolias. This was ironic in more than one way, as Wulf makes clear. Indeed, when Thomas Jefferson, then in Europe acting as American ambassador to France, visited England he carried away from the groves of American shrubs and trees that he saw ideas for rather more authentic designs on his own property at Monticello in Virginia.

Yet it was to a Swedish botanist that science looked when in search of a system to organize all the new plants coming to European notice. Less inclined to give plants than to receive them, Wulf reveals, Carl Linnaeus nevertheless provided a powerful way of classifying plants according to their floral parts (*Systema Naturae*, 1735). For all its artificiality, this system could easily be employed, producing reliable results. Linnaeus also simplified and standardized the naming of plants by the use of a binomial system in which every plant was known by a genus name and then also a species name (*Species Plantarum*, 1753). Although some were initially slow to accept the ideas of Linnaeus (Miller, for example, did not adopt them until the eighth edition of his *Plant Dictionary*, published in 1768 when he was 77 years old, and the aged collector, President of the Royal Society and founder of the British Museum, Sir Hans Sloane, was even more unreceptive when Linnaeus visited him in 1736), the Swede's ideas nonetheless steadily gained acceptance, not least in the New World where they could easily be understood and applied by those who otherwise lacked reference material for the purposes of plant identification and classification. Linnaeus sent his favourite pupil, Carl Solander, on a trip to Britain to promote his ideas and to visit British nurseries and collections. Solander did indeed promote the Linnaean system in Britain, but not quite in the way that Linnaeus had planned, for, much to his master's chagrin, Solander liked life in Britain so much that he stayed. Affable and talented, he made influential connections and gained himself a position at the British Museum, where he started to catalogue and arrange the natural history collections with the use of the Linnaean system.

Perhaps most importantly of all, at the British Museum Solander met Joseph Banks, a rich landowner with a passion for botany, and together these men led the way in opening up new fields of plant collecting in the Pacific. The second half of Wulf's excellent book covers the period when exploration and collecting abroad took a new direction. After the American War of Independence rather less came from America, but at about the same time James Cook set out on his Pacific voyages, the first of them on HM Bark *Endeavour*. At the age of just 25 years Banks led a party on *Endeavour*, and was accompanied by his close friend Solander. Afterwards the two men were more or less inseparable until 1782, when Solander died in

Banks's London home at 32 Soho Square of a brain haemorrhage—very much to Banks's distress. Thereafter, as Wulf shows, from his privileged position as President of the Royal Society, trustee of the British Museum and unofficial advisor to George III regarding the royal gardens at Kew, Banks ensured that the British obsession with plants continued unabated. Indeed, the imperial influx from the East and from the Pacific increased massively under Banks. Botanic gardens were established in places such as Calcutta, missions were despatched to transport plants (most famously under William Bligh) and as Pacific colonies were established the flow of specimens increased from them too. It should perhaps be remembered in this context that during Banks's time some 7000 plant species were introduced to British horticulture largely through the gardens at Kew.

At Kew, Banks often helped to organize the plants, even personally carrying some to the greenhouse on his head if he deemed them too precious to be risked in the hands of the gardeners (one instance was a fuchsia from South America). Colourful anecdotes such as this pepper Wulf's book, as do the voices of the individuals themselves from their letters and journals. Wulf brings alive the personalities and outlook of the great collectors and botanists, showing how the wonder and appeal of the natural world inspired a series of remarkable eighteenth-century figures who put British gardens and plant collecting on a truly global footing. With useful notes, a full bibliography of references and archival sources, and an interesting plant glossary based on Miller's *Gardeners Dictionary* and both editions of William Aiton's *Hortus Kewensis*, this book is also valuable as a reference work in its own right. In an entertaining read, Wulf has produced a tale of travel and plant collecting that reveals much about her own obsession with the history of gardens and how many of the plants familiar to us today came to be in our own beds and greenhouses.