

'THE MADNESS OF AVOCADOS'

By The Perambulator

One of the unexpected effects of last year's lockdown was our all paying more attention to food. Restrictions on movement meant more people buying food from local shops and markets, and with erratic prices and occasional absences from the shelves, meant more of us thinking more about where food came from and whether it would always keep coming. Our supermarkets, our cafés and restaurants are full of food from impossibly far-distant countries. The empire has gone but Britain remains at the centre of a global network of supply lines: roses from Kenya, almonds from California, apples from New Zealand, strawberries from Spain and avocados from Chile.¹ The fragility of those super-taut lines has been demonstrated by both Brexit and Covid: in maximising efficiency, systems have minimised resilience and empty shelves have been the result.²

The current threat to our food security may be partly caused by Brexit paperwork, partly by the disappearance of European workers and partly by measures taken to control Covid. But in addition, it is a legacy of our country's colonial past. Our supermarkets' promise to bring us a global cornucopia, fresh and perfect each day, is an echo of Victorian horticultural *hubris*. Our sense of entitlement to that bounty leaves us vulnerable to its inevitable failure, as those over-taut supply lines start to snap.

It was not always this way. From the late sixteenth century onwards, when Stow's *Survey of London* refers to the many 'garden plottes' in Aldgate and Hackney, London was ringed by market gardens supplying its basic food needs. In 1796 Daniel Lysons reckoned there were some 8500 acres of such gardens within 12 miles of the city. But railways and the

docks brought cheap food from further afield, and built development devoured the open space and pushed horticulture closer to the margins, until by the 1970s the city's market gardens had largely disappeared (*fig. 41*).

Now a visit to the supermarket reveals depressingly little fruit or veg from the UK. The UK grows a low proportion of its own food compared to other countries, something like 58% (it was 82% in the early 1980s and the proportion continues to decline) and we have allowed supermarkets to pinch ever more of the price from growers – about 5–6% of the shelf price.³ The UK runs a £24BN trade deficit in food – 84% of fruit and 46% of veg being imported.⁴ Over the last forty years we have become accustomed to food that is both cheap and free of the constraints of seasonality or climate.

But Tim Lang, University of London professor and author of *Feeding Britain: Our Food Problems and How to Fix Them*, published last year, has suggested that we have a particular problem. Our attitude is unusual even among the wealthiest nations, and he suggests it is a result of British exceptionalism. The food we imported – or, as he puts it, 'plundered' – from the empire in the nineteenth and especially the twentieth centuries led us to a dangerous neglect of home production. This was recognised even before the Second World War by William Beveridge and others, but their warnings were ignored.⁵

Food production, fruit and veg, occupy an intersection between agriculture and horticulture. The development of new varieties, the skills of hybridization, or pruning, grafting, growing, are the stuff of garden history from mediaeval illustrations and texts to the mass of Victorian journals. Although the kitchen garden may have been a closed technical area to many owners, it was also part of the aesthetic enjoyment of an estate: from 'To Penshurst' to *The Gardeners' Chronicle*, food production and consumption – the feeding of a household – have always been fundamental to the development of the

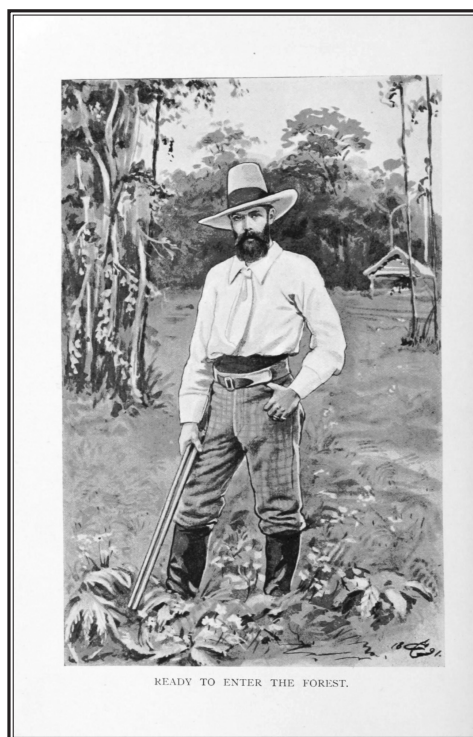
1. Quite apart from the lack of resilience, much of the production of that cornucopia is ethically and environmentally toxic. On strawberries see <https://www.dw.com/en/spains-sea-of-plastic-where-europe-gets-its-produce-migrants-get-exploited/a-47824476>; on avocados see <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2019-12-06/avocado-cartels-satisfy-our-hunger> and <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-chile-environment-water-idUSKBN25G2NT>; and on Kenyan roses see <https://www.euractiv.com/section/africa/news/europes-love-of-roses-sends-ripples-through-kenyan-lake/>

2. Philip Garnett, Bob Doherty and Tony Heron, 'Vulnerability of the United Kingdom food chains exposed by COVID-19', *Nature*, 4 June 2020, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s43016-020-0097-7> Accessed 4/8/21.

3. <https://www.foodsecurity.ac.uk/challenge/uk-threat/> Accessed 4/8/21.

4. <https://www.newfoodmagazine.com/article/130750/rural-living-food-security> Accessed 4/8/21.

5. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/mar/22/tim-lang-interview-professor-of-food-policy-city-university-supply-chain-crisis>



41. Market Garden in Evelyn Street, Deptford, photographed shortly before acquisition by the LCC for redevelopment as flats in the 1930s (IMAGE © LONDON METROPOLITAN ARCHIVES (CITY OF LONDON))

42. Albert Millican, *Travels and Adventures of an Orchid Hunter...*, 1891. (THE HISTORY COLLECTION /ALAMY STOCK PHOTO)

country house and its gardens and parkland.

Part of that development has been inspired by 'exotic' plants brought back to the UK from other parts of the globe. It is easy to romanticise the process: intrepid botanists braving *savage* jungles and mountains to find *unknown* horticultural treasures and bring them back for naturalisation in gardens in Britain (fig. 42). But plant-collecting was part of the great imperial project. The discovery and development of new productive or food plants was politically and strategically important. The RHS was not just a scholarly society focused on the gardening interests of British landowners; it had a significant geopolitical role in identifying and exploiting the potential of new plants as economic assets. As Professor Val Williams put it: 'While hybrids of original collected plants are now a staple of our northern European gardens, plants were as much of a colonial commodity as spices or textiles, gemstones, metals or works of art.'⁶

Thus, Robert Fortune, a hero among gardeners for his introductions of ornamental Chinese plants, was also an industrial spy employed by the East India Company to smuggle the secrets of tea-production out of China, enabling the EIC to turn India into a rival centre, based on land seizure and enforced labour. Michael Pollan has remarked on how tea in turn played a key role back in Britain, in combination with cheap sugar allowing the new industrial working class to endure long shifts and chronic hunger.⁷

In 1859 Kew and the India Office sponsored the smuggling of *Cinchona* seedlings out of Ecuador by Richard Spruce to form the basis of a British-controlled quinine production in India and Ceylon. Kew's website account of Spruce's expedition, while recognising its dering-do, simply refers to the new plantations as bringing 'relief to thousands of malaria sufferers'.⁸ Of course they did, but they also helped secure British rule in India by soldiers and administrators no longer fearful of malaria.

The same process happened with rubber: seeds smuggled out of Brazil in 1874 by

Henry Wickham, who was employed by Kew and the India Office, propagated at Kew and then seedlings sent to Singapore Gardens to establish a new industry in Malaya. By the end of the century, British-owned plantations had crushed the Brazilian rubber industry, their advantage stemming from indentured Chinese labourers, impoverished Tamils and debt peonage.

Kew was at the heart of a network of plant exchange, commissioning expeditions to *collect* – a comfortable euphemism for what was often smuggling, with high penalties for those caught in countries of origin – plants with economic value, propagating them and sending them out to British colonies: Cork oaks were sent to the Punjab; ipecac, mahogany, and papyrus to India; West Indian pineapples to the Straits Settlements; tea plants to Jamaica; an improved strain of tobacco to Natal; the list is extensive.⁹

From the late eighteenth century onwards, botanic gardens were established throughout the colonies – in Calcutta and Bombay, in St Vincent, in Sydney – with the specific aim of exchanging and cultivating strategically useful plants. Later, under Hooker, Kew brought these gardens into a network with Kew at its heart whereby, as Lindley described it, the empire's gardens 'were capable of conferring very important benefits upon commerce and of conducting essentially to colonial prosperity'.¹⁰

The transfer of plants of course was strategic: development of those colonies, in rivalry with other European powers. Seeds have been one of the most precious and easily transported cultural artefacts: Thomas Jefferson famously wrote that: 'The greatest service which can be rendered to any country is to add a useful plant to its culture.' In our habitual focus on ornamental plants here in the UK, it would be easy to forget that plant-collecting had a deadly serious, economic and political role in the development of the empire.

There is still much to do for botanic gardens to explore and then convey to the

6. Afterword to William Arnold, *Suburban Herbarium*, (Axminster: Uniformbooks, 2020), p.120.

7. <https://www.theguardian.com/food/2021/jul/06/caffeine-coffee-tea-invisible-addiction-is-it-time-to-give-up>

8. <https://www.kew.org/read-and-watch/richard-spruce-botany-on-a-global-scale> Accessed 15/7/21.

9. Lucile Brockway, 'Plant Imperialism', <https://www.britishempire.co.uk/science/agriculture/plantimperialism.htm> Accessed 15/7/21.

10. Report of the Committee appointed by the Lords of the Treasury in January 1838, to inquire into the Management &c. of the Royal Gardens, by Dr. Lindley, reproduced in *The Floricultural Cabinet*, vol VIII, p.169.



43. Terracotta portrait bust of Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753) by Michael Rysbrack (1694-1770), slightly to right, with a mole on his lower left cheek, in an elaborate wig and wearing a lace collar over a jacket.
(© THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM)

public the full complexity of their histories. It is startling to realise that Lucile Brockway's book on Kew, *Science and Colonial Expansion*, came out in 1979 and its research remains a kind of optional extra to interpretations of Kew's history.¹¹ This history is still being resisted: when Kew announced in March this year its plans to provide more information to visitors about the links between its plants and colonialism, the Tory MP Sir John Hayes, of the self-appointed Common Sense group, thundered that it was 'preposterous posturing by people who are so out of touch with the sentiment of patriotic Britain'.¹²

A similar outrage was expressed over the British Museum's decision to re-present Rysbrack's terracotta bust of Hans Sloane, benefactor of the Museum and founder of Chelsea Physic Garden (fig. 43); 'British history is being eradicated' was one of the more moderate responses on Twitter.¹³ But to better understand the context of Sloane's life and wealth is not to eradicate history but to enrich it. The only heritage such research eradicates is the heritage of wilful ignorance. Sloane's ownership of plantations and their slaves, part of the dowry his wealthy wife brought to their marriage, enabled much of his natural history research and collecting, and this context illuminates our understanding of both the Museum and the Physic Garden. The mainstream media outrage illustrates how far we have to go to open up to this fascinating aspect of garden history.¹⁴

In 2007, the 200th anniversary of the *Slave Trade Act* inspired many institutions to launch research projects into Britain's colonial history and what it meant. English Heritage held a landmark conference in 2009, which later became the basis of its 2013 tome, *Slavery and the British Country House*; UCL set up its *Legacies of British Slave Ownership* project,

which resulted in the astonishing database of the same name; and the Welsh Historic Gardens Trust received HLF funding for *Bittersweet*, a wonderful project that explored the links between Welsh estates and the sugar trade, including visits to those gardens from BAME and other minority groups. Nostalgic memories from elderly West Indians who had come to the UK after the war of eating sugar cane or scrumping coffee beans, brought a whole new dimension to understanding of the Swansea Botanical Gardens.¹⁵

In September 2020, the National Trust published its preliminary report on links between its country houses and historic slavery.¹⁶ It appeared a few months after the death of George Floyd had provoked a resurgence in the Black Lives Matter movement and the hauling down of the Colston statue in Bristol. While the research ten years earlier by EH and UCL was greeted with respect, in 2020 the NT provoked furious opposition, with a campaign entitled *Restore Trust* set up specifically to attack the report and indeed the whole premise that this aspect of country house history had been suppressed and needed to be brought into the open.¹⁷

Restore Trust argued that the report gave a 'one-sided' view of history.¹⁸ Visitors, it argued, should not leave NT properties feeling their history or heritage has been 'demonised'. Instead it wanted to help restore 'the aesthetic experience' of the Trust's country houses so that visitors can enjoy them 'without intrusive interpretation'.¹⁹ It is hard not to take this as evidence that the report's premise is correct: *Restore Trust* is demanding that an important aspect of history be tidied away, to prevent any discomfort intruding on an experience shorn of real meaning or understanding.

What's the problem? Where does this spume of indignation come from? Researching the links between country houses and colonialism is not about rewriting history; it is

11. For example the tentatively worded conclusion in Caroline Cornish, 'Kew and Colonialism: a history of entanglement,' 2020, <https://www.kew.org/read-and-watch/kew-empire-indigo-factory-model> 'This model can be interpreted in different ways ... Today it strikes many viewers as a depiction of the inequalities which marked so-called 'extractive colonialism', where the emphasis was more on benefit-taking from colonies than on benefit-sharing.' Accessed 15/7/21.

12. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9353241/Kew-Gardens-growing-woke-Famed-attraction-decolonised-labelling.html> Accessed 15/7/21.

13. https://twitter.com/_SaveOurStatues/status/1298016168175861760 Accessed 15/7/21.

14. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/aug/30/it-is-not-hans-sloane-who-has-been-erased-from-history-but-his-slaves> Accessed 15/7/21.

15. <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/slavery-and-british-country-house>; <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/>; <https://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/567>. Accessed 4/8/21.

16. <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/addressing-the-histories-of-slavery-and-colonialism-at-the-national-trust#Download%20the%20report>.

17. <https://www.restoretrust.org.uk/restore-trust-issues/interimreport> Accessed 4/8/21.

18. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/national-trust-campaign-woke-agenda-b927838.html> Accessed 4/8/21.

19. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9432351/National-Trust-members-launch-campaign-against-charitys-woke-agenda.html> Accessed 4/8/21.

about writing more history. And it is so interesting! As the *New Arcadian Journal* has recognised for years, understanding the material culture behind eighteenth-century gardens does not detract from but rather enriches the experience of such places: who can forget those witty, unsettling images of American bombers over Stowe, or the juxtaposition of Cannon Hall with the slave-ship of the same name?

Of course, we live now with the polarisation of social media, culture wars, hate speech, identity politics, post-truth politics and the rest. The manufactured froth brings to mind in contrast the sober certainty of Walter Benjamin writing in 1940:

Cultural treasures have an origin which [we] cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.²⁰

It is time to recognise that our current colonialist relationship to the planet will destroy us. It is time to recognise that relentless extraction of natural and human resources is toxic to the beneficiaries as well as to the cultures and ecosystems which continue to be plundered. Plenty has not brought happiness and, *pace* William Blake, excess has not led to the palace of wisdom.

It is time to recognise that everything is connected: gardens have never existed in a vacuum where 'aesthetic experience' can float free of context and understanding. Thinking about how we enjoy and think about gardens has its part to play in establishing a more balanced and fairer relationship with the world.

That rebalancing means some hard questions about relinquishing a lifestyle which is rapidly making the earth uninhabitable. We are all complicit: there is no moral high ground in this. But until we do that work, we will continue to live in an infantilised never-never land, with sanitised, ignorant heritage alongside our midwinter strawberries from the glasshouses of Spain, our Kenyan roses and our plump avocados from the drought-plagued valleys of Chile. It cannot go on.

'SPRIGHTLY MIRTH AND MARTIAL PLEASantry': THE MILITARY ENCAMPMENTS IN HYDE AND ST. JAMES'S PARKS IN THE WAKE OF THE GORDON RIOTS

By Todd Longstaffe-Gowan

On the 3rd July 1780 Sadler's Wells Theatre advertised the premiere of 'All for Scarlet' in the pages of the *London Courant*. The evening amusement was to feature a 'Great variety of Singing, Dancing, Tumbling, Postures, Rope-Dancing, &c.' as well as 'a performance (never yet exhibited) consisting of Recitatives, Airs, Catches, Choruses, Dancing, &c. called ALL for SCARLET Or Ding-Dong to the Park'. The stage backdrop had been decorated by the eminent scene-painter Thomas Greenwood the Elder and depicted 'A STRIKING VIEW of the CAMP, near the CANAL [in St James's Park], And an exact representation of its ENVIRONS'.¹

The performance was praised in the *Morning Chronicle* as 'a compleat piece of sprightly mirth and martial pleasantry';² and another correspondent writing in the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* declared that 'All for Scarlet, or Ding-dong to the Park' was 'one of the prettiest *petit[e] pieces*' he had ever seen, and that his 'ears received with great pleasure' the 'songs, catches, &c.'. He reserved his greatest praise, however, for the stage scenery, which he opined was 'as pleasant a scene of the park camp, canal, Westminster-Abbey, and its vicinity, as can be exhibited on canvas for public observation'.³

The choice of music and the 'park camp' scenery suggests that 'All for Scarlet' was a light-hearted, patriotic response to the Gordon Riots, which only a month earlier had shaken the metropolis to its very foundations.

1. *London Courant*, 3 July 1780, p.1. 'All for Scarlet' was a satirical adaptation of an earlier air composed by Thomas Arne entitled 'Sacred is war, and truly good' which had been sung by King Alfred in the Oratorio 'Alfred the Great' performed at the Drury Lane in 1759. It was a bellicose piece and was performed at the height of patriotic fervour during the Seven Years War.

2. *Morning Chronicle*, 5 July 1780, p.3. The entertainment was a great success, playing on the London stage for upwards of six weeks in the summer of 1780. *The Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 8 July 1780, p.3; *Morning Chronicle*, 14 August 1780, p.1. The entertainment was revived the following summer to equal popular acclaim. Michael Angelo Rooker – a student of Sandby – executed 'a masterly perspective of the camp in St. James's Park' for the backdrop of 'The Genius of Nonsense' which ran at the Theatre Royal in Haymarket from September 1780. (*Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 4 September 1780, p.2; *Public Advertiser*, 2 September 1780, p.1).

3. *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 5 July 1780, p.3.

20. Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the philosophy of history', in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*, (London: Fontana, 1982), p.258.