

Book

Connections and collections

The Enlightenment seems familiar to us in ways that the apocalyptic sectarian fury of the English Civil War, only a generation or two earlier, does not. We recognise its coffee shops and consumerism, its newspapers and networkers, its Eurosceptics and cosmopolitans, and at the heart of it all a grand ambition: to classify and reduce to order the new landscapes, creatures, and peoples revealed by exploration and commerce. All the slave-trading, periwig-powdering ambiguities of 18th-century European life were personified in Hans Sloane—an Ulster parvenu turned society physician and, as James Delbourgo argues in this rich and masterly new biography, the greatest collector of his age.

In the spirit of its subject, one could read *Collecting the World* as a magisterially annotated catalogue of Sloaneiana. Sloane's fortune: fees from his wealthy patients, rents from his London properties, salaries from his many public offices, and dividends from slave plantations in Jamaica. His friends: Robert Boyle, Thomas Sydenham, Samuel Pepys, John Locke, among many Enlightenment luminaries. His collections: something like 200 000 items, from intaglios and starfish to potsherds and prints—and, best of all, "miscellaneous things". His honours: President of the Royal College of Physicians, physician-general to the army, Secretary and then President of the Royal Society, baronet, royal physician. His legacy: the British Museum, the nuclei of the British Library and the Natural History Museum, and half a dozen street names in a well-to-do London suburb.

This glut of worldly achievement points us towards the paradox of Sloane's reputation, one that Delbourgo, Associate Professor in the History of Science and the Atlantic World at Rutgers, takes up in his introduction. During his life Sloane was a cultural and

intellectual powerbroker at the heart of the British establishment, but after his death he was quickly forgotten, and remains a peripheral figure in studies of Enlightenment natural philosophy. His status was not built on the originality of his medical practice or his scientific thought but on his collections and his connections. *Collecting the World*

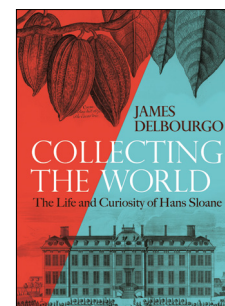
"Delbourgo's Sloane figures as a bridge between the genteel early modern taste for cabinets of curiosity and the more programmatic collecting campaigns of Enlightenment savants."

is, then, a biography with a larger historiographical mission. Delbourgo wants his readers to look beyond the usual suspects in Enlightenment natural philosophy—Boyle, Robert Hooke, Isaac Newton—and appreciate the growing importance of the life and human sciences, and the ways in which these disciplines emerged from cultural and intellectual exchanges at a global level.

Like Charles Darwin a century and a half later, Sloane's outlook and career were shaped by a long sea voyage he made in his twenties, a voyage with an avowedly imperialist purpose. Sloane's origins had not been especially promising: born in 1660, the younger son of a County Down estate manager, he seems to have suffered a bad bout of consumption at the age of 16, but survived to study medicine in London and Montpellier. After graduating he became a disciple of Thomas Sydenham, the "English Hippocrates", who impressed on him the value of understanding disease at the bedside rather than in the library. He rose rapidly, becoming a Fellow of the exclusive but fogeyish Royal College of Physicians at the age of 27, and it seems to have been his college connection with Peter Barwick, James II's doctor, that

gained him a position as physician to the Duke of Albemarle, the newly appointed governor of Jamaica. Albemarle, debt-ridden and rakish, had been given the task of reasserting imperial control over the island and its increasingly independent-minded planters. On the 3-month voyage out Sloane, schooled in the Classical humoral tradition, watched his shipmates' constitutions adapting to the tropical climate, their urine stinking and their chins pimply.

During his year and a half in Jamaica Sloane, when not bleeding, blistering, or purging his employer, seems to have described and collected everything he encountered. Animals, birds, strange nuts, lustrous pearls, pre-Columbian burials, clouds of mosquitoes, all went into his notebooks and many into his luggage. In his observations Sloane practised what Delbourgo calls "total commodification": the flesh of



Collecting the World: the Life and Curiosity of Hans Sloane
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Sir Hans Sloane (1736) by Stephen Slaughter

manatees made “extraordinary food”, but their powdered bones could cure kidney disease, and their hides could be made into fine shoes for ladies and vicious whips for slaves.

Sloane’s trip to Jamaica coincided with a great increase in the British demand for sugar, and a parallel expansion in the slave trade. Delbourgo is careful to give this aspect of Sloane’s life the space, depth, and clarity it requires. He notes the disquieting differences in Sloane’s attitude to his white patients and the slaves he occasionally treated. Sloane usually assumed the latter were lying or overacting to get out of their labours. One slave was forced back to work with the application of “a frying-pan with burning coals” to his feet; another was bled and purged until she returned to sweeping floors in the house of her mistress. Sloane was evidently curious about the lives of slaves, collecting their instruments and having passages of their music transcribed into stave notation. But his concern with description and classification did not extend to unpicking the category of “negro” or “slave”—as Delbourgo points out, a diverse set of peoples from West African nations, the Indian Ocean world, and the Caribbean, forcibly assembled, and given a label that obscured their differences and rendered them abject.

Sloane’s relationship with Jamaica did not end when he returned to England in the summer of 1689. He married Elizabeth Langley Rose, the widow of one of the richest Jamaican slave-owners, and set about organising his collections and observations into a treatise. Delbourgo notes with scholarly understatement that Sloane’s dense, technical *Natural History of Jamaica*, published in 1707, “did not go on to be a classic in the history of science or travel writing”, but its hundreds of pages and expensive illustrations reflected his restless curiosity, his taste for advancement, and his growing fortune. In 1712, he purchased Chelsea Manor—not just a grand house by the Thames but also a large and lucrative estate—as a refuge from city life and a place to assemble his multifarious collections.

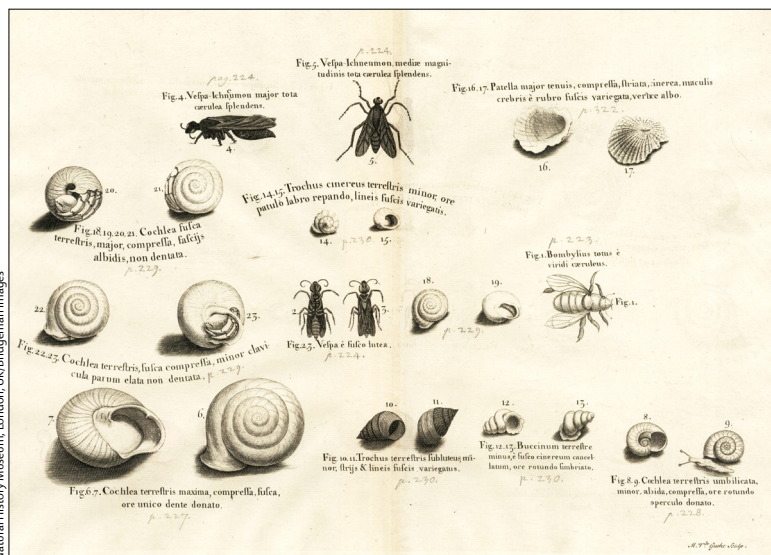
For those who came after, the most important moment in Sloane’s life was his death in January, 1753. His will bequeathed his collections to the nation, but this offer came with strings attached: if Parliament would not pay £20 000, Sloane’s trustees would hawk the estate around other European capitals. Within 6 months Parliament had acceded, and raised the necessary funds with a dubiously honest public lottery. Searching for a suitable home,

his trustees considered and rejected Buckingham House before settling on Montague House in Bloomsbury, London, only a short stroll from Sloane’s opulent consulting rooms.

Those who know and love the British Museum—still on the Montague House site, though now in a later and more imperious building—will be intrigued by Delbourgo’s rhapsodies on the theme of classification. Enlightenment visions of a perfect universal classification system for all knowledge are typically countered with Jorge Luis Borges’ satire on the apocryphal *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*, in which animals are divided into “suckling pigs”, “those that tremble as if they were mad”, “those drawn with a very fine camel hair brush”, and so on. Delbourgo, though, argues that to portray classifications as either universal or completely arbitrary is to caricature them; instead, we should understand them through their creators and, most importantly, their use. Delbourgo’s Sloane figures as a bridge between the genteel early modern taste for cabinets of curiosity and the more programmatic collecting campaigns of Enlightenment savants.

The bookcases, cabinets, and drawers at Chelsea Manor displayed Sloane’s taste, wealth, and connections, but they were also intended to celebrate divine providence, the emerging Enlightenment republic of knowledge, and British imperial majesty. Over his long life Sloane made himself, in Delbourgo’s words, “a man with both the inclination and the resources to sample and survey every single thing in God’s creation—to collect and catalogue the variety of the world”. Delbourgo’s prose is by turns luscious and breathless, penetrating and precise, revelling in the dance of tastes, scents and colours, and the interplay of themes and voices. His triumph in *Collecting the World* is to show his readers the Enlightenment for what it was: the grandest of dreams and the greatest of follies.

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Shell and insect illustration from *Natural History of Jamaica* by Sir Hans Sloane