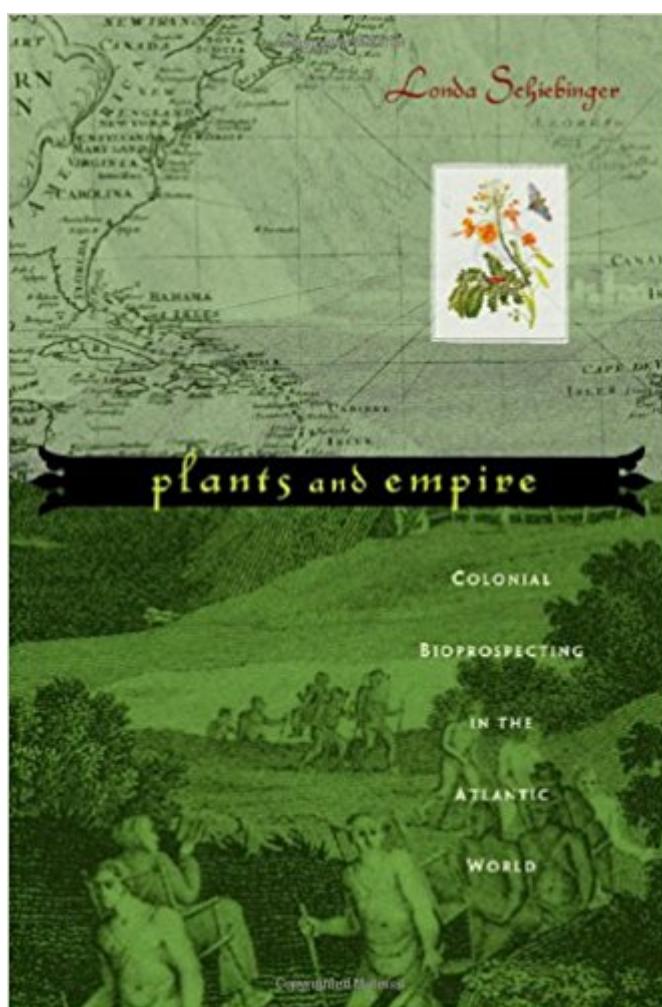


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# Plants And Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting In The Atlantic World



## Synopsis

Plants seldom figure in the grand narratives of war, peace, or even everyday life yet they are often at the center of high intrigue. In the eighteenth century, epic scientific voyages were sponsored by European imperial powers to explore the natural riches of the New World, and uncover the botanical secrets of its people. Bioprospectors brought back medicines, luxuries, and staples for their king and country. Risking their lives to discover exotic plants, these daredevil explorers joined with their sponsors to create a global culture of botany. But some secrets were unearthed only to be lost again. In this moving account of the abuses of indigenous Caribbean people and African slaves, Schiebinger describes how slave women brewed the "peacock flower" into an abortifacient, to ensure that they would bear no children into oppression. Yet, impeded by trade winds of prevailing opinion, knowledge of West Indian abortifacients never flowed into Europe. A rich history of discovery and loss, *Plants and Empire* explores the movement, triumph, and extinction of knowledge in the course of encounters between Europeans and the Caribbean populations.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Londa Schiebinger's scholarly study covers botanical exploration during what the author calls 'the long eighteenth century': from the 1670s until about 1802. This was a period of dawning European recognition that the real treasures of the New World lay not in fabled cities of gold but in the vines, bushes, and flowers that crowded village gardens and grew in the jungles beyond...Schiebinger's thoughtful study, then, sheds light not only on how new knowledge comes to be, but also on how some new knowledge comes to be ignored. (Natural History 2005-04-01)Londa Schiebinger's

ambitious, eminently readable new book focuses on "the long eighteenth century" when botany reigned as queen of the colonial sciences; Hopefully, Schiebinger's intellectual voyage beyond Europe's borders will lead many others to recognize the fundamental importance of knowledge formation--and non-formation--on the colonial "periphery" of the Atlantic World. (Gregory T. Cushman *Journal of the History of Medicine*) This is a curious book. The heart of it tries to explain why something did not happen...[Schiebinger's] focus is, as she puts it, 'the nontransfer of important bodies of knowledge from the New World into Europe.' It is, then, a study in 'agnotology,' that is, of 'culturally induced ignorances.' The study of things that did not happen and of ignorances does not sound promising, but Schiebinger has written an entertaining book that raises some interesting questions, and for people passionate about the history of fertility control, no doubt, an important book. (J.R. McNeill H-Net) [A] fascinating study...Schiebinger has read widely in the natural-historical and medical literature of the period, and she writes engagingly, bringing to life many of the chief protagonists. This book ought to be essential reading for anyone interested in the relationship between science and empire. (Mark Harrison *American Historical Review* 2005-06-01) *Plants and Empire* presents a subtle and compelling explanation for why knowledge of West Indian abortifacients was not taken up by scientists in Europe. More broadly, Schiebinger illustrates the explanatory power of agnotology. Her study of scientific ignorance demonstrates that understanding what scientists do not know is just as important as understanding what they do know. (Stuart McCook *Science* 2005-01-01)

*Plants and Empire* shows how botany and slavery, cruelty and courage, curiosity and capitalism all converged on one beautiful "peacock flower"--the ornament of European gardens, a sought-after medicament, and an abortifacient for slave women who refused to bear children into inhuman bondage. This book is rich in information and insights about how plants have transformed our world; it is above all rich in stories about the people who hunted and used them, splendidly told. (Lorraine Daston, Max Planck Institute for the History of Science)

Atlantic history is turning into quite the hot topic these days in various academic circles. When I use the phrase "Atlantic history," I'm not referring to mere narratives dealing with navies or trading vessels, but rather the sweeping arc of political, economic, cultural, and social dynamics of the nations and continents bordering the Atlantic Ocean. It is a topic that also deals with slavery, piracy, colonialism, revolution, and the rise of capitalism. Histories in this field tend to look at events spanning three or four centuries, usually the 1600s to the 1900s but often greater swaths of time,

and how these events arose from the complex interactions of various peoples. I've read quite a few books in this challenging field, from Marcus Rediker's "The Many-Headed Hydra" to Barry Unsworth's fictional novel "Sacred Hunger" to a series of essays from Philip D. Curtin. All three were enlightening in particular ways, but all three couldn't possibly hope to cover every aspect of such an enormous topic. Well, Rediker comes close. But plenty of work still exists for the keen-eyed historian. Enter Londa Schiebinger and her "Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World." Plants, it seems, moved about as much as people during this time frame. Who collected plants in the New World and took them back to Europe? Were there specific plants sought by European scientists and, if so, which ones and why? These are only a couple of the many questions the author seeks to answer in this book. According to Schiebinger, to find the answers to these vexing questions involves studying the state of botanical study in the 17th and 18th centuries, the role women played in collecting plants and using the medicine distilled from them, the personalities behind the cataloguing of plants, and the various methods used to disseminate knowledge about the medicinal uses of the plants in question. The book explains that the European nation states considered plants a valuable commodity, so much so that kings and princes underwrote the creation of special botanical gardens employing scientists and dozens of men willing to go out into the field to collect specimens. Plants could provide cures for various afflictions or dyes for clothing that could translate into millions in profit for a particular nation. Moreover, the acquisition of material meant fame and fortune for the botanists involved in their collection. Carl Linnaeus, the father of modern scientific classification, pops up in these pages more than once. So do a few women who went out into the field--primarily a man's domain--to write their own treatises on native flora and fauna. Schiebinger mentions many useful plants, but focuses on one in particular to show how empire building and imperialism manifested itself in such an innocuous activity as botany. The Peacock flower, which grew widely in the Caribbean and was used by local women as a way to end unwanted pregnancies, caught the eye of European collectors quite early. These men even knew what the plant's function was. So were does empire enter the picture? First, Schiebinger argues that doctors and botanists attempted to hide the true use of the plant back home--a process of purposefully obscuring scientific data the author calls agnotology--so that European women would not use the plant to terminate pregnancies. At the same time, doctors and researchers never hesitated to use this plant and other abortifacients in experiments on slaves in the New World. Thus knowledge, or the control of knowledge by male scientists, was used to regulate female reproduction and assert a form of dominance over the native populations in the Caribbean. Moreover, Schiebinger asserts that slaves and conquered populations used the Peacock flower

because they didn't want their children to live in bondage. Pretty heavy stuff, wouldn't you say? The research in the book is impeccable. The author consulted medical books, botanical collections, memoirs, pharmaceutical pamphlets and catalogues, letters, and other pertinent materials to construct a detailed examination of the importance of botany in European expansion and conquest. "Plants and Empire" is at its strongest when arguing that herbal medicines were enormously important to European economic trade, more important than we would think. The book is at its weakest when trying to convince the reader that scientists tried to hide the knowledge of abortifacients from European females. Yes, it does appear that the particular trait of the Peacock flower didn't pop up all over the place, but it did appear in a few journals and reports. Besides, the Europeans had access to a large number of effective abortifacients that worked just as well, if not better, than the Peacock flower. Some of these medicines were still available well into the 20th century. Moreover, the argument that the disappearance of midwives, with their vast knowledge of such "immoral" materials, would result in a loss of this knowledge amongst the general populace seems unlikely. Knowledge, especially "forbidden" knowledge, is surprisingly resistant to any attempts at restriction. I enjoyed reading Schiebinger's book despite these problems. She's quite a proficient writer, capable of guiding the reader through the often daunting numbers of Latin plant names with the greatest of ease. Too--and I probably shouldn't say this about an academic whose specialty includes gender studies--she's quite attractive if the photograph on the flap is any indication. I could easily see myself sitting in the front row of her class with endearing messages written on my eyelids. Seriously, students of Atlantic history and others who love metahistory would do well to check out this book. It is a fine contribution to the field.

Study on western imperialism and its roots (pun intended) in botanical exploration and cultivation turns into study on 17th-19th century feminism. Seriously, great book and good data but why does this gem on history have to turn into a gender study? You people seem to enjoy the previous assessment of this book but not only does the reviewer say the same thing in extremely long format but he goes on to call the author attractive and muses about being her lustful student. This book is unnecessarily tainted by feminist theory. It tries desperately to give voice to and glorify women's roles in imperialism and exploration and paint European women as victims. The only victims here are the slaves from Africa and the natives of the Americas who were raped, enslaved, and ethnically cleansed to make way for the white man AND WOMAN. This book proves white women were at least complicit in genocide.

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