

# Slavery

and the natural world

Chapter 10: Attitudes and  
acknowledgement

## Context

This material is part of a wider project on slavery and the natural world, carried out at the Natural History Museum, 2006–08. The information is based on documents held in the Museum’s libraries, and explores the links between nature (especially the knowledge, and transfer, of plants), people with an interest in natural history (mainly European writers from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries) and the history and legacies of the transatlantic slave trade<sup>1</sup>.

More can be found in the original documents, written by natural historians at the time of slavery. Contact the Natural History Museum Library [www.nhm.ac.uk/research-curation/library/](http://www.nhm.ac.uk/research-curation/library/) +44 (0) 20 7942 5000. The additional references section has other useful sources such as relevant articles, books, journals and websites.

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1 For more background information see Chapter 1: The project.

## 1. Introduction

The attitudes of natural historians towards enslaved and indigenous peoples in the Americas varied enormously. Hans Sloane was in Jamaica at the time when the transatlantic slave trade was only just beginning to shape society there. He directly profited from, and assisted the work of, the transatlantic slave trade; but although he recorded the harshness of slavery, he made virtually no explicit moral or political comments<sup>2</sup>. Later, natural historians such as Joseph Banks seemed to accept the transatlantic slave trade as part of the economic status quo of the day. Other natural historians such as Henry Barham and William Wright were plantation holders and actively supported slavery.

For many early European colonists, the Americas were seen as lands offering rich natural products, an idyllic Garden of Eden, a view that was romanticised in many images at the time<sup>3</sup>.



▲ Children harvesting the bounty of the land, Jacquin, 1763  
© The Natural History Museum, London

Some natural historians, travelling to Africa and the Americas and seeing the brutality of slavery, were uncomfortable or ashamed by what they saw.

'That Slavery not only depresses, but almost brutalizes human Nature, is evident from the low and abject State of the present *Grecians*, when compared with their learned and glorious Ancestors.' (Hughes, 1750, p16)

John Atkins, a naval surgeon writing in the 1720s, was strongly opposed to the slave trade. Thomas Winterbottom and the Quakers Peter Collinson and Dr John Fothergill also showed sympathy and concern for enslaved Africans.

2 See also Chapter 2: People and the slave trade and Chapter 4: Everyday Life.

3 The Garden of Eden idyll was later replaced by an image of degenerate and uncivilised Europeans as the planter class established themselves and introduced conspicuous consumption as well as their own questionable laws.

A minority of natural historians including Henry Barham and Maria Merian acknowledged that many of their specimens and sources of information came from enslaved Africans and indigenous peoples of the Americas. As scientific writing became less anecdotal and aimed to be more objective, many of these acknowledgements were omitted, and the contribution African and indigenous Americans made to science was lost.

The naming system that was eventually widely adopted in western science was the system developed by Carl Linnaeus<sup>4</sup>. Plants and animals were often named because of their location, their appearance, or after European explorers and naturalists of the time. It was very unusual for a scientific name to be based on an enslaved person – an exception is *Quassia amara*, named after Kwasi, an African who had been enslaved<sup>5</sup>. Majoe or Macary bitters (*Picramnia antidesma*) is one example of a common name of a plant that acknowledges an enslaved woman, Majoe.

## 2. Attitudes

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, most people in Britain had little awareness of the reality of slavery. But during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the anti-slavery movement grew as the inhumanity of the trade became more widely known.



▲ Map of Caribbean, Ogilby, 1671 © The Natural History Museum, London

Natural historians and doctors who travelled to Africa and to the colonies in the Americas did experience slavery first hand. Their attitudes often reflected the times – the transatlantic slave trade was seen as a necessary part of world trade and the need to harvest the world's riches<sup>6</sup>.

4 The two-part binomial system used a genus and a species name, both in Latin. See Chapter 2: People and the slave trade for more information on Carl Linnaeus.

5 See also Chapter 2: People and the slave trade.

6 At the time, the trade was seen as respectable, as the monarchy, the Church of England and politicians, as well as reputable merchants and tradesmen, were all involved. Philippa Gregory called her 1992 novel about the slave trade in Bristol *A Respectable Trade*.



▲ Images of Brazil, Frontispiece, Piso 1648  
© The Natural History Museum, London



▲ The people and produce of the Americas, Frontispiece, Jacquin, 1780  
© The Natural History Museum, London

Many Europeans justified slavery on the basis of skin colour or religion. Over time, scientists in Europe and the United States began to develop theories of human variation that often suggested African people were inferior, culturally, intellectually or in appearance.

Some Europeans based in the colonies described both enslaved Africans and poorer Europeans<sup>7</sup> in similar ways, suggesting that social status was an important factor. Others showed more respect, concern and sympathy for enslaved Africans.

The natural historian and Church rector Griffith Hughes, writing about enslaved people in Barbados, said:

'The Capacities of their Minds in the common Affairs of Life are but little inferior, if at all, to those of the *Europeans*. If they fail in some Arts, it may be owing more to their want of Education, and the Depression of their Spirits by Slavery, than to any Want of natural Abilities; for an higher Degree of improved Knowledge in any Occupation would not much alter their Condition for the better.' (Hughes, 1750, p16)

7 Many of whom were indentured labourers – contracted for fixed periods on low pay in poor conditions.

He concluded African and European people were not very different:

‘It hath perplexed the Learned to find out some natural Cause of the Negroes Complexion, so remarkably differing from the rest of Mankind. Some have endeavoured to account for it, from the intense Heat of the Sun in these and such-like hot Climates: but this is so far from being true, that I have always observed, that the Hair of those who are exposed to the Sun’s Heat, turns from a true black, to a brown reddish Colour. As to the Blackness of the Negroes Skin, this reaches no deeper than the outward Cutis; for, when this peels off by being scalded, or by any other Accident, the Part ever after remains white. Neither can the extraordinary Curling of their Hair be owing to the Heat of the Sun; for the *Indians* have always lank Hair, tho’ generally exposed to its Heat. As to the Stature and Make of Negroes, excepting that a greater Number of them have their Noses shorter, and Lips thicker, than the *Whites*, I never could find out any extraordinary Difference: They are generally strait-limb’d, which is occasioned, in some measure, by their not lacing with Bandages their Children when young, according to the too usual Custom of a few of the *white* Inhabitants here, as well as the almost universal Custom in most Northern Countries, which not only prevents the free Circulation of the Blood, but is often the Cause of unnatural Distortions of the Body.’  
(Hughes, 1750, pp14–16)

Griffith Hughes identified the need for more Africans in the Caribbean each year:

‘...it will not be here improper to take some Notice of the Nature and Disposition of our Negroes, or black Inhabitants, employed in cultivating our Land: These are between Sixty-five and Seventy thousand, tho’ formerly we had a greater Number: Yet we are obliged, in order to keep up a necessary Number, to have a yearly Supply from *Africa*. The hard Labour, and often the Want of Necessaries, which these unhappy Creatures are obliged to undergo, destroy a greater Number than are bred up here...’ (Hughes, 1750, p14)

William Smith, an Anglican priest and amateur natural historian, argued against converting Africans to Christianity because of the risk of uprisings<sup>8</sup>:

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8 See also Chapter 9: Transfer and exploitation of knowledge. Converting enslaved Africans to Christianity was banned in many British colonies throughout much of the time of the transatlantic slave trade.

'I have, since my return to *England*, (several times) heard it objected, by mistaken Zealots, that if the Masters of our Plantation Negroes, would but have them baptized, and that if we Clergymen, would be at the pains to instruct them, they would then do much better in all respects, because the *Christian Religion*, would teach them far better Principles, than they now have to work upon, under a State of Paganism. But alas! these People are by no means competent Judges of so weighty an affair: For a Friend of mine, baptized a Negro Boy, and taught him to read; the Consequence whereof, was, That he might look after his Horse himself, and go on his own Errands for the future, or else, that he might find another Negro to do it: In short, it is ridiculous to argue against repeated Experience; and the true state of the Case, stands thus: When a Slave is once Christened, he conceits that he ought to be upon a level with his Master, in all other respects; in consequence whereof, he presumes, That if his Master corrects him, for ever so great a Fault, he is at full liberty to send him out of the World, by a Dose of Poison. For instance, a Parishioner of mine, baptized a Black Woman, and had her well instructed in our Religion here in *England*, but she had not long been arrived at *Nevis*, before she poisoned four White Persons, and was executed for so doing: But if even the whole Country was so mad, as to set about such an odd Conversion, the effect would then be a general Rebellion, and Massacre, of us Whites: This is the Truth.' (Smith, 1845, p229–30)

Natural historians commented on ways in which Europeans saw both the indigenous peoples of the Americas and enslaved Africans. In some cases these observations were comparisons between people based on physical characteristics:

'Neither can the extraordinary Curling of their Hair be owing to the Heat of the Sun; for the *Indians* have always lank Hair, tho' generally exposed to its Heat.' (Hughes, 1750, p14–5)

Sometimes the comments were admiring:

'The Indians or natives of Guiana make very good hammocks of cotton, which they barter with the inhabitants of Paramaribo for other commodities.' (Stedman, 1806, vol 1, p221–3)

Some European writers recognised that enslaved Africans had skills to produce crops. The planter Henry Barham wrote that:

'The way of making indigo is so difficult, that many planters never obtain it: I had a Papaw negro that would make indigo with any man in Jamaica; and, when they miscarried in making it, would send far and near to know of him the reason, and to remedy it: I must confess I never pretended to direct him. The whole dependence is in due steeping the weed, and beating its liquor.' (Barham, 1794, p77)



▲ Indigoterie, showing the stages of indigo production, Du Tertre, 1671  
© The Natural History Museum, London



▲ *Indigo (Indigofera tinctoria)*, Sloane Herbarium, collected 1687–89, ID 709  
© The Natural History Museum, London

Europeans also often relied on enslaved Africans for medical treatments:

'We Whites are subject to have a very small sort of Worms called Chiggoes breed insensibly in our Toes, and in the Bottoms of our Feet. In two days time or less, we perceive that they make us go a little lame, and that place looks blueish: But they are easily, and with scarce any pain, taken out of the skin by one of our skilful Negroes, by help of a Pin or Needle; and a little Tobacco Ashes put into the hole from whence they are taken, finishes a Cure.' (Smith, 1745, p99–100)

'It is not likewise uncommon for these little Vermin to get into the Feet of People of the best Condition; but as they are soon taken out by their Slaves, it seldom proves to be of bad Consequence...' (Hughes, 1750, p42)



◀ Chiggers, Catesby, 1771  
© The Natural History Museum, London



Often the European accounts reflected the realities of colonisation. For example, the English fought the Spanish over control of dyewoods in Mexico<sup>9</sup>. Hans Sloane observed that the English lost the co-operation of the indigenous peoples of the Americas in the trade, because, instead of treating them as equal trading partners, they captured them and sold them into enslavement:

'The Indians of this place us'd formerly to Trade with them, but the English not keeping their Faith, but taking and selling them, they are retired up into the Country several Leagues.' (Sloane, vol 1, 1707, plxxxii–lxxxiii)

Even where there is no evidence suggesting natural historians' attitudes to the trade, there are examples showing that they were prepared to use the transatlantic slave trade to their advantage. Dru Drury<sup>10</sup>, for example, sent a cargo of whip thongs for sale in St Kitts:

'I rec'd your 2 letters together with the Box of Flys by Mr. Finch, for which I return you my sincere thanks. They are in extream good order, a full account of which I shall make the subject of the next letter... Also I have set down 12 doz. whip thongs which I sent July 19 1753 re which I did not charge in the Invoice of that date but mentioned them in my Letter of 27 July 1753 wherein I desir'd you to sell them for me, these I must get you likewise to set to rights, for as I never rec'd any Letter from you in which these things were mention'd, I cannot ascertain them myself.' (Drury, 1761–83, p19)

## 2.1 John Gabriel Stedman



▲ John Gabriel Stedman stands over an enslaved African after the capture of Gado Saby, Frontispiece, Stedman, 1806  
© The Natural History Museum, London

It appears that the longer some Europeans spent in the colonies, the more sympathetic they became towards enslaved people. This was true of John Gabriel Stedman and Maria Merian<sup>11</sup> in Suriname, where the Dutch colonial rule was particularly brutal. John Gabriel Stedman described the compassion he felt for an elderly Maroon left behind when others had fled:

9 See Chapter 3: Commercial plants.

10 See Chapter 2: People and the slave trade.

11 See Chapter 2: People and the slave trade.

‘About noon we returned to *Gado-Saby*, where, sitting down to rest from our fatigue, a tall *old rebel negro* appeared suddenly in the very midst of us, with a long white beard, a white cotton sheet tied about his shoulders, and a broken cutlass in his hand. Seeing this venerable apparition, I instantly started up, and forbidding my people to fire at him, I civilly desired him to approach me, pledging myself that no person under my command should dare to hurt him; but that he should have every thing for his relief that I could afford. – He answered, ‘No, no, massera!’ with the utmost deliberation, and shaking his head in an instant disappeared; while two of my men (contrary to my orders) fired after him, at the distance of perhaps six paces only, yet both missed their object, to my great satisfaction, he being a poor forsaken creature that had been left behind the rest, gleaning a precarious subsistence from his own deserted fields which we had formerly destroyed. What renders the negroes so difficult to hit with a ball is this, that they never run straight forward, but *zig-zag*, liked the forked lightning in the elements.

I now, to fulfil my orders, once more ransacked *Cosaay*, with its adjoining plains, though with a sore heart, on account of the poor lonely old rebel. Here, having cut down several cotton and plantain-trees, okero or althea, pigeon pease, maize, pine-apples, and some rice, most of which had spontaneously sprung up again since our last devastation, I could not help leaving, before a *little shed*, where was some fresh ashes and banana shells, a few rusk biscuits, and a good piece of salt beef, as also a bottle of new rum, for the unfortunate solitary old man, this being his retreat; after which we once more encamped in the fields of *Cosaay*.’ (Stedman, vol 2, 1806, p330–2)

In spite of his sympathy, John Gabriel Stedman was not against slavery, and he worked as a mercenary soldier who hunted down freedom-fighting Maroons on behalf of the Dutch. Although he was very concerned to protect his mistress, Joanna, and their son from the horrors of the slave trade, his criticism of Kwasi suggests that he may have thought Africans were not supposed to be treated equally to Europeans<sup>12</sup>:

‘Of this *Graman-Qwacy* I will beg leave to give a short account, before I take farewell of the reader. Suffice it for the present to say, that the Prince of Orange, besides paying his out and homeward passage, and giving him several presents, sent him back to Surinam dressed in a suit of blue and scarlet, trimmed over with broad gold lace: on his hat he wore a white feather, and looked upon the whole not unlike one of the Dutch generals; which goodness made this king of the negroes, however, very proud, and even frequently very saucy.’ (Stedman, vol 2, 1806, p313)

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12 See Chapter 2: People and the slave trade.

John Gabriel Stedman described an idealised view of contented enslaved workers that in fact belonged to him on a cotton plantation in Suriname in 1775:

'I shall now introduce to the reader's acquaintance a negro family in that state of tranquil happiness, which they always enjoy under a humane and indulgent master. The figures in the plate are supposed to be of the Loango nation, by the marks on the man's body, while on his breast may be seen J.G.S. in a cipher<sup>13</sup>, by which his owner may ascertain his property. He carries a basket with small fish, and a net upon his head, with a large fish in his hand, caught by himself in the river. His wife, who is pregnant, is employed in carrying different kinds of fruit, spinning a thread of cotton upon her distaff, and comfortably smoking her pipe of tobacco. Besides all this, she has a boy upon her back, and another playing by her side. Thus, under a mild master and an honest overseer, a negro's labour is no more than a healthy exercise, which ends at the setting-sun, and the remaining time is his own, which he employs in hunting, fishing, cultivating his garden, or making baskets and fish-nets for sale; with this money he buys a hog or two, sometimes fowls or ducks, all which fattens upon the spontaneous growth of the soil, without expense, and very little trouble, and, in the end, they afford him considerable profit.' (Stedman, vol 2, 1806, p291)

He also described the brutality of other plantation holders in graphic detail and included illustrations<sup>14</sup> that showed some of the ways in which enslaved people were subjected to extreme cruelty.



▲ Enslaved workers in Suriname, Stedman, 1806 © The Natural History Museum, London



▲ The Execution of Breaking on the Rack, by William Blake, from Stedman 1806 © The Natural History Museum, London

13 J G S are Stedman's own initials.

14 The graphic images by leading artists, including William Blake, were based on Stedman's drawings but made even more horrific. They became powerful evidence for the British anti-slavery movement.

## 2.2 Hans Sloane



▲ Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753),  
Picture Library reference 4273  
© The Natural History Museum, London

Hans Sloane was a physician (doctor) who travelled to Jamaica and built up a collection of plants and other objects that formed the basis for the British Museum (and subsequently the Natural History Museum)<sup>15</sup>.

In Jamaica, he collected more than 800 plants and other natural history specimens and recorded the ways in which they were used. Hans Sloane's personal attitude to slavery is not clear. While he directly benefited from, and participated in, the trade, his writings are ambiguous, suggesting neither a pro nor anti-slavery stance. While he rejected African medical authority, he noted that Africans lived far longer than white settlers, who often drank themselves to death, including his employer, the Duke of Albemarle. In addition to his botanical specimens, he collected many cultural artefacts as exotic 'curiosities', including musical instruments and transcriptions of music played by Africans. Hans Sloane published many observations on slavery, including the punishments Europeans inflicted on Africans<sup>16</sup>:

'After they are whip'd till they are Raw, some put on their Skins Pepper and Salt to make them smart; at other times their Masters will drop melted Wax on their Skins, and use several very exquisite Torments.' (Sloane, vol 1, 1707, plvii)

As a doctor, he wanted to learn as much as he could about local herbal remedies<sup>17</sup>. He described how enslaved Africans treated illnesses, especially with herbal remedies ('simples'):

15 See Chapter 2: People and the slave trade.

16 Hans Sloane presented the punishment and torture of enslaved people as an object of curiosity in his *Natural History* in 1707; curious in his view both for the extremity of the punishments used and the dignity with which Africans endured them. He made no clear moral or political argument about the justice of such practices. It was only after the 1780s, as a result of abolitionist campaigning, that it became impossible to publish such accounts without confronting slavery as an urgent moral and political issue, rather than something to be described simply as part of natural history. See, for example, James Delbourgo's essay at: [www.britishmuseum.org/PDF/Delbourgo%20essay.pdf](http://www.britishmuseum.org/PDF/Delbourgo%20essay.pdf).

17 Some of his observations of Jamaican plants used as medicines are available at [www.nhm.ac.uk/nature-online/life/plants-fungi/roots-herbs/index.jsp](http://www.nhm.ac.uk/nature-online/life/plants-fungi/roots-herbs/index.jsp).

‘Their Physick consists for the most part of Cupping with *Calabashes* on the pain’d place. They first apply the *Calabash* with some Chips or Combustible matter burning in it, when that is pull’d off they cut the place with Scarifications, and then apply the Cupping glasses or *Calabashes* again. Their Lancet is a sharp Knife, with which they cut through the Flesh held between their Fingers. This, instead of relieving, sometimes seems rather to add more pain to the place, by making a Flux of Blood that way... Another very general Remedy in almost every Disease, is mixing Clay and Water, and plaistering over either some part, or all the body in the warm Sun; but as this must of necessity stop the insensible transpiration, so it rarely misses to add a Cough to the Patients Malady, and always, by what I saw, fails of the Cure of the Distemper. Although I will not say but that in some Diseases it may avail. They use very few Decoctions of Herbs, no Distillations nor Infusions, but usually take the Herbs in substance. For instance, in a Clap, they grind the Roots of Fingrigo and Lime-Tree, between two Stones, and stir them into Lime-Juice till it be pretty thick, and so make the Patient take it evening and morning for some time. This is the same method of preparing Medicines, with what in the *East-Indies* is practised, for I have seen many Simples from thence, and all, or most, are to be ground on a Stone with some simple Liquor, and so given the Patient. Besides Simples, the *Negros* use very much bleeding in the Nose with a Lancet for the Head-ach. They thrust up the Lancet into the tip of the nose, after tying a Ligature about the Neck, and some drops of Blood follow, whence they think themselves relieved in Colds, with Hoarseness and stuffed Noses. Bathing is very much used by them. They boil Bay-Leaves, Wild-Sage, &c. in water, in one of their Pots, when boil’d they tye a *Fasciculus* of these Plants up together, and by putting that into the Decoction sprinkle their Bodies all over with it as fast as they can, they being naked. The *Negros* and *Indians* use to Bath themselves in fair water every day, as often as conveniently they can.’ (Sloane, vol 1, 1707, pliii–lv)

Sloane documented traditional uses of plants and ways of life in great detail, and thought that the information would be of wider benefit:

‘Another Use of this History may be, to teach the Inhabitants of the Parts where these Plants grow, their several Uses, which I have endeavour’d to do, by the best Informations I could get from Books, and the Inhabitants, either Europeans, Indians or Blacks.’ (Sloane, vol 2, 1725, preface pxv)

However, he also suggested that he had nothing to learn from enslaved Africans’ medicine, which was in any case learned from indigenous peoples of the Americas, and which had already been documented by earlier Spanish authors<sup>18</sup>:

18 Compare this attitude with other natural historians such as William Bosman, writing about the west coast of Africa in 1721, who was impressed by African medicine and felt that Europeans could learn much from their treatments, see Chapter 8: Medicines. Edward Long, who wrote *The history of Jamaica* with generally racist views of enslaved people, referred to Hans Sloane and lamented the ignorance of planters towards the medical knowledge of the enslaved (Long, vol 2, 1774, p136–7).

'I have heard a great deal of their great Feats in curing several Diseases, but could never find them any way reasonable, nor successful in any, and that little they know of Simples here, seems to come from the Indians, they being us'd for the same Diseases in *Mexico* and *Brazile*, as *Piso*, *Marcgrave*, *Hernandez*, *Ximenes*, and others relate.' (Sloane, vol 1, 1707, pliii–lv)

Hans Sloane dismissed some of the knowledge and treatments used by enslaved Africans and described his own attempt to cure a man of a sexually transmitted disease with mercury:

'One *Hercules*, a lusty Black *Negro* Overseer, and Doctor, was not only famous amongst the Blacks in his Master Colonel *Fuller's* Plantation, but amongst the Whites in the Neighbourhood, for curing several Diseases, and particularly *Gonorrhoeas*. He had been three years before troubled with that Distemper, which he thought by the Country Simples he had cur'd, but came to me, complaining of a very great heat in making water with intolerable pain, and scalding. Looking upon that part affected, I found he had neglected his Clap, and that Caruncles had grown up and stopt almost quite the passage of Urin or *Urethra*, wherefore Nature had by a Tumour and Apostemation made a passage for the Urin in *Perinaeo*. This passage had callous Lips. I order'd him some Mercurial Medicines, and would have try'd several other Remedies for his Cure, had I not soon after left the Island. There are many such *Indian* and Black Doctors, who pretend, and are supposed to understand, and cure several Distempers, but by what I could see by their practice, (which because of the great effects of the Jesuits Bark, found out by them, I look'd into as much as I could) they do not perform what they pretend, unless in the vertues of some few Simples. Their ignorance of Anatomy, Diseases, Method, &c. renders even that knowledge of the vertues of Herbs, not only useless, but even sometimes hurtful to those who imploy them.' (Sloane, vol 1, 1707, pcxli)

Spending 15 months in Jamaica, Hans Sloane did not collect as much local information as some planters with an amateur interest in natural history who were based in the Caribbean for longer. He cited and paraphrased other writers' work, particularly information from Henry Barham used in Sloane's second volume of *Natural History*. Whereas Henry Barham acknowledged his enslaved African and indigenous sources (see below), Hans Sloane adopted the approach of referencing secondary written sources and omitting first-hand sources of information.

Hans Sloane's work was particularly significant because he collected specimens, described them in detail and published these observations so that they were available to others. His descriptions and illustrations were the basis of many of the scientific names for Jamaican plants later introduced by Carl Linnaeus.

## 2.3 Joseph Banks



▲ Sir Joseph Banks (1743–1820),  
Picture Library reference 51908  
© The Natural History Museum, London

Joseph Banks was a very important influence politically, and he was particularly interested in making plants profitable<sup>19</sup>. He planned the transfer of breadfruit from the Pacific to the Caribbean to feed enslaved Africans cheaply.

Joseph Banks' attitudes to slavery seemed to have changed over time, perhaps as a result of his contact with the pro-slavery doctor and plantation holder William Wright who supplied him with many specimens (see below). Joseph Banks also corresponded with the English abolitionist William Wilberforce and expressed his support for the former enslaved people in Haiti who had fought for and won their freedom:

'Was I Five and Twenty, as I was when I embarked with Capt. Cooke, I am very sure I should not Lose a day in Embarking for Hayti. To see a sort of Human beings emerging from Slavery & making most Rapid Strides towards the perfection of Civilisation, must I think be the most delightfull of all Food for Contemplation.' (Banks, quoted in Gascoigne, 1994, p41)

Joseph Banks clearly saw slavery as morally unacceptable:

'[A] struggle almost equal to an Earthquake must take place & Slavery must be abolished not on moral principles which are in my opinion incapable of being maintained in argument, but on Commercial ones which weight equally in moral & in immoral minds.' (Banks, quoted in Gascoigne, 1994, p41)

He saw enslavement in economic terms and wrote that free labour would generate even more profit. However, he was reluctant to support the abolition of slavery:

19 See Chapter 2: People and the slave trade.

'I have no doubt it is impolitic & inexpedient to imploy slaves when free men can be procured & am fully convinced that the Labor of Slaves is in every instance dearer than that of free men deprivd of all hope of improving their circumstances by successful efforts... the ambition of a slave is to do as little labor as possible. But, on the other hand, not convinced of the need to hasten the end of slavery. Apparently there were no free men to do the work in the West Indies, or otherwise, if it were more economically efficient to employ free labourers, then the planters would do so. By comparison with Europe it would be better to let slavery die a natural death. The state of servitude adopted in this & other European nations is a complex system which in the end naturely arises out of slavery. We had slaves & no servants in England 1700 years ago & 1700 years hence the West Indies will be cultivated by free men... The motion of it from worse to better is slow but it is sure... let us be contented that we are free here without insisting that all mankind shall be made free.' (Banks, quoted in Gascoigne, 1994, p40)

## 2.4 William Wright



▲Memoir of William Wright, Frontispiece, Wright, 1828 © The Natural History Museum, London

There were a number of people linked to natural history who were obviously in favour of slavery.

William Wright was a naturalist and became Surgeon-General in Jamaica between 1774 and 1778. Initially he was doctor to 1,200 enslaved Africans, as well as a local free population, in Trelawny. William Wright became one of Britain's top experts on tropical medicine and disease. He was a slave-owner and was in favour of slavery, although he agreed that conditions for enslaved people should be improved. He rented out his enslaved workers to try to make his money quickly:

'... the annual profit being equal to 50 per cent. On the value of the slave'. (Wright, 1828, p24)



As the anti-slavery movement grew towards the end of the 1700s, William Wright gave written evidence to the Privy Council in favour of the slave trade in 1788:

'The following questions were stated by the Privy Council to the agent for Jamaica; the answers subjoined to each were given by Dr. William Wright, lately of that Island.

Q. Are Negroe Slaves subject to any particular diseases to which the white inhabitants are not subject? If they are so subject assign the causes.

A. Negroes are subject to three species of Leprosy, viz. the Elephantiasis, the Leprosy of the Greeks and the Arabians, and these they entail on their posterity. The Yaws is an African disease, common in the West-Indies, and Numbers of Negroes die annually, with the best of management.

Q. Can any cause be assigned which impedes the natural increase of Negro slaves?

A. Too early use of venery, promiscuous connection, concealment of venereal complaints, night-walking to Negroe plays, immoderate dancing, excess in spirituous liquors, &c. ...

Q. Are many children born of Negro slaves, and in what proportion are they reared?

A. Many born: If they escape the Locked-Jaw, if they get over the Small-Pox, Measles, Hooping-Cough, Dentition, and the Yaws, and if born of sound parents, they are easily reared.

Q. Would it be possible to cultivate the lands in the West-Indies by the labour of free Negroes?

A. Impossible.

Q. Would it be possible to cultivate the West-India Islands to advantage by the labour of Europeans; or could their constitutions subsist in such a climate under the labour necessary?

A. Utterly impossible. Under no government they would commit every excess; Nine out of ten would die with the term of the three years.' (From a printed cutting enclosed in letter dated 1788 from Wright to Banks)

William Wright wrote to his brother opposing the bill to abolish the slave trade going through Parliament in 1792 (the Bill was not passed until 1807):

‘The Slave Trade Bill has met with an unexpected check in the House of Lords. Ministers must have foreseen this; but, by fine speeches on humanity, keep up their popularity, and retain their places. Prince William Henry was in Jamaica when I was there, and saw the real state the Negroes were in. He seems to have weighed the consequences of abolishing the trade, as fatal to our commerce, ruinous to our islands, destructive to our countrymen, and no way serving the cause of humanity. In Africa, where, if they have no vent for their prisoners or felons, they will butcher them; nay, eat them! Several nations have their teeth filed as sharp as those of dogs; and I have been told it was done to bite and devour their enemies. Such are the cannibals we are making a noise about, while we lose sight of all the tender ties of relationship, colour, country, and Christianity. A levelling disposition and spirit of innovation seem very prevalent. A new society has been formed, to get more equal representation in Parliament. This will give ministers something else to mind than the savage tribes of Guinea.’ (Wright, 1828, p88)

He gave further evidence to the House of Commons in 1792 explaining why Africans were suited to slavery:

**Question.** How comes it about that slave Negroes are able to labour in the heat of the sun, which you allege so fatal to Europeans?

**Answer.** From conversations I have had with sensible Guinea Negroes, I think they change their climate and condition for the better. They described their country to be hot, sultry, and in many places unhealthy; their habitations as temporary and miserable, infested by noxious animals, and surrounded by hostile nations, so that their lives and properties are perpetually in danger. They are brought to a fine healthy island, where, in a little time, they find themselves quite at home, in safety and under protection. The Negro is supplied with every necessary of life, both in food and clothing. He has a good house, and proper utensils. When at length he is put to work, it is proportioned to his strength. The heat of the sun is so far from being hurtful, he takes delight in it. This, too, is precisely the case with his descendants.’ (Wright, 1828, p16–17)

William Wright corresponded with Joseph Banks until 1807 and sent him many specimens<sup>20</sup>. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1778, the same year that Joseph Banks became its President. It is possible that William Wright may have influenced Joseph Banks’ attitude towards slavery, and the plan to transplant breadfruit from the Pacific to the Caribbean<sup>21</sup>. Joseph Banks seems to have been least opposed to slavery during the 1790s when his connections with William Wright were strongest.

20 The Natural History Museum has a small collection of letters from William Wright to Joseph Banks, dated 1788–1791. A larger collection of Wright’s letters to Banks, from 1778 to 1793, is in the State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, and online at: [www.sl.nsw.gov.au/banks/series\\_14/14\\_view.cfm](http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/banks/series_14/14_view.cfm).

21 See Chapter 5: Diet and nutrition.

## 2.5 Thomas Winterbottom

Thomas Winterbottom was a physician who spent seven years in the newly established anti-slavery settlement of Sierra Leone<sup>22</sup>. He was against the slave trade and, unlike many other writers at the time, he made a respectful study of local customs and traditions and indigenous medicinal knowledge. He refused to describe all Africans as if they were a single people and showed the diversity of people he encountered. He also explained the difference between the medical practices and the terminology of different cultural groups he met.

Thomas Winterbottom wrote a detailed description of African sleeping sickness<sup>23</sup>, and one of the symptoms he noticed (the enlargement of the lymph glands in the neck) is still known as Winterbottom's sign.

He drew on local knowledge and felt Europeans would benefit from understanding more about African treatments, but he also understood Africans' reluctance to part with their medicinal knowledge<sup>24</sup>.

Thomas Winterbottom worked as a doctor for four years in Sierra Leone, treating malaria (which he caught several times himself), sleeping sickness, yaws, leprosy, tuberculosis, scurvy, dysentery and many other diseases. He reduced the death rate by realising that poor hygiene and dirty conditions encouraged disease and infection.

Thomas Winterbottom had an extremely positive view of African women, and rejected polygyny. He wrote:

'... particularly the females, are said to be the handsomest people... estimation of female beauty among the natives... is the same as in most [other countries]... [they] are remarkable for the beautiful contour of their limbs, and for an ingenuous open countenance...' (Winterbottom, vol I, 1803, p180–1)

'... women are regarded as beings of an inferior nature, and as born to be the slaves of man... Polygamy... tends still more to debase the female sex... [men rise] in the esteem of [neighbours] in proportion to the numbers of women'. (Winterbottom, vol 1, 1803, p144–5)

At the time, there was growing support for a scientific theory of human difference based on the inferiority of Africans. Europeans were often placed highest on the scale of humanity with Africans often placed lowest. Thomas Winterbottom refuted these arguments point by point in a measured style. He rejected ideas that Africans were inherently inferior to Europeans. He wrote that racial differences based on skin colour were absurd when there are such different skin colours within racial groups. Jewish people, for example, vary from white to black and there are huge variations within African populations<sup>25</sup>.

When Thomas Winterbottom died in 1859 he was 94 years old, the oldest doctor in Europe at that time.

22 See Chapter 2: People and the slave trade for more information on Henry Smeathman's role in setting up the Sierra Leone settlement.

23 See Chapter 7: Fevers.

24 See Chapter 8: Medicines and Chapter 9: Transfer and exploitation of knowledge.

25 See Pocock, 2007.

## 2.6 Quakers



▲ Peter Collinson (1694–1768),  
Picture Library reference 52076  
© The Natural History Museum, London

Peter Collinson and John Fothergill were two natural historians who were also Quakers<sup>26</sup> and strongly anti-slavery.

Peter Collinson was a cloth merchant and a keen gardener. Through his business contacts he received seeds and plants from around the world. His personal plant collections became famous, and he realised the economic value of importing North American seeds for English collectors. He was a patron of Mark Catesby<sup>27</sup>. Peter Collinson corresponded with Hans Sloane, Carl Linnaeus, John Fothergill and Benjamin Franklin (on electricity), and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society. His contribution to charities included being a founding governor of the Foundling Hospital for abandoned babies.

John Fothergill was a leading London physician and horticulturist and was one of the scientists who sponsored Henry Smeathman's specimen-collecting trip to Sierra Leone<sup>28</sup>. He was also an educational reformer, a supporter of many charitable causes and a tireless friend of Americans and the cause of American rights. John Fothergill founded a famous Quaker school for boys and girls and other charitable and educational institutions in America. He combined knowledge of advances in medical science and care of the sick with discoveries in natural history and political developments during the American Revolution. Benjamin Franklin, a friend of his, wrote, 'I can hardly conceive that a better man has ever existed'.

The humanitarian qualities of Quakers that Peter Collinson and John Fothergill shared were supported by the majority of the British public as the anti-slavery movement grew in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

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26 The Society of Friends (who became the Quakers) objected to slavery from the late 1600s, produced the first anti-slavery literature in the 1760s, and presented their first petition to Parliament in 1763. They strongly influenced The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, set up in 1787.

27 See Chapter 2: People and the slave trade.

28 See Chapter 2: People and the slave trade.

### 3. Acknowledgement

Some natural historians and their suppliers acknowledged that they gained information from enslaved Africans who were often referred to as 'negros'. For example, the natural historian James Petiver received information from Captain J Walduck, in Barbados, who wrote:

'I have now only sent you one book of plants, with as many of their names and virtues as I could learne, their uses I have gott from our Physicians (shall I call them) Nurses, Old women and Negros, and for the future, I will take care by some experiment or other not to be imposed upon but will serve you with truth to the utmost of my Capacity... [I]f you or any friend of yours will put me upon any enquiry or experiments directing the method and that [being] in my capacity I will redely goe about it, and remit you all the matter of Fact with pleasure and Truth, and likewise if you will take the pains to Instruct me by letters, or direct me to Books, how to know the Qualities of Herbs, Roots, barks, etc. as I have negros and other opportunities to employ my time in those things, so my Letter with the things themselves, shall wait upon you upon every discovery I make... it would be the greatest pleasure imaginable to me to Collect and Improve what nature hath so liberally bestowed upon us.' (Petiver Papers, 1712<sup>29</sup>, p24–28)

Dru Drury told Henry Smeathman that he wanted all the details of his interaction with Africans and 'whether they laugh at you' for collecting in Sierra Leone<sup>30</sup>:

'I desire when you send me the next Letter you would be particularly careful to write small, I insist on it you don't write larger than this, let me have none of your damned large scrambling characters that wont allow you to put above 6 words in a Line & by that means prevent me knowing in what manner you live how you spend your time & what reception you have met with among the Blacks, how they relish your catching Birds & Flies whether they laugh at you for so doing & whether you have yet made a journey into the interior part of the country in short I want to have the whole history of your present life compiled in a sheet of paper & I am so anxious to hear from you that I most heartily curse the avarice of the merchants for carrying their Ships such an enormous way round as the West Indies & not sending them directly to Europe.' (Drury, 1761–83, p242)

Some other natural historians, especially those who spent time in the colonies, gave details of how they obtained specimens and their local sources of information. Two examples are Henry Barham and Maria Merian.

29 British Library, Sloane Ms 2302, ff 24, 28.

30 See Chapter 2: People and the slave trade.

### 3.1 Henry Barham

Henry Barham was a naval surgeon who settled in Jamaica, where he established a private practice as a doctor. He eventually bought land and became a substantial plantation holder, living there for over 30 years. He was largely self-taught in natural history, and in about 1710 he wrote up a large list of Jamaican plants and their medicinal properties, which he sent to Hans Sloane, perhaps in the hope of having it published. Henry Barham also sent Sloane cultural objects including a bullet and clothing used by Maroon resistance fighters. Hans Sloane found such articles particularly fascinating as mountainous areas occupied by Maroons had been too dangerous for him to visit personally during his time in Jamaica.

Henry Barham supported slavery and believed that God put Africans and indigenous Americans on Earth to profit Europeans. Having lived in Jamaica for over 30 years, Barham was certain that Africans and indigenous peoples had knowledge, particularly through their medical traditions, worth seeking out.

Henry Barham's list was written in an informal, anecdotal style and he acknowledged that much of his information came from enslaved Africans and indigenous peoples of the Americas. He frequently said that he was introduced to a plant or its medicinal properties by African or indigenous American people.

Henry Barham was, however, usually disrespectful in the way he acknowledged enslaved Africans and indigenous peoples in the Americas and he rarely identified them as individuals<sup>31</sup>. In one account he was cured by an African who he described as 'vile and mean'.

'Called the hog-plum tree<sup>32</sup>, and is a larger tree than any of the rest, having a large yellow plum, which hath a rankish smell, but a pleasant tart taste. The hogs feeding upon them, they are called hog-plums; sheep also feed upon them, when fallen upon the ground. In the year 1716, after a severe fever had left me, a violent inflammation, pain, and swelling, seized both my legs, with pitting like the dropsy; I used several things, to no effect. A negro going through the house when I was bathing them, said, 'Master, I can cure you,' which I desired he would; and immediately he brought me bark of this tree, with some of the leaves, and bid me bathe with that. I then made a bath of them, which made the water red as claret, and very rough in taste: I kept my legs immersed in the bath as long as I could, covering them with a blanket, and then laid myself upon a couch, and had them rubbed very well with warm napkins; I then covered them warm, and sweated very much: I soon found ease, and fell asleep. In five or six times repeating this method, I was perfectly recovered, and had the full strength and use of my legs as well as ever; giving God thanks for his providential care, in bestowing such virtues to mean and common plants, and that the knowledge of them should be made known to so vile and mean objects as negro slaves and Indians.' (Barham, 1794, p148–9)

31 Barham's account of Majoe (*Picramnia antidesma*), which was unusually named after an enslaved woman, was more respectful, see section 4. Naming.

32 Hog plum is *Spondias mombin*.



▲ Hog Plum (*Spondias mombin*), Sloane Herbarium, collected 1687–89, ID 952  
© The Natural History Museum, London

Hans Sloane used Henry Barham's information extensively and acknowledged this in the second volume of his *Natural History of Jamaica* (1725). Both Hans Sloane and Edward Long (a plantation holder<sup>33</sup>) largely omitted the references Henry Barham had made to his sources. Hans Sloane also proposed Henry Barham for election as a Fellow of the Royal Society. He did not, however, get Barham's work published. Henry Barham did not know Latin, and therefore did not write in the newly emerging academic style. His list was published only in 1794, and was then mistakenly attributed as the work of his son, also named Henry.



▲ Anna Maria Sibylla Merian (1647–1717), Picture Library reference 4886  
© The Natural History Museum, London

### 3.2 Maria Merian

Maria Merian's accounts from Suriname show enslaved women's resistance through abortion and poison<sup>34</sup>, but also show how recognition of African and indigenous peoples' contributions to science was minimised over time.

Maria Merian used information from enslaved Africans and indigenous Americans when working on Suriname insects. She acknowledged and respected the help and knowledge of 'myne slaven' (my slaves)<sup>35</sup>.

She also described the hardship enslaved Africans endured. Maria Merian described the peacock flower (*Caesalpinia pulcherrima*) and its use in abortions.

33 Edward Long wrote *The History of Jamaica*, 1774. Long was in favour of slavery, justified by what he saw as the uncivilised state of Africans and Britain's rightful claim to profit from the Caribbean. The historian Londa Schiebinger described Edward Long's views on traditional cures as racist (Schiebinger, 2004, p82).

34 See Chapter 6: Resistance.

35 See also Schiebinger, 2004, for further information.

'This plant Flos pavonis has parts which are used by the slave women to induce abortion. The Indian slave women are very badly treated by their white enslavers and do not wish to bear children who must live under equally horrible conditions. The black slave women, imported mainly from Guinea and Angola, also try to avoid pregnancy with their white enslavers and actually seldom beget children. They often use the root of this plant to commit suicide in the hope of returning to their native land through reincarnation, so that they may live in freedom with their relatives and loved ones in Africa while their bodies die here in slavery, as they have told me themselves.' (Merian, 1705, p45)



▲ Flos pavonis (*Caesalpinia pulcherrima*), Merian, 1705 © The Natural History Museum, London

There was also evidence that indigenous peoples of the Americas (Tainos, Caribs and Arawaks) all knew of, and made use of, abortion herbs before European contact<sup>36</sup>.

Hans Sloane knew Maria Merian's Suriname work (he had one of her original 1705 editions), but he did not quote her on this particular plant:

'It provokes the Menstrua extremely, causes Abortion, &c. and does whatever Savin<sup>37</sup> or powerful Emmenagogues will do. Ligon tells us that it was carried first to Barbados from the Cape Verd Isles, and that it throve there very much.' (Sloane, vol 2, 1725, p49–50)

Hans Sloane's attitude to abortion was summarised when he wrote:

'... if women knew how dangerous a thing it is to cause abortion, they would never attempt it... One may as easily expect to shake off unripe Fruit from a tree, without injury or violence to the Tree, as endeavour to procure Abortion without injury or violence to the Mother'. (Sloane, quoted in Schiebinger, 2004, p110)

Other European naturalists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as Henry Barham, described *Caesalpinia pulcherrima*'s powers.

36 See Schiebinger, 2004, p128.

37 Savin (*Juniperus sabina*) was a plant used in Europe to induce abortion.



'Sir Hans Sloane tribes it amongst the bastard senna's, for this comes the nearest of any in America, and, when dried and old, it is very difficult to distinguish one from the other; and as for virtues, I have often experienced it to have the same with that of Alexandria; besides which, a decoction of the leaves or flowers has a wonderful power to move or force the *menstrua* in women. The flowers make a delicate red purging syrup, and the root dyes a scarlet colour.' (Barham, 1794, p16)

James Macfadyen, writing in 1837, cited both Ligon and Hans Sloane and provided illustrations that Europeans had moved away from acknowledging local contributors:

'This prickly shrub is usually about 10 feet in height. The flowers are very showy, red or less frequently yellow, with long stamens, arranged in a terminal corymb. It is supposed to have originally been a native of the East Indies. It appears, however, from Sloane, to have been common at a very early period after the discovery of the Island [of Jamaica]. It is stated by Ligon, that it was brought to Barbadoes from the Cape de Verd Islands.

The leaves when bruised have a smell resembling that of savine, and the infusion, as also that of the flowers, is considered a powerful emmenagogue, so as even to bring on abortion. The leaves are also said to be purgative, and to have been used as a substitute for senna. The seeds, in powder, are stated to form a remedy for the belly-ach. It has been proposed to employ the shrub itself in making fences; but it is not well adapted for this purpose, from the branches being long and not much subdivided, and few and naked towards the root.' (Macfadyen, vol 1, 1837, p331)

Merian's work was highly respected in the eighteenth century by scholars such as Carl Linnaeus, but by the nineteenth century it was subject to criticism. Over a hundred years after her death, her use of indigenous people and African sources was considered unprofessional and untrustworthy and used to discredit her work. The Reverend Lansdown Guilding, who was in charge of the botanic gardens on St Vincent, criticised her extensively in an article published in 1834:

'Much fault is to be found with the absurd position of many of the figures, and the very great inaccuracy of others: indeed, it is difficult to imagine how they could have been prepared, unless they were sketched from memory. The grand defect of the work is the introduction of idle stories, related to her by strangers. The 'paucis solum exceptis, quae ex ore Indorum percepta junxi,'<sup>38</sup> go far to destroy that confidence which would naturally be given to a patient observer of nature.' (Guilding, 1834, p356)

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38 Translates as, 'I joined a few lone items copied down which were understood from the speech of the Indians'.

Lansdown Guilding relied on a later edition of Maria Merian's work, rather than one of the original 1705 ones whose production she personally oversaw. His article was published in St Vincent in 1834 after his death. He had never visited Suriname. In the article he used phrases such as:

'abounds with errors'  
engravings are 'sadly deficient' in detail  
'rude and useless'  
'badly represented'  
'such instances of carelessness and neglect'  
'strange mistakes'  
'imperfect knowledge'  
'without any attention to nature'  
'much distortion and alteration'  
'no foundation in fact'  
(Guilding, 1834, p356–75)

Lansdown Guilding's criticism of Maria Merian related to her facts as well as to her sources:

'The plates are preceded by one of those fanciful and useless frontispieces which were formerly thought indispensable in an illustrated work, and which occupied, to no purpose, the time and labour of the engraver. Here the fair author is represented, in the foreground, before a basket of tropical fruits, with her attendants placing in cabinets chip boxes filled with extended insects; while the room is swarming with a host of butterflies and caterpillars that would have frightened Pharaoh in the land of Egypt. In the distance is a Surinam landscape swarming with frogs, in which we behold two old gentlemen, in bag wigs and broad-tailed coats, assisting the maid-servant to capture flies.' (Guilding, 1834, p356–7)

'With the lizard I am not acquainted, but disbelieve the improbable story of its acquiring the length of 10 or 12 feet.' (Guilding, 1834, p358)

'The creature at the bottom is fictitious. The hollow lantern-shaped head of the Fulgora has been glued on a Tettigonia, and probably sold to our good-tempered author by some cunning negro. From her words, 'Persuasum mihi ab Indis est',<sup>39</sup> she evidently had no better authority for presenting us with this strange figure.' (Guilding, 1834, p371)

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39 Translates as, 'I was persuaded that it is from the Indies'.

Maria Merian's work was criticised over a hundred years after her death, probably as a result of sexist attitudes of the time. As a result of Lansdown Guilding's article Maria Merian's work more or less disappeared from view in the nineteenth century. It was only in the late 1970s that her contribution to entomology and botany was appreciated more widely again. William T Stearn, of the Natural History Museum, working with Elisabeth Rücker, a German art historian, published the first academic translation into English of Merian's book *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium*. The significance of her work outweighed Guilding's criticisms. Maria Merian was reinstated to her place as the 'mother of entomology' as she is now known.

## 4. Naming

Natural historians with a classical education used strings of words in Latin to describe specimens at the time of the transatlantic slave trade (until binomial names were introduced in 1753). Henry Barham, as described above, did not know Latin. He wrote about a plant locally called attoo<sup>40</sup> (which was used as a tooth cleaner):

'I never could find any other name for this plant, and that I had from a negro. I take it to be the same plant that Sir H. Sloane calls ... radix fruticosa glycirrhizoe similis cortice fusco, &c. and indeed the root to the sight much resembles English liquorice, but of a bitterish taste...' (Barham, 1794, p9)

Maria Merian recorded local names and information about the plants and animals she studied. In the introduction to her book *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium* she stated:

'...the names of the plants I have kept as they were given to me by the natives and Indians in America'. (Merian, quoted in Schiebinger, 2004, p207)

She did not, however, record a local name for the plant she called in Latin *Flos pavonis* (*Caesalpinia pulcherrima*).

Although other natural historians often recorded common species names, it was rare that the names of enslaved Africans or indigenous peoples of the Americas were written down<sup>41</sup>. There are some exceptions where plants were named after people.

### 4.1 Majoe bitters (*Picramnia antidesma*) and Pickering's herb (*Ruellia paniculata*)

The ways in which science acknowledged (or not) the help of Africans and indigenous peoples of the Americas are illustrated in these examples.

Henry Barham wrote how a plant (*Picramnia antidesma*) was effective in treating yaws and other diseases. It was called Majoe (or Macary bitters) after an enslaved woman<sup>42</sup>:

40 Attoo is *Gouania lupuloide*, see also Chapter 4: Everyday life.

41 See also Chapter 2: People and the slave trade.

42 See also Chapter 8: Medicines.

'This admirable plant hath its name from Majoe, an old negro woman so called, who, with a simple decoction, did wonderful cures in the most stubborn diseases, as the yaws, and in venereal cases, when the person has been given over as incurable by skilful physicians, because their Herculean medicines failed them; viz. preparations of mercury and antimony. It is also called Macary bitter<sup>43</sup>, from its growing in great plenty in the bay of Macary, and being a very bitter plant... This plant was first shewn to me by a planter, who had done many excellent cures amongst his negro slaves, in old inveterate stubborn ulcers, and that by only boiling the bark and leaves, or flowers and fruit if they happen to be on the tree when wanted to make use of, giving them plentifully to drink, and washing the sores with some of the decoction; then laying over them a leaf of the jack in the bush, until their sores were healed.' (Barham, 1794, p96)



▲ Majoe bitters (*Picramnia antidesma*), Sloane Herbarium, collected 1687–89, ID 896 © The Natural History Museum, London

Majoe or Macary bitters are only found in the Americas, which raises the question how the enslaved woman learned or discovered its properties<sup>44</sup>.

A number of other natural historians wrote about *Picramnia antidesma*<sup>45</sup>. John Lunan referred to both Hans Sloane's and Henry Barham's work, as well as to that of the Swedish natural historian Peter Swartz:

'It is looked upon as an anti-venereal, and the negroes commonly use an infusion of it in colic. An infusion of the bark is deemed an excellent remedy in intermittent fevers, and in affections of the bowels and stomach.' (Swartz, quoted in Lunan, vol 1, 1814, p477)

Although 'the negroes' are mentioned, the reference to Majoe disappeared as European writers, aiming for more scientific objectivity, quoted from each other. James Macfadyen, writing in 1837, cites Hans Sloane, Patrick Browne and Peter Swartz, but not Henry Barham or John Lunan, and the reference to both the plant's common name and its origins disappeared from the account. He did, however, write that *Picramnia antidesma* was so effective as a medicine it deserved to be better known:

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- 43 Its scientific name is *Picramnia antidesma*; common names include Macary bitter, old woman's bitter, bitter wood and Tom Bontein's bush.  
 44 See Chapter 9: Transfer and exploitation of knowledge, which showed that enslaved Africans learned many medical skills from the indigenous peoples of the Americas.  
 45 See, for example, Patrick Browne, 1756, p123. Hans Sloane (vol 2, 1725, p101) drew on Barham's description of the plant and its uses.

'This shrubby tree affords a bitter, less intense than that of the *Quassia* or *Simaruba*, but much more grateful. The leaves are bitter, with a sweetish taste, resembling that of the liquorice, and a decoction has been prepared from them. The bark, however, is the part which has been principally employed in medicine. It has been given with success as an alternative in constitutional affections, connected with syphilis and yaws, and as a tonic in debility of the digestive organs, and in intermittent fever. I consider that it has not received that attention as a remedy, to which it is entitled.' (Macfadyen, vol I, 1837, p224)

As science became more professional and the writing more abstract and less personal, so many references to first-hand sources of knowledge and information disappeared in successive publications.

The example of Majoe bitters contrasts with Pickering's herb (*Ruellia paniculata*), which was named after the European it healed rather than the African healer who applied it<sup>46</sup>.

'These herbs are called in Latin *prunella*, or alheal or self-heal; and the Germans call them *brunella*, or *brunellen*, because they cure that disease which they call *die bruen*, common to soldiers in camps and garrisons, which is an inflammation of the mouth, tongue, and throat, with blackness, accompanied with a strong burning fever and distraction or delirium: The juice of these plants is a certain specific for that distemper, and all sore mouths and throats, mixed with a little honey of roses and white-wine vinegar. The decoction of the herb, in wine or water, makes an excellent traumatic drink, to forward the healing of all wounds and stubborn ulcers. It is said to take away the pain and swelling of the testicles, which negroes are apt to have. Above twenty years past, one captain Pickering, a gentleman I knew very well, had a stick with fire at the end of it darted at him, which happened to come just under the brow of his eye, and seemed to turn his eye out, and all despaired of his life. No surgeon being at hand, they sent for an old negro man, well skilled in plants; as soon as he came, he ran and took of this herb that hath the bluish or purple flower, and washed it, reduced the eye as well as he could to its place, and then laid on the bruised herb, bound it up, and the captain was carried home. The next day he sent for a surgeon; and, when they came to open it, found it healed up to admiration; upon which they sent for the negro, and desired him to finish his cure; which he did in two or three days, only applying the same thing; and then the captain rewarded the negro very well, and desired him to shew him the herb. This I had from several worthy gentlemen who were there present, and affirmed it to be matter of fact and truth, who since, they told me, use it to all green wounds with great success, and call it Pickering's herb to this day.' (Barham, 1794, p171–2)

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46 See Chapter 8: Medicines.

## 4.2 Kwasi (*Quassia amara*)



▲ 'The celebrated Graman Quacy', engraving by William Blake, Stedman, 1806  
© The Natural History Museum, London

Kwasi was the enslaved African in Suriname, after whom a plant, *Quassia amara*, was named by Carl Linnaeus<sup>47</sup>. He is perhaps the only known example of an enslaved African being recognised in this way.

Kwasi treated Europeans as well as enslaved Africans with a South American root, which was good at reducing fever.

Kwasi almost certainly obtained his knowledge of the plant from indigenous peoples in the Americas or from Maroon communities<sup>48</sup>. But Kwasi did not say which plant it came from or how he made his remedies from it<sup>49</sup>. Thirty years later he finally showed the plant to a Swedish soldier, Carl Gustaf Dahlberg.

'But besides these, and many other artful contrivances, he had the good fortune, in 1730, to find out the valuable root known by the name of Quaciae bitter, of which he was actually the first discoverer, and from which it took its name: and, notwithstanding this medicine is now less in repute in England than formerly, it is highly esteemed in many other parts of the world for its efficacy in strengthening the stomach and restoring the appetite. It has, besides this valuable property, that of being a powerful febrifuge, and may be successfully used when the bark is nauseated, as is frequently the case.' (Stedman, vol 2, 1806, p359)

Dahlberg had married a wealthy Dutch widow in Suriname – his mother-in-law had been Kwasi's owner. In about 1760, thirty years after he had first used the medicine on Europeans, Kwasi showed Dahlberg the plant he used. Carl Gustaf Dahlberg grew the plant in his garden and, when he visited Sweden in 1762, he took specimens of it, pickled in wine spirits, to present to Carl Linnaeus. The following year, Linnaeus named the plant *Lignum quassiae*, later changed to *Quassia amara*, in honour of the man who had reported its medicinal properties (which were similar to quinine, or Peruvian bark (*Cinchona*), used for treating malaria<sup>50</sup>).

'... an unknown Negro slave named Qvassi discovered a medicine that he began using for his fellow slaves' severe fevers, and that with such success, that even the masters sought his help'. (Linnaeus, 1763, p5)

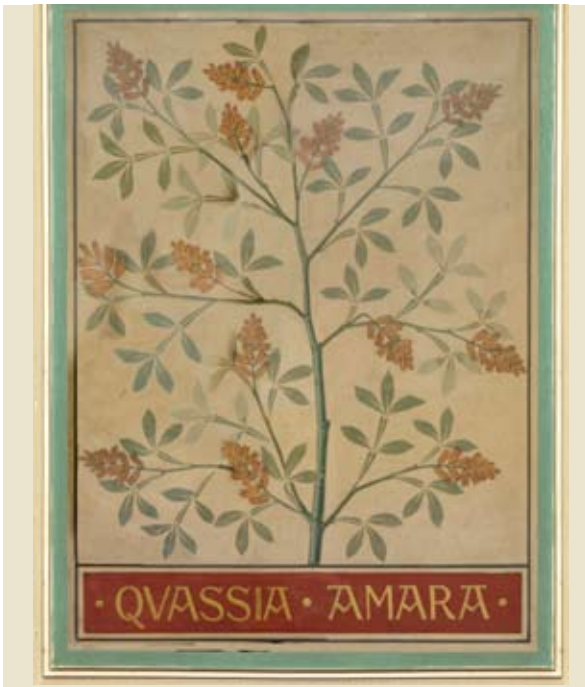
47 See Chapter 2: People and the slave trade.

48 See Chapter 8: Medicines as well as Schiebinger, 2004, p213.

49 See also Chapter 9: Transfer and exploitation of knowledge.

50 See Chapter 7: Fevers.

Lisbet Rausing (2003) described how this angered Dahlberg:



▲ *Quassia amara*, a decorative ceiling panel from the roof of the Natural History Museum's Central Hall, Picture Library reference 48863 © The Natural History Museum, London

'... who wanted himself, and not the person who, as he saw it, was his family's property, to be given the discoverer's glory and the species name... As Linnaeus wrote to his closest friend: 'Why is Dahlberg not pleased with the dissertation? Everything was after all what that fool said. He wanted to be great, but wasn't' (cited in Drake 1939, p45)'. (Rausing, 2003, p194–5)

Carl Gustaf Dahlberg was the brother of Nils Ericsson Dahlberg, a student of Linnaeus, and the genus *Dalbergia* (the source of rosewood) was later named after them. *Quassia amara* is called Quassiehout or Kwasi-bitá in Suriname.

## 5. Alternative interpretations



This chapter presents research information and context. The evidence itself can be seen in different ways and raises many questions and some further areas for research. Through the Natural History Museum's slavery and the natural world public programme many alternative interpretations and questions relevant to this chapter have been collected and some of these are summarised here.

## Hans Sloane

There was a lot of discussion about Hans Sloane, as founder of the British Museum and the collection that became the Natural History Museum.

He was a doctor and interested in medicine. However, he also dismissed many African and indigenous peoples' medical practices. At the same time, he collected other cultural objects, including music and musical instruments, which seems to give significance to some aspects of enslaved Africans' lives.

- Was this a reflection on the relatively short time he was in Jamaica (15 months) or other interests or prejudices?

As one participant in the discussion sessions pointed out, Hans Sloane may have been dismissive of African medical knowledge, 'but he didn't dismiss everything. After all, he was there looking for a miracle cure like quinine'.

Another participant commented that Hans Sloane's attitude was more likely a result of arrogance or ignorance: 'Sloane was dismissive of why people committed suicide. He said it was just because they believed they returned home. Arrogance and ignorance was around then as it is today.'

## People and perspectives

The bias in the European accounts held by the Museum was discussed: 'Hidden history... you think in so much more detail about how people did live under such extraordinary and horrendous conditions... the written sources are so completely one sided, so this is piecing together a more representative history.'

'How appropriate is it for the de facto interpretations of plants and foods seen this evening to be done by dead white amateurs in an Aristotelian tradition rather than by Africans in context themselves?'

'I think we should emphasise that this project has uncovered information which helps piece together the history of what really happened.'

'Natural History Museum should have collections by anthropologists of African descendants – diversify your collection.'

It was pointed out that the events focused primarily on British natural historians because of the bicentenary of the British Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, 1807, but therefore:

'There seem to be this thinking that there was only the British that was involved in slavery in the West Indies. I would also like to say that the French and the Dutch had just as much influence as the English.'

'The atmosphere of the discussion was that Europeans enslaved Africans. No mention was made of the Africans who grew rich capturing other Africans for sale.'

'I am just thinking that if you are going to take the West Indies and Suriname and so forth there are people there who did not come from Africa but came unwilling all the same from India and from China and from Ulster and from Sweden as indentured labourers and there is a very fine difference between indentured labour and slavery. Because slavery is not just that you are badly treated and you do not get paid slavery also shows you have no freedom to decide the way you live your life at all and this is often the case for indentured labourers too.'

One participant commented on her emotional as well as intellectual engagement with the subject saying, '... but that was a definition [of science] and my feelings have changed'.



The subject of the development of science was discussed at length: 'Science is not this static something but over time it moves on and I think when you look back over 300 years history of the slave trade you can see how science has evolved and changed in relation to time.'

'If you really ponder about this process you will see the immense power that African people have had to actually harness in order to withstand this and retain their own indigenous systems and let us ensure that the empowering process, particularly for young people remains the essence of this work.'

It was added that, '... building [on] the comments about empowerment and validation one of the very important issues is about additional expertise... [and] that there have been a limited number of experts who have been commenting on these things historically and what we are saying is that there are some other experts who are outside of the realm of dialogue who need to be commenting'.

Participants expressed their own attitudes and perspectives on the subject of the transatlantic slave trade. Some of their comments were:

- The sheer number of people removed from home during the slave trade.
- I would like to know why slavery started.
- Slavery started because one race does not want to put their own race into hard labour.
- Why did people use slaves? The only reason that I can think of is money and power.
- Slavery had been happening for a long time, it's been brutal at all time.

Attitudes and legacies of the slave trade were noted:

- The legacy of the enslaved African is racism.
- Both the slaves and slave owners want to forget. Perhaps the stiff upper lip is part of the legacy.
- 'If you were white, it's all right. If you were brown, stick around. If you were black, get back, get back.'

'I can understand that slavery has existed for a long time but I think in this particular aspect because it is to do with Africa and African Caribbeans and how we describe them the issue of how it is still experienced through racism which still exists today.'

## 6. Additional references

There is a full list of references, including all of the research documents, in Chapter 1: The project. These references offer additional reading specifically relating to this chapter.

**Gascoigne, John**, *Joseph Banks and the English Enlightenment: Useful Knowledge and Polite Culture*, Cambridge University Press, 1994

**Long, Edward**, *The History of Jamaica*, 3 vols. London, 1774

**Petiver, James**, Letterbooks and miscellaneous papers, British Library, London, 1696–9 and 1712<sup>51</sup>

**Pocock, Nigel**, 'Thomas Winterbottom: Abolitionist physician', *Triple Helix*, Spring/Summer, p16, 2007  
[www.cmf.org.uk/literature/content.asp?context=article&id=1950](http://www.cmf.org.uk/literature/content.asp?context=article&id=1950)

**Rausing, Lisbet**, 'Underwriting the oeconomy: Linnaeus on nature and mind', *History of Political Economy*, 35, p173–203, 2003

**Schiebinger, Londa**, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World*, Harvard University Press, 2004

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51 These papers are located in the British Library, Sloane Mss. 2302, 3333, 3334.