

Department of History and Philosophy of Science

Cabinet of Natural History

This research seminar is concerned with all aspects of the history of natural history and the field and environmental sciences. The regular programme of papers and discussions takes place over lunch on Mondays. In addition, the Cabinet organises a beginning-of-year fungus hunt and occasional expeditions to sites of historical and natural historical interest, and holds an end-of-year garden party.

- Cabinet of Natural History publications
- Cabinet of Natural History blog
- See the news archive for photos and reports from Cabinet events

Seminars are held on **Mondays at 1pm on Zoom**. Organised by L. Joanne Green (ljg54).

Lent Term 2021

1 February

Sarah Easterby-Smith (University of St Andrews)

Enlightenment science in Surat? Interpreting the collections of Anquetil de Briancourt and family (1773–1779)

This paper examines the personal collection of books and scientific instruments formed by Étienne Jean Anquetil de Briancourt (1727–1793) during his residence in Surat, Gujarat. De Briancourt, younger brother of the more famous French orientalist Anquetil Duperron, was French consul at the comptoir from 1773 until 1779. Like all consuls, his official duties were concerned with the management of mercantile matters. He also interceded – somewhat dramatically – within local politics. However, an inventory of de Briancourt's personal effects tells a very different story: together with his family, De Briancourt compiled a scholarly collection that was more characteristic of a Parisian intellectual than of a merchant living on the north-east coast of India. Working with the evidence contained in the inventory, this paper asks what it meant for a French family to compose a 'European' scholarly collection in a trading post such as Surat, and it examines the relationship between the de Briancourt collecting activities and the scientific aspirations of the Absolutist French state.

15 February

Alexander Etkind (European University Institute at Florence)

A natural history of evil

Based on his forthcoming book, *Nature's Evil: A Cultural History of Natural Resources* (Polity Press), Alexander Etkind will talk about non-human agency of sugar, fur, hemp, oil and other natural resources in their relations with the changing character of the state. In their interaction with technology and labour, different natural resources lead to different social institutions. Revising the contemporary perspectives on the classical problem of evil, this bottom-up narrative constitutes the new subdiscipline that Etkind calls Cultural History of Natural Resources.

22 February

Kaleigh Hunter (University of Wuppertal)

Gardens in ink: engraved title-pages of botanical treatises from 1450 to 1700

The broad aim of this project is to explore the relationship between natural history and visual methods of communication through the engraved title-pages of early modern European printed books. More specifically, my research will focus on the roles that these images played in the development of botany as a field of study, focusing on the rise and decline in popularity of the printed herbal in the early-1500s to late-1600s. In this talk, I will give an introduction to this ongoing research project and a look into the types of themes that can be seen on these title-pages.

1 March

Edwin Rose (University of Cambridge)

Books, botany and the organisation of nature in 18th-century Cambridge

In July 1760 Dr Richard Walker of Trinity College transferred £1600 to the University of Cambridge for the purpose of founding 'a public Botanic or physic garden'. These funds purchased the old Augustinian Priory and its grounds, what we now know as the New Museums Site, land occupied by the Cambridge Botanic Garden between 1760 and 1846. In 1762 Thomas Martyn (1735–1825) was appointed as the third Professor of Botany who immediately embarked upon arranging the Botanic Garden according to the Linnaean system of classification; the first institution of its kind to be founded on Linnaean principles in Britain.

In this talk I examine how printed books and herbarium specimens, many of which are still held by Cambridge University Library and Cambridge University Herbarium, were used to manage information on the living plants in the Cambridge Botanic Garden between 1760 and 1820. This was the responsibility of Martyn and a succession of curators who navigated between the living plants, dried specimens and an annotated library of approximately 1000 volumes used to identify, classify, describe and arrange species represented in the garden and the specimens held in Martyn's Botanical Museum. This system for managing information was designed to accommodate the increasing numbers of living plants, specimens and seeds Martyn and his curators received from a global network extending across the Americas, Africa, Asia and the Pacific, many of which they cultivated in the Cambridge Botanic Garden and arranged according to the Linnaean framework.

8 March

Chris Wingfield (Sainsbury Research Unit for the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas)

Dithipa: (re)collecting animals and their depictions from southern Africa's Missionary Road

The association of ethnography and natural history collections in the museum of the London Missionary Society during the early 19th century has been interpreted as suggestive of a European vision 'of people who lived in unity with nature'. Through a focus on southern Africa, this paper asks whether these collections can also provide an insight into the ways in which animals were understood in the contexts from which they were collected. Can we read the predominance of large mammals from southern Africa as indicative of the significance of large mammals for precolonial southern African societies, or are they simply indicative of European concerns? It will be suggested that a consideration of artefactual forms, and in particular the carved ivory handled knives, dithipa, suggest a precolonial cultural significance for wild animals that was significantly altered by the ecological transformations associated with missionary and colonial encounters.

15 March

Andreas Weber (University of Twente)

Governance of and by paper: natural history and the Dutch Empire in Southeast Asia, 1800–1850

The unruly materiality of 'paper' is an intriguing vehicle to examine the relationship between natural history, chemistry and governance in the early 19th-century Dutch Empire. Owing to high costs for imported raw materials, changing patterns of consumption and trade restrictions, civil servants, printers, suppliers of writing equipment, and owners of paper mills were forced to find ways to secure the circulation of paper between Europe and Southeast Asia, as well as between colonial outposts in the far-flung Malay Archipelago. While government officials in The Hague and Batavia tried to streamline paper flows in offices and print shops, engaged citizens, entrepreneurs, naturalists and chemical savants such as Adriaan Rogge, Jan Kool and Petrus Johannes Kasteleyn started to tinker with and reflect upon domestic and colonial surrogates which were supposed to replace costly raw materials (e.g. linen rags) from elsewhere. By conceptualizing governance as the evolving consequence of the circulation of paper-related actors, expertise and materials, this paper works towards a history of paper in which a 'mentalist' and a 'materialist' (Latour) approach is combined.