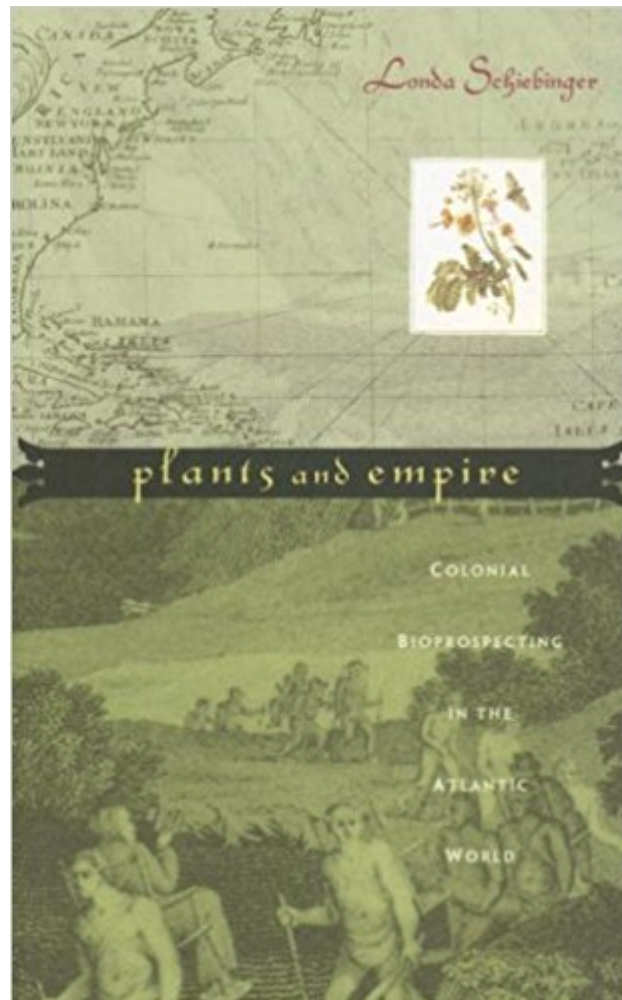




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Plants And Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting In The Atlantic World



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.

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Customer Reviews

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.

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