

The Infrastructures of Plant-Hunting

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HOW did exotic plants arrive in Britain, changing the look of the Victorian garden and the practices of horticulture and botany? The acquisition of nonnative flora and fauna was long framed by horticultural historians as the result of great British derring-do and hand-to-hand conflict. “How many of us,” demands the 1998 *The Plant Hunters: Two Hundred Years of Adventure and Discovery around the World*,

know that the explorer who found over 300 rhododendron species was one of two survivors of a party attacked in a rebellious uprising and had an escape worthy of a member of the Species Forces; that the man responsible for establishing the tea industry in India single-handedly fought a gun battle with pirates while running a high fever?

Characterizing those who resisted the plant-hunters as aliens, “rebels,” and “pirates,” the text designates those who extracted plants from their habitats as “explorers” of superior courage and morality. This racially freighted rhetoric reflects an enduring British colonialist effort to reframe the intimidation and oppression of other nations, through the removal and exploitation of resources, as virtuous and apt. Projecting brutality onto others, *The Plant Hunters* presents the transformation of British horticulture as a sort of reward for a superior courage that supposedly legitimized and enabled imperial hegemony: “As peaceful civilizations flourished,” the authors conclude, “so did the garden.”¹

In practice, plant extraction involved few feats of extreme physical bravery or scenes of *Boy’s Own* high drama. The letters of Victorian commercial plant-hunters reveal that, instead, the removal and exportation of plants entailed the deployment of emerging colonial and national

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infrastructures together with complex regional and local networks and knowledge systems. Expenses were advanced by colonial bankers, merchants, and businesses; hunters liaised with knowledgeable local people to identify plant populations and employed teams of local laborers to remove and transport specimens, on mules and/or by rail, to the ports. Much of a plant-hunter's day-to-day life, tellingly, involved paperwork—submitting drafts and bills of exchange, sending letters and cables to employers, and completing bills of lading to ship plants, in stages, to Europe, where they were received at customs houses before journeying on, by rail and by road, to nurseries, collectors, and auction houses. The greatest risks to the hunters were posed by fevers and falls. The large and diverse community of people with whom they worked served not as gun-slinging murderers but as funders, advisers, transporters, translators, guides, service-providers, mentors. They helped hunters navigate complex financial, transportation, governmental, and telecommunication systems as well as languages and landscapes to which they, of course, were the aliens.

The Frederick Sander Correspondence, held at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, offers rich insight into the infrastructures and networks deployed by Victorian plant-hunters. The archive contains letters exchanged between dozens of hunters and Sander, self-titled “Orchid King,” who operated premises outside London, Bruges, and New York. Sander required his employees to write detailed accounts of their day-to-day labor, and these together with telegrams, bills of lading, invoices, and memos reveal the operations of an emerging Victorian multinational. Aided by business manager Joseph Godseff, Sander worked closely with bankers and merchants with whom he communicated by mail and, from the late 1880s, cable, building out from and reinforcing a growing colonialist infrastructure.

Sander's biggest challenge was how to keep hunters moving without advancing too much money at any one time. Collectors regularly traveled to regions, like South America, that were not under British control, yet they needed funds for day-to-day expenses and the complex business of hiring and provisioning work-teams. Sander was deeply mistrustful of his employees, who were often poor and ill-educated, fearing they might fritter funds away. His solution was to deploy bankers and merchants to dole out money in small increments, building out from and on the foundations of empire into what historians have termed the “informal empire,” those regions “in which the influence of British financial interests attenuated without necessarily abrogating local sovereignty.”² Aiming to fund, and keep a close eye on, his men and their progress, Sander profited from

an empire-centered banking network even as practical experience regularly showcased its limits.

South America was a hotbed of orchid-hunting. In Trinidad, the Colonial Bank served as a nexus point, helping to move money from the metropole into and through regions beyond British political and military control. Forerunner to Barclays, today the Republic, the Colonial had head offices at 13, Bishopsgate Street, East London, and fourteen branches across the Caribbean, with acting agents in New York, Paris, Hamburg, and Copenhagen.³ The bank was founded by British bankers and merchants in 1837 as a result of the emancipation of enslaved peoples; as freed workers entered the commercial and retail sectors with wages, investors anticipated an expansion of commerce and the growth of the economy. Meanwhile, plantation owners were heavily in debt after years of poor management, declining sugar prices, and high interest rates, requiring substantial investment to help generate labor-saving approaches in the face of the loss of a large, “free” (to them) labor force. The bank was founded to get credit and investment to plantation owners and, by easing cash flow, to facilitate British commercial and economic growth in the region.⁴

Sander’s nursery business, five decades later, benefited enormously from the Colonial’s financial relationships. Sander arranged, with the bank’s head offices, for funds to be made available to hunters who traveled to Trinidad; local manager William F. Kirton made monthly cash payments to Sander employees.⁵ Kirton then worked with a network of businesses to accommodate hunters as they moved into parts of South America outside British control. One such company was Hahn, Grillet, gold miners in Bolívar, Venezuela. Kirton gave each hunter monthly drafts (meaning documents that confirmed obligation, on the Colonial’s part, to pay up) so the hunter could seek funds. Yet local laborers and service providers needed assurance a hunter’s credit was good not just that month but going forward. To help a plant-hunter generate trust, Hahn, Grillet provided an informal document that confirmed creditworthiness, backed by their name. This functioned as a more effective guarantor of funds with local people than, say, bills of exchange. Bank drafts that Hahn, Grillet received were either presented directly to the Colonial, or to a secondary bank with which the Colonial had a relationship, for payment.

In other, more urban areas, Sander worked with merchants, sending them paper checks that could be cashed at local banks. August Strunz, a commission merchant in the busy port of Barranquilla, Colombia,

provided money in this way. German-born Strunz was one of a number of traders who moved into the region after the extension of the railway and dock. Strunz acted as an agent of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company, founded in 1839 by a British plantation manager in the West Indies. Another infrastructural system developed to nurture British economic and commercial interests in the aftermath of emancipation, the service combined the ferrying of mail and freight with passengers. Ticket sales from the latter helped keep the service profitable.⁶

Strunz received checks from Sander, issued on the London and County Bank. These he cashed, dispersing a monthly stipend to hunters in local currency equivalent to, typically, £75. Strunz also invoiced Sander for additional expenses the hunters incurred; German-born Oswald Kerbach was a particular thorn in his side. “Mr. K. arrived here yesterday destitute of funds as usual,” Strunz wrote irritably in October 1893, “and I have had to supply him with the necessary amount, ticket &c. for his return home.” Strunz eschewed responsibility for the hunters’ achievements: “If Mr. Kerbach has not collected Plants promptly for you I can in no way be made responsible, as I have no control whatever over Mr. Kerbach’s movements or doings.”⁷ But he did help to put Kerbach’s crates of plants onto steamers, writing to Sander to explain (for instance) that fifty-four cases were headed home with Kerbach on the *Dee*—a Royal Mail screw steamship commissioned in 1875—to Southampton, via Trinidad, under the consignment of J. F. Obree & Co., shipping agent at 4, Oriental Place, Southampton. Other plant-hunters generally completed bills of lading themselves; Strunz took a more active role with the somewhat hapless, often sick and feverish, Kerbach.

Letters, cables, checks, and bank drafts were useful mechanisms for moving money, the hunters, and freight around the globe. But paper documents were vulnerable to interception. When a Dutch-born hunter, Cornelius Oversluys, arrived in Colombia, Strunz received a cable from Sander demanding: “Give Ccredit [Credit] Overslays [*sic*].” Strunz explained that he did not trust it, “owing to the manner in which telegrams get changed in this country. I would thank you by return of Mail to confirm above cable and to give me precise orders.” Bills of lading could also, if they fell into the wrong hands, give rival hunters information about competitors’ collections, as could vessel passenger and police lists. To try to throw dust in the eyes of rivals, hunters regularly faked their own names in official paperwork and the names of plants on bills of lading. They used code words and identities in telegrams and letters in case they were opened—though not always successfully: Claes

Ericsson, a Swedish-born hunter, wrote ruefully to Sander to admit that he and two of his associates had discovered they were all using the name “John” to mean something different.⁸

Indeed, far from being Special Forces operatives, hunters struggled mightily with navigating infrastructures, local and national, “hard” and “soft”—roads, ports, telecommunications, local authorities, financial institutions, law enforcement, health systems. Complaints about getting lost, about the difficulties of moving along muddy paths through the jungle in rainy season, the challenges of understanding the language, debts and struggles with government officials, the mail and telegraph systems, steamer and railway schedules, were commonplace. Few had the insight into botany or the environment that would allow them to find rare species themselves, and here local knowledge networks were invaluable. The letters of William Digance, a young British hunter in Brazil in the early 1880s, reveal that workers in hotels catering to tourists acted as go-betweens, connecting hunters with knowledgeable locals. Digance was asked by the keeper of the Beresford in Petropolis for a list of plants he wanted, after which the hotelier found guides to assist. Digance was put in touch with several Black assistants by the hotelier, and by and large he reported that their interactions went well; the men treated him fairly, he reported, somewhat to his surprise.⁹ Digance carried plates with him, cut from European-printed botanical magazines, to help guides identify the particular plants Sander required.

Victorian plant-hunting was thus powered by what Cannon Schmitt has called a “national-imperial infrastructure” that moved cash, people, information, and commerce through and beyond the geographical boundaries of empire. Heavy British investment in South America and its infrastructure, over the course of the nineteenth century, paid off; trips became easier, and more profitable, as plant-hunters retrieved more resources for extraction. As the elaborate infrastructure of banking and business grew, so the parameters of “informal empire” expanded also, undergirding practices of brutal, exploitative extraction that were certainly not limited to plants. Yet emerging colonial infrastructures only took the hunters so far; local and traditional knowledge systems were essential as well, and hunters and businessmen alike knew their force. Indeed, plant-hunting and banking in the region could not function without the support, expertise, knowledge, and traditions of local people—a fact the enduring narrative of hand-to-hand conflict and triumphant British vanquishing seems structured carefully to conceal.

NOTES

1. Musgrave et al., *The Plant Hunters*, 9. My thanks to Henry Hansmann, Jonathan Macey, and Alan Schwartz for generously providing insights into nineteenth-century banking systems.
2. Schmitt, *Darwin*, 8.
3. Palgrave, *The Banking Almanac*, 229.
4. Friginals and Cateau, “The Crisis of the Plantation,” 93; San Miguel and Monteith, “Economic Activities Other Than Sugar,” 136.
5. On late nineteenth-century wire transfers, see Standage, *The Victorian Internet*, 119–20.
6. On the service’s history, see Forrester, *British Mail Steamers*, *passim*.
7. A. Strunz to F. Sander, FSC/RBGK, Box 22, 632, 629.
8. A. Strunz to F. Sander, FSC/RBGK, Box 22, 616, 617; C. Ericsson to J. Godseff, February 14, 1892, Box 1, Folder 4, 260.
9. W. Digance to F. Sander, October 5, 1890, FSC/RBGK, Box 1, Folder 3, 138, 140.

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