Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-speaking world

7 | 2012

Ceramics / Submorphemics

David Philip Miller and Peter Hanns Reill (eds), *Visions of Empire: Voyages, Botany and the Representations of Nature*

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/4550>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.4550

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, "David Philip Miller and Peter Hanns Reill (eds), *Visions of Empire: Voyages, Botany and the Representations of Nature*", *Miranda* [Online], 7 | 2012, Online since 09 December 2012, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/4550> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.4550>

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REFERENCES

David Philip Miller and Peter Hanns Reill (eds), *Visions of Empire: Voyages, Botany and the Representations of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1996] 2010), 370 p, ISBN 978-0-521-17261-5

- 1 *Visions of Empire: Voyages, Botany and the Representations of Nature*, edited by David Philip Miller and Peter Hanns Reill, is a volume which derives from a conference held at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library and entitled “Visions of Empire”. Although the conference and the hardback publication that followed are not recent, the fresh publication of the collection in paperback fully deserves a review. This engaging book deals with representations of nature and tackles the significance of cultural practices which gave rise to them. Made up of 4 parts and 15 individual chapters, the collection makes explicit how representations of nature changed with the intensification of the exploration of new worlds during the eighteenth century, not only impacting scientific knowledge, but also, more importantly, influencing the cultural, economic and political fields. Moreover, as the collection shows, the growth of knowledge linked with maritime expeditions and explorations of new worlds went hand in hand with the growth of audiences for such knowledge. The book clearly shows how accounts and images related to these new worlds, specimens and even natives were widely circulated throughout the eighteenth century.

- 2 The first part of the collection, on “The Banksian Empire”, revolves around the figure of Sir Joseph Banks, analysing how he conducted his scientific exploration and became, in David Philip Miller’s words, a “center of calculation”. Drawing on Bruno Latour’s definition of the creation of “centers of calculation”, as expounded in *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (1987), Miller explains how Banks controlled the making of the collections and points out the connections between Banks’s and other contemporary scientists’ pursuit of science and the construction of the empire. This definition of “empire” linked with forms of knowledge is expanded in the other essays. One examines the different categories of collectors who supplied Banks and Kew Gardens with plants and animal specimens, revealing how these collectors served as agents of empire since they were invited to look for specimens that might benefit British economy and advance scientific interests (David Mackay); another studies the exchanges that took place under the guidance of Banks (Alan Frost); and a final one which highlights how the development of a medical language of atmosphere and order on board ships and the management of diseases such as scurvy aimed to impose a greater order (Christopher Lawrence). All in all, the articles map out the transformation of the collecting mentality from that of the “gentlemanly virtuoso” (John Gascoigne, 109) to an ordering of the collections which followed systematic lines.
- 3 The imperial uses of botany are further examined in Part 2, which focuses on Carl Linnaeus’s exploration of the “economy of nature”, underlining the relationship between nature and politics (Lisbet Koerner). As Linnaeus’s system of classification became disseminated in popular science books read by the elite class of Britain, Janet Browne argues, the understanding and appreciation of plants also permeated garden design. Linnaeus’s system of metaphors, expressing plant sexuality by modelling it on human society, influenced a politics of sexuality at the end of the eighteenth century (Alan Bewell), suggesting the connections between the rise of botany as a scientific discipline and sexual attitudes and the construction of gender differences.
- 4 The ways in which metaphors, images or concepts that shape scientific discourse are related to other fields of knowledge or simply permeate culture are tackled in Part 3, which looks at representations of living nature and their uses, probing the relationship between such representations and how they are made comprehensible. In order to unravel the ties between science and aesthetics, Martin Kemp examines botanical representation from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, while Barbara M. Stafford focuses on the instruments and studies the development of the representation of microscopic discoveries during the eighteenth century; lastly, Michael Dettelbach looks at Humboldt’s physics and his model of empire. In the last part, on “The Indigenous Environment: Anthropological Perspectives”, the articles analyse descriptions of early or more modern encounters between explorers and the native inhabitants (Ingjerd Hoëm, Alessandro Duranti) and underline the connections between voyages of discovery and anthropological study. Simon Schaffer’s afterword closes the collection.
- 5 This rich collection will not only provide an insight into the history of eighteenth-century voyages of exploration, the making of botany as a scientific discipline and its popularisation, but it will above all offer a highly valuable overview of the discourses that inform visions of nature and of the world. By merging history of science and social history, *Visions of Empire: Voyages, Botany and the Representations of Nature* proposes a cross-disciplinary expedition into the construction of new worlds and their wonders

which will not fail to fascinate students and scholars interested in the relationships between science, economy, politics and culture.

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Mots-clés: botanique, empire britannique, nature

Keywords: botany, Empire, nature

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