



Activating the Archive

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Archives such as those of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh hold so much for an artist and writer such as myself. They hold within them fascinating ways through which we might consider our complicated relationship with the natural world, thinking and making connections in both temporal and geographical terms, exploring links and threads in different ways and manifestations. Within each plant specimen held (living and in the herbarium) lie stories that speak to the scientific, political, historical, as well as ecological. My first encounter with the archive, for the RBGE's Silent Archive exhibition, resulted in *Footnotes*, a series of etchings, where I used specimens found in their herbarium with cuttings about species, often collected from scientific journals and often decades old and held in their library archives, to expand the narratives and contexts that relate to economic botany, and in this case, histories of enslavement and the middle passage .

Stories of individual curiosity might dovetail into colonial quests and conquests or moments of resistance. To illustrate, what follows are some of the ongoing threads of my enquiries manifested in art and writing, thus far. The Herbarium contains thirteen specimens collected by Archibald Hewan in 1862 during an expedition to Fernando Po; this island is now known as Bioko and is part of Equatorial Guinea. At that time, it had been invaded, colonised, and variously occupied by Portugal, Spain, and leased to Britain for use as a naval base running anti-slavery patrols. Hewan's specimens are from the *Aspleniaceae* family – the spleenwort family of ferns, and they are beautifully delicate

specimens, some still with roots intact, bearing details of the place of collection written in his spidery handwriting. These specimens travelled from Bioko to Edinburgh, but Hewan himself holds one remarkable story of the intersections of individual circumstances, opportunity, and interests with global affairs and routes of commerce, enslavement, colonialism, and empire. He was born on a Jamaican plantation of mixed heritage (his grandfather was the white plantation owner—and this sentence itself holds so much). He travelled to Great Britain to be educated in Glasgow and Edinburgh before traveling to Old Calabar (now part of Nigeria) as a missionary medic (Lee 2022, Thomson 2024), his journey mirroring the reach, implications and consequences of British imperialism.

The archives of the Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh potentially hold keys to more local and environmental change. Charlotte Cowan Pearson's incredible botanical illustrations of plants and flowers, painted in the late 1800s are held here. Pearson is a wonderful example of a 19th-century female artist labelled 'amateur' and it's interesting to reflect on the status of how women artists were perceived at that time. Her annotations list not just the flowers she's painted but the very specific locales where she collected them – often around Edinburgh – places or habitats that may still exist or may have radically transformed in the time from then until now, and may give important insights into environmental change. For example, rural places then might now be part of Edinburgh's suburbs or city proper or have since been 'developed' in some way. Similarly, the archive holds the notebooks of Professor John Balfour Hutton, Chair of Botany at the University of Edinburgh and a Regius Keeper of the Botanic Garden. His 'excursion diaries' about the trips made across Scotland with students taken in the 1860s, reveal socio-historical elements as well as botanical information, including modes of transport before modern-day bridges were built or cars or buses existed: "Party of about 60 met at Granton Pier at 9 a.m. and proceeded by steamboat to Burntisland". His excursions took him to places such as Ben Lawers, a rare mountain habitat in the UK and an extremely important site for its rare alpine flora –now under threat because of the climate and consequent habitat change that threaten its alpine species. This strand is something I look forward to investigating more.

The specimens sent to Edinburgh by Hewan hold stories that go far beyond the mere specimen or the collector. The places described or depicted by those, such as Balfour and Pearson, have perhaps 150 years' worth of growth since their encounters. These archives hold so many narratives, and the potential to reveal so much about environmental, and indeed, societal and political change. Works such as *Footnotes*, or putting Archibald Hewan's specimens in a wider context demonstrate ways in which these archives can be used to explore complicated intersections of plants and history and how the material culture of the archive can work in concert with other research and contextualization to link the past to the present and potentially the future, to tell stories that need to be told.

SEARCH

CREDITS

Plants on Paper

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