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BOOK REVIEWS

Annette Giesecke and David J. Mabberley, general editors: *A Cultural History of Plants*: 6 volumes, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022: boxed, £440.00..
One writer of this review, Malcolm Thick, must declare an interest, having contributed the chapter 'Plants as Staple Foods' to the third volume of this work, *A Cultural History of Plants in The Early Modern Era*. This is the latest in a series of six-volumed sets produced by Bloomsbury. The cultural histories so far produced are on a diverse range of topics, including Medicine, Sport, and Money, and more esoteric subjects such as Color (sic), Memory, and Hair. Each volume is about 225 to 259 pages long and the sets are priced at £440. They follow a similar format: the 6 volumes cover the history involved from antiquity to the present day, so the work in question devotes one volume in turn to Antiquity, The Post Classical Era, The Early Modern Era, The Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries, The Nineteenth Century, and The Modern Era. The editors chose the most important aspects of the cultural history of plants and these form the same eight chapters in each set: Plants as Staple Foods, Plants as Luxury Foods, Trade and Exploration, Plant Technology and Science, Plants and Medicine, Plants in Culture, Plants as Natural Ornaments, The Representation of Plants. Bloomsbury explain the format: 'Each volume discusses the same themes in its chapters so that readers may gain an understanding of a period by reading an entire volume, or follow a theme through history by reading the relevant chapter in each volume.'

The common chapter headings might be supposed to put contributors in a strait jacket but, at least in the set reviewed here, this was not the case. Contributors were allowed quite a bit of slack in deciding how to tackle their chapters. To take Plants as Staple Foods as an example, three of the chapters attempt to cover the whole world whilst the other three confine themselves to Europe. Three chapters have sections on olives and vines, the other three do not. The focus of three chapters in volume 2, The Post Classical Era (defined as 476–1453/92), is on China, south-east Asia and the eastern Islamic lands, reflecting indeed an age of exploration and increased international contact. The disadvantage is that the chapters on both Plants in Culture and The Representation of Plants omit discussion of anything from Europe. Similarly, in volume 3, The Early Modern Period, the excellent chapters on both Culture and Representation concentrate on developments in and influences from Italy. Inevitably, the writers draw on their research when writing their contributions and thus the books are full of recent developments. But not absolutely the latest, such multi-authored works tend to be produced at the speed of the slowest contributor and, in my experience, might be many years in the making.

Covering the whole world, or even just Europe, over a couple of centuries in, say, 25 pages is a tall order and on occasion an author has barely scraped the surface of a topic. Several reviewers of earlier sets have described them as 'introductions' to a topic. Given these constraints, the overall standard of contributions is high. Obviously, there are comments with which one might not agree. The genre of history painting is dismissed as unimportant in the representation of plants in the nineteenth century; the classical world was still, however, a prestige subject and plants figure prominently in, for example, the reconstructions of the classical world by Alma-Tadema, such as *The Flower Market* (1868), as well as in paintings related to classical myth such as de Morgan's *Clytie* (1887). But H. Walter Lack's chapter has the merit of including a section on plant representation in the applied arts, and thus makes some comments on textiles and embroidery which are exceedingly rare in these volumes. Almost no examples from textiles, tapestry, embroidery or needlework are used in any chapters; they are not in any index. There is nothing on late medieval millefleurs tapestries, smothered in flowers and plants, such as the *Lady and the Unicorn* series in the Musée de Cluny, or on other tapestries showing plants. Plainly, these materials do not survive as readily as wood, stone, ceramics, etc. Porter notes, for example, the destruction of a seventh-century Sassanid carpet, *Spring of Khosrow*, now known only through description. But he also notes how plant motifs from Sassanid and Iranian textiles, when extant, were imitated in Byzantium and parts of medieval Europe in other media. As Lack states, evidence for the representation of plants can be direct (we have the objects), or indirect – we have paintings and prints showing textiles. Examples of the very popular plant embroidery in the early modern period onward still exist. Given the excellent analyses of the multivalent symbolism of plants which occur in Volume 3, it is a shame that no comments could be included for, say, *The Rainbow Portrait of Elizabeth I* (Marcus Gheeraerts (?) 1601). The plants on her embroidered bodice exemplify the point that representation is never clear cut. Usually interpreted as spring flowers identifying Elizabeth with a 'Golden Age' restored by the goddess Astrea, they are not all spring flowers or indeed flowers. But all were thought to have medicinal properties, emphasizing the message that Elizabeth looks after the security and wellbeing of the realm. The Bracton altarcloth is a surviving piece of an Elizabethan flower-embroidered dress. The V & A holds both the portrait of Margaret Layton and the jacket she wears in the portrait. Plants in culture, representation and as natural ornaments are broad topics, and, taken with the contributors' very reasonable concentration on their own areas of expertise, the field of tapestry and embroidery has fallen through a crack, as it were, in the organization.

A major fault in this set is the absence of colour illustrations. Plants are colourful. This fault is particularly evident in the chapters on plants in culture,

as natural ornaments, and in the representation of plants. So, the shimmering gold of Gustav Klimt's *Der Kuss* , the bright orange of Vincent van Gogh's *Zonnebloemen*, and the blocks of colour in Paul Gauguin's *Vairumati tei Oa* are all reproduced as variations of grey. In Figure 8.5 in volume 4, a still life of a vase of flowers, most of the flowers are invisible, and Figure 8.9 sees Carl Linnaeus lost in gloom. I anticipate that full colour illustrations would have made the price of these volumes ruinously expensive, but limited use of colour, balanced by omitting those black and white pictures are which just not viable, should have been considered. Another fault in our view is cost. As they stand, at £440 the set this publication is by no means cheap. Is this retail price dictated by production costs? Certainly not by the cost of reimbursing the contributors who each received a nominal fee for their chapters, eaten away by inflation from the date of their contracts to eventual publication. I suspect the price includes a large profit margin on each sale, and a relatively small print run is aimed at academic libraries as target purchasers, not undergraduates. This is a pity: one wonders if a sparsely illustrated edition in paperback for say £90 the set, (£15 each volume) might have been much more useful to young scholars. The bibliographies in each volume are large and are a help in pursuing a topic further.

Jane Card and Malcolm Thick

Rebecca Earle: *The Body of the Conquistador. Food, Race and the Colonial Experience in Spanish America, 1492–1700*: Cambridge University Press, 2013: 278 pp., paperback, £21.99.

The idea of nurture over nature is no surprise to readers in the early twenty-first century, but few historians have studied its workings in a distant culture destined to have a long-lasting impact on modern European food and social history. Rebecca Earle delivers such a study impeccably in her remarkable book *The Body of the Conquistador*, first published as a hardback in 2012 and also available as an affordable paperback. In six accessibly structured thematic chapters the author examines links between dietary beliefs and everyday food in the first two centuries of Spanish-American colonial history. She argues that a spiritual mandate absorbing the European chain of world order and humoral medicine governed colonial beliefs and eating, but that it went further in the New World, creating a division between the edible and inedible. Earle charts how this classification worked and, along the way, how it impacted on the New World food exchange.

While the book is designed for an academic audience, who already recognize it as a seminal work – the 34-page bibliography condenses years of awe-inspiring research – it can be wholeheartedly recommended as a general read thanks to its rich source material and the author's vivid writing style. An opening overview of European dietary theories precedes a closer look at colonial food anxieties,