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Sir Hans Sloane and his passion for Jamaica

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OVER THE years Jamaica's compelling natural beauty has attracted more than a few individuals of worldwide acclaim. One that immediately comes to mind is the swashbuckler movie hero, Errol Flynn, who had an abiding love affair with Port Antonio. Others include British writers, Ian Fleming (creator of the debonair British spy James Bond) and Noel Coward (award-winning playwright) both of whom were pulled to Jamaica's north coast. Yet centuries before there was famed British physician, researcher and writer Sir Hans Sloane whose 15-month sojourn in Jamaica would help define his life and greatly impact future scientific advances.

SIR HANS SLOANE (1660-1753)

Sloane was born in Ireland in 1660 to a family of relative prosperity. As a boy he is said to have been fascinated by natural history. It is no wonder that as an adult he was educated in chemistry, anatomy, general medicine and botany in both England and France. He was one of few people in history to receive a medical degree without having a

Bachelor's degree. As a young fellow of the prestigious scientific group, The Royal Society, in 1687 Sloane was given the chance to travel to Jamaica as personal physician to the new Governor, Christopher Monck, the 2nd Duke of Albermarle. Knowing that this would give him the chance to make new observations of the natural world and collect any number of plant specimens, he eagerly embarked on this new adventure. During the ocean voyage Sloane exercised his natural curiosity by recording the habits of sea birds and incidences of phosphorescence in the water.

SLOANE IN JAMAICA

During the relatively short time in which time Sloane remained on the island he gave his deep curiosity about natural history full rein in ways he would never again be able to. He made extensive notes on local flora and fauna, local customs and even earthquakes, eventually compiling a massive collection of some 800 specimens. Sloane was known for his exactness and he would spend hours documenting and drawing anything he was

unable to preserve. Yet he was not so completely steeped in science that he missed chances to invest in sugar and cinchona, the plant used to make the medicine quinine which began to be used in the 17th century to treat malaria. Sloane himself used quinine to make an ointment to treat eye ailments.

SLOANE'S RETURN TO ENGLAND

In 1689, the Duke of Albermarle died and Sloane accompanied his widow back to England, along with his collection of specimens – the first to be brought to England from the Caribbean. He stayed on in the Duchess' household as her personal physician for close to 5 years. Soon after Sloane published a list of the plants he had collected in Jamaica (*Catalogus Plantarum, 1696*). Sloane spent time meticulously comparing his findings with those of other scientists ending up with a groundbreaking study that reduced a number of species down to one. His work remains useful to this day for both scientific and historical research.

Several years after his return from Jamaica Sloane married the widow of a wealthy Jamaican planter, thus becoming a very wealthy man in his own right – a fact that proved useful in establishing a successful medical practice. In the 1700s he published a more extensive *Natural History of Jamaica* in two volumes (1707 and 1725). They also contained information of his visits to a few other West Indian islands including Barbados and St.

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Kitts and Nevis. By this time he had begun to receive acclaim for his research and writing but he continued to practise medicine on a regular basis. Indeed, Sloane went on to have an extremely illustrious medical career. He was appointed as Physician Extraordinary to Queen Anne (1712-1714) and King George I (1716), President of the Royal College of Physicians (1719-35; he succeeded Sir Isaac Newton) and Physician in Ordinary to King George II (1727). He dedicated the first volume of his *Natural History* to Queen Anne and the second to King George I. George I conferred a baronetcy on him in 1716.

Sloane is credited with promoting many public health care initiatives such as the establishment of a foundling hospital (a hospital for orphans) as well as the introduction of inoculation against smallpox – although an unpopular practice at the time Sloane did inoculate members of the royal family.

SLOANE'S MUSEUM

Sloane never lost his passion for collecting that was so well exercised in Jamaica. By the time of his death in 1753 at the age of 93 all the rooms and hallways in his house were filled to overflowing with objects of all kinds, shapes and sizes – plants, animals, gems, coins and many more – as well as his own drawings and notes. His house had become a muse-

um of sorts and a major attraction. Aware of the value of his collection and harbouring a distinct desire to preserve it in perpetuity, he included a provision in his will that all the objects in his collection remain together in and about the city of London. He offered his collection to the city of London for £20,000 payable to his daughters – a large sum for the time but an amount far less than the collection's actual worth. Funds from a lottery were used to make the purchase during the year of his death and the British Museum of Bloomsbury was created. Over a century later in the early 1880s, the Museum of Bloomsbury's collections were transferred to a new home – the British Natural History Museum at South Kensington. Sir Hans Sloane, noted physician, scientist and collector, who had spent defining moments of his life on the island of Jamaica in the 1680s, had become the founder of the celebrated British Natural History Museum – his Jamaican natural history collection, in many ways, its original nucleus. In 1963 the Natural History collection became its own entity, recognized as separate from the rest of British Museum's collections.

Today Britain's Natural History museum spans the gamut of the natural sciences and stands as one of the best in the world.

Sloane's sojourn in Jamaica can also be indirectly credited with introducing Europe to the pleasures of eating chocolate. Whilst there, Sloane became fond of

a local drink known as cocoa. At first he couldn't abide its bitter taste, but found it pleasing once mixed with milk. He took the recipe home to England and soon many apothecaries (druggists) were manufacturing it as a medicine known as "Sir Hans Sloane's Milk Chocolate". The recipe was eventually taken up by the Messrs. Cadbury in the 19th century and, as they say, the rest is history.

Sources: Black, C.V. (1983). *The History of Jamaica*. Kingston: Longman Caribbean/Carlong Publishers Ltd., <http://es.rice.edu/ES/humsoc/Galileo/Catalog/Files/sloane.html>, <http://www.nmh.sc.uk/botany/databases/sloane/hansslope.htm>



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Sir Hans Sloane



Sloane's desk probably looked very similar to this, notebooks full of his observations of the natural world and collections of a number of plant specimens.

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