

# SLOANE RANGER

MARY MIERS travels to Jamaica to retread the footsteps of collector, scientist and antiquary Sir Hans Sloane.

IMMURED from the pulse and heat of modern Kingston, the Institute of Jamaica's natural history museum occupies a large, somewhat old-fashioned building on East Street in downtown Kingston. Here, recently, I met the botanist Dr George Proctor, a venerable figure in his eighties who led me slowly along several corridors, up and down flights of stairs, through laboratories and into his herbarium, pausing *en route* to show me his monograph, *Ferns of Jamaica*, and a blow-up photograph of his daughter, Fern, former Miss Jamaica USA. Eventually we reached a library, where we were served with mugs of milky coffee as we pored over three leather-bound volumes—two nearly 300 years old, describing a voyage to the West Indies and the natural history of Jamaica, and a *Catalogus Plantarum* of Jamaican plants published in Latin in 1696. Their author was the celebrated scientist collector, Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753), whose Jamaican footsteps I had come to retrace.

Sloane came here in 1687 as physician to the governor, the Duke of Albermarle. At only 27, he was already a fellow of the Royal Society (he later succeeded Sir Isaac Newton as president) and the Royal College of Physicians, and an established London physician. During his 15 months' stay he 'took what pains I could at leisure Hours from the Business of my Profession, to search the several Places I could think afforded natural Productions', and collected more than 800 plants. He 'immediately described them in a Journal . . . dried as fair Samples of them as I could, to bring over with me', and 'employd the Reverend Mr Moore, one of the best Designers I could meet with there, to take the Figures of them, as also of the Fishes, Birds, Insects etc. in Crayons'.

Sloane's Jamaican field-trips were to prove highly

**Statue of Sir Hans Sloane by Rysbrack, now in the British Museum**

significant to his later fame as a botanist and collector, and ultimately to the establishment of the British Museum. His *Catalogus Plantarum* and beautifully engraved volumes (widely referred to as the *Natural History*) attracted wide critical acclaim and established his reputation in the academic world. Carl Linnaeus, father of the binomial system of taxonomy and author of *Species Plantarum* (1753), was strongly indebted to him, even if he thought his collections were 'in complete disorder'. Sloane's bound volumes of pressed Jamaican plants formed the core of his celebrated herbarium, (now preserved in the Natural History Museum and viewable on [www.nhm.ac.uk](http://www.nhm.ac.uk)). His wider collection, amalgamated with other important collections he had purchased and including many West Indian 'curiosities', ran to some 80,000 objects: it filled 'every closet and chimney with books, rarities etc'. On his death this remarkable body of material was acquired, together with his herbarium and library, as the founding core of the British Museum.

The *Natural History* is particularly appealing to lay readers for its descriptions of the island's topography, agriculture, inhabitants and customs, and a rivetting 'account of diseases in Jamaica and how I endeavoured to relieve them'. Unfortunately, the Duke died within a year, but it is clear from letters in the British Library that Sloane remained much in demand in Jamaica, even after he had returned to Britain with the Duchess, her embalmed husband and a cargo of specimens (a live iguana, crocodile and snake perished on board). 'I am particularly in want of you, for I have not had a day's health since I see you . . . my poor friend Hayes died for want of you,' wrote a patient in 1690.

I set off in search of Sloane's Jamaica armed with chunks of text from the *Natural History* and excerpts from his correspondence, transcribed and generously made available to me by Marjorie Caygill of the British Museum. Also indispensable were a copy of Sloane's map of Jamaica and notes from Dr Proctor, who has combed the island and found most of the plants published in the *Natural History*. Sloane rode out from Spanish Town on a 'sure-footed horse'; I travelled in an air-conditioned Discovery with the redoubtable Valerie Facey, publisher, historian and conservationist of tireless energy, whose running commentary on the history and flora of Jamaica greatly illuminated the trip.

The Blue Mountains were still covered in virgin forest when Sloane came here; there were indigo plantations but no coffee, and many places had different names. But we were able to plot his journey north with the aid of his detailed







Hans Sloane's map of Jamaica, published in Volume I of his *Natural History* in 1707

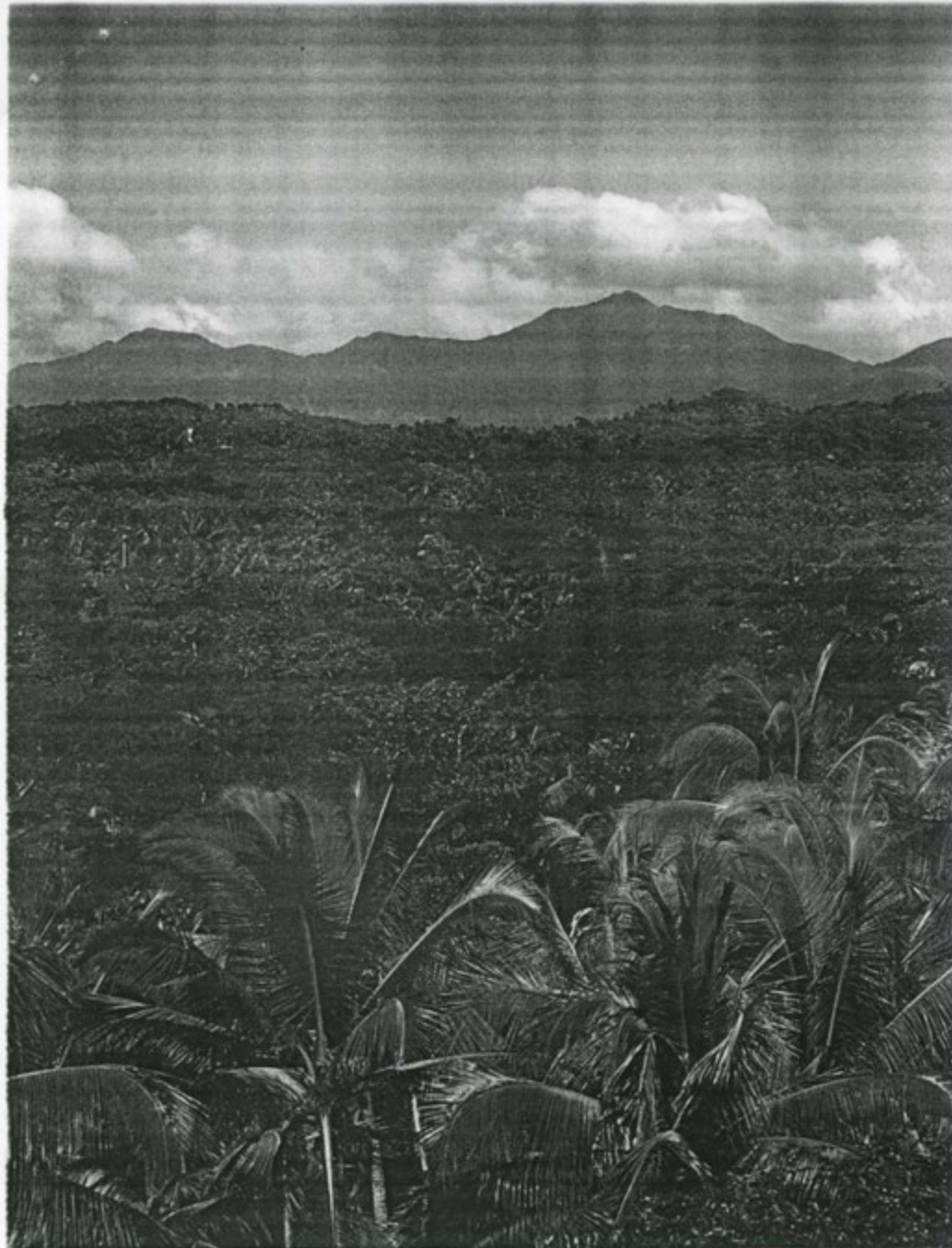
topographical descriptions. We followed his route 'by the Water-side, or along the banks of the Rio Cobre' through the gorge between Spanish Town and Bogwalk—an area he referred to as Sixteen Mile Walk or St Thomas in the Vale—and crawled through the pea-soup fog which 'lasts till about eight or nine, and then is dispell'd by the sun'. It was not difficult to spot the 'Hill or rather a Rock, on the left side, going up, which is at least two hundred yards perpendicular height having Bushes here and there on it [now densely cloaked in vegetation], down which a wild Boar being hunted precipitated himself and was at the bottom reduced to Mash'. We swung over Mount Diablo, noting as

Sloane had the reddness of the soil, now mined as bauxite, and thankful not to be spending the night 'on Plantain and Palm Leaves' in a hunter's hut. Sloane (like me) found his sleep 'very much interrupted by the Croaking of a sort of Tree-Frogs . . . the singing of Grasshoppers, and noise of night Animals'.

Nueva Sevilla, the original Spanish capital, was already in ruins when he arrived, and today only fragments remain. Indeed, with the exception of mighty Colbeck Castle and a few other ruins, precious little pre-18th-century architecture survives. The Spanish introduced citrus fruit, horses and bananas, but they used the island principally as a cattle ranch and

left no elaborate colonial towns. The British sugar plantations, with their associated slave system, had only relatively recently got going; their great houses had not yet been built and Spanish Town, then the capital St Jago de la Vega where the governor lived and Sloane stayed, had not yet acquired its handsome Georgian ensemble of public buildings. Nor had the bridges and roads depicted in 19th-century engravings been built, or Kingston developed over the Liguanea plain, where Sloane saw oysters growing on mangrove trees. Port Royal had not yet been destroyed by earthquake, and British-built houses were still 'for the most part Brick, and after the English manner, which are neither cool, nor





View of the island of Jamaica's lush, sub-tropical hill country

able to endure the shocks of Earthquakes'. Sloane would have recognised much that was English in the thronging, fort-encircled fleshpots of Port Royal, and in the political and legal establishments of the capital, but already by the 1680s the emerging colony had become quite Creolised.

Mongoose darted across our path as we returned from the north coast through lush country watered by the Flint River (possibly Sloane's 'Orange River'). Scruffy hamlets clung to the sides of a road we had been warned was impassable. Cocoa bushes, palms and fruit trees cloaked the landscape in a rolling greenness, broken only by the sudden flare of an African tulip, or an *Erythrina umbrosa* in early bloom, and rimmed by the distant violet-blue line of

the mountains. We sought out the Jamaica pepper (pimento, or allspice, almost exclusively produced by Jamaica), whose 'branch, leaves, flowers, fruits etc.' Sloane first showed to Europeans, and, most significant of his discoveries here, the *Theobroma cacao*, or cocoa plant.

'Chocolate', Sloane wrote, 'is here us'd by all People . . . it seems by its oiliness chiefly to be nourishing . . . [but] I found it in great quantities nauseous, and hard of digestion.' Mixed with milk and a little sugar he found it a palatable drink, and on returning to London had it manufactured in blocks as 'Sir Hans Sloane's Milk Chocolate . . . greatly recommended by several eminent physicians . . . for its lightness on the stomach and its great use in all



(Above top) Trade card for 'Sir Hans Sloane's Milk Chocolate'. (Above) Sloane's specimen of the cocoa plant brought back from Jamaica in 1689 and now in the Natural History Museum

consumptive cases'. Production was continued in the 19th century by Messrs Cadbury.

Returning to Bogwalk along the Rio d'Oro, we crossed a fertile plain of citrus groves and sugar plantations and came to Guanaboa Vale. This area, settled by one of the original British regiments after 1655, has long been richly cultivated, although Sloane noted that the 'great Chocolate or Cacao Nut-Walks' planted by the Spanish had grown wild. By 1664 it had an Anglican church—St John's—whose pretty Gothic remodelling survives today beneath a red tin roof. After countless enquiries we extricated 82-year-old Uriah Shirley from a distant village and gained access to find, beneath threadbare carpets, beautifully carved grave slabs commemorating British settlers who died here in the early 18th century.

Sloane's Jamaican trip was an early and shortlived experience, but it profoundly influenced his long and distinguished career. After returning to London he married Elizabeth Rose, a rich widow whom he had met in Jamaica, and rejoined his circle of brilliant friends such as Locke and Ray, while greatly enriching himself as a fashionable physician and entrepreneur. A definitive biography has yet to be written on this leading enlightenment figure who straddled the old and new worlds of science. Meanwhile, an exhibition mounted to mark the 250th anniversary of his death last year reopens at Chelsea Physic Garden in April (020-7352 5646).