

**H        , *L'Empire de la nature: Une histoire des jardins botaniques coloniaux (fin XVIII   si    -ann     1930)*,  
Champ Vallon: Ceyz  rieu, 2023, 363 pp. ISBN 9791026711483**

“Delivering science-based knowledge and solutions to protect biodiversity and use natural resources sustainably to solve urgent global challenges” – in this statement, part of its 2021 *Manifesto for Change*, the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, outlines its renewed mission to steward plant diversity. Such declaration finds its historical counterpart in H        ’s *L'Empire de la nature: Une histoire des jardins botaniques coloniaux (fin XVIII   si    -ann     1930)*.

In this significant work, Blais retraces the global networks and the imperialistic impulses behind botanical gardens, shedding light on how these institutions fostered the global circulation of plants, resources, and knowledge for colonial agendas from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The book examines the origins of colonial botanical gardens, beginning with the establishment of the Cape Garden in 1653 and the St. Vincent Garden in 1765, which represent the earliest instances of such institutions in the colonies; however, between 1780 and 1820, a significant expansion of botanical gardens occurred, reflecting a renewed impetus for colonial control over imperial territories. This momentum, though, began to wane after World War I, as agronomic sciences gradually supplanted botanical studies in shaping colonial policies.

Relying on a rich and well-established bibliography within which this research is positioned, *L'Empire de la nature* offers an innovative lens on the scientific, political, and cultural dimensions of botanical gardens during the colonial period, linking them to broader processes of environmental manipulation, economic exploitation, and knowledge exchange. Through meticulous archival research, Blais traces how European powers established botanical gardens in colonies from the Caribbean to Asia, embedding them in economic networks and cultivating “exotic” species to satisfy metropolitan and commercial demands. Crucially, Blais challenges the traditional notion of a centralized, European-dominated botanical network, embodied in the “Kew model”. Rather than a one-way flow from colonies to the European metropole, she reveals an intricate system of exchange among colonial peripheries. Botanical gardens in Pondich  ry, Calcutta, and Buitenzorg, for instance, did not merely serve London or Paris; they operated as independent hubs where plants, documents, and knowledge circulated laterally across empire networks. This decentralized exchange upends the view of botanical science as strictly metropolitan, underscoring the colonies’ active role in shaping botany and ecology on a global scale.

Blais’s study is divided into four sections, each illuminating a distinct aspect of botanical gardens and their role in empire-building. The first part explores the origins and foundational mission of these gardens, from sites of medicinal plant research to complex hubs of trade and acclimatization. She examines the ways in which these spaces embodied imperial ambition by imposing European classifications on local ecologies. Case studies such as the Jardin des Plantes in Paris and Kew Gardens illustrate how botanical projects became cultural and political instruments, furthering imperial dominance. The second section brings readers into the aesthetic and physical organization of the gardens, seen as designed landscapes of control. They symbolized conquest over both nature and people, transform-

ing urban and rural spaces to embody the “civilizing” mission of the empire. In Algeria, for example, French gardens imposed European agricultural models on local landscapes, subjugating native practices to metropolitan ideals. In the third section, Blais delves into the social and scientific dynamics of the gardens. She details the stratified communities involved in maintaining these institutions – from botanists and directors to gardeners and often-overlooked local laborers, whose knowledge and labor underpinned colonial ambitions. In fact, Blais’s attention to the roles of women and indigenous workers underscores the hidden labor behind these ostensibly European enterprises. The fourth section examines botanical gardens as economic engines: acclimatization practices fueled by colonial gardens facilitated, for example, the transplant of species like Eucalyptus from Australia to the Mediterranean, altering ecosystems for economic profit. These activities transformed botanical gardens into global production sites, directly linking them to mercantile and industrial demands of the empires. Blais’s analysis, in fact, unveils how botanical gardens were designed to serve economic ambitions, a function that continues to resonate in contemporary environmental issues.

Central to this volume is the concept of the colonial state as an entity that organizes, catalogs, and exploits nature, distinguishing between “good” and “bad” plants in a manner that reflects the broader mechanisms of control and classification at play within the empire. Drawing on Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of the “gardening State”, which highlights the state’s role in shaping, managing, and cultivating its territories, this idea serves as a foundational insight for understanding the colonial botanical gardens.

Combining archival research with a microhistorical approach that foregrounds the agency of marginalized actors, both human and ecological, Blais reveals how botanical gardens functioned as networks of resource extraction and knowledge control. The book’s transimperial approach draws connections across regions and time, showing how local initiatives fed into broader imperial designs while maintaining distinct colonial adaptations. In situating botanical gardens within the larger narrative of imperialism, *L'Empire de la nature* compels readers to recognize that these gardens were not merely spaces of botanical curiosity, but rather potent tools of empire that set in motion systems of environmental control that persist today.

Finally, Blais’s work speaks directly to ongoing debates around biodiversity, conservation, and ecological management, highlighting how the colonial practice of using botanical gardens to manipulate and exploit nature has echoes in modern debates about sustainability and resource control.

**Beatrice Falcucci**

Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona  
[beatrice.falcucci@upf.edu](mailto:beatrice.falcucci@upf.edu)