

## Queen Mary University of London Natural History Museum

### AHRC LAHP Collaborative Doctoral Award Decolonising the Sloane Herbarium

#### Further Particulars

'Decolonising the Sloane Herbarium' will investigate a foundation collection of the Natural History Museum (NHM) in order to re-imagine our understanding of its global and imperial dimensions. The Sloane Herbarium was created between c.1680–1753 by the *de facto* founder of NHM, Sir Hans Sloane, and comprises around 120,000 dried plants mounted in 265 folio volumes. The specimens come from over 70 countries and dependencies, having been contributed by upwards of 300 individuals. Many of these collectors operated within commercial and political enterprises immersed within nascent British imperialism, including the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans, but these historical entanglements have never been comprehensively mapped and analysed.

NHM has begun to recognise the importance of these histories to re-frame its collections for contemporary audiences, but lacks the informational means to answer even simple questions such as what proportion of its foundation collections were acquired as a function of the slave trade. This project will leverage existing institutional data, enriched with new archival research, to address this shortcoming. It will surface hitherto hidden histories of the Sloane Herbarium, generate an exciting new database for future generations of researchers to exploit, and inform ongoing institutional conversations at NHM about provenance, collections datasets, and decolonisation.

Under the joint supervision of staff at both Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) and NHM, this studentship will address the following research questions:

- What can we learn by quantifying the geographical provenance of specimens in the Sloane Herbarium?
- What global and transcultural encounters are legible in the Herbarium's physical organisation and informational apparatus? Which of these encounters were demonstrably coercive of territories or people, for example, those predicated on the trade in enslaved Africans?
- What will it mean to 'decolonise the Sloane Herbarium'? How can the NHM more effectively research, acknowledge, and publicise its collections' pasts?

## The Project: Additional Details

Herbaria are vital resources for botanists, forming a record of global plant diversity and an opportunity for the study and description of species. More recently, the material turn in the history of science has also made herbaria objects of interest for humanities academics, not least for understanding the micro-historical ramifications of colonisation and imperialism. These two strands of scholarly enquiry have typically taken place in parallel more than in collaboration, a trend this project aims to change. It emphasises the importance of understanding the herbarium historically, as an archive of human practices, methods, and knowledge. But it also seeks to consider the herbarium as an archive that historically has been conceived by and curated in the interests of individuals and institutions that have profited from cultural, economic, and political forms of imperialism.

The collections of Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753) are the foundation deposit of the NHM. Sloane's herbarium, comprising 265 folio volumes that contain an estimated 120,000 botanical specimens, is the largest surviving component of his natural history collections. The Sloane Herbarium was assembled between the 1680s and Sloane's death in 1753, and includes plants collected in over 70 countries and dependencies worldwide by more than 300 contributors. Its first 8 volumes comprise plants collected by Sloane in Jamaica, where he served as physician to the colonial Governor between 1687-89 and also met his future wife (who would bring him the profits of sugar plantations that deployed enslaved African labourers). Sloane's is the largest extant early-modern herbarium and its research uses are diverse, spanning the humanities and the natural sciences. Yet the political and social geographies of Sloane's enterprise to collect the world's plants are yet to be comprehensively quantified, despite researchers increasingly uncovering compelling and complex narratives of the specimens' diverse histories.

The core activity for this studentship addresses the problem of searchability, a major impediment to the use of the Sloane Herbarium by researchers across disciplines, as well as to any attempt to quantify the collection geographically. The current key indexing resource itself instantiates a structural barrier to the contextual understanding of the plants' entangled provenances. J.E. Dandy's *The Sloane Herbarium* was published in 1958, based on research begun by James Bennett. Its 324 pages detail the contents of the herbarium volumes alongside biographical summaries of contributors and geographical information about localities, but contain little or no information about the commercial and political enterprises that materially underpinned collecting activity. Apart from Sloane's annotated copy of John Ray's *Historia Plantarum* (1686-1704), there is no other meaningfully comprehensive index to the Sloane Herbarium, including no digital database. Enabling a social and geographical analysis of the collection, with specific attention to clarifying its hidden histories of colonialism and empire, requires a solution to this problem.

The major first stage of this project will therefore extrapolate and structure data already recorded by Dandy to create a relational database that can be enriched with contextual information derived from archival research. This new data will connect individuals and locations to specific institutions (e.g. the Royal African or East India Company) and enterprises (e.g. a trading voyage or colonial plantation), support enhanced quantitative analysis of the Sloane Herbarium as a whole, and identify

specific networks of people and places that connect specimens and link them to particular historical practices and events. The student will build on existing digital research and development by NHM that underpins the biographical information on botanical collectors served through JSTOR's Global Plants database. Ultimately the project will create a resource that can also be published via NHM's data portal to replace Dandy and supply a new informational paradigm for the primary finding aid that supports research in the Herbarium.

## **Supervision and Training**

The holder of the studentship will be registered as a doctoral candidate in the School of English and Drama (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences) at Queen Mary, and will fulfill all the requirements of the PhD degree there under the supervision of Dr Richard Coulton and Professor Markman Ellis. In addition, the student will benefit from joint-supervision at NHM working under Dr Mark Carine and Miranda Lowe.

The successful candidate will be trained to understand Sloane's herbarium as a collection, and familiarised with the existing documentation and methods for searching its contents. With appropriate technical support they will then prepare and document the database, ensuring interoperability with related datasets and compliance with sectoral standards. The student will subsequently interrogate this database in order to address the research questions and direct further archival work: analysing the Herbarium's organisation and contents as functions of multiple global and transcultural encounters, while selecting case studies to highlight as examples of the collection's hidden histories that can be productively reframed through the lens of decolonisation. This studentship will also help to develop resources to support public understanding of the Sloane Herbarium's social and material connections with histories of globalisation, slavery, and empire, while contributing to broader institutional learning at NHM about how to re-imagine collections datasets in order to foreground these crucial facets of provenance.

In the course of their research, the successful candidate will be trained in archival scholarship for working with manuscript resources at the British Library, Natural History Museum, and elsewhere; collections retrieval, handling, and curation skills for working with early-modern herbaria; and digital skills for data handling and manipulation in a humanities context. The student will be supported to participate in scholarly networks and seminars at QMUL and the Institute of Historical Research in London, as well as in training opportunities offered through the postgraduate education programme at NHM.

## **The Studentship**

The studentship includes a stipend at the Research Council UK Home/ EU rate (£17,609 per annum in 2021/22) plus fees for three and half years beginning in October 2021. The awarded candidate will also be entitled to a £550 per annum stipend top-up. Studentships can be either full or part-time. As a LAHP student, the successful candidate will have full access to the LAHP Doctoral Training Partnership

development activities and networking opportunities, joining a cohort of about 90 students per year.

[For further information see the LAHP Studentships information online.](#)

## Eligibility

We are looking for an excellent, highly promising, and appropriately qualified student who will embrace the opportunity to bring together academic research in the humanities with experience and training at one of the largest natural history museums in the world. We want to encourage the widest range of potential students to study for this Collaborative Doctoral Award and are committed to welcoming applicants from different backgrounds.

- Applicants may come from a variety of disciplinary perspectives (e.g. archaeology, anthropology, literary or cultural studies, history, heritage studies, natural history, history and philosophy of science, museum studies, archive and information studies).
- It is expected that the successful applicant will be able to clearly explain the relationship between their education / experience and the topic of the award, and to indicate how their present research interests relate to the proposed project.
- Some experience of historical collections handling and/or digital humanities will also be of benefit to applicants.

N.B. All applicants must meet the [Student Eligibility requirements defined on the LAHP website](#).

Candidates will normally hold (or expect to receive before October 2021) a master's-level degree with evidence of high quality work within their postgraduate assessment profile. Equally, we recognise that research students can approach a doctorate via various routes. Doctoral applicants who have not completed a research preparation master's-level degree are therefore eligible to apply for AHRC funding providing they can demonstrate that they have equivalent experience that has prepared them for doctoral research. Equivalent experience might include, but is not restricted to, a strong track-record of employment in a library, museum, botanic garden, or heritage institution, that includes responsibility for relevant archival research, collections curation, and/or public engagement activity.

## Application

Applications **must be submitted in two phases**:

1. [Online via the QMUL PhD application portal](#) by 5pm on Friday 29 January 2021
2. [Online via the LAHP CDA application portal](#) by 5pm on Friday 5 February 2021

The details that follow refer principally to the QMUL PhD application phase. You must **complete this application first** in order to include your QMUL application ID reference number on the LAHP CDA application form.

You will be required to include in your application to QMUL:

- your 'research group': select "early modern" or "eighteenth-century"
- a 'Research Proposal' and 'Statement of Purpose' (see note below)
- a current academic CV
- two academic references (or one academic and one professional reference) which should be by individuals familiar with your recent work in relevant fields (these references also need to be submitted to LAHP)
- your degree certificate and university transcripts
- IELTS scores (International English Language Testing System) if applicable

*Important Note about the 'Research Proposal' and 'Statement of Purpose'*

As part of the formal PhD application to QMUL all candidates are required to submit these two documents. For the purpose of this specific Collaborative Doctoral Award we encourage you to prepare these sections principally by re-purposing the text of the 'Personal Statement' from your LAHP application form. For the 'Research Proposal' in particular, while you should explain in some detail the basis of your academic interest in the topic and outline how you will develop and execute this PhD project, you do not need to reformulate those components stipulated in the generic guidance for applications to the Department of English (such as the 'Research Questions') that are already detailed by the supervisors in these Further Particulars.

The deadline for the application to QMUL is **Friday 29 January 2021 by 5pm**. **Applications received after this date cannot be considered.** It is the responsibility of applicants to ensure that their referees write by that date.

Once you have completed the QMUL PhD application **you must also submit the LAHP CDA application form by 5pm on Friday 5 February 2021.**

**Shortlisted candidates will be invited to interview (probably online) in late March / early April 2021.**

### **Contact Information**

Candidates are welcome to make contact with the lead supervisors, Dr Richard Coulton ([r.x.coulton@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:r.x.coulton@qmul.ac.uk)) and Dr Mark Carine ([m.carine@nhm.ac.uk](mailto:m.carine@nhm.ac.uk)) in advance of submitting an application.

Questions about the online application process for QMUL should be directed to Hari Marini, Research Student Support Administrator in the School of English and Drama at QMUL ([sed-research@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:sed-research@qmul.ac.uk)).

For queries about the LAHP CDA application process email [cda.lahp@london.ac.uk](mailto:cda.lahp@london.ac.uk).