

Session: Experts in the Periphery — Governing Techno-sciences and Societies from the 19th to the 21st centuries

EXPERTISE AND COLONIAL MANAGEMENT OF PLANT GENETIC RESOURCES IN THE WEST INDIES

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Abstract

Intellectual property in biological objects is the foundation on which much of the profitability of the modern biotech industry rests. Yet the ascription of intellectual property to the biological relies on a complex set of practices for collection, classification and distribution of plant genetic resources. This paper focuses on the historical development of these practices as a key area of interaction between legal and non-legal, entrepreneurial and government-sponsored regimes of ownership and control of genetic resources.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries networks for the collection, cataloguing, sale and exchange of plants proliferated around the globe. The British Colonial Government was a key player in this web. It sponsored – through Royal Charter – a network of Royal Botanical Gardens, charged with collecting and sending samples back to Kew Gardens in London and to the other British colonies' botanical gardens. The role of government (and not just the British one) in such networks is relatively well known, although much detail remains to be uncovered. What is virtually unknown is the role of individuals and entrepreneurs. To take one example, in 1888 the Kew-trained botanist Walter Elias Broadway arrived in Trinidad and Tobago to take up the newly created role of Assistant Superintendent of the Royal Botanic Garden. This role was a central part of the colonial service's mission in T&T. However, Broadway fought with his supervisor John Hart and the turn of the century found him in Grenada curating the island's botanic gardens but supporting his heavy drinking habit by selling plant specimens to public and private herbaria and collections around the world. In 1904 Broadway retired, only to come out of retirement in 1908 to take up the acting curatorship of the Botanic Station in Tobago where he worked, once again, for the colonial services.

Individuals such as Broadway played an important role in spreading genetic resources around the world; recovering their stories helps us to understand how, for example, bananas came to be a staple of Queensland agriculture. Broadway's career was a microcosm of the mixed ecology of plant breeding in his period, encompassing commercial and civil service sponsored plant collecting and distribution. Stories such as Broadway's are therefore equally valuable to understanding how expertise was generated and maintained in diverse contexts.