

Sir Hans Sloane, *eminence grise* of early Enlightenment London

Arthur MacGregor

When Warwick invited me to take part in this evening's proceedings it was easy enough for me to agree, partly because – as you'll have gathered – he's a very persuasive chap but mostly because Sir Hans Sloane has long been something of a hero to me – not a brash, towering, all-conquering kind of hero but a modest, almost diffident individual, hugely industrious and generous with it – an improbable figure, you might think, to occupy a key position at the centre of London's scientific society for thirty or forty years in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century but that's the case that I'll be trying to make over the next half hour.

I've been asked to talk a little about the role Sloane played at this time – or rather about his multiple roles since he operated in a wide variety of spheres in a way that's hard to parallel. I suppose the figure of Sir Joseph Banks might be cited from the later eighteenth century, but whereas the forceful Banks stamped his authority in peremptory manner on every field in which he became involved, Sloane was prepared to shoulder the responsibilities that came his way and to carry them far beyond what was expected of him, but without feeling the need to brand them with his own personality. Indeed so adept did he become at this mode of operating that he almost succeeded in writing himself out of historical consciousness for the next 200 years: it was only with the appearance of two biographies commemorating the bicentenary of his death in 1953 that his reputation began to be reconstructed, a process that's been carried forward since that time particularly by curators in the three institutions which owe their existence to him – the British Museum, the Natural History Museum, and most recently in the British Library where terrific work has been undertaken in reconstituting Sloane's library of printed books and making the results available on the web by our colleague Alison Walker.

This evening I'd like to draw on all those strands of recent research in order to fulfil my remit of characterizing the multiple fields of endeavour within which Sloane not only participated but came to play a prominent – often key – role.

As my starting point I'm going to turn to the list of trustees chosen by Sloane to administer his will – not a very promising source, you might think, but if I tell you there were no fewer than 63 of these trustees and that they were selected specifically to represent all the spheres of interest in which he had made significant contributions, then you may be persuaded of its validity. The largest constituency represented there was the Royal Society – some 40 trustees – and it's undoubtedly there that we'll find the key to much of Sloane's reputation among his contemporaries.

He was still only a very young 24-year-old physician at the start of his career when elected to the Royal Society in 1685. His medical training had earlier involved him in the study of medicinal plants at the Apothecaries physic garden at Chelsea and later at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, where he became a dedicated (and respected) follower of the botanist Joseph Pitton de Tournefort, with whom he remained on friendly terms for the rest of his life. By the time he returned to London, complete with his doctorate from the protestant University of Orange, Sloane was easily received into the circle that included John Locke and Robert Boyle, as well as the distinguished naturalists John Ray and Martin Lister, and it was with their support that his election to the Royal Society was quickly secured. In his own words, Sloane was determined 'to be no useless member, but to cast in my mite towards the advancement of natural knowledge'. Within eight years the Society had elected him its second secretary and two years after that its first secretary, a post that not only put Sloane in charge of the Society's voluminous correspondence under its president (from 1703 Sir Isaac Newton), but also gave him responsibility for producing the *Philosophical Transactions*, the somewhat moribund journal recording all the issues with which the Society concerned itself which, under Sloane's editorship, was quickly transformed into an effective and respected register of much of the scientific endeavour of the day, undertaken by the Fellows and by their overseas correspondents. The sheer industry by which Sloane achieved this turn-round is evident from the vast volume of his correspondence that survives at the British Library and elsewhere, and although he wasn't without his critics, particularly those who regretted the change in emphasis that took place in the Society's proceedings, away from the Newtonian agenda – the 'Physico-Mathematicall Experimental learning'

enshrined in the Society's founding charter – towards a much more diverse and inclusive range of topics – diverse to the point of miscellaneity, his critics charged. Sloane's period as secretary of the Society undoubtedly established him as the very linch-pin in the entire fabric of English scientific life for the 20 years in which he occupied that position; later he was elected a vice-president of the Society, frequently deputizing during Newton's numerous absences, and finally in 1727 he was chosen to occupy the president's chair himself. Sloane himself would gain a considerable reputation as a naturalist, as we'll see, but if he never quite fulfilled his early promise it's reasonable to attribute this to the tremendous workload imposed by his duties during these years. None the less, they did place him at the very hub in England of the Europe-wide network of scholarship referred to by historians as the 'republic of letters' or the 'commonwealth of letters' depending upon their political persuasion, and brought him international recognition acknowledged by his election to a number of foreign academies – in Berlin, Göttingen, St Petersburg, Madrid and Paris – the latter honour made all the more remarkable by the fact that Britain and France were at war during those years, necessitating his obtaining permission from the Queen to accept it. At the same time Sloane transformed the financial health of the Royal Society with his astuteness in financial administration, so much so that when the time came for him to relinquish the presidency at the age of 81 it was said of the presidential office that man who had ever occupied it 'had the prosperity of the Society more at heart, was a greater benefactor to it, or put its affairs into better order'.

Key as it is to an understanding of Sloane's importance as probably the single most influential figure in the London scientific community over several decades in the early 1700s, his position within the Royal Society was only one of the important offices he held at this time. Although he benefited from fortunate marriage to a rich widow with an income from plantations in the West Indies and from judicious investments of his own (notably in the so-called Peruvian bark from which quinine is distilled and in chocolate as we'll hear later), Sloane maintained his position as a successful physician in private practice throughout his working life. He was further associated with a number of hospitals: from 1694 to 1730 he was physician in charge at Christ's Hospital, a post that brought

him a small salary which he regularly returned to the hospital for the relief of its more needy inmates; he was involved in the establishment of the Foundling Hospital and was a governor – as well as a financial donor – to several others. At the same time he was notably free with his time and expertise, 'humane and generous', it was said, 'and giving his advice and physic from the dispensary freely to the poor at his own house until 10 every morning, refusing fees very frequently from those whom he thought but in moderate circumstances and never greedy of them, even from the most opulent'. Although not a noted medical innovator, Sloane seems always to have been open to new advances based on solid evidence. Perhaps his most memorable role here is in forwarding the introduction of inoculation against smallpox, a practice observed by the botanist William Sherrard in Turkey and communicated to Sloane, who first published details of it in the *Philosophical Transactions* and then demonstrated its efficacy to the wider world by inoculating first one of his own grandchildren and later the royal princesses: the consequences of failure on both counts would have been calamitous, but it's worth mentioning that half a dozen charity children from St James's were prudently put through the ordeal before it was applied to the royal family. He was awarded honorary doctorates by Oxford and from Trinity College, Dublin, and in 1705 was elected to the College of Physicians in Edinburgh. His primary allegiance, though, from his first election in 1687, was to the College of Physicians in London, which in 1719 elected him its president, an office he would hold for the next 16 years.

The high regard in which he was held by his fellow physicians no doubt was crucial in his selection to be a Physician Extraordinary to Queen Anne in 1712 and, after Anne's death, to George I, who rewarded him with a baronetcy. A formal court appointment followed in 1727 when George II named him as his Physician in Ordinary, he, as the formal citation goes, 'having been before constantly employ'd about the whole royal family, and always honour'd with the esteem and favour of the Queen Consort'. At this latter appointment he relinquished a further duty conferred on him five years earlier, namely that of Physician General to the Army, a post that had carried responsibility for the commissioning of regimental and garrison surgeons and overseeing the work of the military apothecaries.

It was typical of Sloane that at a time when most physicians were content to leave the intricacies of medicines to the less prestigious body of apothecaries, and were indeed rather disdainful of them, he was assiduous in the attention he paid to cures from his earliest days at the apothecaries' physic garden and was proud of his knowledge. During the reading of the Physicians Bill at the House of Lords in 1720, for example, it seems that certain witnesses for the apothecaries had suggested that the physicians knew nothing of drugs, prompting Sloane to offer 'to contend with them, and . . . bring 500 drugs that all the apothecaries in town should not know one of'. The Society of Apothecaries none the less had good reason to be grateful to Sloane, for when he acquired the manor of Chelsea in 1712 and hence became their landlord, he entered into an agreement with the Society that for an annual rent of £5 and fifty dried plants to be presented to the Royal Society he would make over to them the garden and all its appurtenances. This arrangement, incidentally, would bring the Royal Society over 2,000 plant specimens over the years, to be preserved in their Repository or museum. Sloane also contributed £100 to the Apothecaries towards the repair of the watergate and the enclosing wall of the garden, and he secured further £100 for them from the Royal Society towards the expenses of the garden. In gratitude the Apothecaries commissioned a life-size statue of Sloane from Michael Rysbrack to stand in their garden, which it continues to do in facsimile form to this day, with another copy now in Duke of York Square. Sloane's name is, of course, commemorated in a number of street names in Chelsea and a number of other allude to his descendants, all resulting from the marriage of his daughter Elizabeth to Colonel Charles Cadogan, later Baron Cadogan, whose family estate today still encompasses much of the property formerly associated with Sir Hans.

So far I've concentrated this evening on Sloane the establishment figure and paid no attention to the two great projects that occupied so much of his spare time – if you can imagine that he had much time to spare with the commitments I've already outlined – but these too contributed immeasurably to the stature he came to enjoy. The first of these involved bringing to publication his massive two-volume *Natural History of Jamaica*. The opportunity and stimulus for this had come during the 15 months or so he spent in the West Indies as a youthful personal physician to the newly appointed governor of the

islands, the 2nd Duke of Albemarle. With characteristic earnestness Sloane had declared that 'next to the serving of his grace and family in my profession, my business is to see what I can meet withall that is extraordinary in nature in those places' which, he said, 'promise to be useful to me as a physician: many of the antient and best physicians having travelled to the places whence their drugs were brought to inform themselves concerning them.' Despite Sloane's ministrations the Duke, who had never been in good health, died less than a year after he arrived in Jamaica, so that Sloane had the advantage of a fair bit of leisure thereafter to familiarize himself with the local flora and fauna. The process of working up the field notes and drawings he brought back with him would extend over the next 26 years, starting with occasional papers published in the *Philosophical Transactions* and a much-admired volume in 1696 of plants growing in Jamaica: John Ray expressed his astonishment 'that a single person, in so short a space of time, and merely at his leisure hours, could have collected within the limits of one island such a number of plants, which he afterwards described and delineated with so much diligence and exactness'. The effort that Sloane put in to this initial publication and the success he achieved with its methodical structure and method of presentation were of wide significance: as Ray wrote to him, 'You have done botanists great service in distributing or reducing the confused heap of names, and contracting the number of species'. Shortly after this time Carl Linnaeus in far-away Sweden would begin to formulate an entirely new system of nomenclature that would render redundant the traditional cumbersome formulae – even in Sloane's streamlined form – but for a period of time his modest volume stood as an exemplar to other naturalists working in the field. Volume I of the definitive *Natural History* itself appeared in 1707, but in the words of his biographer Thomas Birch 'the multiplicity of his business in his profession prevented him from obliging the world with the second volume till the year 1725'. The results, worked up with the same meticulous attention to detail and documentation, secured Sloane's place as the undisputed authority on the botany of the zoology of the West Indies in the early eighteenth century and brought him acclaim from scholars all over Europe.

And the final bounty from this Jamaican interlude which would exercise a lasting beneficial influence on Sloane's authority was the physical collection of

dried plants, preserved animals, fossils, shells and ethnographic specimens he brought back and which at a stroke transformed his embryo collection into the single most important private museum in London. An endless stream of visitors found their way to his house at Bloomsbury and later to Chelsea in order to look at specimens in detail or merely to marvel at the range and quality of his cabinet and of Creation in general. In the half-century after his return from Jamaica he added to the collection and its associated library with large numbers of individual purchases, bequests from like-minded friends, and bulk purchases of large swathes of some of the most significant collections of the day in the fields of natural history, antiquities, printed books and manuscripts other materials, to the point where, at his death, he was said to have expended over £50,000 on its formation and to have assembled a wholly unprecedented museum of an encyclopaedic character. Of the dried plant specimens alone, it has been said that 'It would be difficult to overstate the significance of the Sloane herbarium for the history of plant classification, as it represents by far the largest collection of plant specimens from the pre-Linnaean era. It is indeed, almost certainly, the largest collection that was ever assembled during this early period, and as such it provides a remarkable demonstration of the state of botanical knowledge in London just before the dawn of today's systematic methods and nomenclatural procedures'.

Amongst historians up to the later twentieth century there seemed to develop a recurring tendency to dismiss Sloane's collecting activity as an indiscriminate Hoovering-up of almost anything that came on the market, but the engagement of increasing numbers of museum curators and librarians who actually know the collections in detail has shown how very misguided this view of the collection was, and with increasing attention being paid now to the systematic catalogues that Sloane himself maintained of his collection he can be seen as an exemplary curator in his own right, not simply absorbing the collections made by others but reducing them to the kind of order that often evaded their original owners. Over thirty volumes of these catalogues survive, compiled initially by Sloane himself and in older age carried on by a series of amanuenses retained for that purpose. After a great many years when only a few of these sources were cared for or consulted by modern curators, concerted

efforts to transcribe, document and make available these texts are now being made in all the present-day institutions that owe their origins to the collections that Sloane assembled and which by the time of his death had already been described by the then Prince of Wales on a visit to the manor house at Chelsea in 1748 as 'an ornament to the nation'. The Prince observed too 'how much it must conduce to the benefit of learning, and how great an honour will redound to Britain, to have it established for publick use to the latest posterity'.

With Sloane's passing in 1753 the trustees and executors with whom I began my talk were called upon to execute the somber task that had been set for them. The complexities of the will need not concern us except to say that its effect was to bring about what would be the first state-owned national museum – not only in Britain but in the whole of Europe. Even such an influential figure as Sloane had no way of bringing this about by himself, of course, but the terms of the will played a catalytic role first of all in persuading Parliament to purchase the collection for a fraction of its true value at £20,000 and thereafter to combine it with two notable libraries, those of the Earls of Harley and of Sir Robert Cotton, to form the founding collection of the British Museum. The new institution would open its doors six years after Sloane's death in Montagu House in Bloomsbury – on the very site where it continues to stand today in much modified form.

The terms of the British Museum Act specified that 'the said museum or collection may be preserved and maintained, not only for the inspection and entertainment of the learned and curious, but for the general use and benefit of the public' – representing a very significant step in the process of the democratization of the museums, which hitherto had generally been rather exclusive private establishments to which the public had little chance of access. The Act also enshrines the principle that 'all arts and sciences have a connexion with each other' and are mutually sustaining. While Sloane himself had never voiced such a coherent view of his objectives in collecting it none the less exemplifies the whole principle on which he had conducted much of his own life and particularly the way he had formed his collection. It's given to very few individuals to make an impact in so many different theatres of activity and it's very fitting that the architects of the new institution – its trustees, its early staff, and even those sympathetic figures in Parliament who gave the project a fair

wind – should so faithfully have honoured Sloane's wishes and indeed built on his concept in order to produce an institution far more comprehensive and certainly more long-lasting than Sloane could ever have imagined possible.

Typically of the formal portraiture of the period, the Sloane we see in contemporary likenesses looks rather aloof and haughty, but Birch gives him an altogether different character which chimes much more closely with the evidence from his daily life that I've outlined. 'His person', writes Birch, 'was tall and graceful; his Behaviour free, open and engaging; and his conversation cheerful, obliging and communicative. He was easy of access to strangers, and always ready on proper notice to admit the curious to a sight of his museum. His table was hospitable, and he appointed one day a week to persons distinguished by their learning, and particularly those of the Royal Society.' Now that's a picture of Sloane that I can well believe to be both accurate and well-deserved. Even today, when some museums seem to teeter on the cusp between educational establishments and entertainment arcades, it's gratifying to think that the fruits of Sloane's labours continue to form the cornerstone of no fewer than three of our most important public repositories, and that his collections continue to function in the generation of new knowledge in much the same way that he conceived them 300 years ago.