

Joseph Hooker: plant collecting and career building

Outline

In the late 1870s, it seemed as if revolution threatened the once-sleepy ground of Kew Gardens. Open-air “indignation meetings” were held, petitions signed, satirical cartoons appeared in usually conservative gardening magazines and questions were even asked in the House of Commons. At the heart of the controversy was Joseph Dalton Hooker, director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, who was accused of being a corrupt tyrant, of having turned the national botanic garden into “a snug little preserve—a sort of happy hunting ground for the scientifically inclined members of the Hooker family”.

What caused this upheaval and why was Hooker apparently so opposed to admitting the general public? In this profusely illustrated talk, Jim Endersby will trace Hooker’s career from its earliest days, through his years as an explorer and plant collector, to his eventual rise to the “throne of science”, the presidency of The Royal Society. By understanding how Hooker tried to raise the status of botany – and why he found it so difficult – it becomes clear why he became so sensitive to anything he thought (or imagined) might be an attack on the dignity of his beloved science. He was afraid that making his beloved Kew more accessible to “swarms of nursery maids and children” (not to mention those “whose motives are rude romping and games”), would undermine the forty years of hard work he had put in to persuade his fellow gentlemen of science to take botany seriously. Hooker’s efforts – and the opposition he faced – shed light on his career and the history of Kew, but also on the wider, imperial and industrial world of Victorian science.

Biographical

Jim Endersby is Reader in the History of Science at the University of Sussex. He is an acknowledged expert on Hooker, and has written several books including *Imperial Nature: Joseph Hooker and the Practices of Victorian Science*; *A Guinea Pig’s History of Biology*; and, most recently *Orchid: A cultural history*.