

The Scholarly Atlantic

Circuits of Knowledge between Britain, the Dutch Republic and the Americas in the Eighteenth Century

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On 30 August 1735, Johan Frederik Gronovius in Leiden wrote to his friend and fellow-naturalist Richard Richardson in Bierley, England, “You will remember that at the time you arrived here in town, you met at Mr. Lawson’s a gentleman from Sweden, that went the same night to Amsterdam, where he is printing his *Bibliothecam Botanicam*. His name is Carolus Linnaeus.” Gronovius went on to praise Linnaeus’ singular learning “in all parts of natural history” and the excellent qualities of his new taxonomy of minerals, plants and animals. Gronovius predicted that “all the world” would especially be “much pleased” with his “Botanic Table,” although he expected that it would take time “before one can know the right use,” and it might thus “be rejected” by those who would not be prepared to devote some time to study it.¹ Gronovius himself was so impressed by the significance of Linnaeus’ achievement that he not only helped to see several of works of Linnaeus through the press in the Netherlands but also decided to reorder a survey of the “plants, fruits, and trees native to Virginia” sent to him in manuscript by John Clayton of Virginia shortly before, according to Linnaeus’ system of classification, and publish it as the *Flora Virginica* in 1739/1743. This was the first comprehensive overview of the flora in this British American colony to appear anywhere.²

The story of Gronovius, Linnaeus and the *Flora Virginica* illustrates the main theme of this essay, namely the increasing connectedness between circuits of knowledge in the North Atlantic in the eighteenth century and the prominent role of actors in the Dutch Republic in the emergence and evolution of these networks. I conceive of “knowledge” both in the meaning of

1 Johan Frederik Gronovius to Richard Richardson, 30 August 1735, in *Extracts from the literary and scientific correspondence of Richard Richardson, M.D., F.R.S.* (Yarmouth: Charles Sloman, 1835), 343–345.

2 *Flora Virginica exhibens plantas quas V.C. Johannes Clayton in Virginia observavit et collegit, easdem methodo sexuali disposuit, ad genera propria retulit, nominibus specificis insignivit et minus cognitatas descripsit Joh. Fred. Gronovius*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Cornelis Waak, 1739–1743); Raymond Phineas Stearns, *Science in the British colonies of America* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1970) 556–557; Joan K. Stemmler, “A brief note on the authorship of the first *Flora Virginica*: Clayton, Gronovius and Linnaeus,” *Virginia Journal of Science* 55 (2004): 125–134.

kennen, knowledge by acquaintance of objects, namely from the senses by taste and experience, and in the meaning of *weten*, knowledge of causal explanation by reasoning.³ Scholarship can comprise both forms of knowledge.

Contrary to views in the Anglo-American literature,⁴ I will show that the evolution of knowledge networks in the North Atlantic in the eighteenth century was a more complex affair than just the bilateral exchange between British and the American colonials. It was more than an interaction between confident, established scholars in the imperial metropolis and restless outsiders from New York, Philadelphia or Charleston trying to make a name for themselves in the wider world. European continentals, for a start, were deeply involved in networking. Moreover, players on both sides of the Atlantic not only entertained bilateral relations, but often corresponded with people in more than one region at the same time. Multilateral relationships, as in the case of Gronovius, were by no means uncommon. And these sorts of relationships developed not just between actors based in Britain, the Continent and the British American colonies, but also between American colonials or European continentals and people living in South America, notably in Dutch Guiana. In the course of the eighteenth century, networks of knowledge cut across different imperial spaces. This essay concentrates on connections between Britain, the Dutch Republic and the Americas, with occasional glances at Sweden, France and Italy. It does not deal with the networks of knowledge in the North Atlantic as a whole, including the contributions of Spain or Denmark. Such a comparative, overarching analysis is the subject of other studies.⁵

Apart from increased connectedness between circuits of knowledge in a *geographical* sense, I will argue that the North Atlantic in the eighteenth century also saw a growth in connections in other respects. Circuits of knowledge

3 For this distinction, see Harold Cook, *Matters of exchange. Commerce, medicine, and science in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 15, 20.

4 See e.g. Stearns, *Science in the British colonies*; John C. Greene, *American science in the Age of Jefferson* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1984); Joyce E. Chaplin, *The first scientific American. Benjamin Franklin and the pursuit of genius* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); Nick Wrightson, “[Those with] great abilities have not always the best information.’ How Franklin’s transatlantic book-trade and scientific networks interacted, ca. 1730–1757,” *Early American Studies* 8 (2010): 94–119.

5 See Karel Davids, “Dutch and Spanish global networks of knowledge in the Early Modern Period: Structures, connections, changes,” in *Centres and cycles of accumulation in and around the Netherlands during the Early Modern Period*, ed. Lissa Roberts (Berlin-Münster: LIT Verlag, 2011), 29–52; and my forthcoming book *Ocean of knowledge: Globalization and the making of knowledge in the Atlantic world, c. 1680–1850*.