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Ecological Communication at the Oxford Imperial Forestry Institute

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In 1950 Princess Margaret opened with pomp and circumstance the new building housing the Imperial Forestry Institute at Oxford University. "Long before the Royal car was due," the local newspaper reported, "great crowds, in which women and children predominated, gathered at vantage points to get a 'close-up' of the Princess."[1] The royal blessing of the building was meant to foster environmentally sensitive forestry within the British Empire. This paper discusses how this ethic came to shape the building's design.

Historians investigating the colonial and postcolonial heritage of environmental debates have recently focused on the cultural and ecological history of imperialism.[2] This trend follows a general shift away from political and economic histories and toward a broader understanding of the role of Orientalism within empires. In the case of scientific practices, this cultural turn has revealed fresh understandings of the relation between places of research in the periphery and central academic institutions.[3] Historians of botanical gardens, for example, have documented a reciprocal relationship between scientific microcosms mirroring the socio-organic environment of entire empires.[4] At the heart of this connection were natural history museums, and their

historians have shown how their order of knowledge represented ways to master Oriental landscapes and people.[5] This paper will follow the above trend by exploring the process by which forestry research came to shape the architecture of a particular building. Instead of looking out at the environmental history of landscapes, the following pages will turn inward to the milieu in which imperial scientists worked. After all, even devoted naturalists spent most of their time inside offices, libraries, and laboratories. In the field of environmental studies these places have largely been ignored, with the exception of laboratory and architectural histories.[6]

The Imperial Forestry Institute's building was a meeting ground for scientists, forest managers, students, timber dealers, and university administrators, and it should be understood in view of their different agencies and interests. They all had in common a call for knowledge, but they had different agendas with respect to what knowledge should do. One therefore needs to understand the ecology of communication between them. The most dominant group within the building was made up of scientists researching the validity of different forestry theories and empirical findings. To them the building served as a workplace and as a tool for securing funding and opportunities. They were supported by forestry managers within the British Empire whose chief interest was to undermine laissez-faire capitalism and gain control over the empire's forests through governmental managerial principles. Visitors from the carpenter business also frequented the building, and their interests were in different types of timber in relation to woodwork. The agenda of the students in the building was different, as their chief concern was to pass their exams so that they could find work either as scientists, managers, or otherwise become active in the lumber business. Finally, the building should be understood in view of the architect, whose agenda was to make sure its aesthetic reflected ideals about science held by the Oxford University dons and administration.

These different agents of the building came to construe nature as an oriental economy juxtaposed with the Occidental research represented in the design and outline of its architecture. This relationship between Occidental architecture and Oriental nature was made pos-

sible through the ecology of communication of different social agendas advanced in relation to the building. That people with different backgrounds and professions saw nature differently did not hinder the exchange of opinions, as communication could take place between different systems of knowledge in the form of a pidgin language.[7] They could trade knowledge even though they were operating with differing systems of rationality with differing aims and methods.

The following pages will first lay out the agenda of the scientists, the managerial ethics of their patrons, and the role of the students within the Imperial Forestry Institute. The next section will discuss its aesthetic and architecture in view of the values held by Oxford dons and patrons of the carpenter business. The final section will address the overall layout of the building, arguing that it came to represent a mirror image of British imperial forests and values.

Managerial Scientists, Students, and Their Patrons

The aim of the Imperial Forestry Institute was scientific management of the empire's forests. It served as a knowledge bank of nature's economy controlled by a cluster of scientists, students, and their patrons. The institute was established to train forest officers and nurture a culture of scientific management within the British Empire.[8] The larger history of this research has recently been the subject of an excellent study by Ravi Rajan (2006) titled *Modernizing Nature: Forestry and Imperial Eco-Development, 1800–1950*.[9] It is worth reviewing his findings in relation to activities at Oxford University to understand the context in which this managerial culture emerged. When the School of Forestry was reorganized into an institute in 1924, Rajan argues, the aim was to give higher education in forestry and consequently a better running of the Crown's forests. The experience of timber shortage in the wake of the First World War led to a demand for new management regimes. As free market capitalism sought to exploit forests within the empire, higher education sought to establish a more scientific mode of forest management in the Continental tradition.[10] The criticism of laissez-faire capitalism and exploitation was at the heart of the ethos

of the institute. The students were taught that the empire had a sad history of mismanagement, and that broader state ownership, control, and scientific planning of forests was important to avoid irresponsible exploitation of the empire's forestry resources.[11]

The prime mover of this call for professional forestry was the first director of the institute, Robert Scott Troup (1874–1939). As previous head of the Forest Service in India, he fashioned forestry management in line with his colonial experiences. His publications consisted mainly of descriptions and suggestions for economic exploration of forests throughout the empire.[12] To avoid mismanagement he favored state control and planning at the expense of what he regarded as irresponsible private or local exploitation of forests. Previous depletion of forests "in many parts of the world gives genuine cause for alarm" (1928, v), he wrote in his textbook, and the students' task was to learn proper forest conservation and management. State ownership could facilitate a synchronization of economic and natural systems that were in the long-term interests of Britain, he argued in *Forest and State Control* (1938).[13]

The institute was built for forest management of the British Empire. Maintaining this global approach was of prime importance to defend its existence and to build its future, as the British Isles did not have large forests. The institute had since its beginning received much of its funding from the forest administration in the colonies, money that was often generated by previous students of the institute. At the time of the opening of the new building in 1950 almost all of the 220 officers working for the Colonial Forest Service were alumni of Oxford. This network of former students was crucial for securing financial and material sustainability, as the institute got most of its income from the colonies.[14] As students they were required to spend time researching abroad, mostly in India, where they established contacts for potential jobs. The social dynamics of the institute were thus intrinsically linked with successful management of the British Empire. It is telling that the title of its journal, *Empire Forestry Review*, and the name of the institute itself were kept long after political realities made them obsolete. That the titles "Imperial" and "Empire" were not changed to "Commonwealth" before 1962 is evidence of the profession's pride in

servicing the British imperial mission as well as the importance of the colonial network for their work.

This trust in imperial managerial forestry should be understood in context of similar views at Oxford University. Here scholars and students alike, such as the ecologist Arthur G. Tansley, the zoologist Charles Elton, and the ornithologist Max Nicholson, all believed in the importance of scientific management of the empire's natural resources. Among them was also Julian Huxley, who, in a textbook written together with H. G. Wells, argued that environmental problems could be solved only through scientific planning. Scientists should plan nature's "energy circulation as carefully as a board of directors plans a business," they argued (Wells 1931; Anker 2001).

The image of scientists as directors planning nature's economy implied the presence of a bank, which is a fitting image of what the Imperial Forestry Institute came to be. The scholars at the institute would act as brokers, creating both moral and economic profit for their institution. The moral profit was to come in reputation and the economic profit in terms of pay, research grants, and opportunities. The institute came to function as a trading floor of knowledge with scientists in the image of brokers negotiating nature's economy. The building itself represented the material place in which such exchanges of knowledge and know-how took place. The number of visitors, the diversity of scholarly publications, and the intensity of knowledge trading were all factors that determined the activities of the institute. Careful deliberation on how to attract a diversified and competent audience was an integral part of the planning process of the new building. The construction of a building as a trading floor for ecological communication was crucial for the future of the discipline, since the Imperial Forestry Institute thus would be in a position to control the exchanges.

The desire to have their own building was as old as the institute itself. The old home of the School of Forestry was too small and not fitted to the new institute's needs, and various proposals for a new building circulated in the 1920s without generating enough patrons. This would change in 1930 when Rajah Brook of Sarawak donated £25,000 to Oxford University to promote colonial forestry research.[15] This donation was not enough for a new building, but it started a domino effect of

donations. The Rhodes and Pilgrim Trusts soon promised support if others would do the same, and the result was a series of contributions from various colonial agencies with funds controlled by the network of former Oxford students. This financial momentum for a new building, which by the end of the 1930s was still insufficient, was halted by the impossibility of fund-raising during the Second World War. When it ceased, the university was ready to go forward with the building if additional money could be raised. Fortunately, the Colonial Development and Welfare Fund, which normally allocated money to development in the colonies, was willing to provide an additional £45,000, and Oxford University then guaranteed the rest. The construction could thus start in 1945 as part of the movement to rebuild a country shattered by warfare. When finished it became one of the first new buildings to be put in use at Oxford after the war.

Almost twenty years of fund-raising provided the institute with only a limited budget, and the scientists had to scale down their desires in planning the building. The most painful curtailment was the abandonment of a forestry museum. A natural history museum for forestry-related research had been the dream of the institute for a whole generation. Such a museum was supposed to not only hold a collection of wood samples from around the empire, but also to display for students, patrons, and the public how trees relate to the environment and the economic prosperity of the empire. It came as a great disappointment to the staff that the original idea of a large central museum in the building had to be abandoned for financial reasons.

A Renewal of Arts and Crafts through Architectural Design

In the summer of 1942, at the darkest time of Britain's fight against advancing Nazi forces, the institute hired an architect to draw up plans for a new research building. It was their way of trying to boost some hope in the midst of a series of catastrophic news from the front lines. The new building was to give scientists and visitors a sense of responsibility for forests within the empire, while at the same time generate

respect for wood-making through an appreciation of the British Arts and Crafts tradition.

The choice as architect was Hubert Worthington (1886–1963), a partner of Thomas Worthington & Sons architect firm and a former Eaton student (Pass 1988, 160–61). His design was meant to stimulate hopes for a postwar Britain that would care about environmental sensibility. He was a keen reader of John Ruskin (1819–1900), who, according to the historian of architecture John Farmer, "can be credited with the founding of green sensibility" in ecological design. Ruskin, Farmer claims, championed for a renewal of the moral and spiritual values represented in a Gothic Revival architecture that could foster resistance to uncontrolled laissez-faire capitalism. Buildings should display unity between faith and science and between humans and nature by displaying the beauty of the natural world in its design. According to Farmer's interpretation, Ruskin's architecture respected "the spiritual power of the air, the rocks and the waters" (1999, 66, 85). The Oxford Museum of Natural History, completed in 1860, is perhaps one of the most famous buildings inspired by Ruskin's theories. Its countless moldings, capitals, and wrought-iron details of botanical decoration were meant to bridge the spiritual and natural worlds into a grand cathedral of science. For visitors and scholars, the Oxford Museum was meant to foster an ethic of environmental responsibility and sense of belonging to nature.

Though not a follower of Gothic Revival, Worthington was sympathetic to Ruskin's critique of unchecked capitalism and plea for environmental sensibility in the form of organic ornamentation. Thomas Worthington & Sons were known for their rather pompous Victorian style of architecture, and they designed buildings with a rich display of botanical decorations. The professional breakthrough for the young Worthington came with his restoration of the Manchester Cathedral, an achievement that generated a professorship in architecture at the Royal College of Art in South Kensington (1923–28), and later a Lectureship in Architecture at the University of Oxford. Of the two different ways of doing architecture—modern and the "old-fashioned" style (Newton 1925, 216)—Worthington was known for the latter. His lectureship at Oxford gave him access to several rehabilitation jobs for

the university, since he was known as someone who designed within the traditional nonindustrial style. This was the chief reason the university hired him as the architect for the Imperial Forestry Institute ("New Work at Oxford" 1942a, b). Like Ruskin, Worthington sought to build spiritual places for research activities that were sensitive to the beauty of nature and knowledge.

The new Imperial Forestry Building was to represent a changing attitude away from industrial exploitation, intrinsically related to the causes of war, and toward a peaceful future where humans would live in harmony with themselves and the natural world. In walking through the building one was supposed to see and feel how the ecology of forests relates to the wealth of each part of the empire, and admire craftwork pointing to a better relationship between humans and nature. The building was to illustrate the importance of visualization to the imperial sciences (Stepan 2001). Thus the building's design and layout was to set new standards for environmental sensitivity and creativity in the use of timber. Using different types of wood as building material was meant to counteract modernist design based on destructive monoculture forestry. The homage to the machine and mass production of International Style architecture failed to appreciate how this type of design would lead to social and environmental destruction. Instead, Worthington sought a visual language that was supposed to blend in with the old-fashioned style of the Oxford University and community. In a handout to journalists it was thus described as "modern in style, but not severely 'functional' " (Russell 1950, 1), since functionalism was synonymous with the pitfalls of the industrial-minded avant-garde and the laissez-fair-minded capitalists.

The presentation of nature's beauty and variety was an integral part of the building, and one therefore has to take into account the carpenters of the project. A special grant from the university secured the expense of turning raw timber into fine woodwork, and two of the most respected woodcraft firms in Britain, Heal's Contracts and Webbers Ltd., received the prestigious job ("Timbers" 1950). The interior was to reflect the biological diversity of the world's forests displayed in floors, walls, wainscots, window frames, doors, columns, reception desks, furniture, and in various ornaments.

Traditional Arts and Crafts shops were in decline after the war due to stiff competition in industrial production of building materials. They were the victims of the governmental policy of modernization of the construction and building industry in the ongoing postwar restoration of Britain. The conservative Oxford traditionalists saw this as a most unfortunate trend. Craftwork was to the skilled worker not only an economic opportunity, but a way of living morally in balance with humans in relation to themselves, society, and the natural world. It represented a viable response to the natural world, since it was a type of labor that created a symbiotic relationship between natural materials and humans. To the carpenter, forests were something more than just a stockpile of resources for industrial exploitation.

Such questioning of industrial building techniques and relations to nature was an integral part of the agenda for the Oxford dons when planning their new forestry institute. The new building was to be a model for an alternative relation to forests that would respect its intrinsic beauty and vulnerability. It was a display of woodwork, craftsmanship, and the role and usefulness of trees to society in general, and buildings and furniture in particular. In short, the building was to be a place where staff, students, and visitors could learn the art of recognizing types of trees while at the same time reflect upon the state of the art of craftsmanship and its superiority to industrial buildings and their sad exploitation of natural resources. The visitors were at the core of the project, or, as one of the forestry lecturers, Laurence Chalk, explained: "The object of using Empire timbers on such a lavish scale has not been so much to provide a home worthy of the Institute—the building itself does that—but to give a permanent demonstration of what can be done with Empire timbers if they are handled with skill and imagination."[16]

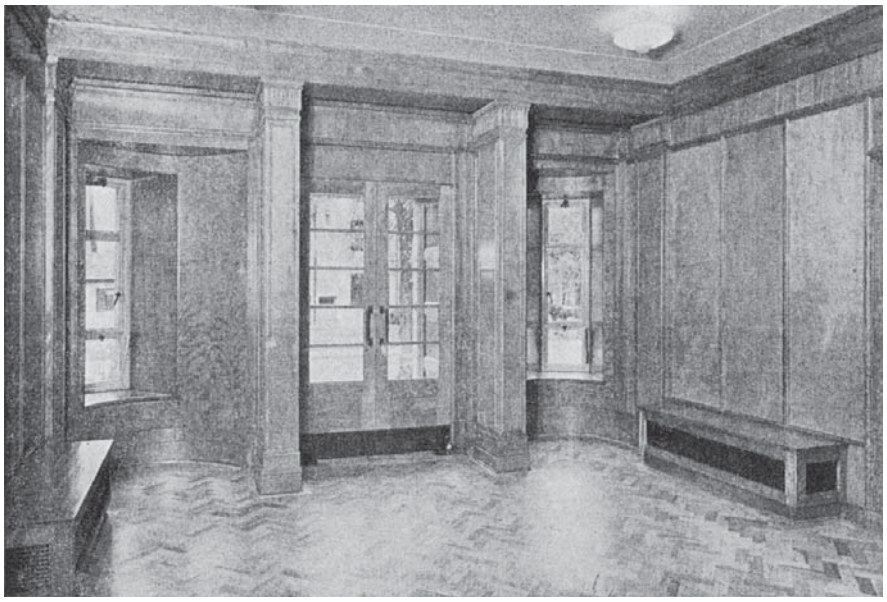
The Institute as a Microcosm of the Empire

In the discussions between the researchers and the architect, the creative idea surfaced that one should use nature's commodities to shape the building (Cronon 1991). The institute's staff argued that one could

get the much-desired forestry museum if one used wood from different parts of the empire to furnish the institute. In this way one would also be able to illustrate the usefulness of timber to visitors.

The two most vocal defenders of this museum organization were Chalk and W. R. C. Handley, who in the late 1940s used most of their research time together with the architect figuring out the logistics of what they labeled the "living museum" of different kinds of wood ("Timbers" 1950, 320). In 1947 the institute sent an appeal to their extensive social network for help in realizing the material side of the building. They asked for gifts of wood from all the timber-producing parts of the empire to build and design the institute's interior. They were amazed by the response. Soon piles of timber and planks of all kinds arrived at the construction site from every corner of the empire, and Worthington, in close collaboration with the research staff, became busy planning the proper order, use, and design of it all. Altogether twenty-eight colonies, dominions, and states within the empire, as well as six private firms and individuals, donated timber and planks to the institute. As a collection it was a unique representation of the world's biological diversity of trees. The transfer of types of wood was thus a key feature of the building process, and the building came to visualize the global ecological exchange of biota that the historian Karen Brown (2003) describes as "a feature of European imperialism" contributing to the establishment of imperial scientific networks.

The building became, in effect, a material representation of a scientific patronage system that can be read as a parable of governmental authority (Scott 1998, 11–22). The gifts were organized in the new institute's interior according to the location of the patrons, and the building thus became a material microcosm of the empire with various rooms representing patrons, colonies, and collaborators. The outline, design, and materials of the building further demonstrate the intrinsic relationship between imperial politics and scientific research. The empire's forests were understood as belonging to the Oriental; they were the mysterious, unchanging collection of trees growing in the ultimately inferior regions of the empire. This representation enabled scientists and managers of the Occident to steer and manage these environments. The building was to be a center for distribution of geo-



Imperial Forestry Institute, Oxford. Entrance hall paneled in Canadia yellow birch, 1950.

political awareness of the aesthetic value of wood, the appreciation of Arts and Crafts woodwork, the economic utility of sound forest management, and finally the importance of scholarly research. By setting patronage and knowledge on display in a museum, the scholars created a stream of normative assumptions teaching Occidental visitors and students how to rule Oriental nature.

The institute was designed as a museum of tree types organized by area, or as Chalk explained: "The general aim has been to group woods from similar geographic regions" ("Imperial Forestry Institute" 1950b, 319). The three-story building was thus meant to be a microcosm of the forest ecosystems, while at the same time also to display a network of patrons of forestry. The types of wood would remind students and staff alike of who supported their activities. The order of the building thus reflected a patronage relationship between scientists and the colonial mission of forest management within the empire. This ordering of the collection emerged from the process of collecting timber, thanks to the mobilization of a large network of former students and colonial patrons with interests in forestry.

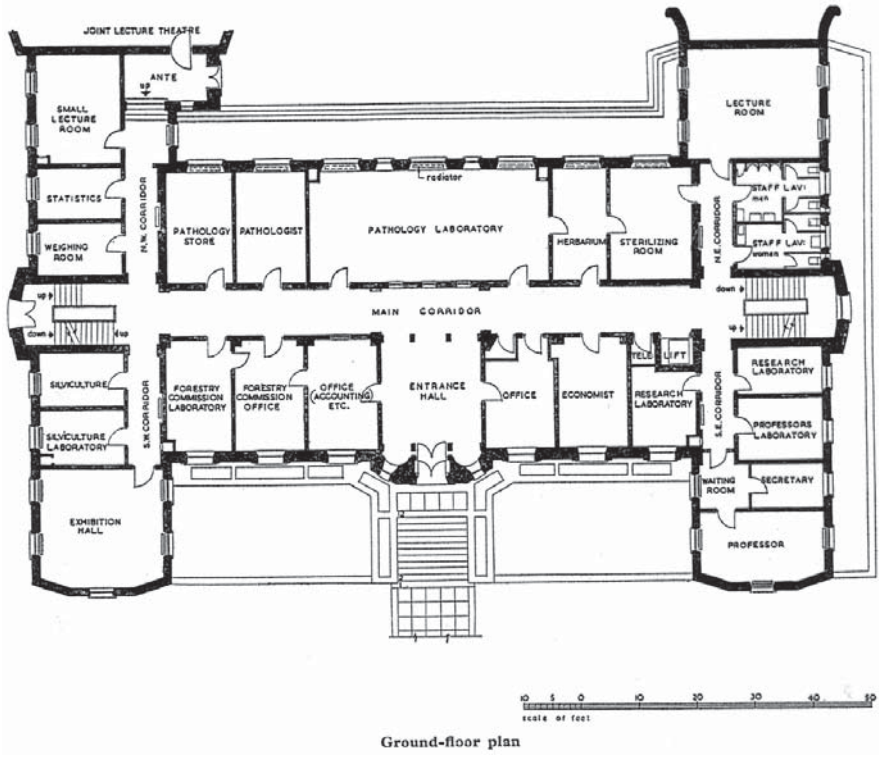
When entering the building, the first thing the visitor experienced was a paneled hall in veneered Canadian yellow birch.

The decorated columns, arches, doors, and adjacent corridors of the entrance area were also made of the same birch, while the floor was made of maple wood, all from Canadian forests. Given that the chief purpose of the institute was to educate and serve the foresters within the empire, it is not surprising that Canadian timber was given a prominent place in the entrance area of the building. Canada was in 1950, and is still today, the largest producer of timber under the British Crown, and it was important for the institute to place the gifts from the Canadian Lumbermen's Association at the very entrance. The Canadian government officials were gearing up their research activity on forest management and promoting forest education in light of the growing demand for timber after the war. They thus represented one of the most important future patrons of British forestry research (CMDR 1947).

All the subsequent rooms on the ground floor contained various marvels in wood:

The two administrative offices located next to the hall had floors made of rimu (a gift from the government of New Zealand), with desks and chairs of crabwood (a gift from the government of British Guiana), and a door made of peroba from South America. The administration did not have a high social status within the institute, and these offices were not meant for public display, so their floors and furniture were made of leftover pieces of plank. The office of the Forestry Commission and laboratory next to the accountant enjoyed a somewhat higher status. Though sparsely decorated compared to the entrance hall, the offices' occupants could enjoy working surrounded by exclusive handmade furniture made of mupumena, a token of appreciation from the Government of Southern Rhodesia.

The west wing of the ground floor represented, roughly, the Far East of the southern hemisphere of the empire. At the end one would find the Rajah Brook Room, which was the exhibition hall of the institute designed for receptions, small exhibitions, and social events of various kinds. The room was named in honor of the generous gift received in 1930 from the Rajah of Sarawak. Yet, no plank came from the state, which at the time was in political turmoil and dissolution,



Ground-floor plan

Imperial Forestry Institute, Oxford. Ground-floor 1950.

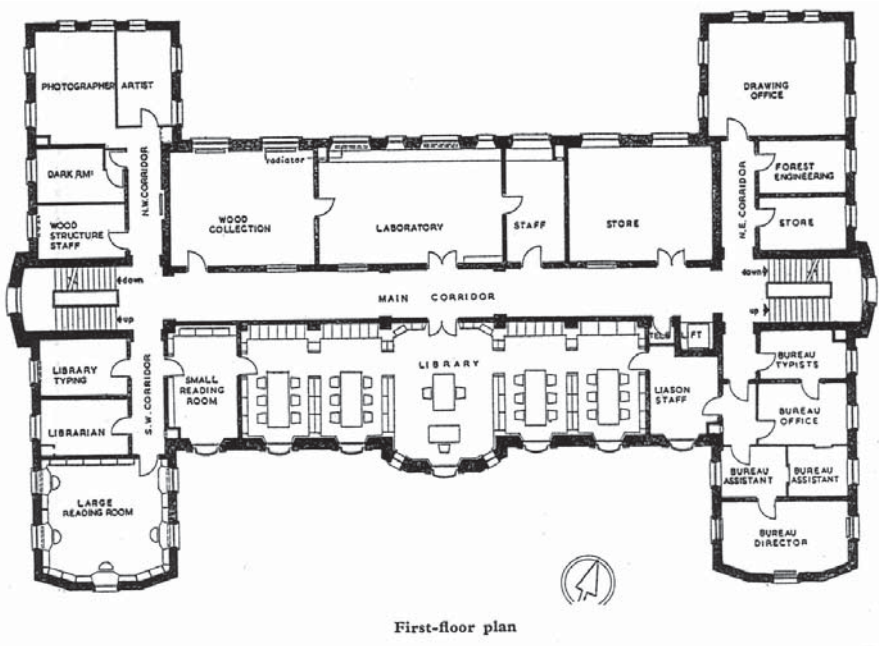
so the staff decided instead to furnish it with gifts from Australia. The idea was to "boast woods from the opposite sides of the world" ("Timbers" 1950, 320). The panels were made of walnut, while the moldings, tables, and chairs were made of maple (all gifts from the government of Queensland), while the floor was made of karri-tree and the edgings of jarrah (all gifts from the government of Western Australia).

From the receptions at the Rajah Brook Room one could walk down the western corridor to a small and a large lecture theater to hear about the latest research. This way one could admire doors made of makore (from West Africa) and primavera (from Central America), and perhaps open them to look at the floors inside where the lecturer in silviculture worked. They were made of gurjun (a gift from the government of Pakistan). The small lecture room had a specially designed lecture desk and a host of chairs suitable for taking notes, all made of

muninga, (a gift from the government of Tanganyika), and a floor of kokrodua from the Gold Coast of West Africa (a gift from the Victoria Sawmills, Ltd., England). For larger events one would pass this room and instead walk through an anteroom (with solid knotty panels made of western red cedar) into the large lecture theater. The hall was attached to the Department of Botany, and western red cedar was used for the plywood panels with specially made seating of western hemlock (all gifts from Seaboard Lumber Sales Co. in British Columbia).

The middle part of the ground floor generally represented the eastern part of the southern hemisphere. The first office to the right was the Malaya committee room. After the war, the Malaya colony became one of the largest financial sponsors of the institute, and a fair share of both graduate and undergraduate students from this colony got their forestry education at Oxford.[17] It was thus important to give gifts from this colony proper display: The visitor would enter through a door made of mengkulang, which was also used for the rotary-cut veneer panels with solid moldings, while the floor was made of merbau, also a gift from the government of Malaya. In order to make the room regionally correct, Indian rosewood was used for the chairs and Burmese padauk for the conference table. The gifts from the government of Burma were displayed fully across the corridor in the pathology laboratory used mainly for teaching, where Burma teak was used for tabletops and bench seats. A similar gift was on display in the Lecture Room farther down the corridor, where Tasmanian oak—a gift from the Tasmanian government—was used to make both the seating and the floor.

The right part of the ground floor generally represented the south and southwestern part of the hemisphere. Some of the greatest marvels of the building were to be found in the rooms of Professor Harry G. Champion. He had his own research section donated by the government of British Guiana, with a floor made of mora and a handmade desk made of South American cedar. He also had his own laboratory with a floor of mora, and a specially designed table in African mahogany donated by the Nigerian-based African Timber and Plywood Co. Ltd., which also gave mahogany for furniture in a laboratory across the corridor. This company also sponsored the floor of the anteroom in



Imperial Forestry Institute, Oxford. First-floor 1950.

which Champion's personal secretary worked. The door to the professor's office, made of specially designed stinkwood, opened to a showroom made out of woods from the southern part of Africa. The walls were paneled in stinkwood from South Africa, a personal gift from J. Hunt Holley, the president of the South African Association of Science, and from the Union of South Africa. The floor, made of an African mahogany iroko, was a gift of the African Timber and Plywood Co. in Nigeria, and the furniture was made of mupumena and sapele, which were gifts from the government of Southern Rhodesia.

When moving up to the first floor one could lean upon a railing with fir-tree emblems in wrought iron, before entering a corridor made of jarrah, a gift of the government of Western Australia.

Given that most of the interior arrangements were carried out by Chalk, it is not surprising to find that his personal office was particularly elegant, with a door, desk, table, chairs, and veneer panel in avodire (a gift from the Gold Coast colony), and a floor made of Rhodesian teak (from the government of Northern Rhodesia). The offices

of the rest of the first floor were less extravagant, though by no means ordinary. Details aside, they were furnished with specially designed office desks, tables, chairs, and shelving made of various types of wood donated by different governments. Most of them had specially designed doors as well. The offices of the director of the Empire Forestry Bureau, located above Champion's offices, were also elaborately made, displaying Australian trees (as gifts from the government of New South Wales). The laboratories were also favored with various framing, benches, desks, and shelving, thanks to a series of wood gifts from different governments.

The students dominated the activities of the first floor, experimenting in the laboratories and reading in the library, which had a floor made of teak, a gift of appreciation from the government of Burma. Their reading room was furnished in "such English stalwarts as mahogany" ("Timbers" 1950, 320) from Honduras, a gift from J. Gliksten & Son Ltd. This room was one of the showrooms, with a floor made of wood from the East African olive tree and a large table with chairs of African mahogany, all generous gifts from the East African Cooperative Society of Nairobi. Leaving the mahogany room—through a solid mahogany door—one passed down a short corridor and entered the periodicals room (through a door made of solid alpine ash from Australia), which was a miniature representation of trees growing on this continent. The room was composed of three types of eucalyptus: mountain ash, obeche, and afara. Mountain ash was used for solid shelving and book stacks, the obeche and afara were used to build card index cabinets, while the alpine ash was used for veneered window framings. All were gifts from the government of Victoria. The floor was made of Australian red mahogany, a gift from the government of New South Wales. A visitor noted that "there is a faint pink tint to some of the wood in this room, much to the annoyance of the Institute. It is hoped, however, that it will fade in the course of time" (320). Feminine pink was not desired by the male scholars.

The second floor was less extravagantly furnished. Various leftovers were used in the research rooms and laboratories to make framing, benches, and shelving, but this was not displayed as part of the building. Scholars and students could enjoy sitting on stools made

of Trinidad teak or more-luxurious Windsor chairs made of elm and beach, but that was about it. The exception was the display of a gift from the government of North Borneo, which had only sent a tiny amount of seraya, and the architect cleverly used it to make a telephone booth in the corridor so that this part of the empire also could be represented with a room.

The basement was not part of the "living museum." This was the home of three lathes, a Victoria milling machine, a pillar drill, a bench drill, an electric arc welder, a four-post grinder, a treadle guillotine, a power hacksaw, and various other machines. This was where woodworkers labored, and their rooms were not included among the marvels of nature.

Judging from journalists' opinions, one may safely conclude that the "living museum" was a success. The reviewer of the *Cabinet Maker and Complete House Furnisher* was particularly excited about the fact that the building provided a comprehensive list of types of wood: "The students have the excellent opportunity of getting to know the woods of the world by the doors they open and the furniture that is in the daily use" (quoted in Russell 1950, 2). A visitor from the *Gliksten Journal* was equally enthusiastic in noting that "the timbers are only a visible token of the help and goodwill of the donors, but will always be valuable in themselves as a much more effective exhibition of timbers than would have been a collection of specimens in the museum that was dropped out of the plan" ("H.R.H. Princess Margaret" n.d., 18–20). The journal *Wood* praised "the architect in the decorative treatment" of wood and stressed that "the interiors are of great value in forming a permanent exhibition of timber used in a 'live' form in contrast to the specimen piece" ("New Building" 1950, 442). Clearly, the role of the building was well understood as a material representation of a patron's goodwill and relation to the Imperial Institute.

The Oak of Ecological Communication

The chief aim of the building was to facilitate communication of knowledge among scholars, students, and visitors whose aims and

objectives were different. The spaces in which such contact took place were built in English oak, as this type of wood represented the solid foundation of the British heritage while also providing a "natural" space for negotiating knowledge.

British oak was used by design in the room intended to be used for negotiations and decision-making. Oaks, it is worth noting, have a special place in British environmental culture. The ecologist Arthur G. Tansley wrote a whole book about them, arguing that "the oak rightly takes pride of place among British trees, and this for several different reasons. Everyone—or at least everyone except the city children who have never seen a green field or a cow, and they are surely fewer with each year that passes—everyone knows the oak. . . . The oak has long been the symbol of British solidity and strength, both because of its look of strength and because its wood is hard and resistant to decay" (1952, 1).[18] Tansley also added that oaks were the last remnants of the original British landscape, and thus represented its very origin and heritage. An oak-paneled room thus gave researchers and British visitors alike a sense of belonging. It provided the proper setting for scientific, political, economic, legal, moral, artistic, and educational judgments concerning forests. The large meeting room on the top floor was designed to host faculty meetings and special sessions with the VIPs of British forestry. A guided tour of the building for special guests would have its natural ending here, as if one were returning home from a tour around the empire. Even though the floor was made of rimu (a gift from the government of New Zealand), it was definitely a room meant to honor the gifts of oak and chestnut from His Majesty's Forestry Commission. The room had a solid oak door and paneling with twenty chairs and a large table made of chestnut, all cut and seasoned by the British Forest Products Research Laboratory. A large portrait of Robert Troup would overlook it all. After a tour looking at tree marvels and woodwork wonders from around the empire, this room offered a safe homegrown oak environment from where one could discuss the management and research of forests in the British domains and colonies.

The library was also one of the few rooms where English wood dominated, with shelving and moldings made of oak donated by His

Majesty's Forestry Commission. This non-Oriental shelving suggests a sense of neutrality and objectivity for the world's largest collection of books on forestry and related matters. The same was the case with the wood collection room paneled in English oak. Wood identification was an important part of the curriculum, and the specially designed room was furnished, thanks to its patrons, with a variety of more than seventeen thousand timber pieces "cut and stacked like books" (Russell 1950, 2). These types of wood could be understood as an image of a scientific discovery for the scientist, a managerial prospect for the manager, a tricky exam question for the student, a financial opportunity for the carpenter, and an aesthetic marvel for the Oxford don, since systems of agency operate independently, even while taking place under the same roof and while admiring the same object.

That the Imperial Forestry Institute was built as a microcosm of scientific agencies is nothing new or even original. Since medieval times European natural historians have organized marvels of nature in *wunderkammern* representing the natural world and its patrons. Influential Hermetic and Gnostic thinkers of the Renaissance, for example, were fond of designing microcosms as representations of macrocosms.[19] Ever since then, thinkers and scientists have fashioned their research spaces according to respective visions of the environment. It is therefore not surprising to find representatives of the British forestry constructing a building according to their set of imperial beliefs. The building represents a material manifestation of ideas about nature that have dominated Western scientific thinking for centuries. It is still there today as a constant reminder of how the Oriental nature served as a condition for securing British research needs.

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the following I have used material from two boxes labeled "Opening of the Forestry Building 19th Oct 1950" at the Plant Sciences Library at Oxford University (hereafter PSL).

Notes

1. "Princess Opens forestry Institute in Oxford," 1; "Imperial Forestry Institute, Oxford" 1950b; "Imperial Forestry Institute, Oxford" 1950a.

2. See Howe, "When—If Ever—Did Empire End?"; Powell, "The Empire Meets the New Deal"; Carruthers, "Africa"; Bocking, "Empires of Ecology"; Tvedt, *The River Nile in the Age of the British*; Dunlap, *Nature and the English Diaspora*; and Grove, *Green Imperialism*. See also Adams and Mulligan, *Decolonizing Nature*.

3. See Bravo and Sörlin, *Narrating the Arctic*; Proudfoot and Rouche, *(Dis)Placing Empire*; Fan, *British Naturalists in Qing China*; and Grove, Damodaran, and Sangwan, *Nature and the Orient*.

4. See Drayton, *Nature's Government*; Spary, *Utopia's Garden*; and Koerner, *Linnaeus*.

5. See Mitchell, "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order"; Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*; Forgan, "Building the Museum"; and Saumarez Smith, "Architecture and the Museum."

6. See Kohler, *Landscapes and Labscapes*; Macy and Bonnemaison, *Architecture and Nature*; and Latour, "Give Me a Laboratory and I Will Raise the World."

7. See Star and Griesemer, "Institutional Ecology"; and Galison, *Image and Logic*, 781–844.

8. "Forestry at University of Oxford"; Laurie, "The Commonwealth Forestry Institute"; and Imperial Forestry Institute, *Annual Report*.

9. See also Rajan, "Imperial Environmentalism or Environmental Imperialism?"; and Barton, *Empire Forestry and the Origins of Environmentalism*.

10. See West, "Forests and National Security," 270–93; and Prince of Wales, *Speech*.

11. See "Your Royal Highness."

12. See Pearson, "Professor Robert Scott Troup"; Stebbing, "Robert Scott Troup"; and the following by Robert S. Troup: *The Silviculture of Indian Trees*; *Indian Woods and Their Uses; Report on Forestry in Kenya Colony*; *Report on Forestry in Uganda*; and *Exotic Forest Trees in the British Empire*.

13. Similarly in Anderson, "State Control of Private Forestry under European Control."

14. See *Annual Report*, Imperial Forestry Institute; Champion, "The Silver Jubilee of the Imperial Forestry Institute"; and Lee, "The Story of Great Britain."

15. See " Rajah of Sarawak's Gift"; Reece, *The Name of Brooke*; and Laurie, "The Commonwealth Forestry Institute," 207–8.

16. Chalk quoted in "Imperial Forestry Institute, Oxford" (1950b, 319). Information about types of woodwork with Latin names, locations in the building, and patrons is listed on pp. 321–27.

17. Champion, *The Imperial Forestry Institute*, 15–16. Malaya was third in terms of the number of students with 10 graduating from the Institute between 1945 and 1950, compared to 20 from Nigeria (first) and 15 from the Gold Coast (second). Only Nigeria gave more money to the Institute than Malaya.

18. See also Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*.

19. See Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*; Conger, *Theories of Macrocosms and Microcosms*; and Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*.

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