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"Global Plants and Digital Letters: Epistemological Implications of Digitising the Directors' Correspondence at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew"

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Digitisation is presenting new possibilities and challenges for the use of collections in both the humanities and the sciences. However, digitisation is also another layer in a longer process of selections shaping the collection—something which must be analysed on a case-by-case basis. This paper considers the epistemological implications of the digitisation of the Directors' Correspondence (DC) collection (1841-1928) at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, made available through the Global Plants database. In order to avoid a polarised analysis of the end-products of archive and database, the selection process shaping this collection is traced from the writing of the letters and their reception into the DC at RBG, Kew, to the digitisation with corresponding metadata and the end-user searching the database. Particular attention is given the digitisation process and the knowledge produced by the project digitisers, as they combine close reading and database searches in writing the summaries of the letters for the metadata. This analysis of the DC engages with wider discussions about digitisation by emphasising the importance of taking a longer historical perspective, with particular attention to moments of selection, and highlighting the knowledge generated by those involved in the digitisation process. By doing so, the result is not a clear trajectory but a combination of losses and gains, disconnections and reconnections. Care is therefore needed to avoid replicating the invisible losses of extractive approaches to knowledge production, particularly in the context of collection-based biodiversity conservation. (Text from author's abstract)

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