



Seminar

REBECCA EARLE

EURIAS Fellow, SCAS.
Professor of History, University of Warwick

Potatoes and the Pursuit of Happiness

Tuesday, 6 February, 11:15 a.m.

In the Thunberg Lecture Hall
SCAS, Linneanum, Thunbergsvägen 2, Uppsala
www.swedishcollegium.se

S W E D I S H
C O L L E G I U M
for ADVANCED STUDY

ABOUT REBECCA EARLE

Rebecca Earle holds a BA in Mathematics, History of Art, and German from Bryn Mawr College, PA, and an MSc in Mathematics, an MA in History and a Ph.D. in History from the University of Warwick. She has taught in the History Department at the University of Warwick since completing her doctorate. Her earlier work studied Spanish American cultural and political history and focused particularly on the nature of identity, memory and embodiment. Her second monograph, *The Return of the Native: Indians and Myth-Making in Spanish America, 1810-1930* (Duke University Press, 2008), for instance, offered a hemispheric interpretation of elite nationalism in postcolonial Spanish America. Her third monograph, *The Body of the Conquistador: Food, Race and the Colonial Experience in Spanish America, 1492-1700* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), explored the centrality of food in the construction of colonial space and the 'racial' categories that underpinned it. This book was awarded the 2013 Bolton–Johnson Prize for the best work in English on Latin American history. She has also published on the distinctive Spanish American artistic genre known as *casta* painting, the history of letter writing (ed., *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers 1600-1945* [Ashgate, 1999]), the cultural meaning of drunkenness, and other topics.

Her current research explores the cultural significance of food and eating in the modern world. At the Swedish Collegium, she will be writing a global history of the potato. This project uses the emergence of the potato as an Enlightenment superfood to explore the connections between everyday life and new ideas of individualism, political economy and the state. The overall aim is to explain the genesis of our current obsession with balancing individual dietary freedom with the health of the body politic.

ABSTRACT

Eating acquired a new political importance during the Enlightenment, as writers began to link individual diets to the strength and wealth of nations. This talk examines the eighteenth-century career of a foodstuff that became emblematic of these developments: the potato. Politicians, statesmen and philosophers across Europe enthusiastically promoted the potato as a means of strengthening the body politic. They framed this promotion within a language of choice and the individual pursuit of happiness. In so doing they laid the foundations for today's debates about how to balance personal dietary autonomy with the demands of public health. The roots of the current neoliberal insistence that healthy eating is fundamentally a matter of individual choice thus lie in the Enlightenment.