

The Dalarna Journey together with Journeys to the Mines and Works
Translated and edited by Andrew Casson Gullers Förlag, Örebro, Sweden

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On the road with Linnaeus – the Reuterholmian Travel Society

This is an impeccable and beautiful book. It is produced to the highest ‘coffeetable’ standards but also contains a remarkable and fascinating text – or rather texts, because there are really two textual components to this book. The first is of course the original (translated) diary by Linnaeus. The other is the extensive accompanying modern editorial text, which, with all the indexes and illustrations, probably doubles the original diaries for length. All this editorial matter explains with great clarity the background to the journeys and the diaries, and also includes numerous scholarly but highly readable footnotes. These unerringly seem to anticipate almost every question that readers might ask themselves about points in the diary, whether they are specialists or not in the subject matter concerned.

Moreover, both the original text and the modern editorial matter represent the substantial efforts of three different teams. Although Linnaeus wrote the diary proper, the information in it was compiled through the efforts of all eight members of his expedition, which he charmingly called the ‘Reuterholmian Travel Society’ (more of which, below). The modern editorial text was the result of a joint project between Dalarna University, Dalarnas Museum and the publishers themselves. This was led by Arvid Hjalmar Uggla, with the assistance of a further 26 other scholars who worked for over 15 years to produce the Swedish edition of these diaries in 1953, published by the Swedish Linnean Society and Nordiska Museet. In fact, there had been earlier Swedish editions, the first of which was published in 1889, but the 1953 Swedish edition and its 2007 English counterpart are the first authoritative scholarly editions. The third team effort was that which produced the present English version, including the illustrations, and includes, in addition to present translator and editor, Andrew Casson, names familiar to Fellows, like John Edmondson FLS and Gina Douglas FLS.

The book is an unusual size, being an almost square ‘quarto’ which I guess was intended to facilitate the very pleasing and generous page layouts. The diaries proper occupy left-hand columns and the footnotes the right-hand columns, in a width ratio of about two to one respectively. Every page is also interspersed with illustrations, often in colour, usually of an animal, plant or mineral related to the text, often as reproductions of work by older naturalists and illustrators. There are also numerous illustrations related to the mining and to the social, medical and ethnic details of the diaries, including old photographs. And lastly, there are also reproductions of Linnaeus’s own drawings, and of excerpts of the handwritten text of his original Dalarna manuscript, as kept in the Linnean Society of London.

Having conveyed something of the complexity of the production and history of this book, and its contents, what of the diaries themselves? The origin of the journey is fully conveyed in Linnaeus’s own title page: “carried out at the order and expense of the Most Magnanimous and Right Honourable Nils Reuterholm Governor of the province of Dalarna, through the Swedish province of Dalarna ... containing observations on Geography, Physics, Mineralogy, Botany, Zoology, Ethnography and Husbandry”. To this list might be added

the mines and mining industry of the region, and the extension of the journey into the neighbouring part of Norway, then under Danish rule.

Linnaeus was just 27 years old on the summer's day his Travel Society started their journey. His organization of his expedition is intriguing, and perhaps also for its time (I have not checked), innovative, in that he enlisted his fellow travellers on an academic, horses-for-courses basis according to the particular subjects each was to study as they went along, reporting at the end of each day their findings to Linnaeus. They were all younger men than himself, the youngest being a teenager, Benjamin Sandel, an American Swede who reported on the agricultural economy. Linnaeus was the self-styled "President", referred to by Carsson as the "benevolent despot" of this "summer jaunt". In reality, notwithstanding the evident enjoyment these young men have in doing such things as estimating distances by firing their guns or by trying to throw stones across rivers, this was a serious little travelling academy of which Linnaeus was the professor, encouraging and teaching his students as they went on their journey, conditions of which were not always as summery and jaunty as Carsson has dubbed it.

The journey clearly has its origins in that great contemporary European drive to generate detailed rational accounts, with collections, of the contemporary economies, geography, natural history and potential products of different regions, both at home and abroad. Linnaeus however is also genuinely concerned with the health and welfare of the people they move amongst. Life in this region of Sweden was very hard, even at 'bread-line' levels. The climate was harsh and the soils and natural resources in many places were often inadequate for producing enough for people to live on – aside that is from the great commercial success of the copper and iron mining in the region. Nevertheless, conditions for the people working these mines and their smelters were grim, and Linnaeus reflected that it must have been places like this which inspired preachers in their portrayal of Hell – so anticipating William Blake's "dark, satanic mills" by 70 years.

As most naturalist readers would expect, Linnaeus recounts the botany of the journey in great detail (at that time, using pre-Linnean nomenclature of course! – which the editors have rendered into modern Linnean names). But Linnaeus as a zoologist is also very evident here too, incorporating the observations of his zoological companion, Eric Emporelius, complete with in-the-field dissections. But most surprising perhaps, to anyone who thinks of Linnaeus mainly as a biologist, is the extent and detail of his observations (with his geologist, Ingel Fahlstedt) on the general geology, and on the mining and smelting methods.

Moreover, written in 1734, the diary gives a snapshot of geological thinking before the work of James Hutton, William Smith and Charles Lyell, and their contemporaries in the later eighteenth century, who generated the first revolution in the earth sciences by realizing the extent of geological time and giving us the rational foundations of stratigraphy. Linnaeus gives us interesting details of the rocks, fossils and minerals they find, but can convey no idea of how old they might be, nor of how one outcrop relates to another in geological structure and stratigraphy. Nevertheless, Brian Gardiner FLS (1989) has shown how Linnaeus's geological thinking developed throughout his later life and how the principle of stratigraphic correlation came to him in the 1760s in the course of his numerous other journeys around Sweden. I recommend this article for further background on Linnaeus as a geologist including the significance of the Dalarna journey.

The Travel Society made a carefully numbered collection of rocks and minerals, which, according to the editors, was eventually part of the posthumous purchase of Linnaeus's collections made by Sir James Edward Smith, including a 2500-strong mineral collection. Apparently, while his biological collections are now in the care of the Linnean Society of London, his minerals were sold on by Smith shortly after he acquired them. But after an admittedly very brief amount of research effort on my part (and thanks here also to Gina Douglas FLS), I have not yet been able to discover the eventual fate of Linnaeus's mineral collection, apart from those which remained in Sweden (see also Gardiner 1989).

Thanks to these diaries, I have now discovered that Linnaeus also seems to have been a bit of a fashion-writer too, as the diaries include numerous details on the style and make-up of the clothing as well as the looks, attractive or otherwise, of the people whom the expedition meet on their way. But if I may be allowed just one little reservation about this excellent book, readers who really want to follow the journey in detail, will need a good modern topographic map of the region to help them, and, given the amount of geological detail in the diaries, even a geological map too. The contemporary maps reproduced in the book are interesting and attractive, but not quite enough. I also recommend a web search for images of the region as it is today, unless of course, you know the region already.

All in all, there is an enjoyable wholesomeness about the writing, in its simplicity and earnestness, and a wealth of fascinating historical and scholarly detail, and natural history. There is something for everyone in these diaries. This book made me want to set out myself to follow in the footsteps of the Reuterholmian Travel Society through Dalarna.

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Reference

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