

2007

The Linnean Tercentenary

Some Aspects of Linnaeus' Life

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8. Linnaeus' Students or "Apostles" – Fabricius' account of life with Linnaeus

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The most admirable account of Linnaeus as a person and of his day to day relations with his family are to be found in the recollections of his star pupil and 'apostle' Johan Christian Fabricius.

The first account we have from Johan is as a seventeen-year old describing one of Linnaeus' forays:

"The cheerful party – there were often a hundred and fifty of us of various nationalities – broke up into small groups who had orders to forgather at an agreed hour; Linnaeus kept with him only a handful of the cleverest students. Sometimes the rendezvous chosen was the Castle of Sävja, and we would all set out in that direction, not without a lot of hilarity which Linnaeus never attempted to restrain. As soon as everyone had assembled, Linnaeus began to identify the plants which had been collected. A table was spread for twenty, provided with fruit and syllabubs, and those who had found the rarest plants sat with the Master at this table; the rest ate standing up, hoping one day to enjoy the honour all envied and which was enough to stimulate the most lively competition among these young rivals."

Other pupils add further information. The students, we are told, wore light and comfortable linen uniforms, and caps which soon became decorated with flowers. Linnaeus appointed certain 'officials', such as a secretary, a prefect to maintain discipline, and a marksman to shoot birds. Whenever a rarity was discovered a bugle-call was sounded, whereupon everyone ran to Linnaeus to hear him demonstrate. At the end of the day they all marched back to the town, Linnaeus at their head, with banners waving and horns and kettledrums playing. When they reached the Botanic Garden there were repeated cries 'Vivat Linnaeus!', after which the party broke up. Both the unconventionality of the students' dress and the informality of their behaviour were frowned upon by the staid professors.

Fabricius has left us by far the most valuable sketch of Linnaeus as seen through the eyes of a favoured pupil:

“For two whole years - from 1762 to 1764, when Linnaeus was about fifty-six – I was lucky enough to be taught and guided by him and to enjoy his intimate friendship. Not a day passed when I did not attend one of his lectures or, as often happened, spend several hours in friendly conversation with him. In the summer we went to the country with him. There were three of us – Kuhn, Zoega and myself: all foreigners. In winter we lived directly opposite to him, and almost every day he came in his red dressmg-gown and green fur cap, his pipe in his hand, to see us. He came for half an hour, but often stayed a full hour or even two; and on these occasions his conversation was extremely lively and agreeable. Sometimes he told us stories about distinguished men of science whom he had known in Sweden or abroad; sometimes he answered our questions or taught us in some other way. And as he did so he would laugh heartily, his smiling face and candid expression showing how much he enjoyed the company of friends.

It was even more delightful when we were in the country. We stayed about three-quarters of a mile from his house at Hammarby, in a farmhouse where we had our own things and fended for ourselves. In summer Linnaeus used to rise very early, usually about 4 o'clock. Because his house was still in the hands of the builders, he would come over towards 6 o'clock and join us for breakfast; then he taught us about the natural orders of plants, staying as long as he pleased and generally until about ten. After that, we would wander until noon among the rocks, where we found plenty to talk about. In the afternoon we went to his garden, and of an evening we almost always played trisettt with his wife.

On Sundays the whole family usually spent the day with us, and then we would send for a peasant to come to our barn and play for us, on an instrument like a violin, while we danced. Admittedly these balls of ours were not very brilliant, the company but small, the dances monotonous (always either minuets or Polish dances); but we enjoyed ourselves enormously. While we danced, the old man would smoke his pipe with Zoega, who suffered from very poor health, and watch us; but very occasionally he would join in a Polish dance and prove himself a better performer than any of us youngsters. He was delighted when we got excited and even rowdy, believing that if we did not we might not be enjoying ourselves. I shall never forget those days, those hours, and it makes me happy whenever I recall them.

What made him so especially kind to us was that we were foreigners. With the - exception of one or two Russians (who were rather idle) we were the only students who depended entirely on him, who heard and saw no one else, and who remained at Uppsala solely on his account. He realized that we admired his learning and studied zealously, and it pleased him to let his own countrymen see that his work would continue to be appreciated abroad even if it should cease to find favour in Sweden. He also enjoyed talking about natural history, which he had very little opportunity of doing at Uppsala. Natural History was his whole life: he thought of nothing else; and since he was at that time the only naturalist at the University he must often have felt very lonely there. . . .

His mind was wonderfully noble, though I know perfectly well that he was accused of having many faults. His intellect was sharp and piercing; you could see it in his eyes. But his greatest quality was his power of ordered reasoning and logical thought; whatever he said or did was orderly and systematic. When young he had a wonderful memory, but all too soon it began to fail. Even while I was there, there were times when he could not recall the name of someone whom he knew extremely well. I recollect an occasion when he was terribly embarrassed because, having written a letter to his father-in-law, he could not remember his name.

His passions were strong and violent . . . He could suddenly lose his temper or become very irritable, though such moods passed almost as quickly as they came. You could rely on the constancy of his friendship; it was almost always based on an interest in science, and all the world knows how much he did for his pupils and how devotedly, how fervently, they returned his friendship and became his champions. He was lucky enough never to have had an ungrateful pupil; even Rolander was more to be pitied than blamed.”

In writing thus, Fabricius makes it plain he had never heard of Henri Missa, a Frenchman who came to Linnaeus in 1748 on the recommendation of Haller. This was hardly surprising, for after Missa’s churlish behaviour towards Linnaeus his name was never allowed to be mentioned. Linnaeus, excited at getting his first (and what proved to be his only) French pupil, had put himself to great trouble and considerable expense to make Missa feel at home. Missa had no money, moderate ability, and an appalling temper; after a few months at Uppsala he suddenly announced that he was sick of botany, and returned home without a word of thanks to Linnaeus, who had ‘done more for him than for a brother or a Swede. And now I hear that he goes about slandering me. So I harboured a viper in my bosom unawares.’

Fabricius continues:

“Linnaeus’ ambition was boundless, and his motto, *Famam extendere factis*, was the true mirror of his soul. But this ambition never went beyond his science; it never degenerated into offensive conceit. He did not much mind what people in general thought of him; he was sensitive only to the criticism of scholars. His way of life was modest and thrifty, his dress simple, and at times even shabby. The high rank to which his King had raised him pleased him only because he saw in it the recognition of his scientific achievements.

Where his science was concerned he could not brook any opposition. He corrected his works at the suggestion of his friends, and was grateful to them; but he scorned the attacks of his enemies. . . . He could not, however, easily forget these attacks, and did everything possible to erase them from the annals of science. He was generous with his praise because he himself loved to be flattered: this was his Achilles’ heel. But his ambition was based upon the consciousness of his own greatness and upon the merits he had gained in a science in which he had for so many years wielded the sceptre of sovereignty. Tournefort, as he so often told me, was his model in his youth; he did all he could to equal him, and found at last that he had far outstripped him.

Linnaeus had been particularly charged with avarice. It cannot be denied that his way of life, taking into consideration his good circumstances, was frugal, and that he did not despise gold. When, however, I remember how poor he had long been, I could easily excuse this parsimony. But I cannot say that it ever degenerated into sordid greed; in fact I can from my own experience prove the contrary. After he had lectured to us all through the summer, we had not only to beg him to take the fees we owed him for these lectures, but even to leave the money secretly on his table, because he had firmly refused to accept it.

His family life was not really very happy. His wife was a large, bouncing woman, – domineering, selfish, and quite without culture; she often spoiled our parties. Because she could not join in our conversations she did not care for company. So it was inevitable that the children should be poorly educated. Her daughters are all amiable girls, but wholly unsophisticated and without the polish that education might have given them. The son, who succeeded his father in his professorship at Uppsala, certainly lacks his father’s vivacity; but the great knowledge he acquired by constantly working at botany, and the many and excellent observations of his father’s which he must have found in his manuscripts, combined to make him a very useful teacher

Linnaeus’ services to science were enormous. Not only did he himself enrich it; – he also trained a considerable number of very eminent pupils. He found means, partly by his engaging way of lecturing, partly by the expeditions he made with them, to inspire them with a love of natural history which they never lost and which induced them to make long and important journeys and to enrich science by valuable observations at home. Few teachers had the good fortune to make so many disciples who all to some extent contributed to the progress of science, and probably no country has sent so many natural historians abroad as has Sweden. Linnaeus was my teacher too, and I acknowledge with deep emotion my great indebtedness to him for his instruction and for his friendship.”

Valuable light is also thrown on Linnaeus and his family by a young German named Johann Beckmann (1739-1811), who taught mathematics; physics and natural history at the Lutheran St Peter’s Gymnasium in St Petersburg. In the summer of 1765 Professor J.P. Falck, an old Linnaean pupil who was professor of medicine and botany and in charge of the Botanic Garden there, learned that his colleague was going to Sweden to visit the mines of Falun; he therefore persuaded him to deliver a consignment of plants and seeds to Linnaeus.

Beckmann, best known as the author of that fascinating bedside book *The History of Inventions* (which range from ‘speaking-trumpets’ to ‘secret poisons’), joined forces with another German, Dr Kölpin, in Stockholm, and the two men reached Uppsala at the beginning of September:

“As it was the vacation when I arrived, Linnaeus was at his country house at Hammarby; but he was expected back in Uppsala the same day. While waiting for his return I went into a bookshop, where I saw an elderly man of medium height, with dusty shoes and stockings, very unshaven, and wearing an ancient

green jacket on which hung an Order. I was not a little taken aback when I was told that this was the famous Linnaeus.

I talked with him as he walked to his house – and in Latin, because he did not understand German well. He remembered the letter I had written to him, and was extremely affable. Since he had walked from Hammarby he was sweating a lot.... As we were about to go into his house, he pointed to an adjacent building and said, ‘Try to get a room there. Everyone who comes to hear me, and all my closest friends, stay there . . . and so does my son. Whenever I have any spare time, that is where I like to spend it – inhaling tobacco smoke and talking with my friends.’

Dr Kölpin, whom Linnaeus already knew, now appeared, and while Linnaeus was being shaved we mentioned our intention of visiting the mines. He told us where we should go and what we ought to see, and also gave us a letter to his brother-in-law, Herr Moraeus, at Falun. In the room there hung the portrait of Linnaeus holding *Linnaea*, portraits of the most famous botanists, and plans of several botanic gardens. We began to talk about insects. and he showed us his own collection; then we went into the splendid Garden, and I cannot describe how eager and excited he was to discover what flowers had come out while he had been away, and to show them to us. It was delightful to see with what pleasure the monkeys greeted him, how caressingly the crested cockatoo called to him, and how affectionately their master responded.”

Beckmann was ordered to visit Linnaeus again in the afternoon to translate a letter he had received from the English botanist John Ellis. “He was delighted to find that I could read English, because he himself knew very little of that language.” The German then left Uppsala; but he returned in October and drove out with the younger Linnaeus to Hammarby. The old botanist received him warmly and begged him to stay for a day or two; but the carriage had been hired and he felt obliged to refuse. Of this visit he wrote:

“The walls of Linnaeus’ rooms at Hammarby were covered with botanical prints taken from the finest volumes of Sloane, Ehret, etc., and pasted on them so that they looked just like wallpaper. . . . Linnaeus’ wife. . . is not so friendly towards foreigners as is her husband, and her very bourgeois clothes made her look rather undistinguished. While we were at table Linnaeus said jokingly, ‘I have another German here; you must learn German so that you can talk to him.’ She replied, ‘It wouldn’t be worth while learning German for *his* sake.’ I replied in my broken Swedish that she was right, and that I would learn Swedish for *her* sake. This made Linnaeus laugh, and she then became rather more affable.”

Beckmann and Fabricius were agreed in considering Fru Linnaea a crude and tiresome woman, and her husband to be hag-ridden. The pastel portrait of her at Hammarby, made when she was middle-aged, shows only too plainly that any charms that the Fair Flower of Falun may have had in the bud had not survived in the full-blown bloom. She seems to have been a typical *Hausfrau*, a thrifty provider but fond in her early married life of frivolous pleasures and the social round, and especially card-playing which in time became almost an obsession; had she lived two centuries later she would

no doubt have divided her leisure hours between the bingo halls and the television screen. Linnaeus, his mind on higher things, did not interfere; he could almost have been described as bigamously married, his other wife and true helpmate being Dame Nature.

It has been said that in the early years of her marriage Sara Lisa gave her husband some cause for jealousy; but it may well have been groundless jealousy that possessed Linnaeus to draw up in the mid-sixties a will by which his wife, ‘should she be so foolish as to remarry, which I have reason to believe she intends to do’, was to have ‘no share in such things as I bought with the money I alone earned by my books, lectures and botanical work’. Whether it was the prospect of losing Hammarby and much else besides that prevented Sara Lisa from a second marriage, we do not know; she cannot in any case have been much of a catch. She died in 1806 at the age of ninety, survived by her three youngest daughters.

“The son [wrote Beckmann] fears his parents more than he loves them, and his mother has always intensely disliked him. On one occasion, when he was already a professor, she boxed his ears; and when his father told her that she should remember that he was a professor, she replied, ‘I’d box his ears, even if he were an archiater.’ It was for this reason that the father had taken a room for him in the house where I was living, and why the son was so reluctant to be with his parents.”

Stoever, quoting Fabricius rather freely, completes the picture:

“The lady of LINNAEUS was a good housewife, but in no respect a pattern of a sweet and mild mother, or of a tender spouse. Her only son lived under the most slavish restraint and in a continual fear of her. Even when he had attained the age of manhood, and bore an academical dignity, she compelled him to SWEEP HIS OWN ROOM. . . . Galled by these shackles of slavery and constraint, the flower of his mind faded, and he lost that eagerness of zeal which he formerly manifested in his studies. His disgust lessened also the affection of his father. . . . When congratulated by a German friend on being his father’s successor, he replied (aged 30): ‘POH! MY FATHER’S SUCCESSOR; I WOULD RATHER BE ANYTHING ELSE: I WOULD EVEN PREFER BEING A SOLDIER!’”

The above account has been extracted from: *The compleat Naturalist. A Life of Linnaeus* by William Blunt with the assistance of William T. Stearn, 1971. Collins, London.

Much of Fabricius’ account was first published by Benjamin Draydon Jackson in his 1923 book entitled, *Linnaeus* (Wetherby, London) in which he enumerated all Linnaeus’ apostles.



Johan Christian Fabricius

Postscript

Fabricius a Danish entomologist who was born in Tonder (Schleswig), Denmark, is generally regarded by historians of entomology as the founder of the science of entomology. He was also a professor of Natural History and Economics, first at the University of Copenhagen and later at the University of Kiel (now in Germany, but before 1848 a part of the Danish Kingdom).

Between 1775 and 1808 Fabricius described and published some 10,000 insects, belonging to every order then known, of what he thought were new to Science. His name is (and was) familiar to almost all serious entomologists. He spoke and wrote in four languages: Danish, German, Latin and English. He visited and became friends with almost all the serious naturalists of his day and studied almost all the important collections. His portrait, based on a drawing done by Lahde in Kiel around 1802 is included in his book on prominent Danes, Norwegians and Holsteiners. The drawing was subsequently made into a copper plate and printed along with Fabricius' famous autobiography, which came out in 1805.
