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Who Was He?

A PROFESSOR OF LITERATURE wrote this appreciation: “Carl von Linné was a great man, and a remarkably happy man. For his happiness he could thank his harmonious nature, and an optimism drawing on his Lutheran piety, learned in the rectory that was his paternal home. His mind was not prey to intellectual anxieties; he did his work, and gathered in its fruits, with humble, grateful joy. . . . Von Linné strongly held the opinion that the grand style was not for him. Instead, only half aware of doing this, he created his own style, straightforward but occasionally with poetic overtones, sometimes striking notes of biblical conviction and, at other times, of Rococo idyll.”¹

It is worth pointing out that practically every element in this oration could be turned into its opposite. Who, then, was the man whose earthly remains lie under the tombstone just inside the entrance to the cathedral in Uppsala?

We know more about him than almost anyone else alive in Sweden at the time. A quick overview serves as an introduction to his appearance and personality, as for instance in this verbal self-portrait: “Linnaeus was not tall, nor was he small. He was thin, brown-eyed. Light of foot, walked quickly, did everything promptly. Had no patience with tardy folk; he was easily moved, sensitive, working continually as he was incapable of husbanding his strength. Ate good things with pleasure, drank good drinks; but was never excessive in such things. He cared but little for the *exterieure*, believed that the man should make his clothes suit him, not vice versa.”² To make his point come across, he described himself once more. This passage has been translated from Latin: “short of stature, rather tall than low; neither thin nor fat, with some *musculeuse artus* and large veins, ever since childhood.” Furthermore: “His head strongly

curved inward at the back of his neck. Hair a snowy white in childhood, later dark, then graying in old age. His eyes are brown, lively, very sharp, excellent power of sight. Old age has left his forehead deeply furrowed. On his right cheek, a feebly growing wart, another on the right side of his nose. Teeth poor, caries having developed from inherited toothaches in his youth”—another study of himself, covering just over a page and obviously composed with the previous self-portrait in mind.³ This intrusively physical description might surprise some readers, but similar passages are found elsewhere in Linnaeus's writings. Here, for instance, he describes his father-in-law: “Of middling height, he had grown tall, evenly set and straight. His bones and joints were strong, surrounded by firm, solid flesh, tendons, and blood vessels. His face was manly, his eyes quick, with a frank expression, his beard grew black and his skin tended to a dark shade; in a few words, he looked a fine figure of a man.” Naturalism makes him mention his own slight warts, one on his right cheek and another on the right side of his nose—features that can be seen in the painting of Linnaeus used as the cover image of this book.

Johann Beckmann, a German historian sometimes spoken of as “the father of technical history,” has described Linnaeus several times. Beckmann wrote: “The nobleman von Linné was of short stature and, as he walked with a slight stoop, appeared smaller than he actually was. His was a liberal heart, and his passions were lively and strong. . . . He loved joking, happiness, and, in every way, good living. His urge for glory was boundless. He cared nothing for his neighbors' opinions, only for the judgments of learned men.”⁴

The editors of *Vita*, his autobiography, observe that “Linnaeus is one of those writers who never discovered the danger of superlatives.”⁵ At times, he seems unaware that “self-praise is no recommendation.” Writing to his old friend Carl Fredrik Mennander in 1762, he mentions that he has been writing his own eulogy: “finding that *propria laus sordet*, yes, indeed, I would say it stinks. I would never show this to anyone in this world unless were it to one man only, my benefactor ever since my years of struggle. If, my Dear Friend, you would consider taking words out, they would be those which attracted attention as they came from such a source.”⁶ We know nothing of Bishop Mennander's reaction, nor what Linnaeus actually sent him—yet another autobiographical outline? He would probably have had the relevant *curriculum vitae* notes at hand when the matter of a national reward was decided. As late as in 1770, it was still in the cards that Mennander would write, or at least edit, Linnaeus's autobiography. A farmer had been dispatched to hand the text to Abraham Bäck, an old

friend, who was in turn to pass it on. It was the second version of Linnaeus's Life—*Vita* number two—and “penned at diverse times, it will also be diverse in thoughtfulness.” Mennander was urged to freely change the order of things. (An earlier, overruled note however instructs that, after the author's death, the *Vita* should be made available to professor Magnus Beronius to use for the encomium and afterward to Linnaeus's widow, “insofar as she will be well,” for her to have it printed.) Mennander was to submit the manuscript to the Academy of Sciences, of whom “my wife will demand” that the institution fulfill its promise to have it printed. Does all this mean that *Vita II* is the most authoritative? Was it really sent on to Mennander and then back to Bäck? While *Vita II* stops at 1750, the following autobiographical text, *Vita III*, goes as far as 1776. Bäck's tribute to his friend seems based on *Vita III*:

His stature somewhat below middling height, neither fat nor thin, of a solid and full build with, since childhood, prominent veins, a large head protruding at the back with a deeper furrow separating the frontal and posterior parts of the head; brown, fiery eyes, sharp vision, good hearing but not for music, quick and easy on his feet, an excellent memory well into his sixth decade by which time first names began to escape him; ability to learn languages was however not one of his gifts, so that he was less than content to be with foreigners who did not know Latin. In Latin, he expressed himself swiftly, easily, precisely, and more briefly than anyone else, when it concerned descriptions of natural phenomena, but for other matters he did not trouble himself much as long as what was said fitted with what was observed. When writing to his patrons, he instilled in his language uncommon and captivating turns that cannot be mimicked. His few speeches displayed the author's wit, daring, and great learning, and could not, one would fancy, have been delivered by any man other than Linné.

With little more than a year of his life left, but still keen to control his posthumous accolades, the old Linnaeus labored over his autobiography. Yet another one; depending on how one cares to count them, it is the fifth or the fourth or possibly the sixth. True, these texts are probably better seen as lists of his qualifications, set out to suit this or that academy preparing to salute its great former member. He was making bids for himself. Attempts to outrank all other claimants make some of his self-assessments read like job applications with the applicant's perfect suitability described in such terms as to make rejection impossible. Below, he outlines his personal qualities for a presentation by the Patriotic Society, which had not

approached Linné until as late as 1775—a noteworthy fact. The final words are familiar: “He [Linné] was of somewhat less than ordinary height, his build solid and full, and his eyes brown and fiery.”

Of these fiery eyes, the notorious gossip J. G. Rothman Jr. observed: “When Linnaeus intends to utter a malice, he narrows one eye markedly more than other.” He added: “His stature is rather less than ordinary, he was neither fat nor thin, had a large head expanded backward, brown eyes full of fire, sharp vision, and good hearing although not for music. . . . Always wore boots and, when at home, dressed mostly in a short night-shirt and a velvet cap. Used to excess both Coffee and Tobacco. With foreigners he spoke only Latin, in which he was not well versed. Cared only a little for medicine.”

Berge Frondin, who at the time was an admirer of Linnaeus’s wife, characterized her husband thus: “He was easy and light on his feet. His temper could flare—he was jovial, witty, and spoke well—always wore boots and walked about in his own house in a nightshirt and a velvet cap—with tobacco and coffee abundant. He was much amused by card games.” Staying with his physical status and its problems, he was plagued by toothaches “ever since in my mother’s belly” and smoked tobacco, probably to excess, to deal with them. In 1772 he wrote: “I hold back on him [tobacco] as far as I dare, not to break utterly with *antiquam consuetudinem, quae in naturam transit*”—an old habit that has become part of one’s nature.⁷

More fiery brown eyes: J. G. Acrel recalls the man, as seen in 1796: “In his not unpleasant face, one noticed his quick and fiery brown eyes, a little short of sight and narrowed, not so much by nature as by habit and work on the investigation of matters in hand, practices that also caused him over the years strong wrinkles around his eyes due to the pulling of the muscles.” He continues:

Walked somewhat stooped but had otherwise in his earlier years a light step which more and more changed so that in his fifth decade he had begun to shuffle his feet forward instead of lifting them. . . . His disposition was quick and easily moved to grief, joy, and wrath but also quick to regain calm. In his youth, he was full of joy, in his middle age always cheerful, witty, and easy with words, and when in cheerful company liked to share laughter with others, an inclination that followed him into his last year. He did not speak much but liked to listen to others and interjected at times his own brief but always interesting anecdotes, with especial preference for events that belonged to his own lifetime, or to his disciples or friends. When in his professorial chair, he showed a

singular and distinguished eloquence, which, although not supported by a notably strong and pleasing voice nor by an elevated way of speaking (as he still had a county dialect), never failed to beguile his audience to the greatest degree.

There are many who have attempted to diagnose his condition, or pronounce him a genius—or both. However, the diagnoses vary. Nils von Hofsten has spoken about Linnaeus's mind and how it was possible to trace signs of incipient physiological decay. Depressed moods and happier states of mind came and went at lightning speed, sometimes seeming to coexist: "He was definitely showing signs of cyclothymia and, at all times, his emotions were labile"—in other words, he had a bipolar disorder. Von Hofsten wasn't a nobody, but the long-standing chairman of the Swedish Linnaeus Society and, furthermore, the expert advisor to the National Board of Health in cases of sterilization.⁸ No one among Linnaeus's contemporaries seems to have made the usually close-at-hand connection between genius and melancholia—for instance, as written up by Samuel-Auguste Tissot in *De la santé des gens de lettres* (1768). Linnaeus never refers to his own state of health other than in the context of physical illnesses.

He could fit into a modern diagnostic category such as ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), which includes people who can also be characterized as quick to take initiatives, energetic, creative, curious, stubborn, impatient, and ceaselessly active. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, the Scottish doctor Alexander Crichton grouped such symptoms into the syndrome "mental restlessness," which could well be compared to Linnaeus's description of himself in *Vita*, quoted above. A list of other creative geniuses with this diagnosis is supposed, rightly or wrongly, to include Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, George Bernard Shaw, Edgar Allan Poe, Salvador Dalí, and Thomas Alva Edison. If medicated in some way—would their special brilliance have disappeared? There are other sources for the biographer to try: in 2013 the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) included "compulsive hoarding." Linnaeus was in his early twenties when he mentioned in a letter (dated 1730) that his insect collection had reached four thousand specimens. His collections would continue to grow steadily, and he later claimed that his herbarium was the world's largest. His library was also very extensive. His contemporaries were all much given to manic collecting, and there might have been an epidemic of compulsive hoarding. It wouldn't be totally unlikely since it is a not uncommon pathology which allegedly afflicts about 2–6 percent of the present-day population.⁹

Today's visitors to the Linné Museum in Uppsala often stop to contemplate the bed where Linnaeus died. "Was he really that small?" the child asks the adult, who, of course, knows the answer: "No, you see, they slept sitting upright in the eighteenth century. Besides, look, you can pull the bed out." But Linnaeus was short, so one might surmise a certain sense of inferiority—a "Napoleon complex"? He and H. C. Andersen were alike: both men had lowly origins, became internationally famous early in life, had huge imaginations, and were famously prickly as well as showing evidence of paranoid traits and fears of death.

Linnaeus quoted God's promise to David: "I was with thee whithersoever thou wentest, and have cut off all thine enemies out of thy sight, and have made thee a great name, like unto the name of the great men that are in the earth." He continued in his own words: "*No one* at our academy has with greater diligence practiced his profession and had more *auditores*. *No one* versed in the ways of nature has made more observations about natural matters. *No one* has had more robust insights into the three realms of nature. *No one* has been a greater *Botanicus* or *Zoologus*. *No one* has with greater skill worked on the understanding of the natural history of our Great Country, its Flora, Fauna or done as many travels in it. *No one* has written more numerous works from his own experiences, nor as neat or orderly. *No one* has reformed an entire science and created a new epoqe." And so on, through a further ten "*No one*" assertions.¹⁰ Linnaeus was *somebody*—not least in his own view. His constant flow of self-praise sounds almost incantatory. He doesn't trust Fortuna and her unpredictable handouts, from the Creator's happy rewards to Nemesis's dark retributions.

Using the words of William Blake, Linnaeus could "see a World in a Grain of Sand / and a Heaven in a Wild Flower." As he writes himself: "My greatest labor has consisted in being an attentive *observer*." By now, another question should be considered: Was he a scientist—and, if so, what kind of scientist? A bright spirit, of course, but not to be compared with the brightest lights of the Enlightenment. At times, and notably in the work of his old age *Nemesis divina*, his mind moved in the deep shadows where ghosts are lurking. He disparaged folk beliefs but was never quite free of them. His was a "genius of the eye," but it is perfectly reasonable to portray him as a scholastic list maker and a traditionalist who never got around to using the microscope.

Often, he acted like a pragmatic utilitarian, but at other times he seemed to see himself as one of God's elect. His intellectual awareness begins in the late Baroque period and ends in the early Romantic period—but was he ever a man of the Enlightenment? It is, alas, only too easy to

equate the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment, but Linnaeus seems not to have read any of the contemporary French philosophers. To him, “Science” was the prime source of Enlightenment; it was a favorite theme of his. In 1759 he said, in a lecture held in front of the royal couple: “Without Science, we would place our trust in priests from Rome and medical men from the French town of Monspelier. Without Science, *huldras* could still be concealed behind every bush; ghosts, and apparitions emerge from every dark corner; gnomes, trolls, river spirits, and all others in Lucifer’s battalions share our lives, like gray cats.”

In Linnaeus’s New Year’s greeting for 1749 to the architect Carl Hårleman, he refers to two kinds of admirable men—those who, like Hårleman, “have made great discoveries and carry tall, heavy torches” and, on the other hand, “the Imitators who have small candles, quite *ordinaire*”—like, perhaps, the writer of the letter? Next, a surprise: “In that very moment, I caught sight of myself in the Mirror, walking with a quite small torch in my hand but, looming over me, stood a large and strong hero”; the protective figure was Hårleman.¹¹ It could be that Linnaeus was not all that surprised because he normally didn’t conceal that he saw himself as an “inventor” and “auctor”—an originator—rather than a “compiler.” He wrote frankly about flattery to the journalist Carl Christoffer Gjörwell: “For your generous praise I thank you most humbly; . . . should I pretend to detest praise, I would lie as would all who said likewise, for whoever hates their own flesh? Love of yourself is the foundation for all that is good. My Dear Sir, you inundate me with eulogies such that, did I not know myself too well, I might have become proud.”¹²

He had a stock expression when disapproving of a state of affairs, which was “dense and barbarous.” “More than 70 years have passed since Swammerdam, Lister, Blankard et al. opened the eyes of the peasants, hitherto blinded by the monks.” To him, monks, the Middle Ages, and “darkness” added up to a set of linked concepts: “Indulgences could be bought if they frequented church diligently to hear some absurd Mass being said [or] if they visited a miracle-making cross, or images to do with Mary so that their world filled with poems, dreams, and monkish fairy tales.” No one had any learning except for the priest, who was actually uneducated but for clichéd book learning. His outburst probably didn’t exclude the Lutheran Church of his own country.

One might compare his stance to that of the poet and wit Johan Henric Kjellgren in *The Enemies of Light*, writing in defense of the Enlightenment. Unlike Kjellgren, Linnaeus didn’t attack esoteric teachings, and sects such as Hermeticism and Freemasonry, but directed his ire at the erroneous

or plain superstitious beliefs of simple people he had encountered and noted down in the travelogues. As he speculated in *Miracula insectorum* (1752), lacking knowledge about nature is “the most prominent reason why many imbecile superstitions are held to be true and become the cause of such vain terrors.”¹³ Still, Linnaeus didn’t always believe himself to be “superior to the common man.” Although his life and his time on the international academic stage coincided with the period called the Enlightenment, “offstage” he personally followed different lines of thought. Was he a Renaissance magus? Such labeling attempts always bring complications in their wake. It is true that, for all his belief in the scientific method, he was intrigued by the occult. Marie-Christine Skuncke, author of a Carl Peter Thunberg biography, provides wall-to-wall coverage by one of Linnaeus’s most adventurous pupils—but also sighs that her hero “still remains to me an enigmatic figure.”

Linnaeus’s scientific work can be summarized under several headings:

1. Creation of the first complete, systematic schema for classifying, in principle, all living organisms;
2. Standardization of the descriptive methodology and terminology for living organisms;
3. Classification of thousands of animals and plants according to his system;
4. Establishment of the principle of binominal nomenclature by naming an organism by just two attributes: its genus and species;
5. Demonstration that human beings should be classified as an animal species;
6. Creating, through the travels of his pupils, a basis for a global natural history;
7. Teaching his own, as well as later generations, the value of knowing how nature works.

Linnaeus was a physical, sensuous man, who responded with all his senses to the signals from his surroundings: shapes and colors, sounds, tastes. He saw everything. His acute sensory responses were essential to his approach to science and seem to have formed his experiences of man and nature. Instead of being discrete about sexuality, he recognized it in himself and lectured about it to others. Censorious voices have loudly claimed that Linnaeus never made a single discovery! Of course, the man himself saw it differently. In his curriculum vitae, the twenty-seven listed entries under the heading *merita et inventa* included his classification system based on sex organs, the binominal nomenclature, and his invention of the “flower

clock.”¹⁴ He might well have added a few more: the 100-degree temperature scale, dendrochronology, and perhaps his version of evolution. His insistence on standardization as an important feature in many different contexts is rightly influential. How “discovery” is defined matters: surely methodology counts, as well as perspectives, ways of thinking, and recognition of contexts. One might well add his influence on his contemporaries—his “impact”—though some could view this as a demerit.

Another line of criticism takes its cue from the darker aspects of his persona. Not just the shadowy night of *Nemesis divina*, but what was said about him, for instance that “he was one of the least generous of men; what he could reach, he wanted for himself and, in his naive vanity, he hoarded his worldwide reputation like a dragon its gold treasure.”¹⁵ It is easy to portray Linnaeus as a careerist, a man with an outsize ego who enjoyed power and liked being the head boy in the class, but easier still to describe his charm, capacity for hard work, inspirational teaching, and lasting influence. The charismatic young scientist, the aging authoritarian, the writer, and the patriot—the man with “a genius of the eye” and an acute ability to perceive larger meanings in small observations, who had a global outlook and a drive to make natural history available to everyone—women, too. All these characteristics and traits must, of course, also be seen in the context of his life, which was from time to time difficult, plagued by poverty, poor health, and a heavy workload. Linnaeus was naive, yes, and had a monumental sense of his own worth, but he was also an outstanding observer and a vivid writer.

To get a grip on who Linnaeus was, it is not enough to contemplate *one* image—neither of the old man with his gentle gaze, nor the young one with his alert eyes. That simple truth should have become clear even in this lightning-quick introduction, and will be a theme throughout the biography. For instance, we must not allow ourselves to be taken in by the bent old man in the portraits by Per Krafft or Alexander Roslin. Linnaeus had a merry, charming side to his personality but could descend into brooding melancholia. He worked hard but sometimes lost touch with his surroundings. He had a remarkable capacity for grand overviews of systems but would spend days and nights pondering details. His curiosity hardly ever faltered even though the tables he compiled to show the diversity of Creation can be wearisome reading.

As he paced around in the natural world, Linnaeus inspected it with a field marshal’s eagle eye; one might argue that he superimposed a soldierly hierarchy on natural history. The kingdom of plants became structured in an orderly manner from the top down to the single soldier—or plant. This



FIGURE 1. Bust of Linnaeus, hailed by Greco-Roman gods and goddesses. On the left: Asclepius with his serpent-entwined staff. Then, the winged Cupid, Flora, goddess of flowers, and Ceres, goddess of harvest. From Robert John Thornton, *The Temple of Flora*, 1806. Uppsala University Library.

was one of Linnaeus's pedagogical principles and, speaking abroad, he even used analogies such as infantry men, centurions, and decurions.¹⁶ In a famous review of contemporary botanists, he classified them by imaginary military ranks. In some respects, he might easily have joined Sweden's legions of conscientious civil servants; he actually went on to become one of their models.

His perception of the role of numerical order in nature, as Bach's in music, made him believe that God used mathematics to construct his palaces. Linnaeus had probably never heard of Bach and wouldn't have cared for his compositions (he always said "I have no ear for music") but, like Bach, he was attracted to the mystery of numbers and completions of series. *The Well-Tempered Clavier* and *Systema Naturae* both contain twenty-four variations on a theme: preludes and fugues in all 24 major and minor keys, and plants sorted into "classis 1 to 24." Keyboard instruments as well as the medical practices needed tuning to be fit for the great harmony of the world. Bach's *Art of Fugue* and Linnaeus's corresponding synthesis *Clavis Medicinae Duplex* were separated by little more than a decade.

Both men directed their polyphonic creations to their Lord in ecstatic gratitude. Linnaeus loved sequencing—trying out runs over the keys of nature—and excelled in variations based on themes and schemata discovered in nature. Both were systematizers, but they also shared a taste for the esoteric. They wove their signatures into their compositions: one used the notes B-A-C-H, the other his personal logo, the twinflower or *Linnaea borealis*, to show off to the watching audience—and ultimately, to God.

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