“Carl Linnaeus and the purpose of the foundation of the Linnean Society of London”

Linnaeus' life and sciences

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2008
**Carl Linnaeus and the purpose of the foundation of the Linnean Society of London**

As will become clear throughout this study, Carl Linnaeus is a Swedish botanist and explorer who was the first to frame principles for defining genera and species of organisms and to create a uniform system for naming them.

This essay will demonstrate the life of Carl Linnaeus and the purpose of the foundation and aims of the Linnean Society of London.

The essay will begin with Linnaeus’s life and his visit to London. This will be followed with an analysis of the foundation of the Linnean Society of London with focusing on the discussion of the purchasing the Linnaeus’s collections by the Society.

Finally I will conclude with summary of Linnaeus’s life and the aims of the Linnean Society of London.

**Who is Carl Linnaeus?**

The Swedish botanist and naturalist Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) who was one of the world’s most important scientists created a system to organise and name plants and animals that it has been used for over three centuries.

“The Swedish scientist Linnaeus was of pivotal importance in the Age of Enlightenment. While an adventurous traveller, keen collector, zoologist and geologist, his lifelong passion was for botany. He believed he was God’s chosen instrument to put an end to the chaos that reigned in the classification of the natural world” (Blunt, 2001, p.1).

He was also physician, pharmacist, gardener and university professor and trained a number of scientists and sent them different parts of the world such
as North America to collect sample of plants and animals which were not in existence in Europe. This was done for two purposes: economic and scientific. While the first one was to find plants, animals and other products which would benefit his country Sweden, the latter one was to establish a classification method to group similar types of plants and animals and to arrange them in a classification that would allow new specimens to be fitted into this easily.

Although Linnaeus’s first journey was to Lapland, he visited many places including London in England. In 1736, Linnaeus visited England once for a few months to meet botanists as a part of a European tour. He went to Oxford where Thomas Shaw welcomed him; the professor of botany J. J. Dillenius cared of him for a month. Linnaeus then stayed in London in July and August 1736. There, he was introduced to Hans Sloane, physician and collector, through their mutual friend George Clifford of the Dutch East India Company. Linnaeus also met Philip Miller (1691-1771) at Chelsea Physic Garden in London. “His observations are widely spread throughout his various works showing his quick power of observation on all things with which he came in contact” (Gourlie, 1953, p.67).

Linnaeus was a respected botanist in Britain because from the English colonisation of North America, botanists of London and its suburbs wanted to bring plants from the colonies, for their own interest and for their gardens; and Carl Linnaeus provided a system for the easy classification of the plants procured and so he played an important role in this. The Linnean Society of London was founded in 1788, taking its name from the Swedish naturalist, from the Swedish form “von Linne”, with the aim of the cultivation of the Science of Natural History in all its branches and more especially of the Natural History of Great Britain and Ireland. It is the oldest biological society in the world. It is also the world’s premier society for the study and dissemination of taxonomy. The society publishes a zoological journal as well as botanical and biological journals. Upon the death of Carl Linnaeus in 1778, his special collections and library were passed to his son until 1783. After this
date, after the death of the son, these collections and the library were passed to the widow and the Linnaeus’s elder daughters. “In December 1783, Banks advised Smith to take the opportunity of purchasing Carl Linnaeus’s herbarium that had been offered to Banks by Linnaeus’s widow” (Edmondson et al, 1999, p.244). However, they sold them to James Edward Smith who founded the Society and was appointed president.

“On Smith’s death in 1828 the Society bought from his executors Linnaeus’s collections and library and looked after them till this day” (Brenan, 1969, p.304). Linnaeus was a national hero in his home country of Sweden. However, his herbarium and zoological collection, as well as his letters and notebooks are held not in the country of his birth, but by the Linnean Society of London. Linnaeus was a Swedish nationalist and only visited England once. So why did Linnaeus’s collections and specimens end up in London? The sale of the Linnaen collections to a foreigner has therefore remained a matter of regret. Linnaeus’s biographer Dr. Hagberg stated that

“if at first one feels sad because all this has not found a lasting home in a Swedish institution, and slightly bitter against those who were to blame for such neglect, on second thoughts one realizes that a much worse fate might easily have overtaken the collections... Made accessible in a cosmopolitan city and scientific centre such as London, they have been of untold importance to Linne’s international renown. Sweden owes an ineffaceable debt of gratitude to the Linnean Society for the reverence with which it has administered and cared for its priceless possession” (Hagberg, 1952, p.249).

I therefore argue that although the Swedish Linné Society, Svenska Linné-Sällskapet, is directly concerned with Linnaeus, the foundation of the Linnean Society of London was far more important than the foundation of the Swedish Linné Society. The most comparable organisation in Sweden to Linnean Society of London was the Swedish Royal Academy of Sciences, founded in 1739 by Linnaeus himself and some other researchers.
The Swedish Linnaean Society (the Swedish Linné Society) was founded 140 years later, in 1917. The main aim of the society was to publish Linnaean manuscript and to take care of the memory of Linnaeus in Sweden whereas the Linnean Society of London celebrated him and his works; and so when the collections of Linnaeus were overtaken by the Society they were made accessible to everyone in London. These collections included the Linnaean correspondence, his manuscripts, the herbarium and the greater part of his library. If needs to give in numbers, the Linnaeus collections included 14,000 plants, 158 fish, 1,564 shells, 3,198 insects, 1,600 books and according to Cady (1887) 3,000 letters and documents. From this point of view, Linnaeus seemed to be more English than of Swedish when he died as the Society became very interested in his collections.

Today, the Society is an important organisation encouraging debate, research, publications and meetings; and maintaining internationally important historical animal and plant collections from the 18th century in the biological sciences. The Linnean Society has diverse programme of events which are open to the public. In terms of new display programmes of the collections, in 2008, the Society documented Linnaeus’s original fish specimens and launched the digitised images of this heritage collection online, making this resource globally available.

**Conclusion**

In this essay, I studied Carl Linnaeus's life, his visit to London, England; and I analysed the foundation of the Linnean Society of London including the debate about the sale of the Linnaeus's collections to the Society.

Linnaeus was a great botanist and his renown spread across the world. He as an academic trained many scientists who then travelled to various countries to collect a selection of plants and animals. This brought benefits to Sweden.
Linnaeus himself also visited many places among which London took a special place. Because, Linnaeus's plant classification system helped the London botanists to bring plants from the British colonies.

In 1788, the Linnean Society of London was established with the purpose of developing the Science of Natural History. It is a modern research society. The society is the oldest one in its kind in the world and is well known with purchasing the Linnaeus's collections in 1828. Apart from published books and journals, the Society holds regular meetings throughout the academic year, ranging from short meetings to symposia which are open to everybody interested in science.
References


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