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Books

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Master taxonomist

by [Guy Davenport](#)

A review of Linnaeus: The Compleat Naturalist, by Wilfrid Blunt

First published more than thirty years ago (in 1970), Wilfrid Blunt's thorough biography of the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778) has been made into a scrumptious coffee-table book. The elder brother of Christopher (merchant banker, authority on medieval coins) and Anthony (Poussin expert, Keeper of the Queen's Pictures, and Soviet spy), Wilfrid, who taught at Eton, was a writer without frontiers, characteristically crowding his extensive knowledge into biographies of representative figures from a diversity of cultures.

Blunt has the British sense of fair-play and a reticent, decent distance from so accomplished a life as that of Linnaeus, paying great attention to the people Linnaeus knew in England, Holland, Germany, and Sweden. A later book by Sten Lindroth (Sweden's leading historian of science), Gunnar Erickson, Gunnar Broberg, and Tore Frangsmyr, *Linnaeus: The Man and His Work* (California, 1983), gives us a more complex and embarrassing Linnaeus as bogus doctor, egomaniac, loose-cannon theorist, and hopelessly amateurish scientist who "most probably delayed the development of modern biology, and not just in the Nordic countries" (Lindroth).

Linnaeus's enduring accomplishment was to perfect a naming system in Latin, universally comprehensible, for all living things. My tomcat Ejnar is *Felis catus*, of the family *Felidae*; *Felis* is his genus, *catus* (or *domesticus*) is his species. If he were (as he thinks he is) a tiger, he would be *Felis tigris*. There are animals who have only their Linnaean binomials for a name in English (e.g., *boa constrictor*). Philip Miller's authoritative *Gardner's Dictionary* began using the Linnaean nomenclature in 1768, and Peter Collinson, the dealer in plants, urged John and William Bartram (botanists to Franklin, Washington, and Jefferson) to adopt it. Louis XV ordered it (over Buffon's head) to be used at the Jardin des Plantes, insuring (after 1774) its European and American acceptance.

Medicine in eighteenth-century Sweden had not yet caught up with that of Hippocrates (died 485 B.C.). Linnaeus once put two teenage virgins in bed with a sick old man (as per 1 Kings 1:3 and 15), though he did suspect that microscopic "mites" were the carriers of disease, anticipating Pasteur by a century. But he believed in the phoenix and unicorns, and that swallows wintered at the bottom of ponds.

He doubted the biblical account of the universe, as well as other parts of Scripture. He went to church out of a sense of duty to propriety, he and his dog. When he was ill, the dog went in his stead, leaving (like his master) as the sermon droned into its second tedious hour.

Linnaeus the man is harder to get into focus than his crackpot science. A recent discovery of his

travel diary in Lapland shows that a segment of his famous journey to the Saami is fiction. He deferred his marriage until age twenty-eight, after a four-year-long engagement. The wife was something of a termagant and shrew. His emotional life centered around his students whom he called his apostles. He sent them on far-flung expeditions to bring back botanical and zoological specimens. Nothing was excluded from his curiosity: he had Peter Kalm write his doctoral thesis on the American birch-bark canoe. He wrote a prodigious number of books.

He knew, and worked with, the leading British and European scientists of his time. He introduced the Ryvita biscuit to the English table (the recipe was his wife's). In Leiden he met Dr. Herman Boerhaave (the subject of Johnson's first life) by putting a news story in the local paper that he had corresponded with him for years. Boerhaave was outraged, but became good friends with Linnaeus when they eventually met.

Linnaeus's more important patron in Amsterdam was the Anglo-Dutch director of the Dutch East India Company, George Clifford. One of Linnaeus's most beautiful books is the catalogue he made of Clifford's garden at Hartekamp, just outside Leiden (1738).

Linnaeus wrote four autobiographies. He wanted us to know that he was the greatest scientist, ever, the most celebrated and praised, and that no shadow from any direction fell on his unique genius. He had, like Adam, named all the animals (but correctly). He had named all the plants. Twenty-three of his students became professors. His birthplace and his house are Swedish shrines. He is a benevolent "Prince of Flowers" to Swedish schoolchildren. In Erik Nordenskiöld's masterful *Biologins Historia* (3 volumes, Stockholm, 1924; English translation commissioned by Alfred Knopf, *The History of Biology*, 1928)—a splendid book with a patriotically Swedish tilt—Linnaeus is treated as respectfully as Emmanuel Swedenborg.

Blunt's biography is good to read and delicious to look at. Botanical illustration has never been handsomer than in the eighteenth century. The photographs of present-day Sweden have the lyric beauty of a Bergman film.

Guy Davenport's most recent book is *The Death of Picasso: New and Selected Writing* (Shoemaker & Hoard).

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