

BOOK REVIEW

Gunnar Broberg, *The Man Who Organized Nature: The Life of Linnaeus*

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The jacket copy of *The Man Who Organized Nature* declares it to be ‘one of the only biographies of Linnaeus to appear in English’. This is not strictly true; Lisbet Koerner’s *Nature and Nation* (1999) was certainly a biography. However, that book is now twenty-five years old. Gunnar Broberg, who died in 2022, published his book in Swedish in 2019, employing the full range of Carl Linnaeus’s papers, especially his diaries, correspondence and four manuscript memoirs, as well as his published works. The result is the most thorough account of Linnaeus the man that we are likely to have for some time.

Broberg wrote a ‘life and times’ in thirty-eight short chapters that sticks closely to primary sources and for the most part skims lightly over Linnaeus’s science. It is very much about the life and not the work, and in order to tell that life Broberg had to compare and evaluate a number of sources of varying credibility, not least Linnaeus’s own memoirs. Other biographers have noted the tendency of Linnaeus to embroider the facts of his life, or even invent them, and Broberg does a good job of sorting out the truth, while acknowledging many gaps, especially in his earlier years. Nonetheless, his aim, as he states in his preface, is to tell the story in the words of Linnaeus and his contemporaries, and modern historiography has little place in his narrative. Broberg engages mostly with previous (Swedish) biographers, pointing out their merits and their misinterpretations. By the time Linnaeus died in 1778, he was probably the most famous person in Sweden, but Broberg does not go in for hero worship.

Moreover, Broberg’s thoroughness means he includes items that other biographers may have omitted. For example, we learn that Linnaeus may or may not have visited the prostitutes of Amsterdam in 1735, so vividly described by a friend who visited them several years later. We learn how he dressed and the contents of his bag on his trip to Lapland, but only hints of what he did there. We even hear about ‘the finest of outdoor privies’ (p. 137) at the manor where Linnaeus was married, which may have accommodated the posterior not only of Linnaeus but also of Emanuel Swedenborg.

Broberg begins his book with an assessment of Linnaeus and his personality, noting at the outset that the usual image of a humble, modest scholar is almost entirely false. The sources (except for Linnaeus himself) agree that he was short (around five feet tall), proud, intellectually restless, and often difficult to get along with. Broberg posits that he may have suffered from bipolar disorder or ADHD, but does not follow up on this speculation. He summarizes the scientific work of Linnaeus in less than half a page of seven headings, and scatters further highlights of his science throughout the book.

Perhaps Broberg's most perceptive comment compares Linnaeus to his near-contemporary Johann Sebastian Bach; both emphasized numerical order in nature as God's system.

Carl Linnaeus was born in 1707, the eldest child of a provincial Lutheran pastor in southern Sweden. His father was an amateur botanist, and the young Carl wandered the rural countryside as a child, learning to identify plants. Broberg notes his intellectual influences and patrons, first in school and then at the universities of Lund and Uppsala. We learn about the books he read, but not what he got out of them, and we learn many details of student life and later, academic politics. Linnaeus was writing about plant sexuality by 1730, while still a student, but the reader is given a frustratingly brief account of how he came to this idea.

Likewise, we learn little about what Linnaeus actually did during his travels in the 1730s, including the only time he spent outside Sweden, although most historians consider these years to be critically important in the formation of his ideas. In the light of the attention recent historiography has given to the trip to Lapland in particular, Broberg's decision to focus mainly on Linnaeus's unfinished narrative of the journey, the *Iter Lapponicum*, rather than providing a broader perspective, is unfortunate.

Broberg's purpose, however, is to tell us about Linnaeus himself, which he does very well, placing the man firmly within the context of a Sweden that had abandoned its pretensions of becoming a great power while retaining the 'improving' culture of the Enlightenment and maintaining an allegiance to cameralism. Broberg's style is readable, witty and entertaining. Despite his Continental travels, Linnaeus was not a cosmopolitan. He knew no languages other than Swedish and rudimentary Latin, although his personal writings are sprinkled with French words and phrases (there is a chapter devoted to language). Most of his travels were within the boundaries of Sweden. Broberg emphasizes the role of place in the thought of Linnaeus, detailing his travels across Sweden in the 1730s and 1740s, but most non-Swedish readers will have a hard time figuring out where these places are. Maps would have been helpful.

Because Broberg proceeds thematically as much as chronologically, the order of events is often murky to those with a less than intimate knowledge of Linnaeus. A timeline would have been helpful too. To give just one example, the ten pages Broberg devotes to *Systema Naturae* (the first iteration of which was published in Leiden in 1735) only comes in the book after Linnaeus returns to Sweden from the Netherlands in 1738.

The book is well produced, with many illustrations, although it is not clear why some of the black-and-white images within the text reappear in colour in a central section of plates. There is a very good 'Sources and literature' section, which occupies twenty pages at the end of the book, and a full index. The book does not function as a good introduction to Linnaeus's ideas, but scholars of Linnaeus will find much to enjoy and think about in it.