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Sex, Botany, And Empire: The Story Of Carl Linnaeus And Joseph Banks (Revolutions In Science)



Synopsis

Enlightenment botany was replete with sexual symbolism to the extent that many botanical textbooks were widely considered pornographic. Carl Linnaeus's controversial new system for classifying plants based on their sexual characteristics, as well as his use of language resonating with erotic allusions, provoked intense public debate over the morality of botanical study. And the renowned Tahitian exploits of Joseph Banks whose trousers were reportedly stolen while he was inside the tent of Queen Oberea of Tahiti reinforced scandalous associations with the field. Yet Linnaeus and Banks became powerful political and scientific figures who were able to promote botanical exploration alongside the exploitation of territories, peoples, and natural resources. *Sex, Botany, and Empire* explores the entwined destinies of these two men and how their influence served both science and imperialism. Patricia Fara reveals how Enlightenment botany, under the veil of rationality, manifested a drive to conquer, subdue, and deflower all in the name of British empire. Linnaeus trained his traveling disciples in a double mission to bring back specimens for the benefit of the Swedish economy and to spread the gospel of Linnaean taxonomy. Based in London at the hub of an international exchange and correspondence network, Banks ensured that Linnaeus's ideas became established throughout the world. As the president of the Royal Society for more than forty years, Banks revolutionized British science, and his innovations placed science at the heart of trade and politics. He made it a policy to collect and control resources not only for the sake of knowledge but also for the advancement of the empire. Although Linnaeus is often celebrated as modern botany's true founder, Banks has had a greater long-term impact. It was Banks who ensured that science and imperialism flourished together, and it was he who first forged the interdependent relationship between scientific inquiry and the state that endures to this day.

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Customer Reviews

Fara, of the history and philosophy of science department at Cambridge, presents a book in search of a thesis. Despite the intriguing title, it spends little time drawing parallels among British imperialism, botany and eroticism (or, as Fara calls them, "the three Ss: Sex, Science and the State"). The main focus is, instead, on two 18th-century botanists: Carl Linnaeus, a Swede who developed the modern system for classifying organisms, and Joseph Banks, who popularized Linnaeus's system and brought science into the political arena in Britain as head of the Royal Society. Instead of relating a coherent history of these two men who never met, the book bounces between the two like a pinball, going forward and backward in time, repeatedly revisiting Banks's satyric/scientific trip to Tahiti and Australia with James Cook. Instead of analysis of the history being presented, we are treated to long-winded portraits of the key figures and of Tahitian orgies. In the end, the reader comes away with an incoherent image of the British Empire at the end of the 18th century. Fara (*Newton: The Making of Genius*) would have done better to spend time placing her stories in a historical context that might have showed how sex, botany and empire were connected.

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A rollicking read. (New Scientist) Absorbing.... Fara makes a convincing case for Banks's historical impact. (Observer) An entertaining account of the appliance of science to the needs of empire. (Financial Times) A series of captivating forays into his [Banks'] life and times. (Amanda Schaffer Bookforum) This is one of the most amazing books that I have read recently. (Asad R. Rahmani Hornbill) An entertaining book... readable and amusing. (Sarah O'Malley Northeastern Naturalist)

excellent coverage of the topics and time period

This book had so many flaws I'm not sure where to begin. My biggest problem is that the author seems to strongly dislike both Banks and Linnaeus; she gives short shift to their achievements and

focuses on their flaws. The whole thing reads like one long diatribe against imperial Europe and an implication of Banks and Linnaeus by association. When discussing the history of science, I think it is important to take into account the time period in which they lived. The writings of Stephen Jay Gould epitomize this type of inquiry, and his writings on Darwin especially provide insight into the man by viewing him through the lens of his culture. Here, the author takes the opposite approach. Her disdain for imperialism leaks through the pages and she takes every opportunity to praise the various native peoples and bash on the imperialist Europeans. She then goes on to condemn Linnaeus and especially Banks for participating in this system. I will include a couple passages that I think display the near-obsessive dislike of the author for her subjects: "Although Buffon was one of Linnaeus's major critics, the two naturalists did share a faith in their own superiority." p. 99 "Banks gave Pacific plants a Linnaean name, he made them part of European science but suppressed their local identity - an entire genus of Australian shrubs and trees is called Banksia under the Linnaean system." p. 73 And the one of the more egregious passages, that made me stop and say "did I really just read that?" happens when the author "reinterprets" the meaning of a portrait of Banks, James Cook, the Earl of Sandwich and two gentlemen conversing in a garden: "This picture invites reinterpretation as an allegory of imperial dominion and the conversion of Australia into a distant part of Britain. On this reading, with his right hand Cook proclaims ownership of the Pacific Ocean; the papers in his left hand could be either his new navigational chart or his orders to capture foreign territory for Britain. Sandwich leans nonchalantly against a classical statue of a half-naked woman, who might symbolise virgin territory ready to be overpowered." p. 72 These examples abound in the book and it is hard to take anything the author says seriously after she reveals her biases. The other flaws in this book include poor organization, as it skips from one topic to another and seems to lack any kind of overall structure or draw any conclusions. I was especially annoyed by the sheer number of uncited claims the author throws around, to the point where it's not clear whether the author is citing a source or her own biased opinion. Weighing in at a mere 176 pages (including notes and citations), this was a short read. I think the book is so short because the author largely skips over the impressive and monumental achievements of both Linnaeus and Banks. Overall, I found this book to be nothing more than an outlet for the misguided opinions of the author and I do not recommend it.

I'm glad to have read this as it puts into historical and geographical perspective the creation of the system of biological classification created by Linnaeus. There were various other systems proposed at the time and we see a little of them. Linnaeus stayed in Sweden most of his life however. The man

whose names is given to many plants, banksia, however occupies most of the book. Banks did considerably more travelling and attached himself as scientific collector and botanist to several trips including Cook's voyage which gave the name to Botany Bay. The sex alluded to in the title, refers both to classification of plants by their reproductive organs (rather than shape of leaf, say) and to what the travellers got up to in warmer climes like Tahiti. The scandals we are told followed men like Banks through their later lives. The men mentioned were prominent in the Royal Society and enabled trade and advancement of science; for instance they recorded the transit of Venus across the Sun, in order to establish how far Earth was from the Sun. I thought the story could have flowed more freely but I admit it would be hard to do that without fictionalising, and records of the day were stiff or satirical. Good comparisons would be *The Seashell On The Mountaintop*, *Longitude*, and *The Mapmaker's Wife*.

May 23rd will be the 300th anniversary of Carl Linnaeus' birth so I purchased this little book to become familiar with him and to honor his memory. However this book is more about Banks than Linnaeus, altho' Banks did much to promote Linnaeus' system of classification not only in England but thru-out the world. In some ways, Banks was to Linnaeus what Huxley was to Darwin and Bateson was to Mendel. Not only did Linnaeus and Banks promote science (and themselves), but they promoted their respective country's agricultural economy before the Industrial Revolution. Yet both men were largely forgotten soon after their deaths. In large part the successful promotion of Linnaeus' system was due to his use of animal genitalia (in an uptight society) as an analogy to describe the reproductive organs of plants and as the basis for naming and classifying them. Add to that, Banks' well-known promiscuity while in Tahiti on Captain Cook's first voyage there (to record the Transit of Venus) and you have a sure-fire salacious combination (sex sells!). Fara also describes how the English used scientific exploration as a cover for colonization which they justified in the belief that Europeans were a superior race and must help the other races. Both Linnaeus and Banks brought in non-native plants and tried to adapt them to their countries but Banks was far more successful. Indeed Banks had plants and animals transplanted from one colony to another fairly successfully. So even tho' I bought the book for Linnaeus, the inclusion of Banks rounds out the story. While Wikipedia has more facts on Linnaeus it has less of the personal. I gave the book only four stars because Fara doesn't include an index, tho' 's 'Search Inside' feature provided an alternative.

Had to read it for a multidisciplinary class. Compared to the dense crap we have to read, this was

the best. Small pages, large text, easy-to-read sentences--it was a nice break. BUT, it was like this glorified historical narrative about Joseph Banks and Carl Linnaeus--and more about Banks than anything. The "sex" part of this book refers to a few pages that talks about Linnaeus' classification system and also about sexual encounters on Tahiti--but I never felt there was an over-emphasis on sex or sexuality in this book, in case you're worried about a younger audience reading it. Just an okay book.

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