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## A letter by Carl Linnaeus to von Haller

Among some letters written by eighteenth century botanists, acquired by Mrs. Roy A. Hunt in 1961, is one of two and one-half pages by the Swedish naturalist and physician, Carl Linnaeus (1707-1771), addressed to his Swiss counterpart (then at Göttingen) Albrecht von Haller (1708-1777), and dated 13 September 1748. It is one of the more important letters written by Linnaeus, of whose correspondence relatively few originals are in this country. Hence, its presence in this collection merits report.

The greater part of the Latin text of the letter was published by von Haller, in one of his last efforts to discredit Linnaeus, in his rare *Epistolarum ab eruditis viris ad A. H. scriptarum* (Bernae, 1773-1775), and in English translation by James Edward Smith in his *A selection of the correspondence of Linnaeus . . .* (London, 1821. Vol. 2, pp. 425-430). The first page and the closing date-line are reproduced here in facsimile (Fig. 22).

The correspondence between Linnaeus and von Haller was rather extensive during the earlier years of their careers. Smith (1821) provides us with English translations of this exchange, comprising 27 letters by Linnaeus and 29 by von Haller, written in the period of April 1737 and September 1749. The letters are relatively free of criticism and controversy until von Haller wrote on 8 April 1746, in great agitation, objecting to Linnaeus' criticisms in his *Flora svecica* (1745) of many of von Haller's taxonomic opinions. From this time onwards, with one or two efforts towards congeniality, the friendship began to deteriorate until von Haller could seemingly no longer tolerate Linnaeus' position of eminence and published (with many deletions) his file of Linnaean correspondence.

Von Haller, reported by his contemporaries to have been a volatile and unpredictable egoist, is today considered by some science historians to have been equally as brilliant a scientist as was Linnaeus. Had his period of activity not so closely paralleled that of Linnaeus, and not been so strongly overshadowed by the Swede, the Swiss savant might well have been recognized in his day for the genius that he was. When it comes to the taxonomic



Illustri D. Hallero

C. Linnaeus

Per Dm. Nicom. Lobei frangitinas tuas, refertur credere et  
amicitia summa, bene colo, hanc a sermo a magni facio.  
Quidquid veli de meo dicere, potens omnino. inde mihi nihil recedit,  
modo tuam habeat amicitiam. nolo esse inimicus cum ullo,  
multo minus cum levi in arte et antiquo amico.  
Si potens me audire et amicum candidum, ego suaderem quod desit  
quoniam ille te inferior est, tantum illi succidit de fama, qui  
alioq. lateret paucis notis, nisi per paucos. Eosum facultat. Doctus  
vix minus respondebat. memos sum illis est ad me; dixit mihi  
minus debet respondere ad apologiam, et hoc mihi promittit, promittit  
et inde mag. me profeci; tui hora publico verum protulit per.  
Tu potens magis quam. contum alii contribuisse et augmentum. Si non  
liam; plurima per hominum iudicat, quod non intelligit. inde quoniam  
reges bella gerunt. victor evadent cum ruina plerumq. militum. Pater  
lanam; sic eruditus vincit cum jactura plerumq. mentem suorum. Pater  
Dillenius a paucis fuit amatus ob literas cum Rivino, licet videret  
eripit; doluit hoc deum multum; et se hoc doluisse mihi ipse narravit.  
si vera nostra sunt, aut falsa; erant talia licet nostra per utrum  
defendimus; prope facta nostra quia qui tunc laborant in plateis  
nostra iudicet erant aperi. nuncq. Hamburgensium proficiat; si vel ille  
victor eripit in se errora. responde antiquorum controversias  
in se turbata; legat; nonne naufragam parient. multi legunt apolo-  
gias cum oblectamento, sed minus amant personam auctorem. ad horum  
et videt. tu facias in se tua ut placeat, meam est tunc  
ubi amicus suadet. Non debet imperator minus de bello continuare.  
cepit hunc saepe ad ea quae ipse non cogitarent; immo saepe saepe  
alioq. prolix; sic facile videret ut Hamburgensium suspect amicum, qui  
incepta tua sententia omnia; forte eripit quae nunc non intelligit  
in quibus facta cadent. ego hoc tibi dixi ut amicus fraterque  
et precam si non hoc dixeris tibi uti amicus integerrimus. si  
tu aliter hoc eripies a me dicta, valde precor.  
Manifestum ego examinari; et vidi optime dissertationem istam quam  
tu observasti a Helmo St. Loppovico, et hoc notavi in  
Sivue Sotlundico; sed observet quae reliqua praecipue, et videret  
dein nunc debet notum genus condere; observet praecipue, modum  
florendi etc.

Upsal. 1748 C. 13 Sept.

Fig. 22. Letter by Carl Linnaeus to Albrecht von Haller, dated Upsala, 13 September 1748. Shown here is the first of two and one-half pages, with final date-line added.

contentions that existed between the two men, modern opinions more often are in agreement with those of von Haller than with Linnaeus.

The letter here reported is of interest for many observations of Linnaeus, covering such a wide range of topics as mosses, pearl culture, flat-worm morphology, and an appraisal of some generic names of plants in a paper by John Mitchell (d. 1768) in *Acta naturae curiosorum* (8, Appendix: 187-224, 1758). But of equal interest is Linnaeus' effort to placate the angry von Haller without here conceding any errors on his own part, writing—

Our great example, [Herman] Boerhaave, answered nobody whatever. I recollect his saying to me one day, "You should never reply to any controversial writers. Promise me that you will not." I promised him accordingly, and have benefited very much by it.

It is in this letter also that Linnaeus wrote his frequently quoted observation—

If what we do be correct or otherwise, so it will remain, though we fight for it with our lives. After we are dead and gone, children who now play in the streets, will be our judges.

In this letter Linnaeus responds to von Haller's earlier report of having explained to one named Hamberger the differences between his (von Haller's) classification of some grasses and that of Linnaeus (which had been defended by Hamberger). In this reply, Linnaeus urged von Haller "to write no answers to Hamberger . . . he is not on a level with you; and moreover, he is your inferior." Hamberger, little-known to modern botanists (he published only two, now rare, tracts in botany), was Georg Erhard Hamberger (1697-1755), a physician and (in later years) professor of botany at the University of Jena. He was perhaps best known to contemporaries for his drawn-out dispute in the press with von Haller, which was so intense and vitriolic as to have created a scandal in academic circles of that time; one for which he recanted completely on his deathbed, then acknowledging von Haller to have been correct, and himself a victim of false pride.

In the preparation of this note I have had the assistance of Rev. Leopold Krul, O.S.B., Chairman of the Latin Department, St. Vincent College, who drafted a new English translation of this Linnaean letter, and of Willem D. Margadant of this staff. Dr. H. W. Rickett, of the New York Botanical Garden, kindly brought to my attention the earlier publication of the English translation by J. E. Smith. To each of these I express my thanks.

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