

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06970-0 - A Selection of the Correspondence of Linnaeus, and Other  
Naturalists: From the Original Manuscripts: Volume 1

Edited by James Edward Smith

Excerpt

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## Biographical Memoir

OF

PETER COLLINSON, F.R.S. & F.S.A.

AND HIS

LETTERS TO LINNÆUS.

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**P**ETER COLLINSON, F. R. S. and F. S. A. one of the earliest and most constant correspondents of Linnæus, was highly distinguished in the circle of Naturalists and Antiquaries in London for nearly half a century. He belonged to the Society of the Quakers; and his upright, benevolent, active character did honour to his religious persuasion. His family is said to have come from Westmoreland.

He was born Jan. 28, 1693-4, in a house opposite to Church-alley, St. Clement's-lane, Lombard-street, according to a manuscript memorandum of his own, communicated by A. B. Lambert, Esq. V. P. L. S.; but he resided, for many years, at the Red Lion in Gracechurch-street, as a wholesale woollen-draper, where he acquired an ample fortune.

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## MEMOIR OF PETER COLLINSON.

He married, in 1724, Mary the daughter of Michael Russell, Esq. of Mill-hill, Hendon. This lady died in 1753, leaving him two children — a son named Michael; and a daughter, Mary, married to the late John Cator, Esq. of Beckenham, Kent. They are said to have inherited much of the taste and amiable character of their father.

Mr. Collinson appears to have occupied, in the earlier part of his life, a country-house and garden at Peckham in Surrey (where his brother had also a garden); from whence he removed, in April 1749, to Ridgeway-house at Mill-hill, and he was two years in transplanting his collection. The English gardens are indebted to him for the introduction of many new and curious species, which he acquired by means of an extensive correspondence, particularly from North America. Among these was the *Collinsonia canadensis*, so called by Linnæus, who has given a beautiful engraving of this plant in his *Hortus Cliffortianus*. It was first imported in 1735.

The following Letters of Mr. Collinson evince his ardent and genuine love of nature, especially of the vegetable tribes; nor do they less display a character of true piety, cheerfulness, and benevolence, well suited to so virtuous and soothing a pursuit. He enjoyed, throughout a long life, the communications of most cultivators of science in general; for he interested himself about every new or useful discovery, and was one of the first who attended to the (then recent) wonders of electricity; on which sub-

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ject the great Franklin was obliged to him for the earliest European intelligence.

Nor was his personal friendship less valued by people of distinguished character and abilities in various ranks; among which the names of Derham, Sloane, Ellis, and Fothergill stand pre-eminent; as well as those of the accomplished Robert Lord Petre, who died in 1742, and the famous Earl of Bute.

Mr. Collinson became acquainted with Linnæus when the latter visited London in 1736. He died August 11, 1768, after a short illness, in the 75th year of his age, in the full possession of all his faculties, and of all his enthusiasm for the beauties of nature, attended by far more important consolations and supports. All these are so well expressed in his last letter to Linnæus, that we shall not here anticipate the pleasure of our readers by any extract.

The Philosophical Transactions and the *Archæologia* are enriched with several of Mr. Collinson's papers. Dr. Fothergill published an account of his life. He has left, in the hands of his descendants, many interesting anecdotes relating to the introduction or cultivation of particular plants; which have been communicated by his grandson, the present Mr. Cator, to Mr. Lambert, and are now before us. The following especially deserves to be made public, as the result of so munificent an undertaking is worthy of inquiry. "In March and April 1761, the Duke of Richmond planted a thousand cedars of Lebanon, on the hills above his house at Goodwood;

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**4 MEMOIR OF PETER COLLINSON.**

plants five years old, that I procured for him at 18 shillings each. P. COLLINSON." — The garden at Mill-hill, so assiduously cultivated by this gentleman and his son, and for many years abounding with rarities and beauties, fell afterwards into the most barbarous and tasteless hands. After a transient restoration by an eminent Botanist, it is now, as far as we can learn, almost entirely stripped of its chief curiosities.

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## Correspondence.



MR. PETER COLLINSON TO LINNÆUS.

DEAR FRIEND,

London, May 13, 1739.

I could not omit so convenient an opportunity, by my worthy friend Dr. Filenius, to enquire after your welfare, and give you joy on your marriage. May much happiness attend you in that state!

I am glad of this conveyance, to express my gratitude for the particular regard shown me, in that curious elaborate work the *Hortus Cliffortianus*. Something, I think, was due to me from the Commonwealth of Botany, for the great number of plants and seeds I have annually procured from abroad; and you have been so good as to pay it, by giving me a species of eternity, botanically speaking; that is, a name as long as men and books endure. This lays me under great obligations, which I shall never forget.

I am concerned I can make no better acknowledgments than by the small token of Pennsylvanian ores which the bearer will deliver to you.

My best wishes attend you; and if I can any way serve you here, you may be assured of the readiness of your sincere and affectionate friend,

PETER COLLINSON.

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## 6 CORRESPONDENCE WITH LINNÆUS.

P. S. As Mr. Logan has had two Latin tracts published in Holland, I doubt not but Dr. Gronovius has sent them to you. The one is on generation. When a convenient opportunity offers, pray let me hear from you.

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DEAR FRIEND,

London, April 10, 1740.

I hope you had mine with Mr. Miller's dimensions of the cedars of Lebanon at Chelsea \*

I now come to make good my promise to send you some North American seeds, which I herewith send.

It will be a pleasure to me to hear from you. I wish you health and happiness.

From your sincere friend,

P. COLLINSON.

Pray my respects to Mr. Filenius. I send you some English fossils, and the bark of the Lace-tree from Jamaica.

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DEAR FRIEND,

London, April 3, 1741.

Mr. Biork being so obliging to acquaint me of a convenient opportunity of writing to you, I could not forbear indulging myself with that pleasure; in the first place to enquire after your health, and next to know if you received mine with a parcel of American seeds. I also wrote to you by Dr. Filenius †

\* This letter does not appear.

† This gentleman was Professor of Divinity at Abo, and afterwards Bishop of Lindköping.

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## LETTERS OF PETER COLLINSON.

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(for whom I have an high esteem), which no doubt came to your hands. But, my dear friend, you have not thought fit to return me an answer ; however, none is yet come to hand.

I know your active genius cannot be idle. Pray what are you doing ? Some new work, I hope, is ready for the press, to entertain and inform the curious part of mankind.

You know we have frequent varieties by the commixture of the farina of different species in flowers, but nothing so rare to be met with in fruits. But I have this day sent me two apples, the one a russet, or brown-coat apple, and another a green apple. They both were original fruits of the green apple, whose boughs mixed with the russet, and acquired such distinguishing marks of their adulterous intimacy with each other's blossoms, that one part of the apple is russet and the other green, the colours not by degrees going into each other, but there is a remarkable line where one fruit is divided from the other, as in the mixed orange and lemon. The complexion of these two sorts of apples being so different makes the mixture the more remarkable. What is farther remarkable in it is, that though it is originally from the green apple, and grew on that tree, yet its neighbour the russetting has impregnated more than two thirds of it.

Lord Wilmington has another instance of this commixture or blending of fruits, for he has a tree that produces nectarines and peaches, without any art, but quite accidentally. The fruit does not mix

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## 8 CORRESPONDENCE WITH LINNÆUS.

together as in the apple abovesaid; but complete peaches and nectarines, both distinct, are on the same tree\*.

My best wishes attend you. From your affectionate friend,  
P. COLLINSON.

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London, Jan. 18, O. S. 1743-4.

MY DEAR FRIEND DR. LINNÆUS,

I almost despaired of a line from your hands, for I have not heard from you since the 3d of August, 1739; but at last I had the pleasure of yours of the 25th July last. I was much concerned that so large a collection of American seeds was lost; I hope we shall have better success for the future. I have now made up a parcel of South American seeds, and hope to add some Northern ones, to come by first ship. I was delighted to find the *Coreopsis altissima* (query if not a *Rudbeckia*) and the *Collinsonia* were acceptable to you. I hope John Bartram our collector will send more this year. For his great pains and industry pray find out a new genus, and name it *Bartramia*.

\* Of this several instances have since appeared; but the Editor had once a present of a much more curious variety — a fruit precisely half nectarine half peach, the size, colour, surface, and flavour of each being perfectly distinct in the respective halves. This was witnessed by several persons. It grew in the garden of the late A. Aufrere, Esq. at Hoveton, Norfolk, on a tree which usually bore some complete nectarines as well as peaches; but in two different seasons, at some years distance from each other, the same tree produced about half a dozen of these combined fruits.



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Your system, I can tell you, obtains much in America. Mr. Clayton and Dr. Colden at Albany on Hudson's river in New York, are complete Professors; as is Dr. Mitchell at Urbana on Rapahannock river in Virginia. It is he that has made many and great discoveries in the vegetable world. I writ to him to know the reason for his name *Elymus* for a species of wild oats, and many other new names. I hope in a year's time you will see his essays on botany, in Latin, printed. I have the first part finished; but he intends to add another, so the printing of the first is deferred.

The death of the worthiest of men, the Right Hon. Lord Petre, has been the greatest loss that botany or gardening ever felt in this island. He spared no pains nor expence to procure seeds and plants from all parts of the world, and then was as ambitious to preserve them. Such stoves the world never saw, nor may ever again. His greatest stove was 30 feet high, and in proportion long and broad. In it were beds of earth, in which these plants as under were planted, and flourished wonderfully.

The *Hernandia* was 10 feet high, 5 inches round the stem.

Guava — 13 feet high, 7 inches round, spreading 9 feet.

Female Papaw — 17 feet high, 2 feet 3 inches round the stem, and bears plenty of fruit every year.

Anotto — (*Bixa orellana*) 14 feet high, 11 inches round.

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## 10 CORRESPONDENCE WITH LINNÆUS.

Plantain or *Musa*, 24 feet high, the leaves 12 feet long, and  $3\frac{1}{2}$  feet broad; 3 feet 2 inches round the stem, and has abundance of fruit.

A large Palm, 14 feet high, 4 feet round.

*Cereus (Cactus)*, 24 feet high, 1 foot 4 inches round.

Male Papaw, 20 feet high, 3 feet 9 inches round, with several branches  $7\frac{1}{2}$  feet long.

A *Rosa Sinensis* or *Ketmia (Hibiscus)*, 25 feet high, 1 foot four inches round.

One Sago Palm, *Toddapanna* of *Hort. Malab.* 8 feet high, and 2 feet round the stem, a fine plant; with a great number of very large plants, whose names would be too long to mention here.

The back of these stoves had trellises, against which were placed in beds of earth, all the sorts of Passion-flowers, Clematis's of all kinds that could be procured, and Creeping *Cereus*. All these mixed together, and running up to the top, covered the whole back and sides of the house, and produced a multitude of flowers, which had an effect beyond imagination; nothing could be more beautiful or more surprising. There was also a Bamboo Cane 25 feet high.

Next to this magnificent stove were two others, two degrees lower, but these were higher and longer than most that are to be seen. He had also several besides. His Anana stove was 60 feet long, and 20 wide. The collections of trees, shrubs, and evergreens, in his nurseries at his death, I had told over; and they amounted to 219,925, mostly exotic. As