

The purchase of knowledge: James Edward Smith and the Linnean collections

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In 1784, the herbarium and manuscripts of the great Swedish naturalist, Carl Linnaeus, were acquired by a young medical student and non-conformist, James Edward Smith. The purchase was an important step in the establishment of the Linnean system of classification in Britain. It represented a more ambiguous achievement to Smith, however. The purchase transformed him into a leading collector, connoisseur and patron of learning. But it proved very difficult from this position to acquire the credentials to mark Smith out as an original discoverer and orderer of nature as he desired.

On the morning of 23 December 1783, Joseph Banks was having breakfast with a young medical student, James Edward Smith, when a letter arrived announcing the death of Linnaeus's son, and offering to Banks the entire botanical collection, library, manuscripts, and correspondence, of the Swedish naturalist, for a thousand guineas. Banks declined the offer, and advised Smith to make the purchase. After several months of negotiation, Smith obtained the necessary funds from his father. The collections were loaded on board a ship, which set sail for England, narrowly escaping an encounter with a pursuing Swedish vessel. Within several years of acquiring the collections, Smith founded the Linnean Society of London, which met regularly in his residence at Great Marlborough Street, where the collections also found their home.

The purchase was a pivotal episode in the history of natural history, for it provided the material and social basis for the advance of the Linnean system in Britain¹. Yet despite this crowning achievement, or perhaps because of it, Smith failed consistently to gain renown as a naturalist. In certain respects, Smith's purchase was like the investment that Joseph Banks had made by financing out of his personal fortune the botanical expeditions of James Cook's *Endeavour* voyage to the South Pacific. The investment of private wealth to procure a store of natural historical specimens that were in turn, the stuff of universal knowledge and a national treasure, made Banks a major public figure

and statesman of science. But Smith's venture lacked the epic of discovery that could mark him out personally as a hero and scientific practitioner of the first rank. Indeed, to acquire another person's collections was typically to identify oneself as a patron or connoisseur, rather than a possessor, of knowledge. The purchase of the Linnean collections by Smith thus raises the question of whether scientific knowledge could be bought, that is, acquired for money, and owned, like a piece of private property, whilst its value resided in its status as public or national property. What precisely did Smith own as possessor of the Linnean collections?

A career as a physician

To obtain the collections, Smith had to engage in lengthy negotiations with his father, James Smith, a successful merchant-manufacturer of silk and woollens in Norwich. The elder Smith's business was one of a relatively small number of firms that had expanded and diversified during the period known as the golden-age of Norwich textile manufacture². Smith's father was a Unitarian. He kept a common-place book, with comments on Locke and Rousseau that place him at least partially within the tradition of progressive and practically oriented non-conformists for whom science and the arts could form a counter-orthodoxy to the Anglican classicism of the institutions from which they were excluded³. Smith's father apparently wished for his son to follow him in trade, but failing that, to pursue a career as a physician, to which end he sent James Edward to Edinburgh.

James Smith supported his son's interest in natural history, including botanical field trips and an extensive correspondence, for these were clear indications of his son's potential eminence as a medical professional. Botany was an acquisition that gave a finishing polish

to the merchant's eldest son, highly useful in securing contacts and clients among the upper classes. James Edward on the other hand, seems to have chafed somewhat under his father's tutelage, and wrote letters to a fellow pupil about how discouraging it was to be told by one's elders that one's highest ideals of friendship, love, and human society were not to be obtained in commerce with the world⁴. For James Edward and his scientific circle at Edinburgh, botany was perhaps the best way to realize human pursuits and associations that were free of envy and enmity. Botany was not a useful investment in gentlemanliness to be turned to a profit in one's business or profession. It was a manifestation of one's best inner nature – a whole way of life – in important ways opposed to that recommended by his father.

Without taking a degree, Smith moved to London to train under the surgeon John Hunter. He received frequent letters from his father, who prayed that he would not succumb to the temptations and luxuries of the metropolis. Only several months later, he informed his father that the Linnean collections had been offered for sale, and that he deemed such a purchase worthy of his honour and taste. Appreciating at once that the objects would require a large and elegant house to be appropriately displayed, and that he was in effect buying not only a collection, but a whole life-style, quite beyond that of an eminent physician, the elder Smith initially viewed the purchase as an investment beyond his means, in materials of uncertain value. 'We must count the Cost', he wrote:

Surely the Sum will be very large – the Risque and Trouble very great, the Anxiety prodigious and possibly the Disappointment greater than all – Indeed my Dear James! I see it as an Object of immense Magnitude relative

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to our Force, they ought; they must be Proportionate to each other, or Confusion and Ruin, may be the Consequence . . . I shall leave you to think of it deliberately, and would caution you against the Enthusiasm of a Lover or the Heat of an Ambitious Man⁵.

National treasure

There are no materials to document precisely why Smith's father came to support the venture. But Smith's letters home gave in scrupulous detail the collection's value as an exchangeable commodity – the rare books for which collectors would pay large sums, and the precious shells, still tradable luxury commodities for private natural history cabinets. He also noted the eminent parties, such as the Empress of Russia, who had lined up behind him to purchase the collections should he decline. It may be that Smith's father came to conceive of how the purchase might make him a patron of learning, rather than just an educated man. For Smith, the acquisition of the Linnean collections clearly allowed him to sustain and enrich the learned life he had enjoyed at Edinburgh, to enter elite circles of learning on the continent, and to form the centre of a botanical network that could now extend far beyond his family's non-conformist circles⁶. Shortly after his purchase, Smith received a letter of congratulation from high-churchman on the rise, Samuel Goodenough, future Bishop of Carlisle, and a founder with Smith of the Linnean Society of London:

Your noble purchase of the Linnean cabinet, most decidedly sets Britain above all other nations in the Botanical empire, and it were much to be wish'd, that the studies of individuals, with respect to the science at large, would become so animated, and so successful, that she might be induc'd to fix her seat amongst us⁷.

The purchase of the collections thus had the potential to make Smith a person of national importance – a patriot, who had won a great treasure for England, and assisted in securing victory in the race between nations for possession of nature. Such at least is the message of the illustration in Thornton's *New Illustration Of The Sexual System Of Linnaeus* (Figure 1), a lavish series of folios published during the period of the Napoleonic wars. Smith appears crowned by the plant, native to Hindostan, that carries his name, *Smithia sensitiva*, while beneath him race the English ship, bearing the Linnean legacy, pursued by a Swedish vessel, dispatched too late by King Adolfus, who was allegedly out of the country when the great collections were offered for sale. The print manufactured the Banksian voyage that Smith never undertook: a passing of the natural historical crown to Britain. It also effected the translation of the collections from private investment to public property.



Figure 1 Engraving of J.E. Smith by W. Ridley after John Russell's pastel in W. Thornton's (1799) *Philosophy Of Botany*. Courtesy of the Linnean Society of London.

From the beginning, Smith presented himself as the 'trustee' or 'steward' of objects that were really a national treasure, while associates like Banks wrote letters of reference introducing Smith as the 'possessor of the Linnean collections'. Though he could not purchase an aristocratic title nor enter the élite through Anglican institutions of learning, Smith seems to have acquired the pre-eminent title and estate of natural historical nobility, enabling him to gift the nation, in particular its most wealthy and respectable collectors, with botanical wealth: rare copies of Linnaeus's works, rebound to match the covers of the recipient's library, expensive editions of his own translations of Linnaeus, plants named for eminent enthusiasts, and the entire flora of England, re-ordered and classified according to Linnean principles.

The Linnean Society

At the outset, however, the authenticity of the Linnean title had to be defended. The purchase committed Smith to a lifetime of discipleship and proleptizing on behalf of the Swedish naturalist. The Linnean Society was officially convened at Smith's house in 1788, with 20 fellows, 39 foreign members and 11 associates⁸. The Society's first effort to enroll distinguished continental practitioners met with a rebuff from the Dutch naturalist, Petrus Camper, who refused the title of honorary member, not wishing his name to be linked with that of Linnaeus, whom he regarded as a bad and derivative scholar. Smith insisted that

We have always conceived this name [which you unfortunately dislike], peculiarly proper for us, who have among

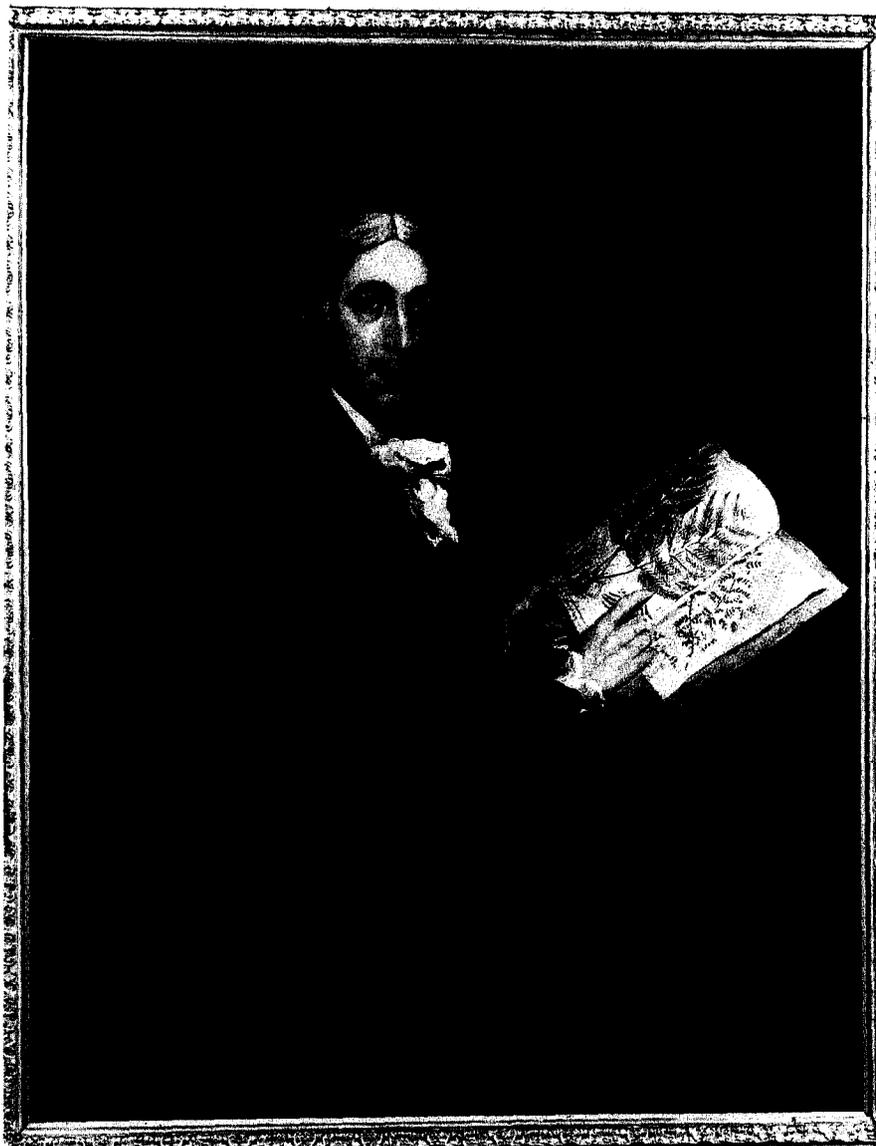


Figure 2 Oil painting of J.E. Smith by John Rising, 1793. Courtesy of the Linnean Society of London.

us the very Museum and Library of Linnaeus in the house where we meet, for you know, Sir, I purchased all his remains. We consider his works as a good foundation to work upon, we are best able to determine the different objects he described, to correct his errors and improve what he has left imperfect⁹.

The Linnean system was promulgated in England like a religious orthodoxy, with Smith and his colleagues serving as guardians and interpreters of a sacred and unfolding text, to be amplified and completed by their work. What this meant in practice was that the English Linneans conducted themselves on the principles of a patronage society, in which possession, credit, and prestige were the property not of Smith, the owner of the collections, but of Linnaeus himself. What gave national honour to Smith, what enabled him to mix with the company of nobles and men of learning of the first class, was what prevented him from marking out his own identity as a possessor of knowledge.

In the portrait by Rising displayed at the Royal Academy at the turn of the eighteenth century (Figure 2), Smith appears in the anonymous guise of 'an eminent botanist', with only the aforementioned plant, *Smithia sensitiva*, which appears on one of the open pages of the book, to indicate his identity. Anonymity was a particular problem for Smith, whose most commercially successful and highly regarded publication was, and still is, known as 'Sowerby's *English Botany*', after the illustrator, rather than the composer of the text¹⁰. The first volume appeared in 1790, and Smith, uncertain about identifying himself with a popular botanical work, with English nomenclature and descriptions, and lavish colour plates, apparently chose to have his name left off, until it was found 'a fit vehicle for original information and criticism'.

The flippancy with which every body quotes 'Sowerby', whom they know merely as the delineator of these plates, without adverting to the information of the work, or the name of its author,

leads me to the mortifying conclusion, that all I have done is of little avail, except to the penetrating eyes of the scientific few, who stand less in need of such assistance. But with their approbation I am conscious I ought to be content¹¹.

Smith was evidently frustrated that the name of a draughtsman and faithful observer should supplant that of the book's 'real author' who had examined each species, and corrected its characters, synonyms and descriptions. But such authorship was hard to establish, since credit was often widely distributed over natural historical knowledge. It was not unusual in botanical works for achievement to be divided between the discoverer of a plant, the persons responsible for its description and classification, and those to whom the author was indebted for the supply of the individual specimen – the collector, and the cultivator. As an author, Smith himself used this dispersal of credit to build his own botanical network. He and many of his fellow Linneans were part of a movement trying to place the systematic botanist at the centre of a network of collection, observation, and display. Thus it was crucial for him to claim as much of a work as possible for himself, or as he put it, to trust no one so that others might trust him.

Botanical libertinism

Smith's claims to knowledge were not uncontroversial, however. He was said by some to have appropriated the property of Linnaeus and of other botanists, which he passed off as his own. In a pamphlet read before the Linnean Society in 1804, Smith was charged with having copied nearly eight hundred generic characters verbatim from Linnaeus, a charge that was so offensive that Goodenough tried to limit the paper's circulation and to eject it from the Society library¹². The author was a leading systematic botanist and founding member the Linnean Society, Richard Salisbury. Smith and Salisbury may have fallen out over moral matters: Salisbury first having introduced a young protégé of Smith's to a prostitute, and second having falsely declared bankruptcy to avoid supporting his estranged wife¹³. But Salisbury's lowly nature evidently corrupted his botany for, according to Smith and Goodenough, he tried to discredit the Linnean system by exploiting its licentious language – naming, for example, the common water lily, *Castalia*, from the Latin, *casta*, because its petals 'chastely fold over and cover the organs of impregnation'.

As Goodenough put it, 'To make the name of the nymph of the fountain where Apollo and all the Muses drank the purest lymph, serve for the denomination of a plant inhabiting foul, stagnating, foetid water, and that too in a flora Graeca, which is to preserve the memorial of all Grecian excellence in the natural world, will be an offence of the grossest sort'¹⁴. The Bishop had

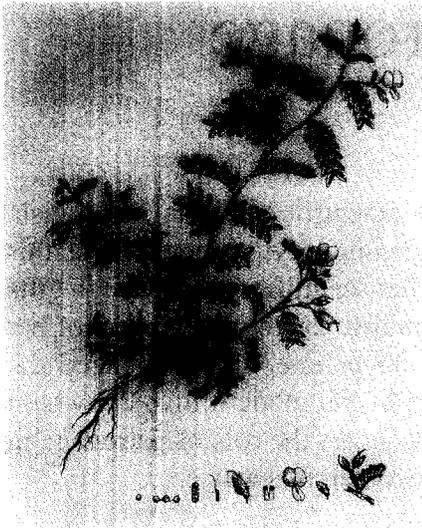


Figure 3 *Smithia sensitiva*. Engraving by J. Sowerby in W. Aiton's *Hortus Kewensis*, 1789. Courtesy of the Linnean Society of London.

long been dedicated to the sanctity of botanical language, distancing himself from the erotic terminology of authors such as Erasmus Darwin, whose botanical libertinism incurred anti-Jacobin criticism from the likes of Viscount Canning¹⁵. Goodenough counselled Smith on the art of purifying the Linnean system, which placed the reproductive parts of the plant at the centre of botanical study: 'your character for delicacy would not suffer by attending what I say about scrotiforme and genitalia ... Linnaeus's disgusting names, his nomenclatural wantonness, vulgar lasciviousness, and the gross prurience of his mind'. Smith, who had made gifts of his works to the Duchess of Portland, took steps to avoid compromising relations with female readers. As he wrote in his *Introduction to Physiological Botany*:

None but the most foolish or depraved could derive anything from it but what is beautiful, or pollute its lovely scenery with unamiable or unhallowed images. Those who do so, either from corrupt taste or malicious design, can be compared only to the fiend entering into the garden of Eden¹⁶.

Though forfeiting the approval of some of his fellows, Smith's Linnean adversary Salisbury continued as an active contributor and officer of the Society for many years. He defended his botanical character in a letter addressed to the editor of *Monthly Magazine* (although published separately),

accusing Smith of stealing the very name and description of his botanical namesake, *Smithia sensitiva* (Figure 3), which was so-called by the famous pupil of Linnaeus, Dryander, but only after Salisbury had himself discovered and cultivated it.

The words of that modern Aristides were indeed 'let it be *Smithia*', but they were uttered after, not previous to, my acquainting him with Dr J.E. Smith's wishes to have the Genus, and every syllable respecting it in *Hortus Kewensis*, was printed from my manuscript¹⁷.

Salisbury also reworked Smith's character in his own description of the genus, printed in the successful work, illustrated by William Hooker, *The Paradisus Londinensis*.

I had the honour of naming the genus in *Hortus Kewensis*, notwithstanding Dr Smith has thought fit to quote *me* against *myself* relative to this point in a late publication, which I leave him to settle with his own heart. Not that I ever thought the plant at all adequate to commemorate his botanical merits, for it is a low mean-looking hispid annual; and such is still my opinion of *some* of his labours, that if, like Napoleon the great, I had kingdoms instead of genera to bestow, he should wear one of the most brilliant diadems in my gift¹⁸.

By the time of his controversy with Salisbury, Smith had quit London, returning with his wife to Norwich, glad to be relieved, as he wrote to Banks, of the 'envy and backbiting, or more nauseous cant, among authors and artists in the society of the great town', and taking the Linnean collections with him¹⁹. Relying for the most part on his tenuous role as an author to maintain his public standing, he was unable to control the conduct of botany sufficiently to expel or silence an aberrant Linnean like Salisbury. Smith remained President of the Linnean Society, though his friends warned him that 'he who would reign over many must be perpetually contending with many'²⁰. Removed from the institution they had helped to found, the Linnean collections apparently reverted to the status of private property, and were eventually sold back to the Society, according to Smith's wishes, after his death, for a handsome profit.

Acknowledgement

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