

Book review

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Book review

Kennett T.: The Lord Treasurer of Botany: Sir James Edward Smith and the Linnaean collections. – London: The Linnean Society of London, 2016. – ISBN 978-0-9935510-0-0. – 23.4 × 15.6 cm, 388 pp.; flexibound. – Price: GBP 25.00. – Available at <https://www.linnean.org/>

Who could be better qualified to write a comprehensive biography of James Edward Smith (1759–1828), the founder of the Linnean Society of London, than the archivist who has catalogued and studied for five years the c. 3500 letters of his correspondence? Tom Kennett, now working at Lambeth Palace Library, is precisely the man to accomplish this job. The end result is a detailed and at the same time very readable life of a remarkable man, who for several decades belonged to the inner circle of English botany. Very appropriately the preface states “By the end of his life Smith was one of the architects of an astonishing renaissance of botanical knowledge in Europe, knighted in 1814 by the Prince Regent (later George IV), the author of important botanical catalogues, [...] entrepreneur, and an authoritative scientific expert at the centre of a remarkable network of botanical correspondents, and the gatekeeper to the treasures of Linnaeus.”

The most striking aspect of this biography is the very considerable number of unpublished sources it is based on, accurately referred to in most of the 1020 footnotes with the original material largely kept in the archives of the Linnean Society of London. Further letters studied by Kennett are conserved in libraries and museums in England, Scotland and the United States, while archival resources in continental Europe have not been taken into consideration. The end result is a scientific biography full of factual information and verbatim quotations with a minimum of hypotheses. Kennett’s book is nicely structured: Preface, Protologue, Cast of Characters (p. 9–11) and Timeline (p. 13–17) are followed by eleven chapters with the volume ending in an Epilogue, Notes (p. 315–348), Bibliography (p. 351–359) and a detailed Index (p. 363–388). Regrettably an appendix containing a complete list of JES’s publications is missing. The author has carefully selected 26 figures in colour, among them photographs of the well-known portrait of JES, aged 33, and of his wife Pleasance, aged 23, both kept by the Linnean Society, of a frontispiece and a plate taken from Sibthorp’s famous *Flora Graeca*, both based on watercolours by Ferdinand Bauer, as well as a few herbarium specimens. The line drawings of several buildings

associated with the life of JES, among them No 32 Soho Square, London, Sir Joseph Banks’s home (p. 57), No. 12 Great Marlborough Street, London, the first home of the Linnean Society (p. 120), and No. 29 Surrey Street, Norwich, JES’s home from 1796 until his death (p. 219), are gems. The same is true for the very well-presented maps illustrating JES’s Norwich (p. 18) and London (p. 110–111) as well as the route of his Grand Tour to what are now Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Switzerland (p. 76, 98).

Chapter 1 “Roots: The Early Life of James Edward Smith” offers a good introduction to the social and religious climate in Norfolk with JES growing up in a Presbyterian circle with Unitarian leanings. Not being member of the Church of England meant that he could not consider enrolling at Oxford or Cambridge. Chapter 2 “London: The Sale of the Century” concentrates on JES’s purchase of the Linnaean collections, library and archives. Although this story has been told many times, Kennett offers interesting details, e.g. insights into the pecuniary situation of JES’s father, a wealthy wool draper, who paid for his son’s acquisition, and about how an order was arranged to come from the Treasury that “every thing except the books [of JES’s acquisition] should be admitted [...] without duty”. Kennett rightly underlines that JES, although well-connected and elected to the prestigious Royal Society relatively early, still needed to make a living since “there was a dearth of salaried posts for naturalists in 18th-century England. Chairs of Botany existed at Oxford and Cambridge, but for the majority of the century they were occupied by father-son successions, who unwittingly competed with each other on the number of years between lectures”. JES’s travels on the continent are dealt at length in Chapter 3 “The Grand Tour”, rather conventional in approach and needless to say paid for by his father. They brought him an MD from Leiden University and many new scientific contacts which he was to cultivate during all his life. Chapter 4 “Foundation of the Linnean Society” offers good insights into JES’s subtle tactics of achieving tacit approval from Sir Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society so that “the Royal Society would not oppose the establishment of a society that had the potential to dilute its own scientific endeavours”. Kennett quite rightly calls the most important function of JES’s foundation to act as “facilitator of scientific communication, consultation and research”, a role this society continues to fulfil. How JES began his botanical career is elucidated in Chapters 5

“Establishing Smith” and 6 “Academic success”, with its amalgam of scientific writing, editing and giving series of public lectures in natural history advertised in London newspapers. The struggle of JES’s publications, many serially issued, to find their audience is nicely described – with James Sowerby’s *English Botany*, for which JES provided the text, the only popular and financially viable product. Needless to say, ample space is given to the endless feuds among individual botanists and the personal rancour fuelling many disputes between Linnaeans and Anti-Linnaeans. The title of Chapter 7 “The Botanical Radical” refers to Queen Charlotte’s reaction to *A Sketch of a Tour*, JES’s recollections of his Grand Tour, causing a minor court scandal since she is reported to have “found so many bad things which she could never forgive, that she could not go on [receiving botanical tuition from JES]”. Private matters, JES’s engagement, his move back to Norfolk and its consequences for the Linnean Society, and the death of his father are dealt with in Chapter 8 “The Bereaved and the Betrothed”. Flora-writing is the main topic of Chapter 9 “The Floras” with an emphasis on *Flora Graeca* (ten volumes with a total of 966 coloured copper engravings) and *Flora Britannica* (in four volumes without illustrations), both outstanding works that brought JES great recognition and in case of the first project an annual salary of £150. Maybe too much room is given to a bitter and acrimonious quarrel between two Fellows of the Royal Society reflected in the title of Chapter 10 “Smith vs Salisbury”, i.e. JES vs Richard Anthony Salisbury, the latter standing according to Robert Brown “between a rogue and a fool”. In addition, JES’s 3348 articles and 57 biographies of botanists written for Abraham Rees’s *Cyclopaedia* are discussed. Chapter 11 “The Lord Treasurer of Botany” is a quotation from a letter by Joseph Anton Schultes, Professor at Landshut University, sent to JES. Part of the chapter is an analysis of JES’s unsuccessful campaign for the Cambridge professorship which consisted of three strands: (1) the University Professorship, an unpaid position voted for by the Senate; (2) Dr Walker’s Reader, appointed by the five governors of the botanic garden, also unpaid and (3) the Regius Professorship appointed by the Crown with a salary of £200 p.a. The following description of what is rightly called the “battle between whiggism & science against old-fashioned esprit de corps” (i.e. being a member of the University and of the Church of England) makes particularly fine reading. It can act as a good

example of the Kafkaesque labyrinth called decision-making in academia – in the end neither the promise of the Prime Minister, then Lord Liverpool, to support JES’s candidature for the Regius professorship nor the vitriolic pamphlets published by JES on his struggles had any effect. The rest of the chapter is devoted to JES’s final years overshadowed by family troubles, financial problems of the Linnean Society and the loss of several of his old friends and associates, among them Banks and Sowerby, but at the same time relieved by his continuing pleasure in lecturing. For good reason Kennett does not suppress the extensive sources on JES’s delicate health, always precarious, which was one of the causes for the repeated delays in his serial publications. It is against this special background that JES’s huge output has to be seen. Unfortunately one aspect of JES’s activities is only lightly touched on – his bringing together of an impressive and important herbarium and library, both now in the possession of the Society he founded – and indeed this gap has still to be filled by another publication.

There are only a few and minor mistakes: in 1786 JES did not visit “Belgium”, a state founded only in 1830, but the Austrian Netherlands, then forming part of the Holy Roman Empire (p. 80); copies of the first volume of Olof Rudbeck’s exceedingly rare *Campi Elysii* (p. 131) exist also in Paris and Vienna; in August 1794 John Sibthorp and Francis Borone, JES’s manservant and botanical assistant, were still in Istanbul, not in Cyprus, which they never visited (p. 205). Only a few typographical errors could be spotted, among them Chalons-sur-Sôane (recte Chalons-sur-Saône, p. 88).

Congratulations to author Tom Kennett and to the President, council and fellows of the Linnean Society, who can be proud of a fine biography of the founder of their Society.

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