

Linnaeus and Lund - a complicated relationship

Lund University's most famous alumnus from the 1700s is undoubtedly Carl Linnaeus or - as he still was called by his enrolment here - Carolus Linnaeus. This is ironic considering that his time in Lund was very short: one academic year. Hereunder, he was living with Kilian Stobæus, and famous is the story of how young Linnaeus smuggled out books from his host's library - with 1,700 volumes, one of the city's largest private one - which he secretly read at night. Caught, he first suffered from his landlord's anger, but when his interrogation revealed the sinner's unusual talent, were not only the library's doors permanently opened to Linnaeus. No, Stobæus took him publicly in his arms, taught him and spoke even about making Linnaeus to his heir! Understandably then that Stobæus was "heart-sorely displeased" when his young student suddenly went to Uppsala. Linnaeus' own remorse over the incident is seen both in his autobiographical notes and in the subsequent letter to Stobæus.

As equally split as Linnaeus relation to Lund was, is how Lund's relation to Linnaeus has been, afterwards. The historian Martin Weibull called him in 1868 proudly for Lund's "first gift in return" to Uppsala and made sure his name was included in the pantheon of famous alumni names that same year, as painted in the Academic Society's Great Hall.

A generation later wrote on the other hand, Martin's son Lauritz Weibull about Linnaeus that "you look in vain in him for any sign of Lundensian character and perception." It was like a contribution in a debate in the 1920s: should a statue of Linnaeus be erected in Lund? Many local cultural figures expressed their scepticism and the student body was reluctant to grant space in Lundagård to what they saw as an apostate. When the statue finally came into place in 1938 it also ended up on Peter's Square outside the university area.

In recent years, Lund University has however, rather indulged in Linnaeus Pride, both during the 250th anniversary of Linnaeus's journey to Scania and during the great Linnaeus celebration year of 2007. Not the least, been joyful and proud about the around SEK 900 million in so-called Linnaeus grant from the Research Council to various research - the largest sum any applying university ever has received.

I wonder if even Stobæus rejoice in his heaven?