

## CAREER-BUILDING ACROSS THE OCEANS IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: A REVIEW OF MARIE-CHRISTINE SKUNCKE'S "CARL PETER THUNBERG: BOTANIST AND PHYSICIAN"

Marie-Christine Skuncke, *Carl Peter Thunberg: Botanist and Physician: Career-Building Across the Oceans in the Eighteenth Century* (Uppsala: Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study, 2014), ISBN: 978-91-981948-0-7, 376 pp.

Sebastian KROUPA\*

*Carl Peter Thunberg* (1743–1828): *Botanist and Physician* is a thoroughly researched and engagingly written account of the career of this prominent Apostle of Linnaeus, best known for his work on South African and Japanese flora. This beautifully illustrated book is arranged chronologically and subdivided into geographically distinctive chapters, as we accompany Thunberg on his voyage across half the world and find out what was involved in building a successful career in medicine and botany. Having been trained under Carl Linnaeus in Uppsala, Thunberg was invited in 1771, upon recommendation of his mentor, to travel to Japan and collect specimens for Dutch botanical gardens. In the same year, Thunberg signed up as a surgeon with the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and embarked on an eight-year long journey which took him to South Africa, Java, Japan and Ceylon. Following Thunberg on his travels, Skuncke masterfully uses an individual biography as a keyhole through which to capture the cross-cultural encounters in different parts of the globe, in which Thunberg was involved. In a distinct move away from Eurocentric narratives of great men of science, rather than on Thunberg himself the author focuses on the network he built and the actors involved. Skuncke's meticulous reconstruction of the relations of power and patronage within Thunberg's network highlights that his skills in network-building were at least as important as his intellectual abilities in paving a successful career, which culminated shortly after his return to Europe with a professorship in Medicine and Natural Philosophy at his *alma mater*.

During his voyage, Thunberg relied on the support of numerous patrons, both in Holland and Sweden. In exchange for specimens of exotic flora and fauna, these individuals sponsored Thunberg financially or promised to help further his career in Europe. Skuncke underlines the reciprocal nature of these links, the reliance on trust and, above all, the essential role of plant and animal specimens as a form of capital mediating these exchanges. She skilfully captures the fragility of such systems, as the relationships within Thunberg's network were constantly shaped and renegotiated by travelling (or lost) objects. Inevitably, due to conflicting interests of

---

\* University of Cambridge, Department of History and Philosophy of Science, Free School Lane, Cambridge, CB2 3RH, U. K. E-mail: sk796@cam.ac.uk

the individuals involved, many of whom resented each other, tensions were omnipresent and Thunberg had to handle his correspondents and shipments carefully. For instance, his Dutch contacts asserted primacy over Thunberg's consignments, which Thunberg obviously had to conceal from his Swedish patrons. Yet he had to satisfy all parties – not to mention the need to build his own private collection as a foundation for his publications and career after returning to Europe. Given the frequent strife and misunderstanding, Thunberg's financial situation was often very tight, which forced the Swede to show an enterprising spirit: such as when he bought a 'unicorn horn' in Batavia to sell it with profit in Japan as an aphrodisiac.

In this context, it was essential to exchange specimens and other favours systematically. Beyond providing physical specimens, other forms of 'payment' involved naming plants strategically after one's patrons: out of 19 newly described genera, Thunberg named 12 after his benefactors, including Jacob Radermacher, a VOC official whom he befriended in Batavia. However, outside of the Dutch context, this libation was wasteful and when Thunberg published an account of the plant in the *Philosophical Transactions* in 1779, he renamed it and added English references in an attempt to catch the eye of Joseph Banks. Only two years later, nevertheless, Thunberg changed the name back to *Radermachia* in the dissertation of his protégé Claës Fredrik Hornstedt, for whom he planned a voyage to Batavia and hoped for Radermacher's assistance. The logistics of shipping letters and *naturalia* to various places in Europe was another area which required careful planning and effective strategies. Skuncke vividly portrays these issues and emphasises the complex negotiations with intermediaries from the ranks of various trading companies – such as merchants, officials and ship's surgeons – and the dependence of travelling naturalists on the goodwill of these individuals. In addition to presenting specimens as commodities, further overlaps between commercial and scientific networks thus emerge.

In gaining access to knowledge and specimens, Thunberg relied on both European and non-European local brokers. Skuncke portrays in detail Thunberg's interactions with these figures in different cultural contexts and points to the problematic nature of source material produced and preserved within European colonial structures. Although Thunberg clearly obtained information from non-Europeans, he remained largely silent about their names and if any specific aspects are available about the encounter, they are described through the eyes of one party only. In grappling with these issues, Skuncke succeeds particularly in the chapter about Thunberg's stay in the Tokugawa Japan, the highlight of the book. Although he was for the most part confined to the artificial island of Deshima, used by the VOC as a trading outpost, Thunberg managed to develop a system of exchange with Japanese intellectuals: in return for his expertise in Western medicine, he obtained local knowledge and specimens, which he could use as capital in his further transactions. These transfers involved fusions of Sino-Japanese and Western methods. For instance, one of Thunberg's recipes against leprosy included camphor tea and blood drawn from the acupuncture point *shakutaku*, while one of the Swede's counterparts Yoshio Kōzaemon adapted Thunberg's technique for treating syphilis to local conditions. In her analysis of Thunberg's Japanese venture, Skuncke shows how both

Thunberg and Japanese intellectuals contributed to each other's careers and social status, and provides an excellent example of the construction and transmission of knowledge through reciprocal, albeit asymmetrical, processes of negotiation.

In the fashion of the knowledge brokers whose lives she reanimates on paper, Skuncke herself crosses numerous disciplinary, linguistic and geographical boundaries as she disentangles the threads of one extraordinary scientific career. The result is a most welcome contribution to the study of social practices in eighteenth century natural history and medicine from a world perspective.