

“From a desire to serve”

In a letter coded “553”*, written by (Gunner) William Peckover to (Sir) Joseph Banks, asking for his assistance in getting him an appointment on Cook’s second voyage to the South Seas; Peckover in an afterthought asks Banks to “Pray my humble duty to Dr Solander.”

*(Newly Commissioned for the South Seas, Mitchell Library, Banks Papers Voluntiers. (p 553))
Dr Daniel Charles Solander was born at Norrland in Sweden, on the 28 February 1736, his father was a local clergyman; he died on the 16 May 1782 at Sir Joseph Banks’ house in Soho London. Whilst still a schoolboy Daniel came to the attention of Carl Linne, the father of modern taxonomy, Professor of Practical Medicine at Upsala University: he is more commonly known as Carolus Linnaeus. Linnaeus’ father was also a clergyman and it may be the relationship with Daniel Solander developed through the parents. Linnaeus published his major botanical work, *Elementa Botanica* at Upsala in 1756 and entrusted the editing of the work, which introduced binomial nomenclature to flora and fauna, to Daniel Solander who was approximately 19 at the time. The relationship between the master and his student was unique, for in *Correspondence of Linnaeus*, ed. Smith, Linnaeus is said to have “cherished him (Daniel) as a son under his own roof” and in a letter of introduction to the Englishmen, John Ellis and Peter Collinson said Daniel was a “much loved pupil”.

Solander graduated at Upsala; probably in medicine; and on Linnaeus’ recommendation left for England in April 1759 although ill health delayed his arrival until July 1760. He learnt to speak and write English early in his stay, and proved to be very influential in the scientific circles he mixed in, being the promoter of his master Linnaeus in the establishment of the systematic cataloguing of species.

“his instructions made everybody correct and systematic. And introduced Linnaean learning and precision”.

(Smith, *ibid*).

The Earl of Bath, William Pulteney, a scholar, politician and well-known Whig, praised Solander even higher,

“his name (Solander) and the connection he was known to bear as the favourite pupil of the great master (Linnaeus)” and “his perfect acquaintance with the whole scheme” and “the urbanity of his manners”

were such as to gain acceptance of the Linnaean system of taxonomy in England.

Linnaeus recommended to the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg that Solander be appointed Professor of botany, but the latter refused the position after listening to the advice of his friend Peter Collinson, who had recommended Solander to be appointed Assistant Librarian at the British Museum. In 1763 the new Assistant Librarian began the task of cataloguing the natural history collections of the British Museum. Possibly before this time or certainly shortly after the British Museum appointment he came to the attention of (Sir) Joseph Banks, the British naturalist and member of the Royal Geographic Society. At the time Banks was a mere 20 years of age, but such was his reputation that he was engaged to accompany James Cook on his first voyage to the South Seas. He and Solander would have undertaken the responsibility to search out new flora and fauna, to collect where possible and record those species that were found, an onerous task.. Banks was educated at Christ Church College Oxford, and helped establish botany as a scientific discipline. In 1768 Banks invited the older Solander to accompany him on Cook’s 1st expedition, as the former’s assistant at a salary of £400. , Solander was given leave of absence from The British Museum and assured that his appointment would be re-established on his return.

William Peckover was born 17 June 1748 at Aynho in the Cherwell Valley Northamptonshire, the eldest child, and only son of a “poor man” (see *Militia Lists Aynho 1762*) Daniel and Mary Peckover (nee Avies). For economic and social reasons young Peckover decided to leave the land, where for generations his ancestors had eked out a meagre living, and seek a comparatively better life in the Royal Navy. Life for mariners at that time was harsh, but was considered better than the Army, “The private of the army was no better treated (than the able seaman). At home he had no barracks...and.... a population that hated the red coats. As to discipline, one soldier of George II had received 30,000 lashes in sixteen years”.

Trevelyan, *English Social History* 1942, pp 348.

The records show that Peckover enlisted at the age of 21, this would have been the year in which James Cook set sail for Hawaii to observe the transit of Venus. Very little was known of the South Seas at the time, other than the explorations of Abel Tasman, who discovered New Holland (Australia). The young Peckover saw the opportunity for adventure, "a home", and friends in his shipmates, "regular" meals and freedom from the tyranny of enclosures. Up until the mid-18th century Northamptonshire had been the least enclosed county in England, but this was rapidly changing and causing deaths from malnutrition as well as from riots against enclosure of the common fields.

It is a matter of speculation on how Peckover developed a relationship with Banks and Solander, but the circumstances in which they found themselves may have helped. At the time of Cook's first voyage Banks was aged 25, Solander 32 and Peckover 21 and although they might have come from different social backgrounds, they must have shared the same excitement of the expedition. One can assume from the quality of the literacy in Peckover's letter below, written in about 1771, to Banks about the second voyage that the former had a degree of latent intelligence, and that Banks recognised this.

Dear Sir,

Tho I entered into the Navy chiefly from a desire of serving my Country faithfully & tho the same principle still attaches me to the service yet. I cannot help wishing for a more reputable station in it. My dislike of an inactive life at land was the sole reason for declining your obliging recommendation at Richmond. As you was so good to me during your last voyage & so generous since your return I am determined to hazard my life A gain with you in the same vessil from motives of gratitude & regard. I ham now emboldened to solicit your goodness to have me appointed supernumerary midshipman in one of the ships newly commissioned for the South Seas. Lord Greville was so obliging as to promise my Uncle that he would mention this scheme to you & did not doubt but that you would honer it with your approbation & assistance. as is Lordship is not in town nor will bee in town in nine days I have taken this liberty of applying directly to you lest the list should be filled up before his return to London. I sincerely thank you for every Instance of your condescending goodness to me & ham with wishing you every real blessing.

Your very much Obliged & most

Obdt. & humble servant

William Packover

PS

Please to direct to me

At Mr Sernders in Warwick

Pray my humble duty

To Dr. Solander

This letter includes a thank you to Banks for his kindness on the 1st of Cook's voyages and suggests that Banks took Peckover under his wing. In their explorations on land the two scientists would have needed equipment; microscopes, chairs, folios and much more; they would have required the services of at least a couple of able seamen to tote the luggage. Peckover was new to naval life, did Cook appoint him to Banks because of this or if he was the new boy was he just landed with tasks that older tars did not want? As a country boy Peckover would have been familiar with the wild flowers of an English hedgerow in abundance before agricultural improvements took place.

As John Clare, the Northamptonshire poet wrote: -

"Blue-bells and cuckoos in the wood

And pasture cuckoo's too

Red yellow white and blue

Growing where herd cows meet the showers

And lick the morning dew

I love wild flowers"

(from Wild Flowers by John Clare)

It seems inevitable that during the three-year expedition Peckover would have taken more than just a passing interest in the work of Banks and Solander. Linnaeus based his initial classification system upon botanical specimens, and Solander would have been looking to classify new found

species, from the South Seas, into that Linnaean system. Whilst Peckover would not have understood the Greco-Latinised nomenclature he would surely have recognised the common families of flowers and their relationship to those of his native county.

One can imagine the confined conditions below deck aboard the converted collier, Endeavour, for the ratings, although Banks and Solander would have had their own quarters to store specimens. It would be a natural response to the sweaty and smelly bodies of his shipmates, and the stench from the bilges, for Peckover to seek some respite with the two scientists.

This was primarily a scientific expedition, not a passage of war, Peckover would have been given maintenance duties aboard ship. It may be possible that he was allocated to the gunroom, where he began to learn the skills to take him to Warrant Officer as a Gunner. He would have had time to extend his interests and chose to take an interest in the scientific side of the expedition. In this manner some limited form of friendship between our three principals would have developed and Peckover's desire to serve (and learn) would have added to the quality of the friendship. Solander was in the process of promoting a new type of classification for flora and fauna and with a willing audience in Peckover could have responded in a fraternal way.

Whether one accepts the preceding speculations or not, there is little doubt, based upon the sentiments expressed in the above letter that some special relationship developed, between William Peckover, Joseph Banks and Charles Solander, on the 1st of Cook's Voyages.

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