Introduction

"Forget not Mee & My Garden. . . ," the 27 year old Peter Collinson wrote his Maryland friend George Robbins in 1721. "If you have any Shells, Curious Stones, or any other Natural Curiosity Remember Mee. I want one of your Humming Birds which you may send dry'd in its Feathers, and any Curious Insect."[1] And so with Collinson's letters for the rest of his life—importunings, thanks for rarities received, introductions to people and plants, cultivation instructions, queries, encouragements.

His letters are vigorous and enthusiastic, filled with excited descriptions of new discoveries and how-to-do-it advice. He often wrote in haste, standing up at the shipping desk in his fabric merchant's shop in London, snatching time from business to write: "This comes from behind the Counter. You know what a shop Is to write under no Interruptions, but I am used to It & my friends are so good to Excuse all my Blunders."[2] He referred to himself and his Virginia planter friend John Custis as "Wee Brothers of the Spade."[3] Thanking Linnaeus for naming a plant after him, Collinson observed, "Something, I think, was due to me from the Commonwealth of Botany, for the great number of Plants and Seeds I have annually procured from abroad, & you have been so good as to pay it, by giving mee a Species of Eternity botanically speaking, that is, a name as long as Men and Books endure."[4]

More than seven hundred and fifty of his letters survive (192 follow) to more than seventy-five correspondents (27 are represented here). He corresponded with the leading scientists and collectors of his time—Carl Linnaeus, Benjamin Franklin, Sir Hans Sloane and Sir Charles Wager; many of the nobility including the 8th and 9th Lords Petre, the Earls of Jersey and Bute, and the Dukes of Richmond; colonial officers and gentlemen such as the Penn proprietors, Cadwallader Colden (Deputy Governor of New York), John Custis, and William Byrd II of Virginia; and inspired

amateurs like John Bartram and others of those "Curious in our Way"[5] in the North American colonies, Germany, Ireland, Russia, the West Indies, Holland, Switzerland, Italy and Sweden.

He wrote about plants, butterflies, British imperial interests, electricity, weather, fossils, earthquakes, snakes, wars, terrapins, cures for gout and rabies, red Indians, astronomy, premiums to encourage colonial productions, the migration of swallows, magnetism, and now and then a Quaker homily. He did not mention music or slavery.

Collinson's letters display a clear sense of his own achievement, a temper, and the forward manner that helped make him such a successful collector. Writing thanks to Sir Hans Sloane in the 1730s for a present of shells, Collinson asked for a few more: "If I mistake not I remember to have seen you have a great Number & Variety of Duplicates in a Cabinet that stands on the Left Hand as I went into the Roome where the Mummy lies."[6] His letters reflect his pride in his nation and of English achievements—for example his December 10, 1762 note to John Bartram: "Now my dear John, look at the map and see by this glorious peace [of Paris] what an immense country is added to our long, narrow slip of Colonies."

He was remarkably healthy. Aside from a few bouts of gout, his 76 years were energetic without interruption. As for what he looked like, according to his friend John Fothergill, "His stature was below middle size, and his body was rather corpulent; his habit was plain, having been bred a quaker; his aspect kind and liberal. . . .[7] Another contemporary, Richard Gough wrote of him in a private memorandum, "He remarkably hardy and wore thin wastcoat in winter."[8]

After his death, the *Annual Register* reported

> When he was in London he applied to the business of his counting-house; when in the country, he was almost continually employed in his garden, observing and assisting the progress of vegetation, which equally contributed to his pleasure and his health.
>
> He was in the highest degree fond of both flowers and fruit. Of fruit he always made the principal part of his meal: and his house was never without flowers, from the early snowdrop to the autumnal cyclamen.[9]

He hated heat and he loved food. On September 17, 1765 he complained to Linnaeus, "I do assure you I have had little pleasure of my life this summer, for I cannot bear heat. I have longed to be on Lapland Mountains." On the subject of food, "The North American Ursus I have often eat of it in England & think it is the most agreeable tast of all Flesh. My friend a Merchant had large young Bears brought over every year & fatted them with and Sugar. It is really fine Eating & the Fatt is whiter & finer

than the Fatt of Lambs."[10] He annotated his copy of Philip Miller's *Gardener's Dictionary* with a list of "melting Peaches," their size and characteristics.

A plain man of limited education and large enthusiasm, Collinson was born in London on January 28, 1694 and raised by a gardening grandmother in Peckham. His limited means and his Quaker heritage that precluded his taking the Test Oath meant that he could not go to an English university (in his time affiliated with the Anglican Church). He chose instead to go into his father's business of selling quality fabrics to an elite domestic market and exporting them to the British colonies. It was a good business in the 1730s, '40s and '50s, but it declined with the trade disruptions of the Seven Years War and the impending American Revolution. Collinson was not well-off when he died.

He taught himself through his friends and his reading. His library included most of the natural histories available and published in his time, along with biographies, travel accounts, gazetteers, geographies, mythologies, books on antiquities, astronomy, and practical science. He used his books hard and marked them for reference. Typical is the annotation in his copy of Pliny's *History of the World:* "It is plain from this romantic account they knew not the origin of asbestos—nor the country from whence it came & yett knew how to manufacture it. I have paper made with it by Ben Franklin of Philadelphia who sent me several sheets of them."[11]

His scientific interests were recognized early. At 34 Collinson was elected to the Royal Society under the sponsorship of Sir Hans Sloane. He served it for 40 years (fourteen as a member of the council), introducing in their own names the discoveries of others, including his American correspondents Franklin and Bartram and arranging for publication of their letters to him. He wrote often for the new *Gentleman's Magazine* (the *New Yorker* of his time) and contributed to the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions* and to other journals.

Friendship came easily to him, face-to-face and through letters. His business acquaintance with the gentry and the nobility, his American planter customers, his Philadelphia friends, ship captains, and his mercantile correspondents all helped expand his collections as he sought curiosities of every description. Many the captain who carried home in his cabin packages of seeds and nuts, shells, bulbs, ginseng roots, sprouting skunk cabbages, hatching turtle eggs, dried birds packed in tobacco dust. His zest for collecting held strong all his life. Three months before he died he wrote a friend, "Pray if any thing new or odd occurs Lett me know."[12]

The ranks of the Curious grew during Collinson's lifetime, a reflection of the nation's peace and its growing profit from colonial trade. Collecting and research

benefit from a climate of prosperity, and there were many who could afford science in the 18th century. Support for colonial expansion and development went hand in hand with the impulse to exploit natural history as much for the sake of pure science as to render science useful to trade and industry. Collinson grew up with Robert Boyle's "General Heads for the Natural History of a Country, Great or Small: Drawn out for the Uses of Travellers and Navigators" (1666) and John Woodward's 1696 *Brief Instructions for Making Observations In All Parts of the World.* His early letters to John Bartram are filled with brief instructions of his own.

Shared curiosities often bridge differences in age and class and they did for Collinson. Consider his warm friendship with Sir Hans Sloane, an educated man 34 years his senior and physician to the Queen. Sloane delighted in the younger man's talent for observation and discovery, and he found Collinson's enthusiasm charming, just as he enjoyed having his treasures openly admired—all the more gratifying when the admiration carries a hint of honest envy as Collinson's did.

It was Sloane who introduced Collinson to the Royal Society. On the docks and in the coffee houses where stocks were traded and rarities displayed alongside the latest New World cargoes, commoner met nobility and gentry on level ground as they exchanged observations and specimens, but the Royal Society was the club of the most sophisticated philosophers. The entrée Collinson gained there was crucial.

An enthusiast himself, Collinson was an indefatigable broker of enthusiasms. He recognized the achievements of others and helped to further them. For all he was a determined collector eager to add to his garden and cabinet, he was unselfish and seems to have defined himself in promoting the ventures and discoveries of his imaginative friends, frequently through the Royal Society.

His promotion of Benjamin Franklin exemplified his inspired patronage: "Collinson is the most important single person in Franklin's scientific career. He was responsible for Franklin's initial activity in electrical science; his encouragement was equally responsible for its continuation."[13] In 1753, at Franklin's request, Collinson used his influence with "those at the helm" to get Franklin appointed deputy postmaster-general of the American service.

He helped to popularize Linnaeus's system of plant identification and championed the interest of Linnaeus's protégé Daniel Solander (later to sail with Banks as Naturalist aboard the *Endeavour*) to become curator of the British Museum. His greatest triumph was the introduction and re-introduction of more than 100 American plants through the efforts of his American collector John Bartram. Also, he sent some good plants west: pear scions, peach stones, melon seeds, and, to Bartram what

we know today as our kitchen rhubarb with instructions on cooking and this note, "Eats best cold."[14]

Here is how his friend Cadwallader Colden described Collinson to a friend in London,

> I have lately fallen into a literary correspondence with a Gentleman, who is curious in several branches of the natural History of America, & I am told has an exceedingly curious collection of that sort, as well as the most compleat Garden of American Plants that is in great Brittain. It is the more extraordinary by his being a Merchant, who seldom apply themselves to any study that no way tends to advance their trade. He seems to me to be a man of Generous principles & universal Benevolence. . . .[15]

Writing about himself to Colden, Collinson observed, "I hate to be idle, and think all time surely lost that is not usefully employed; for which reason clubs, taverns and coffee houses scarcely know me."[16]

Although Collinson traveled extensively around England, he left it only once and never visited America. As he wrote John Bartram,

> It is with pleasure when we read thy Excursions (& wish to bear thee Company) but then it is with concern that we reflect on the Fatigue thee undergoes, the great risks of thy Health in Heats & Colds but able all the Danger of Rattlesnakes. This would so curb my Ardent Desires to see vegitable Curiosities that I should be afraid to venter in your woods unless on Horseback & so Good a guide as thee art by my side.[17]

Among his wealthy and aristocratic friends he encouraged large-scale planting of American evergreens which he described as "another means of painting with Living Pencils."[18] He was, however, not a landscape architect but a gardener and propagator. Individual flowers from his garden were often painted, but no painting or drawing of his garden is known, and while many of his contemporaries remarked on the extent and range of his collection, none described the arrangement of the whole as remarkable.

In later years he described in a private memorandum his introduction of exotic plants and perfection of propagation techniques as his greatest contributions. "My Publick Station in Business brought me acquainted with Persons that were natives of Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Pensilvania and New England. My Love for New & Rare plants putt mee often on soliciting their assistance for seeds or plants from those Countries," he wrote, but "What was common with them (but Rare with us)

they did not think worth sending. . . . Neither Money nor Friendship would Tempt them. . . ."

Then John Bartram was introduced "as a very proper Person for that purpose, being a native of Pensilvania with a numerous Family. The profits ariseing from Gathering Seeds would enable him to support it."

The introduction worked and Bartram turned out to be an inspired collector. Collinson arranged subscriptions for the five guinea boxes of Bartram's seeds (packets of 105 varieties of trees and shrubs in each). His careful records show more than one hundred subscribers including collectors in Ireland, Scotland, France and Germany during the period 1740–1767. Of course "Transacting this Business of procureing Foreign Seeds brought on mee every year no little Trouble, to carry on such a Correspondence attended with so much Loss of time, viz. In keeping Accounts, writeing Letters with Orders, Receiving and Paying the Collectors Money, Difficulties and attendance at the Custom House. . . & then disperseing the boxes to the proper owners, etc. etc.

"Yet all this trouble with some unavoidable Expence attending it did not discourage mee for I willingly undertook it without the least grain of profit to my self in hopes to improve, or at least adorn my Country. . . I had Public Good at Heart. . . ."

His trouble didn't end with distributing the boxes and paying Bartram. For one thing, Bartram didn't always want cash, so Collinson had to act as banker, and often Bartram wanted goods that Collinson had to obtain and ship. And then, "[A]fter I had supplied the several persons. . .with Seeds, the next was pray Sir how and in what manner must I sow them, pray be so good Sir as to give me some directions, for my Gardener is a very ignorant Fellow."[19]

With the exception of Franklin, Collinson met few of his American correspondents. He depended on their "Speaking Letters in that Silent Language [to] Convey their most intimate thoughts to my Mind."[20] What is remarkable is how intimate *his* letters are—his dismay at the death of his best friend, Lord Petre; his joy when a dry root takes life; his pleasure at "the peep of a new thing"; his gusto for tastes and fragrances; his terror of snakes and delight when the mud turtle Bartram sent climbs his stairs; his happiness for his friends. His operating principle seems to have been, What I gave away I kept. Meanness wasn't in the man. He was animated all his life by a sense of wonder. He was a dirt-under-the-nails gardener.

Late in life he reflected, "I often times Stand with Wonder & amazement when I View the Inconceivable variety of flowers, Shrubs & Trees now in our Gardens & what they was 40 years Agon, and in that Time what quantities from all North America have annually been Collected by My Means and procuring. . . . Very few

Gardens, if any, excells Mine att Mill Hill for the Rare Exotiks which are my Delight."[21]

He died on August 11, 1768, "seized with a stoppage in his Water which could never be remedied."[22]

This selection is intended to provide a convenient picture of his interests and influences. The letters are presented essentially as he wrote them (or from drafts and copies where the original could not be located). In their sometimes sprawling, scrawling incoherence his letters reflect what Collinson told many of his correspondents: "I am vastly Hurried in Business and no Leisure." Subjects were interrupted when a customer came into his shop or a new thing came to mind, and often a letter was left open for days before the ship that would carry it set sail. Many of his postscripts are longer than the basic letter, and postscripts to postscripts are not uncommon.

His capitalizations and spelling are erratic. Where sense required, the editor has discreetly modernized spellings, inserted dropped words, eliminated underlinings and added minimal punctuation. Collinson's dashes have been replaced with paragraphs, commas, and periods. Interpolations are given within square parentheses. His "Old Style" datings and Quaker spellings of the months have been modernized and their placings standardized at the beginning of each letter.

A brief biography of each addressee appears at the foot of the first letter to that person. Plant identifications have been included where reasonable certainty permitted, but as Collinson wrote Bartram in 1735, "a Compleat History of Plants is not to be found in any author." [January 20, 1735. ALS:HSP] That remains true. For the identifications we have made we have relied on Mabberley, D.J., *The Plant Book* . . . (2nd edition), Cambridge University Press, 1997, and Bailey, L.H. *The Standard Cyclopedia of Horticulture.* New York, 1928. Dr. Ann F. Rhoads, Senior Botanist, Morris Arboretum of the University of Pennsylvania, checked the identifications we attempted.

Martha Armstrong, G.D.R. Bridson, Gina Douglas, and R.G.C. Desmond helped identify subjects for illustrations and locate images. We sought illustrations Collinson might have seen by artists he knew and patronized and, in some instances, supplied with subjects: Mark Catesby, Georg Dionysius Ehret, George Edwards, Philip Miller, Moses Harris, and William Bartram. The American Philosophical Society, Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, The Linnean Society of London, the Library Company of Philadelphia, the Royal Society, and Lord and Lady Derby of Knowsley Hall kindly allowed us to use images from their collections without fee.

Dr. John Edmondson, Curator of Botany, Liverpool Museum, and Mrs. Carole LeFaivre-Rochester of Philadelphia proofed the text for the most egregious errors. Those that remain are the editor's.

NOTES

1. PC to George Robins, October 6, 1721: MdHS (not included here).
2. PC to Franklin, April 12, 1747: N-YHS.
3. PC to John Custis, December 15, 1735: AAS.
4. PC to Carl Linnaeus, May 13, 1739: LS.
5. PC to John Bartram, August 16, 1735: HSP.
6. PC to Sir Hans Sloane, [ca. 1730]: BL.
7. *The Annual Register, or a View of the History, Politics, and Literature For the Year 1770.* 5th edition, London, 1794, p. 57.
8. Autograph memorandum, Cambridge Univ. Library.
9. *Annual Register, op. cit.*
10. PC to Carl Linnaeus, October 26, 1747: LS.
11. Plinius (Caius Secundus, the Elder). *The Historie of the World,* 2 vol. in 1, First Edition in English, 1601; vol II, p. 4: APS.
12. PC to John Player, May 19, 1768: Glos. Rec. Off (not included here).
13. Cohen, I. Bernard: *Benjamin Franklin: Experiments,* Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1941, p.15.
14. PC to John Bartram, August 16, 1735: HSP.
15. Cadwallader Colden to Captain John Rutherford, *Colden Papers* 1743–47, p. 15: N-YHS.
16. PC to Cadwallader Colden, March 7, 1741: N-YHS (not included here).
17. PC to John Bartram, February 3, 1736: HSP.
18. PC to Philip Southcote, October 9, 1752, Draft: LS.
19. "An Account Of The Introduction of American Seeds Into Great Britain, By Peter Collinson," Autograph Memorandum: Natural History Museum, Botany Library, London.
20. PC to John Bartram, December 10, 1762: ALS: HSP.
21. Autograph Memorandum copied at the foot of the Appendix in PC's copy of Philip Miller's *Gardeners Dictionary* (8th edition) at the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. Also quoted (in a slightly different form) in Dillwyn, L. W. ed. *Hortus Collinsonianus: An Account of the Plants Cultivated by the Late Peter Collinson, Esq., F.R.S.* Swansea, 1843, p. vi.
22. William Logan, Jr. to his father, in Philadelphia, London, August 14, 1768: HSP.