

Classified knowledge

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [August 2, 2000](#) issue

Question: Who had reason to vandalize the statue of Carl von Linné, a.k.a. Carolus Linnaeus (1707-78), prompting Chicago authorities to move it from once-Swede-surrounded Lincoln Park to the University of Chicago?

Answer (choose one):

- a) anti-Swede toughs;
- b) neighborhood thugs;
- c) enemies of pornography;
- d) lovers of pornography;
- e) postmodernists;
- f) Uppsala preachers and their heirs.

I recall some controversy in 1976 as to whether the statue should be rescued at all. Would its removal be an injustice to Swedish-Americans, who had commissioned and placed it in the park in 1891? And if it were moved to the university campus, should Linnaeus have his back to the classrooms and front to the traffic, or vice versa?

For those who do not keep up with the genus *statuary* or the species *Linnaeus*, here is a reminder that the Swedish scientist was a pioneer taxonomist, inventor of much that goes with the concepts of genus and species.

I've recently found a clue about the trashing of the statue, thanks to the publication of Lisbet Koerner's *Linnaeus: Nature and Nation*, reviewed by Eric Zencey in *Lingua Franca* (April). Koerner and Zencey tell us some good things about the hero: He loved his country. He had a deep empathy for starving peasants. He tried to grow bananas, coffee and other tropical plants in order to feed the peasants, and his failed attempts at northernizing such plants led him to the botanizing that is his legacy.

Back to our quiz. Rule out a) anti-Swede toughs. Everyone in Chicago has always liked Swedes. b) Neighborhood thuggery? Why Linnaeus and not one of the innumerable men-on-horseback statues? c) and d) Pornography or antipornography?

Long ago vandals had stripped the statue of the four allegorical female figures surrounding Linnaeus. Harmless, nonerotic and nonthreatening, they represented either four branches of science or the four seasons. No one knows which.

Perhaps an e) postmodernist trashed Linnaeus, just as his biographer trashes him now. His villainy? He classified and labeled plants, and classifying and labeling is what patriarchal hegemony-minded dead white European males did. Zencey says, "Unfortunately, [the author] can't forgive him for not being postmodern."

But I think the preachers did it. The clue is Zencey's comment that "throughout his life, Linnaeus was pious but far from conventional. He taught his dog to leave church during sermons so that he could follow along in sham concern." Aha! Swedish Lutheran preachers have a motive to get even with the scientist for this novel form of sermon-criticism. We've seen people doze during sermons, or fake a nosebleed or pinch a baby so that they have reason to leave at the ten-minute point of a homily, just before the minister starts saying things like "Let us, therefore . . ." But Linnaeus the taxonomist invented his own species of protest and sermon-criticism.