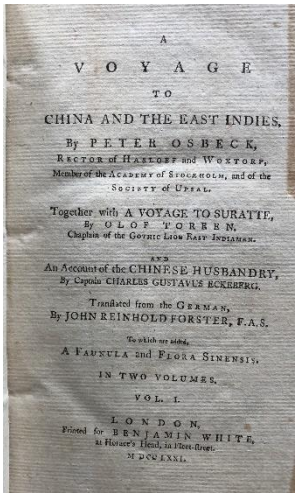
Skinny pigs and hibernating swallows

Every now and again you find a book with footnotes intruding from an author, editor or translator, which are just as interesting as the text.

But lets start with one of the giants of 18th C natural history. Carl Linneaus, presiding in Uppsala, established the binomial taxonomic system for plants and animals which we still use today. He sometimes gets a bad press these days, through no fault of his own, as epitomising the cultural imperialism of the Enlightenment. However, he was exceptional in assembling and classifying plant specimens from all around the world according to his system, particularly helped by a group of 17 men who go by the name of 'Apostles'. These men were students or disciples of Linnaeus, and include some big names, such as Daniel Solander, naturalist with Joseph Banks on Cook's first voyage, and Anders Sparrman, sailing along with Johann Forster and son Georg, as naturalists on Cook's second voyage (the authorities having abandoned Banks for his excessive zeal).

Some four of the Apostles made voyages to China, including Sparrman, and perhaps the most noteworthy was the naturalist and chaplain for the Swedish East India Company, Pehr Osbeck. (Once the English and Dutch established their hugely profitable East India Companies, everyone had to have one). Osbeck sailed there in 1750 and spent about 15 months in the regions around Canton, which was as far as most could go into those days. After returning to Sweden, encouraged by Linnaeus, he published an account of his travels in 1757. Published along with it were letters from another Apostle, Olof Torén, who also made it back from China, with tea plants that died, dying himself soon after his return. A third segment of the book is the travel account of Olav Ekeberg, a notable sea captain, naturalist, chemist and physician, who made several voyages to China, also bringing back specimens for Linnaeus.

Osbeck's book of 1757, *Dagbok öfwer en ostindisk Resa åren 1750, 1751, 1752*, was translated into German in 1762, and Johann Forster translated this German version into English in 1771[1]. Forster also translated Sparrman's account of his voyage with Cook, and a couple of other accounts from Linnaeus' apostles, using these earlier books to help convince the authorities that he was the man for Cook (the second voyage was from 1772 to 1775). Forster arrived in England in 1766, and after many problems in teaching positions and developing important friendships with naturalists such as Thomas Pennant and, supremely, Joseph Banks, ended up with his appointment. He was not a man known for his humour – his journal from Cook's voyage is notable for his complaints (seawater and a goat in his cabin as they headed for the Antarctic circle, etc.), and he had a history of argument fed by his sense of self-importance. But he was above all, a scientist, a fine observer and recorder.


A
VOYAGE
TO
CHINA AND THE EAST INDIES,
By PETER OSBECK,
RECTOR of HAGLOBY and WORTORP,
Member of the ACADEMY of STOCKHOLM, and of the
SOCIETY of UPSAL.
Together with A VOYAGE TO SURATTE,
By OLOF TORREN,
Chaplain of the GOTHIC LION REAST INDIAMEN.
AND
An Account of the CHINESE HUSBANDRY,
By Captain CHARLES GUSTAVUS ECKEBERG.
Translated from the GERMAN,
By JOHN REINHOLD FORSTER, F.A.S.
To which are added,
A FAUNULA and FLORA SINENSIS,
IN TWO VOLUMES.
VOL. I.
LONDON,
Printed for BENJAMIN WHITE,
at Horace's Head, in Fleet-Street.
M DCC LXXI.

Forster says in his Introduction that he has added a few footnotes to the Osbeck translation, denoted with an 'F', and also includes those from one of his prior German translators, Daniel

Schreber, denoted by 'D.S'. He didn't hesitate in deciding what the English reader might like to read: Osbeck's entry for the 1st September carries a Forster footnote: '*Here our author has inserted an history of China, extracted from books in the hands of most English readers; we have omitted it as uninteresting*.'

One nice footnote has neither of the above initials accompanying it. However, it is not in Osbeck's original Swedish edition, nor in the German translation, and it has an eye on an English readership, particularly associating an Englishman with his roast pork with crackling. This suggests that it might be Forster's.

After a few unpleasant weeks visiting the Faroes and then sailing south, Osbeck eventually reaches Cadiz, the regular stopping point for voyages south. He stays there a few weeks, exploring the local region and describing everything Spanish, including the food. And here is the Jamón ibérico de Belota, with its diet of acorns, a greatly sort-after delicacy even 300 years ago. '*Swine are kept in whole herds by a man who feeds them with acorns, which are commonly sold at Cadiz and at other places. The swine are very large, thin haired, and black as jet. It is probable they came originally from Africa, as I am told that this sort of hogs is very scarce higher up in the country. It would be worth while for an economist to get a breed of these swine; but they must also be fed as they are here, and have some exercise every day, which keeps them from growing too fat, and makes them taste well. The exportation of a boar of this kind is forbidden, but a sow almost ready to farrow would be still better for the propagation of this kind of hogs. We bought a good many of these swine for our ship; and every Saturday we killed one of them, and had broth called Puspas boiled from part of it.'*
And here is the footnote: '*In England no man tries to prevent his hogs from growing too fat.'* It's hard not to think that it is Forster, not known for his humour, being a little wry.

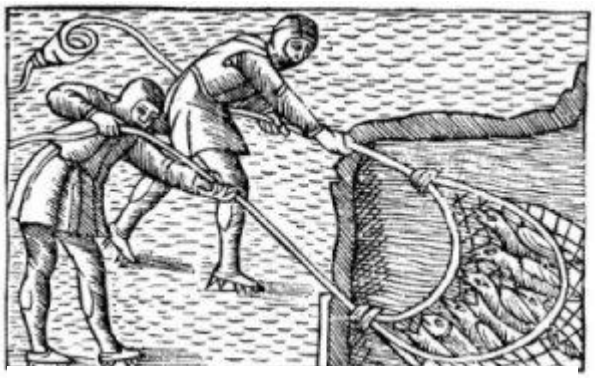
A little later there is something less down to earth. After 10 weeks in Spain, Osbeck sails south, past the Canary Islands, heading for the Cape of Good Hope, then onto Malacca, Sumatra, Java, the South China Sea and Canton. Near the Canary Islands, amidst his many records of birds, he finds a swallow at sea. '*The swallow which we saw yesterday, was so tired to-day, that we could catch it with our hands. It was the Hirundo rustica, or house-swallow. It is somewhat extraordinary, that it should be met with at so great a distance from Sweden, and in so different a climate. I do not pretend to assert, that it came yesterday from the bottom of the sea, as it was taken so near the Canary islands.'*

Forster feels that he has to footnote this: '*Our author, with the northern naturalists, takes it for granted, that swallows retreat under-water when they disappear in autumn; there is good evidence that many of them migrate from Europe to Africa; and it has been frequently asserted, that a few have, at time, been found in a torpid state, hid in old buildings: but how a bird so much lighter than water, can contrive to keep itself half a year at the bottom of the sea, seems inexplicable.'*

In the midst of much close and scientific observation, occasionally you are reminded that things were not always scientific in these increasingly enlightened times. Where did this strange belief, that swallows hibernated in the mud or under the sea, come from? There are many articles written on this, that by Lee a good one.[2] It seems that the ancient Greeks and Romans, and probably most observers living around the Mediterranean and North Africa,

saw that swallows appeared in their regions in the Northern winter and disappeared again come spring. Hesiod and Aristophanes both note them as a sign of spring. Aristotle was the problem, deducing not inducing, keen on unsubstantiated generalisation, and once taken up by scholasticism retarding the development of science for a good few hundred years. He believed that some swallows hibernated in hollows in trees. This was largely ignored, but taken up again with the rediscovery of Greek philosophy in the 12 and 13th centuries. The hibernating swallow theory was then revived, by Albertus Magnus in the 13th C, and then with greater silliness in the 16th and 17th centuries, with theories such as swallows flying to the moon (provided by the educator Charles Morton in a treatise on bird migration, Morton himself becoming a migrator, in later moving to America). Christianity, while early on getting hibernation wrong, did take the swallow to heart, appropriating it as emblematic of souls searching for God, a large burden for such a slight bird.

The northern naturalists that Forster had a poke at included the Swedish Archbishop Olaus Magnus, who in 1555 wrote about swallows hibernating under water or in mud, since they are seen frequenting the shores of seas and lakes in autumn. Even that hero of the enlightenment Carl Linnaeus promulgated this theory in the mid 18th C, as did Samuel Johnson, who knew everything, and even that keen observer of the English countryside Gilbert White. The expansion of European empires eventually put it all to rest with closer, accurate observations of swallows migrating.



Fishermen netting hibernating swallows from a lake. In Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus, Olaus Magnus, 1555.

Here in New Zealand, we have the Welcome swallow or warou, appearing only in the last 50 odd years with a sideways migration from Australia. And as proof that New Zealand is a welcoming environment, they seem happy to stay, leaving migration to others, and in one instance, regularly nesting inconveniently and grubbily above the front door of our bach.

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[1] Osbeck, Pehr, Toréen, Olof / Ekeberg, Carl Gustav. A Voyage to China and the East Indies by Pehr Osbeck. Together with a voyage to Suratte by Olof Toreen. And an Account of the Chinese husbandry by Captain Charles Gustavus Eckeberg, translated from the German, by John Reinhold Forster. To which are added, a Faunula and Flora Sinenses. London, B. White, 1771.

[2] Lee, Alexander. The Great Migration Mystery. History Today, vol 790, 5 May, 2020. https://www.historytoday.com/archive/natural-histories/great-migration-mystery