SIR HANS SLOANE AND THE APOTHECARIES' GARDEN*

by

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IT is just 300 years since Sir Hans Sloane was born, and to commemorate the event the Chairman and trustees of the Chelsea Physic Garden have invited the members of the Faculty of the History of Medicine and Pharmacy of the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries to meet here. The Garden no longer belongs to the Apothecaries, but passed early in this century into the possession of the London Parochial Charities Board, who have lovingly and ably cared for it since.

I am very honoured to have been invited to address you briefly on this occasion.

Hans Sloane was born in Northern Ireland, in what Pepys called 'that blessed year in which our Sovereign was restored', 1660. The bent of his mind was early seen to be towards natural history and science, so in 1679, after his recovery from an attack of phthisis, which his biographer tells us taught him to live a quiet and sober life and to eschew strong drink, his father sent him to study medicine in London. There he lodged in Blackfriars Lane, next to the Apothecaries' Hall and by permission of the curator of their Chelsea Physic Garden, Mr. John Watts, he studied botany there and developed a great fondness for the subject and love of the Garden. In 1684 Sloane wrote to his friend, John Ray the naturalist, of Watts' successful experiments in keeping his plants warmed in winter with an ingenious system of underground hot-water pipes, which attracted much contemporary interest.

The Apothecaries had obtained their lease of this Garden in 1673 from its then owner, Lord Cheyne. It was the site where Sir Thomas More had once cultivated his charming 'paradise' of flowering shrubs and fruit trees, which is still commemorated by the name of the neighbouring Paradise Walk.

We do not know much of the contents of the Garden until 1682, when Professor Paul Herman of Leyden paid a visit and arranged to exchange rare plants. Watts took these over personally on a barge, and returned with a full exchange cargo of bulbs and plants, which included a Cinchona tree and the four Cedars of Lebanon which excited the admiration of Evelyn, and were the first to be grown in this country. The last one only fell in 1904. This whetted Watts' appetite and shortly afterwards he sent one of his gardeners, James Harlow, to Virginia, and later Jamaica, to collect botanical specimens for the Society. Some of these were presented to Dr. Compton, 'the gardening bishop' of London, to adorn the gardens of Fulham Palace; more were sent to Badminton, where we hear that they flourished more than anywhere in Europe, owing to the enthusiasm and skill of the Duchess.

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Fig. 1

Bust of Sir Hans Sloane by Rysbrack, recently discovered in the British Museum

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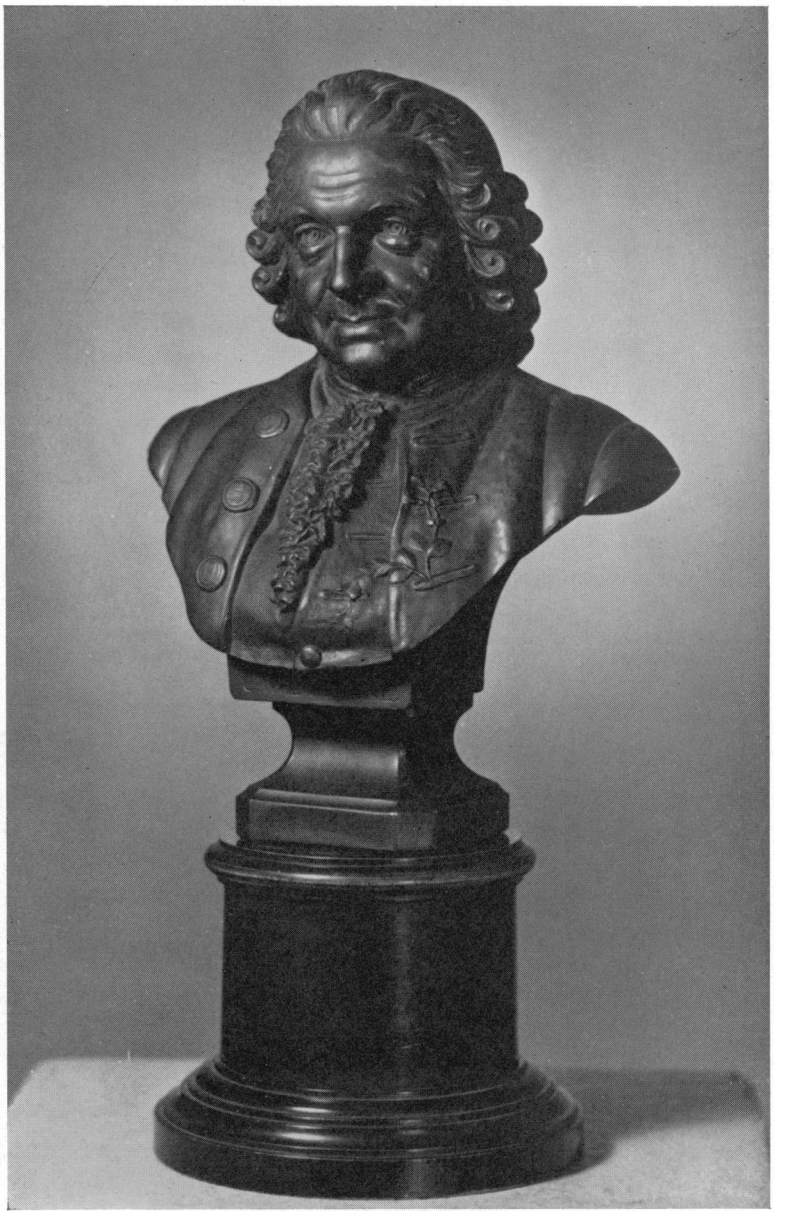

Fig. 2

Bust of Linnaeus, presented to the Apothecaries' Garden by the University of Uppsala

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Meanwhile Sloane, who had taken his M.D. in France, had also spent fifteen months in Jamaica as the medical attendant to the Governor, the Duke of Albemarle, and it was at this time that he gathered the notes for his great *Natural History* of the flora and fauna of the island, which he published many years later. Soon after his return, he was elected one of the Secretaries of the Royal Society, which had been founded in the year of his birth, and over which he later presided for fourteen years with the greatest distinction.

He flourished in practice, and in 1712 he bought the old Manor of Chelsea for a country house, and in this way acquired also the freehold of the Physic Garden. This had been offered to the Society of Apothecaries by Lord Cheyne for £400, but they had been unable to raise this sum. In 1722 Sloane generously made this over to them on condition that for the next forty years they would send annually to the Royal Society fifty dried, mounted and named specimens of plants grown in the Garden. The Apothecaries more than fulfilled this condition, and the *Philosophical Transactions* record the receipt of over 3,000 such specimens, all of which are now in the British Museum. The exhibition of these is said to have been one of the origins of the annual 'Conversazione', which is still an important event at the Royal Society.

In addition he contributed generously to the upkeep of the Garden. A personal gift of £100 is recorded, together with a similar sum from the College of Physicians, of which he was the President, for the repair of the water gate, and later £160 for general purposes. He also laid the foundation of a new great greenhouse which was completed in 1732; the small pools which now adorn the rockery are the original tanks of this building.

Sloane was one of the promoters of the new colony of Georgia, and contributed towards the cost of sending a plant collector from the Apothecaries Hall. It was this man who took with him as a gift from the curator, Philip Miller, the packet of cotton seed which was the parent of the subsequent great American cotton crops, and so ultimately of three-quarters of the world's supply.

Next year, in gratitude to their benefactor, the Society of Apothecaries commissioned, at a cost of £280, from John Rysbrack the fashionable sculptor of that day, the marble statue of Sir Hans, wearing the Presidential robe of the Royal College of Physicians, which stands in the centre of the Garden still. The terra cotta model from which this was made was discovered by the late Mrs. Esdaile in the vaults of the British Museum some years ago. I had hoped, by courtesy of the Director, to bring it here today, as no more suitable time or place could, I think, have been contrived for its first public showing. Much to the regret of all concerned, however, it is found to have become in the course of time too fragile to move. (Fig. 1)

In 1736 the great botanist, Linnaeus, visited both Sloane and the Physic Garden. Boerhaave, in somewhat flowery language, wrote: 'He who sees you both together will look upon a pair of men whose like can hardly be found in the world.' It is unfortunate to have to record, however, that they do not seem to have got on at all well together. One reason may have been that Linnaeus, being master of little or no English, conversed in Latin, a language in which

the aging Sloane had never been noticeably proficient. He may also have tended to resent the boastful manner in which the younger man was introducing his new system of botanical nomenclature, as this is said to have angered also the gentle Philip Miller. Nevertheless, in honour of his distinguished visitor, Miller set out the beds in the Garden of which he was in charge afresh on this new system. A small bronze bust was presented to the Garden only a few years ago by the University of Uppsala in memory of this excursion by their great son. (Fig. 2)

Linnaeus was presented by Miller with a copy of his famous book *The Gardeners' Dictionary*, of which he wrote in acknowledgment: 'This is not only a dictionary of horticulture, but of all botany too.' The beauty of its illustrations of leaves and flowers, which were all grown in this Garden, inspired the contemporary makers of Chelsea china to incorporate many of them in the design of their 'red anchor' pieces. Ten years ago the Lady Mayoress of London opened an exhibition of this china which was held by our neighbours of the Royal Hospital. She was presented with a bouquet grown in this Garden as a memento of the fact.

Sloane was a good friend to Miller, who was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society during his Presidency. This event may have predisposed him to his first attack of gout, which took place after he had 'dined sumptuously' there, about which he wrote shortly afterwards to Sloane asking which of his herbs or simples he should use for treatment. The response was brief but succinct: 'Patience and flannel my dear Miller, are the best remedies.'

Sloane was the most outstanding physician of his day. Although nearly all scientists were at that time physicians, he nevertheless remains unique in having presided over the Royal College of Physicians as well as the Royal Society. He was Physician-General to the Army, and the first medical man to be created a baronet. He was one of the great collectors of his time, and his collection was bought by the nation and re-established as the British Museum in Montague House, purchased for this purpose by the Government in 1754, the year after his death. He contributed no less than 24 papers to the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society. He also invented milk chocolate!

We have met here today in his Garden, under his statue, to celebrate his birth 300 years after this event. What more in conclusion can be said of this dignified and friendly figure who looks down on us?

It has been said that his four outstanding characteristics can be read in the manner in which he bequeathed this Garden to the Apothecaries. Firstly piety, in that the purpose of his gift was 'to enable the Society to support it for the manifestation of the power, wisdom and glory of God in the works of His creation'; a practical business sense that expected zeal and efficiency from the Society, and sought to ensure it by rigid but fair conditions; a love of practical learning—'that young botanists may be trained to know how to distinguish useful plants from those that are hurtful'; and lastly, gratitude, for the opportunity afforded him as a youthful student to lay the foundations of his knowledge in this Garden that he loved and saved for posterity, to the inestimable benefit of the sciences of botany and pharmacology.