

Scholars and Literati at the Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences and Letters (1760–1800)

David de la Croix Elise Delvaux

IRES/LIDAM, UCLouvain

This note is a summary description of the set of scholars and literati at the Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences and Letters between its creation in 1760 and 1800. For more detailed information about these individuals, please visit the comprehensive database available at <https://shiny-lidam.sipr.ucl.ac.be/scholars/>

1 THE ACADEMY

The Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences and Letters is an academy founded in 1760 and based in Trondheim. It is Norway's oldest scholarly and scientific institution. The Society was founded by the Bishop of Nidaros, Johan Ernst Gunnerus, the headmaster of the Trondheim Cathedral School, Gerhard Schoning, and the councilor of state Peter Frederik Suhm. The Society was created at a time when Norway did not have any other institution of higher education. It received royal affirmation of its status in 1767. Initially named "The Trondheim Society", it was given its current name in 1788 to enhance its official status.

In 1771, Gunnerus, who was a professor of theology at the University of Copenhagen (see De la Croix (2021)), was charged with establishing Norway's first university. He suggested establishing it in Christianssand: if this had happened, the Society would have relocated to be in close proximity to the university. However, this plan was never carried out and the Royal Norwegian Society stayed in Trondheim. The first university in Norway was established in 1813 in Oslo.

2 SOURCES

To find the members of the Royal Norwegian Society we used primarily Olaus Schmidt's 1960 publication, entitled "Det Kongelige Norske videnskabers selskab Matrikkel 1760 – 1960). Schmidt is a Norwegian genealogist and historian. He was a fellow of the Royal Norwegian Society and wrote for the Norsk Biografisk Leksikon, the Norwegian Biographical Dictionary. We also used Wikipedia as a biographical dictionary, in cases where it provided information not present in Schmidt's work. Finally, Midbøe (1960) provides a general history of the Society, in Norwegian.

3 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Table 1 displays some descriptive statistics. We find a list of 365 members from the foundation of the Royal Norwegian Society until 1800. Among these 365 names, we were not able to identify weak links, i.e. either corresponding members or foreign members, from the source. Information on place and year of birth was found in 71-80% of the cases, which is in the average of other societies. The scholars involved became members when they were relatively old (42.4), but stayed for the remainder of their lives (mean age at death is 68.5 years). As measured by being listed in the VIAF catalogue (65.5%), we can conclude that the members were generally productive scholars. A majority of scholars also have a Wikipedia page (56.7%).

Period	nb. obs	birth date known	birth place known	mean age at appoint.	mean age at death	with Wiki.	with VIAF
1734–1800	365	79.7%	71.5%	42.4	68.5	56.7%	65.5%

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

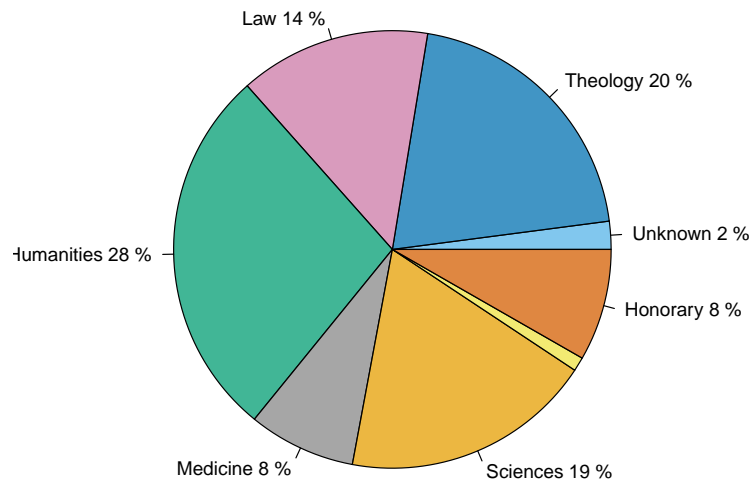


Figure 1: Broad fields at the Royal Norwegian Society (published scholars only)

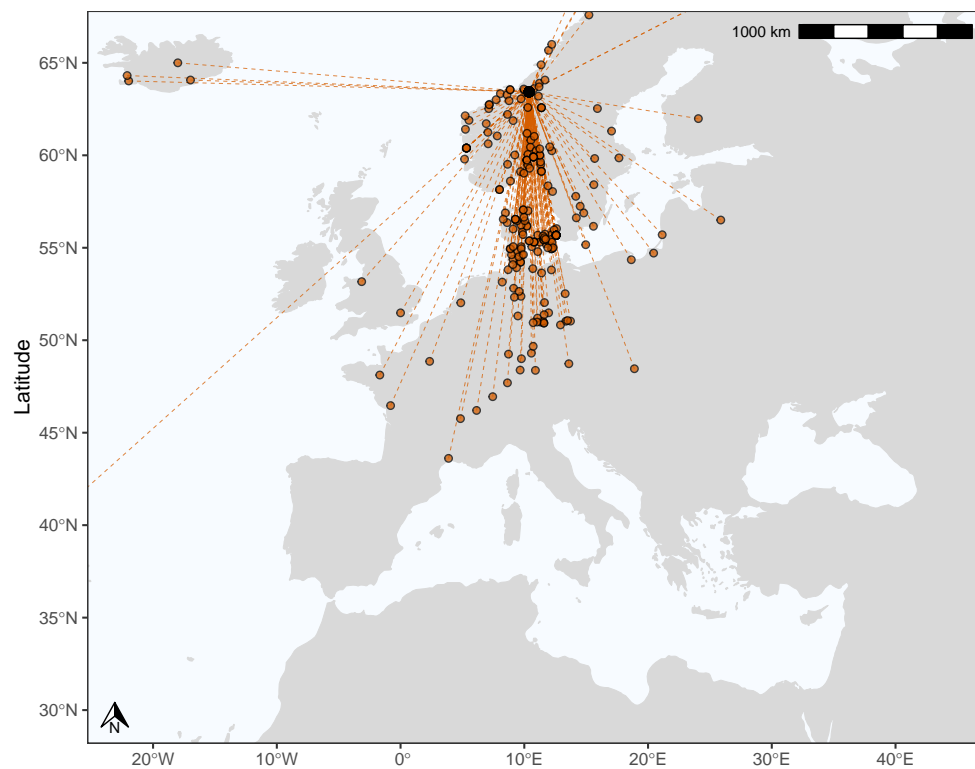


Figure 2: Places of birth of the members of the Royal Norwegian Society

4 FIELDS

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of academic disciplines within the Royal Norwegian Society. Sciences and medicine represents only one fourth of the total. Humanities have the biggest share, and theology is very strong as well. The importance of theology is particularly striking for an institution founded in the second half of the eighteenth century.

5 PLACE OF BIRTH

Figure 2 displays the documented birthplaces of the ordinary members active at the Norwegian Royal Society. Members came from diverse regions in Scandinavia, including Iceland. Many members came from France, Prussia and the Holy Roman Empire, and none at all came from Italy, Spain, or Portugal.

6 HUMAN CAPITAL OF SCHOLARS AND LITERATI

For each person in the database, we compute a heuristic human capital index, identified by combining information from VIAF and Wikipedia using principal component analysis. The details are given in Curtis and De la Croix (2023). Figure 3 shows the names of all the scholars with a positive human capital index at the Royal Norwegian Society.

7 TOP 5 SCHOLARS

We provide a brief overview of five members with a high human capital index, skipping the top 3 (Linnaeus, member of at least 16 academies, d’Alembert, member of at least 12 academies, and von Haller, member of at least 14 academies) who have already been described in other issues of RETE.

Carl Peter Thunberg (Jönköping 1743 – Thunaberg 1828) was a Swedish naturalist. At 18 he started studying at Uppsala University where Carl Linnaeus was his teacher. He became one of his disciples. After six years, he graduated in 1767. Linnaeus encouraged him to travel to France and the Netherlands to deepen his knowledge. In Amsterdam, he met J. Burman who was also a disciple of Linnaeus. Burman convinced him to travel to collect plants and animals for the botanic garden of Leiden. Thunberg then travelled to Cape Town, arriving in 1772. His next stop was Japan, which he chose because for half a century, very little information about that country had reached Europe. He named many plants (254) including *Allium thunbergii*, *Geranium thunbergii*, *Pinus thunbergii*. Member of the Royal Norwegian Society since 1772, he was also professor at the University of Uppsala (1784-1828).

Johan Christian Fabricius (Tønder 1745 -- Kiel 1808) was a Danish zoologist. He was a specialist of “insecta” which included insects, arachnids, and crustaceans at the time. He is considered to be one of the most important entomologists of the 18th century. Indeed, he named nearly 10,000 species and created the basis of the modern classification of insects. He entered the University of Copenhagen in 1762 and travelled to Uppsala the same year, where he also became a student of Carl Linnaeus. In 1770 he was appointed as a professor in Copenhagen and around 1775 he was appointed in Kiel as a professor of natural history and agricultural economics. He promised to build a natural history museum and a botanic garden there. He tried to resign several times, but ultimately kept the position for the rest of his life. His major systematic entomology works include: *Systema entomologiae*, *Genera insectorum*, *Species insectorum*.

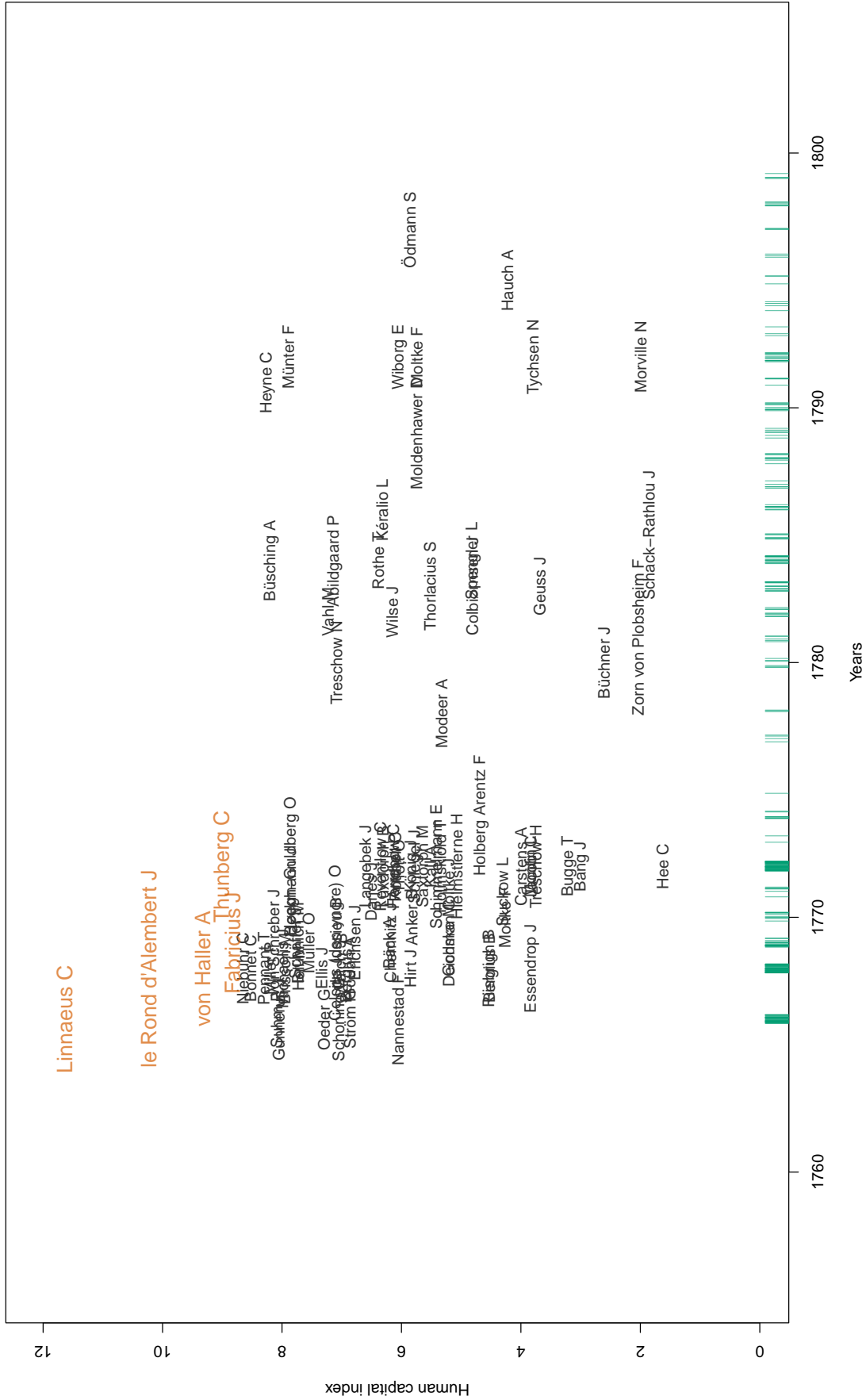


Figure 3: Famous scholars at the Royal Norwegian Society

Carsten Niebuhr (Lüdingworth 1733 – Meldorf 1815) was a German mathematician, cartographer and explorer in the service of Denmark. His father was a successful farmer who owned his own land. Niebuhr and his sister was educated at home by a local schoolteacher. Later, he attended the Latin School in Otterndorf. He planned to become a surveyor but instead he attended university. He was a bright student and Johann David Michaelis recommended that he participate in the Danish Arabia expedition that was supervised by Frederik V of Denmark. Before departing, he studied mathematics, cartography and navigational astronomy. His observations during the expedition helped to prove the accuracy and practicality of the Lunar Distance Method to determine the longitude. His works include “Beschreibung von Arabien” and “Reisebeschreibung nach Arabien und andern umliegender Ländern”. He remains highly regarded, even now, and a street in Copenhagen is named after him.

Charles Bonnet (Geneva 1720 -- Genthod 1793) was a Genevan naturalist and philosopher. At 7 years old he lost his hearing, and in adapting to that he became interested in the natural world. Because other children mocked him due to his handicap, his parents arranged for him to be privately educated. He worked in law, but natural science was his passion. He became the youngest corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences after submitting a paper containing several experiments. He invented the term “phyllotaxis” to describe the arrangement of leaves on a plant stem and was one of the first to observe parthenogenetic reproduction in aphids. Bonnet also made important discoveries about insect respiration and used the term “evolution” in a biological context. He described the Charles Bonnet Syndrome, which is characterized by visual hallucinations in psychologically healthy individuals, a condition he had observed in his grandfather. His works include “Contemplation de la nature” and “La pal-ingénésie philosophique”.

Thomas Pennant (Downing Hall 1726 -- Downing Hall 1798) was a Welsh naturalist, traveler, writer and antiquarian. He received his primary education at Wrexham Grammar School before going to Fulham. At 12, he was introduced to natural history. In 1744, he joined Queen’s College in Oxford before moving to Oriel College. Like many other students from wealthy families, he left Oxford without a degree but in 1771, received an honorary degree for his work in zoology. Pennant’s first writings were scientific papers about different events such as the earthquake he experienced, alongside some papers on geology and fossils. One of these papers caught the attention of Carl Linnaeus and he proposed Pennant for membership in the Royal Swedish Society of Sciences in 1757. Pennant was deeply honored and stayed in contact with Linnaeus for the rest of his life. Several species are named after him, including *Anchomasa pennantiana*, *Blennius pennantii* and *Maurolicus pennanti*. Some of his major works include “The British Zoology”, “A Tour in Scotland”, “A Synopsis of Quadrupeds” and “Genera of Birds”.

8 FINAL THOUGHTS

The Royal Norwegian Scientific Society is the northernmost academy of the premodern period and was established before Norway had a university. Its focus was diversified, and it excelled in the humanities, science, and theology.

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Homepage: <https://perso.uclouvain.be/david.delacroix/uthc.html>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/UTHCerc>

Database: <https://shiny-lidam.sipr.ucl.ac.be/scholars/>

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