Linnaeus.* I fear that this new biography of Linnaeus will be bought more as a profusely illustrated gift book (and consequently remain unread) than as a work of literary merit — a fate it most certainly does not deserve. The illustrations, though excellent and, for the most part complementary to the text (two plates of Dutch flower pieces are included on the extraordinary flimsy justification "Linnaeus nowhere makes mention of the great Dutch flower-painters such as Jan van Huysum and Rachel Ruysch . . . ?) are but a gloss to this most elegant biography of 'The Prince of naturalists'.

Linnaeus's great bequest to science was his use of concise and consistent names (binomials) for all organisms known to him and, perhaps more significantly, his use of these names for labels alone as distinct from the diagnoses which previously had served the dual function of description and name. Linnaeus, though not a great original thinker, was supremely endowed with two talents so desperately needed at a time when the rapid accretion of scientific knowledge had thrown the kingdoms of nature into chaos: a capability for the systematic organisation of facts and an immense capacity for hard work. Unrewarding material for a biographer one may think and yet Mr Blunt, an experienced writer with half-a-dozen memorable biographies already to his credit has resurrected Linnaeus's humanity which lay dormant in the hands of other authors (whose books on Linnaeus are now so difficult to obtain that the question 'do we need another life of Linnaeus?' should never arise.)

This book, together with all other Linnaean biographies after 1903 is inevitably moulded around the definitive 'Linné: Lefnadsteckning' of Th. M. Fries and one recognises many familiar passages; but these are only the bare bones — the real meat lies in the apposite, extensive and beautifully translated selections from contemporary writings particularly by Linnaeus himself seasoned with Mr Blunt's attic salt. Who would have believed that the author of the laconic 'Species Plantarum' could also have written: 'YELLOW and brightly gleaming are the fields of *Chrysanthemum*, former ploughed fields of *Hypericum* and sand-fields of *Stoechas citrina*. RED as blood are often whole slopes of *Viscaria*. WHITE as snow are sand-fields of the sweet-smelling *Dianthus*. DAPPLED are the waysides with *Echium, Cichorium, Anchusa* and *Malva* . . . ')? In a lighter vein Linnaeus comments on the distant cry of corn-frogs: 'If, in summer, one puts a bucket upside down on one's head, goes beneath the surface of a lake and then calls into the bucket, that too sounds like a cry from a long way off' — personal experience? — one wonders.

The author also succeeds in making Linnaeus's travels infinitely more interesting than they appear in other accounts I have read, again largely by well chosen quotations. How familiar is Linnaeus's experience when 'assailed by such swarms of midges as surpass all imagination. The air seemed to be solid with them . . . They filled my mouth, nose and eyes and made no attempt to get out of my way . . . They almost suffocated me. When I clutched at a cloud before me my hands were filled with thousands of these insects all far too small to describe.'

Linnaeus has often been called a skilled draughtsman but, judging by drawings shown in this book, Mr Blunt is right when he comments 'Matisse once said that his ambition was to draw like his little girl of five; Linnaeus achieved this effortlessly.'

The author skims lightly (and rightly) over the scientific side of Linnaeus's work but this deficiency is more than compensated for by W. T. Stearn's supremely concise appendix on the intricacies of Linnean nomenclature. Dr Stearn's erudite shadow also hangs over the more technical parts of the main body of the book.

I give the last word to Mr Blunt who speaks for many of us when (elsewhere) he comments on Linnaeus's inapt name *Asclepias syriaca* for a native of N. America: 'All this is not to belittle the stupendous achievements of Linnaeus, for confusion would have been worse confounded had he not appeared on the scene at the precise moment that he did. None the less, one cannot help wondering whether, if botanists as a whole had been endowed with a livelier sense of humour and had permitted themselves a little more flexibility, the gulf which today so sadly yawns between the botanist and the horticulturalist might not have been allowed to become so unbridgeable . . . none but "true professors" can hope to understand anything whatever of the complex problems that tease the minds of the botanists in their ivory towers today.'

R. B. BURBIDGE

* 'The Compleat Naturalist' by Wilfrid Blunt with the assistance of William T. Stearn. Collins 1971. 256 pp, numerous colour plates and illustrations in the text. Price £3.50.