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Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen
Georg-August-Universität Göttingen
Platz der Göttinger Sieben 1
37073 Göttingen
Germany
Email: gdz@sub.uni-goettingen.de

CONTRIBUTIONS TO NATURAL HISTORY

BY

J. F. BLUMENBACH.

PART THE SECOND.

I.

How Wild Peter was found and brought prisoner to Hameln.

ON Friday, July 27th, 1724, at the time of hay-harvest, Jürgen Meyer, a townsman of Hameln, met, by a stile in his field, not far from Helpensen, with a naked, brownish, black-haired creature, who was running up and down, and was about the size of a boy of twelve years old. It uttered no human sound, but was happily enticed, by its astonished discoverer showing it two apples in his hand, into the town, and entrapped within the Bridge-gate. There it was at first received by a mob of street boys, but was very soon afterwards placed for safe custody in the Hospital of the Holy Ghost, by order of the Burgomaster Severin.

II.

What happened to Wild Peter in Hameln.

Peter—that was the name given him on his first appearance in Hameln by the street-boys, and he retained it up to quite old age—Peter showed himself rather brutish in the first weeks of his captivity; seeking to get out at doors and

windows, resting now and then upon his knees and elbows, and rolling himself from side to side on his straw bed until he fell asleep. He did not like bread at first, but he eagerly peeled green sticks, and chewed the peel for the juice, as he also did vegetables, grass, and bean-shells. By degrees he grew tamer and cleaner, so he was allowed to go about the town and pay visits. When anything was offered him to eat, he first smelt it, and then either put it in his mouth, or laid it aside with a shake of the head. In the same way he would smell people's hands, and then strike his breast if pleased, or if otherwise shake his head. When he particularly liked anything, as green beans, peas, turnips, mulberries, fruit, and particularly onions and hazel-nuts, he indicated his satisfaction by striking repeatedly on his chest. Just when he was found by Jürgen Meyer he had caught some birds, and eagerly dismembered them.

When his first shoes were put on him he was unable to walk in them, but appeared glad when he could go about again bare-footed. He was just as little pleased with any covering on his head, and extremely enjoyed throwing his hat or cap into the water and seeing it swim. He first of all became used to go with clothes on, after they had tried him with a linen kilt. In other respects he appeared of quite a sanguine temperament, and liked hearing music; and his hearing and smell were particularly acute. Whenever he wanted to get anything he kissed his hands, or even the ground.

After some time Peter was put out to board with a cloth-maker. He adhered to this man with true attachment, and was accompanied by him when he went from thence, in Oct. 1725, to Zell, into the hospital there, situated by the House of Correction; but about Advent in the same year King George I. sent for him to Hanover.

III.

Peter arrives in England, and now becomes famous.

In Feb. 1726, Peter, under the safeguard of a royal servant, by name Rautenberg, was brought from Hanover to London; and with his arrival there began his since so widely-spread celebrity. This was the very time when the controversy about the existence of innate ideas was being carried on with the greatest vivacity and warmth on both sides. Peter seemed the much-wished-for subject for determining the question. A genial fellow, Count Zinzendorf, who afterwards became so famous as the restorer and Ordinary of the Evangelical Brotherhood, as early as the beginning of 1726, made an application in London, to the Countess of Schaumburg-Lippe, for her interest, that Peter might be entrusted to his charge, in order that he might watch the development of his innate ideas; but he received for answer that the king had made a present of him to the then Princess of Wales, afterwards Queen Caroline, well known as one of the most enlightened princesses of any age; and that she had confided him in trust to Dr Arbuthnot, the intimate friend of Pope and Swift, and the famous collaborator of *Gulliver's Travels*, still for the purpose of investigating the *innate ideas* of Wild Peter.

Swift himself has immortalized him, in his humorous production, *It cannot rain, but it pours*¹. Linnæus gave him a niche in the *Systema Naturæ*, under the title of *Juvenis Hannoveranus*: and Buffon, de Pauw, and J. J. Rousseau, have extolled him as a specimen of the true natural man. Still more recently he has found an enthusiastic biographer in the famous Monboddo, who declares his appearance to be more remarkable than the discovery of Uranus, or than if astronomers, to the catalogue of stars already known, had added thirty thousand new ones².

¹ [Or, *London strewed with Rarities*, Ed.]

² "I consider his history as a brief chronicle or abstract of the history of the progress of human nature, from the mere animal to the first stage of civilized life." *Ancient Metaphysics*, Vol. III. p. 57.

IV.

Peter's Origin.

It is a pity, after all the importance which the great people attached to Wild Peter, that two little circumstances in the history of his discovery should be left out of sight, or neglected; which I will here repeat, as far as possible, from the earliest original documents, which I have before me. First, when Peter was, as I said, met with by the townsman of Hameln, the small fragment of a torn shirt was still fastened with string about his neck. Secondly, the singularly superior whiteness of his thighs compared to his legs, at his first entry into the town, occasioned and confirmed the remark of a townswoman, that the child must have worn breeches, but no stockings. Thirdly, upon closer examination, the tongue was found unusually thick, and little capable of motion, so that an army surgeon at Hameln thought of attempting an operation to set it free, but did not perform it. Fourthly, some boatmen related, that as they were descending in their boat from Poll, in the summer, they had seen at different times a poor naked child on the banks of the Weser, and had given him a piece of bread. Fifthly, it was soon ascertained, that Krüger, a widower of Lüchtringen, between Holzminden and Höxter, in Paderborn, had had a dumb child which had run away into the woods, in 1723, and had been found again in the following year, quite in a different place; but meanwhile his father had married a second time, and so he was shortly afterwards thrust out again by his new step-mother.

V.

Peter's Life and Conduct in London.

Dr Arbuthnot soon found out that no instructive discoveries in psychology or anthropology were to be expected from this imbecile boy; and so, after two months, at the request of the

philosophic physician, a sufficient pension was settled upon him, and he was placed first with a chamber-woman of the Queen, and then with a farmer in Hertfordshire, where at last he ended his vegetatory existence as a kind of very old child, in Feb. 1785.

Peter was of middle size, but when grown up of fresh robust appearance, and strong muscular developement; his physiognomy was by no means so stupid; he had a respectable beard, and soon accustomed himself to a mixed diet of flesh, &c., but retained all his life his early love for onions. As he grew older he became more moderate in his eating, since in the first year of his captivity he took enough for two men. He relished a glass of brandy, he liked the fire, but he showed all his life the most perfect indifference for money, and what proves, above all, the more than brutish and invincible stupidity of Peter, just as complete an indifference for the other sex.

Whenever bad weather came on, he was always ill-tempered and sad. He was never able to speak properly. *Peter, ki scho*, and *qui ca* (by the two last words meaning to express the names of his two benefactors, *King George* and *Queen Caroline*), were the plainest of the few articulate sounds he was ever known to produce. He seemed to have a taste for music, and would hum over with satisfaction tunes of all kinds which he had often heard: and when an instrument was played, he would hop about with great delight until he was quite tired. No one, however, ever saw him laugh—that cheerful prerogative of mankind. In other respects he conducted himself as a good-natured, harmless, and obedient creature, so that he could be employed in all sorts of little domestic offices in the kitchen, or in the field. But they could not leave him alone to his own devices in these matters; for once when he was left alone by a cart of dung, which he had just been helping to load, he immediately on the same spot began diligently to unload it again.

He probably lost himself several times in the neighbourhood during the first ten years of his residence in England; but at all events one day, in 1746, he unwittingly strayed a

long way, and at last got as far as Norfolk, where he was brought before a justice of the peace as the suspicious Unknown—this was at the time when there was a look-out for the supposed emissaries of the Pretender. As he did not speak, he was committed for the moment to the great prison-house in Norwich for safe custody. A great fire broke out there on that very night, so that the prison was opened as soon as possible, and the detained were let out. When after the first fright the prisoners were counted up, the most important of them all was missing, the dumb Unknown. A warder rushed through the flames of the wide prison, and found Peter sitting quietly at the back in his corner; he was enjoying the illumination and the agreeable warmth, and it was not without difficulty that he could be dragged forth: and soon afterwards, from the advertisements for lost things, he was recognized as the innocent Peter, and forwarded to his farmer again. Briefly, as an end to the tale, this pretended ideal of pure human nature, to which later sophists have elevated the wild Peter, was altogether nothing more than a dumb imbecile idiot.

VI.

Mistaken accounts by the biographers of Peter.

Meanwhile the history of this idiot is always remarkable, as a striking example of the uncertainty of human testimony and historical credibility. For it is surprising how divergent and partly contradictory are even the first contemporary accounts of the circumstances of his appearance in Hameln. No two stories agree in the year, season, or place where and when he was found by the townsman of Hameln, and brought into the city. The later printed stories are utterly wrong; how he was found by King George I. when hunting at Herrenhausen, or, according to others, on the Harz; how it was necessary to cut down the tree, on the top of which he had taken refuge, in order to get at him; how his body was covered with hair, and that he ran upon all-fours; how he jumped about trees like a squirrel;

how he was very clever in getting the baits out of wolves' traps; how he was carried over to England in an iron cage; how he learnt to speak in nine months at the Queen's court; how he was baptized by Dr Arbuthnot, and soon after died, &c.

VII.

Genuine sources for Peter's history.

I have critically examined everything that there is in print¹ about Wild Peter, and collected besides other accounts of the history of his discovery. The chief of these is a particular manuscript account by Severin, the Burgomaster of Hameln already mentioned, which he despatched in Feb. 1726 to the minister at Hanover, and for which I am indebted to the kindness of the most worthy master of the head school in Hameln, Avenarius. There are, besides, numerous national chronicles, and the unprinted collections of the chamberlain Redeker in the town-house of Hanover. With respect to his later mode of life in England, besides what I found out there myself, many of my friends there, such as the ambassadors of Hanover, Dr Dornford and M. Craufurd, have communicated to me accurate accounts, which they themselves got together in Hertfordshire itself, and which I have made use of.

As to the likenesses of Peter which are in existence, I possess two masterly engravings, which, I am assured, bear a close resemblance to him. The one is a great sheet, in a dark style,

¹ *Leipziger Zeitungen von gel. Sachen*, 1725, No. 104, 1726, Nos. 17, 61, 88. *Breslauer Sammlungen*, Vol. xxxiv. Dec. 1725, p. 659, Vol. xxxvi. Ap. 1726, p. 506.

Zuverlässige nachricht von dem bei Hameln gefundenen wildern knaben. Wobei dessen seltsame figur in Kupfer gestochen befindlich, 1726, 4to.

Spangenberg's *Leben des Gr. Zinzendorff*, II. B. p. 380.

Swift's *Works*, Vol. III. P. I, p. 132, ed. 1755, 4to.

Ein brief des Hamelschen Burgemeisters Palm, v. 1741, in C. F. Fein's *Entlarter Fabel vom Ausgange der Hämelschen Kinder*, Hanov. 1749, 4to, p. 36.

Gentleman's Mag. Vol. XXI. 1751, p. 522, Vol. LV. 1785, P. I. pp. 113, 236, P. II. p. 851.

Monboddo, *Ancient Metaphysics*, Vol. III. Lond. 1784, 4to, pp. 57, 367.

[Comp. *Peter the Wild Boy*. An enquiry how the Wild Youth lately taken in the woods near Hanover, &c. &c. 12mo. Lond.—A copy in the Brit. Mus. Ed.]

by Val. Green, from the picture by P. Falconet; it represents him as sitting, a full-length figure, in about his fiftieth year, and was painted at London in 1767, when he was presented to the king. The other is by Bartolozzi, after the three-quarter figure painted by J. Alefounder three years before Peter's death, quite a well-looking old man, whom any one who knew no better, might suppose to be more cunning than he looked.

VIII.

Peter compared with other so-called wild children.

It seems, perhaps, well worth the pains once for all to examine and settle critically the accounts of poor Peter, who has been considered of so much importance by so many of our greatest naturalists, sophists, &c.; principally, because this is the first story which can be set forth according to the real facts: for all the other instances of so-called wild children, almost without exception, are mixed up with so many beyond measure extraordinary and astonishing untruths or contradictions, that their credibility has become in consequence highly problematical altogether.

Taking those instances only, which Linnæus has set out in his rubric on the *Homo sapiens Ferus*, and with which he has introduced his *Systema Naturæ*; his *Juvenis ovinus Hibernus*, who when sixteen years old was carried about as a show in Holland, where he was described by the elder Tulp¹, even entirely according to that account was an imbecile, dumb, and also outwardly deformed creature, but which could hardly have grown up from the cradle among wild sheep in Ireland, because they exist no more there than anywhere else. That he eat grass and hay at Amsterdam in the presence of astonished beholders, is, I think, just as credible, as that the pretended South-sea Islander from Tanna, who some years ago was carried round at harvest-

¹ *Obs. Med. lib. iv. c. x. p. 296, fifth ed. L.B. 1716.*

time and fairs, used to munch stones. Besides the extraordinary description, which that otherwise so worthy Burgomaster of Amsterdam gives us of this boy, and also the fact, that so far as I know, no contemporary or even more recent author upon the natural history of Ireland, alludes to him even by a single word, makes me extremely suspicious on the matter; and at all events, I do not think it worth the attention which has been bestowed upon it by our own Schlözer and Herder.

As to the *Juvenis bovinus Bambergensis* of Linnæus, so far as I know, we have no other testimony, except what we are told by the worthy Ph. Camerarius, who says¹, that this Bamberg savage, who at that time had entered into the condition of holy matrimony, informed him that he had been brought up on the neighbouring hills by the cows.

More precise, but still more suspicious, is the account of the eight years old *Juvenis lupinus Hessensis* of 1344 (not 1554, as Linnæus² and all his copyists give out), who celebrated the good reception which he had met with from the wolves when they had carried him off about five years before. They had made him a soft nest of leaves, laid all round him, and kept him warm, brought him a share of their spoil³, &c.

Much also must, at all events, be subtracted from the *Juvenis ursinus Lithuanus*; as, for instance, what we are assured by the authority, the imaginative Connor, in his *Medicina Mystica seu de Miraculis*⁴, that it is nothing uncommon in Poland for a bear giving suck, if it happens to find a child, to take it to its lair, and bring it up from its own breast. Many instances indeed are given by the elder Joh. Dan. Geyer, in his monograph *On the Lithuanian Bear-men*; one Polack bear-man in particular of about eight or nine years old, whom

¹ *Oper. horar. subsecivar. Cent. I. p. 343, ed. 1602.*

² [In the tenth ed. Linnæus wrote, 1344: the 5 in the twelfth ed. is probably therefore a misprint. Blumenbach seems to me always inclined to bear hard upon Linnæus. Ed.]

³ *Additiones ad Lambert. Schafnaburg. Apposita ab Erphesfordensi monacho anon. in Pistorii scrip. rer. a Germ. gestar. Erf. 1613, fol. p. 264.*

⁴ p. 133, ed. 1699. Comp. the *History of Poland*, Lond. 1698, 8vo. Vol. I. p. 342: where a little Polack is represented in a respectable copperplate, as he sucked the old bear-mother between two young bears.

King John III. met with, and had baptized; and who was made fife-player to the militia, notwithstanding that he preferred going on four feet instead of two¹.

It is said of the *Puella Transisilana*² that she was about eighteen years old, when, in the winter of 1717, she was caught in a net on a search-hunt organized for that purpose by one thousand Krauenburg peasants. She was quite naked except for a scanty straw apron, her skin had become hard and black, but in a little time after her capture it fell off, and upon that a beautiful fresh skin came to light, &c. (I have kept quite close to the account of the witnesses.)

In other respects this wild girl was very friendly, and of good cheerful temper, and was stolen from her parents when a little child in May, 1700.

The *Puella Campanica*, as she was called by Linnæus, or Mad^{lle}. le Blanc, according to her French biographers³, who considered her as an Esquimaux girl sent to France, was first of all observed in the water, where two girls about the size of children of ten years old, and armed with clubs, swam about and ducked in and out like water-hens. They soon quarrelled about a chaplet of roses, which they found; one of them was struck on the head by the other, but she immediately bound up the wound with a plaster made out of a frog's skin tied with a strip of bark. Since then, however, she was seen no more, but Mad^{lle}. le Blanc, the victress, covered only with rags and skins, and with a gourd-bottle instead of a bonnet on her head, was entrapped into a neighbouring &c.

Johannes Leodicensis was, according to the account of the credulous Digby⁴ a peasant youth of Liege, who ran away for

¹ ["A man of credit assured me, that there was found in *Denmark*, a young man of about fourteen or fifteen years old, who lived in the woods with the bears, and who could not be distinguished from them but by his shape. They took him, and learned him to speak; he said then, he could remember nothing but only since the time they took him from amongst the bears." *Life of Vanini*, Anon. 1714. Ed.]

² *Brest. Samml.* xxii. s. 437.

³ *Hist. d'une jeune fille sauvage*, Par. 1755, 8vo.

⁴ In *Two Treatises, in the one of which the nature of Bodies in the other the nature of Mans sou'e is looked into*. Paris, 1644, fol. p. 247.

fear when the soldiers plundered his village into the forest of Ardennes, and lodged there for many years, and lived upon roots, wild pears, and acorns.

There still remain, what are called by Linnæus, *Pueri Pyrenaici* of 1719, on whose traces however I have not yet been able to come again¹. Meanwhile, what I have here set down about the others will, I hope, tend to give the proper value to those wonderful and various stories about these pretended men of nature in a philosophic natural history of mankind.

IX.

Neither Peter nor any other Homo sapiens ferus of Linnæus can serve as a Specimen of the original Man of Nature.

If we make a fair deduction from the really too tasteless fictions in those stories, and let the rest pass muster ever so indulgently, still it will be at once seen, that these were altogether unnatural deformed creatures, and yet, what also goes very much to show how abnormal they were, no two of them were at all like each other, according to any critical comparison of the accounts we have of them. Taken altogether, they were very unmanlike, but each in his own way, according to the standard of his own individual wants, imperfections, and unnatural properties. Only in this were they like each other, that contrary to the instinct of nature, they lived alone, separated from the society of men, wandering about here and there; a condition, whose opposition to what is natural has been already compared by Voltaire to that of a lost solitary bee².

¹ [But see *Antient Metaphysics*, Vol. iv. pp. 37, 38, and the Spanish work, *Semanario Erudito*, of 1788, there referred to. Ed.]

² "If one meets with a wandering bee, ought one to conclude that the bee is in a state of pure nature, and that those who work in company in the hive have degenerated?" Comp. also Filangieri, *Scienza della legislazione*, T. i. p. 64, second ed.

X.

Above all no originally Wild Condition of Nature is to be attributed to Man, who is born a domestic animal.

Man is a domestic animal¹. But in order that other animals might be made domestic about him, individuals of their species were first of all torn from their wild condition, and made to live under cover, and become tame; whereas he on the contrary was born and appointed by nature the most completely domesticated animal. Other domestic animals were first brought to that state of perfection *through him*. He is the only one who brought *himself* to perfection.

But whilst so many other domestic animals, as cats, goats, &c. when they by accident return to the wilderness, very soon degenerate into the natural condition of the wild species; so on the other hand, as I have said, all those so-called wild children in their other behaviour, and nature, &c., strikingly differed one from another, for the very reason that they had no originally wild species to degenerate into, for such a race of mankind, which is the most perfect of all sorts of domestic animals that have been created, no where exists, nor is there any position, any mode of life, or even climate which would be suitable for it.

¹ Comp. Part I. s. VIII.