

**A TRIBUTE TO THE  
MEMORY OF  
PETER COLLINSON**

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A Tribute to the Memory of Peter Collinson by William Dillingham

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**WILLIAM DILLINGHAM**

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A  
TRIBUTE TO THE MEMORY  
OF  
PETER COLLINSON.

WITH SOME NOTICES OF

DR. DARLINGTON'S MEMORIALS

OF

JOHN BARTRAM AND HUMPHRY MARSHALL.

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## PETER COLLINSON.

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THIS name indicates where those who would profit by the teachings of history may find a happy illustration of the many excellent traits of character which result from a life conformed to principles of Friends. The sect has been much criticised; the number of its adherents is limited in extent; we do not ourselves see things spiritual in the light they do, and we have heretofore expressed our dissent and given our reasons as occasion prompted. But the truth of history must concede to them rare virtues, characterized as they are by self-denial, and eminent success in their efforts to relieve suffering humanity. Indeed they deny themselves the use of some agencies which most Christians think powerful and effectual as means of doing good. They have had the test of time; they have had their trials, neither few nor small; they have been sifted and scanned; and, while differing from almost all the rest of the world in some great leading rules of life and conduct, they have persevered and have been sustained: after the lapse of more than two centuries, the world sees a vast product of good to the whole human family from the labours of these few men. Upon whom else in the wide world, since time began, has the sun of truth shone with a brighter light to carry him to the dark re-

cesses and secret depths of sorrow, suffering, sin and shame, to relieve the miseries of a brother sinner, a fellow immortal? Wherever man presents himself, of whatever race or kind; however wrecked in body, in mind, or in estate; however savage, barbarous, and idolatrous; however vicious and corrupt, the slave of his appetites and passions; nay, however sunk in the depths of infamy and crime, Friends regard him still as a fellow creature, to whom "our Father in heaven" has imparted an immortal soul, and who, while life lasts, should be treated and cared for as a fellow traveller to eternity.

Their success in these efforts has certainly been pre-eminent. Witness their treatment of the criminal and of the insane. We cite this as one of the good traits for which Friends are distinguished, and it is one which has contributed to give character to the age. Who does not rejoice to live in an age when the insane are no longer treated with cruelty, and when the most wretched in crime may be taught that there is still, for them even, a God of infinite mercy? How do we look back with wonder upon the thousands of years the world had existed before it was discovered that a grand panacea for diseases of the mind was to be found in the law of love? And how does the world seem to have forgotten that one came down from heaven "and abode awhile in the flesh," to teach man how he should treat his brother-sinner, and to point the dying malefactor to the gate of heaven? For the general prevalence, blessed influence, and practical application of these truths, we are greatly indebted to Friends.

Their quiet virtues, happy amenities, and silent worth, do not attract the gaze of the world; but they will repay us for seeking out and looking into them. Their simple habits; their industry, integrity, and thrift; their pleasure in doing good; their intense interest in nature's varied handiwork; their estimate of things conducive to comfort, peace, and happiness, over things luxurious and things ostentatious; their abhorrence of war; their active sympathy with all in distress, and their preference of the "good name which is better than precious ointment" over worldly glory, had all a faithful representative in Peter Collinson. In their full representation we do not think the Society has produced his superior. We do not say that he

was a better man than George Fox or William Penn; that he was so deep a thinker as Dr. Fothergill; that he did more to leave a name behind him than James Logan; that he was so great a naturalist as John Bartram; or, that he relieved as much distress as Elizabeth Fry. But, studying his character as it has been recently developed, it does appear to us that he combined more of all these respective qualities than either of the individuals named. One who has done more than any other towards this development, and who understands the whole subject as well as any man living, says of him, in a manuscript now under our eye—"he was one of the earliest and most distinguished cultivators, and most distinguished patrons, of the Natural Sciences in the Society of Friends; and, at the same time, an honour and an ornament to the sect." It must be acknowledged that the same authority says of Dr. Fothergill, the intimate friend of Peter Collinson, that he "regards him as the most accomplished Quaker that ever lived, whether considered as a man of science, or as a philanthropist"—adding, "while the Society of Friends may ever be proud of their great lawgiver Penn, the lovers of nature among them may boast of a Logan, a Collinson, a Fothergill, and a Marshall; to each of whom a *genus* has been dedicated, that will preserve the memory of their worth and services as long as the plants which bear their names shall continue to grow." But the pre-eminence in accomplishments among Friends, which our correspondent assigns to Dr. Fothergill, relates particularly to science and philanthropy. As a practical utilitarian, a helper of others to do good to their fellow-men, and to attain the heights and depths of scientific discovery; to push their researches through difficulties and dangers to earth's remotest bounds, and perhaps in some other characteristic excellencies, Peter Collinson surpassed him; although it must at the same time be confessed also, he was not so good a Whig, nor so great a friend to our revolutionary movement.

Could we ask Dr. Franklin—"who, of all men, best deserved a statue, in commemoration of active, disinterested, and valuable services in building up the Philadelphia Library?" he would say, "Peter Collinson." Those most knowing in the early history of this institution now say, that the marble which occu-



pies a niche in its front, would have found a more fitting place in front of the Philosophical Hall opposite. Ask Franklin again, "from whom he derived the information, and who furnished him with the hints and put into his hands the actual means whereby he made his splendid discovery of the identity of lightning and electricity," and he will tell you, "Peter Collinson."\* It is melancholy to think that his thirty years gratuitous and invaluable services for the Library should have been terminated by this excellent man, as we have good authority to believe, under a sense that they had not been duly estimated by those having it in charge.

He was the only man in the Royal Society at London who appreciated Franklin's letters announcing his discovery; which, when first communicated there, were frowned down, sneered at, and refused a place in their published transactions. Peter Collinson had them published, drew the attention of knowing men to them, excited admiration of the wonderful secret disclosed, and was among the very first to foresee and proclaim Franklin's undying renown.

He did more than any man living to help to make John Bartram what he became, and without his aid Bartram could never have accomplished one half his wonderful achievements. Dr. Fothergill goes so far as to say, "That eminent naturalist, John Bartram, may almost be said to have been created such by my friend's assistance," "constantly exciting him to persevere in investigating the plants of America, which he has executed with indefatigable labour through a long course of years, and with amazing success."

\* In Dr. Lettson's edition of Dr. Fothergill's works we find a letter from Dr. Franklin to Michael Collinson, Esq., dated "Craven Street, Feb. 8, 1770," from which we give an extract. After referring to and describing the valuable services rendered to the Philadelphia Library, he goes on to say:

"During the same time he transmitted to the Directors of the Library the earliest accounts of every new European improvement in agriculture and the arts, and every philosophical discovery; among which, in 1745, he sent over an account of the new German experiments in electricity, together with a glass tube, and some direction for using it, so as to repeat these experiments. This was the first notice I had of that curious subject, which I afterwards prosecuted with some diligence, being encouraged by the friendly reception he gave to the letters I wrote to him upon it. Please to accept this small testimony of mine to his memory, for which I shall ever have the utmost respect; and believe me, with sincere esteem,

Dear Sir, your most obedient, humble servant,

B. FRANKLIN."

It is an interesting fact, that it should have been reserved for our own time and for our own country, to bring to light far more than was before known of the life, history, and scientific habits and correspondence of that eminent and excellent man, who was a London merchant, and who died about the middle of the last century. True, the English themselves acknowledge, that it was an American who first told them what they wanted to know about Sebastian Cabot. The Edinburg Reviewers, even before that, had found out that "they should soon learn to love the Americans if they sent them many more such books," as one which Robert Walsh had written about France.

The recent work by Dr. Darlington, a Pennsylvanian, has awakened deep interest in England, with regard to one of their own sons collaterally introduced, and is equally well spoken of on both sides the water. It is entitled, "Memorials of John Bartram and Humphry Marshall;" but nearly one half of its five hundred and ninety-five pages of fair, large, open type, is occupied with the letters of Peter Collinson. No Philadelphian can read it without feeling that the next statue erected in the city of brotherly love after those of Penn and Franklin, and that contemplated in honour of Washington, should be one to perpetuate the memory of what she owes to Peter Collinson. Whoever reads it will find interesting matters of colonial history; minute particulars illustrating the character of the intercourse between this country and the old for fifty years before the Revolution, which he sees no where else.

But to return to Peter Collinson—since sounding his praises so loud, we must be permitted to call up Southey to our support. He thus sums up in few words, what was known and thought of this London friend of our own Logan, Franklin and Bartram, in his time:

"Peter Collinson, whose pious memory ought to be a standing toast at the meetings of the Horticultural Society, used to say that he never knew an instance in which the pursuit of such pleasure as the culture of a garden affords, did not find men temperate and virtuous, or make them so. And this may be affirmed as an undeniable and not unimportant fact relating to the lower classes of society, that whenever the garden of a cot-

tage or other humble dwelling is carefully and neatly kept, neatness and thrift and domestic comfort will be found within doors.

“When Mr. Allison settled at Thaxed-Grange, English gardens were beginning generally to profit by the benevolent and happy endeavours of Peter Collinson to improve them. That singularly good man availed himself of his mercantile connection, and of the opportunities afforded him by the Royal Society, of which he was one of the most diligent and useful members, to procure seeds and plants from all parts of the world, and these he liberally communicated to his friends. So they found their way first into the gardens of the curious, then of the rich, and lastly, when their beauty recommended them, spread themselves in those of ordinary persons. He divided his time between the counting-house in Grace-church street, and his country house and garden at Mill Hill near Hendon; it might have grieved him could he have foreseen that his grounds there would pass into the hands of a purchaser who in mere ignorance rooted out the rarest plants, and cut down trees which were scarcely to be found in perfection any where else in the kingdom at that time.

“Mr. Collinson was a man of whom it was truly said that, not having any public station, he was the means of procuring national advantages for his country, and possessed an influence which wealth cannot purchase, and will be honoured when titles are forgotten. For thirty years he executed gratuitously the commissions of the Philadelphia Subscription Library, the first that was established in America; he assisted the directors in their choice of books, took the whole care of collecting and shipping them, and transmitted to the directors the earliest account of every improvement in agriculture and the arts, and of every philosophical discovery.

“Franklin, who was the founder of that library, made his first electrical experiments with an apparatus that had been sent to it as a present by Peter Collinson: He deemed it, therefore, a proper mark of acknowledgment to inform him of the success with which it had been used, and his first essays on electricity were originally communicated to this good man. They were