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Charles T. Ambrose

*University of Kentucky*, cambros@uky.edu

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# Georges-Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon (1707-1788)

## THE FRENCH RIVAL OF LINNAEUS

By Charles T. Ambrose

Georges-Louis Leclerc (later called Buffon) was born in 1707, the same year as the Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus, who coined binomial names for 7,700 species of plants and 4,400 species of animals (see pages 4-5). During their careers they were unfriendly rivals who deprecated each other's work. When Buffon was director of the *Jardin des Plantes* in Paris, Linnaeus dismissed him as a mere gardener. In turn, Buffon disparaged Linnaeus' sexual classification of plants (*Systema naturae*) but reluctantly employed his binomial system for genus-species names.

Buffon was raised in a prosperous bourgeois family in Montbard, a small town near Dijon (of mustard fame) in Burgundy (100 miles southeast of Paris). Attracted to mathematics and nature, he experimented in his family forests on the strength of

various woods and gained the favor of the French government, whose navy required strong masts and hulls for ships. Buffon ascended in the ranks of the several French academies and in 1748 was appointed superintendent

of the *Jardin du Roi* (later the *Jardin des Plantes*). Linnaeus had visited there in 1747. (Thomas Jefferson did so in 1786-87, dining often with Buffon.) Over the ensuing decades Buffon enlarged the grounds and facilities, and they became

the European center of biological research and teaching during the eighteenth century. His fame was such that British privateers boarding French ships at sea allowed cargo addressed to him to continue unmolested.

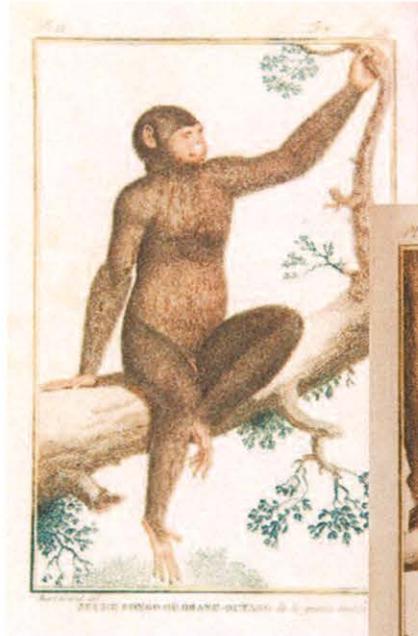
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Library call numbers for Transylvania's editions of *Historie naturelle* are on stick slips to avoid damage to the extremely fragile volumes.

In 1752 Buffon astonished French scientists when he duplicated Archimedes' fabled feat of igniting a distant wood pile with the sun's rays focused by many convex mirrors. He aligned 360 mirrors in a six-foot square to focus on wood up to 200 feet away. This disproved an assertion by Descartes (1596-1650) that fire could not be so generated.

In his youth Leclerc had felt destined to write a comprehensive survey of the universe and the natural world. Between 1749-89, under the name Buffon, he published his 36-volume *Histoire naturelle, Générale et Particulière*, which treated the formation of the planets and the earth (three volumes), quadrupeds (12), birds (9), minerals (5), and other animals (7). The *Histoire* went through six editions and is credited with making natural history a popular pursuit in France. It ranks with the 36-volume *Encyclopédie* of Diderot (1713-84), who took notes on Buffon's early volumes while imprisoned at Vincennes, outside Paris, in 1749. Louis XVI also read the *Histoire Naturelle* while awaiting his execution in 1793.



By linking man and the ape to a common stock, Buffon anticipated Darwin, who provoked opprobrium a century later by relating men with apes through evolution.



Buffon conceived the universe as having resulted from a comet collision with the sun and the fiery, molten balls of gasses having slowly cooled and condensed over tens of thousands of years into the planets. Initially, he postulated that life forms were spontaneously generated without any divine act. This long time frame and assertions in the early volumes of the *Histoire* contradicted prevailing religious teachings and prompted the faculty of theology at the Sorbonne to challenge Buffon. He dutifully recanted any heretical views but in later works advanced other non-Biblical biological ideas, always careful to append suitable disclaimers to escape renewed censorship. The intelligent reader knew Buffon's true intent.

The appeal of Buffon's *Histoire* was his masterful prose and vivid descriptions of the world's animals, including their distribution and behavior. He suggested that new varieties of animals could result from their migration and geographical segregation under certain conditions. He wrote about the great fertility of animals and nature's limited resources to support them. In the struggle for life, this discrepancy could result either in the starvation or death (Malthusian-like) of many individuals and species, or in their degeneration into different varieties and species. Invoking these outcomes, Buffon postulat-

ed that with sufficient time nature "could have evolved all other organic forms from one primordial type." For example, he suggested that the ass and horse both degenerated from an early common ancestor and, similarly, the ape was a degenerate man. By linking man and the ape to a common stock, Buffon anticipated Darwin, who provoked opprobrium a century later by relating men with apes through evolution.

*Histoire naturelle* was not regarded highly among naturalists because of Buffon's reckless generalizations, but was applauded by the *philosophes Français*

for its style and noble eloquence. Rousseau found no writer Buffon's equal. When elected to the *Académie Française* in 1753, Buffon did not expound on natural history but extolled an elevated prose style, which he felt outlasted content. He wrote, *Le style est l'homme même*.

In 1771, Louis XV named a new director of the *Jardin* when told that Buffon would soon die. Instead, he recovered, and to assuage the *contretemps*, the king made him a *comte* and his paternal lands a county (*comté*). Already for many years Leclerc had been referring to himself as de Buffon, so named after the small village that his father had purchased near Montbard.

Notoriously vain, Leclerc/Buffon's great interests were fame, fortune, and comfort. In his later years he suffered severely from kidney stones. When he died in 1788, his funeral attracted 20,000 Parisians. His remains were interred at Montbard. A year later, during the country-wide revolt, his chateau there was sacked, his tomb opened, and his corpse defiled by a Burgundian mob angry that his yearly income of 80,000 livres had come in part from taxes on the people. In Paris at the height of the sanguineous revolution, his only son, Buffonet, was guillotined. ¶



*Charles T. Ambrose is a Professor in the Department of Microbiology, Immunology, and Molecular Genetics at the University of Kentucky College of Medicine. In recent years, he has published widely on medical history.*

*Photos: Jeff Rogers*



<sup>1</sup>History records that in the third century B.C. a hostile Roman fleet threatened the city of Syracuse (Sicily) but was destroyed by Archimedes, who used mirrors to focus sun rays on the ships, thus igniting them in the harbor.

<sup>2</sup>Transylvania's Special Collections has four editions of this work.

<sup>3</sup> Buffon reported that the annual income for basic necessities was 10 million livres for a king, 10,000 livres for a gentleman in good station, and 500 livres for a peasant. Another source placed his annual income at 50,000 *écus*, about \$250,000.

*Sources*

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*Buffon's Historie naturelle went through six editions and is credited with making natural history a popular pursuit in France. Transylvania has four editions of this work. At left, senior Chase Bannister examines a volume of the University's 1799 edition.*

