

Peter Forsskaal—a Swedish Renaissance Man

by [David Goldberg](#) (August 2024)



Peter Forsskaal (P. Dahlman, 1760)

The eighteenth century Swedish thinker and natural scientist Peter Forsskal is not a household name even in his home country, but he deserves greater worldwide recognition. He was a man who bridged what C.P. Snow in his 1959 Rede Lecture was to term “The Two Cultures.” In this lecture and in his other writings, Snow lamented the cultural divide between the sciences and the humanities and called for the building of bridges between the two ways of viewing the workings of the world.

Forsskal was brought to my attention by Czech lawyer Karol Kodada at a conference in Budapest in 1992 organized by the late Tom Riley. I spoke about “The History of the Idea of Transparency in Europe.” This topic is the climax of Forsskal’s pamphlet, making what is now known as “freedom of information” intellectually rooted in eighteenth century Sweden. Forsskal writes that in order for people to be able to properly participate in society’s affairs, they must be able to have information about a government’s inner workings. In part inspired by his notion, Sweden adopted “His Majesty’s Gracious Ordinance Relating to Freedom of Writing and of the Press,” commonly accepted as the world’s first FOI law. It legally obliges the publication of official information. In 2023 UNESCO added this law to its “Memory of the World.”

Born in Helsingfors (now Helsinki) in 1732, Forsskal moved with his family to Uppsala in Sweden, enrolling at the University at the tender age of 10 (actually, not so unusual at the time). Dubbed the “stinging nettle,” he became one of the “apostles” of world-renowned botanist Carl Linnaeus. These were a group of students who carried out botanical and zoological expeditions throughout the world that were either devised or approved by Linnaeus.

Pehr Forsskal was invited to join the 1761 expedition to Egypt and modern-day Yemen (Felix Arabia) commissioned by Danish

King Frederick V. En route to Yemen, Forsskal made many botanical discoveries and was one of the first to describe the flora and fauna of the Red Sea region. The expedition reached Yemen in April 1763 where he found a commiphora (the genus of myrrh) of which Linnaeus was particularly interested. Unfortunately Forsskal died on 11 July 1763, aged 32. The cause is disputed: some say malaria; others that his rather reckless culinary lifestyle was instrumental in his premature demise. Forsskal's investigations were published posthumously in 1775 by Carsten Niebuhr, another expedition member, as *Flora Aegyptiaco-Arabica* and *Descriptiones Animalis*.

What makes Forsskal doubly noteworthy is that in 1759 this natural scientist penned *Thoughts on Civil Liberty* (*Tänkar om Borgerliga Friheten*). Bypassing Uppsala University and publishing the tract in the Swedish vernacular (not in Latin) ensured the text a wider readership. A commendably short pamphlet, it predates the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen and the American Bill of Rights by more than 30 years.

The publication was censored by state censor Nils Oelrich and subsequently banned. Forsskal's mentor, Linnaeus, had to recall (albeit reluctantly) the 500 copies Forsskal had distributed around Uppsala. Happily, Project Forsskal member Gunilla Jonsson has discovered the uncensored version, and another member, Thomas von Vegesack, persuaded Stockholm publisher Atlantis Bok to print 1500 hardcopies of the pamphlet which it did in English and Swedish in a tetebeche format (upside down in relation to each other).

Nowadays, the text of Forsskal's prescient "Thoughts on Civil Liberty" can be read in 20 languages and dialects—including Scots, Esperanto, Arabic, Mandarin and Hebrew.

Forsskal rightly deserves to be known for his ground-breaking text on Civil Liberties every bit as much as his flora and fauna discoveries in Yemen and the Red Sea region. And clearly

he merits wider appreciation from the academic establishment for bridging the cultural divide which despite C. P. Snow's warnings is so much with us today.

His life and work is accessible at Project Forsskal's website <http://www.peterforsskal.info>. I founded Project Forsskal and curated it from early 2000s until 2023; now it's under the stewardship of Professor Jonas Nordin (Lund University).

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