

## INVITED PAPER

# The story of Peter Wilhelm Lund: between life and work

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Anniversaries and commemorations often inspire us to tell stories about a person's life as if it was the staging of a final scene – the achievement or frustration of ambition – a final scene that allows us to understand a person's life as part of history, and history as if it was based on the life of its characters. In contemporary historiography it is recognized that history can never be reduced solely to a report about its heroes and that the life of a person rarely confounds itself only with a person's work and ambitions.

Accordingly, the story of Peter Wilhelm Lund has been told from different points of view – sometimes as a success, sometimes as a failure. His life can be viewed as the story of a brilliant scientist and naturalist, or as the story of a man who was unable to complete his mission and whose career ends in crisis and paralysis in confrontation with the challenges of his science. Which is the true story? Is there a single true story? From which perspective do we have the right to evaluate a man's life in terms of success or failure?

From the point of view of success, the story of Lund is the story of a young, promising scientist who initiated his career as fast as a comet. In 1824, Lund graduated, winning two gold medals as prizes for pioneering dissertations in both the fields of surgical medicine and natural history. After scientific trips to Germany and Italy and a first visit to Brazil, he was already a researcher with a growing international reputation and was elected, at the age of 29, to be the youngest member of the Royal Danish Science Society. Soon after this, in 1831, he embarked on a sponsored expedition to Brazil. Here he discovered the great possibilities in the study of comparative zoology and laid the foundation of Brazilian paleontology. He mapped extensively the Brazilian pre-historic fauna and discovered the first evidence of pre-historic man on the continent. The results of his work clearly contributed to the forthcoming evolutionary theory of Darwin. After more than 10 years of excavations in more than 100 caves in the state of Minas Gerais, he finally settled and established himself permanently in Lagoa Santa, concluding six dissertations on the Brazilian megafauna and dispatching his collection to Denmark in 1844.

From the critical point of view, his life is the story of a diligent scientist whose hard work was forever impaired by his adherence to the incorrect theories of William Buckland and Georges Cuvier on the evolutionary cycles during the creation of Earth. His collection was forgotten for years, victim to the political struggles in the Danish scientific community, until

reappearing only as a documentation of his own theories outdated by the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin, which was published more than two decades after Lund's first results. His life may be, finally, the story of an embittered man that renounced his scientific career to live for almost 30 years a placid life, tortured by existential crises and hypochondriac fears that prevented him from returning to his own country.

Which of these stories is the true one? Probably both. Maybe neither. Today, it is still difficult to fairly evaluate the scientific contribution of Lund's work. However, it is a fact, sometimes forgotten, that the last of his dissertations on the pre-historic fauna greatly departs from the theses of Cuvier. In it, he shows that there is no clear separation between the pre-historic and historic faunas and, even if he did not reach this conclusion explicitly, it permitted a rereading of his research results under the hypothesis of an evolutionary relation between the extinct megafauna and the extant one<sup>1</sup>. He also reported on the revolutionary finding of human remains in the pre-historic environment of the Latin American continent. Despite obtaining and describing these results in his last dissertation, Lund was unable to reformulate his previous work in light of his final conclusions.

I would like, on this occasion, to highlight another perspective that continues to be present, for me and many other Danish citizens living in Brazil: the fact that Lund's life had a trajectory which united two very different worlds and which, still today, continues to unite two nations and two cultures. To us, Danish citizens residing in Brazil, the route taken by Lund undoubtedly represents a fascinating example. His story is the story of the conflicts that originate in our lives as a consequence of the option we made to live in the tropics. Lund always maintained contact with his family at Denmark, and frequently expressed his homesickness and complained of the conditions, sometimes difficult and tumultuous in Brazil. Somewhere in his heart, he kept alive the hope of returning to Denmark, or at least to Europe, to southern France – Provence – where he imagined he could find a compromise between the tropical climate of Brazil and the inhospitable cold of Denmark that he detested.

On the other hand, he never denied that he felt quite well at Lagoa Santa – “Now, here is a good place to live” – as inscribed under his bust in the main plaza of Lagoa Santa. Lund integrated himself perfectly in the Brazilian society of the nineteenth century. He found at Lagoa Santa a life style that greatly compensated the obvious losses he suffered: isolation from the

<sup>1</sup> This point has been emphasized recently in the research of the important historians, Michael Sterll and Brigitte Holten, and presented in three unpublished speeches presented at the The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and in letters in 2000. My observations are in great debt to the work of Sterll and Holten.

international scientific community and interruption of his promising intellectual career which, in Denmark or any other European country, would have secured him a position in a university or research institution. Lund gave up these honors and opted for the calm and beauty of the small town of Lagoa Santa. He had a true passion for the climate, for the Brazilian nature, for the people and for the landscapes around Lagoa Santa, as well as for the cerrado region of Minas Gerais.

We, Danish, must recognize that the memory of Peter Wilhelm Lund was damaged in Denmark by the distance between the two countries and that only in the last two decades is it being recovered – and it was not Lund's fault. During all his productive life, he sent his dissertations to the Royal Danish Science Society and all the material from his excavations as a personal gift to King Christian VIII. He received in return financial support for his work in the form of fellowships, as well as support to maintain the collaboration of his Norwegian friend, Peter Andreas Brandt, whose drawings were fundamental to Lund's natural history research. After the death of King Christian VIII, the connections changed for the scientist. His collection of bones and fossils was kept, for more than a decade, in the boxes constructed for its transportation from Lagoa Santa, and the lack of care and recognition certainly hurt Lund in the first years after he terminated the work in the caves of the *cerrado* of Minas Gerais. "A prophet is never recognized in his homeland," says a well-known proverb, and in certain ways, it seemed that the fate of Lund was to be forgotten by his fellow-countrymen, while he grew in the Brazilian scientific memory.

Personally, I never heard of the life of Peter Wilhelm Lund before I read his romanced biography, "Lagoa Santa – Lives and Bones" or its new edition, "The Road to Lagoa Santa" by the Danish writer Henrik Stangerup, which was published in Denmark in 1982 and in Brazil the following year. The interpretation of Stangerup is based on the biography written by Lund's niece, Henriette Lund (1885), and recognizes, in Lund's abandonment of scientific research, a reaction to the frustration and disenchantment he felt in relation to the deplorable fate of his collection and paleontologic theories. There is no doubt that Lund's family was, to certain extent, responsible for the melancholic and even resentful shade given to the naturalist's history which would influence the interpretation of Stangerup afterwards. A citation from the memory book, "My Life," written by the historian Troels Lund, which appears at the preface of Stangerup's novel, is significant:

"To me, everything melted in a single impression. The maritime adventures confounded themselves with what occurred to Uncle Wilhelm during his voyages to Brazil. The Indians that I imagined were those he had encountered there. Uncle Wilhelm, himself: the main personage around whom all events revolved... I was part of the escort that penetrated into the pristine forest with a black man and his large knife in front, opening the way. I admired the secret magnificence of the stalactites in the caverns, illuminated by the mysterious reflex of the torches. And I stayed, during the rain season, quietly sitting near Uncle Wilhelm in the large empty room, with that sloth laid down in a corner, while, outside, the lightning brightened the sky and the downpours fell endlessly... But, as the years passed by, the tone of the conversations about Uncle Wilhelm started to change little by little. The love and admiration were still the same, but now certain new shades of sadness and worry were added, and each

day more emphasized, to the background of a picture that was, before, so golden... In the air, there was something that he glimpsed from there, but which he did not comment on in his letters, as if some anxiety threatened him that my parents whispered about between themselves, but did not want to tell me about" (Stangerup, 1982:15).

In the fictional writing by Stangerup, the explanation for the permanence of Lund in Brazil is given in terms of an existential crisis provoked by the doubts he had in relation to the results of his own research and by the lack of recognition for his work. Using the freedom of a writer and novelist, Stangerup creates a physical collapse for Lund in the cave of Cerca Grande as the critical culmination of the investigations in the caves that supposedly leaves the scientist without the physical and mental conditions to take the decisive step of abandoning Brazil. Although representing a classic and tragic narrative interpretation of Lund's life, there is no concrete evidence about Lund which allows us to affirm that this melancholic version by Stangerup has any substance, or that his supposed collapse actually occurred.

However, a positive aspect that Stangerup was able to emphasize – himself profoundly fascinated by Brazil – and that he was able to express with mastery in his novel, was the deep enchantment felt by the scientist for the landscapes and the people of Lagoa Santa. In the novel, Stangerup writes:

"Rocky mountains, even the smallest ones, are rare here. Generally, around the city, there is just a red mud where yellowish-green grasses grow. But Dr. Lund feels strongly attracted by Lagoa Santa, where he and Brandt arrived on October 17, and not only because of the reputation of its curative waters. He sees, again, with satisfaction, the houses covered by the colonial roofs, many of them with small trails leading to the margins of the lake, which is animated by a great richness of birds. This richness is what makes this the most beautiful lake he has seen in this country, so needy of them. An excellent place to stay at during the rainy season, when the caves are submerged: here he will recover his strength and will be able to organize his collections. The undulate terrain – extensions of more than two acres entirely plane are rare –, is convenient for nice walks in the interval between rains, to meditate and... forget. The red mud, product of the dissolution of primitive mountain masses, confirm Lund's impression that Brazil is the oldest place in the world, something he intends to report in detail to Forchhammer, now that his research field is the history of evolution, which cannot be dissociated from its close contact with geognosy" (Stangerup, 1982:143).

Although he had already concluded his academic work in 1843, Lund continued, until his death in 1880, to be a scientific reference to contemporary fellows. He was visited by several young scientists that nourished from the experience of the idol naturalist. Reinhardt, son of Lund's old professor at the University of Copenhagen stayed here for two years. Later, came Eugene Warming – the founder of ecologic botany and who, later, would work for the rest of his life as professor and director of the Botanic Garden of the University of Copenhagen. Warming was also the first voyager to document the landscapes of Lagoa Santa and is the author of the only photographs we know of the elderly Lund. His memories confirm the idyllic image of the Lagoa Santa of the nineteenth century, also reflected in Stangerup's novel.

*The story of Peter Wilhelm Lund*

The letters written by Lund, his activities amongst the community of Lagoa Santa and the fact that he remained in that town for 45 years, seem to me to reveal positively the appeal that the landscape and the tropical life had for him. As I contemplate it, it is difficult to see a failure in Lund's fate, and I am convinced that his permanence in Lagoa Santa was not only the fulfillment of the scientist's course but also of the human being Peter Wilhelm Lund, who created deep bonds in the town's memory. From here, he kept continuous correspondence with admirers and colleagues all around the world, taught reading to the children and, occasionally, worked as a physician. In addition, he founded the town's musical band and adopted a child who later became an important citizen of Lagoa Santa. Lund's health was not perfect but he still reached 79 years. He was sociable, communicative, spoke several languages, played the piano wonderfully and was a great shooter, able to spend days on a horse. In Brazil, he received recognitions of all sorts and felt himself entirely adopted by the country. He was a honorary member of the Brazilian Historic and Geographic Institute, received the "Ordem do Cruzeiro" commend from the emperor Pedro II and, especially, left his imprint in the life and history of Lagoa Santa, which is still commemorated today.

Nothing allows us to think that he did not stay there on his own will. He stayed because he chose Lagoa Santa, Minas Gerais and Brazil as his new land, to which he dedicated himself with diligence and passion, serving all us, Danish citizens living in Brazil, as an example and a reason for pride.

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