

It seems only yesterday I was babysitting a toddler-sized Billy Drury, and now here he is, a soloist on the stage of Jordan Hall! In honour of our long-running connection, I wanted to write something which brought together his interests, my context and the adventures of childhood in general. My search for a text led me to – of all things – the correspondence of Sir Joseph Banks, prominent naturalist and protagonist in the British ‘discovery’ of Australia in 1770. *In Defence of Toads* is the label I have given (with appropriate British spelling) to a delightful passage from Banks’s letter to one Reverend Samuel Hopkinson, penned nearly forty years after his voyage of discovery to the Pacific. In this excerpt, Banks very earnestly, and thus somewhat comically, attests to the harmlessness, even usefulness of toads. He evokes a youth of inquiry, where wonder and danger go hand in hand, and the courage to make up one’s own mind is a given. It is my hope the music communicates all this, and that Billy, musicians and audience alike find here something of their childhood.

"I have, from my childhood, in conformity to the precepts of a mother, void of all imaginary fear, been in constant habits of taking Toads in my hand, holding them there some time, and applying them to my face or nose, as it may happen. My motive for doing this very frequently, is to inculcate the opinion I have held since I was taught by my mother, that the Toad is actually a harmless animal, and to whose manner of life man is certainly under some obligation, as his food is chiefly those insects which devour his crops, and annoy him in various ways. To treat such an animal with cruelty, and to regard it with disgust, I have always considered as a vulgar error..."

Sir Joseph Banks, in a letter to the Reverend Samuel Hopkinson, June 18 1808,  
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