Correspondence between Adolphe Brongniart and Robert Schomburgk: trading natural history collections for honours

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses some correspondence between Robert Schomburgk (1804–1865) and Adolphe Brongniart (1801–1876). Four letters survive, containing information about the history of Schomburgk’s collection of fishes and plants from British Guiana, and his herbarium specimens from Dominican Republic and southeast Asia. A study of these letters has enabled us to confirm that Schomburgk supplied the collection of fishes from Guiana now in the Laboratoire d’Ichtyologie, Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle, Paris. The letters of the German naturalist are an interesting source of information concerning the practice of sale and exchange of natural history collections in the nineteenth century in return for honours.


Four letters from Robert Schomburgk (1804–1865) to Adolphe Brongniart (1801–1876), in the manuscript collection of the library of Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle in Paris, are documents of great interest, bearing witness to the practice of “trading” natural history collections for honours and decorations. They also contain valuable information about Schomburgk’s collection of fishes¹ and plants from British Guiana, and his herbarium specimens from Dominican Republic and southeast Asia.²

In his first letter³, written in French and dated 9 November 1846, Schomburgk stated that in a conversation two years previously Brongniart had remarked that “the botanical museum has no collection of plants collected in the interior of Guiana during my 1835–44 journey”, and that

the difficulty of transporting plants from the interior of the country [Guiana] to the coast is an obstacle to sending extensive plant collections to Europe. The most complete collection is the one that belongs to our friend Mr George Bentham [1800–1884], followed by mine. Only two other collections are more or less complete, those I offered the museums in London⁴ and Berlin. The other collections, resulting from my journey, to be found in Europe are very fragmentary.⁵ My projects have undergone a profound change, and I am now offering the Botanical Museum the very same collection I previously would not have parted with for anything in the world.
i.e. the plant collection I made in Guiana. It consists of 1200–1500 different numbered plants that complete the collection of Mr. Bentham, who described these plants in Hooker's Journal of Botany.

The sale of specimens and natural history collections was a common practice in the nineteenth century. Schomburgk, however, did not simply want to sell his collection. He wanted to exchange it for the highest French order.

I am doing this not because I desire to make a profit, but only for the distinction, the only form of reward which I hope your King, to whom I already owe a gold medal, will graciously deign grant me for the services I have rendered to science, and to geography in particular. If this hope of mine comes true, I will consider it more than ample compensation for the efforts I have undertaken for the advancement of science. The Prussian King and the King of Saxony have honoured me with high-ranking decorations that correspond to the officer's cross of the Légion d'Honneur, and I would feel gratified to the utmost degree if His Majesty the King of France decided to reward me in similar fashion. Already in 1843 Baron Humboldt raised my hopes of receiving this order. The meeting I had at the time with the King to discuss my travels to the interior of Guiana, and the King's positive opinion of me, encouraged Baron Humboldt to envisage such a prospect.

The collection of plants from the interior of Guiana (modern Guyana) was not Schomburgk's only incentive for the French administration, nor was Brongniart his only correspondent: "I also possess a small collection of freshwater fishes from the interior of Guiana which I will likewise present to the Royal Museum. I wrote to Monsieur Valenciennes to inform him of my proposal and dare hope that you gentlemen will combine your efforts to bring about its acceptance." The rest of Schomburgk's letter shows that he was almost certain that things would go well for him. "Please tell me how to send the plants, which Mr. Pamplin has packed into cases, to Paris. They are not arranged in order by families. I am at present very much taken up by the geographical and natural description of Barbados, which task will keep me in London over the coming months." The Museum in Paris was highly interested in the acquisition of both collections, fishes and plants. The high administrative rank of both Brongniart and Valenciennes also facilitated a favourable outcome to Schomburgk's request. Thus, it is not surprising that in his next letter dated 28 December 1846, he wrote:

Allow me to thank you most cordially for the news related in your letter, that the Minister of Public Education has agreed to award me the order I desire. I shall soon post the collections to the address you have indicated. I have been ill and did not go out recently, but I will be able to prepare the collection for mailing soon. I shall see to it that you receive descriptions of the locations in which the plants were collected. If I am not mistaken you will find these locations indicated on most of the "numbers" attached to the plants. I have no fruits, and the samples of wood that I do possess I shall certainly send. As you know all my travels took me to the "inaccessible" parts of Guiana, where it was impossible to use animals for transport purposes, and the only way to convey my things was on the backs of Indian porters. This was a considerable obstacle to putting the collection together.

The matter was not completely closed, however, since Schomburgk wrote: "You write that the minister has requested a report of my travels from the Museum's administration and that you hold a high opinion of the findings of my journeys down the Rio Negro and the Orinoco [River]. I wish to call your attention to my expeditions of 1841–1845, which you will find described in the Journal of the Geographical Society." Schomburgk boasted of his exploration of the rivers of the Amazon basin especially to Tapanahoni, a tributary of the Maroni River, and of having mapped the Anegada and the Virgin Islands. He insisted that following publication to his maps and observations on the ocean currents around these islands, the incidence of shipwrecks fell sharply. Previously not a year had passed without six to ten ships sinking, often at considerable cost in human lives. In this letter he also...
returns to the subject of the ichthyological collection, informing his correspondent that "... at the end of the week I shall write a letter concerning the fish collection ... [and] ... the collection will be sent to Le Havre perhaps on Thursday next, and certainly on Sunday the 3 January at the very latest". Finally he offers Brongniart several wax heads of Macusi, Taruma and Wapishana Indians.

Schomburgk was extremely grateful for the distinction he received from the French government. The third letter11, dated 21 October 1858, was written when he was British Consul in the Dominican Republic. In it he informed Brongniart that a journey to the interior of that country had allowed him to collect botanical and geological specimens. "Animated by the same desire as in 1847 to contribute ... to your national collection", he sent Brongniart two cases via London. One contained 150 specimens, some of which represented plants known only through Plumier's12 writings. The second contained fossils, including some previously found only in the collections of the Geological Society of London. In his letter he excused himself: "I regret I have no more to offer, but if these things are acceptable to the Museum I request you will direct your agent in London to call with an enclosed note on Capt. Becker at the Admiralty" who has his own collection. The list of specimens was enclosed with the collection. He asked that the Minister of Public Education be informed of "this small gift which I beg him to consider as a proof of my continued desire whenever an opportunity offers itself to render myself useful to your great Institution".11

Pursuing his career in the British Foreign Service, Schomburgk continued to send natural history specimens to Paris. The fourth letter13 was sent from Siam (Thailand), and was dated 29 December 1858. In it he informed Brongniart that he was now consul in Bangkok. He complained that health problems and a heavy work load kept him from dedicating himself more to science. "I have however collected a few plants, around Bangkok and at Anhin on the Gulf of Siam (lat. 13° 23', long. 100° 50')". Schomburgk sent the collection comprising approximately 190 specimens to Paris. This letter is the last evidence of the German explorer's co-operation with the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle.

NOTES

1 The correspondence confirms that Robert Schomburgk, and not by his brother Richard, made the collection of fish from Guiana now in the Laboratoire d'Ichthyologie, Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris. Previously there had been no conclusive evidence that these specimens were sent by Robert because the catalogue mentions only "Schomburgk" without specifying the initials.

2 Now in the national herbarium at the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris (P).

3 Schomburgk to Brongniart, 9 November 1846 (Mss 2363/433, Fonds manuscrits, Bibliothèque Centrale de Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris (hereafter BC-MNHN)).

4 A collection of 2,341 plants from British Guiana, presented at various dates from 1836 (Günther, 1904).

5 For example the collection of Baron Delessert in Paris contained several specimens that Schomburgk had brought back from Guyana.

6 "Genres" in the original manuscript.

7 It was, in fact, a very important collection. Whitehead (1973) stated that

The most important of these early works, however, stemmed from the collections and observations made in Guyana by Robert Schomburgk in 1835–39 and later by his brother Richard in 1840–44. Robert Schomburgk described and drew 84 freshwater fishes ... his drawings and notes being edited by Sir William Jardine (not very satisfactorily ...). Jardine's manuscript of the Fishes of Guiana is in the British Museum (Natural History). It comprises Schomburgk's autobiographical notes and descriptions of fishes, together with Jardine's versions
or additions. Only a few small sketches (presumably by Schomburgk) are pasted in; it is not known where Schomburgk's other originals drawings are.

The "other original drawings" are not in the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle (MNHN) collections. This does not mean that Schomburgk did not send them to Valenciennes, however, since much of Valenciennes' correspondence is not in the MNHN. Moreover, not one of Schomburgk's letters to Valenciennes is listed in the catalogue of manuscripts in BC-MNHN. If the hypothesis that the drawings were enclosed is correct, they may presently be in private hands, like Valenciennes' correspondence with Agassiz, for example (Monod et alii, 1965–1966). Of course the collection sent to Paris was not unique because "All geographical information obtained by You during the above period of three years, whether physical, political, or astronomical, shall be considered the property of the Society, and at its disposal to be published in any manner it may think fit. But collections of natural history shall be Your property, – with the exception of one set of any collections you may make of dried plants, birds, fishes or insects, which the council would be happy to have it in its power to present, in Your name, to the British Museum ..." (Maconochie, 1836). This collection nevertheless consisted of 155 fish specimens, representing 79 species and 61 genera, and provided material for description of new taxa.

William Pamplin: there is one undated letter, asking that plant specimens Schomburgk wrote for be given "to the bearer", among Pamplin's surviving correspondence (see Tully, 1999: 339), but it may have nothing whatever to do with the gift to Paris.

Schomburgk to Brongniart, 28 December 1846 (Mss 2363/434, Fonds manuscripts, BC-MNHN).

Jardine (1841) wrote: "Mr Schomburgk became at this time aware that a society for promoting geographical knowledge had recently been instituted in London; and while he sent his first Hydrographical Survey to the Admiralty, he at the same time forwarded a description of Ancagado to the Royal Geographical Society, which was published in their second volume, but being entirely unknown to the Hydrographical Office of the Admiralty. One of His Majesty's surveying vessels, then on the West India Station, received orders to test Mr Schomburgk's work, and the commander of that vessel having reported favourably, the chart was published."


Charles Plumier (1646–1704), a noted pioneer of West Indian botany. The correspondence makes no mention of a possible consignment of fishes. It is likely that Schomburgk was acquainted with Plumier's ichthyological work. But, despite the French missionary's significant role in investigating American fishes (Pietsch, 2001), and the Museum's interest in specimens from Central America, neither the letters nor the Museum's archives contain any information about possible collections made in the Dominican Republic by Schomburgk and sent to Paris.

Schomburgk to Brongniart, 29 December 1858 (Mss 1970/376, Fonds manuscripts, BC-MNHN).

REFERENCES


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