



NatSCA

Natural Sciences Collections Association

<http://www.natsca.org>

Biology Curators Group

Title: Review: Natural History Manuscript Resources in the British Isles

Author(s): Hancock, E. G.

Source: Hancock, E. G. (1981). Review: Natural History Manuscript Resources in the British Isles. *Biology Curators Group*, Vol 2 No 10, 464 - 465.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/1627>

NatSCA supports open access publication as part of its mission is to promote and support natural science collections. NatSCA uses the Creative Commons Attribution License (CCAL) <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/> for all works we publish. Under CCAL authors retain ownership of the copyright for their article, but authors allow anyone to download, reuse, reprint, modify, distribute, and/or copy articles in NatSCA publications, so long as the original authors and source are cited.

REVIEW

Natural History Manuscript Resources in the British Isles

Bridson, G. D. R., Phillips, V. C. & Harvey, A. P. (Compilers), 1980. £97.00. Mansell, London; quarto; I-XXXIV, 1-473 pp.

David Allen, in his foreword suggests that in studying the history of our subject there has been too much preoccupation with the printed surface and not enough attention to the untidy, formless world beneath - the manuscripts and archives. This has been changing gradually and the greater awareness of the importance of archival material has led to the production of this book. A postal questionnaire has been the principal method of gathering data, especially from institutions outside London. The results are presented in the body of the book (pages 1-376) under institutional names in alphabetical order. The seventy pages following are an index to the names of the naturalists who are mentioned in the catalogue. This is extensive in that any proper name mentioned in the returns is indexed, not just the main entry name. This can mean that some of the names in the index are not necessarily represented by a manuscript resource, but this is a small proportion. An example of this is C. D. Day's notebooks at Dorset County Museum where he made notes from F. D. Marice (sic) on British Tenthredinidae (Hymenoptera). There is no manuscript material of Francis D. Morice in Dorset, it being preserved at the Hope Dept. Oxford (indexed under his properly spelt name).

This is followed by a place-name index to county level for the British Isles, country level for the rest of the world, the whole being arranged by continent or ocean. Thus, Socotra is found under "Indian Ocean (including Red Sea)". This may be biogeographically unsound but usable. Finally a Subject Guide is provided. Based on the Universal Decimal Classification system of book cataloguing one first looks up the taxon, for example Cruciferae (Plantae) 582.5, to find under 582.5 in the Subject Guide that a relevant manuscript is in the Robert Brown Collection at the BM(NH) in the form of "observations on the class Tetradymania (Cruciferae) of the Linnean Herbarium".

Apart from the catalogue and its indices another useful entity is the Annotated Bibliography which goes with the compilers' introduction. This has ninety-six references and summarises previous work such as the Historical Manuscripts Commissions' National Register of Archives. As a large proportion of naturalists' manuscripts are linked with their collections and therefore usually in museums it is surprising to see no bibliographic reference to museums under the section on Guides to Repositories. Perhaps this is the reason why my own museum only received a questionnaire *via* the local authority's reference librarian. Here we come back to the old question of the efficiency of the questionnaire as a method of compiling catalogues. In the introduction the additional problem of local government reorganisation is mentioned which, taking place early in 1974, coincided with the sending out of the questionnaires. This meant that some of the names and addresses of respondents were lost in the orgy of new titles and the moving of offices but again this is mentioned in the context of libraries and record offices, not of museums which suffered equal if not worse ignominies during this period.

Generally speaking there are few errors of commission and slight misrepresentations are probably the fault of the person returning the questionnaire. One of these, to the embarrassment of the reviewer, concerns

what is probably the most interesting archive in Bolton Museum, that of the herbarium of Charles Ottley Groom (see below). It is the omissions which are so obvious (to a provincial museum curator at least). What happened to Manchester Museum, Birmingham Museum and Exeter Museum (there must be some Percy Sladen archives there to go with others indexed at the Horniman, Linnaean Society and Royal Entomological Society), for example? Nottinghamshire Record Office and the University of Nottingham Library have sent in returns but there is no mention of Wollaton Hall Museum as an institution in its own right housing manuscript material. Perhaps a useful appendix to this book would have been a list of those who were circulated and did not return the questionnaire. The compilers claim to have made an attempt to "include every repository in the British Isles that holds any natural history manuscript or papers by or concerning natural historians". They have deliberately excluded the Public Record Office and collections in private ownership but concerning those other omissions one is left in the dark. They may have occurred because they have no manuscripts (which is unlikely) or that they saw fit not to return the questionnaire (or it was lost in a bureaucratic pipeline) or the compilers were not aware of their existence. The net result is that having paid £97.00 for a book a researcher might reasonably expect it to be as complete as possible. If the person or institution in which one is particularly interested is not listed in the "Natural History Manuscript Resources in the British Isles" this might deter further investigation.

The book is very well produced on good quality paper, with large clear type. It has no dust jacket but does have coloured head bands. The point is that has the reverence for the printed surface taken over to such an extent so that a catalogue of the untidy formless world beneath is virtually impossible for most of us (as individuals and responsible public servants) to acquire? A cheaper form of reproduction would also mean that additions and corrections could be made more readily and frequently. Notwithstanding all this the compilers are to be congratulated on producing the book. A flying start is given to the historian of the subject and the reviewer already has a list of names and places to follow up at the earliest opportunity.

E. G. Hancock.

Groom, Chas. Ottley. Became successively Groom-Napier, Duke of Mantua and Monteferrat, Prince of Mantua, Prince of the House of David. Claimed to be a 'Palaeologos'. Warned off the B.M., said to be dead many times, law case before Sir Geo. Jessel. Sold false nuggets to Ruskin. Had no types. Founded Mantuan Gold Medal of which Owen's specimen is in the B.M. (N.H.). His alleged pedigree is in *The Cornhill Mag.* September 1912. His wife's collections, Sale, *Nature*, May 1895, p. xxxv, etc.; *Ath.* May 1895, 626. Was a notorious rogue and thief, tried to kill Thomas Davies by dropping a boulder upon him from a high ladder in Tennant's shop in the Strand.