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THE DUTIES OF NATURAL HISTORY

(NOTES ON EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY CUSTOMS DUTIES ON IMPORTED NATURAL HISTORY SPECIMENS)

The exploratory and commercial expeditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, through the collections they brought back, were the primary source of our knowledge of the world's flora and fauna. However, it is not always appreciated that such collections were not unreservedly welcomed into Britain - they were, in fact, during the early nineteenth century at least, subject to customs duty.

It would appear that the collectors of this period may have been equally unaware of these charges for, William Swainson (1789 - 1855) noted that many had fallen foul of the regulations. He, therefore, in 1822, set out in his pamphlet The Naturalists' Guide the necessary arrangements that should be made and the charges to be anticipated. Swainson was in a most suitable position to do this; both his father and grandfather had held various posts in the Customs service and he himself had been appointed a clerk at an early age. He did not find the work to his liking and soon left to join the army and travel abroad where he gained the experience of collecting and preserving which is detailed in the rest of the book.

The Treasury at that time were clearly aware of the commercial value of such collections and, as ever, wished to share in the proceeds. However, the task of valuation appears to have been beyond them and it was left to the recipient of the collection to do this, under pain of losing the collection (admittedly with some recompense) if the customs official thought it too low. There must have been some specialisation in the service to accommodate this facet of the work. However, to accurately value a collection would have required a considerable breadth of knowledge. The misidentification of a species could drastically alter its value. Thus, a rare specimen of the genus Conus could command a price in double, sometimes approaching treble figures, whereas the commoner members of the genus would remain firmly in single figures or less. The valuation of totally undescribed species would have been an almost impossible task. (The erroneous localities attributed to specimens collected at this time may perhaps be partially attributable to the investigatory rummagings of custom officers resulting in the loss of or mixings of labels).

The Treasury were obviously aware of the difficulties of valuation and exempted pre-notified scientific collections. The rates attracted by the non-scientific collections were devised both for their ease of operation and to reflect the commercial value of the specimens. Certain aspects of the rates are similar to today's VAT, i.e. those specimens which had been processed in some way, e.g. the mounted bird specimens attracted the highest rate while the 'raw' material attracted lower rates. However, some taxa e.g. mammals, reptiles, fish, etc., are not even mentioned, presumably suggesting that they had little commercial value on the domestic market. Swainson, with particular reference to fish, attributes this to the unattractiveness of the preserved specimen to which might be added the difficulties and bulkiness of storage.

The relative apportionment of the duty does not appear to have unduly influenced the desirability of collecting taxa; shells, for instance, continued to be considerably more popular than fish. In a wider sense, however, the effect of taxes has rarely, if ever, been considered in relation to the succession of crises that characterised nineteenth century natural history. The expansion

of natural history publication has been attributed to the reduction of the paper taxes in 1836, however, could not these taxes have also discouraged botanical collecting. Swainson in his book advocates changing the paper twice daily for a fortnight during the pressing of plants. Admittedly, this is for low latitudes, however, at high latitudes the production of a large collection would entail the consumption of a considerable quantity of paper, not considering that used for final mounting. The significance of such taxes on the activities of the leisured and moneyed class that indulged in natural history collections is debatable but as far as I know has yet to be assessed.

Swainson, W. 1822 - The naturalists' guide for collecting and preserving subjects of natural history and botany. London (p.65-66 Appendix reproduced opposite).

MISCELLANEOUS.

NOTICE OF AN UNCOMMONLY TAME AND SENSIBLE PINE MARTEN
(*MUSTELA MARTES*). BY ST. K. VON SIEMUSZOVA-PIETRUSKI.

In June 1836 I obtained a very young Pine Marten, which in a short space of time became so domestic that he truly deserved the admiration of all who had an opportunity of seeing him. This pretty little animal went about freely through all the rooms of the house without doing harm to any one, played in the court-yard with my Danish dogs, often sprang upon their backs, and rode frequently upon the good patient beasts after the manner of monkeys in a very comical style for a good distance. The dogs too were very fond of the Marten, and never showed signs of their inherited hatred of such animals. In time he became so much attached to my person that he followed me everywhere, even into the neighbouring villages, just as only a dog or badger would do (see my remarks upon the badger in Wiegmann's Archiv, 1837, Part II.). In these walks it was very interesting to observe how he was able to overcome his natural innate propensity for climbing up trees; for it very frequently happened that the desire of climbing up a tree seized him; yet as

soon as he perceived that I had gone on, the little animal hastened after me directly. Even upon long excursions to the old forests of the Carpathian mountains, at a distance of three and four (German) miles, the Marten was my faithful companion; he swam through rivers and brooks with perfect ease like an otter: but the most remarkable thing besides was, that he never went very far from me; only once do I remember having lost him for some hours. This happened in the following manner.

On the 30th of August the gentle Marten followed me, as he always did on an excursion, into the part of the Carpathians which is called the Potoninen. I was busied in collecting the beautiful *Carabus Sacheri* in an enchanting spot, and quite forgot my Marten, who had found a nest with young blackbirds (*Merula montana*, Brehm.) just by, and was quietly devouring them. After a fortunate booty of Coleoptera I then wished to climb a lofty hill called Paraska, but I missed the Marten and continued my way without him. How great was my joy, upon my return, after eight long hours, to find the sensible animal again in the very meadow where I had lost him!

If I was absent from home this Marten would take no food the whole day long; and when I returned showed his joy by merry leaps and caresses.

He ate everything that came to table, bread, fruit, cheese, milk, but he was fondest of raw flesh; he drank wine with great relish, and plentifully. This even hastened his death, for once he drank so much, that on the following day he was found dead on the house floor.--*Wiegmann's Archiv für 1839*, 3tes Heft.

Annals of
Natural
History 4
(1840)

(See opposite page)

Directions for clearing Packages of Shells, or other objects of Natural History, at the Custom House.

MANY fine and interesting parcels of natural productions have been lost to their owners, from ignorance of the necessary precautions to be followed in sending their collections from abroad, and of the forms to be observed on their arrival here. The boxes, on being shipped, should be entered on the ship's manifest, and three receipts or bills of lading required from the captain; two of these may be sent home by different conveyances, and the third retained as a security. The person to whom they are addressed in England, should immediately apply, on the arrival of the vessel, to a Custom House agent or broker; who will do all that is needful for putting the party in immediate possession. The following are the different duties imposed on these objects, and which are levied on the value the owner chooses to put on them; observing, however, that if the Custom House officer considers that value to be very low, it is optional with him to pay the proprietor the value he has himself affixed, and 10 per cent in addition; thus retaining the property in the king's name. Information on this subject, from the Custom House broker, will be very useful: and the two following gentlemen, having some knowledge of Natural History, should on these occasions be preferred. In London, Mr. Wheeler Gibson, Custom House broker and general agent, No. 31, St. Dunstan's Hill; and in Liverpool, Mr. Edward Morrel, in the same business.

CUSTOM HOUSE DUTIES.

| | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| Shells, Insects, Dried Birds and Dried Plants, Rough (or unpolished) Fossils, and Flower Roots..... | } 20 per cent. on their value. |
| Live Plants, Trees, and Shrubs..... | |
| Garden Seeds..... | Duty free; 1s. per lb. |
| Forest Seeds..... | 25 per cent. |
| Stuffed Birds (or Birds set up in their natural position with wires, &c.)..... | } 50 per cent. |
| Minerals (if the specimens are under 14 lb. weight each)..... | |
| Ditto (if each specimen is above 14 lb. weight)..... | } 2d. per lb. |
| | |
| | } 20 per cent. |
| | |

It should here be mentioned, that in cases where extensive and valuable collections have been made abroad by travellers or naturalists, expressly intended for scientific purposes, the Lords of the Treasury, with proper liberality, are generally pleased to exempt them from any duties, on regular application being made. At the same time it is to be hoped, this liberal policy will soon be extended generally, and these subjects (acquired often by great perseverance and personal risk; and generally valuable only in the eyes of a naturalist,) may be exempted from duties, which can add but a mite, to a revenue of millions; and which exist under no other government in Europe or America.