



NatSCA

Natural Sciences Collections Association

<http://www.natsca.org>

Biology Curators Group Newsletter

Title: Robert's Serendipitous Butterflies

Author(s): Ross, H. & Nash, R.

Source: Ross, H. & Nash, R. (1981). Robert's Serendipitous Butterflies. *Biology Curators Group Newsletter*, Vol 3 No 1, 22 - 25.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/1857>

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.

"Serendipity. Former name of Ceylon + ity; coined by Horace Walpole upon the title of the fairy-tale The Three Princes of Serendip, the heroes of which 'were always making discoveries by accidents and sagacity, of things they were not in quest of'"O.E.D.1970.

Since 1939 the Ulster Museum has held a collection of 67 sheets of water-colour paintings of Ceylonese butterflies and 85 sheets of drawings and water-colours of exotic Mollusca. The paintings lay neglected until the early 1970's when they were chanced on in a tea chest. Initially it was only apparent that they were of very considerable merit and that they had been executed by a 19th century naturalist called Robert Templeton. Such significance as became attached to them resulted from a chance observation in early 1979 that scribbled notes on the paintings referred to some of the species illustrated as 'nov.', 'nov.sp.', 'n.sp.', that such notes apparently predated the published descriptions of the species and that they had been made by celebrated entomologists. Three of these were of special interest: Francis Walker, George Robert Gray and Joseph Obadiah Westwood. Francis Walker published the first list of the butterflies of Ceylon and the others described Ceylonese species.

The paintings were carried to London and the advice of Richard Vane-Wright sought. He agreed that the paintings were of considerable historic and taxonomic interest and began a study. In Belfast we began to explore. It soon became evident that Robert Templeton was largely ignored in published sources. On the other hand very substantial evidences of his contributions to zoology were emerging. During 1979 and 1980 we identified

1. The published work of Robert Templeton.
2. Contemporary publications on Ceylon and Ceylonese natural history.
3. Manuscript sources.
4. The butterfly and mollusc paintings and annotations.
5. Family documents.
6. The published work and some manuscripts of contemporary naturalists.
7. Part of the Templeton collection in B.M.(N.H.).

By mid-1980 we had a sufficiently complete picture of Robert Templeton to assemble an exhibition and write a preliminary account of his life and work.

This is not the place to summarise Templeton's life and work. The preliminary account is published and available from the museum as Dr. Robert Templeton 1802-1892 Naturalist and Artist. Ulster Museum publication No.234 48pp. 19pls. 4 col. Price £2.00. Rather we wish to draw attention to the very real need for a proper understanding of the socio-historic background of collections and to lessons learned in this limited study which proceeded intermittently over a period of about six months.

When Templeton took up a twelve year residence in Ceylon in 1839 very little had been published on the natural history of the island. By this time

Templeton was a most accomplished field naturalist and was well versed in scientific procedure. Very little appropriate literature was available on the island and what was there must have been wholly insufficient. Templeton set about making collections and gathering data and executing the butterfly paintings. These materials were passed to his friend Joseph Obadiah Westwood in London - at the time Westwood was Secretary of the Entomological Society. Since Templeton was largely uncertain of the identity of his captures he assigned numbers to specimens (or in some instances to what he believed to be taxa) and used these numbers to link his specimens to his notes, drawings and paintings. In London the specimens and literature were passed between the systematists and identified, annotated, reidentified and further information was sought from Templeton. In other words the complex and subjective exercise of associating phena with taxa proceeded. In the 1850's the Templeton collection passed to the British Museum but the paintings were kept by the family. Westwood may have kept the documentation, much of which appears to be lost and the links between specimens, literature and the contexts of collection and documentation were broken. The reconstruction of the events of 1839 onwards to reassemble the broken links required an analysis of literature, specimens and manuscript and a knowledge of the historic context.

A good example of a reassembled taxonomic link is provided by Vane-Wright (pers. comm.) writing on Troides darsius (Gray, 1852). 'Templeton illustrates a male (No.2) and a female (No.1) of this endemic birdwing species. As with most of his paintings he shows only the upper-side of the right-hand wings and the body in full: in this and in many other cases he gives, in addition, a pencil outline of the left-hand wings. Moore [annotation] notes the male as 'Haliphron ♂' (a misidentification which also appears in Layards MS) and the other specimen as 'female not descr.' 'Ornithoptera Boisd. Amphimedon Boisd.' (repeating Doubleday's misidentification of 1846) and finally 'Ornith. Darsius G.R. Gray ♂ 2, ♀1'. TYPE MATERIAL. Gray (1852:5) in his Catalogue describes darsius from 'males and females' in the BM, and also by reference to Hewitson's figure, misidentified as amphimedon, in Doubleday 1846:pl.1, figure 2. In his later List, Gray (1856:4) enumerates five specimens 'a, b. Males. c. Female. Ceylon, presented by R. Templeton Esq. d. Ceylon, Male. From the Rev. H. Wenham's collection. e, Ceylon. Female. Presented by Dr. Kelaart'. Howarth (1977:159) notes a single syntype extant in the BM(NH), the male figured in Doubleday. Howarth gives its register number as 45.19 but this should read 45.79, the register number for a large collection of Ceylon insects purchased from Rev. Wenham. The figured male is therefore specimen d of Grays (1856) list. I have now located the two females c and e but not the males a and b. Female e is labelled 'Ceylon 48-3/darsius Gray' and comes from a small collection (B.M.48.3) of Ceylon material presented by 'Dr. Kelaart, Chatham'. Female c is labelled 'Ceylon 52-62/darsius Gray'. Register no. BM52.62 (dated June 16th) belongs to one of the large collections of Ceylon insects presented by Templeton to the B.M. As Gray's 1852 description is based on 'males and females' we may take it that the males a and b (lost?) and the extant female c, presented by Templeton, formed part of the type series even though it would appear they only reached the B.M. curators by June 1852. The BM(NH) Entomology Department library card has a pencilled date '8.i.1853' on the entry for Gray '1852' which suggests that this work may have appeared very late in 1852 or even in early 1853. I have labelled all three extant specimens, c, d and e as syntypes of Papilio darsius Gray. Although Templeton's painting of 'No.1' does not appear to correspond to specimen c it is very likely that the paintings were available to Gray at the time of fixing his description, and they can be regarded as iconotypes'.

The mollusca paintings afforded the means to reassemble some socio-historic links. An analysis of watermarks, annotations and style and comparison of the figures with those in conchological works in use in the first part of the 19th century revealed much about Templeton's early life and the surrounding intellectual climate. These insights are of especial

value in a general sense in that our collections of this period are very poorly documented. A more proper understanding of them is only emerging now that we have begun to accumulate information on the naturalists associated with them, their contacts and the literature and material available to them. For instance we know now that the mollusc paintings executed by Robert Templeton, for the most part prior to 1830, were copied from Gualteri's Index Testarum Conchyliorum (1742), Lister's Historia Conchyliorum (1685-1692), Brooke's Introduction to the Study of Conchology (1815), Donovan's Naturalist's Repository (1805), and The Natural History of British Shells, Sowerby's Genera of Recent and Fossil Mollusca (1821-1834) and Brugière's Encyclopédie Méthodique (1792) and some other minor works. Evidently the early Belfast naturalists had marshalled some very substantial resources. They also formed a well-integrated group. A sheet of paper included with the mollusc plates bears a drawing and handwriting exercise labelled 'Henry Haliday (A.H. Haliday the renowned Irish entomologist) Pinx Oct. 2nd 1820. Clifton'.

The Templeton study has proved most instructive being microcosmic in that not too many people were closely involved with him and that he spent much of his life in isolation. When we assembled information for this short account a number of features were highlighted which seem to us of general curatorial application.

The Templeton paintings which seemed of little but artistic and some historic interest were the key to the solution of a number of problems some anticipated and some not. As they were investigated one problem generated another and it soon became clear that a multidisciplinary approach to these was the most productive. The initial approaches were to experts; Richard Vane-Wright for the butterflies and Peter S. Dance and David Heppell for the molluscs. Once it was established that the paintings were important they remarked on the contexts, that is to say on the state of the science at that time, the likely Templeton contacts and possible sources of information. The advantage of expertise is not only precision but economy - what we could have done poorly over a long period of time was done well quickly. This left us with the tasks of compiling historic information and bibliographies, co-ordinating and constantly formulating new questions. As soon as was feasible we drafted a short account of Robert Templeton's life and work linked to an appeal for general and specific information and published this. Attention was drawn to this paper by writing to a variety of societies concerned with both natural history and history and repeating our appeal. This proved most fruitful and in most cases we were able to reciprocate either at the time or subsequently (most of our sources themselves required a context for their holdings or information).

Since early 19th century natural history was polymathic and since Templeton had travelled fairly widely we sought information from a variety of disciplines and countries. Main sources were the British Museum (Natural History), the Zoological Society of London, the Royal Entomological Society, the Royal Artillery Museum, the Mauritius Institute, the National Museum, Dublin, the Public Records Offices in London and Dublin, India House, the Calcutta Museum, the Hope Department of Entomology, the National Maritime Museum and the Royal Army Medical Museum and a large number of private individuals too numerous to mention individually.

We have said the Templeton study relied largely on unravelling the connections between specimens and literature both published and unpublished. Fortunately in our study the collections were mostly in their original state. In several instances where they had been 'curated' essential links had been irretrievably broken, usually by the 'curator' - better words would be respectively vandalised and vandal. The maxim is clear - if in doubt do

nothing. This is underlined by the paintings themselves - surviving probably because they had been overlooked, they proved to be both a key and the tip of an iceberg, leading as they did to the rediscovery of Templeton's insect collection in the B.M.(N.H.), to a Templeton manuscript on Irish spiders (largely incorporated into Blackwall's Ray Society monograph), Edgar Leopold Layard's splendid Ms autobiography and providing insights into our own collections in very numerous ways.

What information we have on Robert Templeton is being collated into an extended account of his life and work and we would be most grateful for any information on him or on early natural history in Ceylon. We are particularly anxious to trace some water-colours of Ceylonese moths purportedly by Edward Donovan but in fact almost certainly the work of Templeton which were offered for sale to the B.M.(N.H.) on July 26th 1971 by Robert Wian, 6706 Los Verdos Drive, Palas Verdes Peninsula, California 90274. The museum did not buy the paintings and we have failed to trace Mr. Wian. They may have subsequently passed through a London saleroom and it seems most likely the paintings are either in the hands of a dealer or a collector, or collectors. Perhaps they will begin a new chapter.

Helena Ross
Robert Nash