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The Case of Stephen Lawrence (1999) and The Fly in the Cathedral: How a small group of
Cambridge scientists won the race to split the atom (2014). He was also a founder of the
of this had been true it would surely have surfaced in his correspondence with his brothers
elsewhere in Europe, but it did not. Nor was it mentioned in any newspaper report during his
lifetime, or in his obituaries. And the evidence in The Rothschild Archive that Nathan was
offered a knighthood a few weeks after Napoleon’s defeat (an honour he rejected) strongly
suggests that he had done nothing that the government could have considered disreputable or
potentially embarrassing.7

The legend of Nathan Rothschild and Waterloo is just that: a legend. As with most legends,
they are underpinning elements of truth: he had relatively early information and he seems
to have profited by it. The rest, however, is fiction, and not harmless fiction. The Nathan
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NOTES
1 Elizabeth Longford, Wellington: Pilot of Suez (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975); A. Niall Ferguson, The Rise of
4 Rothschild/Brockhast, Shadow: ‘Satán’ was Georges Daimrecur, a well-known left-wing
activist and writer.
9 Letter from Nathan Rothschild to Carl Rothschild, 20 June 1815. KAL xi/8/7. The reference to Roworth is a post-script.
10 Calendars of the Caledonian Mercury, 24 June 1815.
11 KAL xi/11/27 and xi/14/1.
12 David Ricardo and Bridge Truelove were among those who made large sums. See Peter Straff, Jr., ed., 1811–17: The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1901–1915).

Orchids held a special fascination for the Rothschild family throughout the nineteenth and
twentieth centuries. They were amongst a number of plants that the family collected; however,
the orchid was exceptional, providing the beauty and variety of form with the horticultural
challenge of its cultivation, which made it a cherished family asset. The rarity of the orchid
and its high price at auction was a fitting trophy for the richest family in England and its exotic
flowers complimented the lavish interiors of the Rothschild houses. The orchids were also a
pleasurable distraction from the business of banking and for sharing with friends.
The provision of manpower and horticultural expertise, together with the installation
of the latest glasshouse technology needed to grow the orchids, was a demonstration of the
wealth of the family and the high standards of excellence espoused by its members. But it also
revealed their personal devotion to these new, peculiar plants that flooded into the nurseries
of the early nineteenth century. Early exposure to orchids as a child led to Ferdinand de
Rothschild’s (1893–1986) patronage of the orchid expert Frederic Sander (1871–1920) and
ensured the family were at the vanguard of the introduction of the genus into Europe and
England. Indeed some orchids were named after family members in appreciation.1 It
appealed enough to 1st Lord Rothschild, Nathaniel de Rothschild (1840–1911) and his son
Walter (1806–1937) at Tring Park and later Lionel de Rothschild (1884–1944) at Exbury to join
the group of orchidologists of the Royal Horticultural Society, namely the Orchid Committee,
which gave them an opportunity to be involved scientifically. As orchid species became more
rare, and in order to extend the orchid flowering period for cutting, orchid hybridisation
became the objective in the professional and amateur glasshouses of England and Europe.
The Rothschild gardeners were no exception, cultivating numerous orchid hybrids, which
won many RHS awards.1 A further step taken in the early twentieth century by Lionel de
Rothschild at Exbury was to experiment in the germination of orchid seed, a field that had
been thus far unresolved.

All of these were more than enough reasons for a Rothschild to become passionately
attached to this genus. But, perhaps more fundamentally there was an emotional connection
between the family and the imported orchid plants. Both the family and the
orchid genus were outsiders, seen as exotic, curious and yet ultimately fascinating. Both were
expensively bound in their uniqueness, subjects of envy, tricky to look after, with seemingly
ecentric characteristics that needed special care and handling.5 When cultivation and
treatment of these exotic specimens was fruitful, the results were often breath-taking. Orchids
collected from distant lands by plant collectors who often risked their lives searching for these
unique specimens were part of global networks that as bankers the Rothschilds shared.

An Absolute Passion:
The Rothschilds’ orchid collections at
Gunnersbury Park, Tring Park, Exbury
Gardens – and London’s East End

Francesca Murray reveals an unexpected link between nurserymen and a refinery
in her study of the Rothschild family’s passion for orchids.

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Gardening and collecting rare plants have many parallels to banking in terms of the planning, cultivating and growing, anticipation and legacy. And despite the limitations of their time, an interest in horticulture between Nathan Rothschild (1777–1836) and his four brothers for furnishing their gardens with the latest exotic plants available in new glasshouses, naturally included orchids. Horticultural changes were afoot in England: the brick tax was abolished in 1842, and with an easing of the timber duty in 1811 new glasshouse suppliers sprung up from the 1810s. The heating of greenhouses had changed with hot water boiler systems becoming popular to create the ideal environment for tender stovel plants. The plants still had to get to the customer’s glasshouse in one piece first. The invention around 1829 of the Wardian case helped transport the live plants to England.

The Rothschilds used their established international networks of bank agents to obtain rare and exotic plants including orchids for Gunnersbury. Often these agents would have little knowledge of what they were being asked to source, and this sometimes led to impatience with seemingly unintelligible new plant names. Orchids were grown in the extensive glasshouses and Charlotte published her own catalogue of her orchids at Gunnersbury Park. Since the sixteenth century, there had been a tradition of the rich and wealthy cataloguing their newly acquired exotic plant collections in richly illustrated books called Florilegia. Charlotte’s catalogue is modest and unillustrated, simply listing the thirty-four different species of orchid at Gunnersbury. However it is packed with contemporary detail of the world of orchid collecting. It notes the geographical origin of each orchid and states from whom the orchid was sourced with a short description of its botanical name giving clues to dating it to around the 1870s. The names include James Veitch of Chelsea, Dominy and Seden his orchid hybridisers; orchid hunters, Hurton, Lobb, and Ross; Lady Tankerville, the Duke of Devonshire (a celebrated orchid collector) and Joseph Hooker of Kew. It demonstrates how exclusive her collection was whilst revealing an expert knowledge of orchids. The ‘Vanda tessai’ is also detailed in the diary of Thomas Hobbs, a gardener at Gunnersbury Park who noted over 200 of their blooms, a fact that was fitted in the Gardener’s Chronicle and shared around the family. On 27 April, 1858 he sent ‘49 spikes for Lord Rothschild and 1 dozen for Newmarket’.

Cultivation in the glasshouses was managed under the professional eye of the head gardeners, George Reynolds and James Hudson, who joined the estate when Leopold de Rothschild bought the neighbouring small mansion and consolidated the two gardens in 1899. Unusually Hudson and the older Reynolds continued to run the sites separately. Famous orchids included Dendrobium fimbriatum ‘Odentahelena’ and ‘Vanda’. They used different techniques and growing media for their orchid houses, which can be seen in their orders from Wood and Son, Reynolds preferring the old style sphagnum moss while Hudson tried out the newer orchid-growing medium. The achievements of these gardeners demonstrated the standards that the Rothschilds expected in their gardens and also the trust they placed in their employees. The men wrote many articles for the gardening press on their interests as well as orchids including hybrid waterlilies, fruit production and genetics. The Rothschilds had become advocates of the science of hybridisation, underlined by the agreement of Leopold to host a visit from delegates of the RHS Conference of Genetics (where the term genetics was first coined) of 1906. The delegates visited Gunnersbury Park for tea and enjoyed a tour of the garden and glasshouses.

Tring Park was given to Nathaniel de Rothschild, or ‘Natty’ as he was known, in 1872 by his father. It became known as a centre for the zoological research of his son, Walter, at his purpose-built private museum. However, in the glasshouses there was scientific experimentation too. Natty had a keen interest in botany and orchids were his favourite plant. He was appointed Vice President of the RHS in 1902, an honorary post he held for 13 years and became known as a ‘patron of the science of horticulture’. He attended meetings of the RHS Orchid Committee and even presented photographs of his newly flowered orchids. Varieties cultivated by hand at Tring, such as Cattleya Manni ‘Tring Park’ var, Cattleya Hardyana ‘Tring Park’ var, were awarded First Class Certificates and he was deeply involved in supervising their cultivation for year round spectacle. Both his head gardeners served on the RHS Orchid committee: Edwin Hill (d.1904) and Arthur Dye, carried out pioneering work with the orchids the Phalaenopsis species for which Tring Park became well known. Walter inherited an avid interest in orchids from his father. He wrote to Colonel Prain at Kew, ‘varieties now growing are a number of Lycostylis gillfoylei and Daryanthes giganteus and numbers of rare Bulbophyllum Camptolalae and other orchids of botanical interest’.

Fertilising orchids was not an easy task as Darwin himself had noted in his paper of 1862. Walter Rothschild had been fascinated with fertilisation of orchids by insects and argued his theories in the Orchid Review with other orchid specialists. The 1909 catalogue of Tring
View of Tring Park, where Nathaniel, 1st Lord Rothschild established his greenhouses.
Photograph by Riancho Caverniti.
Park orchids noted over 2,324 orchid hybrids developed at Tring, some of which may have been developed from plants shared by the Gunnersbury Park estate and from members of the family. Walter was the youngest recipient of the RHS Victoria Medal of Honour in its inaugural year of 1897 for his orchid hybridisation. His brother Charles, an entomologist with a keen eye for the detail of classification, focused his orchid passion on native orchids in their natural habitats. An album of photographs taken by Charles of native orchids in situ shows a keen conservationist’s eye. As the heir of Tring Park he bequeathed the Tring orchid collections to Kew Gardens on his own early death in 1941, having contributed many plants and seeds to the Herbarium in his lifetime.

Lionel de Rothschild created his first garden at the age of five and he is well known for the rhododendrons and azaleas at his garden at Exbury. However he collected a number of other plant groups, of which orchids were of special interest. He developed a substantial orchid collection, which included Cymbidiums, Cattleyas, Odontoglossums, Miltonias and Calanthes some of which may have been brought to Exbury from Gunnersbury Park and also exchanged with those of Tring Park. In 1928, he was invited onto the RHS Orchid committee by Sir Jeremiah Colman (1859–1942) of Gatton Park and was voted Vice Chairman in 1929. Benjamin Hills became head of the orchid house which was housed in a large glasshouse complex incorporating a specially built orchid laboratory. Lionel took the new genus extremely seriously. He wrote to Colman saying ‘my main aim is eventually to show only home grown orchids.’

To do this he wanted to be able to successfully germinate and propagate more orchids himself. For an amateur to invest in scientific experimentation to germinate orchid seeds was ambitious, as they needed a sterile environment and scientific process of treatment. However, Lionel immediately set to the task. The financial rewards to solving this botanical conundrum would have been colossal, as even the commercial nurseries struggled with propagating some orchid species. In this, however, Lionel had one unusual and unexpected advantage. The Rothschild bank had operated the Royal Mint Refinery in the East End of London since 1852;
from 1958 to 1959, a spare laboratory was used to test seeds of Cymbidium, Odontoglossum and Laelia Cattleya. Lionel’s instructions to Mr Williams at the Royal Mint Refinery gave a specific instruction to keep the collection going with the arrival of World War II.

40 His untimely death in 1888 left no peace from the gentiles who are very few and far between, building a small hothouse because I have no enemy bombs falling on their glasshouses.

Lionel’s collection numbered 23,000 orchids in plant and seedling form, Cymbidium, Odontoglossum, Miltonia, Cattleya, Vanda, Phalaenopsis, Cypripedium, Odontioda, and other genera. 41 He wrote to Colonel Durham at Kew in 1888/9, named by Lawrence, orchid enthusiast and later RHS. It was impressed by the orchid community. Lionel’s orchids informed his work on his rhododendron and orchid collections of the Orchid Committee January 1911, attributing to him the orchid community.

66 The fertilisation of Ophrys speculum, in a dozen years, one century ago.

67 The fertilisation of Ophrys speculum.

68 ‘The fertilisation of Ophrys speculum, p. 189. ‘Orchids, were perhaps his favourite and several beautiful hybrids bear his name.’

69 ‘Lord Rothschild showed a life sized photograph of the most beautiful Phalaenopsis Schlumbergera grown in his gardens since 1888, bearing eighty–eight flowers.’ Journal of RHS Orchid Committee January 1911, c.civ.

70 The Gardener’s Chronicle, 12 December 1893, p.197.


73 ‘You may tell Mr. Vannotti that I have given him a name…’ KAL. M4/c/1/34.

74 ‘My very clever chemist at the RMR for the non-symbiotic germination of orchid seeds, compiled by Mr Williams. I may tell you, May 1923, p.311/2011/3.14.


76 Marc-André Selosse, Bernard Huth, a Rothschild agent in Mexico to Lionel de Rothschild by the late Major Evelyn de Rothschild, no.724, p.62.

77 The Tring Park orchid collection 1899–1920, p.21/2/21/13. An example was Liliaceae colors roods given to Lord Rothschild by the late Major Evelyn de Rothschild. KAL. M4/c/1/9/2/1.

78 ‘I don’t love this orchid now to be seen in popular character at Gunnersbury Park. The plants…are not blooming abundantly, for there are fifty–four spikes of blossoms. The late Mr. S. Williams ones were much better.’

79 Flowering of Ophrys speculum, in a dozen years, one century ago.

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