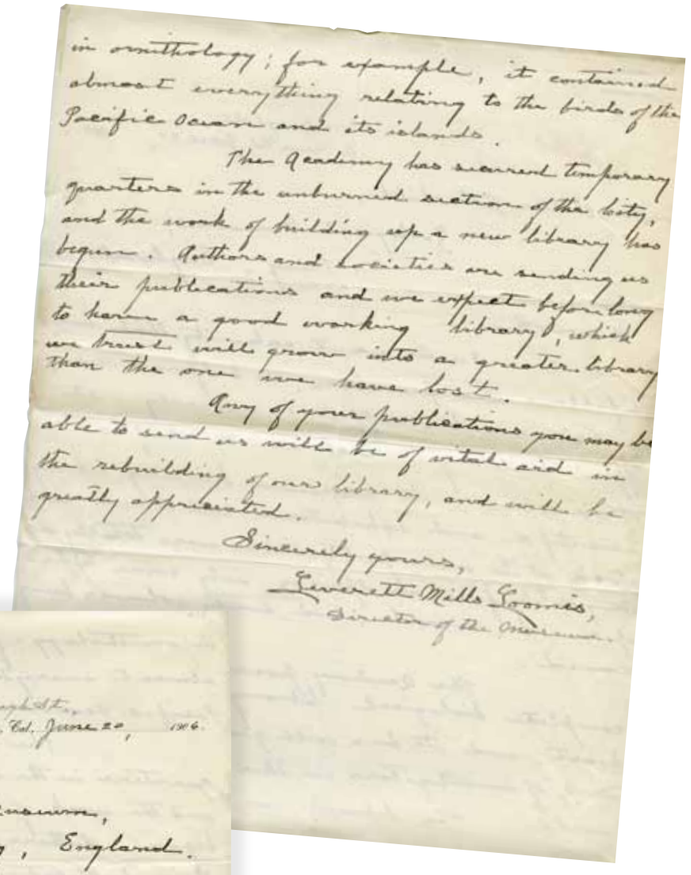
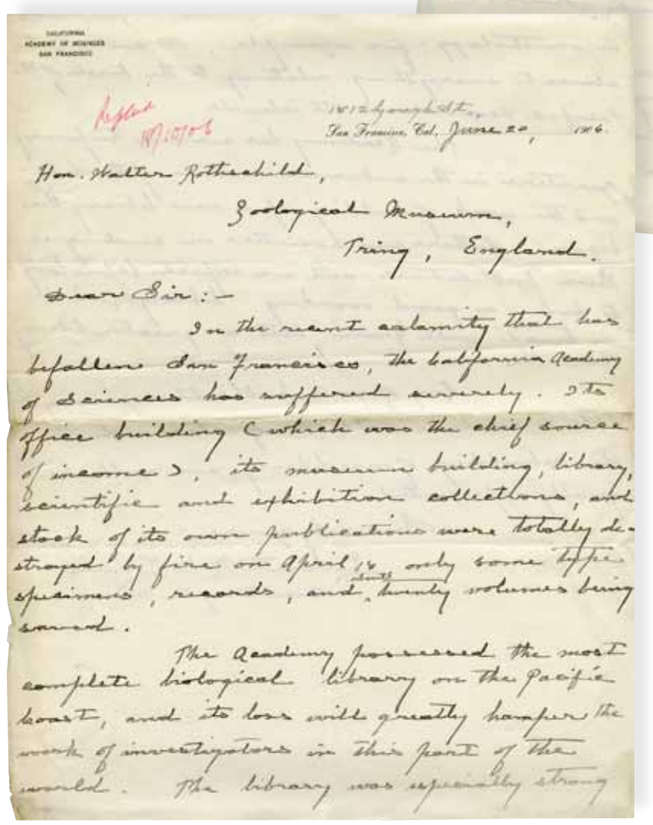


in ornithology; for example, it contained almost everything relating to the birds of the Pacific Ocean and its islands.

The Academy has secured temporary quarters in the unburned section of the city, and the work of building up a new library has begun. Authors and societies are sending us their publications and we expect before long to have a good working library, which we trust will grow into a greater library than the one we have lost.

Any of your publications you may be able to send us will be of untold aid in the rebuilding of our library, and will be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely yours,
Everett Mills Goonis,
Director of the Museum.



CALIFORNIA ACADEMY OF SCIENCES SAN FRANCISCO

1819 Broadway St.,
San Francisco, Cal. June 20, 1906.

Hon. Walter Rothschild,
Zoological Museum,
Tring, England.

Dear Sir:—

In the recent calamity that has befallen San Francisco, the California Academy of Sciences has suffered severely. Its office building (which was the chief source of income), its museum building, library, scientific and exhibition collections, and stock of its own publications were totally destroyed by fire on April 18, only some fifty specimens, records, and twenty volumes being saved.

The Academy possessed the most complete biological library on the Pacific coast, and its loss will greatly hamper the work of investigators in this part of the world. The library was especially strong

Opposite, top left
Two views of the Tring Museum correspondence at the Natural History Museum, London.

The Director of the California Academy of Sciences reports on the devastating consequences of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake.
NHM Archives TR/1/1/27/90.

The World Writes to Walter: Cataloguing Tring's Correspondence

Lorna Cahill describes the thrill of diving into the correspondence from the Tring Museum, untouched for almost 75 years.

Tring Museum

Today, the Natural History Museum at Tring hosts over 120,000 visitors a year, but it was originally built for the use of one man – Walter 2nd Lord Rothschild (1868–1937). In 1889, the 1st Lord Rothschild built the museum on his Tring Park estate for his son, to house his growing collection of natural history specimens. In 1892 Walter opened its doors to the public and soon appointed two curators, entomologist Karl Jordan and ornithologist Ernst Hartert. Both Jordan and Hartert assisted Walter with studying and maintaining his vast collection for almost 40 years. As is evident from the extent of the specimen collections and correspondence created, they were hugely influential in their field, describing over 5,000 new species and publishing the periodical *Novitates Zoologicae* from 1894 to 1939. Walter's museum became one of the largest single collections of zoological specimens accumulated by one man. It housed 200,000 birds' eggs, 300,000 bird skins, thousands of mammals, hundreds of reptiles and over 2 million butterflies and moths. The bird skins were sold to the American Museum of Natural History in 1931, but the rest of the specimens and correspondence were bequeathed to the Natural History Museum on Walter's death.[1]

The Tring Correspondence Project

In 1984, the correspondence covering the life of the museum from 1890 to 1939 was transferred to the Archives at the Natural History Museum in London. A first attempt to catalogue the material began in 1996, and has since continued in a piecemeal fashion by volunteers. As a result, after 16 years, only a fraction of the collection has been catalogued. Thanks to the support of The Rothschild Foundation the letters can now receive the undivided attention they truly require, and a full time cataloguer has been employed. To test the water of what could be achieved by a dedicated archivist, the first stage of the project had the aim of cataloguing 12 years of letters in six months. In order to ensure the maximum amount of material could be uncovered, it was decided to only briefly describe the letters. This project will be laying the groundwork for future research – creating a skeleton catalogue, which can then be fleshed out more and more in the future.

One of the most impressive things about the collection is its size – more than 200 boxes, containing a total of over 60,000 letters. It is incredible to think that this was the work of three men, in contact with hundreds of people all over the world. In 1904, over 500 separate individuals and institutions wrote to Tring Museum and were answered by one of the curators. In 1905, that increased by another hundred. It seems impossible that Hartert and Jordan were able to get any other work done!

Unlike the strictly professional correspondence of larger institutions, such as national museums, or universities, the Tring collection is able to tell us more about the personal lives of the curators and their colleagues around the world. The correspondents not only discuss their work, but sometimes mention their home life and develop close friendships with the curators. Between discussions on ornithology and bird-collecting, Edward Charles Stuart Baker

(1864–1944), working for the Indian Police Service in Assam, writes of his loneliness and invites Hartert to visit him and stay for a year or so.[2]

It is also clear that the work of the entomologists and ornithologists does not exist in an isolated bubble. World-changing events find their way into the story of the Museum, such as the California Academy of Sciences reporting the loss of nearly all their specimens and books in the fires following the San Francisco Earthquake in 1906. The Director wrote to Tring to ask if any books could be sent to replenish their biological library.[3]

The wider network of people involved in the study of natural history are well represented in the correspondence. There are not just letters from ornithologists and entomologists, but also taxidermists, specimen dealers, museum curators, booksellers, publishers and librarians. This offers a complete picture of the work of natural scientists in the early twentieth century. There is also work being carried out, as part of the Rothschild Scientists project in collaboration with Tring, to see if the correspondence can be used to identify specific specimens and establish when and where they were acquired. It may be possible to follow the journey of a specimen from the collector in the field writing to report his success to Walter, to the shipping company's bill of lading, to the specimen dealer based in London, who often provided lists of specimens alongside their letters to Tring.

Although the collection includes few examples of Walter's writing, it is clear from the variety and extent of people writing to him for advice and help that his influence and reputation was incredibly far-reaching and positive. As well as scientists and collectors, businesses and people from the local area often appear among the correspondents. Various local groups and institutions write asking if they can visit the museum – including Jim Horn, a local 11 year old boy inviting Walter to visit his own museum any time he likes.[4] Local farmers and gardeners offer to send the Museum interesting finds, including the mutated head of a rabbit, a live fly and some privet.[5] Unfortunately, most of the early material does not include copies of replies, as these were most likely destroyed in a bonfire in the 1960s, but the occasional annotation from Jordan or Hartert simply says 'Yes' or 'No'.[6] It seems that the local people were eager to take advantage of being close to such a fascinating collection, and kept an eye out for possible additions to Walter's museum.

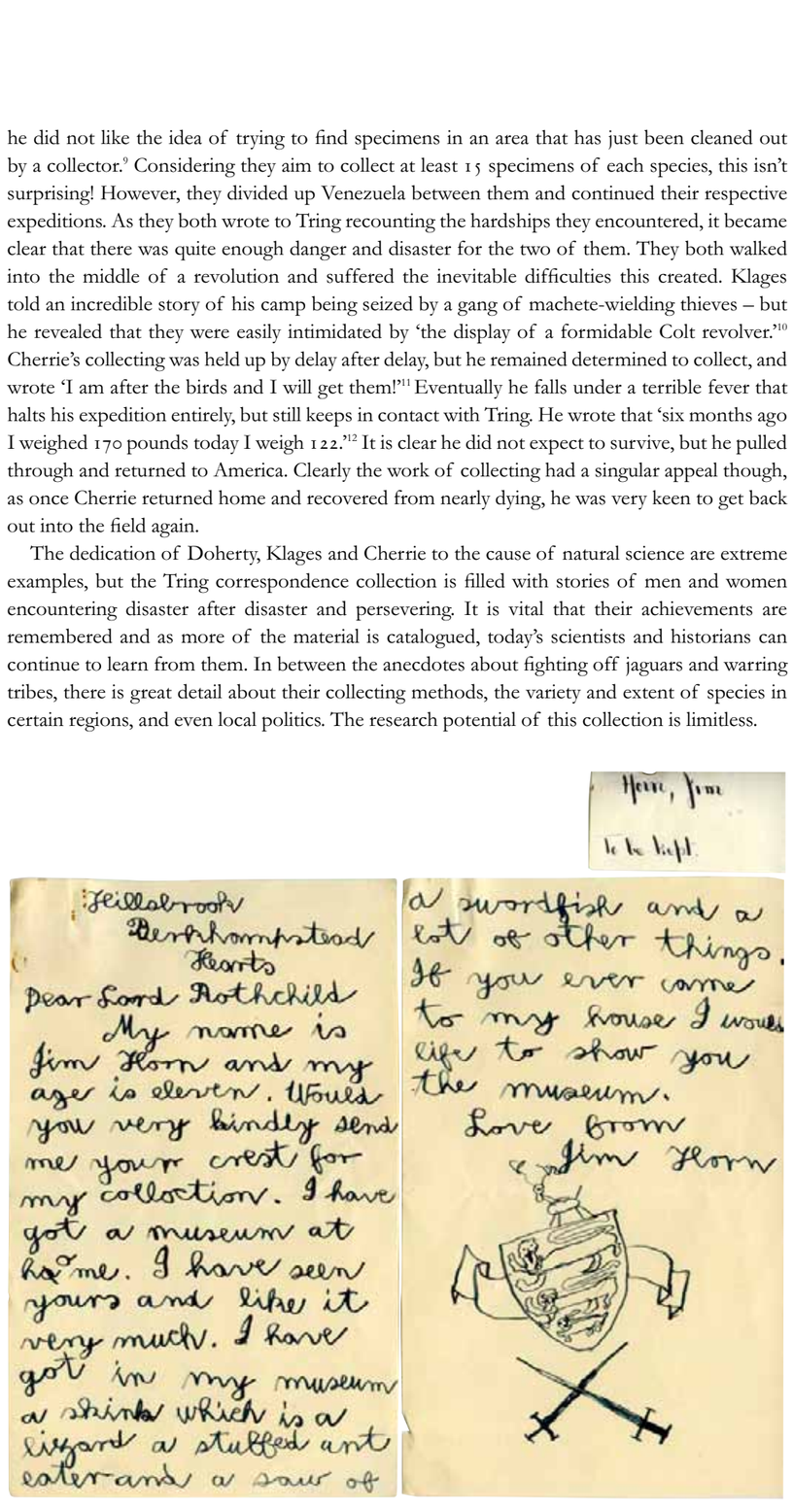
Walter's Collectors

The most compelling stories that can be found within the correspondence are undoubtedly those of the men who collected specimens in the field. Covering every corner of the globe, men ranging from professional explorers and collectors to missionaries and diplomats would write to Tring offering their services.

One of the most tragic tales to emerge from the letters is that of William Doherty (1857–1901), an American entomologist who collected specimens in Indonesia and East Africa. He was a vivacious and determined character but perhaps a reluctant collector. He wrote to Tring with a 'warts and all' account of his experiences. From 1896 to 1898 he travelled through Indonesia, and the trials of extreme weather, tigers and pirates eventually took their toll. After his right-hand man was killed by local people and he nearly died of Beriberi, he described Papua New Guinea as 'hell on earth.'[7] However, this terrible expedition did not put him off for long, and after recovering at home, he returned to London and began planning his next trip. By 1900 he was back in the field in British East Africa. After two months of torrential rain, charging rhinos and marauding Masai in Mombasa, Doherty last wrote on 14 February 1901 that he was looking forward to Uganda, but sadly died of dysentery in Nairobi 3 months later.[8]

With the risks involved it is interesting to see evidence of the more competitive nature of these collectors. In 1896 George K Cherrie (1865–1942) offered himself to Walter as the best candidate for collecting specimens in Venezuela, and is not best pleased when he discovers another collector, Samuel Klages (1875–1957), will be travelling there too. Cherrie wrote that he did not like the idea of trying to find specimens in an area that has just been cleaned out by a collector.[9] Considering they aim to collect at least 15 specimens of each species, this isn't surprising! However, they divided up Venezuela between them and continued their respective expeditions. As they both wrote to Tring recounting the hardships they encountered, it became clear that there was quite enough danger and disaster for the two of them. They both walked into the middle of a revolution and suffered the inevitable difficulties this created. Klages told an incredible story of his camp being seized by a gang of machete-wielding thieves – but he revealed that they were easily intimidated by 'the display of a formidable Colt revolver.'[10] Cherrie's collecting was held up by delay after delay, but he remained determined to collect, and wrote 'I am after the birds and I will get them!'[11] Eventually he falls under a terrible fever that halts his expedition entirely, but still keeps in contact with Tring. He wrote that 'six months ago I weighed 170 pounds today I weigh 122.'[12] It is clear he did not expect to survive, but he pulled through and returned to America. Clearly the work of collecting had a singular appeal though, as once Cherrie returned home and recovered from nearly dying, he was very keen to get back out into the field again.

The dedication of Doherty, Klages and Cherrie to the cause of natural science are extreme examples, but the Tring correspondence collection is filled with stories of men and women encountering disaster after disaster and persevering. It is vital that their achievements are remembered and as more of the material is catalogued, today's scientists and historians can continue to learn from them. In between the anecdotes about fighting off jaguars and warring tribes, there is great detail about their collecting methods, the variety and extent of species in certain regions, and even local politics. The research potential of this collection is limitless.

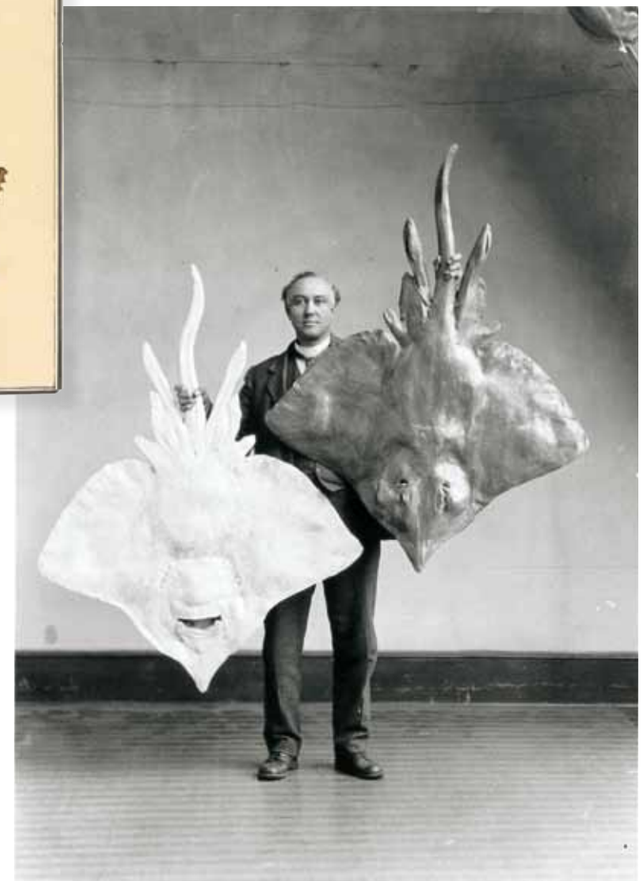

Hertf, June
to be kept.

Fieldbrook
Berkhamsted
Herts
Dear Lord Rothchild
My name is
Jim Horn and my
age is eleven. Would
you very kindly send
me your crest for
my collection. I have
got a museum at
home. I have seen
yours and like it
very much. I have
got in my museum
a skins which is a
lizard a stuffed ant
eater and a saw of
a swordfish and a
lot of other things.
If you ever come
to my house I would
like to show you
the museum.
Love from
Jim Horn

'Love from Jim Horn'. A letter received by Walter Rothschild inviting him to view the sender's own natural history museum.
NHM Archives TM/1/128.
© Natural History Museum, London

A receipt for the purchase of alpine boots from James Carter of London, 1906.
NHM Archives TM1/1/92.
© Natural History Museum, London

Opposite
Illuminating images can also be found amongst the correspondence, including a botanical drawing by entomologist Victor Farault, and a photograph of taxidermist Mr Bayley displaying his craft.
NHM Archives TM/1/130 *(above)*
NHM Archives TM/1/128 *(below)*.
© Natural History Museum, London



Looking ahead

The project has been a fantastic challenge, involving no small amount of detective work to identify names, places and dates. The benefit of working consistently and intensely on a project such as this is that the impenetrable handwriting and ornate signatures of individuals become increasingly familiar. As I progress through the years I look forward to seeing material from my favourite correspondents, such as the wonderful curly loops of specimen collector Walter Goodfellow (1866–1953), who collected for Tring in Indonesia and the Philippines. Unfortunately not everyone wrote as beautifully as Goodfellow, or was too vigilant at putting dates on their letters. It seems incredible that scientists and collectors who understood how essential it was to record the provenance of every butterfly specimen, do not worry about treating their letters the same way. Fortunately, history will remember them regardless – it just means a bit more work for me!

Lorna Cahill is the Project Archivist for the Tring Correspondence Project at the Natural History Museum, London. She completed a Postgraduate Diploma in Archives and Records Management at University College London in 2011.

NOTES

1 Mary LeCroy, Ernst Mayr at the American Museum of Natural History, in *Ornithological Monographs* (2005) vol. 58, pp.30–49.
2 E. C. S. Baker, letter dated 15 May 1891 (TM/1/1).
3 California Academy of Sciences, letter dated 20 June 1906 (TR/1/1/27/88).
4 Jim Horn, letter date unknown (TM/1/128).
5 J. E. Thomas, letter dated 9 January 1903 (TR/1/1/24/461); Howroyd, M Letter dated 15 August 1906 (TR/1/1/27/270).
6 Miriam Rothschild, *Dear Lord Rothschild* (Balaban, 1983), p.299.
7 William Doherty, letter dated 8 October 1897 (TM/1/26/17).
8 William Doherty, letter dated 14 February 1901 (TM/1/49/4).
9 George K. Cherrie, letter dated 18 May 1897 (TM/1/3/4).
10 Samuel Klages, letter dated 9 May 1898 (TM/1/119).
11 George K. Cherrie, letter dated 12 February 1898 (TM/1/33/4).
12 George K. Cherrie, letter dated 5 November 1898 (TM/1/33/4).