

DEAR LORD ROTHSCHILD

BIRDS, BUTTERFLIES & HISTORY



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Birds, Butterflies and History

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was important and interesting and enjoyable. Walter never left anything for tomorrow — except his accounts.* This not infrequently led to tremendous confusion and a feeling that everything was getting out of control.

Some of his telegrams to his curators were a hotchpotch of varied information and instructions. Thus from the pier at Bournemouth he wired to Hartert:

Please tell Sharpe Keulemans can make sketches of the 3 rails and send Dresser the Madagascar rollers I took all those new finches out and have got them here Huge beaks and heads like nestor parrots Write to Palmer to collect carefully on Oahu and get all he can and on Nūhau also I saw Castang [sic] and settled about pheasants

He frequently became involved in minutae. Some idea of the detail — rather puzzling for the ordinary reader — can be gauged from the story of the White Rhinoceros, which included yet another acrimonious exchange of letters with Alfred Newton.

In 1893 Walter brought off a great coup by procuring the first entire specimen of the White or Square-mouthed Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros simus*) and he included these glad tidings in a letter to Alfred Newton. He never dreamed that behind his back Harmer (the Director of the University Museum, later of the Natural History Museum) had written at Newton's instigation to Walter's own collector Mr. Coryndon and asked for a White Rhino for Cambridge! Actually Coryndon had already left on the expedition and was out of reach of mail by the time the letter arrived at Salisbury. Newton, on hearing that, contrary to instructions from Tring, two bulls had been shot by the hunters, wrote and suggested that one might be given to Cambridge. "I have been trying for more than 25 years to get one," and added ingenuously, "I think we have been for some time in communication with Mr. Coryndon, but Harmer who is now superintendent of the Museum carried out the correspondence and I am not acquainted with the details". Walter wrote and explained that the British Museum had accepted one entire animal, but he himself would be satisfied with only a skin if Newton would like to buy the skeleton for £120. The price was reduced because "unfortunately it appears to have 3 or 4 caudal vertebrae missing and the large boss on the thigh bone which fits into the socket of the ilium was smashed by a bullet.... However the bones can be replaced in

* Walter's juggling with his finances deserves a book to itself for he combined wild and insouciant spending in some directions, with extreme care and attention in others. He spent almost nothing on himself, and was frugal in all ways, but his livestock was pampered and indulged. While he was in Algeria, Charles was trying to deal with the contents of the linen baskets. There is one telegram from Walter — a *cri de coeur* — which has survived: "Tell my brother not to sell snake".

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plaster." Newton passed the hat round, collected £162.1.6 and accepted Walter's offer "providing that it had no other defects than those you mention". Newton added he would greatly prefer having the maceration done by his people. "I need hardly point out to you the importance of looking after the bones of the feet, and especially the terminal phalanges of the toes which are too apt to be left in the *sabots* unless care be taken."

In reply Newton received a depressing letter from Walter, written from the Bank:¹⁵

New Court
Dec 13th 1893

Dear Professor Newton,

I warmly regret being unable to send you the skeleton unmacerated for a reason which affects me as much as you. F.C. Selous & Coryndon are the two scouts of the company and as you know went to the front as soon as war was declared. The consequence was a man named Maclaurin brought the 2 Rh. Simus home & packed all the bones indiscriminately in one case & the two skulls in a 2nd as the British Museum insist on mounting their own & I could only pick out the correct number of bones to each skeleton & not fit them till macerated they have put them in soak & I, till they are fitted, have nothing more to say.

I used the term boss and not condyle (Newton had made a sarcastic remark about this term) as I had when I wrote not seen this injured bone & so merely quoted Coryndon's expression. The toe bones I can assure you will be carefully dealt with, for I have seen they are all there & have given my taxidermists orders to carefully take them out.

Yours sincerely

WALTER ROTHSCHILD

Newton then demanded to know where the specimens were located, for as he said "If only that is to assure ourselves in the allotment of bones the Brit. Mus. may but take the opportunity of giving themselves the benefit of any doubt should a particular bone be missing from their skeleton." He certainly did not trust the B.M.! He suggested that Harmer should visit Tring forthwith having apparently forgotten that maceration was taking place elsewhere.

Walter explained that since one beast was larger than the other there was no need to worry about the "owner" of any particular bones, but it would be 6-8 weeks before they could be on view. The suspicious Newton was not satisfied and continued to fret and pester, demanding to know where maceration was

being carried out and saying even if it was only *the outside of the macerating tanks*, he wanted Harmer to see them.

Walter patiently replied, in the most conciliatory manner, again on New Court notepaper:

Dec 18th 1893

Dear Professor Newton,

As you specially ask me where the White Rhinoceros skeletons are I must tell you they are being macerated by Alfred Brazenon 39 Lewes Road Brighton but when the bones are clean & dry you or Harmer shall see both skeletons before the British Museum take theirs. Of course if there should be any defects not known to me you will then see everything yourself & form your own judgement.

Yours sincerely

WALTER ROTHSCHILD

As we have seen, Walter did not bar natural history from his working day at the Bank, and quietly carried on a considerable flow of Museum business from New Court.

This letter apparently satisfied Newton, since the correspondence seems to have ceased, but Walter had to wait a year for his cheque for £120. Nevertheless, in June 1895 the two Museums were still wrangling over the White Rhino's tailbones. Walter decided to call in Günther to play Solomon, and to supervise the mounting of the two bulls side by side at Gerrards, the taxidermists. He left Hartert and Harmer to deal with the correspondence. He had had just about enough of both Newton and the tailbones of *Rhinoceros simus*.

The brief sketches of the five of Walter's collectors, Harris, Wollaston, Doherty, N.C. Rothschild and Cunningham which follow give some idea of the varied and unusual individuals who engaged in this highly specialized type of activity. Although so different in background, life-style and character, all five shared a profound, even emotional interest in the marvels of the animal kingdom — including those men who, like Harris, depended for their livelihood on the specimens they caught and slaughtered. All five of them contributed — in a greater or lesser degree — to the unique character of My Museum.