

The early death of Colonel Robert C. Tytler and the afterlife of his collection

Authors: Prÿs-Jones, Robert P., Harding, Alison C., and Rooke, Kathryn

Source: Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club, 141(2) : 240-244

Published By: British Ornithologists' Club

URL: <https://doi.org/10.25226/bboc.v141i2.2021.a13>

BioOne Complete (complete.BioOne.org) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at www.bioone.org/terms-of-use.

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non - commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.

The early death of Colonel Robert C. Tytler and the afterlife of his collection

by Robert P. Prÿs-Jones, Alison C. Harding & Kathryn Rooke

Received 11 March 2021; revised 21 April 2021; published 15 June 2021

<http://zoobank.org/urn:lsid:zoobank.org:pub:8544C731-0E59-4CF8-85BB-403B2C361581>

SUMMARY.—A letter by Allan Octavian Hume and three by Bertram Bevan-Petman, all written between 1904 and 1911 to Ernst Hartert, bird curator of Rothschild's Tring Museum, are present in the Rothschild Tring archive, now held by the Natural History Museum. These shed light on both the probable cause of the early death in 1872 of Colonel Robert C. Tytler, British army officer and naturalist in colonial India, and on the somewhat convoluted fate of his collection subsequently.

By the mid 1880s, the famous Indian ornithologist Allan Octavian Hume (1829–1912) had both given up ornithology and presented his huge bird collection to the British Museum (Natural History), now the Natural History Museum (NHMUK) (Collar & Prÿs-Jones 2012). Given that this was some years before the founding in 1889 of the Tring Museum by Walter Rothschild (1868–1937), it is not surprising that only a single letter between Hume and Walter's bird curator, Ernst Hartert, exists in the Rothschild Tring Archive held at NHMUK. This letter (TR/1/1/25/230) is, however, of considerable interest for the light it sheds on both the early death of another Indian ornithologist, Robert C. Tytler (1818–72), and, in conjunction with three other letters (TR/1/1/25/355 and TR/1/1/32/376) from a Bertram Bevan-Petman, on the fate of Tytler's bird collection.

Colonel Robert Tytler spent his adult life serving in the army in British colonial India, but he was also a naturalist and photographer of some note, sharing the latter interest with his second wife Harriet (1828–1907), who is well known for her vivid first-hand account of the 1857–58 Indian Mutiny (Sattin 1986). As a natural historian, Tytler was probably best known as an ornithologist, notably of the Andaman Islands, where he was based from 1862 to 1864; Tytler's Warbler *Phylloscopus tytleri* Brooks, 1872, is perhaps the most familiar of several bird taxa named for him. Around 1861, Tytler had bought two houses in Simla (Sattin 1986) and, when not posted elsewhere, spent his later life in one of these, Bonnie Moon. This was situated a little higher up Jakko Hill than Rothney Castle, to which Hume moved with his bird collection in c.1871 (Moulton 1992). Based on his own collections, Tytler had by then already set up a museum, open to the public, in Bonnie Moon, the first in the Simla area. Besides a large collection of birds from all parts of the world, this included 'animals and shells from the Andamans, oriental manuscripts, and geological, mineralogical and mythological specimens' (Buck 1904: 129).

For at least the last eight years of his life, Tytler suffered a debilitating illness. In early 1864, after serving less than two years as Superintendent of the Andaman Islands and then only in his mid 40s, he had to ask to be relieved of his post 'and proceeded on sick leave, as his health was failing' (Sattin 1986: 179). By 1867, when his wife Harriet returned after some months in England, she was 'shocked with the awful change in him. His system was so drained of its strength that he was never the same man again' (Sattin 1986: 180). In autumn 1870 Lord Mayo, the Viceroy, requested Tytler's posting to the Home Department in Simla (Buck 1904), where 'the authorities thought he would be of most use devoting himself to the 'curious and valuable pieces on show' in his museum (Sattin 1986: 180). This closed

after Tytler's death in September 1872, but Harriet 'preserved the ornithological specimens, and expressed her intention of giving them to Simla, in memory of her husband, should a museum ever be formed there' (Buck 1904: 129). Announcements of Tytler's passing stressed his long illness, e.g., 'The deceased officer had long been ailing, and of late the malady from which he was suffering assumed a form which left but little hope of recovery' (*Times of India*, 19 September 1872).

The gift of the collection to the Simla municipality did not materialise, and the specimens were wrapped in newspapers and packed away in boxes around 1873. In 1907 the collection passed to Harriet's daughter-in-law, a Mrs Livingstone-Thompson, who 'after some other efforts to dispose of it, sold it in 1909 to Mr. B. Bevan-Petman, the well-known barrister of Lahore. His intention was at first apparently to present it to the Tring Museum, but circumstances determined that he should give it to the Lahore Museum' (Whistler 1918: 738). Whistler spent ten days in 1918 examining it there, finding much of the collection very well documented but in a deplorable physical state. His key conclusions were that only about 2,500 skins remained, including material from many parts of the world, but notably Brazil and the Andamans. However, Tytler's catalogues were not with it, and an informant of Whistler's in Simla claimed that Hume had borrowed them without returning them – 'rather a failing of his judging from old ornithological correspondence!' according to Whistler (1918: 739), who himself suspected that 'it is quite possible that the Catalogues are with his [Hume's] collections in the Natural History Museum at South Kensington'.

The first of the above-mentioned letters reveals that, on 26 May 1904, Bertram Bevan-Petman, by profession a barrister, wrote to Rothschild's bird curator, Ernst Hartert, from the Hotel Central in Simla, India, with information about Tytler's bird collection [NB: in the letters below, comments in parentheses are the author's, those in square brackets are our insertions]:

'[Tytler's] collection numbering, I am told, some four thousand specimens is now in the possession of his widow, a client of mine, who is now willing to part with them. The birds are at present packed away in soldered tin cases. But the [*sic*] Mr. A.O. Hume, retired civilian, living near the Crystal Palace, who some while ago presented the whole of his collection to the South Kensington Museum, is well acquainted with every bird in the Tytler collection, and would give you any scientific particulars you might require as to its contents should you think of acquiring the same. I understand he offered Mrs. Tytler Rs. 3,000 for 100 birds (the pick, no doubt), but she refused to part with any, from a sentimental point of view. As the birds are of no use to her, I have persuaded her to sell if you wished to buy. In that case, you could get to hear from Mr. Hume what the probable worth of the collection is, and make your own estimate. Mrs. Tytler's idea is Rs. 10,000 for the lot, but I have no doubt I could persuade her to take less. I shall be happy to do anything I can in the matter for you, such as examining the specimens, reporting on their state of preservation, and the like. I shall be in Simla till November, after which my address will be Lower Mall, Lahore, Punjab.'

Hartert clearly acted on Bevan-Petman's suggestion to contact Hume, as the latter wrote from his Upper Norwood residence to Hartert on 1 October 1904. His letter is transcribed here in its entirety:

'I find your letter of the 5 July[?] still by me – I thought I had answered it, but there is no endorsement on it to that effect & in case I did not reply to it, as I intended, I will write now what little I have to say – if this prove [*sic*] to be a duplicate – please burn it.

I knew Col. Tytler's collection well, whilst he was alive – what it may be now after these years I cannot even guess – I should in this respect hope for the best, but expect the worst.

But in its best days, I should think that the Collection would not have been of any value at Tring. What Tytler aimed at was a collection representative of the birds of the world. I should guess that fully half his birds were American & African; given to him by our mutual friend Jules Verreaux & most of these were very indifferent specimens. His Indian birds were mostly his own collection, but he was not a neat taxidermist. All his birds were carefully ticketed. Whoever has them can very easily make a list of them. I would not think of buying if I were in your place, unless they sent a list - & then even I would not buy unless they sent the birds that you might select out of the list, on inspection. Even before poor Tytler died, the birds had become very grimy & secondhand, as it were – He had a mode of shut[ting][?] all the doors & windows of the places he used as a museum & he used to fill this with a dense smoke to kill the insects – another point, the specimens, at any rate the majority of them were preserved mainly with powdered arsenic. In later years he used good arsenical soap – I gave him some pounds once (I used to make 2 stone (28 lbs) of my own speciality yearly) but apparently most of the French* (*Author's footnote: *I mean the birds which had from time to time been given to him or sent by J. Verreaux.*) and Andamanese birds were preserved by merely dusting in powdered arsenic, which used to dust out of them in my time, whenever they were pulled about much. This & this only killed poor Tytler – he died solely of arsenic poisoning, & the stupid Drs did not know – we none of us knew then how to treat him for this. This is another point to consider. I don't believe in the first place that you would find one tenth of the birds of any use to you – of that tenth, I suspect half would prove very bad specimens, & the rest likely to give trouble, owing to the manner in which they were preserved.'

This letter is classic Hume, with cogent opinion being presented as irrefutable fact and the statement 'please burn it' reminiscent of that in the preface to his first book, *My scrap book: or rough notes on Indian oology and ornithology* (Hume 1869–70), telling his readers to burn them if they did not find them of use (Collar & Prÿs-Jones 2012)! On receiving this less than enthusiastic recommendation from Hume, Hartert presumably replied cautiously to Bevan-Petman, who wrote again from Simla on 12 December 1904 as follows:

'Enclosed is a list of a few of the birds in the collection. Another list, more or less complete does exist in Col. Tytler's writing, but cannot at present be found, though I have asked that further search may be made. When found, it will be forwarded and may perhaps enable you to give some idea of what may fairly be asked for the collection. Of course, Mrs. Tytler has no real idea; and the only birds I know are game birds! Also, sending a few specimens for you to look at – labelled. Will endeavour to send you some vultures from Lahore this winter (where I shall be till March). Saw some splendid specimens of eagles last month when out shooting with Rana of Dhama (altitude 5000 ft.) – unluckily had only rifle with me. But hope to get them for you later on. Till March, address will be 'Lower Mall, Lahore' - after March, 'Walsingham, Simla'. Have been very busy all season – worked off legs – or would have written before. Excuse paper & scrawl, but am packed up, preparatory to migration down to the plains. There are some horribly repulsive vultures (several kinds) round Simla hills – are these any good to you? They smell like mad! – shooting is easy, but the work afterward nauseating...'

Hartert must have responded declining the offer of Tytler's birds, given Bevan-Petman's final letter sent from Walsingham, Simla, over six years later, on 10 January 1911:

'You may perhaps recollect the late Colonel Tytler's Collection of Bird Skins, concerning which we had some correspondence some while ago. Well, the old lady died, his widow, I mean; and the daughter begged me to take the birds off her hands. I did not want them, for the simple reason that my time is much too fully occupied with my work to allow me the relaxation of such pleasures. However, as she wanted the money badly, I bought them from her at her price, and the things have been stored here ever since, that is some two years ago, in one of my godowns. I got one of my babus to copy out the birds' names for the purpose of a catalogue, and though he appears to have made out some astounding names, I daresay that the expert will be able to guess in due course what the names stand for. I am sending you by this post under registered cover the said typed catalogue, in case you should require any of the birds. If so, will you please put a mark against the bird in question, with the price you are willing to pay, and I will arrange that the birds you select shall be sent to you. I do not of course know if you want any of the birds at all: I am quite ignorant of any of them, whether they are good bad or indifferent; but it struck me that by chance the Collection might contain one or two or perhaps more that Mr. Walter would like, and as the Collection was now mine, I should be very glad to let him have the pick of it, if only in recollection of some very pleasant days' shooting that he was good enough to give me some years ago.

When you have done with the Catalogue, will you kindly send it to me at 14, Rockleaze, Sneyd Park, Bristol. I am sailing for Home this week, on account of the illness of my elder son, and I shall be home for some six weeks.'

Again, no reply from Hartert is available, but it seems almost certain that the Tring Museum did not acquire any specimens from Tytler's collection at either opportunity, as there is no sign of such in the American Museum of Natural History, New York, where the great bulk of Walter Rothschild's bird skins now reside (P. Sweet & T. Trombone *in litt.* 19 February 2021). As to what survives of the collection Tytler still held when he died, an e-mail approach to Lahore Museum regarding its current state unfortunately remains unanswered. There is also no evidence that NHMUK ever received the main catalogue(s) of Tytler's collection via Hume, although it does possess an earlier short catalogue of specimens that Tytler passed to the East India Company Museum in London in early 1854 (MSS IND). A number of such catalogues of donations were received by NHMUK when it took on the bulk of the India Museum's zoological collections in the late 1870s. Tytler's is interesting in that it reveals he had donated not only bird and mammal specimens, but also fish, insects, cones (botanical), a dagger found on a battlefield and 'a pack of playing cards of native manufacture from an English design', highlighting his eclectic collecting.

Besides their role in filling in additional details concerning the fate of Tytler's collection prior to it reaching Lahore Museum, the most striking assertion in these letters is Hume's confident ascription of the cause of Tytler's death, namely poisoning from use of arsenic powder, a suggestion not seen in other accounts consulted. Given Hume's description of the state of Tytler's bird collection, the concept of chronic cumulative arsenic poisoning does however make considerable sense. Morris (2010) has assembled information relating to the apparent impact of arsenic on taxidermists and other collectors. Given the inevitable lack of any sort of data on individuals' actual accidental intake of the substance while using it, generalisations are difficult. However, it certainly appears that the use of arsenic powder

tends to be more harmful than the use of the arsenical soap, mentioned by Hume, which gradually replaced it. Overall, perhaps the most interesting parallel is with the American ornithologist Elliott Coues (1842–99), who strongly recommended the use of arsenic powder and, who, like Tytler, died in his mid 50s. In his manual of field ornithology, Coues (1874: 54) wrote 'Use dry powdered arsenic, plenty of it, and nothing else. There is no substitute for arsenic worthy of the name, and no preparation of arsenic so good as the simple substance. Various kinds of 'arsenical soap' were and may still be in vogue; it is a nasty greasy substance, not fit to handle...'. Regarding his early demise, Allen (1909: 424) noted that despite '...all his apparent energy and ceaseless activities, his health gave way at last, and for some years before his death he was a sufferer from a complication of diseases.'

Acknowledgements

We are extremely grateful to Andrea Hart, Shyamal Lakshminarayanan, Pat Morris, Hellen Pethers, Paul Sweet and Tom Trombone for assistance rendered. Nigel Collar and Pat Morris read through earlier drafts and made useful suggestions.

References:

- Allen, J. A. 1909. Biographical memoir of Elliott Coues 1842–1899. *Natl. Acad. Sci. Biograph. Mem.* 6: 397–446.
- Buck, E. J. 1904. *Simla: past and present*. Messrs. Thacker, Spink & Co., Calcutta.
- Collar, N. J. & Prÿs-Jones, R. P. 2012. Pioneer of Asian ornithology: Allan Octavian Hume. *BirdingASIA* 17: 17–43.
- Coues, E. 1874. *Field ornithology. Comprising a manual of instruction for procuring, preparing, and preserving birds, and a check list of North American birds*. Naturalists' Agency, Salem, MA.
- Morris, P. 2010. *A history of taxidermy: art, science and bad taste*. MPM Publications, Ascot.
- Moulton, E. C. 1992. The contributions of Allan O. Hume to the scientific advancement of Indian ornithology. *Indian Archiv.* 41: 1–19. [Reprinted with minor additions and a new Appendix B on pp. 295–317 in Daniel, J. C. & Ugra, G. W. (eds.) (2003) *Petronia: fifty years of post-independence ornithology in India*. Bombay Natural History Society & Oxford Univ. Press, Bombay.]
- Sattin, A. (ed.) 1986. *An Englishwoman in India: the memoirs of Harriet Tytler 1828–1858*. Oxford Univ. Press.
- Whistler, H. 1918. Colonel Tytler's collection of birds. *Ibis* 60: 737–739.
- Addresses:* Robert P. Prÿs-Jones, Bird Group, Dept. of Life Sciences, Natural History Museum, Tring, Herts. HP23 6AP, UK, e-mail: r.prys-jones@nhm.ac.uk. Alison C. Harding, Dept. of Library and Archives, Natural History Museum, Tring, Herts. HP23 6AP, UK e-mail: a.harding@nhm.ac.uk. Kathryn Rooke, Dept. of Library and Archives, Natural History Museum, Cromwell Road, South Kensington, London SW7 5BD, UK, e-mail: k.rooke@nhm.ac.uk