

A LETTER FROM WILLIAM BOOKEY BROWNRIGG TO THOMAS HENRY HUXLEY, DATED 29 NOVEMBER 1865, AUTHORISING HIM TO DESCRIBE HIS FOSSIL VERTEBRATES FROM JARROW COLLIERY, CO. KILKENNY AND GIVING DETAILS OF HIS FIND

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Abstract

William Bookey Brownrigg, who discovered the Upper Carboniferous (Pennsylvanian) vertebrate fossils at Jarrow Colliery, Co. Kilkenny in 1864, published a short paper on the material. Shortly afterwards E.P. Wright, a zoologist from Trinity College Dublin, contacted Thomas Henry Huxley with a view to publishing a full description of the material. In November 1865 Huxley wrote to Brownrigg about his involvement and in his reply Brownrigg agreed to Huxley describing the material. Ultimately, when it came to the publication of the fossil fauna, Brownrigg was side-lined. Brownrigg's letter to Huxley is transcribed here.

Introduction

The discovery of the Upper Carboniferous (Pennsylvanian) vertebrate fossils from Jarrow Colliery, Castlecomer, Co. Kilkenny in the 1860s remains one of the most important geological discoveries made in Ireland over the last 200 years.

The fossils were discovered by William Brownrigg of Brannockstown, Co. Kildare, who was a graduate of Trinity College Dublin and had a semi-professional interest in geology. He did not make a living from his geological expertise but he had been and continued to be an active member of the Geological Society of Dublin (and its successor the Royal Geological Society of Ireland) and was also a keen fossil collector. He had informally named one of his fossils *Wandesfordii*, after the owner of the land in which the colliery was situated, and had guessed that they could be reptiles, reckoning that he had discovered 'six or seven' new forms (Brownrigg 1865).

Their discovery prompted rapid efforts to describe them, and priority over the finds and hence the right to publish on them was contested by various scientists, both amateur and professional. Edward Perceval Wright of Trinity College Dublin, who had been approached by William Bookey Brownrigg, finder of the fossils, for assistance, turned himself to Thomas Henry Huxley, the undoubted contemporary expert on fossil amphibians, with a request to collaborate on their description. Correspondence between Wright and Huxley has been recently shown to be somewhat cautious, with both men anxious to gain the upper hand in recognition for the find and description of the fossils (DeArce *et al.* 2011).

Recently a manuscript letter from Brownrigg to Huxley, now contained in the Huxley archives of University College London, has come to light, and this adds to our understanding of the affair. Brownrigg's letter was in response to one from Huxley dated 29 November 1865, in which he wrote

that he wanted to make sure that Brownrigg was happy that he would describe the fossils with a view to their publication. [Huxley's letter to Brownrigg is mentioned in item ICL29.139, a letter to Wright dated 29 November, and mentioned to Wright again on item ICL29.141. Huxley had read Brownrigg's reply on 30 November, and on the same date he wrote to Wright with the news (ICL29.145).]

As this until now unpublished letter provides important information on the background to the description of the vertebrates from Jarrow Colliery, Co. Kilkenny, it is important that it is made available to the public domain. This is the purpose of this short communication.

What follows is a full transcript of Brownrigg's reply to Huxley's query, written from his townhouse in Dublin. The words in brackets are unclear in the original.

Transcript

18 Adelaide Road
Dublin

Nov. 29: 1865

My Dear Sir,

I hasten to assure you that you are most welcome to name, describe and illustrate all or any of my coal fossils which you said (could?) occur here. And I need hardly say that it gives me very great pleasure to think that those I collected and so saved from the fire are examined by you as worthy of so much trouble.

At the same time perhaps it is as well to give you a short account of my share in the transaction—About one year ago I found pieces of *Wandesfordii* at the Jarrow pit colliery with other fossil reptile remains feeling sure that I had never seen anything like them before. I promptly (went) up with them to Dublin and showed them from time to time to different friends but nothing satisfactory was made of them. About August last my friend Dr EP Wright was about describing some new insects which I gave him from the same coal measures and came to Castlecomer to look over my fossils found during the (scour?) for insect remains. He then told me he was so satisfied that I had a lot of undescribed reptilian and fish remains. that he would get a grant of money at the next—September meeting of the Brit. Assoc. to assist me in collecting more specimens. Eventually Dr EP (to) got me twenty pounds from the Brit. Assoc and came with me to Jarrow to

explore the beds in which the fossils were found, and I then asked him to undertake the description of all my material and he consented on the conditions that nothing but collecting and drawing was to be (thereafter?) up till January and that he then should be at liberty to consult you on subject going over to show you the drawings to tell you the conclusions he might have come to, and ask you to join him in a memoir for the Academy or the Palaeontological society. Shortly afterwards Professor Haughton got some specimens which he said he was going to send at once to you to describe. Dr E.P.W then told me that it would be unfair to you to let you describe new forms on the few remains in Prof. H. hands, he (Dr. W) having at the same moment the key to the whole in his fossils and from what he has since told me I believe he at once wrote about my specimens to you. I believe it to be his wish that you would describe them and I feel they could not be in better hands, at the same time fresh specimens will probably be coming to light (next) week and if you were both working together on the subject I thought Dr W prefers might be of some assistance to you he being on the spot and some such arrangement would I felt be pleasant to Mr Dobbs the agent of the mine who knows Dr W. I know that Dr W is as quixotic as it is possible to be about taking the work from any one still more from one whom he thinks the best qualified to do it (he like you urged me to do it myself and he promised me to help and told me to be sure of your assistance too as he said you never failed to help on a young beginner, the truth of which from your kind offer I am now deeply sensible of) but I cannot think I do him any injustice in mentioning the (about) trusting you will excuse my going into these details and assuring you that your letter has completely removed from my mind any slightest feeling of irritation at my plans not being carried with exactly as I wanted, that may have existed. I want only again add that the fossils are for describing quite at your disposal. I remain my dear Sir yours very faithfully,

W Brownrigg.

PS I should have written yesterday but have been laid up since Sunday with a severe cold and attack of diarrhoea.

Discussion

Brownrigg acted in haste, writing and posting his letter immediately after reading Huxley's. Huxley acknowledged receiving it in a letter to Wright dated 30 November. Although Brownrigg's handwriting

does not betray any obvious haste, some words are unreadable and his grammar and wording are obscure at times.

Six times in the 583 words of text, Brownrigg gently asserts his ownership of the fossils, and the fact that he found them and saw their novelty. E.P. Wright was welcomed to Castlecomer as a visitor after the existence of fossil vertebrates had been established. Clearly in Brownrigg's mind this ownership referred not just to the pieces of coal bearing the fossils, but to the intellectual act that their sight elicited, in his mind, of having identified them as new and valuable to science. Huxley's request was an acknowledgement of this priority. Only this interpretation, and the assumption that it must have been so obvious to all that no honourable person would consider twisting its meaning, can explain Brownrigg's consent to Wright's wish that Huxley would describe them.

With his generous concession to Huxley, his dismissal of Samuel Haughton's plans and his acceptance of Wright's conditions, which amounted to a moratorium in reporting until after January, Brownrigg must have thought that he had created a climate of total trust between the three men; himself, Wright and Huxley, where good will would flow from all to all.

In his letter to Brownrigg (ICL29.141) Huxley was explicit, asking for permission to describe and publish. Even if he was overawed—as he obviously was—at being approached by a world authority such as Huxley, Brownrigg specifically *did not* mention his permission to *publish*. This was immediately taken for granted by Wright and by Huxley. Huxley's rapid reaction to Wright's offer and his counter-offer of coming to Dublin immediately was not what Wright had expected. It was little short of an invasion, which Wright was unable to fend off. Wright had sent photographs of the fossils, and was prepared to send drawings, but eventually had to receive Huxley to inspect the fossils directly and then to send him the entire collection at Jermyn Street, London. Wright suggests that the paper to be published in the *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* was still pending Huxley's approval of Wright's conclusions, but he was already committed to it before an unsuspecting Brownrigg. While Brownrigg barely disguises his unease he does agree to Huxley's request, no doubt realising that the fossils deserved the highest expertise available for their description.

The following year Wright and Huxley (1866) published a short paper that heralded an authoritative paper of five years later, in which Huxley

solely provided the full taxonomic descriptions of the fossils (Huxley and Wright 1871). This paper was published in the *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy* to which Wright had contributed the section on the geological setting of the find. Much of Wright's information had come from the observations of Brownrigg who had earlier published a brief outline of the discovery (Brownrigg 1865). Following the publication of the 1866 paper, William Hellier Baily of the Geological Survey of Ireland claimed, with questionable justification, priority over the finds (Baily 1866). It is clear that Wright, an academic, side-lined Brownrigg in the whole affair as he expected to be involved in the scientific description of his finds. It was not unknown for collectors of important material to be marginalised by academics and others when it came to publishing reports on material (Torrens 1995; Knell 2000). Shortly afterwards, feeling disaffected and aggrieved, Brownrigg abandoned his study of geology altogether (DeArce *et al* 2011).

Acknowledgements

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