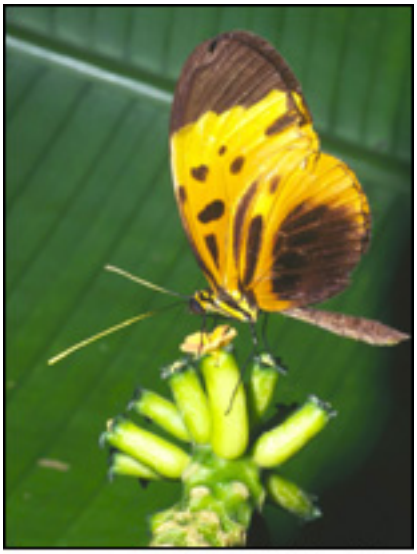
Books, Bravado and Butterflies: Tales from The Natural History Museum

Editor's Introduction | The Natural History Museum holds about 3 million butterflies in its collection. These specimens represent an enormous variety of locations around the world, and many of them symbolise incredible stories of human endeavour. Phil Ackery, who has worked with the butterfly collections for over 30 years, presents a fascinating and highly personal introduction to just a few of those stories.

In the mid 1960s, I started work at The Natural History Museum where I was soon given the job of re-curating the holdings of *Heliconius* butterflies. These South American species are well known to a wide audience due to their suitability as live exhibits in butterfly houses: they are extremely long-lived, and adults stay on the wing for up to nine months. Through my work with the *Heliconius* I became familiar with various place names in French Guyana, including the localities of St Jean du Maroni and St Laurent du Maroni, two towns on the Maroni River.



A Heliconius butterfly, *H. numata*, feeding on flower pollen.

Around that time I read, whilst travelling to work, two semi-autobiographical novels by Henri Charriere. The first one, *Papillon*, is probably the better known. The second was *Banco*, and together the books tell the story of Henri Charriere's life in the French penal system--specifically the time that he spent in the French penitentiary lands in French Guyana. When I opened up *Papillon* I was delighted to see the location of St Laurent du Maroni on the map of penitentiary settlements in the frontispiece of the book, and odd snippets of information relating to butterflies throughout the text.

A contemporary of Charriere from French Guyana, Eugene LeMoult, was one of the most significant private butterfly-collectors of the twentieth century. He was, at one time, governor of the penitentiary settlement in which Henri Charriere was incarcerated, and it seems that a network of released prisoners provided butterfly material for him. The posthumous sale of LeMoult's collection in 1968 was one of the great butterfly events of the twentieth century. The Natural History Museum secured important South American butterflies of the genus *Prepona*. Other specimens came to the museum from secondary sources, mostly from a now little-known private collector, Jimmy (or J.J.) Joicey, whose private butterfly museum in Surrey, England, survived until the 1930s.

Like many released prisoners, Henri Charriere made some attempts to collect butterflies commercially. He was aware of the value of gynandromorphs, specimens that show both male and female characteristics. Some gynandromorphs are bi-lateral--they exhibit the female sex on one side and the male sex on the other. *Morpho* butterflies provide spectacular examples. The right hand side of *Morpho melaneus* is male and the left hand side is female.

P. Ackery

A bi-lateral gynandropmorph of Morpho melaneus. The wings on the right are male, those on the left are female.

The devious Charriere decided to defraud an American collector. He wrote in *Papillon*:

These related anecdotes increased my awareness of the fascinating raft of literature that surrounds butterfly-collecting expeditions of the past. Of the numerous authors who have described their collecting experiences, Henry Walter Bates (author of *The Naturalist on the River Amazon*, 1863) and Alfred Russel Wallace (a prodigious writer whose most familiar work is *The Malay Archipelago*, 1869) are well known as great nineteenth-century naturalists. Bates was particularly interested in the biology of butterflies, and conducted pioneering work on mimicry--hence the term 'Batesian mimicry' which describes how a palatable butterfly secures protection from potential predators by assuming the wing pattern and behaviour of a distasteful species.Wallace, also a student of butterflies, was especially interested in their distribution from the point of view of historical biogeography.

Other notable works recount the exploits of Margaret Fountaine and Evelyn Cheesman--two very formidable ladies. Fountaine travelled the world, breeding butterflies and recording their life histories in beautiful paintings now held in the entomological library at The Natural History Museum. Her collection of butterflies resides at the Castle Museum in Norwich, England, while her collecting experiences are detailed in two posthumously published volumes, *Love among the Butterflies* (1980), and *Butterflies and Late Loves* (1986). Evelyn Cheeseman was not solely devoted to butterflies, but she wrote books full of wonderful details on the localities that she visited, for instance *The Two Roads to Papua* (1935).

Another author and collector, Frederick Markham Bailey, was one of the last players in what was called 'The Great Game'. This battle of wits was played out in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries between the expansionist British in India and the expansionist Russians who sought domination and influence north of the Himalayas. F.M. Bailey was a British spy and one of the last protagonists of The Great Game. In *Mission to Tashkent* (1946), he is illustrated in many military guises as an Austrian, Serbian, and even a Russian. His clandestine work gave him many opportunities to pursue his hobby of butterfly collecting in this little-known remote area. Many of his original specimens were kindly presented to The Natural History Museum, although his personal collection is now held in the American Museum of Natural History, New York.

Over the course of 20 years I contributed towards the compilation of *A Catalogue of the Butterflies of the Afro-Tropical Region*, published in 1995. Much of the work involved was rather routine--it involved visiting The Natural History Museum library, checking the original references, the spellings, the dates of the specimens, etc. One wonderful aspect of the catalogue is the bibliography. The nineteenth-century publications about butterflies had fabulous titles, evocative of images of now-forgotten military men and colonial administrators: for instance, *On the Butterflies Obtained in Arabia and Somaliland by Captain Charles G. Nurse and Colonel J. W. Bury in 1894 and 1895, and On a Small Collection of Butterflies Made by Consul Sir Alfred Sharpe at Zomba,*

British Central Africa. These wonderful titles, many found in the *Proceedings of the Zoological Society*, greatly heightened and helped to define my previously unfocused interest. I began to wonder what would be necessary in order to reconstruct some of these amazing collections. The Natural History Museum collections are systematic--arranged by species. So when a collection is acquired, the specimens are identified and placed in the appropriate part of the collection. Thus, a small collection could end up scattered throughout any of the 10,000 drawers that make up the main butterfly collection. There are four prerequisites to recovering such specimens: a contemporary taxon list, a unique collection marker (a collection when registered is given a number that is attached to each individual specimen), an up-to-date catalogue, and a willing source of labour!

We then chose the collection that we wanted to reconstruct as a test of feasibility-- *A List of the Butterflies Collected by William Bonny on the Journey with Mr Stanley from Yambuya on the Aruwimi River, through the Great Forest of Central Africa with Description of Nine New Species*. The account of this collection was written by Henley Grose-Smith in 1890. Our expectation was that this material would have passed to J.J. Joicey and then to ourselves as part of the Joicey Bequest.

At this point in the story I would like to introduce Emin Pasha. Emin Pasha was a German, born Edward Schnitzer in 1840. He died in Africa in 1892 in a gruesome manner--by partial decapitation. A very talented child, he was born into a typical middle-class German family in Oppeln, at that time in Silesia. He qualified in medicine and had a particular aptitude for languages. He later became involved in the Turkish Diplomatic Service, and it was there that he adopted the name Emin. Pasha was in fact his rank in the Turkish Diplomatic Service. Early on in his career he was known as Emin Bey, Bey being a lower rank. In 1875 he was stationed in Khartoum in Sudan where he secured the post of Chief Medical Officer for the southern Sudanese province of Equatoria, which eventually was to lead to his appointment as governor of the province. This was the period of the Mahdhist revolt against outside domination of the Sudan, led by Mohammed Ahmed (1848-85), which climaxed with the death of General Charles George Gordon at Khartoum. As a result of the revolt, Emin Pasha's governorship of the province of Equatoria was very much perceived as the last vestige of European influence in a darkening region. In Britain his plight was the talking point of the day. Under public pressure a relief expedition was hurriedly put together under the leadership of Henry Morton Stanley in order to secure Emin Pasha's safe retreat from Equatoria.

Instead of taking the obvious route, a dash westwards from the east coast of Africa, Stanley decided to approach Sudan from the west. There were probably two reasons for this. First, the Kabaka of Buganda (a rather mercurial character who at the least provocation would declare open season for missionary hunting), blocked his route from the east. Second, Stanley had earlier in his career continued David Livingstone's exploratory work in Africa. On a previous expedition he had travelled up the Lualaba River, thinking that it was a tributary of the Nile. The river surprised him by taking a sharp turn to the left, eventually flowing into the Congo River which Stanley then traced through to the sea. This had been one of the great expeditions, opening up the previously unknown heart of Africa. So, Stanley was familiar with the western route, albeit in the opposite direction.

Detail from map of Equatoria in the 1880s. In present day terms it embraces southern Sudan, extreme north-eastern Congo and north-western Uganda.

In January 1887 Stanley set off for Zanzibar. Here, he raised his expedition and then shipped it round the Cape, to the mouth of the Congo and up the Congo River. The logistics were ill

conceived. No plans had been made for provisioning the men, who numbered about 700, so they were forced to live off the land--a land that was already ravaged by famine. The expedition eventually ground to a halt at the village of Yambuya on a tributary of the Congo, the Aruwimi River. The expedition camped here for some time but the men's health was deteriorating.

Stanley decided to lead an advance column to Lake Albert, but it took some six months to force a route through the Ituri Forest. Of the 400 men who set off with him, fewer than half actually survived the journey. The rear column, having been stationed at Yambuya, followed on and exacerbated the tragedy; only 60 of the 270 men in this second group survived. Eventually, Stanley escorted Emin Pasha out of Equatoria, but at home there was a huge outcry at the loss of life, which resulted in this being the last of the large scale, military-style, British colonial expeditions. It was on the terrible march of the rear column that William Bonny, one of Stanley's officers, collected the butterflies that were subsequently described in Grose-Smith's 1890 work. It is not easy to imagine the hardship and difficulties under which the butterflies were collected. Sadly, we were fairly unsuccessful in finding the material. We located the specimens representing the nine new species mentioned in Grose-Smith's title but the rest of the material could not be found.

The Royal Entomological Society of London

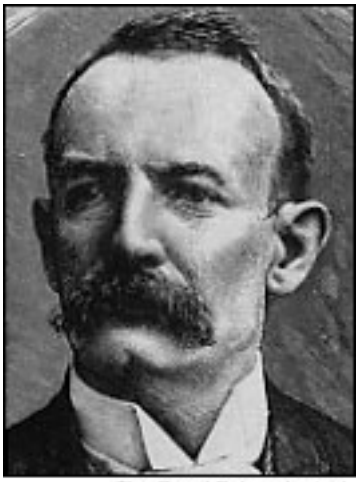
Henry Morton Stanley 1841-1904, explorer and journalist.

Of the new species, one was named *Cymothoe bonnyi* in honour of its collector, William Bonny. Another of the new species, *Hypolimnas stanleyi*, honoured Henry Morton Stanley. His second-in-command, Edmund Barttelot, is similarly commemorated by *Hypolimnas bartelotti* (unfortunately misspelled by Grose-Smith). Barttelot was mentally unstable, probably a paranoid schizophrenic. He was involved in the sort of tragic episode that characterises a lot of British exploration in Africa. Having been driven to distraction by the singing of a native woman, he struck her in a moment of madness. The woman's husband then murdered Barttelot in revenge, and was in turn hanged for the crime.

The Royal Entomological Society of London

Edmund Musgrave Barttelot 1859-88. Major, 7th Fusiliers and Stanley's second-in-command.

William Bonny is buried in London only two miles from The Natural History Museum, and the butterflies he collected, in the military plot at Brompton Cemetery. Where is the remaining material that we couldn't find? Joicey was very generous in his lifetime and gave away specimens, so it is unlikely that the museum received all the material from this collection. I suspect that it went to other museums and collections in the UK. Recently, I was looking through the material bequeathed to the museum by John Levick in the 1940s. In this collection I found, quite by chance, a few more specimens of the species *Cymothoe bonnyi* bearing identical labels to those characteristic of the William Bonny collection.

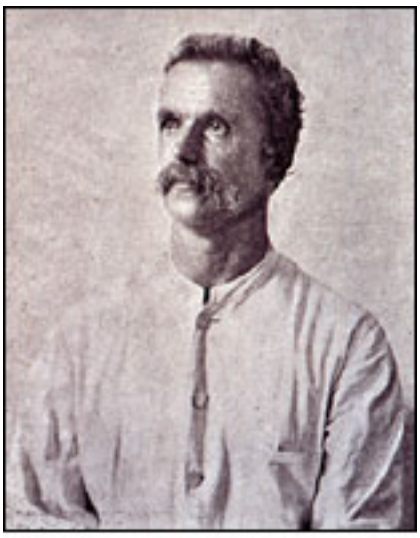


William Bonny ?-1899. Army Medical Staff Corps and explorer.

Not unduly discouraged by this partial failure, it was decided to further pursue collection reconstruction using a collection made by Emin Pasha himself, building on the background we had already established. We again had an original list, A.G. Butler's *On the Lepidoptera* received from Dr Emin Pasha (1888). This time, we were much more successful, finding 184 butterfly specimens representing 75 of the 128 species on the list.

Much of the material originated in two localities: Lado in southern Sudan, and Wadelai in present day Uganda. But by far the most interesting specimens were acquired on a short expedition to the Monbuttu area (in present-day Congo) about 100 miles to the west, where the butterfly fauna is remarkably different from that of Lado and Wadelai. It is obvious from contemporary accounts that various authors readily appreciated the importance of Monbuttu material. The Monbuttu mammal account lists 28 species, 16 of which were, until that time, regarded as being exclusively west African species. This represents a 1,000 mile eastward extension of the then known ranges for west African species, and contrasts very strongly with the situation in nearby Wadelai and Lado where there was no evidence of a west African influence.

The localities of the butterfly captures were readily traced in one of the standard books on Emin Pasha, Schweinfurth's *Emin Pasha in Central Africa* (1888). The book includes a gazetteer and maps. However, there are some significant discrepancies with respect to the dates on the specimens. Emin Pasha's movements are well documented and in some cases do not correlate with the information on the specimen labels. As such records are relied upon heavily in research, it would be unfortunate if their accuracy was proved doubtful. I believe that the main indications of their true origins lie in the curious labelling on some of the specimens. Some obviously came from trading stations such as Gadda station and Bauri station, but the spellings on the specimen labels are Italian--Stazione Gadda and Stazione Bauri. Records show that on his outward journey, Emin Pasha was accompanied by the Italian Major Gaetano Casati, who undoubtedly remained in the Monbuttu area long after Emin's return to Lado. So Casati certainly had the opportunity to collect the problematical material. In his own travelogue, Casati states, when discussing a new species of *Hyrax* that he caught: 'I caused the skin to be taken off and be sent to Emin Pasha with numerous other mammals, birds and butterflies'. It's unfortunate that when this beautiful new *Hyrax* was figured and described, Casati was forced into the background and the species named *Dendrohyrax emini* as if Emin Pasha had been responsible for discovering and collecting it. With the discovery that Casati almost certainly collected the problematic material, then the localities become believable. So, a knowledge of the history of a collection can be instrumental in resolving problems that would otherwise cast doubts upon specimen data.



Major Gaetano Casati.

In major natural history museums, the study of systematics, or derivations from systematics, holds sway. This encourages the view that specimens are just the units of information that facilitate science, a rather different balance than that usually associated with more conventional cultural collections. The historical perspective has become largely lost. Perhaps The Natural History Museum's *Voyages of Discovery* exhibition in 2000 was the first sign of a reverse swing in the proverbial pendulum. By their nature, such exhibitions demand the location of authentic historical material, and we have demonstrated that reconstructing historical collections need not be an impossibility. But we still have a long way to go before we can match, for instance, Art Academia in which the history of art is a subject it its own right. For example, the art collection of the Courtauld Gallery functions as the history-of-art study collection of the University of London, certainly indicative of a profile that the history of natural history does not yet come close to matching.

Books:

Title: Footsteps in the Jungle : Adventures in the Scientific Exploration of the American Tropics
Format: Hardcover
Author: Maslow, Jonathan Evan
Date: 01-OCT-96
ISBN: 1566631378

Title: Bright Paradise
Format: Paperback
Author: Raby, Peter
Date: 01-FEB-98
ISBN: 0691048436

Title: Papillon
Format: Paperback
Author: Charriere, Henri
Date: 01-JUL-01
ISBN: 0060934794