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Letters from Thomas Reedy to Sir William Macarthur, during the Chevert Expedition of 1875

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Abstract: Thomas Reedy (1842-1929) was head gardener for Sir William Macarthur. In 1875, as an expeditionary member on the Chevert Expedition, he collected plants from islands in the Great Barrier Reef, the Torres Strait and New Guinea for Macarthur. Three surviving letters to his employer, Sir William Macarthur, are introduced, transcribed and minimally annotated.

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Introduction

In 1875, Sir William Macleay financed and led a scientific expedition to New Guinea; the first scientific expedition from Australia to a foreign shore (Fulton 2012). The expedition was considered enormously successful in scientific circles obtaining roughly 1,000 birds, 800 fish, many reptiles, mammals, insects, spiders, marine molluscs and ethnographic objects (Macleay 1875a; Fulton 2012; 2016a; 2018). The expedition is commonly referred to as the Chevert expedition following the name of the ship *Chevert* that carried the expeditioners (Fulton and Bialek 2018). There were also three plant collectors sent by Sir William Macarthur. Thomas Reedy was the most senior of these three and was the head gardener at *Camden Park*, the family estate of the Macarthurs southwest of Sydney. He had worked at *Camden Park* since 1854, retiring in 1926 (Fulton 2016b). Reedy collected assiduously and was mentioned several times by Sir William Macleay in his personal journal of the expedition (Macleay 1875b). Reedy and the other plant collectors collected 800-1000 living plants, in addition to an unknown number of seeds, and at least 157 dried specimens, the latter were sent to Baron Ferdinand von Mueller, in Melbourne (Macarthur 1875; Fulton 2016b).

The zoology and anthropology of the Chevert expedition have been frequently discussed in the literature (e.g. Fletcher 1893; 1929; Ramsay 1877; Fulton 2001; 2016b; 2012 and references therein; 2017a; 2017b; Davies 2007) while Reedy's botanical collections have been comparatively ignored. This lack of reporting surely stems from the dearth of reference material available to researchers. Beyond Mueller's Descriptive Notes on Papuan Plants I (Mueller 1875) and the recent publication of dried specimens collected by Reedy on the expedition (Fulton 2016b) and John Dowe's report on Macarthur's Palm *Ptychosperma macarthurii* (H.Wendl. ex H.J.Veitch) H.Wendl. ex Hook.f. (Dowe 2007), there is little to report and less to discuss.

However, three hand-written letters by Thomas Reedy were detected in the archives of the Mitchell Library, in Sydney. All three were addressed to Reedy's employer Sir William Macarthur and reported some of Reedy's collections along with minor ecological notes. The first two letters were addressed from the "Ship Chevert" and dated May 30, 1875 and June 12, 1875; they briefly discussed Reedy's collecting efforts on islands in the Great Barrier Reef. The third was sent from "Somerset", which was the final government outpost near the tip of Cape York and dated June 25, 1875. This letter provided more commentary with Reedy thinking of matters at home and promising to make good inventory of what will soon be collected in New Guinea. It also welcomes the fresh goods sent by Macarthur to the expeditioners, which arrived by the mail steamer at Somerset. These letters carry minimal information on the plants collected, but report some sense of Reedy's feelings and thoughts at the time. In all letters, Reedy sounds enthusiastic about what he has collected and seen. The letters provide a little more information on what was collected—where and when. Yet surely their greatest value lies in reporting the thoughts, feelings and emotions of one of the lesser known and less famous members of the

expedition. Such letters add a human context to what would otherwise be merely botanical and historical data.

The letters have been carefully transcribed below. They are annotated with current species names following the Australian Plant Census (APC), and where appropriate annotated with concise commentary and references. Additions and changes to Reedy's letters are placed within square brackets, although some minor and punctuation changes have been incorporated to improve the overall readability of the letters. Copies of Thomas Reedy's original handwritten letters are given as Appendix 1, because his handwriting may convey a sense of emotion through inflections that type cannot. The original letters may also be read and interpreted contrarily by different researchers.

The Letters

Ship Chevert

May 30th 75

My dear Sir William we have had a very pleasant passage up to this time and I have not been sea sick. We are all of us very comfortable and well provided for. Mr Macleay is kind to us. We went ashore on Friday at Percy Island No. 2, the vegetation on that island and the surrounding islands are very poor. I found a terrestrial orchid, which I think is new. I got 2 plants of it, the flower stem is from 12 to 18 inches in height and from 20 to 30 flowers on the stem, thick fleshy tubers about the size of a man's finger. I gave Capt. Onslow a flower to send you. I hope things are going on well at Camden.

I am, dear Sir William, your humble Servant Thomas Reedy.

Ship Chevert

June 12th 75

My dear Sir William we called at several of the islands as we came along but did not go on to the mainland, which I am sorry for as I think there would be some things to be had. Most of the islands are full of *Dendrobium undulatum* [*Durabaculum undulatum* (R.Br.) M.A.Clem. & D.L.Jones; *Dendrobium undulatum* R.Br. is an illegitimate name. Various varieties have been named in the genus *Durabaculum* (Clements & Jones 2002)] some of the plants from 4 to 6 feet in height – the vegetation on those islands are nearly alike. I got some few seeds of different things and also some plants for drying, which I find very difficult to dry at sea more so when the days are damp. I have packed 3 casks and 1 close[d] box with plants which I hope the mail steamer will take tomorrow as we are going to meet it on our way with the steam launch. I have not labelled the plants but I keep a memo of them. The small casks are filled with a dendrobium from Barrow Island. This is a lovely orchid something like *Dendrobium monanthum* [*Dendrobium monanthum* Teijsm. & Binn. (from IPNI 2019): here Reedy refers to a plant, which is not native to Australia.] in colour and size of flower except much stronger in growth and several flower spikes a stem, from 12 to 20 flowers on the stem, it looks

charming in flower. I got all I could of it. I should liked to have got more but we did not stay long at that island. It is found on the bare rocks exposed to much heat and dryness, it is possible that it may be *Dendrobium bigibbum* [*Vappodes bigibba* (Lindl. & Paxton) M.A.Clem. & D.L.Jones], but I cannot say for certain [A dried specimen of this species from Cape Grenville, collected by Reedy, is in the National Herbarium of Victoria MEL 624057A (Fulton 2016b, p 61)]. The large cask contains *Dendrobium undulatum* [*Durabaculum undulatum* (R.Br.) M.A.Clem. & D.L.Jones] and *Bolbophyllum* sp. [orthographic variant of *Bulbophyllum* Thouars nom. cons.] from Fitzroy Island and a few of the dendrobium from Barrow Island. I daresay you will not care for *D. undulatum* nor the *Bolbophyllum* but I thought they would do for exchange with some of the people at Sydney. The close[d] box contains *Drynaria quercifolia* [*Drynaria quercifolia* (L.) J.Sm.] and ——— large variety very handsome in growth and also a small fern which I have seen before. *Bletia* [*Bletia* is a genus in Orchidaceae] from Palm Island growing in black soil and much shaded this I [have] not seen before. Terrestrial orchid from Percy Island this is very pretty indeed and some plants growing on the *Acrostichum grande* [the fern, *Platyserium superbum* de Jonch. & Hennipman.], which I do not know. Please to have the casks opened on the end that the label is on; one cannot pack plants on board ship the same as on land but I hope they will reach you safe.

Somerset

June 25th 75

Dear Sir William

I have just received your kind letters it has given me great pleasure to hear from you, at the same time I am very sorry that you should have had so much trouble with the tank and that there has been another flood at Camden. I have not read all your letters as we start early tomorrow for New Guinea. I shall keep account of every thing that I get at New Guinea. I am happy to hear that Sir George Macleay is taking such interest in getting plants for you sir and also to hear that Mr Stephens has not forgotten you altogether. I did not sow all the seed of *Kentia wendlandiana* [*Hydriastele wendlandiana* (F.Muell.) H.Wendl. & Drude] it is to be found on the loft in a brandy case in the shed packed with light soil, the seeds may not be good as they are a long time exposed. I shall send you account of every thing that I get at New Guinea should I get a chance to do so, we have just landed the oranges [& etc] they will be most acceptable. I enclose a flower of dendrobium from Cape York it is not dry but you may have a chance to see it. I hope to be able to dry this flower. I have sent you a lot of plants of it [A dried specimen of *Dendrobium rigidum* R.Br., collected by Reedy from near Somerset, is in the National Herbarium of Victoria MEL 624409A (Fulton 2016b, p 61)]. I am very glad that Mr Sanderson devotes so much of his time at Camden Park. I trust by the time of our arrival at Camden at least my home that you Sir William will have a fine lot of plants from England and that we shall bring with us a fine collection of things from New Guinea for you sir. I shall take care of myself with the help of God. I thank

you for your kindness in looking after my wife and family. I wish you good bye Sir William.

Yours most obediently

Thomas Reedy.

I miss you very much Sir.

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APPENDIX 1

Thomas Reedy's Letters to Sir William Macarthur – copies of the original letters (Reedy 1875)

(State Library of New South Wales- Call Number A 2939 (CY 1004). Frame numbers 120-126).

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Ship Chevert
May 30th 45
My Dear Sir
William we have had
a very pleasant passage
up to this time
and I have not
been sea sick
we are all of us
very comfortable,
and well provided
for. Mr Maclean
is kind to us
we went ashore
on Friday at
Percy Island
No 2, the vegetation
on that Island
and the surrounding

islands are very
poor I found a
Terrestrial orchid
which I think is new
I got 2 plants of
it, the flower stem
is from 12 to 18 inches high
and from 20 to 30 flowers
on the stem, thick
fleshy Tubers about
the size of a mans
finger I kept
on slow a flower
to send you
I hope things are
going on well at
Camden I am Dear
Sir William your
humble ser^{vant} Thos Reedy

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Rudy - incomplete

Ship Chevert
June 12th 45

My Dear Sir William
we called at several
of the islands as we
came along but did
not go on to the main
land which I am sorry
for as I think there
would be some things
to be had most of the islands
are full of *Sandrobium*
undulatum some of the
plants from 4 to 6 feet
in high - the vegetation
on these ^{islands} are nearly alike
I got some few seeds of
different things and also
some plants for drying

which I find Very difficult
to dry at Sea More so
when the days are damp
I have packed 3 Caskets and
~~one~~ Close Box with plants
which I hope the Mail
Steamer will take
to morrow as we are
going to meet it on our
way with the Steam ~~mail~~
I have not labeled the
plants but I keep a
Memo of them
The small caskets are
filled with a *Dendrobium*
from Barrow island this
is a lovely orchid
Something like *Dendrobium*
monanthum in colour and
size of flower except

137
Much stronger in growth
and several flower spikes
a stem from 12 to 20 flowers
on the stem it looks
charming in flower
I got all I could of it
I should liked to have got
more but - we did not stay
long at that island it is found
on the bare rocks exposed
to much heat - and dryness
it is possible that it may
be *dendrobium digibbum*
but I cannot say for certain
the large case contains *dendro-*
bium undulatum and *Pollophyllum*
Sps from Fitzroy island
and a few of the *dendrobium*
from Barrow island I suppose
you will not care for *d. undulatum*

Not the Polypodium but I
thought they would do for exchange
with some of the people at Sydney
The close Box contains
dryneria Inureifolia and
—— large variety
Very handsome in growth
and also a small fern which
I have seen before Pletia
from palm island growing in
Black Soil and Much shade
this I not seen before Terrestrial
orchid from Percy island
this is very pretty indeed.
and some plants growing on
the acrostichum grande
which I do not know please
to have the Cases opened on
the end that the cable is on
we cannot pack plants on
Board Ship the same as on
land but I hope they will reach
you safe

139
Somerset

June 25th 75

Dear Sir

William

I have just received
your kind letters it
has giving me great
pleasure to hear from
you at the same
time I am very sorry
that you should have
had so much trouble
with the Sunk and
that there has been
another flood at
Camden I have not
read all your letters
as we start early tomorrow
for New Guinea I shall
keep account of every

140
thing that I get - at
New Guinea - I am
happy to hear that
Sir George Macleay
is taking such interest
in getting plants for
you Sir, and also
to hear that ^{Mr} Stephens
has not forgotten you
all to gether. I did
not sow all the seed
of *Rentia Newlandiana*
it is to ^{be} found on the left
in a Brandy ^{in the} Case ^{shed}
packed with light soil
the seeds may not be
good as they are along
time exposed I shall
send you account of
every thing that I get
at New Guinea should

41
I got a chance to do
so, we have just
landed the oranges &
they will be most acceptable
I Enclose a flower of
Dendrobium from
Cape York it is not
dry but you may
have a chance to
see it. I hope to dry
this flower ^{here} I have sent
you a lot of plants of it
~~I am Mr Sanderson~~
I am very glad that
Mr Sanderson devotes
so much of his time at
Camden Park, I trust
by the time of our
arrival at Camden
at least my home

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that you Sir William
 will have a fine lot of
 Plants from England,
 and that we shall
 bring with us a fine
 Collection of things from
 New Guinea for you Sir,
 I shall take care of
 My self with the help of God
 I thank you for your
 Kindness, in looking
 after My wife & family
 I wish you Good
 By Sir William
 Yours Most Obediently
 Geo Reedy

I miss you very
 much Sir