

Ms. Gosse, Philip Henry, 1810-1888
Coll. 1859-1886, correspondence
00494 Naturalist, Author

Philip Henry Gosse papers

Extent: 1 box (6.5 centimetres)

Correspondence list

7 folders:

1. Gosse to Mrs. N. Watrefield, ALS, August 5, 1886
2. Gosse, 3 miscellaneous ALS and 1 fragment
3. Gosse to Lloyd on Sea Urchins, May 31, 1859
4. Gosse to J. W. Hardman – 6.29.1885 – Prospectus Seaside Trip, ALS
5. Gosse to unknown recipient, re: book orders, ALS
6. Gosse to Thomas Rymer-Jones, 7/5/59, ALS
7. Gosse to Stebbing and copy letter to Turner, ALS, 20 April 1877

Biographical entry from Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Online
(www.oxforddnb.com):

Gosse, Philip Henry (1810–1888), zoologist and religious writer, was born on 6 April 1810 at the High Street, Worcester, the second of four children of Thomas Gosse (1765–1844) a mezzotint engraver and itinerant painter of miniature portraits, and Hannah Best (1780–1860), who before her marriage had been a domestic servant. His childhood was spent in Poole, Dorset, where at an early age he demonstrated a marked enthusiasm for natural history which was encouraged by his aunt Susan Gosse (1750–1829), who was herself a gifted naturalist. After attending local schools, including Blandford grammar school in 1823–4, he began work as a junior clerk. In June 1827 he was indentured with the firm Slade, Elson & Co. of Carbonear, Newfoundland. There he developed further his interest in natural history. In 1832 he returned to England and during the voyage underwent a religious experience that was to determine the course of the rest of his life. On his return to Carbonear he joined the Methodist Society and became friends with an emigrant couple from Liverpool, Mr and Mrs Jaques, who had an important influence on the development of his religious views.

At this time Gosse also decided to professionalize his interest in natural history and to this end he began a careful documentation of the entomology of Newfoundland. The result was his ‘Entomologia Terrae Novae’, which although still unpublished is today of scientific importance as a valuable historical record of the distribution of the insects in

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On 21 June 1835 Gosse left Carbonear together with the Jaqueses to settle in Lower Canada, where they planned to set up an agricultural co-operative. Their plans, however, were doomed to failure for none of them had any farming experience and the land was poor. The farm of 110 acres which they purchased jointly for £100 was situated near the village of Waterville, 1 mile north of Compton in the county of Sherbrooke in the Eastern townships. They quickly discovered that they had made a mistake in moving to Lower Canada, yet despite the considerable hardships incurred Gosse was able to maintain his optimism. Indeed, the outdoor life served to stimulate his passion for natural history, and he became known locally as ‘that crazy Englishman who goes about collecting bugs’ (Fyles, *Canadian Entomologist*, 17). During the long winter months he wrote up his scientific observations, which he submitted to the Literary and Historical Society of Quebec, and he supplemented his income by teaching in the Compton village school.

In March 1838 Gosse sold his part of the farm and left for the United States where he hoped to secure a teaching position. He visited the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia where he met the palaeontologist T. A. Conrad, who suggested that he should go to Alabama where there was a shortage of schoolmasters; accordingly, on 18 April 1838, Gosse departed aboard the schooner *White Oak* for Mobile. On his arrival in Alabama he secured a position in a small school in the village of Mount Pleasant, just north of Clairborne, but his stay there was unhappy, largely on account of the widespread abuse of slaves; he was particularly disturbed by the attitude of the local Methodist community in their strong defence of slavery. The upshot was that he decided to return to England, and on 6 January 1839 he left Mobile.

On his arrival in England, Gosse applied to the Methodist church to train as a full-time evangelist but was turned down on account of his age. He moved to London where he obtained dismal lodgings in Drury Lane and, desperate for money, trudged the streets selling his paintings. For a time things looked very bleak but towards the end of 1839 his fortunes changed when he took over a small day school in Hackney and a manuscript he had written of his Canadian experiences was accepted by the publisher Van Voorst. The book was published the following year with the title *The Canadian Naturalist: a Series of Conversations on the Natural History of Lower Canada*. It received widespread praise and although it was written in an archaic format it none the less demonstrated a freshness of style. It is important today as it reveals that Gosse had a practical grasp of the importance of conservation, far ahead of his time.

In October 1844 Gosse left London aboard the *Caroline* for Jamaica, where he intended to work as a professional collector for the dealer Hugh Cuming. In all he spent eighteen months on the island, this being the most productive and happy period of his life. He lived at Bluefields, near Savanna la Mar, then the centre of Moravian missionary activity, and to help him he engaged a young West Indian, Samuel Campbell (1827–1892), with whom he formed a successful collecting partnership. At this time he also collaborated with the naturalist Richard Hill (1795–1872) of Spanish Town.

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Gosse left Jamaica on 26 June 1846 and on his return to London set about writing up his work. The result was the trilogy *The Birds of Jamaica* (1847), *Illustrations to the Birds of Jamaica* (1848–9), and *A Naturalist's Sojourn in Jamaica* (1851). The latter is considered to be his finest work. It is written in a congenial style and firmly established his reputation both as a naturalist and a writer. Today, Gosse is still remembered in Jamaica where he is referred to as the ‘father of Jamaican ornithology’ and there is a bird club named after him.

In 1843 Gosse was introduced by William Berger to a small group of Christians known as the Brethren who met weekly in his house in Hackney. It was at one of these meetings that he met Emily Bowes (1806–1857) an established writer of evangelical tracts, whom he married on 22 November 1848. She had a profound influence on the development of his religious views. Their marriage proved extremely happy and on 21 September 1849 she gave birth to their only child, Edmund William Gosse.

During the following years Gosse produced a succession of highly successful books on natural history, but the considerable overwork this entailed led to a breakdown in his health and he was advised to leave London for the country. Early in 1852 he settled in Torquay, then later in that year he moved to Ilfracombe. It was here he wrote *A Naturalist's Rambles on the Devonshire Coast*, published in 1853, which brought before the public the science of marine biology, and was partly responsible for the sea-shore craze of the mid-Victorian period. (As the famous, eccentric, and deeply religious Devon naturalist, he is the model for Theophilus Hopkins in Peter Carey's prize-winning novel *Oscar and Lucinda*, 1988.) In May 1853 he helped establish the first public aquarium in Regent's Park and later that year constructed one of the first domestic glass aquariums. The following year he published *The Aquarium* which triggered a second craze to sweep through Victorian society.

Much of Gosse's success was due to the fact that he was essentially a field naturalist who was able to impart to his readers something of the thrill of studying living animals at first hand rather than the dead disjointed ones of the museum shelf. In addition to this he was a skilled scientific draughtsman who was able to illustrate his books himself. Indeed the chromolithographic plates in *The Aquarium* and *Actinologia Britannica* (1860) were prepared from his own watercolours and were a major advance in natural history book illustration intended for the mass market.

In 1856 Gosse was elected FRS, and was now the leading popularizer of natural history in the country. However, in April tragedy struck when Emily Gosse discovered she had breast cancer. After much deliberation and prayer they opted for treatment by the American physician Jesse Weldon Fell (1819–1890); he claimed to have discovered a non-surgical cure for this disease, but it proved disastrous, and on 10 February 1857 Emily died after much suffering. Gosse wrote of the episode in a small monograph entitled *A Memorial of the Last Days on Earth of Emily Gosse*, a curious work originally intended for private circulation, which reveals much of Gosse's character and is today of considerable interest to the medical historian. At some time in 1857 Gosse became alarmed by the extent to which many scientists were taking the developmental theory, yet

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he could not deny the scientific evidence which indicated that the earth was far older than had been previously believed. His precipitate action was to publish, *Omphalos: an Attempt to Untie the Geological Knot*, which he hoped would reconcile geology with the biblical account of creation and so halt the decline into apostasy. In it he proposed the universal law of prochronism, and argued that the earth had been created with fossils already in the rocks, giving it a false appearance of age, just as Adam would have had a navel, indicating an apparent past (*omphalos* is the Greek for navel) although it had never been attached to an umbilical cord. Although *Omphalos* was widely reviewed, it was none the less universally condemned by both Christians and evolutionists alike. Gosse, however, stood firm and in 1866 issued a supplement entitled *Geology and God: which?*, in which he reaffirmed the prochronism hypothesis and replied to one of the main objections, namely that his theory implied God to be *Deus quidam deceptor*. Then in 1872 he again publicly defended *Omphalos* and wrote: 'Many have sneered at it (an easy process!) but I have not yet met with a single adversary who accepting my postulates have convicted me of non-sequitur' (*English Mechanic and World of Science*, 24 May 1872, 255). He claimed he had been greatly misunderstood, which is probably true (for it is clear he had never intended to defend a narrowly literalist interpretation of Genesis), but the damage had been done and his reputation had been ruined. To add to this *Omphalos* was a huge financial loss, but he bore this stoically and with good humour, for on 8 May 1869 he instructed his publisher Van Voorst to remainder the book and wrote: 'will you please arrange it: they will probably offer you as an old fox more than one whom they consider a Goose' ('Correspondence book of P. H. Gosse', privately held).

On 23 September 1857 Gosse moved to Sandhurst, St Marychurch, on the outskirts of Torquay. Soon afterwards he established an independent chapel in Fore Street, where for almost three decades he ministered to a congregation of about a hundred. On 18 December 1860 he married at the Zion Chapel, Frome, a Quaker spinster, Eliza Brightwen (1813–1900). She was a kind, tolerant woman who shared his interest in natural history as well as having considerable skills as a watercolourist. In 1864 she received a substantial inheritance and this gave Gosse the financial security he had previously lacked.

In addition to his scientific writing Gosse wrote widely on religious matters, his publications ranging from evangelical tracts to a history of the Jewish people. He was particularly interested by biblical prophecy and on this subject he published several fascinating monographs including *The Revelation* (1866). For relaxation he grew orchids and in his latter years took up astronomy and landscape painting. Although often misunderstood Gosse was a man of great goodness of heart who, beneath an austere outward appearance, had genuine warmth and sensitivity. He had a good sense of humour and to his generosity there was a practical dimension. Throughout his life he had an optimistic outlook: 'Hope has always been strong in me', he recalled (P. H. Gosse, CUL, Add. MS 7017, 212). He had good health and was physically strong. In March 1888 he suffered a heart attack; although he recovered, from then on his health gradually declined and he died at his home on 23 August that year. He was buried in the Torquay cemetery.

L. R. Croft