

Mueller, Politics and the Purchase of Sonder's Herbarium

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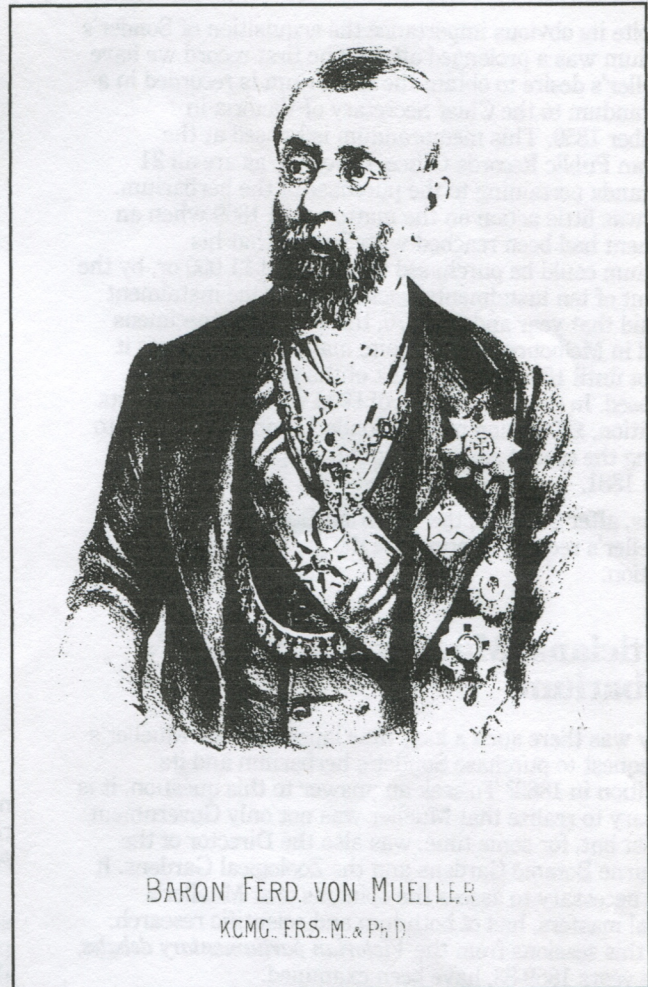
Ferdinand Mueller was appointed Government Botanist of Victoria in 1853, a position he retained until his death in 1896. A few days after his appointment he commenced his first collecting trip, a journey of more than 2 500 kilometres through eastern Victoria. He returned to Melbourne with a collection generally considered to be the foundation of what is now known as the National Herbarium of Victoria (MEL). Today the MEL collections are of great importance to botanists, specifically plant taxonomists, and most of the credit for this must go to Mueller. He actively encouraged botanical exploration within Australia and also obtained non-Australian plant specimens from donations, through exchange programs with overseas herbaria, and by the purchase of collections. Mueller was so successful at amassing specimens that in 1888 he could boast that 'no region of the globe is unrepresented in the Melbourne Herbarium, and this often by original material not extant in many other places nor now obtainable anywhere' (*Gard. Chron.* 4:211-12, 1888). During his term of office Mueller also published over 1 000 scientific articles and described, as new, about 2 000 plant species.

When a plant is described and named for the first time the collections upon which the taxonomist bases his description are referred to as *type* specimens. Therefore, type specimens are of great importance as they establish the application of a name. Not surprisingly, numerous type specimens of species described by Mueller are housed at MEL. As a result of Mueller's active pursuit of herbarium material from both home and abroad, MEL has many thousands of such collections. Today's plant taxonomist, to ensure stability in the naming of plants, must be able to examine type specimens. It is this fact that helps makes MEL a most important herbarium, not just nationally but internationally.

Because of the importance of type specimens it is essential that taxonomists know at which herbaria such collections are housed. With this in mind I prepared a paper for the botanical history symposium held in Melbourne, May 1988 and organised by the Australian Systematic Botany Society (ASBS). The paper documented the private collections that had been purchased for MEL, both during and after Mueller's reign as Government Botanist. In the presented paper I limited myself to speaking on the German botanist Otto Sonder, his private herbarium and its contents, the acquisition of Sonder's herbarium by the Victorian Government, and two related subjects - the political perception of Mueller and the political perception of the value of scientific research. The following is an abridged version of that paper, which will be published in its entirety, and with full references, in the symposium proceedings.

Sonder and his Herbarium

Otto Wilhelm Sonder (1812-81) was a German botanist who qualified as an apothecary in Berlin in 1835. For more than 30 years he was the proprietor of a large pharmaceutical establishment in Hamburg. He devoted much of his spare time to botany and his publications included a flora of Hamburg, accounts of the Algae and the families Epacridaceae and Styliidiaceae in Lehmann's



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Plantae Preissianae (an enumeration of the plants, mainly collected by Ludwig Preiss, in the Swan River Colony) and description of many plant families in *Flora Capensis*. The latter work, on southern African plants, was co-edited by Sonder and the Irish botanist, William Harvey.

Sonder had an enormous private herbarium. In fact, it was too large for a private individual to handle alone and as he could not afford to employ a curator, he made it available for purchase during his lifetime. The bulk of the herbarium was purchased by MEL in 1883 and Mueller's estimates of its size varied from about a quarter to a third of a million specimens. (In 1894 Mueller suggested that MEL had a total of about one million specimens, which highlights the importance of Sonder's herbarium.)

Sonder's herbarium embraced all major plant groups and contains specimens of species that would otherwise not be represented at MEL. This alone makes it a useful acquisition but its great value comes from the fact that it contains thousands of autographic specimens (type and other collections named by authors of species). Arthur Court, a former MEL botanist, previously noted (*Muelleria* 2 : 188, 1972) some of the major components of Sonder's herbarium at MEL. He suggested that the algae were the most important part of the collection, containing type specimens of species named, not just by Sonder, but by

the renowned phycologists C.A. Agardh and W.H. Harvey. Other important collections included several thousand specimens from J.G.C. Lehmann (another Hamburg botanist and editor of the *Plantae Preissianae* mentioned previously), and large numbers of South African and South American plants.

Acquisition of Sonder's Herbarium

Despite its obvious importance the acquisition of Sonder's herbarium was a prolonged affair. The first record we have of Mueller's desire to obtain the herbarium is recorded in a memorandum to the Chief Secretary of Victoria in November 1859. This memorandum is housed at the Victorian Public Records Office, Laverton, as are all 21 memoranda pertaining to the purchase of the herbarium. There was little action on the matter until 1869 when an agreement had been reached with Sonder that his herbarium could be purchased for a total of £1 000 or, by the payment of ten instalments, each of £120. One instalment was paid that year and, in 1870, three cases of specimens arrived in Melbourne. But despite many more requests it was not until 1883 that the bulk of the herbarium was purchased. In that year a sum of £900 was allocated for its acquisition, £800 being paid to Sonder's widow and £100 to covering the cost of packaging and transport; Sonder had died in 1881.

Thus, after 24 years, the Victorian Government acceded to Mueller's request to purchase the great Sonderian Collection.

Politicians, Mueller and Sonder's Herbarium

Why was there such a long time lapse between Mueller's first request to purchase Sonder's herbarium and its acquisition in 1883? To seek an answer to this question, it is necessary to realize that Mueller was not only Government Botanist but, for some time, was also the Director of the Melbourne Botanic Gardens and the Zoological Gardens. It is also necessary to assess the opinions that Mueller's political masters, had of both him and scientific research. To do this sessions from the *Victorian parliamentary debates*, for the years 1859-83, have been examined.

In 1857, when he became Director, Mueller had under his control not just the Botanic Gardens, but also an area encompassing the Domain and Government House Reserve. Mueller introduced a series of planting schemes, including experimental planting programs, and developed, among other things, a formal systems garden (Pescott 1982). However, after 1864 there was considerable discontent with Mueller's handling of the development of the Gardens. Mueller's concept of a garden, one with a scientific and educational role, did not incorporate sweeping lawns, amenity beds and beautiful vistas; it was not the botanic park desired by the public. Perhaps as a result of the public outcry William Ferguson, a regional inspector of forests, was appointed as 'Curator of the Botanic Gardens and Inspector of Forests' in 1869 (Pescott 1982). There was considerable conflict between Mueller and Ferguson and in August 1871, during parliamentary debates concerning the Gardens, there were accusations that Mueller had at one stage hid in the shrubbery to listen to a private conversation between Ferguson and a third party. Mueller was also accused of failing to render assistance to an ill person taken by Ferguson to the botanic museum. However, various politicians expressed general approval of Mueller. One suggested that Ferguson should be transferred 'to another scene of action, where he would not interfere with the proceedings of Dr Mueller, a gentleman who, although perhaps absurdly sensitive as to what some people cared



Specimen from Sonder's herbarium.

nothing at all about - empty honours - had nevertheless rendered the most important services to science' (*Victorian parliamentary debates* 1871, p. 982).

With regard to Mueller's scientific services similar sentiments were expressed about a year later when it was proposed that Mueller should be given exclusive control of the 78 acres forming the Botanic Gardens, with the Domain being handed over 'to a competent landscape gardner'.

A more or less favourable response to Mueller at this stage is not surprising. For his scientific achievements he had gained, in 1867, an hereditary Barony from the King of Württemberg. But not all members were happy with Mueller, as shown by the following citations from Messrs Johnstone, Vale, Hanna and Cohen respectively (from *Victorian parliamentary debates* 1872, pp. 1208-1210):

Whatever Baron von Mueller's scientific abilities might be, the Botanic-gardens were in a condition disgraceful to a man with any pretensions to science...their appearance was in no way creditable either to Melbourne or to the colony at large.

The baron was a first-rate botanist, but an absurd and crochety man in reference to landscape gardening.

If Baron von Mueller had paid as much attention for the last 10 or 15 years to his duties as he had for the last few days in looking after members of the House, he would have done far more good to the country. He had observed the baron flying about like a will-o'-the-wisp, and moaning and groaning to members of parliament...If he had charge of him, he would have dismissed him..Baron von Mueller had had his way too long.

The baron wanted supreme command and would

brook no control. If he could not have his own way, he tried to make out that he was a ruined man.

In the same debate Mr McLellan, a supporter of Mueller's (*Victorian parliamentary debates* 1872, p. 1210), said that:

The baron was a very good advocate of his own interest, and that, if he saw the baron coming along a street, he would turn back rather than meet him. At the same time, he objected to Baron von Mueller being treated in a way similar to that which had driven from the colony some twenty gentlemen whose talents could not be appreciated here, though they were appreciated elsewhere.

Another advocate of Mueller's, Mr Phillips, expressed similar sentiments in the following passage (*Victorian parliamentary debates* 1872, p. 1213):

The other night, when the galleries were cleared, the honourable gentleman at the head of the Government so far forgot himself as to imitate Baron von Mueller's broken English...It was unworthy of (the) Chief Secretary (J.G. Francis) to caricature a man possessing the high scientific attainments and European reputation of Baron von Mueller.

The following year Mueller lost his position as Director of the Botanic Gardens but retained the position of Government Botanist. In February 1876, when considering the vote for the Government Botanist there was considerable discussion in parliament on the value of Mueller's work. Many seemed to be impressed by Mueller's scientific achievements. Exceptions again included Mr Hanna (*Victorian parliamentary debates* 1876, p. 2326) who:

trusted that the Government would consider the propriety of at once and for ever laying this infernal ghost of Baron von Mueller, which for a very long time past had turned up every year in the most disagreeable form possible... Baron von Mueller might gain sufficient brass buttons and leather medals to fill a wheelbarrow, but, in his (Mr Hanna's) opinion, it was an absolute fraud on the country to retain him in any capacity.

In August of the same year the Chief Secretary, Mr J.A. MacPherson, was asked what the country would gain by employing Mueller at £800 per annum. In reply MacPherson alluded to the high standing of Mueller among the learned societies of Europe and expressed the wish 'that Victoria, in the pursuit of wealth, would not altogether forget the highest branches of knowledge which indirectly benefited to the country to a very large extent, although the result might not be seen directly' (*Victorian parliamentary debates* 1877, p. 499). Another member called for an explanation as to why the vote to the Government Botanist's department had increased on the previous year. In part reply, Mr D. Gaunson, member for Ararat, noted that (*Victorian parliamentary debates* 1877, p. 499):

One of the chief duties of Baron von Mueller appeared to be to produce a work on Australian plants which was distributed among a few societies and also among Members of Parliament, who as a rule, religiously pitched it upon the fire, for the reason that they were unable to understand it, and took not the slightest interest in it. Possibly it was one of the very best advertisements for Victoria that there was such a great scientific gun in the colony as the Baron. From that point of view, and after the nice little speech from the Chief Secretary as to the value of the Baron's services was it not desirable that he should be paid a decent salary.

Mr J. Woods, member for Collingwood, reminded parliament that the colony was in some financial difficulty. He (*Victorian parliamentary debates* 1877, p. 500) further added:

He had heard a great many vague statements as to the inestimable value of the department of the Government Botanist, but he could not see that it was of the slightest practical value in the colony. What plants were there in the colony which they did not know? He was speaking in a commercial sense. He quite admitted the great scientific attainments of Baron von Mueller, and the value of what the Baron might do to spread scientific knowledge, but to keep the department for that purpose, was in the present circumstances of the colony, a luxury which Victoria could not afford. He would therefore suggest that the Chief Secretary should transfer the whole of the department of the Government Botanist to New South Wales, the Government of which colony had a surplus...of money, and, consequently, could afford to maintain a department of this character.

Mueller retained his position and in 1883 he was again mentioned in parliament. On 10 April Mr J. Harris drew attention to the item of £900 for the purchase of Sonder's herbarium. He asked the then Chief Secretary, Mr G. Berry, what assurance had he of the value of the collection. Berry stated that the item had been placed on the estimates following the recommendation of Mueller and that, although he personally was 'inclined to strike out the item...in the interests of science, he held his hand' (*Victorian parliamentary debates* 1883, p. 161).

The parliamentary records reflect a number of aspects which affected Mueller's chances of procuring the Sonder herbarium. During the 24-year period there had been changes in both government and ministers responsible for his department. The long-term development of accord between departmental heads and ministers is not enhanced in such situations. The Colony of Victoria was also expanding rapidly. It is not difficult to see that instead of funding the purchase of a dried plant collection a government would be more likely to fund works which were seen to be critical for future development. This is particularly so in times of economic hardship - as alluded to above. It is also evident that Mueller was not just a successful scientist. He was also successful at antagonizing politicians; an achievement which would not have helped him win additional funding for any projects. Finally, the records suggest that, despite the statement that Sonder's herbarium was purchased 'in the interests of science', many Victorian politicians did not appreciate pure scientific research. And, if they did, in most cases it was probably more likely a result of Mueller's overseas standing than an appreciation arrived at through their own assessment of his work.

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