

Ellen Hutchins: James Townsend Mackay's letters to Ellen

Transcription of the six letters, made by Madeline Hutchins of the Ellen Hutchins Festival, from the originals held in the Archives of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

James Mackay, botanist at Trinity College Dublin to Ellen Hutchins, at Ballylickey, on the shores of Bantry Bay, West Cork

1. 10th September 1805 from Tralee (after his stay at Ballylickey with Ellen)

Tralee 10th September 1805

Miss Hutchins

Madam

*I enclose for you a small specimen of *Hymenophyllum alutum* [*Trichomanes speciosum*, Killarney Fern] in fruit, as I promised to you I would, I only found one in fructification the first time I found it which had not been seen before by any Botanist, but this time I have found about a dozen in that state.*

*The day I left Ballylickey I found the new Irish saxifrage by the side of the road before you pass the Priests Leap and in a bog at the foot of it on the Kenmare side when gathering specimens of *Sium verticillatum* which I had only once before seen in Ireland a species of *Ophrys* which I had never before found, it is at any rate new to Ireland & may perhaps be *Ophrys Loeselii* but I have no book with me at present where it is described. After spending a few days near Kenmare I went to Killarney, spent about a fortnight in exploring the mountains, islands in the lakes and other places about it in which time I have made several additions to our Irish Flora and one new to Britain.*

I arrived here yesterday from Dingle near to which I found several plants I had not before met with in this country; but for the last fortnight I have been very much annoyed by wet weather.

Tomorrow morning I intend setting out by Ardport to Ballylongford and cross the Shannon to the county of Clare and from thence proceed to the co. of Galway. - I hope

that the weather will favour me for a month longer – I found the Carex we got on Sugar Loaf when crossing the Priests Leap and took plants of it which I sent with some others from Killarney to Dublin; so that you need not ascend Sugar Loaf a second time in order to fetch it.

I measured several Arbutus trees in the Lough Island Lower Lake of Killarney of large dimensions, one of which a foot above the ground where it divides into four limbs measures 9 ½ feet in circumference & each of the branches above 3 ½ feet round. Height from the root to the extremity of the branches 36 feet – by this you will readily perceive that Killarney produces much larger Arbutus than Glengarriffe.

I hope that you will still continue to gather femeneach [Irish feamnach, seaweed] and that the Boat is nearly finished for your accommodation.

I remain

Madam

Your most [text missing]

servant

J T Mackay

N.B. I hope that you will have an opportunity of sending my specimens to Dublin before the middle of October.

2. James Mackay to Ellen Hutchins, 22 March 1806

Dublin 22 March 1806

I received your favour and also the box containing the plants and shells quite safe. I am very much obliged by your attention and now return the box you sent with some plants for your garden – most of them would look well upon your rock [at the side of Ellen's flower garden at Ballylickey] provided you have some good fresh earth to plant them in.

The two roses keep flowering for the most part of the season they may either be kept in pots of rich earth or planted out in your garden, they are hardy enough to stand our winters.

The Chrysanthemum is also pretty hardy and makes a beautiful appearance in November the general season of its flowering. It will last in flower till Christmas if the weather is not very severe — the stems should be cut over after flowering and if left in the open air a little litter put over the roots in winter if the frost is severe. Both it and the roses are readily propagated by cuttings.

The Cistus's are a beautiful tribe of plants and are all pretty hardy. Saldonella is rather tender and should be kept in a pot till you have more than one plant, when you can try it out.

I doubt not that the whole will thrive well under your fostering hand. I shall always be glad when in my power to add any plant you may wish for to your collection.

I thank you for your kind to [sic] offer to send me more sea plants, & am glad you find such amusement in collecting and examining them; but am afraid I give you too much trouble in drying and preparing them. Conferva gelatinosa is rather scarce, nor have I specimen well preserved.

The Ophrys paludosa was the plant I found in a marshy place by the right hand side of the road after crossing Priests Leap about two miles distant from Ashgrove.

The Antirrhinum repens I found on the refuse of an old slate quarry about a mile below the town of Bandon by the river side. Should you not get it I can send you a plant the next time I am sending any thing for you. I am just on the eve of setting out for Scotland, and hope to return in about four weeks. Should you send any specimens to 8 Park St. they will be kept for me. I intended to have sent you some other kinds of roses, but my hurry going off to Scotland prevents me at present. I beg that you may be assured how much

I am

Madam

Your most obliged and obedient humble servant

J T Mackay

Cistus populifolius

helianthimum var. minor

libanotis

ladanifinus [now ladanifer, Gum Cistus or rock rose]

roscus
mutabilis
laxus
anglicus

Saxifraga oppositifolia
sarmentosa [also *stolonifera*]

Chrysanthemum indicum [parent of the cultivated ones]

Soldanella alpina [Alpine Snowbell or Blue Moonwort, native to the Alps and Pyrenees]

Phlox stolonifera [from the Appalachian mountains USA]
subulata [from east and central USA]
ovata [Mountain Phlox]

Artotis repens [now called *Arctotheca prostrata*, Creeping Bear's Ear or Prostrate Cape Weed from the Cape Province of South Africa]

Rosa chinensis
semperflorens

Vetheimia (*Veltheimia*) *sarmentosa*

Chelone formosa from South America

N.B. The box is directed for you care of Mr R Mitchell, 20 Grand Parade, Cork.

3. James Mackay to Ellen Hutchins, 26 March 1807

I have to thank you for your kind letter of the 16th inst. and also for another of the 15th of last month the contents of which I have not yet had sufficient time to examine. I thank you for your kind invitation of sending more and shall be glad of more specimens of the Conferva you sent me last if the parcel is not gone before this reaches you I think it seems different from any you sent before but am not as yet certain about its name. I cannot as yet tell you exactly the price of Mr Dillwyn's work on Confervae but it is published in Numbers at about 2/6 or 5/- each I think each No if 5/- will contain 10 or 12 plates with descriptions. Any of your friends in London that will take the trouble to call at Mr Sowerby No 2 Mead Place, Lambeth, London will get the necessary information where it is to be got and also know the price and quantity of it published. Mr Turner's work on Mosses is in Latin. It is entitled Muscologiae Hibernica. The title of Mr Dillwyn's work is Dillwyn's British Confervae.

I will attend to what you say of not wishing to have your name mentioned in print — I hope I have not erred in mentioning it to Mr Turner. I should think it were a pity that two persons who have paid so much attention to the same branch of botany should not know one another's names!

I believe I mentioned in my last letter that he was about to send me for you, specimens of rare British sea plants. I wrote him word I was sure they would be acceptable — I expect them here about the middle or latter end of next month — I will soon have his opinion of some of your rare species which I have sent him. Your Fucus No 6 is certainly Fucus edulis of Turner's Synopsis and which was considered by some authors as only a variety of Fucus palmatus, although I think it very different from it in many respects, as you also justly observe it to be.

I shall mention to Mr Turner, what you say of Fucus membranacens, perhaps he may not have seen it in a recent state.

I understand Mr Taylor will be going to your part of the country next month when I will send you some plants, or may perhaps send them before he comes.

I have found since publishing my list that the plant I took for Turritis glabra is not that plant but Turritis alpina, new to Britain. It will soon appear in English Botany together with my new British Arenaria. So that instead of a Turritis glabra H Br.

you can mark in the list Turritis alpina Linnaeus Systema Vegetabilium page 600. It is a biennial plant. I enclose you a few seeds of it which you can immediately in your garden on a light soil. It grows on a sandy common near the sea side in Connemara perhaps you may find it on your coast next summer.

I remain

Madam

Yours respectfully

J T Mackay

4. James Mackay to Ellen Hutchins, 25 March 1808

12 U. Baggot Street, Dublin, 25 March 1808

Dear Madam

I ought long ere now have answered your letters of the 27th January and 1st March both of which were very acceptable, but I have been so busily occupied with our new garden [the Botanic Garden at Trinity College Dublin was moved to Ballsbridge] that I have hardly had time to think of anything else. I have been terribly disappointed by Archer in not getting Mr Turner's No's of Fuci long ere now. The books they were coming with were sent by Liverpool, and as they had not come to hand three weeks ago, to make sure work I ordered Gilbert and Hodges to get the Fuci over by Holyhead along with this month's periodical publications which they expect in a day or two more. I am sure you must have lost all patience by this time for them.

I suppose you have heard how delighted Mr Turner was with your parcel of sea plants. He says that you and Mrs Griffiths (an English lady) in point of zeal and success stand at the Head of our Marine Botany! I forget if I mentioned to you Mr Turner's intention of visiting Dublin the end of June next when I believe it is his intention to visit the Giants Causeway; but if he will take my advice he would rather go to Killarney and Bantry, as I am fully persuaded although I have not seen the former place, that your country is the best field for a botanist were he inclined to go south. I would gladly accompany him once more for a few weeks, if I could possibly spare as much time.

I heartily congratulate you on the rarities your rock [at the side of Ellen's flower garden at Ballylickey] produces, and will certainly fulfil my long promise of sending you some plants for it and your garden some time next week. As I intend sending you some beautiful American shrubs, you had better be getting a small bed prepared with dry turf mould from the surface of some adjacent Heath common where you see the Erica vulgaris or cineria thriving best. The mould should be broken down very fine. You will also want to have some fresh brown loam which should be neither too sandy nor strong clay. I dare say you may find it on some dry bank in the wood near your garden. I shall mention the particular soils for the different plants more particularly when I send them.

The weather is still uncommonly severe. We had a heavy fall of snow last night which still covers the mountains but has melted off with us.

The little Sertularia marked No 6 in your last letter has puzzled me very much but I am now pretty certain that it is only a variety of eburnea. The black spots Dr Scott and I conclude to be the Animal without a crust. You were right in saying it came near it. No 26 is a small portion of Tabularia Ramosa. No 25 is Alcyonium digitatum as you thought. You are getting on famously in this branch. I am proud of having set you to work in it, being persuaded that from your discriminating powers and great attention you will in time make some important discoveries in this branch of natural history.

The little moss marked No 1 from Glengarriff is a small variety of Dicranum Flexuosum of Turner's Musc.

I am very glad you have now taken to the mosses and shall be glad of specimens of any which you don't know to be very common and also of any lichens. I will look over those you sent me more particularly before I write to you next. I am quite delighted with your fresh water Confervae and I do hope no other branch of Botany or Natural History will make you give up those and the sea plants. When you have any little thing to send me, send it by post or without putting the letter under cover.

I shall be glad to hear from you and remain your much obliged and obedient servant

J T Mackay

5. James Mackay to Ellen Hutchins, June 14th 1810

Dear Madam

I received your letter containing the halves of two pound notes and have got the Lady of the Lake for you. The price of it is two guineas. Almost every copy that has come to Dublin has been bought and I hear a second edition is to be published immediately. I have not read it through but am anxious to do so, for I think it beautiful and very descriptive. I am well acquainted with the part of the country where the scene is laid. Benvoirlich, Loch Katrine, Benledi etc are names which bring former days to my remembrance. The book shall be sent in a box by the coach tomorrow evening along with Dillwyn and the things from Mr Turner. Thank you for allowing me to keep the Synopsis. I will also send three Numbers of E B [English Botany] being all I have yet got. I expect some others daily along with one or two Numbers of Turner's Fuci of which I have yet but the one Number to send you. Getting books over by Liverpool as Gilbert and Hodges does is often very tedious. I think your little Rose is only a variety of Spinosissima. It is often times very small in rocky or sandy grounds. I have several varieties of that species very dwarf with double flowers but as I only a cutting or two of each last September my plants have done little more yet than taken root. They are the sweetest little beauties I ever beheld. One of my plants which has white flowers had one flower. When I am able to propagate them you shall have plants of all the varieties. They were first raised in Scotland by sowing seeds of the wild varieties. I have the single varieties Red, White and Striped. I am very sorry that you are likely to be so much confined and lament the cause. [Ellens mother's ill health was keeping Ellen house bound] I hope however that your garden will afford you amusement in your leisure hours for I suppose that scarcely a bit of moss remains unnoticed by you in your immediate vicinity, but you will also have pleasure in visiting your old acquaintances near you in their native stations.

I will send you a specimen along with the books of a beautiful nondescript lichen which I found lately on a sandy common by the sea near Baldoyle. The same had previously been found by Mr Brodie near Exmouth.

I thank you for your observations on my Saxifraga and am glad they coincide with my own very nearly. I will thank you for specimens of your Hypnum Dicksonii and Grimmia crispula. I have Arenaria trinerva but do not recollect having found it in Ireland. I shall be glad of a plant or seed of it as I have no native specimen.

We are like you much in want of rain although for the last two or three days we have had some showers. The clouds today have a watery appearance.

*A good number other seeds you had the goodness to send me have come up. The greater number have not yet made their appearance. They are as you thought Botany Bay productions. Two of those that have made their appearance are pretty plants *Glycine rubicunda* and *coccinea*. I will if you choose send you a plant of each for your green house when the plants are fit to be removed. My green house and stove are now looking very well especially the former. I have the Moving Plant (*Hedysarum gyrans*) in great health with its small fairy leaves dancing about.*

I shall be glad to hear of your receiving the books safe and I remain your much obliged etc

J T Mackay

6. James Mackay to Ellen Hutchins, 24th August 1810

Dear Madam

I am ashamed at being so long in writing to you. My principal reason has been that I had nothing interesting to communicate and I am sorry to say it yet pretty much the case. I have had but little time of late to attend to indigenous botany on account of my necessary attendance in the Garden. My father who lives with me and used to be of great use in superintending my workmen when I had occasion to leave home has been very poorly all the summer; on account of which and some other circumstances I have almost given up the idea I had of going to England this season, although I have still some thought of going to see the Liverpool garden next month.

*I have now two more No.'s of the Fuci for you, but as they do not contain many native species I think of keeping them a little while longer when I expect to have another No.. The only native species they contain are *saccharinas*, *digitatus* and *phyllitis*. You are mentioned as one of the finders of the latter. Its fruit it seems is still unknown. In the No. of E B for April your beautiful *F. ulvoides* has again made its appearance. Dr Smith does not seem quite satisfied at it being made a distinct species*

from punctatus and has the following observations after making some remarks on its appearance he says "When however we consider how variant in appearance the fructification of the very same Fucus is often found, we cannot but feel rather dissatisfied on the subject, and we submit the matter to the publick, chiefly out of deference to the experience and judgment of the Lady who discovered this elegant seaweed, and of Mr Turner, who is rather inclined to support her opinion." Your new species of Ulva, called ramulosa is figured in the same No.

The last Number of the Edinburgh Review a work which you are perhaps acquainted with contains some interesting extracts from two publications of the celebrated Humboldt, a Prussian gentleman who began an expedition to Spanish America in 1799 and was engaged in it until 1804. In these distant travels he is said to have directed his enquiries into every department of nature and of society. The mass of curious information which he procured, and the superb collections which he was enabled to make relative to different objects of science far exceed, it is said, any thing that has heretofore been achieved by the exertions of an individual. He is said to have cast much light on the history of our species, to have extended the limits of accurate geography; and to have increased to stores of botany, zoology, and mineralogy with immense additions. These invaluable acquisitions classed under different heads are to be brought out successively, in a style of execution unrivalled for elegance and splendour. Some portions of the composition have only yet appeared which are said to be yet disjointed and unfinished — nor is the narrative of the voyage which will occupy five quarto volumes yet begun. ??? have already been spent in publishing what has come to the hands of ?? our reviewers; and perhaps as many more will elapse before the whole shall be completed. The work is published at Paris. I have thus given you some account of a work of which you are perhaps already acquainted with, but should that not be the case I will send you the Review along with the No.'s of the Fuci as if you have not seen it your curiosity must be excited. I hope your Mother's health is better and that you have not entirely given up your Botanic walks.

I shall be happy to hear from you and remain with much truth, your most obliged and aft. servant

J. T. Mackay

(Note written in margin of last sheet)

I've enclosed your bank note back from the person I gave it to. They said it was a forgery although I don't see that it has been marked as such. I return it as I hope you know the person you got it from.