

Oct 7 '59

Prof. Asa Gray, Cambridge.

My dear Doctor Gray,

After having first acknowledged, with thanks, the receipt of your paper on some Rubiaceae, brought to me by our mutual friend Mr. James, I will solicit a few moments of your attention: On the announcement of the death of Mr. Nuttall, at one of the last meetings of the Am. Phil. Society, I was appointed to deliver an obituary and biographical notice of our deceased friend. Had I been present at the meeting, I would have declined that honor, on the plea that I was much less acquainted with the life of N. than several other Members, who had been his intimate friends and were much more competent to perform the task.

At the next meeting, I offered unsuccessfully my objections, and, on the promise of assistance, I did yield, seeing that nobody would take off the burden from my shoulders: I would not have the memory of one who has done so much for our science, neglected and passed over in silence by an institution of which he had been a prominent Member. I am, therefore, collecting materials and have already a good heap of them. I am now wanting some little details about Mr. N.'s residence in Cambridge, which you can easily give me. He must have been called there in 1823, and left in 1833? Was he at Cambridge in the capacity of Professor of Botany, in the chair you now occupy, or as an adjunct of Dr. Peck, or simply as one of the curators? Has he left any particular trace of his passage in your regions, recollected

Some anecdotes

by his contemporaries (and can you give me some information about his way, & means, when he was in Cambridge?).

A more, and truly important service which I beg of you, is your assistance in a critical opinion respecting his scientific labors. I do not feel sufficiently posted up to give my own, and I have not as yet looked seriously into his works to form a correct opinion of them.

As an explorer, Nuttall seems to me to have done more than any other single Botanist. To him we are indebted for about 200 new genera of standing worth, and an infinite number of good species. He has been indefatigable in his labors, fearless, and has accomplished the most harassing and dangerous journeys ever undertaken by any other Botanist. As such he deserves a good notice.

His genera of N. A. plants, I have always much admired; it is his best production, without any doubt. His descriptions are accurate and evincing a peculiar botanical acumen characteristic of one born for such parts. Had his descriptions been founded upon microscopic inquiries as yours are, he would perhaps have curtailed the number of his new creations, but his observations were always made with a small magnifying glass of very moderate power. His defect have been in his excessive ambition to surpass his colleagues in the number of his discoveries and specifications. If in his last publications of N. W. Oregon and California plants, he has unreasonably multiplied his genera and species, it may be owing to the above cause, & to the

rapidity of his explorations through regions which he has not had the chance to revisit; Taking, for instance, in the coining of a new genus, for a distinctive mark, a trifling deviation of another generic form, and in his new species, simple alterations of form, brought on by difference of soil, of exposure, of age. This looseness at creating new genera and species has resulted in the just curtailment of his new creations, many of his new genera into subgenera or sections of another genus, and many of his species into varieties, to say the least. However, we must admit that he faithfully pointed out the ^{generally} actual difference, however trifling, existing in the objects of his comparisons. Has he not in his Sylva introduced too many simple shrubs which ought not to be there?

Nothing, or very little is known of Nuttall, in this city, before 1817. So far his acquaintance had been among gardeners, The Bartram, Carr, Malon & others, all dead except Col. Carr. He began to be known in the scientific world in 1817, when he became a member of the Academy of Sciences & of the Phil. Society.

He is said to have died at 73 years of age. To me, who have seen him frequently before his departure for England and at his last visit, he appeared already an old ~~broken~~ man. When I last saw him, I took him for a man about 68 to 70 years of age. I shall give no names of my informers in my notice.

Please, give me a full answer, I shall be much obliged to you and beg your indulgence for the trouble. Very sincerely yours
E. Durand
Phil. Oct. 7. 1839.



Durand, Elias. 1859. "Durand, Elias M. Oct. 7, 1859." *Elias Durand letters to Asa Gray*

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