

U.S. Ship Vincennes at Sea
Lat. 27° 30' N. Long 140° E. Oct 14th 1854

Dear Dr.

We expect to reach the Bonin Islands some time or another when we get a little more wind or one more favorable if no fresher - that by which we are now propelled being as directly ahead as if it was sent on purpose to retard our progress. - Anticipating the possibility of finding there a whaler or other vessel going to China and thinking you might be gratified by knowing where I am and what I am doing - though this occupation be much like that of the boy who was helped by his brother - to do nothing I devote a small portion of my valuable time to enlighten you respecting the above matters. - We left Hong Kong on the 12th Sept. and started right in the teeth of the N.E. Monsoon - and there it soon showed much to our delay and discomfort - producing no small discouragement and vexation. Fairly out in the China Sea whichever way we attempted an egress into the Pacific we were headed off and if at any time an eddy ^{current} combined with the head wind the lubberly old ship was unequal to the contest and we had to try another course. Thus we aimed first to get out by the Baschees and could make no better course for it than that which would have taken us to Manila. Next we ran to the Northward and attempted to go round the north end of Formosa but with no better success for here again we were headed off.

Meantime we had most uncomfortable squally weather the ship wet - clothes and everything else damp and musty and we could seize the opportunity to breath a little fresh

air only in the intervals between the squalls. At night for the most part we lay to and the rolling of the ship was any thing but agreeable - occasionally bringing down on the head of the would be sleeper books clothing or other articles that were not securely lashed. Thus we beat about till the 27th when by a kind of slant we slipped out into the Pacific and congratulated ourselves that we should now enjoy some of the benefits of the reputed character.

The distance from Hong Kong to Formosa under favorable circumstances could be run in three days. Since clearing the Formosa Passage we have had mostly clear pleasant weather - but the other extreme and we are now in the horse latitudes frequently calm all day and sometimes at night - but generally a light breeze during the latter.

We beat up for the island of Boordim two entire days with the confident expectation of landing while the ship was making a running survey of the island, just at night of the second day when we were within a very few miles of it the weather assumed a rather threatening appearance - but very slightly - and taking this into consideration and the little knowledge we possessed of the shoals and rocks round the island as well as the uncertainty of effecting a landing in safety - the Capt concluded to proceed on our voyage promising indeed to visit it on our return - which he will never do. It would have been interesting to land on an island which so far as is now known was never trod by human foot. If we ever reach the Bonin's I hope to have two or three days botanising. It was at first the Captain's design to put up the observatory and leave the Astronomer to make observations while he cruised the islands in the ship. I would have been left also

This plan I am told is now abandoned and we will be in port only two or three days then make a running survey of the group and stand away for some other land. We have ~~of~~ one hundred and fifty (150) miles yet to make and the wind now dead ahead. From the best information I can gain of our future operations I lost by my transfer to this ship the only really good opportunity to make a valuable collection that will be presented during the whole cruise. This privilege I would have had on board the Hancock in Gaspar Straits when a trigonometrical survey was made and time and ample facilities afforded for landing. Henceforth only running surveys will be made during which the few chances of landing will be improved.

I collected about 800 species of plants at Hong Kong and vicinity but our long delay there for the protection of the pusillanimous puppets at Canton has now thrown into the adverse monsoon and this with my transfer to this ship and subsequent loss of time has blasted my prospects for the whole voyage. If we follow out the plan which has been indistinctly and indefinitely laid for our future operations I see only one oasis before me and that not very verdant or blooming. It is intended to establish an astronomical station next summer in the vicinity of Behning's Straits while the squadron is employed in the arctic seas and I suppose I will be left there if I desire it. I presume too I can be transferred to the Steamer if I will and should the prospect of the next summer's cruise in her be more inviting I shall apply to go in her. I regret exceedingly that I did not request a transfer just before leaving Hong Kong but I was then sick and although I really thought I should do better in her I so much dreaded the trouble of a

removal that rather than seek it I even dreaded the order for it I am inclined to think the Capt. would have sent me to the Steamer if I had been well.

I regret that you designed sending my books to the Sandwich Islands. If I had known before leaving Hong Kong to whom they would be consigned I would have written for them to be forwarded to that place. As it is I shall come into possession of them only just before the end of the cruise. Next summer's operations will be up the eastern coast of Asia in different lines for different vessels, to Behring's Straits, - thence to California - then via Sandwich Islands to Hong Kong and home by way of the Cape of Good Hope. Of course these plans are liable to all sorts of changes by instructions from the Navy Dept. I have determined the families, most of the genera and some of the species of Hong Kong plants ~~and~~ ^{but} ~~are~~ ^{are still} some entirely unknown to me. I have been studying for the last few days with but indifferent success.

To relieve the tedium of the voyage and in rough weather when these manipulations can not be carried on besides ordinary reading, I have taken up the systematic study of German with the assistance of the Capt's clerk and if we have as much salt water work proportionally as we have already had and as little opportunity for botanizing I expect to be a pretty good Dutchman by the time I return.

16th This morning early we were in sight of Rosario and a small volcanic production. As it was nearly calm two boats were lowered and manned and we pulled away about four miles to take a closer view of it. It appears to be about half a mile in length and less than a quarter

in breadth. A heavy surf broke all around it which prevented us from landing and taking possession in the name of "His Majesty Uncle Sam" Two small patches of green vegetation were observed one looking like grass and the other apparently some prostrate spreading plant. One or two birds were seen and a plenty of sharks and other fish of which a few were taken. The island has a thin upper stratum of scoria and the laminated substrata are variously bent by the upheaving force.

19th. A little after midday came to an anchor in Port Lloyd. Peel Island one of the Borin group.

28th. We are in the midst of a furious storm in a well protected harbor with three anchors down - It's a dark day all the hatches covered and nothing to do but read or write by candle light. I have given the northern end of the island a pretty thorough examination and shall bring away a better list of plants than Beechey did. I recognise a considerable proportion of his as *Corydalis racemosa*, *Pentstemon tiliaceus*, *Xanthoxylum piperitum*, *Eucorymbus japonicus*, *Raphirolepis*, *Hydrocotyle Asiatica*, *Sideroxylum ferrugineum*, *Cinnamomum*, *Terminalia* a *Morinda* & another sp. of *Rubiaceae* that I can't determine, a fruticose plant near *Pananche*, *Scaevola*, two sp. of *Apocynaceae*, a *Physalis*, ^{three or four} ~~two or three~~ sp. of *Solanum* one or two *Callicarpas*, one *Euphorbia*, one *Fig*, one *Conifer*, *Alpinia*, several *Cyperaceae* (at least three sp. of *Carex*) & *Grasses*, dries ferns one fresh water Alga (*Bubbochaete*) one or two mosses only, a fair proportion of lichens and a very large number of *Funghi* to which I have directed my attention particularly finding it the most abundant family in season at present. The island furnishes one true fern but I have not yet succeeded in find-

ing a fertile ground - for which I intend to make a more thorough search the first fair day. There are also some tall palm-trees now in flower which I must cut at the same time and from which I must obtain specimens. One *Spig Pandanus*? is quite abundant. On the North side of the island I found a large widely spreading tree with panicles of greenish yellow flowers, and very brittle wood. It is closely allied to *Euphorbia* but I could not detect it in to any genus ~~the~~ described in Endlicher. The fruit was young and no insect had already taken possession of every individual specimen and wholly or partly eaten out the ovules. I saw at least three *Crab*-none in flower. Desiring mention, but one.

I find but few insects - no large Coleoptera - but one or two large ~~leaf~~ *Lepidoptera*. A few spiders, Grasshoppers, Crickets and minute beetles from Fungi constitute the small number I have thus far procured. One Cicada as noisy as its American kindred is abundant but so shy that I have not succeeded in taking a specimen. No quadruped is indigenous unless you call a small lizard such - and this is the only reptile belonging here. Two sp. of birds numerous in individuals form the greater proportion of the fauna so far as my observation has extended though there are several other species. Fish are plentiful both in species and individuals as well as varied and beautiful in color and form. Turtle are numerous in this season and we have procured as many as we needed from those preserved in pens. - There are about thirty inhabitants mostly Sandwich Islanders more or less however under the control of two or three Americans. They cultivate a few sweet potatoes (for which alone are now favorable) and other

and other vegetables on which and on fish they principally subsist. They appear to be a miserable drunken set when they can get any thing to get drunk on and are ready to promise to do for tobacco &c as we have had abundant experience in the men who have come off from shore drunk.

Decr 9th. We left the Bowen Islands on the 8th ult and after a tedious hunt for certain doubtful islands represented as scattered along on the parallel of 30th. discovering only Lot's Wife we arrived here ^(Doolah) on the 16th inst and anchored off Napa an open roadstead where the ship will considerably under the influence of winds and tide and where we commonly get a sprinkling of salt water when we go ashore. But thus far I have done very well armed in India-rubber. I have made a respectable collection of plants for though it is the winter season in which nevertheless they never have any frost. The contrast between this and the Bowen group when all is in a state of nature and this is very striking. Here every spot of soil as big as a blanket is in the most perfect state of cultivation so much so that a weed is hardly to be found. There are however ravines and cliffs and rocky patches which are in a state of nature and no goats to eat up the scanty vegetation which man has no motive for destroying. Close by the Palace at Shong (Yang) or Chong (Gathie) there is a space enclosed and apparently in a state of nature. If a park there are no deer or other quadrupeds in it so far as I could perceive and it is probably tabooed, for when I rashly jumped over the wall no one of the crowd of inquisitive men and boys who had been following me not even the official spy ventured to follow. Here I had a good quiet time and found an oak, a cherry, an orange and divers forms

and other interesting things Beechey's collector procured here
one Alga I presume I should not exaggerate if I guessed my
collection would number fifty and Mr. Stimpson has pro-
cured some that I have overlooked. The necessity of returning
on shipboard at night has prevented me making any long
excursions. The restraint under which the people live in
consequence of the unsocial disposition of the Government
towards foreigners prevents any thing like traffic with
the people except through a licensed comprador so much
so that you can't reward any one for little services which
they are willing to render as they invariably refuse money
even to the children and you must leave it on the ground or
pay them in some other way. We talked of making up a par-
ty for an excursion of two or three days towards the other
end of the island but a circumstance occurred to prevent
it. A ship W. P. Swan Capt. Hedges from California for
Shanghai sprung a leak and came to anchor near the
South end of the island and under the lee of the land where
she filled and heeled over on her beam ends. We went round
and endeavored to right her and get her ashore but were
unable to get at her cable to cut or unshackle it. Her
masts were cut away - yet she righted but little. Some
spars, sails and flour were taken from her and she was
abandoned. Her officers and men are with us and we
will probably sail in a few days for Shanghai or
some other port where we can land these men. While
occupied with the wreck I went ashore twice and picked
up some nice things not seen on this side. Today among
other things I found Woodwardia procumbens. One would sup-
pose from Hooker's account of it that it was the normal
condition of the plant to be prostrate whereas few of the

plants exhibit proles I procured a plenty of fine fruiting spec-
imens. Few or none of the prodigious plants have perfect cori-
I found with it an *Osmunda*? with only two or three of the
lower pinnae fertile and pinnate all the rest merely serrate
I have several figs and I see two sp. of *Morus* without fruit
Mosses are scarce. Lichens pretty numerous *Compositae* are
somewhat rare. Lichens *Fungi* very rare at least at this season

Dec 17th We are approaching the coast of China having left
Lo-choo on the 13th Our Capt would be very glad to have an op-
portunity of transferring our passengers to some ship bound to Hong
Kong or Shanghai not wishing to go just now into port. But
whether we do or not this event of the shipwreck gives us an oppor-
tunity of sending letters some weeks earlier than we otherwise would
have done. I have no idea when we are going between now and Feb?
when we are to be at Hong Kong. My *Borin* plants amount to about
three hundred including one hundred and twenty *Fungi* (the number of sp.
pretty much guesswork) I have not been over my Lo-choo collection
except some of the lower families. You tell me to look out for *Algae*. I have
from this island 88 and *Stimpson* some more. I believe I wrote you that
I had given up the *Algae* to him & had taken the insects. At last I sus-
pected he did not pay so much attention to this branch as it deserves and
I concluded to have a finger in the pie myself and the above is the re-
sult a great ~~one~~ ^{one} compared with *Berkey's* single *Dictyota*. Hereafter
I shall improve every opportunity that presents to save these plants
I found twenty ferns also at Lo-choo, more or less lichens, but
four!! *Fungi* (very dry compared with *Borin*) two *Hepaticae* one *Marasmius*
two or three *Lemnæ* one *Chara* one *Potamogeton* one *Dostera*? one *Pistia*
several *Compositae* & *Leguminosae* &c. &c. I recognise but few of ~~the~~
Berkey's plants—but many perhaps most of his were procured from
other parts of the island I presume I shall reckon more than two

summed - so that counting from the proper beginning of my
work about a year ago at the Cape of Good Hope up to the pres-
ent time I have collected at my different stopping places ~~about~~
two thousand species[±] which is pretty well considering that
so much time has been spent in two long passages by sea -
viz. from the Cape to China & thence to the Bonin islands

I sincerely hope the books you send me may not stop at the Sandwich
Is or rather may not go there but may track me up and overtake me
in time to be of some service

Very truly
Yours

Charles Wright



Wright, Charles. 1854. "Wright, Charles Oct. 14, 1854." *Charles Wright correspondence with Asa Gray*

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