



François-Louis Comte de Castelnau (1802–1880) and the mysterious disappearance of his original insect collection

NEAL L. EVENHUIS

J. Linsley Gressitt Center for Research in Entomology, Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, 1525 Bernice Street, Honolulu, Hawaii 96817-2704, USA. E-mail: Neale@bishopmuseum.org

Abstract

A brief biography of François Louis Comte de Castelnau is presented, correcting his birthdate and surname, and the ultimate fate of his original personal collection of insects and other natural history material is discussed.

Key words: biography, Castelnau, Coleoptera, Diptera, Heteroptera, Pisces, type material

Introduction

François Laporte (Fig. 1), also known as the Comte [Count] de Castelnau, was a fairly well-known French coleopterist, naturalist, and diplomat of the 19th century. Having spent the last 20 years of his life in the French diplomatic corps in Melbourne, it is no surprise that after his death the National Museum in Melbourne would house a large amount of Castelnau material. Horn & Kahle (1935) mentioned the Castelnau collection in Melbourne and itemized the whereabouts of other specimens—Oxford, Paris, Belgium, as well as many others dispersed through sale to a number of different private collections [see also Sharp (1901) for further details on some beetle types]. However, this material comprised the results of collections he had made after he had sailed to South America in 1843. Efforts to find his original personal collection made before the 1840s have proven fruitless. From 1828 to 1840, Castelnau was an avid writer, publishing some 35 entomological papers and describing many new species, primarily in Coleoptera, but also in Hemiptera and Diptera. Because of fruitless searches throughout the years for them, those specimens have been considered lost or destroyed.

What apparently is not well known is that, in January 1842, Castelnau donated that original collection, which at the time was one of the largest personal entomological collections in Europe, to what essentially was the forerunner of the Smithsonian Institution.

A letter of 19 June 1841 from Castelnau to the National Institution for the Promotion of Science in Washington, D.C. formally started the process. The letter of response one month later from Francis Markoe, Jr., corresponding secretary of the National Institution to Castelnau and Castelnau's response to Markoe are as follows [as printed in the *Bulletin of the Proceedings of the National Institution*]:

Washington, July 22, 1841.

Dear Sir : At the last stated meeting of the National Institution, Mr. Force, the Vice-President, submitted your letter of the 19th ult., offering to deposit temporarily among our collections your valuable entomological cabinet and books on natural history. A committee was immediately appointed, consisting of Col. Abert, chairman, Dr. H. King, and myself, to whom your letter has been referred, with authority to make the necessary arrangements for availing ourselves of your generous offer.

I hasten to convey to you the acknowledgments of the members for this mark of the interest you take in the Institution, and to assure you that, in accepting so valuable a trust, the Institution duly appreciates the liberality manifested by you as one of its members.

I am requested by the chairman to communicate the above facts to you, and to request you to let us know in what