



Transcription of Friedrich Sellow's expedition diaries

Friedrich Sellow (1789-1831), originally from Potsdam, was one of the pioneering explorers of the South American continent; in particular Brazil. In the first two decades after the founding of the zoological museum he played a significant role in the growth of the collections. A gardener by training, and later something of a jack-of-all trades, Sellow also worked for others such as Joseph Banks in London or the Museum Real in Rio de Janeiro. However, thanks to the initiative of Alexander von Humboldt, who recognised Sellow's abilities from an early stage, the Prussian state financed his expeditions and thus claimed a large portion of his discoveries for Berlin. From 1814-1831 Sellow explored the southern provinces of Brazil and neighbouring regions of Argentina and Uruguay, having received instructions for collection from Martin Hinrich Lichtenstein. He brought together thousands of collection objects – zoological specimens, rock samples, botanical material and ethnological finds – for the scientific institutes in Berlin. The greater part of his collections, as well as his legacy of letters and drawings, are held in the Museum für Naturkunde.

As a researcher Sellow was typical of Humboldt's time, exemplified by an encyclopaedic approach to collection and documentation. The use of astronomy to help determine the geographical coordinates of his specimens was typical of early attempts in the late eighteenth century towards measuring the world. Many first descriptions of plant and animal species draw on material which Sellow sent back to Europe. The value placed on his work by his contemporaries can be measured by the number of times he had species named after him. His correspondence reveals that Sellow's early death in Brazil curtailed his wish to write up the results of his research himself.

In total, 71 diaries and 26 excursion reports from the years 1818 and 1831 are held in our historical archives. These field notebooks, which today are difficult to decipher, contain valuable observations about natural history and geography; supplemented by drawings, sketch-maps and measurement data. In addition to the exact collection circumstances of the well-documented objects in individual departments of the museum,

Museum für Naturkunde: Transcription of Friederich Sellow's expedition diaries

Sellow's diaries offer information about the social and cultural history of South America in the early nineteenth century. In order to fully document Sellow's scientific contributions it is vital that these records are deciphered and critically studied. Since mid-November 2011 the Fritz Thyssen Foundation has supported a project to transcribe Friedrich Sellow's expedition diaries, an extract of which is given here.

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further information

Transcript from the expedition diary of Friedrich Sellow

Life and work of Friedrich Sellow

Lichtenstein's collecting instructions to Sellow