

The Kuiper/Dance letters: a 50-year chronicle

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One definition of a chronicle is 'a continuous record of events in order of time' (*Chambers Dictionary*, 1998 edition). In one sense, therefore, this sequence of annotated extracts from letters exchanged between Hans Kuiper and me, over a period of half a century, is not a chronicle because it incorporates long periods of silence between us. Our friendship over that period and beyond, however, has been continuous – and that is a good enough reason for me to regard our correspondence as a 50-year chronicle. The following extracts from our letters are given here virtually uncorrected. In that way they retain their flavour and their immediacy. Almost without exception they have been copied from letters in my possession. The first letter from Hans in my archive is dated 30 May 1955, but we had been in correspondence for a year or two before that, sharing thoughts about *Pisidium*, a genus about which I knew almost nothing at the time. Unfortunately, the letters I had received from Hans before that date, all in his characteristically neat and minuscule writing, are lost.

On 28 March 1954 I was on board the troopship 'Empire Windrush', on my way back to England, having completed a two and a half year tour of duty with the RAF in the Suez Canal Zone of Egypt. Early in the morning the engine room blew up and, within an hour, the ship was ablaze from stem to stern. Happily, a Dutch cargo ship, the 'Mentor', plucked me from the Mediterranean and landed me safely in Algiers, where I joined 1500 other survivors. None of my possessions survived. Consumed in the conflagration were many reprints and letters received from conchologists, including several from Hans. I believe he addressed all his letters to 'Dear Mr. Dance'. I addressed all mine to 'Dear Mr. Kuiper', or simply 'Dear Kuiper'. We addressed each other in this formal way up to 1959. My earliest surviving letter from him begins thus:

K to D - 20 May 1955: 'I was very glad to receive a letter from you after a correspondence silence of more than a year. It is a pity that you have lost your separata and conchological correspondence, but the positive side of the accident is still that only the ship, and not your person, has caught fire!'

The rest of the letter was about *Pisidium pseudosphaerium* Favre, 1927 a species I had just collected for the first time in the south of England. Rightly or wrongly, Hans looked upon me as the only student of *Pisidium* in my country at that time, a circumstance which earned me his immediate friendship. Shortly afterwards, on 12 August 1955, he wrote to ask me if I could see my way to examine certain shells figured by B. B. Woodward in his *Catalogue of the British Species of Pisidium* (Woodward, 1913). Two years later, having joined the staff of the Natural History Museum in London, as a member of the Mollusca Section of its Zoology Department, I was in a good position to do just that and sent some notes on the Woodward specimens to him. I little suspected that we were destined to collaborate in a protracted study of the specimens illustrated in Woodward's controversial publication.

K to D - 20 November 1957: 'Thank you for your notes on Woodward's Catalogue. Perhaps it will be worth publishing in due time a list of corrections, but in my opinion such a list must be documented by illustrations and descriptions. Without considerations such a revision will not be very convincing.'

The 25th anniversary of the Nederlandse Malacologische Vereniging was celebrated in Amsterdam from 27 to 30 June 1959 and I was the sole delegate from the United Kingdom. There I met Hans for the first time. Shortly afterwards we dropped the formalities in our correspondence and became 'Dear Hans' and 'Dear Peter'. Subsequently, Hans kept me busy helping to solve taxonomic problems involving specimens, mostly types, of *Pisidium* in the collections I was employed to curate. On 22 July 1959 he had asked if I could find a particular specimen of *Pisidium langleyanum* Melvill and Ponsonby, 1891.

D to K - 13 August 1959: 'So far I have not been able to find the material recorded by Melvill and Ponsonby from Africa though we do have the type series of *langleyanum*. I shall let you know if I come across anything.'

This was not good enough for Hans, so he prodded me again – he could be very persistent at times!

K to D - 16 August 1959: 'I hope you will continue trying to find the specimen of "*Pisidium langleyanum*" figured by Melvill and Ponsonby, 1892, in the Annals and Magazine of Natural History. And then there is still to solve the problem of *Pisidium johnsoni* Smith, 1882, from Madagascar. I don't know what it is. Please find the type lot!'

On 31 December 1959 he wrote to say he hoped to visit me in London at the beginning of February 1960. Circumstances prevented him making the trip then, but he did so later in the month. It seemed to me that he wanted to examine every specimen of *Pisidium* in the Natural History Museum! He was much involved in African species at the time, but he also wanted to examine the specimens illustrated in B. B. Woodward's *Catalogue*, as did I. For a week we studied the hundreds of fragile specimens, glued to cards, which had been photographed for his monograph. Hans would spend the entire day at the microscope, almost without refreshment of any kind, making endless notes. This project gave him a lot of work he had not anticipated



K to D - 24 March 1960: 'This is just to tell you how I feel myself. Really every day I am working on the revision, reading articles, comparing notices, analysing identifications by B. B. W. I shall do my best to finish it this month still and I only hope my ideas and conclusions will be the same as yours.'

Occasionally our identifications differed, but I insisted that his should always take precedence over mine. He was the expert, I was still a beginner. In April 1960 Hans sent

me a lengthy draft manuscript of a joint article on Woodward's material which he had planned to illustrate with his own delicate drawings. I wrote to say I considered the article was too long and suggested ways of shortening it.

K to D - 10 May 1960: 'Thank you for your long letter. I agree with all your points. My first draft is always too long. And what about figures? If you prefer without figures, I am O.K.'

Regrettably, more pressing matters intervened and the planned article was left in limbo for many years. However, there were still other *Pisidium* matters to consider.

K to D - 28 November 1961: 'I remember that you showed me last year some specimens of fossil *P. stewarti* with periostracum intact. You told me that you intended to publish on it. Did you already do so? I should like to have a reprint as soon as you have it. For I might refer to this material in my article on this subject and of which the ms is ready. I have many new data which prove that *P. vincentianum auctorum* = 2 species viz. *P. stewarti* and another one.'

My report on a collection of *Pisidium* from a Pleistocene deposit at Upton Warren, Worcestershire, containing beautifully preserved examples of *P. vincentianum*, Woodward, 1913 had been published five days before I received this letter (Dance, 1961). Hans had neglected to say that 'another one' referred to a new species, *P. dancei* (Kuiper, 1962).

D to K - 23 January 1962: 'Thank you very much for *P. dancei*! I hope it is not going to be a synonym! There is already a genus *Dancea* Zilch, which may prove to be synonymous with a well known genus, and also an *Eremina desertorum* form *dancei* Biggs which is not nomenclaturally valid anyway!! *Pisidium dancei* does seem to be rather different to "*vincentianum-stewarti*" however.'

Before I could return the compliment I had to deal with a serious case of pseudoconchology! In 1965 Hans published an article in which he described *Micranodonta regii* as a new freshwater bivalve from Southwest Africa (1965a). From the accompanying drawings I could see there was something wrong about this new 'freshwater bivalve' and I wrote immediately to Hans to tell him so.

K to D - 12 May 1965: 'You are perfectly right! Some weeks ago I got one specimen with soft parts. This proved to be a crustacean animal, not a mollusc. With open eyes I walked into this trap of the Creator, for still in my paper on the North-African Pisidia I noticed the same error made by E. von Martens (*P. amnicum* v. *elongatum*) and by Parreyss! The only positive thing in this regrettable event is the fact that you considered the figures as being "excellent". So they will be, I hope, a caution board to little amateurs like me, in the garden of malacology. Ashamed for ever, Hans. P. S. I shall publish an "erratum" in the Archiv and give credit to you.'

In the correction published in the *Archiv*, Hans pointed out that Fritz Haas and Alan Solem had also written to him about his little mistake (Kuiper, 1965b). He acknowledged his error with characteristic humour and humility. Soon afterwards he wrote again, with an urgent request.

K to D - 20 January 1966: 'May I ask you to publish now without delay that Himalayan *Odhneripisidium* which you recognised some years ago as a new species? I do not understand why you are waiting any longer. The shape of this Himalayan species is so different from all other *Odhneripisidia* known!'

For some time I had been preparing an article on the species of *Pisidium* collected by members of the 1924 Mount Everest Expedition and had recognised two supposedly new species. Spurred on by this letter I finished the article. Published the following year (Dance, 1967), it included the description of *Pisidium (Odhneripisidium) kuiperi* Dance, 1967. It seemed appropriate that the name of Kuiper should be attached to a species from the

D to K



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30. iv. 65.

Dear Hans,

I have just read with interest your paper on Micranodonta regii.

When you have reprints I should be grateful for a copy - even though I think it has nothing to do with Mollusca! I have not obtained an expert opinion yet but your excellent figures and description leave me in little doubt that you have taken up the study of Ostracods!!!

If my conclusion is wrong perhaps you would tell me what molluscan family you would place Micranodonta in.

Sincerely, Peter.



world's highest mountain.

As the then President of the Conchological Society of Great Britain and Ireland I was expected to give a Presidential Address to the membership on 17 February 1966. My chosen subject was that scourge of French systematic conchology, J. -R. Bourguignat. I had long been interested in this maverick French conchologist and I discovered that Hans, too, was fascinated by him. Hans had acquired an important archive of letters written by French conchologists, most of them addressed to Auguste-Adolphe Baudon, a contemporary and correspondent of Bourguignat's. He extracted many passages from the letters for my use. At my request he also visited various sites in and around Paris associated with the Bourguignat legend. I did not know that he was preparing at the same time a long article, covering some of the same ground as my Address (Kuiper, 1969). His generosity to me at this time was exceptional, as is clear from the following letter.

K to D - 2 February 1966: 'I have now selected autographs of the following malacologists for you. Bérillon, Bourguignat, Bouchard Chantereux, Cessac, Deshayes, Drouet, Fagot, Folin, Gassies, Hazay, Jeffreys, Joba, Locard, Mabile, Michaud, Mortillet, Paladhile, Petit de la Saussaye, Prime, Puton, Terver, Villa. I have got no letters of Baudon himself, but I could send you a page manuscript with a description of a *Vitrina* and a small but nice painting of a *Vitrina*. Are you interested in this?'

With his help and encouragement my Presidential Address was completed satisfactorily (Dance, 1970). I was able to help him by reading and correcting his English manuscripts. Although there was usually little which required correction he knew he had a tendency to over-write.

K to D - 31 May 1966: 'Please would you be so kind as to read and rectify the enclosed text on *Pisidia* from the Azores etc. Dr. Per Brinck has asked me a report on the series which I examined for him and I do not feel happy to send my English ms without having submitted it to an English malacologist ... Today I received the page proofs of my paper on the African *Pisidia*. I see that it is more than 100 pages. I wonder if I could write so much on European species!'

K to D - 8 June 1966: 'I think my paper on African *Pisidia* has to be considered only as a working paper, a basis for further research. I hope it will turn out to be better than Clessin's Monograph. Perhaps I will be a kind of "Woodward, 1913", which had the merit of being a fertile basis for serious criticism.'

His monograph on the African species of *Pisidium* was, indeed, a major undertaking and is probably his largest publication concerned with the Mollusca (Kuiper, 1966). In that same letter Hans responded to one of mine in which I said I intended leaving the Natural History Museum to take up a similar post at the Manchester Museum. I am sure he thought I was making an unwise move and he may have been right to think so.

'It is a pity that you are going to leave the B. M.!! I fear the B. M. *Pisidia* will lose their protector. But for you personally the movement to Manchester must be most important. It opens, I think, new perspectives.'

My move to the Manchester Museum did not open new perspectives and I left after only a year to take up a position at the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff, where I completed my studies of Bourguignat, among other things. In 1972, however, I decided to leave the museum profession altogether, henceforth to follow a dubious career as a freelance writer. Our correspondence dried up almost completely. In January 2000, however, I tried to breathe new life into it. I wrote to Hans, suggesting that we ought to revive our long-dormant article on Woodward's specimens of *Pisidium*. Five months later he replied.

K to D - 27 June 2000: 'I just read your letter of January 31st, addressed c/o Zool. Museum, Amsterdam, which is right, but unfortunately, people over there included it into a box with *Pisidia* to be revised!! I received this box the first week of February, but I waited with opening it until I had more time. That means, not earlier than today! Rarely I had been so pleased while reading this letter from you. Yes, it is a long, long time ago that we had a pleasant contact. I'll answer you more next week. I still have, indeed, all my notes on Woodward ... Best wishes from your colleague of the last century Hans Kuiper. P. S. I am now 86 and still in good health, and still working in the field of *Pisidiology* though not so much as in my good years.'

D to K - 11 July 2000: 'How delightful to hear from you after so long a silence and to know that you are in good health despite an impressive total of 86 years! I am a mere 68 and also in good health. I had begun to worry when I did not receive a reply to my letter of 31 January but you have now put my mind at rest ... I, too, have my notes on the Woodward *Pisidium* (although they are certainly much less complete than yours) and should like to do something with them, in conjunction with yours. I don't think it would now be considered appropriate to publish the correct identifications of all the specimens. Rather it would be more acceptable, I think, to publish a historical review of the Woodward/Stelfox controversy based on the Woodward material. We could use our notes to highlight many of the errors made by Woodward and could quote from letters and publications by Stelfox, Oldham and others.'

Hoping our conclusions could be published without delay, we tried to speed up the process by agreeing to meet in Paris in May 2001, to finalise our plans. Our meeting was fruitful and the final draft of our article was nearly ready by January 2002. Having agreed on the illustrations and a few last-minute alterations, our article was submitted to the editor of the *Journal of Conchology*. It was published in November 2002, no less than 42 years after we had first joined forces in London to unravel the mysteries of Woodward's *Catalogue* (Dance & Kuiper, 2002). Now we could move on to other things. Soon I was asking Hans to help me with a very different project.

D to K - 11 November 2002: 'It is just possible that you could do me a small favour. If you still visit the Louvre from time to time you may have the opportunity to look at a certain painting for me. It is known in English as "The Entombment" and it is by Titian. In the foreground of this painting there should be a snail. Possibly there is more than one. Can you look at it closely and let me know how many snails there are? Are they empty or is the animal visible? Can you identify the species, or at least have a tentative guess? I need the information for an article I have written on John Ruskin. Hoping you and Meggy are well.'

Meggy François, a long-time friend of Hans, agreed to accompany him to the Louvre. She was somewhat disabled at the time, so the authorities conjured up a push-chair for her and arranged for a map-carrying guide to accompany her and Hans while they searched for Titian's 'Entombment'.

K to D - 22 December 2002: 'After at least three quarters of an hour using several lifts up and down and walking the corridors in all directions, we finally arrived in the "Salle des Sept Cheminées", where we found T's painting in the Department "Denon". I have scrutinized the dark underpart of the big painting (L 2.1 m, H 1.5 m) but did not find any shell or object resembling to it. But Meggy was sure to see an empty shell with the opening upwards. I finally confirmed that observation and state the diameter of M's shell is about 3.5 cm. But it was impossible to identify it. Anyhow, not a bivalve. It is roundish, brownish, coiled with a kind of opening upside, all faint.'



This information, acquired with great difficulty, enabled me to complete my article on the conchological activities of the English art critic, John Ruskin (Dance, 2004). Although it is obvious that Hans has always been interested in things other than *Pisidium*, it is worth mentioning that, as a former Cultural Attaché at the Dutch Embassy in Paris, he was more than capable of looking for details on a painting by Titian.

Nine months later, now in his 90th year, Hans wrote to thank me for a little service I had rendered him. His letter also betrayed an uncharacteristic sense of frustration.

K to D - 28 September 2003: 'In the very first place I wish to thank you once again for your critical reading of my text on *P. lilljeborgii*. I realised it when putting it in my computer. Now it is ready, but unfortunately suddenly the p. c. text disappeared. I really thought I was beginning mad. Wise people said: "it is now in the hard disk. You should consult a specialist." Yes, but where do I find such a specialist?'

I had no idea where Hans could have found such a specialist. I, too, am baffled by modern technology, particularly when it goes wrong, and there is not enough time in hand now for either of us to try to understand it. So, in our own, old-fashioned way, we shall continue to exchange letters about things we do understand, such as problematic little bivalves, the curious behaviour of maverick conchologists, and obscure details of Renaissance paintings. We have done this for half a century. Why stop now?

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