

EBHL 2022. Botanic Garden Meise

# What can the archives of a botanist tell us?

**A case: The correspondence of François Crépin (1830-1903),  
Director of the State Botanical Garden and a leading  
rhodologist**

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# Foreword

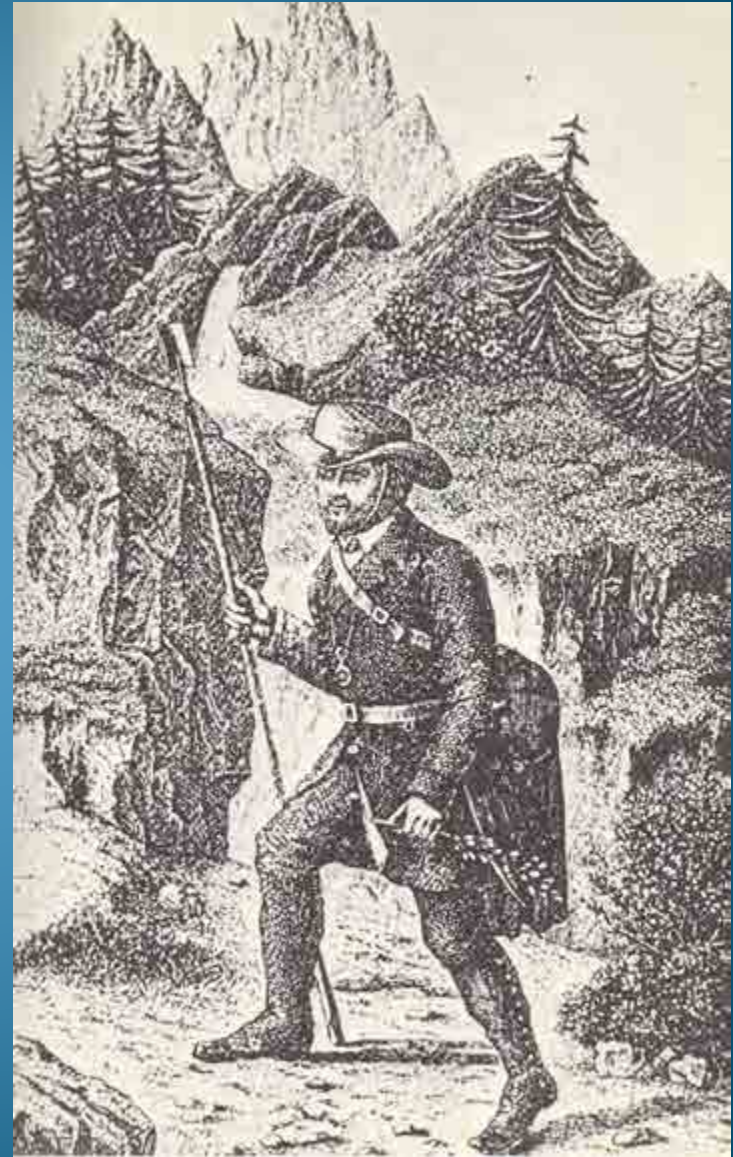


# Who's François Crépin?

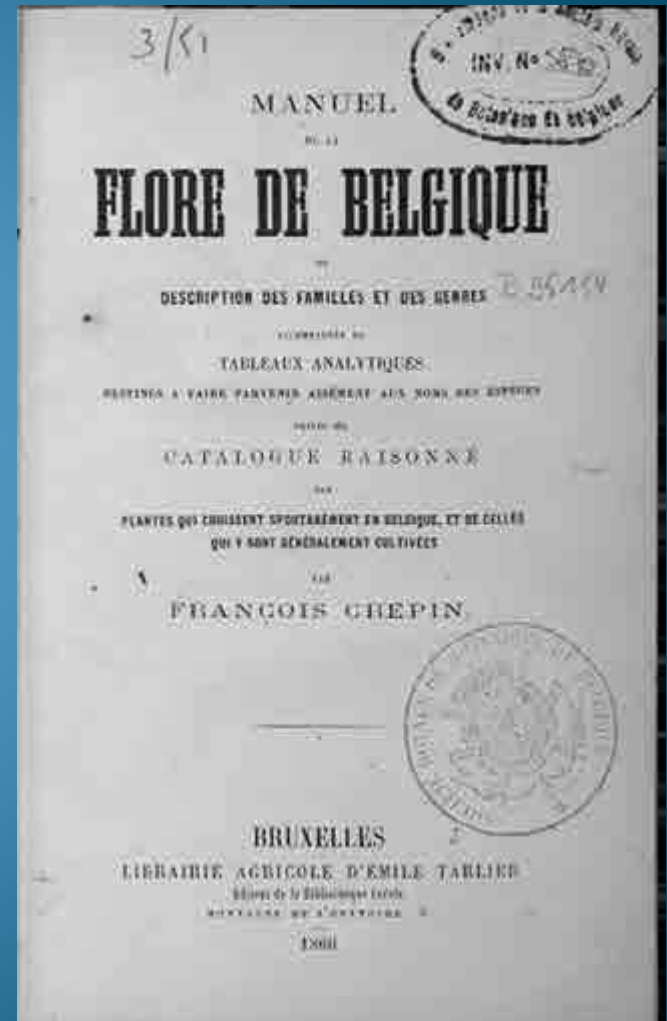
- Born 1830 in a small town (Rochefort)
- Middle-class
- Catholic background
- Lame student



- He wanted to become a botanist
- No formal training in science → he badly needs to achieve something great
- 1st network



- *Manuel de la Flore de Belgique* (1860)
- Co-founder Société Royale de Botanique de Belgique (1862)
- Editor of the *Bulletin de la Société royale...* during 25 years



# Being a “real” botanist is a never-ending work...

- A monograph on the “genre royal”: Rosa (mid-1860’s...)
- 2d network



# 1876: appointed Director of the State Botanic Garden (Brussels)



## 2 networks, thousands of letters: a « scientific freemasonry » (1878)

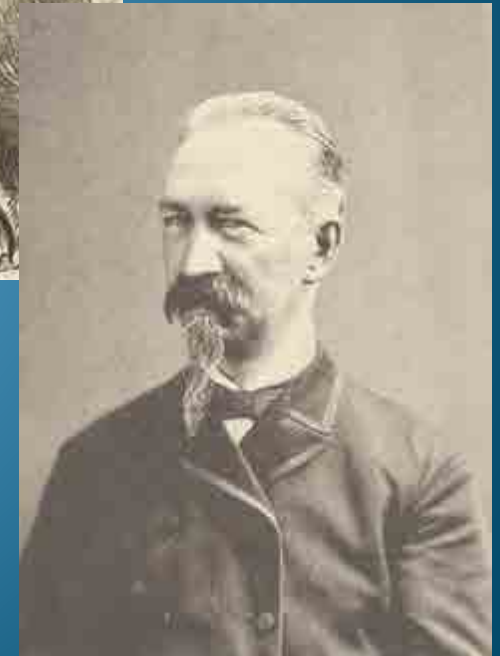
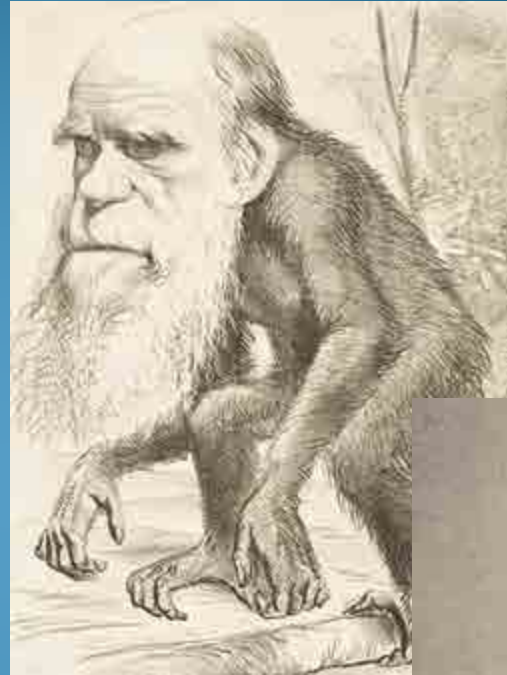
- Circulation of herbaria
- Circulations of ideas and concepts
- Tensions between disciplines
- Tensions between researchers
- Data on the Belgian society...





# Delicacies for historians: 2 fascinating examples

- Crépin's conversion to evolutionism (mid-1860's)
- Old self-taught morphologist versus a young anatomist: Crépin versus P.E. Parmentier



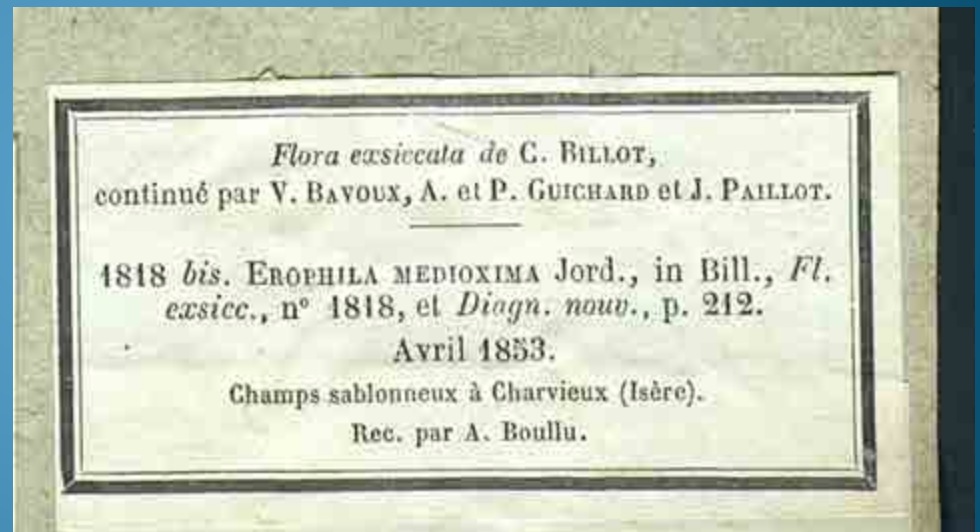
# Plant traces and new thinkings

- Travelling herbaria

- Floristic data



# 1/ dried plants travelling: herbaria



## 2/floristic data

- Distribution revealed
- Locations, old and new
- Non-native plants, invasive species
- Phenology

Remise 21 Juin 1860 349

Mon Cher Amie,

Nous n'avons plus pour le moment de papiers épistoliers. L'un ou l'autre de nous, surtout qui nous d'écouter pour faire connaître le résultat d'une bonne herborisation.

Le 19 Juin, Crassula rubens L. à Barroux-Londry  
Nocella nidus avis — Barroux-Londry

20 Juin, Wolcampyrum histatum L. Remise (Barroux)  
Gerista pilosa L. Barroux-Londry

Ces 2 derniers sont nouvelles pour la flore de  
Sire-Billycock.

Gerista sagittalis — Barroux-Londry  
Ornithopus perpusillus L. Remise  
à Barroux

Quelques-uns de ces petites découvertes?  
— Un petit mot de réponse nous fera  
plaisir. Surtout il faut le faire connaître au  
Sire-Billycock, les herboristes qui  
le connaissent?

A la mi-Juillet, nous reviens au  
parc de nos découvertes.

Salut. Victor Dorlay

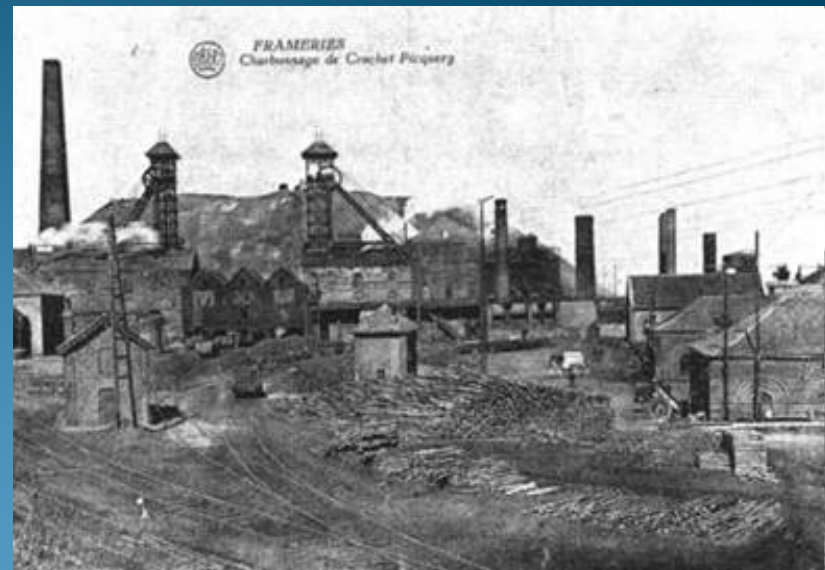
L'anglais l'écrit : "Herbarium"  
Barroux-Londry.

# Double focus

- Extinction of plant populations, disappearing stations and their causes; conservation concerns arising
- Emerging concerns: Native or non-native plants/ invasive species



# The underlying causes...



- **Industry:** "I did not stop long at Fumay, where the terrain is shattered and the vegetation desperately poor. Everywhere one sees nothing but huge piles of slate quarry debris; little or no plants grow on these artificial hills (...). At the sight of such bare places, but nevertheless worthy of the attention of the geologist and the admiration of the tourist, I preferred to visit the alluvial meadows (...)" , *A. Devos, 1867.*

## Underlying causes...



- **Agriculture:**

"Typha minima comes from the herbarium of Mr Marres (...). This gentleman found it in a marsh (...) now dried up and transformed into a field of potatoes (sic)! Well, my dear Professor, this is not a very poetic metamorphosis! But what to do with it? Solanum tuberosum is still eaten just about everywhere, both by Professor Crépin and the King of Prussia", *Vandenborn, 1862.*

## Underlying causes...

- **Leisure:**  
Botany as a hobby  
...in a nutshell:  
the **XIXth**  
**century**  
**liberal-**  
**bourgeois way**  
**of life.**





# Conservation strategies for the « Flore nationale »

- Moderate collections
- Hide the spots to the lay-botanists
- Destroy the inflorescences
- Create new plant populations



Emerging concepts: Introduced and invasive species? Towards a new status for foreign species?



# Conclusions



- Correspondence = too rich a source of data for too many disciplines to be discarded
- Correspondence= priority for the scientific institutions
- Correspondence management should not be transferred to third parties
- Dreaming is cheap... : incoming letters represent only 50% of the possible documentary resources.