

Private papers reveal ‘Who’s Who of British Science’

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One of the most important archives of nineteenth-century science - stored in obscurity for over 100 years - has been reunited and acquired by the John Rylands University Library at The University of Manchester.

The papers belonging to Sir Edward Frankland - one Britain’s greatest ever chemists - contain thousands of letters spanning his entire career with a list of correspondents reading like a Who’s Who of Victorian science.

The names include Robert Bunsen, [Charles Darwin](#), Michael Faraday, Sir Joseph Hooker, Thomas Huxley, Justus von Liebig and John Tyndall. There are almost thirty letters from Darwin alone.

Manchester’s link with the chemist who lived from 1825-1899 dates back to the 1850s when Frankland became the first Professor of Chemistry at Owens College, the forerunner of The University of Manchester.

The archive’s survival is by all accounts miraculous: some of the papers were stored in obscurity at a remote farmhouse in Cumbria and others were rescued from a bonfire.

Only Frankland’s biographer, Professor Colin Russell, was allowed access to the papers in the 1980s.

Also in the archives is a rare minute book of the legendary and secretive

X-Club, a private dining club and controversial pressure group formed by nine leading scientists - including Frankland - who supported natural selection and academic liberalism.

Frankland's achievements included developing the idea of valency - or how atoms bond with each other - taught to school children across the world.

He pioneered a new branch of chemistry concerned with organometallic compounds and played a significant role in revolutionizing the teaching of science.

During three decades of work he pioneered safe drinking-water for Britain's rapidly growing population, so helping to prevent the spread of water-borne diseases.

Frankland's contributions to science have received little recognition in the twentieth century, a result of the dispersal of the archive to his children and its closure to researchers.

Now Dr Helga Frankland, great granddaughter of Sir Edward Frankland, and her sister-in-law, Dr Juliet Frankland, have donated the main archive to the Library - an act of exceptional generosity.

Further material has been given by two other great grandchildren, Dr Noble Frankland, former Director of the Imperial War Museum, and Miss Joan Bucknall.

These generous gifts have reunited the major elements of the archive for the first time in over a hundred years.

Other material includes Frankland's journals, lecture notes, scientific notebooks, records of water analysis, photographs, and family papers.

There is also an extensive archive of Sir Edward Frankland's son Percy, himself a distinguished chemist, and his wife Grace Toynbee, who was a pioneering female scientist. Percy fell out with his father in the 1880s and was only reconciled shortly before Sir Edward died.

Jan Wilkinson, University Librarian and Director of the John Rylands Library, said: "It is particularly appropriate that the archive of Sir Edward Frankland should come to Manchester.

"In the 1850s Frankland was the first professor of chemistry at Owens College, forerunner of the University of Manchester.

"His archive will live alongside the papers of other leading scientists from this great city, such as John Dalton and James Prescott Joule. We are profoundly grateful to the family for so generously donating the archive to us."

Professor Colin Russell, biographer of Sir Edward Frankland, said: "Sir Edward Frankland was arguably the leading British chemist of the nineteenth century.

"Yet he was a controversial figure in his lifetime, and his achievements were often overlooked by his contemporaries.

"In the twentieth century he fell into obscurity. This was due in part to the 'disappearance' of his archive.

"Now that the archive is safely housed in the John Rylands University Library, researchers will be able to study his papers, and to reassess Frankland's vital contributions to Victorian science."

Source: University of Manchester ([news](#) : [web](#))

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