The Molleson couple – founders of the natural history museum in Kyakhta

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Abstract. The paper analyzes scientific collaboration of the spouses Vladislav and Maria Molleson. They lived in little town Troitskosavsk (today it is Kyakhta, Republic of Buryatia) in the second half of the 19th century. They both had a day job teaching in different local secondary schools but all their spare time was spent researching local nature venturing even into Mongolia for this purpose during summer breaks. As a result, they acquired large collections of natural artifacts: birds, animals, plants, etc. Logically the next step was to write and publish scientific papers which they did. Together with a group of equal-minded teachers they organized a society for natural exploration of the region which soon in 1894 became a part of the Troitskosavsko-Kyakhtinskoye branch of the Priamursky branch of the Russian Geographical Society. One of the first things new Society did was to combine all private collections of its founders into proper museum of natural sciences. Vladislav and Maria Molleson tended for the mentioned museum during nearly two decades together and separately. The paper aims to analyze their activity not as of one person and his helper but as of a united team of equal partners.

1. Introduction
The paper address two very interesting directions in the modern history of science. First it is the history of foundation of the natural history museums and second – history of collaboration of couples in scientific research. Both those avenues attract attention of the nowadays historians of science [1–3]. In this case the Molleson couple who lived in little town Troitskosavsk known today as Kyakhta situated in Republic of Buryatia were among founders of a local museum of natural history under the banner of the Troitskosavsk-Kyakhtinsk branch of the Priamursky branch of the Russian Geographical Society (Troitskosavsko-Kyakhtinskoe otdelenie Priamurskogo otdela Russkogo geograficheskogo obshestva) in 1894. For more then a decade together and separately they were the main caretakers of the museum. With time it became a place not only for local public interested in natural sciences or curious about them to come together but a place for scientists to attend when visiting the region. It accumulated a good number of natural collections of local flora, fauna etc. Many of those collections were sent into large scientific centers in St.-Petersburg for the well-known scientists for identification and description and well known in the scientific world. As of today, museum is challenging the second century of its existence, it is active and well-respected.

2. Materials and methods
The main sources for my research were scientific papers published by Vladislav and Maria Molleson describing their different scientific expeditions, natural history collections and activities of the
Troitskosavsk museum as well as descriptions and catalogs of different collections collected and organized by Mollesons in Kyakhta Museum of Local Lore (Kyakhtinskii kraevedcheskii muzei). Also, I used Maria Molleson’s obituary written by her younger colleague and her letters found in the Archive of Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow.

3. Famous couples in the history of Russian sciences in the 19th – early 20th centuries
There are several married couples known for their scientific achievements in Russian historiography of sciences in the 19th – early 20th century. Among them there is mathematician Sofya Kovalevskaya (1850–1891) and her husband geologist and paleontologist Vladimir Kovalevsky (1842–1883); geologist and soil scientist Vasily Dokuchaev (1846–1903) and his wife Anna Dokuchaeva (1848–1897); explorer, cartographer, botanist Olga Fedchenko (1845–1921) and her husband also explorer, cartographer, entomologist Alexei Fedchenko (1844–1873). The first pair, Kovalevsky and his wife, were not an ordinary married couple their marriage beginning as a fake one. They worked separately in different scientific fields and are well-known each in their respected field also separately. Anna Dokuchaeva still is only known as a helper to her husband though she had a few published scientific papers to her name. She had her own little educational business but majority of her time and efforts were dedicated to her husband’s life-work – soil science. Their history as a scientific couple is not researched still. Olga and Alexei Fedchenko lived together, traveled together and worked together although each of them had his/her scientific preferences. His was entomology, her was botany. For the long time Alexei was the only one acknowledged in the historiography, Olga known only as his helper. Then a book was written about Olga. But still they were known separately and only lately some papers arrived describing them as a scientific couple where both partners were equals [4]. Vladislav and Maria Molleson were not such a famous scientists as were named above. He is mentioned in the papers on the history of sciences as an ornithologist, museum conservator, librarian, etc. She is mentioned as his helper if at all. He worked for a few years organizing Troitskosavsk’s Natural History museum, she took over after his death. After that she sometimes were mentioned not only as his wife but as museum curator and local historian. Only their friends and colleagues remembered that they shared interest in Natural History and worked together as equal partners. That is why she could proceed alone after his untimely death – she was as much a scientist as he was may be with slightly different scientific interests.

4. The Mollesons couple
Several people were involved in the founding of the Natural History museum in Troitskosavsk. First of all, it was local teachers as well as local merchants who donated funds as well as a building. A few professional scientists who traveled through Troitskosavsk at the time were also interested and sympathetic to the idea and put a word with Russian Geographical Society in St.-Petersburg. One of those local teachers was Vladislav Stepanovich Molleson (1853–1899). He was born in 1853 in Ufa province to the family of an official. Soon his father was transferred to the Podolsk province and it is the place where Molleson grew up. He graduated from Kiev Gymnasium, gymnasium being a type of high school in Russian Empire and didn’t have means to continue his education in the university. So, he first found some odd jobs in Odessa but soon became a teacher in the county school for common folk in a tiny place Litin in Vinnytsia region of Ukraine. Such a life however couldn’t satisfy Molleson as he was fond of wild nature, hunting, and wild places in general. He was also interested in researching previously unknown flora and fauna. He decided to relocate and in 1877 arrived in Troitskosavsk. In Troitskosavsk he worked also as a county school teacher (uezdnoe uchilishche) and later as a district school teacher (real'noe uchilishche) till 1896 [5]. Here he had an opportunity to satisfy his passion for nature exploration. He also was reading a lot on his favorite subject and basically educated himself. In 1879 he married Maria Ivanovna Alexandrova (1853–1922). His bride was a local girl born and raised in Troitskosavsk, her father a local archpriest. In 1873 she graduated from Irkutsk Women's Institute (Irkutsii zhenskii institut) a boarding secondary school for girls from so called educated families. After graduation she taught arithmetic and French in Troitskosavsk women's Gymnasium [6]. There is no
information about her interest in natural sciences prior to her marriage but during it she was always in synch with her husband in that regard.

![Vladislav Stepanovich Molleson (1853–1899) and Maria Ivanovna Molleson nee Alexandrova (1853–1922)](image)

**Figure 1.** Portraits of: a – Vladislav Stepanovich Molleson (1853–1899); b – Maria Ivanovna Molleson nee Alexandrova (1853–1922)

Spouses spent all spare time exploring local nature. In winter they observed birds and animals they always sheltered in their house. By memoirs it was very peaceful and cozy home [7].

![Molleson’s house in Kyakhta; modern days](image)

**Figure 2.** Molleson’s house in Kyakhta; modern days

In spring they explored Troitskosavsk surroundings, collecting local flora and fauna. During summer vacations they organized scientific expeditions in Mongolia. They lived in tents, travelled light, collected plants, animals, etc. In the early 20th century texts, authors wrote that Maria Molleson was an active helper for her husband. I presume they just shared interest in natural sciences, love for adventures, for unknown places and wild nature. Otherwise she would simply stay at home, be a good housewife and wait for his return from expeditions. There is a famous example of such a behavior. Young bride of famous zoologist and traveler Nikolai Severtsov (1827–1885) Sofia Severtsova (?–1921) decided to accompany him in his expedition in Turkestan in 1865 immediately after their wedding. She helped with botanical collections and what not but after a year of travels she claimed pregnancy, left the expedition, and returned to their estate. And never accompanied her husband in his expeditions again even after her son grew up. Maria Molleson never stopped, never was tired. She was in it as much as her husband. Vladislav Molleson was most interested in birds. He published more than several papers on the subject and became well-known and well-respected ornithologist. He also was talented and skilled taxidermist. Stuffed animals and birds he created were still safe, beautiful, and realistic in the museum nearly one hundred years later. Mollesons usually donated their collections to local secondary schools. But there were simply too much.
5. Foundation of the Natural History Museum
In 1890 Mollesons and a few fellow teachers organized a little group for those interested in natural sciences. Accumulated collections of natural subjects were kept in a little private apartment rented by local supporters. In 1894 the group officially became a branch of the Russian Geographical Society. Immediately a special museum commission was organized. All collections were transferred to its care. A stone building situated in Kyakhta at the time a small place some time away from Troitskosavsk was donated specifically for the museum’s use [8]. In 1896 Vladislav Molleson quit his teaching job and became conservator for the newborn museum. He worked diligently on acquiring of new collections, putting in order old ones, cataloging everything. Molleson organized a library within the museum. The communications with other scientific societies in Russia and abroad alike were open and book exchange between them and Troitskosavsko-Kyakhtinskoye society established. We can presume that he didn’t work by himself, that as with expeditions the majority of this work was a team effort of the spouses. Several society members were interested in archaeology, participated in the archeology digs, and as a result museum got some exceptional archaeological collections of local artifacts. Vladislav digs and Maria Molleson added to the botanical and ornithological collections. Everything went well. And then in 1899 Vladislav Molleson died unexpectedly. He was only 46 years old. Maria quit her job and took over the museum. But it took nearly eight months for the Society to make her status official which it did in 1900. After that she lead the museum for the rest of her life – twenty-two years. She never remarried. During summer time she continued botanical excursions only not so far from her home base as before. All her other time was dedicated to the museum whether she was in the office or at home. She made systematic catalogs of different museum collections, prepared them for publication and published several. First of all, it was catalog of the zoological department. Its ornithological part was the published one. Whether she worked on it first-thing, to honor her late husband’s work or she sincerely shared his interest in ornithology is not known. She next prepared catalog of botanical department and then of paleontological one. During this work she maintained connections with professional scientists well-established in relevant fields. For example, she was in correspondence with an outstanding Russian paleontologist Maria Pavlova (1854–1938) who later in life became professor and doctor and was elected honorary member of the USSR Academy of Sciences in 1930. Maria published more then several papers among them two about Mongolia expeditions and one about history and activities of her museum (in 1913). In 1913, at the end of it’s nineteenth year museum accumulated valuable collections. All in all, 2666 objects in 16664 samples. The largest collection being that of natural sciences. But there were also collections of anthropological and prehistoric archaeology items, ethnographic, industrial and agricultural, numismatic collections. There were also thematic departments such as Japanese, Chinese, Mongolian-Buryat and some others. A valuable library consisted mostly from scientific periodicals received from all over the world in academic book exchange. Old museum’s building became too small for all its treasures. It became too small for its visitors as well. Museum was open for general public only on Sundays and only a for few hours: from 11.00 a.m. and till 14.00 p.m. and still it attracted a lot of people. For example, in 1913 (from January till November) more than 4000 visited museum in the town with only 10000 population the majority of which were illiterate or barely literate [9, 10].

6. Conclusion
Maria Molleson was awarded twice for her efforts by Russian Geographical Society. In 1902 she received a silver medal and in 1917 a small gold medal and with it she became one of a very few Russian women who received scientific awards from different scientific societies and institutions before the Grate Russian Revolution in 1917 along with botanist Olga Fedchenko, mathematician Sofya Kovalevskaya, marine biologist Sofya Pereyaslatseva (1849–1903), astronomer Nina Subbotina (1877–1961) and several others [11, 12]. Her awards were her own. But a good part of her life both private and professional was spend in a very fruitful partnership. It allowed her to fulfill her passion for nature exploration, to take part in the enterprise that she help to make extremely successful and all in all made a solid foundation for the rest of her life. Mollesons were common people without fancy decrees from famous universities. They lived far away from scientific centers and from modern civilization at
all. But they were talented scientists and with the help of their associates they created a base for scientific research in a place where previously it was absent. And that foundation was so solid it weathered the 20th century and is well on the way to its 150 anniversary.

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