

## Under embargo

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## UNPUBLISHED SHELLEY LETTERS DISCOVERED BY CHRISTIE'S Group of letters by British Poet Shelley expected to fetch £20,000-30,000

### Valuable Printed Books and Manuscripts

8 June 2005

**London** - A group of previously unpublished letters by Shelley and his best friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg, have recently been discovered in a trunk by a Christie's specialist, Crispin Jackson, in a house in south London. The letters, which reveal new insight into the life of the British poet were written to Ralph Wedgwood, a member of the Wedgwood pottery family, and were destined for the local car boot sale before the vendor decided to contact Christie's. The group of letters is estimated to fetch £20,000-30,000 when they are auctioned as part of the Valuable Printed Books and Manuscripts sale on 8 June at Christie's King Street.

*I found the letters in a dusty trunk, alongside a wide variety of material relating to the Wedgwood family and the Staffordshire potteries, says Crispin Jackson, head of Books at Christie's South Kensington, of his discovery. The items in the trunk appeared to have been collected more for their Wedgwood interest than for their famous author. The owner, who was left the trunk of manuscripts by her next door neighbours, had thought of selling them in a car-boot sale before contacting Christie's.*

The four letters by Shelley, and four by his best friend, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, date from the poet's days as an undergraduate at University College, Oxford, from which he and Hogg were expelled for writing a pamphlet in support of atheism. In the letters, Shelley, pretending to be a clergyman, elaborates his theories of atheism, which was to be a key tenet of his career as a rebel-poet. In one of these questioning letters, Shelley condemns religion and attacks the very basis of Christianity, writing, 'Christ never existed... the fall of man, the whole fabric indeed of superstition which it supports can no longer obtain the credit of Philosophers'.

Their inflammatory pamphlet, *The Necessity of Atheism* was announced in the *Oxford University and City Herald* on February 9 1811, and was subsequently distributed to bishops and the heads of colleges. On 25 March Shelley was summoned before the authorities, refused to

answer when questioned, and was expelled. Hogg protested and met with the same punishment.

The letters, which are apparently unpublished and unknown, fill an important gap in our understanding of Shelley's intellectual development in general, and of the Oxford expulsion in particular.

The Valuable Printed Books and Manuscript sale on 8 June will also include a copy of Christopher Columbus' letter announcing his discovery of the New World (the handwritten manuscript does not survive but was rushed into print) printed in 1494, just one year after his return from the epic voyage (estimate: £150-200,000). The sale also boasts a copy of Galileo's *Siderius Nuncius*, 1610, which contains the first account of astronomical discoveries made with the telescope (estimate: £150-200,000).