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HOW TO ATTRACT THE WOMBAT - A TALE OF FIVE DAYS OF DISCOVERY.

(with apologies to Harold Cuppy).

On Monday August 20th the Hancock Museum was visited by Mr. J. A. Mahoney of the Department of Geology and Geophysics, University of Sydney, on sabbatical leave at the B.M. (NH) Mammal section. He is working on a revision of the checklist of Australian mammals and monotremes with a colleague from Canberra. He had arrived in Newcastle unexpectedly and requested to see the skins of the Duck-billed Platypus and Wombat described and figured in Bewick's fourth edition of the History of the Quadrupeds (1800). These specimens were amongst the first to be sent from Australia by Governor Hunter in 1798. They were preserved in spirits and sent via Sir Joseph Banks for the attention of the members of the Literary and Philosophical Society, and the story goes that as they were being carried up from the Quayside, one of the casks, possibly the one with the Platypus, broke and poured the contents all over the young woman who was transporting it on her head! (Fox 1827). "The poor soul was nearly suffocated by the pungent and foul smelling spirits. Only those who are familiar with alcohol in which animal matter has been preserved can fully appreciate the sufferings of the poor woman. Apart from her physical nausea one can picture her mental horror at seeing a strange creature, half bird, half beast, lying at her feet" (Russell Goddard 1929)

Unfortunately despite a short search, in the absence of our taxidermist Eric Morton, both myself and the curator Mr. Tynan were unable to locate the specimens. In fact they had always been presumed destroyed or lost prior to 1959 when Mr. Tynan became curator. Russell Goddard, Dr. Mahoney reminded us, states that the skins were in existence when he wrote his centennial History of the then Natural History Society of Northumberland, Durham and Newcastle upon Tyne, (a daughter of the Newcastle Lit. and Phil.) in 1929.

We did manage to find one mount of a Platypus with no history, but this did not match either the type (Shaw 1799) or Hunter's description in Bewick. We advised Dr. Mahoney to return the next day to see Mrs. Grace Hickling, the secretary of the Natural History Society of Northumbria, in case they held the original Hunter letters and drawings.

This proved to be a fruitless request the next day, but we managed, with the help of one of our design assistant's memory, to locate another Platypus mount in the loft. This was brought down and dusted off for inspection, but was found to be a 1941 bequest. However we ascertained that the other mount was a male by checking for the spurs of the hind limbs. Dr. Mahoney then had to leave to go to the Royal Scottish Museum, but was to take up our suggestion to contact the Librarian at the Lit. and Phil.

On Wednesday 23rd, when I was checking the accession dates of the platypuses, Mr. Tynan and I discovered various lists of mammal skins, mounts, etc. made by Stephen Cook, taxidermist (around 1930-1962), sometime after 1950. In these there is a list of 3 platypus mounts and 3 skins, and 1 wombat skin or mount - this was not made clear. There was a note against one of the platypus skins that it was in poor condition and had been destroyed. This may have been the Hunter specimen. The wombat at that time had been in our Upper West corridor store which had been cleared out and altered around 1959. Where to look to see if it still existed?

The following day Eric Morton returned from holiday and began a search of our mammal skins, managing to turn up the remaining two platypus skins, one of which has no history but bears a close resemblance in size and form to the figure in Bewick and is in good condition, a female or immature. There is no way to ascertain whether or not this is the Hunter specimen. I decided to contact the Lit. and Phil. and went down to find that they had preserved the original Hunter letter, with a contemporary copy, which had been read to the Society on December 10th, 1799 (Watson 1897). I could not find an actual reference in the donations list of 1798. The letter is bound in Tracts of the Society, but as yet there is no sign of the drawings which Hunter sent and Bewick used. Perhaps they went to the publisher Edward Walker and were not returned. Hunter's original descriptions had been slightly paraphrased despite a suggestion by Goddard that they were reported verbatim, and I append the original here. To me it brings to mind all the problems of looking after any wild creature in captivity let alone a form totally new and unknown.

On Friday afternoon Eric Morton made my day - (I must add that the wombat is my favourite marsupial). At the back of a store cupboard above the Red Deer case in our British Mammals display, he found the wombat, no longer a flat skin in spirit but mounted, sitting on its haunches, with a hand written label on the base that it was Phascolomys fusea from Tasmania presented by Governor Hunter in 1798. This is not quite correct as the specimen came from an island in the Bass Strait, probably Furneaux's Island according to Fox (1827). Here then was the first wombat to be described and to come to Britain. Although, according to Troughton (1941) the first scientific description made by Shaw in 1800 was based on a different specimen, I feel we can claim scientific precedence for Hunter's example of the animal "the mountain natives call the Wombach". The specimen was a female according to Hunter but Mr. Wingate who prepared or mounted the skin could find no evidence of the marsupium (Wingate 1826, Fox 1827).

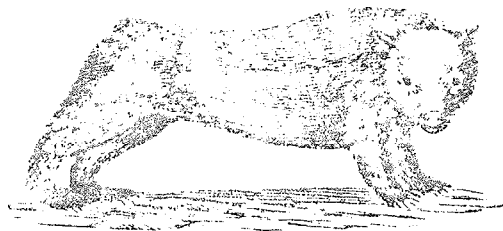


Fig. The Island Wombat (Wombach or Womat) Vombatus ursinus, Shaw 1800

Why John (sometimes printed as James) Hunter (1738-1821), vice-admiral and 2nd governor of the Australian colony from 1795 to 1801 should send his specimens to the Lit. and Phil. of Newcastle upon Tyne remained a small mystery. He became an honorary member of the Society in 1796, as did Sir Joseph Banks, when already residing at Port Jackson. He was born in Leith and had a distinguished naval career, despite two court martials. He sailed to Australia with Commodore Arthur Phillips and the First Fleet, landing in 1788. He died in London. I finally discovered the connection with Newcastle upon Tyne in a footnote in Townsend Fox's Synopsis (1827). Hunter married a Miss Kent, sister of the first naval commander in the colony who took Hunter to Port Jackson, niece of Bartholomew Kent of Newcastle, who proposed Hunter and young Kent as the first honorary members of the Society.

Fox also relates the story of the discovery of the dried up skin nearly 30 years after it was donated, tucked away in a drawer when they were reorganising the Museum. He states 'we have had the annexed engraving made of it by Mr. Bewick Jnr. after resetting it by Mr. Wingate, in an attitude, which he conceives, from 2 calliosities on its haunches, to be more adapted to its habits, than that given in the former figure'.

It seems quite fitting that at the time of the 150th anniversary of the formation of the Natural History Society of Northumbria which took over the Museum from the Lit. and Phil. that one of the earliest and most intriguing specimens should be 'discovered' yet again.

Acknowledgements

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Susan Turner
The Hancock Museum

Governor J. Hunter 1798

A description of an amphibious animal caught on the coast of New South Wales Lat. 40. 36W.

Revd. October 8th, 1799

Sydney N. S. W. August 5th, 1798. Was in considerable numbers. Caught by the company of a ship wrecked on a voyage from Bengal to Port Jackson. As it appears to be unknown I have preserved it in spirits for the inspection of the learned members of the Literary and Philosophical Society.

I received the animal alive by a vessel which I had sent to the relief of the sufferers.

It was exceedingly weak when it arrived having during its confinement on board, refused every kind of sustenance, except a small quantity of boiled rice, which they forced down its throat.

I had it frequently taken out of its case or box in which it was kept, and exposed it in a small place enclosed, where it could get in the daytime, the benefit of the warmth of the sun which however it did not seem to enjoy, but whenever it could shelter itself under a shrub, there it would continue and sleep. It refused every kind of food on shore, as it had done on board, but we could see it sometimes nibble a little of the roots of bushes (rushes?) and grass, this kind of provision was not sufficient for its existence, I saw that it would inevitably die soon if we could find no particular food which it would voluntarily swallow - it grew weaker every day, was exceedingly harmless and would allow any person to carry it about - after having lived, we may say without any kind of food about six weeks, it died; on opening the body to see if anything new was to be seen in the construction or figure of the intestines, no discovery worth notice was made; the brain was taken out of the head, the intestines removed and the body immersed in spirits.