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NATURAL HISTORY IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IRELAND: PART 1

C. E. O'Riordan, J. P. O'Connor and J. M. C. Holmes

Alas, the editor's kind offer of space in the Newsletter for an article on the National Museum arrived in the middle of the holiday and collecting season when most of us were *inter alia* racing around Ireland in pursuit of specimens or basking in the sun. It was only possible therefore to produce part one of a two part article on the institution. Our collections are very important and we feel that they are more deserving of a fuller treatment than time presently permits. Part two will describe therefore our scientific collections and their significance. It will appear in a future issue of the B.C.G. newsletter.

GENERAL DETAILS

The Natural History collections are mainly housed in the Natural History Museum which is situated on Upper Merrion Street, a few minutes walk from the centre of the city. The National Gallery, Government Buildings and the Dail (the Irish Parliament) are nearby. The Natural History Museum is one of four divisions of the National Museum of Ireland. The postal address is the National Museum of Ireland, Kildare Street, Dublin 2 (telephone: Dublin 765521). The public exhibition is open Tuesday to Saturday (10am - 5pm) and Sunday (2pm - 5pm). It is closed on Mondays and on Good Friday and Christmas Day.

In 1970, the Botanical Section was transferred to the National Botanic Gardens. The Museum caters therefore for Zoology and Geology. Although, at present, there is no geological staff, this situation is being rectified. Interviews for two geologists have been held and it is hoped that appointments will be made in the near future. The present staff consists of Dr. C. E. O'Riordan (Keeper), Dr. J. P. O'Connor (Assistant Keeper), Mr. J. M. C. Holmes (Assistant Zoologist), Mr. P. O'Sullivan (Senior Technical Assistant), Ms. D. Murphy, Mr. L. O'Neill and Ms. G. Griffith (Technical Assistants).

PUBLIC EXHIBITION

The exhibition is a traditional one organised systematically and has changed little since it was arranged at the turn of the century. It is housed on four levels *viz* Ground Floor, First Floor, Lower Gallery and Upper Gallery.

GROUND FLOOR

The specimens exhibited on this floor are intended to illustrate the wildlife of Ireland. Examples of almost all the vertebrate and many of the important invertebrate animals now living in Ireland are shown. In addition, the remains of beasts which lived in this country in prehistoric times are exhibited. There are magnificent skeletons of the extinct Irish Giant Deer, including a female, on display. There are several special exhibits of animals in their natural surroundings including the fauna of a marine rock pool. A very popular specimen is a Basking Shark which is suspended from the ceiling.

FIRST FLOOR AND LOWER GALLERY

The general collection of vertebrate animals, including elephants, giraffes, walrus etc., may be seen here. The skeletons of two whales, stranded on Irish coasts, are suspended from the roof. Species of special interest include the Giant Panda, Malayan Stink Badger, Pigmy Hippopotamus, Okapi, Thylacine, Dugong, Sumatran Rhinoceros, Labrador Duck, Passenger Pigeon, Dodo, Solitaire and

*Aepyornis* (with an egg). The display is a comprehensive one of the vertebrate fauna of the world.

#### UPPER GALLERY

The general collection of invertebrate animals is on this floor and it includes all the major and minor groups. The display of beautiful glass models of delicate animals, which cannot be preserved in spirit, is of particular interest. These were prepared in the latter half of the nineteenth century by Leopold and Rudolph Blaschka of Hosterwitz near Dresden. A total of 530 models were purchased between 1878 and 1886, many of which may be seen.

#### THE MUSEUM IN THE PAST

The Natural History Museum originated as one of the many activities initiated by the Royal Dublin Society in furtherance of its aims of fostering the useful arts and sciences in Ireland. The nucleus of the Museum was formed by the purchase of the Leskean Collection of minerals and insects in 1792 aided by a grant from Parliament. In the early years, the embryo museum occupied two rooms in the Society's Hawkins Street premises.

In 1815 the expanding collections were transferred to a suite of six rooms in Leinster House which had been purchased by the Society as its new headquarters. In the first sixty years of its existence the emphasis was on geology, particularly mineralogy, though some zoological material was acquired. With the appointment of a full-time Director in 1851, Dr. Alexander Carte, the emphasis switched to zoology and Carte rapidly set about augmenting the collections wherever necessary.

A new Natural History Building was completed on Leinster Lawn, adjacent to Leinster House and Dr. David Livingstone delivered a lecture on his African discoveries at the formal opening. Following a revision of the State funding of the Royal Dublin Society in 1865, the State undertook complete support of the Natural History Museum and mineralogy. With this extra aid the Museum staff was augmented by the appointment of A. G. More and W. F. Kirby. Purchases of specimens were greatly increased, and the Museum was gradually opened more and more to the public.

Under the Science and Art Act of 1877 the Natural History Museum and other institutions were formally transferred to State ownership, though the Royal Dublin Society retained some offices in Leinster House. The new group of institutions was placed under the Directorship of Dr. Wm. E. Steele, and Carte was confirmed as Director of the Natural History Museum.

When the Science and Art building was completed in 1890, the herbarium from the Botanic Gardens was set up there. For a few years the Geological Survey collections and some Museum palaeontological material was also displayed there, though later transferred to a corridor adjoining the Natural History Museum.

Dr. R. F. Scharff was appointed to the Natural History Museum in 1887 and was made Keeper a year later. With the aid of the staff, among whom were A. C. Haddon, A. R. Nichols, G. H. Carpenter, J. N. Halbert, Miss Jane Stephens, R. Southern and C. M. Selbie, over the next quarter of a century he gradually overhauled the entire exhibition and storage system, bringing it into line with the taxonomically arranged displays of the time. A geological and palaeontological exhibition was set up in a nearby annexe.

In 1922 the Free State Government took over Leinster House in order to hold the Dail (Parliament) there, and the Museum was closed to the public for two years. The annexe and geological collections were never opened again. The

staff was reduced in the early 1920s and Mr. A. W. Stelfox, assisted by Mr. E. O'Mahony, were the sole staff left to cope with normal museum routine.

A Committee of Enquiry was set up by the Minister of Education in 1927, some three years after the Department of Education had assumed responsibility for the Museum. The effective result of its recommendations was that Irish Antiquities was brought into greater prominence and given additional staff. The Committee admitted that Natural History, excepting Botany, was in a very precarious position but its recommendations had the effect of reducing the professional staff of the zoological section from five to two, and though the appointment of a geologist was recommended the post was not advertised.

Dr. P. O'Connor was appointed Keeper in 1930 and Miss G. Roche joined the staff the same year. During the nineteen thirties to the nineteen sixties activity was at a relatively low level due to understaffing. During this time, with the rapidly growing collections throughout the entire National Museum, the lack of space was becoming very evident. Various recommendations were made but no practical solution emerged.

In 1962, the annexe was demolished to make room for a Dail office block and the geological collections were transferred to the Royal Hospital at Kilmainham. A decision to transfer the Herbarium to the National Botanic Gardens was also taken that year, though the actual transfer did not take place until 1970.

A moderate increase in staffing took place during the nineteen sixties and seventies but the Natural History staffing level of 1914 has not yet been restored. It is hoped that this situation will be rectified in time.

#### THE MUSEUM TODAY

Despite the vicissitudes of the past, the Museum is again booming and at the centre of Irish Natural History. Each year, the number of enquiries and visitors increases. The institution provides a nucleus of taxonomic expertise which is utilized by a wide variety of clients including government departments (Fisheries, Agriculture etc.), universities, health boards, industry and the general public. Most identification problems in the Republic usually end up at the Museum often having been passed from hand to hand via incredibly tortuous routes. Indeed, the Natural History Museum has now reasserted its position as a major identification centre for the State; a service which it is able to provide often with the help of many kind friends abroad.

The staff also co-operate with the scientific and naturalist community by refereeing papers, giving advice and confirming identifications. The Museum is greatly utilized as an information centre for matters pertaining to Natural History.

Despite the staffing problems described in the historical section, very little deterioration in the collections is evident. It is obvious that much of the staff's time in the past was put into basic curation; a tradition which continues today. Very few specimens have therefore been destroyed. This situation, coupled with the increase in staff, has restored confidence both among naturalists and the public. The net result is that the Museum is once again receiving a flood of scientific material from abroad and from Ireland. Since we wish our collections to be as representative as possible of the Irish fauna, we urgently require voucher specimens of many species recorded by visitors to our shores. We hope that some of the readers of this article can oblige us - a single specimen would suffice!

In addition to our basic curation and the identification service, the Museum is rapidly becoming an important centre for zoological research in Ireland.

The number of visiting workers has increased enormously. Innumerable enquiries concerning various aspects of research (types, loans etc.) are resolved each year. The staff themselves are engaged in research and are publishing an increasing number of papers on various aspects of the Irish fauna, a trend which is expected to continue.

Although the public exhibition has not been greatly modified over the years, this has proved in many ways to be an advantage. The display has now a charm of its own. It demonstrates the layout of a Victorian museum with its emphasis on the animals themselves as objects of interest. Nowadays, the request from visitors is to preserve it as it is! Within this constraint and our shortage of staff, a programme of improvement (painting, labelling etc.) has been initiated. Attempts are being made to reduce the number of specimens in the public area (an important part of our storage area) and there are several new exhibitions. In recent times, the Museum has received favourable comment in the press and has now appeared in the Dublin Bus Guide as a place of interest.

Undoubtedly, many of our readers will recognise the problems facing the institution. We lack money, space and staff. In recent years, successive Irish governments have recognised the need to preserve the National Heritage. In this context, it is hoped that our problems will be solved and that the Museum will continue to prosper.