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ORIGIN OF THE ULSTER MUSEUM

The Ulster Museum is the youngest of the "provincial" National Museums. Its transfer to a Board of Trustees took place only in April 1962, the opening of the first phase "National" museum to the public occurring as recently as 1971.

The origins of the Ulster Museum lie in the Museum of the Belfast Natural History Society, which was set up entirely by voluntary subscription and opened formally on 1st November 1831, in College Square Belfast. In 1883 it was opened to the public on "New Years Day and thereafter on Saturdays from 12 noon until 3.00p.m., supervision being in the hands of Members of Council of the Society."

In 1842 a new constitution was adopted by the Society which was renamed "The Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society".

In 1843 William Thompson (Natural History of Ireland) was elected to the Presidency of the Society, an office he held until his death. Under his guidance and the more dynamic style of a revitalised Society the museum began to grow both physically and in its impact on the Belfast Public.

For Easter Monday 1845 the entrance fee was reduced and an "advertising campaign" mounted. The public responded ... almost 1000 of them, and "the utmost decorum and quietness was observed, no object in the collections being damaged". This obviously encouraged the Society greatly and for many years the experiment was repeated with ever increasing success. Other days were tried but none ever produced the results of Easter Mondays.

As the years passed the Society continued to flourish, both in terms of public involvement and of the collections. On the death of Thompson in 1852 a report was produced which includes the following:-

"Zoological and Botanical departments.

A complete collection cannot be acquired, but the aim should be to procure a good series illustrative of the fauna and flora of the surrounding district. The Thompson bequest has ensured a complete collection in some departments of Irish Natural History, Ornithological specimens include (i) the collection of British Birds and eggs and (ii) the foreign collection, especially the Captain Crozier collection (Australia) and the Robert Templeton collection (Ceylon). Mammals fishes and reptiles are less complete but of interest. Insects include many Irish specimens, also the Tennant (Ceylon) and Crozier collections. The British series of shells is not yet complete; the foreign series has been lately re-arranged. Other invertebrates are average for a provincial collection. The Thompson Room is to be fitted up for a display of specimens illustrative of the natural history of Ireland. A typical collection (of specimens representative of various classes etc.) is to be formed in the middle room when the Thompson Room is fitted up."

In 1863 another new society was formed, the Belfast Naturalists

Field Club, sharing many members with the B.N.H.P.S. but with much more practical objectives. Almost immediately there was increased pressure for a "local museum" with "scientific collections". The collections were completely re-catalogued and new systems of storage and labelling were instituted.

By 1880 the collections were expanding at such a rate that further extensions had been added to the original building. A "Scientific Curator", Samuel Alexander Stewart, was appointed, who during his period of office produced the first complete catalogue of the collections, a visitors guide and in conjunction with Thomas Corry, "The Flora of the north east of Ireland".

Unfortunately, from these heights the museum seemed to go into a slow decline to the beginning of the 20th century. The volume of the collections and the financial commitment required simply became too much for the Society to bear. Belfast Corporation had already in their possession several major collections (particularly the Grainger collection). It was thus logical and mutually beneficial when in July 1910 responsibility for the museum was transferred to the City of Belfast.

From this time the museum followed the course of other museums guided by a prosperous and enthusiastic industrial community. It flourished and expanded until the College Square premises were no longer adequate. A new Museum building was commissioned and the first phase was built on the Botanic Gardens site between 1924 and 1929. The collections continued to grow and staff numbers gradually grew with the appointment of subject specialists.

Once again the financial commitment grew. There was pressure to "complete" the museum but there was no way in which Belfast Corporation could find the necessary finance.

Eventually, in 1961, after a great deal of negotiation with government, a formula was agreed where the Corporation would hand over responsibility for the museum to an independant Board of Trustees. In return the Government agreed to take over responsibility for the "completion" of the building and eventually for the financial support of the institution.

Thus the MUSEUMS ACT (N.I.) 1961, established at least in name, a national institution to be called THE ULSTER MUSEUM.

David G Erwin

Note..... For further information on the history of the Ulster Museum -
A Museum in Belfast Nesbitt, N. 1979: Ulster Museum pub 233.