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## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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## VERTEBRATE SECTION

The collections of the vertebrate section of the Botany and Zoology department are founded on the specimens, mainly mounted birds, bequeathed to the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society by its first president William Thompson (1805-1852). Thompson is perhaps best known for his 'Natural History of Ireland'<sup>1</sup> published in four volumes, the first three on the birds of Ireland being published 1849-1851. The fourth volume on other faunal groups was published in 1856, four years after his death and completed by Thompson's friends and colleagues from manuscript notes, now in the collections of the museum.

In 1919 the collections, by then part of The Belfast Municipal Museum, were expanded with the donation of the Patterson museum collection, belonging to another of Ireland's leading naturalists Robert Lloyd Patterson and comprising bird mounts and skins from Irish localities.

The collections continued to increase throughout the early and mid 1900's, mainly through public donations rather than as a result of an active collecting policy. In 1963 the donation of the late H.T. Malcomson's collection of bird mounts greatly increased the quality of the mounted collection and over one hundred specimens from the Malcomson bequest now form the basis of the bird display in the gallery pertaining to the natural history of Ireland.

In the late 1960's the museum was fortunate to receive part of the extensive collections of mounted birds from the J.I.S. Whitaker museum, Palermo, Sicily. The specimens are in general of poor quality but they, nevertheless, widen the geographic spectrum of the collections which are otherwise mainly British and Irish in origin.

Work in progress at present includes a revised cataloguing of the entire bird and mammal collections. All the information for each specimen is being collated from old labels, day books, historical files and publications and is being placed on a new card index and label. Each specimen is being allocated a new six digit accession number based, in the case of the birds, on the B.T.O. guide No.13(1971)<sup>2</sup> to the birds of Britain and Ireland and, in the case of the mammals, on 'The Mammals of the Palaearctic Region' by G.B. Corbet (1978)<sup>3</sup>. Data on the mammal collections has been placed on computer disc as a pilot scheme for other collections.

The construction of a new Zoology store, due for completion in late 1981, will alleviate some of the section's existing storage problem and the rehousing of the bird skin and egg collection will occupy much of the section's work effort over the next six months.

The Ulster Museum does not employ a taxidermist. Mr. T. Bruton is employed in the department as a scientific officer responsible for skin preparation and osteology. Mounted specimens are contracted out to a local, museum trained, commercial taxidermist, the museum supplying the specimens, the taxidermist producing the finished mount.

### FISH COLLECTION.

The fish collection numbers less than one hundred specimens and is at present housed with the invertebrate wet collection. Over the

next four years it is planned to expand the collection to include at least one of each of the commoner British and Irish freshwater and marine species. The cost of containers for fluid preserved specimens is, under present economic conditions, prohibitive and the project must await the release of more funds to the department.

A coelocanth, purchased by the department in 1975 and preserved in Steedman's solution with little loss of colour, forms the central attraction of the fish display. Recently, with the cooperation of a local dealer, the museum's fifteen foot display tank has been converted from native coldwater species to tropical species and is proving a very popular exhibit.

#### AMPHIBIAN AND REPTILE COLLECTIONS.

Whether due to environmental conditions, lack of deliberate or accidental introductions or saintly intervention, Ireland has a very depleted amphibian and reptilian fauna; only four species are to be found in this country, the natterjack toad having only a very localised distribution in the South West. This lack of species is very adequately reflected in the size of the amphibian and reptile collection, numbering less than fifty specimens, most of which are in poor condition with little or no information. Expansion of this collection by the addition of fluid preserved specimens from Britain and Ireland is planned and assistance from other institutions would be greatly appreciated.

#### BIRD COLLECTION

##### a. Mounts

Four major collections are represented:-

- (i) The Thompson collection dates between 1800 and 1850, is exclusively Irish and contains many first recorded Irish specimens of American vagrant species. Also included are two first recorded British specimens a Sabine's gull Larus sabini taken on Belfast Lough on 18th September 1822 and a Bonaparte's gull Larus philadelphia.
- (ii) The Whitaker collection dates between 1890 and 1914, and comprises some 2,000 specimens from the Mediterranean, North Africa and North America.
- (iii) The Queen's University Zoology Museum collection predates the formation of the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical museum and received specimens collected by early Irish naturalists and explorers. Included in this collection are three fine examples of the passenger pigeon Ectopistes migratorius and a specimen of emperor penguin Aptenodytes forsteri collected by the Ross expedition to the Antarctic of 1839-1842, the first occasion specimens of this species were collected and scientifically described.
- (iv) The Malcomson collection containing over five hundred specimens of mounted birds, mainly of British and Irish origin. The specimens were mounted by the Sheals family, a father and two sons, who owned a taxidermist's business in Belfast between 1870 and 1930<sup>4</sup>. Curators who have seen Sheals specimens will know of their outstanding quality. An exhibition of the work of the Sheals family is planned for 1982 and information from curators with collections containing Sheals' specimens would be appreciated.

The museum now possesses a mounted bearded tit Panurus biarmicus, mounted in 1794 and believed to be one of the oldest stuffed birds in the world. Curators with specimens mounted before this date should contact the Guinness Book of Records.

The mounted bird collection is housed in thirty purpose built cupboards 2.6m x 1.9m x 0.6m. The cupboards have adjustable shelving. Attempts to make them dust-proof have so far proved inadequate. The collection is laid out in systematic sequence with the exception of the Palermo material which is housed separately and remains largely unworked.

Storage space is limited and a number of large mounts are situated in the aisles between cupboards, whilst older cases are housed in outside storage areas. The rehousing of the skin and egg collections will release extra storage space for the mount collection.

#### b. Bird Skin Collection

Although not containing any type material, series of skins of most British and Irish species are represented in the collection. Much of the material has been collected by the public and prepared by museum staff. The major historical collections are as follows:-

- (i) Professor C.J. Patten collection - birds taken at Irish lighthouses between the years 1911-1917. Most prepared as flat skins. Fully documented.
- (ii) W.H. Workman Museum collection - birds collected in Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century.
- (iii) Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society Museum Collection - collected between 1840 and 1900. Bird skins from the West Indies, New Zealand, Australia, India and Africa collected by early Irish naturalists such as Hyndman, Templeton, Halliday and Patterson. Also included are New Zealand birds collected by Capt. Crozier of the H.M.S. Terror whilst on the Ross expedition 1839-1842.

#### c. Bird Egg Collection

The major collection of bird eggs was purchased from the late John Cottney. Within the collection, most British and Irish species are represented by at least one clutch, fully documented but not catalogued. Other Palaearctic and Nearctic species are represented in the collections including the American Bald Eagle Haliaeetus leucocephalus and the Osprey Pandion haliaetus.

### MAMMAL COLLECTIONS

The mammal collections are small totalling less than six hundred specimens (mounts and skins). The mount collection is almost entirely Irish and includes a very fine example of the Irish wolfhound.

A number of marsupials collected by the late Professor Flynn, father of the famous or rather infamous Hollywood actor Errol, are present in the collections. Present negotiations between the museum and the university should result in the remainder of the Flynn collection including a mounted thylacine or Tasmanian wolf being added

to the collections. The skin collection contains over 200 skins of the field mouse Apodemus sylvaticus collected by Dr. James Fairley from various localities in Ireland, including a series of the rather larger specimens from Rathlin Island, an island off the north coast. All the skins are fully documented.

The department is to receive a collection of over two hundred fully documented pygmy shrew Sorex minutus skins from the Zoology department of the university in the near future.

Of interest is the recent discovery in the collection of the holotype of the Irish rat Mus hibernicus, a new species described by Thompson in 1837<sup>5</sup>, but later to be considered as a melanic form of the brown rat Rattus norvegicus by Major Barrett-Hamilton<sup>6</sup>, Ireland's first mammalogist.

#### OSTEOLOGY

The main effort of preparative work within the section has been the expansion of the osteology collection. A reference collection of disarticulated mammal skeletons is in preparation and the department now possesses at least one skeleton of each of the wild and domesticated mammal species to be found in Ireland. This collection is used extensively by the museum's archaeological department in the identification of faunal remains from archaeological sites. Pleistocene and post-pleistocene species are not well represented and information regarding the availability, either as skeleton or carcase of wolf, lynx, reindeer, arctic fox and wild pig would be welcomed.

A series of skulls collected by Fairley of each of the following species are present in the collection -

Otter Lutra lutra - approx 40 skulls  
Red fox Vulpes vulpes - over 250 skulls  
Irish stoat Mustela erminea hibernica - over 40 skulls  
Field mouse Apodemus sylvaticus - approx 100 skulls

Vertebrate groups, other than mammals, are poorly represented in the collections.

#### THE WILDLIFE ART COLLECTION

During the period the department was under the control of C.D. Deane a policy was initiated of collecting historical and contemporary wildlife paintings, sketches and sculpture. Represented in the collection are the works of Thorburn, Wolf, Tunnicliffe, Gillmor, Ede, Peterson, Donald Watson, Raymond Watson, Scott and Shackleton.

At present the wildlife art collection is spatially separated from the main museum complex but it is planned to house the collection in the new zoology store.

#### SUMMARY

The collections of the vertebrate section are mainly Irish in origin. The fish, reptile, amphibian and mammal collections are small and expansion of these collections is planned. The bird collection is of considerable interest, being mainly British and Irish in origin and containing many fine quality mounts and study skins. The osteology collection contains a useful series of skulls of native Irish mammals

and a reference collection is in preparation.

Curatorial work in progress includes the cataloguing of the bird and mammal collections, with simultaneous re-accessioning and re-labelling. The mammal collections are on computer disc file and a similar course of action is planned for the bird collections.

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Marshall McKee



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