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JAMES SHEALS

Naturalist & Taxidermist

THE STORY OF VICTORIAN AND EDWARDIAN TAXIDERMISTRY

by Marshall McKee

207mm x 260mm (8 $\frac{1}{8}$ " x 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ "), 72pp, 11 colour and 27 b & w illustrations.
Ulster Museum publication no. 253.

When I first handled a copy of this publication with its skin-textured cover and full colour illustration of what is probably the Sheals family's most famous set piece - A Bearded Vulture, wings outstretched attacking a wild cat, I felt like the man holding a bottle of Croft Original sherry "instinctively knowing that the contents would be right".

Written by Marshall McKee this booklet was produced in conjunction with his very successful exhibition on the same subject held in the Ulster Museum last year.

It begins with a brief history of the Art of Taxidermy up to the Victorian era which sets the scene for a well-illustrated, amusing and often touching account of the lives and achievements of the Sheals family, a prime example of the right people being in the right place at the right time.

James Sheals established the family business in 1856, a time when taxidermy was given a powerful boost through the interest engendered by the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace in 1851. With the assistance of two of his sons, Alfred and Thomas, the Sheals family achieved a reputation for artistic taxidermy throughout the world. Their story is told with both humour and scholarship ably complimenting the interests and skills of a family whose work must rank amongst the very best taxidermy produced during this era.

It tells of Pallas's Sandgrouse, the dangers of keeping Bitterns in captivity, the thriving climate for taxidermy at the turn of the century when over 300 specimens were mounted annually and the trials and tribulations of dealing with natural history material without refrigerators or fast transport. The text is throughout the book dotted with well-chosen illustrations of the work and times of the Sheals family.

There are over 800 specimens in the Sheals collection at Ulster Museum and a complete list is included at the end of the publication with documentation thorough enough to bring a blush to my cheeks.

Chapter III deals in some depth with those specimens of particular ornithological importance recorded by Sheals, many of which are in the collections of Ulster Museum. Indeed the naturalist's skills are apparent in James Sheals' ability to recognise a Ferruginous duck "picked out in a poulterers shop next door to ours". This rare species having never before been recorded in Ireland.

Alfred Sheals is justly recognised as the most artistically talented of the family producing not only exquisitely mounted birds but also a series of very fine scale models of mammals which he refused to allow for commercial production though later giving examples away to friends. He was also a

regular contributor to the 'Nature notes of the Northern Whig'. Chapter IV concentrates on the rare birds recorded by him together with extracts of his prizewinning publications submitted to this journal.

Having seen the original exhibition I would have been more than satisfied with this account of the Sheals business. Marshall McKee however went one step further and cleverly wove around the Sheals family core the story of the development of Victorian & Edwardian taxidermy. To assist him with this work he solicited the help of Pat Morris, an acknowledged authority in this field. This help is reflected in Chapter V of the booklet entitled 'Victorian Taxidermy in Britain'. It ranges from the detective story of The Duchess of Richmond's parrot (need I say more), through the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the work of John Hancock of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and traces the evolution of taxidermy techniques by firms such as Rowland Ward and Edward Gerrard. British taxidermy's brief love affair with anthropomorphic work is discussed as well as the fashionable period when most middle class homes used mounted specimens as domestic decoration.

Never one to miss the opportunity to peel the scale from unseeing eyes Pat Morris reopens the discussion on the Hastings Rarities, ticks off tickers, puts the Health & Safety Executive in its proper place and bravely sticks up for the taxidermists of the past who in his opinion had as much responsibility for decimating bird & mammal species as undertakers have for the death of their clients.

His contribution ends, appropriately enough for a work on taxidermy with a tale, a glimpse of which I will give you in the obituary to one of the famous dogs stationed at Paddington in London:

Tim,
Our pet we may still gaze upon
Though dead, like life in form & limb
For what he died at Paddington,
Now Rawland Ward is Padding Tim

This publication never set out to be a definitive account of Victorian and Edwardian taxidermy, which it is not, but it does point out the areas which are well worth our further attention and concern if we are to preserve a rich and always interesting period in the history of natural history collections.

My congratulations to those involved with such an entertainingly written and excellently produced publication - a fitting tribute to the artistic talents of a remarkable family. I warmly recommend it to anyone interested in the quality of both natural history preparations and publications.

R. Hendry