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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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Author(s): Gotto, R. V.

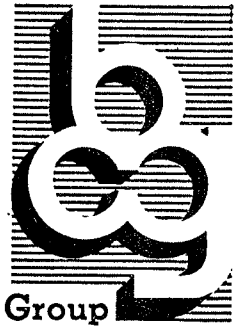
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C O N T E N T S

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« Cardiff Conference - A National Plan for Systematics Collections? »

Dates confirmed 6 - 9 July 1982

Programme will be sent out soon

REMINISCENCES OF QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY MUSEUM, BELFAST

Amongst the various items still to be found in the Queen's University Zoology museum of forty years ago were specimens obtained and identified by Charles Wyville Thomson. This pioneer of oceanography had held the Chair of Natural History and Geology at Queen's between 1860 and 1870. Marine molluscs and crustaceans, blackened and crumbling, were discoverable in the depths of long-unopened drawers, wrapped in fragments of ancient newspaper as friable as the Dead Sea scrolls. Little of this material, alas, would have been worth saving.

A more spectacular exhibit was a very large and badly stuffed polar bear. This was, historically speaking, a rather famous beast, having been shot on one of the abortive expeditions which had set out to look for Sir John Franklin, whose party had vanished in the Arctic wastes while seeking the legendary North-West Passage. The bear's condition had not improved over the years. Its broad back formed a convenient landing-stage for zoology students disinclined to circumnavigate the upper gallery and negotiate a narrow stairway to the lower level. Hanging by the arms, it was possible to drop straight onto the bear and thereby save a few moments while hastening to the next lecture. Its pelt, though superficially luxuriant, was in fact of thistledown fragility. A zealous museum assistant, who once attempted to vacuum-clean the fur, had the unique experience of witnessing what appeared to be a good third of this enormous animal vanish up the tube before the machine could be switched off.

At that time, the museum also housed a large collection of exotic stuffed birds. In biologically improbable postures, they occupied shelf after shelf of dusty, glass-fronted cupboards. They also figured prominently in one bizarre incident. The Vice-Chancellor of the day had announced one of his periodic University inspections - events departmentally regarded in the same light as natural catastrophes. "I like," he had proclaimed on a recent visit to Chemistry, "to see lots of shining glass." This weird obsession created an atmosphere of panic-stricken gloom in Zoology, where acres of the stuff, opaque with the grime of ages, were only too evident. Our chief Technician, a man well versed in the psychology of senior administrators, saved the day. Armed with a filthy duster, he quickly polished the outward-facing glass eye of every bird in the collection. The resulting beady points of reflected light shone brilliantly through the murk of the totally undusted display cases. Seemingly hypnotized by this firmament of avian eyes, the Vice-Chancellor completed his tour in docile silence, afterwards complimenting the Department on its outstanding cleanliness.

Queen's still possesses a fine assortment of marsupial material. Much of this was supplied by T.T. Flynn, professor of Zoology between 1931 and 1948, who came to the Chair from the University of Hobart, Tasmania. His research field was marsupial embryology - an interest unlikely to be pursuable amongst the unpouched fauna of the Ulster countryside. Although a fine first-year lecturer and a good embryologist, Theo Flynn was inevitably destined to be known simply as "Errol Flynn's father". Errol did, in fact, pay one visit to Belfast, before his full blossoming as a Hollywood star. At a party to mark his arrival, he succeeded in spiking the orange juice of a teetotal (and very senior) academic wife with a massive slug of gin. The result, spectacular beyond all expectation, ensured his subsequent exclusion from University festivities.

The old museum has gone now - or rather it has undergone a metamorphosis into administrative offices. When the Department moved to more modern but less spacious quarters, the collections were broken up. A few specimens were retained, some given away, many destroyed. To visit their former home is a curious experience - typewriters clack where primeval silence prevailed, strip-lighting has replaced the softer shafts of a westering sun. Perhaps one should return to the place only after dark. Maybe then the old familiar shapes would re-emerge: the elephant skeleton encrusted with student signatures, the bear who died because Franklin vanished, the sad, exotic fowl. And perhaps the beneficent ghost of Wyville Thomson is there too, cataloguing yet again his treasured sea-snails from the long-forgotten voyages of a century ago.

R.V. Gotto
Zoology Department
Queen's University,
Belfast.