



**NatSCA**

Natural Sciences Collections Association

<http://www.natsca.org>

## NatSCA News

---

Title: Victorian Natural History Galleries in the 21st Century - Keeping a Victorian Gallery Alive

Author(s): Monaghan, N.

Source: Monaghan, N. (2004). Victorian Natural History Galleries in the 21st Century - Keeping a Victorian Gallery Alive. *NatSCA News, Issue 3*, 26 - 28.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/391>

---

NatSCA supports open access publication as part of its mission is to promote and support natural science collections. NatSCA uses the Creative Commons Attribution License (CCAL) <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/> for all works we publish. Under CCAL authors retain ownership of the copyright for their article, but authors allow anyone to download, reuse, reprint, modify, distribute, and/or copy articles in NatSCA publications, so long as the original authors and source are cited.

Fundamentalist Islam. Fundamentalist politicians. Well organised, smart, and determined. Experts have a moral responsibility to lead, to lend their expertise. Remember, expertise involves more than content. The palaeontologist, George Gaylord Simpson, once said that a good scientist should be able to be “scientific” about almost anything. No one knows better how to ask questions and to do so in ways that succumb to rigorous, empirical analysis. No one knows better how to resolve disputes through tests, to unravel, to expose bias, to measure confidence, to build flexible rules that will last three hundred years and a dozen changes in convention. Museums can do a fabulous job imparting the methods and values of science. Stressing methods won’t save us from honest creationists and intelligent designers. But the incompetents and exploiters won’t stand a chance.

### conclusion

The boundaries defining professional domains are fluid. In ecology and environmentalism, for instance, boundaries have shifted quite a lot since the 1960s. It wasn’t always perfectly acceptable for ecologists to assert a role in public policy. It’s hard to imagine policy today without ecologists at its centre. Compare this with the shifting roles of systematists in public policy regarding biodiversity. This shifting is a process of ebb and flow.

In the case of evolution, we’ve shifted too far in the direction of exclusion — too far away from important, controversial subjects — too far away from the questions others are answering without us. That’s a waste of expertise. It’s an abdication of responsibility.

It’s time we shift back those boundaries. If you take anything away from this paper, take away that suggestion. Think about how you define the boundaries of your own expertise and how those boundaries might exclude you from the most important discussions of our time.

Joe Cain is Senior Lecturer in History and Philosophy of Biology in the Department of Science and Technology Studies, University College London. <j.cain@ucl.ac.uk >

### References

- Bock, Walter. 1994. Ernst Mayr, naturalist: his contributions to systematics and evolution. *Biology and Philosophy* 9: 267-327.
- British Museum. 1964. *A short guide to the exhibition galleries*. British Museum (Natural History).
- Cain, Joe. 2002. Epistemic and community transition in American evolutionary studies: the ‘Committee on Common Problems of Genetics, Paleontology, and Systematics’ (1942-1949). *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 33: 283-313.
- Darwin, Charles. 1859. *On the origin of species by means of natural selection, or the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life*. John Murray.
- De Beer, Gavin. 1958. *A handbook on evolution*. Trustees of the British Museum.
- Hickey, Joseph J. 1943. *A guide to bird watching*. Oxford University Press.
- Jones, Steve. 1999. *Almost like a whale: the origin of species updated*. Doubleday.
- Lanyon, Wesley E. 1963. *Biology of birds*. Thomas Nelson.
- Mayr, Ernst. 1942. *Systematics and the origin of species, from the viewpoint of a zoologist*. Columbia University Press.
- Mayr, Ernst. 1948. The New Sanford Hall. *Natural History* 57: 248-254.
- Rainger, Ronald. 1991. *An agenda for antiquity: Henry Fairfield Osborn and vertebrate paleontology and the American Museum of Natural History, 1890-1935*. University of Alabama Press.
- Ruse, Michael. 1996. *Monad to man: the concept of progress in evolutionary biology*. Harvard University Press.
- VanTyne, Josselyn, and Andrew Berger. 1959. *Fundamentals of ornithology*. John Wiley and Sons.

---

## **Victorian Natural History Galleries in the 21st Century - Keeping a Victorian Gallery Alive** Nigel Monaghan, Keeper of Natural History, National Museum of Ireland

### Abstract

The Natural History Museum in Dublin is a Victorian cabinet style museum. It is close to original condition and is seen by many as a national treasure, a ‘museum of a museum’. This also brings challenges in preserving its 19<sup>th</sup> century ambience while addressing significant challenges in the museum environment.

### Historical Background

In 1856 the Royal Dublin Society (RDS) erected a museum building adjacent to their 18<sup>th</sup> century mansion,

Leinster House (O’Riordan 1983). Then on the edge of an expanding city it is now in Dublin city centre. The use of adjacent buildings has also changed over the last century and a half, with the RDS moving to another part of the city, with Leinster House now the centre of the Irish parliament since 1922 (Monaghan 2000). The interior of the building has changed little in over a century (Gould 1994), more from benign neglect than deliberate intent. There was little funding for museum development in the emerging “Free State” following independence from Britain in 1922. Improvements to the building began in the mid 1980s with the establishment of a national lottery, followed by a significant improvement in the national economy. The building was rewired and redecorated in the 1980s and is now undergoing a number of environmental improvements to protect collections. Galleries devoted to geology were demolished in 1962 (Monaghan 1992) and the Botany collections were transferred to the National Botanic Gardens in 1970. The current museum is dedicated to zoology, earth science galleries are planned for the museum headquarters campus at Collins Barracks, Dublin

### **The Galleries**

The current public galleries occupy four floors in a simple rectilinear layout with 10,000 specimens on display, out of a collection of approximately two million. The ground floor has Irish animals of all major groups, including impressive giant deer (*Megaloceros giganteus*) from Pleistocene lake deposits that underlie many Irish peat bogs (Monaghan 1995). The first floor is dominated by mammals with good representation of common species, but including rare items such as a thylacine (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*, there are four in the collection). Above the first floor are two balcony levels, the lower devoted to vertebrates, the upper to invertebrates, including the famous collection of glass models by Blaschka of Dresden (Walshe and Monaghan 2003).

### **Building Environment**

While our Victorian forebears constructed a purpose-built museum with many good points, there are several problems with the current structure. Some are issues of original design, other are related to maintenance and work practices. The roof is in the form of an inverted V with the lower section clad in slate and the upper section glazed throughout. Below the roof space is a horizontal glazed diffuser layer. The issues arising from the roof include leaks (running repairs in 2003 minimised these), dust fallout, heat gain and excessive light. Significant repairs and renovation of the roof are required to address some of these problems.

The main issue currently being advanced is control over excessive light levels. After a century on exhibition most mammals have a universal tan and cream colour, whether giraffe, zebra or panda. A survey by consultant Mark Sutton Vane has assisted the museum in developing a strategy for light control in all areas of the building. The intention is to filter or screen all natural light and upgrade artificial lighting to provide even illumination at low levels.

Changes to the heating system are also being explored to attempt to even out fluctuations in temperature. This has caused significant damage to mounted mammals outside cases, with cracking of hide and snapping of old stitching. Specimens are being restored by the taxidermy firm Jac Bouten en Zoon BV, of Venlo, Netherlands. Major building works are planned which may include lagging of the roof and installation of air handling, which seems the only full solution to this problem.

The unsealed nature of the building is contributing to pest infestation. It is a single, undivided airspace with windows and a front door that provide the only fresh air and are often left open. A new porch and air handling units should provide a considerable improvement. Floors are constructed from open planking, with underfloor heating and cast iron gratings. Display cases have ventilation holes and are not sealed. These provide dark corners for insects to evade cleaning regimes and to get free access to specimens. A programme of pest monitoring using sticky traps, some with pheromone bait, has been introduced along with increased vigilance in stores. The museum has a valuable insect collection in storage in the building adjoining the gallery space (O’Connor 1997).

### **Conclusions**

The issues facing the safety of collections in this building are significant. Some may be addressed easily within existing resources, others will require considerable financial outlay. An extension to the building in order to provide access for people with disabilities and improved fire exits is planned. It will be the aim of curatorial and conservation staff to persuade the architects of the need to include some additional budget for building conservation works to extend the life of the building and its invaluable contents.

### Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Rolly Read (Head of Conservation, National Museum of Ireland) and Chris Collins (Palaeontology Conservation Unit, Natural History Museum, London) for advice on the buildings issues over several years. Museum lighting consultant Mark Sutton Vane (Sutton Vane Associates, London) has produced a detailed study of lighting issues, which is directing current work. Many NatSCA members also provided valuable advice and encouragement during the Dublin conference in April 2004.

### References

- Gould, S. J. (1994) Cabinet museums revisited. *Natural History Magazine* 1/94: 12-20. (Reprinted as Cabinet museums: Alive Alive O! in Gould, S. J. (1996) *Dinosaur in a haystack*. Jonathan Cape, London, 238-247).
- Monaghan, N. T. 1992. Geology in the National Museum of Ireland. *Geological Curator* 5: 275-282.
- Monaghan, N. T. 1995. The giant Irish deer or "Irish elk". *Geological Curator* 6: 171-173.
- Monaghan, N. T. 2000. The National Museum of Ireland. In Buttimer, N., Rynne, C. and Guerin, H. (eds.) *The heritage of Ireland*, The Collins Press, Cork, 404-412.
- O'Connor, J. P., 1997, Insects and entomology. In Foster, J. W. and Chesney, H. C. G. *Nature in Ireland: a scientific and cultural history*. Lilliput Press, Dublin, 219-240
- O'Riordan, C. E. 1983. *The Natural History Museum, Dublin*. Stationery Office, Dublin, 75 pp.
- Walshe, D. and Monaghan, N. T. 2003. The collection of Blaschka Glass Models in the Natural History Museum, Dublin. *Museum Ireland* 13: 43-48

---

### ***Werkgroep Behoud Natuurhistorische Collecties: working on group preservation of natural history collections***

*Oskar Brandenburg, Collections Manager, Leiden Museum of Anatomy & Babke Aarts, Assistant Project Co-ordinator, Academic Heritage Foundation*

The Dutch working group was originally set up in the early nineties. It's main achievement has been the development of a widely-used handbook. This handbook contains both theory and practical solutions for the preservation of natural history collections. It also gives information about best used materials and suppliers. This handbook was easy to update because of the ringband format. However after a couple of active years the working group fizzled out and the handbook has not been updated ever since.

In June 2003 a couple of enthusiastic conservators decided to resurrect the working group. An inquiry was sent out to all known Dutch collection managers working with natural history collections. Our primary aim was to investigate the enthusiasm about the working group amongst collection managers. Secondly, this inquiry was meant to set the new goals of the working group. The main subject of the inquiry was to ascertain how collection managers gained their knowledge about preservation and if their knowledge is in danger of being lost. We also investigated if they experience serious knowledge gaps.

During the first national meeting of the working group the results of this inquiry were presented. Kate Andrew was invited to speak about the recent history of natural history collections conservation in the United Kingdom. Together with a lecture of the coordinator of ICOM-CC's Working Group on Natural History Collections, Dries van Dam, this presentation was a real stimulant to get the people enthusiastic about the new working group. After a fertile discussion-forum, the goals of the working group were set out.

The working group has set itself 3 main tasks, namely

- to inform,
- to organize,
- to stimulate

The working group will *inform* conservators about publications, meetings and new techniques concerning the conservation of natural history collections.

To achieve this, the working group will *organize* workshops, an update of the handbook and meetings. It's role as a knowledge base will hopefully be attained by the development of a website later on this year. In the meantime, a two-monthly newsletter is being distributed by email.