

# NATURE

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## NATIONAL MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES IN BRITAIN

THE collecting instinct is strong in nearly all human beings of all ages. It takes various forms at different periods of our lives, but is always present. But collecting involves collections, and thus museums and art galleries became a necessary adjunct to civilization as a place to deposit the vast accumulations of objects made by individuals and organisations. Originally museums were simply buildings in which such accumulations could be deposited and conserved; and many a museum has been burdened by Sir X's collection of African trophies or Mr. Y's cabinets of marine shells from the Pacific.

But museums have changed, and are changing, rapidly. To the tasks of collecting and conserving has been added the duty of displaying these collections for the educational and recreational benefits of the community. No better evidence of this changed state of affairs, so far as the national museums and galleries of Great Britain are concerned, could be found than in the recently issued third report of the Standing Commission on Museums and Art Galleries\*.

The Standing Commission was set up by the Treasury in 1931 with the following terms of reference: "(1) to advise generally on questions relevant to the most effective development of the National Institutions as a whole, and on any specific questions which may be referred to them from time to time; (2) to promote co-operation between the National Institutions themselves and between the National and Provincial Institutions; and (3) to stimulate the generosity and direct the efforts of those who aspire to become public benefactors".

The Commission is therefore an advisory and not an executive body. Unfortunately, it only deals with the national museums and galleries, and we are pleased to note that the National Museum of Wales is included for the first time. The first report of the Commission was issued in 1933 and the second in 1938. At that time it was hoped to report at five-yearly intervals; but unfortunately the War upset this arrangement, and the present publication covers a ten-year period. At the outset it can be said without hesitation that it is an impressive record of solid achievement and a reasoned statement of aspirations for the future.

The report is divided into three sections. In the first, many will read with interest a connected account of the measures taken for the evacuation and preservation of the vast collections in the national museums and galleries. It is a record of brilliant achievement, but was followed by intense reaction and a feeling of frustration by the trustees and directors concerned. The report relates how temporary and special exhibitions were quickly initiated, and how appreciative was the response of the public to these cultural war-time efforts. So much so indeed that, with the return of more normal conditions,

\* The National Museums and Galleries: the War Years and After. Third Report of the Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries. Pp. 52 + 12 plates. (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1948.) 1s. 6d. net.

special exhibitions have become part of the permanent policy of most of the museums and galleries in Britain.

The total war damage suffered by national museum buildings has been estimated at £1,294,000; those most seriously affected include the British, Natural History, Science, and Imperial War Museums, and the National and Tate Galleries. Fortunately, relatively little damage was suffered by their contents, except for the loss of some 200,000 books in the British Museum Library and about 30,000 volumes of provincial newspapers at Hendon.

In so far as reconstruction is concerned, it is interesting to note that Bethnal Green Museum is to reopen as a type of provincial museum, with material of all kinds taken from the collections at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and "with the same policy of constantly changing exhibitions on a theme employed at the parent Museum". We await with interest the result of this experiment to establish and organise a branch national museum.

In the second part of the report the Commission surveys immediate and long-term building needs and attempts to place them in order of priority. It considers that the most urgent needs in building are in connexion with the national libraries of England and Scotland. It is recommended that as a long-term project a new building for the National Library should be sited near the British Museum; but for the immediate needs of the Library it is considered that additional book-stacks could be erected on the present site. Further, it is gratifying to note that the Commission recommends that the British Museum and Library should continue under the same administration; we believe that separation would be fatal to the efficiency of both institutions. At the Newspaper Library at Hendon, storage structures are to be built immediately. The erection of a permanent microfilm laboratory—the first specially designed building of this type in the world—is recommended, and it is stated that the Rockefeller Foundation is generously contributing equipment costing 56,000 dollars. In Scotland, it is remarked that the present congestion in the National Library is desperate, and new buildings should be put in hand at the earliest possible moment. It is also recommended that, in order of priority, should follow the completion of the second half of the Entomological Block at the British Museum (Natural History); the rebuilding of the centre block of the Science Museum; and a lecture hall and cinema for the Royal Scottish Museum.

Long-term building needs were also considered by the Commission, thus indicating its desire that future planning should be definitely related to a policy. Its recommendations also include the new National Library at Bloomsbury already mentioned, a new gallery of modern art and museum of antiquities in Edinburgh, a new building for the London Museum and extensions to the Imperial War Museum, Science Museum, Royal Scottish Museum and the National Museum of Wales. In addition, there is the project for a Scottish folk museum, though it is stated that the contemplation of a similar museum for England remains the vaguest aspiration. This is perfectly true, so far as a national folk museum and folk park

is concerned, but many professional museum directors are of the opinion that the problem would be better tackled and solved by the establishment of provincial folk museums and parks in selected regions, rather than by the creation of a central national institution for the whole of England; local initiative and enterprise have already started at least two such centres, at Bristol and Plymouth. It is unfortunate, to say the least, that it is not within the province of some national organisation to plan such museums on a cultural basis rather than to rely on the present rather haphazard siting. Reference is, of course, made in the report to the splendid achievement of the establishment and opening by the National Museum of Wales of the Folk Museum at St. Fagans.

The allocation of sites for museums and galleries in South Kensington is reviewed, especially in relation to the proposed retention of the ethnographical collections at Bloomsbury, and the possible transfer to the same building of the Indian collections now housed at South Kensington. This would appear to be a logical and practical necessity.

The third and last section of the report deals with recent developments and future needs in the national museum field. Among acquisitions for the nation mention must be made of Apsley House and Ham House; the former by a generous gift from the Duke of Wellington, through which the nation has obtained an extremely interesting collection of works of art and personalia of historic interest in the setting of an early nineteenth-century mansion. Ham House and its magnificent collection of furniture of the period of Charles II has now been made available to the nation, and, like Apsley House, will be administered by the Victoria and Albert Museum as a branch national museum. It will also be noted with widespread approval that the British Museum (Natural History) proposes to launch a scientific periodical devoted to the publication of researches by the staff based on the museum collections; at the present time the well-known *Novitates Zoologicae* meets this need only in so far as the Departments of Zoology and Entomology are concerned.

Concerning the staff of the national museums, the Commission rightly states that directors and higher keepers, or their equivalent, should be authorities in their particular subject. It is not enough for them to be merely experts, for the position of Great Britain in the realms of art and science depends in no small measure on the capacity for scholarship and learning shown by the higher members of the staffs of our national museums and galleries. But the gap between these members and the routine technical workers is uneconomical, both in its financial and cultural aspects. The Commission urges the introduction of a grade of professional worker who would be capable of carrying out the many relatively routine tasks incident to museum work, although he might not have sufficient training or experience to enable him to act as an authority on any subject or be able to make decisions at a high level. On the other hand, it is no doubt visualized that some at least of this new middle grade would, by initiative and study, fit

themselves for appointment to the higher posts. Such reflexions apply, indeed, not only to the national institutions but also to the larger provincial museums and galleries, where senior officials at present are often burdened with much routine work which could be delegated to others.

This leads to a disappointing feature of the report where the Commission, in endeavouring to carry out the second of its terms of reference, merely expresses a hope that good relations exist between the national and provincial museums and galleries. Actually there is close co-operation between the national and provincial institutions, but this is chiefly due to the goodwill and fellowship which exist between the respective directors and their staffs. It is also in no small measure due to the activities of the Museums Association, the regional federations, and the Carnegie United Kingdom Trustees. All these bodies within their respective spheres have done much to mould the museum movement in Great Britain, and it is unfortunate that their influence and importance is not recognized in the report.

Freedom is the first essential in the development of museums, as it is for universities and indeed all cultural bodies. On the other hand, it is desirable that some controlling body should be responsible for their distribution and broad policy, and to some extent for their financial liabilities. The national museums and galleries are directly responsible to various trustees or a Minister of State, and the Standing Commission has the task of advising with regard to their many activities. But the mass of provincial museums—public and private—have no such unification of advice. It would appear desirable that the national and provincial museums should be under the same broad control, for essentially they are both seeking to serve the community in similar ways. Does the solution of this problem lie in extending the terms of reference of the Standing Commission and at the same time giving it executive control, or should a new body called, say, the Museum and Art Gallery Grants Committee, and comparable to the University Grants Committee, be set up? The latter, with its new responsibilities, holds the purse-strings—represented by the Exchequer grant for university education in Britain—and yet upholds university autonomy. The formation of a similar body in relation to the national and provincial museums could ensure their efficient maintenance, while exerting a measure of guidance without intruding on their administration. This is an urgent matter and should be decided in the relatively near future. The Museums Association, in a memorandum published in 1945, advocated the setting up of a new body on these lines, though it was quite prepared to consider the alternative of extending the powers of the Standing Commission.

Museums are changing rapidly; the earlier musty storehouses of the 'nineties' are becoming centres of culture and learning. They are now vital organisations, of service to the educational and recreational needs of Britain, and it is important that the broad lines of their high-level organisation should be determined as soon as possible.

## NORSEMAN VOYAGES TO NORTH AMERICA

### The Wineland Voyages

By John R. Swanton. (Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections, Vol. 107, No. 12: Publication 3906.) Pp. ii+81. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1947.) n.p.

THE problem of the Norse discoveries in America is one of the most fascinating in all history. Although in the past some people have, like Nansen, dismissed the reports in the saga of Eric the Red and the Flatey book as myths, there can be few students to-day who doubt that the Norsemen visited America on at least two occasions. The present volume is the work of an author who has had experience in unravelling the conflicting accounts left by other expeditions of discovery, and he uses the technique which he had evolved for such research work on the solution of this old and thorny problem. The result is, to my mind, the most successful of all the numerous books so far produced on the subject. He holds that even the most careless report of an expedition must contain some accurate information, and, with this most reasonable assumption, is not prepared to reject any account as valueless. This is sound common sense and completely praiseworthy. Although he admits that the old accounts are too sketchy for absolute certainty in the identification of any particular camp site or anchorage, yet he contends that the general areas visited by Karlsefni's early eleventh-century expedition can be deduced with some reasonable probability of success. He follows Steensby in equating Helluland with northern Labrador and Markland with southern Labrador. He places the Wonderstrands on the Labrador coast of the Gulf of St. Lawrence and suggests that Streamfirth lay somewhere in the region of the Mingan River in the St. Lawrence estuary. As to the exact location of Wineland itself, he is much less certain and wavers between Nova Scotia and New England with a bias towards the latter.

The whole matter is treated with the greatest care and fairness of judgment and should be consulted by anyone interested in the subject. There are points, however, which strike the reader as needing greater attention. One is the question of distances. We are dealing with the traditions of seafaring men and would expect that when the lengths of passages are preserved they would be remembered with at least as great accuracy as descriptions of woods and lakes. Helluland appears to have been two days sail from Greenland. Karlsefni went far north up the Greenland coast to get a fair slant across the northerly winds which had baffled Thorstein's previous expedition. It seems scarcely possible that a small square-rigged sailing vessel can have hit any coast but Baffin Land in the time allowed for it. If this is sound reasoning, everything has to be looked for farther north, which brings us to the second point. Changes of climate are dismissed as being generally considered improbable. But if we are to accept von Post's theories of climatic cycles, they are not improbable at all. In other words, the climate of the eleventh century may well have been more genial than it is at present. This is to some extent confirmed by the southerly movement of the Eskimos following their prey down the west coast of Greenland until they came in contact with the Norse settlers, and by