The making of a modern museum

William Coleman

THE British Museum was largely the product of a single dazzling collection and the intention of an indefatigable collector, Sir Hans Sloane. Soon, however, that collection and the Will that transferred it to the British nation faced unexpected and, hindsight makes clear, increasingly unwelcome competition. Sloane had primarily collected natural objects — plants, animals and minerals — and an associated library. Late in life he proposed that these materials, suitably housed and cared for, should form a repository in which his fellow countrymen could, as Robert Hooke had earlier declared of the Royal Society's museum, "read the book of nature" itself. But conflict was inherent in the very act of creation of the British Museum (1753). Sloane's treasures were confounded with two additional and equally remarkable collections: The Cottonian library and the Harleian MSS. Here were books and documents, important artefacts of human culture, that became and remained formidable rivals of the artefacts of nature.

Until 1880 these varied materials and numerous others, particularly archaeological objects and monuments of early European civilization, slept together in crowded confines in Bloomsbury. Their coexistence pleased few. Antonio Pazzini, Principal Librarian (that is, senior executive officer), was an imperious administrator and the impassioned developer of the Museum's printed materials and manuscripts, the heart of today's British Library. Until 1856 the scientific collections possessed no comparable advocate. From that date, Richard Owen, anatomist, zoologist and skilful political manipulator, directed a course that led to the opening, on 18 April 1881, of Alfred Waterhouse's visually superb new home for the scientific collections. The move to South Kensington in 1880–1883 thus provided physical autonomy for the natural history collections; complete independence (except for its cumbersome name) came only in 1963 when Sloane's original foundation was divided and the British Museum (Natural History) acquired its own board of trustees, including a majority of scientists.

W.T. Stearn and A.E. Gunther, in dissimilar but complementary books, record in abundant detail the many and often complex developments and conflicts that produced today's British Museum (Natural History). Stearn's is a truly comprehensive

The Natural History Museum at South Kensington: A History of the British Museum (Natural History) 1753–1980. By William T. Stearn. Pp.496. ISBN 0-434-73600-7. (Heinemann: 1981.) £15. *The Founders of Science at the British Museum, 1753–1900.* By A.E. Gunther. Pp.219. ISBN 0-950-72760-1. (Halesworth, Suffolk, UK: 1980.) £9.90, \$20.

account, dealing with all aspects of the institution: Gunther explores, largely biographically, selected scientific work carried out by the staff at the Museum during its early years. Printed materials, official and unofficial reports and memoranda, correspondence and scientific publications provide the basis for these volumes. Gunther refers briefly and adequately to his sources but Stearn, alas, one of the foremost students of the bibliography of natural history, provides no overall guide to the marvellously diverse materials that he has consulted; his references lie scattered throughout the text and will need to be extracted by each reader as occasion dictates. Both volumes are well illustrated, the authors' selection of pictures affording a view of most features of the Museum's activities, including curation, exhibition and administration. Also valuable are the several appendices offered by each author, listing chronologically persons and major events associated with the Museum.

A museum, particularly a museum as important and well frequented (two to

three million visitors per annum) as is the British Museum (Natural History), constitutes a diverse and expensive institution that inevitably must try to serve many masters. Its public face may appear orderly and calm but its private life is one of sharply differing opinions and compromise, the latter often offering satisfaction to few or none. Gunther and especially Stearn provide a record of the struggles, some personal and others substantive, that have constantly beset the Museum but neither author provides a sustained general consideration of the one issue that remains in question in all seasons, namely, what are and should be the principal functions of a (natural history) museum and how are these goals best to be realized.

Preservation and exhibition of specimens were intrinsic to Sloane's conception of a national museum; the further purpose of increasing the collections in size, and ultimately in systematic diversity, was added in later years. Only slowly did the British Museum (Natural History) come to view scientific research and technical advising as part of its concern. The example and the constant urging of John Edward Gray (1800–1875) encouraged this trend, one that required appointment of a competent scientific staff. But this was a matter for long years of no particular interest on the part of the Trustees. Such concerns continue, of course, and the demands that they pose are only heightened when limitations on staff,

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A COURTESY OF THE 1 FUNDERS IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM (NATURAL HISTORY)

National Darwinist Gallery

funds and space become severe. The latter is a chronic museum problem and one often felt by the British Museum (Natural History). Confusion of function has been further compounded by the perceived tastes of the television generation: museum exhibitions and popular publications admittedly seek the lower end of a vague average intellect. They seek their market, attendance having become a crucial statistic with which to defend old support and to solicit new funds, by offering gentle instruction and mounting increasingly brilliant displays. Old values have in the process been transformed and the new product — the word fits well — is perplexing.

In this world agog with educational technology and associated display techniques, one must ask a foolishly obvious question — what use the artefact itself? It was the very object whose protection was the minimal original objective of any serious natural history collection, yet many modern displays, including the “spectaculars”, offer more aluminium and plastic than rock, cellulose or flesh, however dry. Study collections, the hard core of a museum in confident times past — and today, as extinctions proceed apace, one of our few hopes for further increasing our understanding of the career of life on this globe — occupy the back room; the public is given a glance at most. The moral is obvious: as display divorces itself from artefact, so might this circus in miniature easily and effectively separate itself from a central museum. Modern displays are instructive and entertaining but they are also reproducible; they can play in Palermo or Peoria as well as in London or New York. So perhaps they should, while the central museums redirect their limited resources to the care, study and display of the genuine objects of natural history. □

William Coleman is Professor of History of Science and History of Medicine at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

The public's view of the Natural History Museum in the 1980s. Opposite — part of the “Nature Stored: Nature Studied” exhibition, a display in a more traditional mould. Above left — the artefacts of nature remain, but push-button displays obtrude in the “Man's Place in Evolution” exhibition. What would Richard Owen (right) have made of it all?

The grand Vernonian omnibus

Robert Fox

Gentlemen of Science: Early Years of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. By Jack Morrell and Arnold Thackray. Pp. 592. ISBN 0-19-858163-7. (Oxford University Press: 1981.) £30, \$59.

THIS summer, in York, the British Association for the Advancement of Science celebrated its 150th anniversary. There could have been no more appropriate location. For it was in York, in 1831, that some 350 “friends of science” set in motion what a friendly contemporary called “the grand Vernonian omnibus”. (The reference was to the Revd William Vernon Harcourt, the son of the Archbishop of York and the central figure in the task of foundation.) By 1844, when the fourteenth of its peripatetic annual meetings took place, once again in York, the BAAS had completed a circuit of the main traditional centres of British cultural life — Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh and Dublin (London, then as now, being excluded as a possible venue) — and of some of the bigger industrial cities. On the way it had given unprecedented visibility to the scientific enterprise and signally advanced the incipient sense of community among Britain's men of science. Oxonians and Cantabs, manufacturers and clergy, military men and doctors, peers and politicians, even some women, had become united in an organization whose seemingly easy commitment to the value-free universalism of science in reality carried a carefully constructed ideology.

Gentlemen of Science is a meticulous study of the first 13 years of the BAAS, in

which these successes were achieved. They were decisive years for science in Britain: the neologism “scientist” won acceptance, and more importantly, as Morrell and Thackray argue, the very *idea* of science as a distinct form of knowledge, at once benign, powerful and progressive, was articulated. In the process, Harcourt's Baconian conception of the Association as a vehicle for the predominantly empirical work of his fellow provincials gave way to a rival conception, emanating from London and Cambridge, which stressed the primacy of theory and mathematics. Inexorably, it seems, the intellectual weight of the Association drifted towards Section A (mathematical and physical science), and it was in mathematical physics that the early BAAS established its most distinctive and coherent tradition of research. Moreover, as mathematical physics rose in the BAAS hierarchy of the sciences, the biological and social sciences — agriculture, ethnology and geography, for example — fell, while phrenology and education were among the would-be sciences that were edged out altogether. Even medicine succumbed as the Association's leaders took upon themselves the task of defining “science”: it was no coincidence that the medical section disappeared in 1848.

The waters which the BAAS chose to sail were often choppy. Tractarians and fundamentalists joined the most conservative elements in political life in seeing the organization as a rival claimant to the various areas of authority which they regarded as their preserve. Then there was always the problem of competing interests within its