BOOKS & ARTS

Behind the scenes

A Natural History Museum researcher unlocks its cluttered store rooms to expose an extraordinary past.

Dry Store Room No. 1: The Secret Life of the Natural History Museum

Richard Fortey

Fourth Estate/Knopf: 2008. 352pp.
£20/\$27.50

Henry Nicholls

I have been inside Dry Store Room No. 1 twice. The fluorescent lighting casts a thin, blue light on a cold room crammed with zoological curiosities — the most precious specimens of London's Natural History Museum.

Several aisles are dedicated to fish. Thousands line up nose to tail as if shoaling along the shelving. One wall is dominated by reptiles: giant tortoises jostle for their postmortem position behind lock and key. A tall glass case holds the head of a giraffe, still attached to its neck like a Victorian lamp to its post.

For Richard Fortey, this seldom-visited vault beneath the dramatic public galleries is “a physical analogy for the jumbled lumber-room of memory”. It cradles the facts and recollections that he has stored away during his career as a leading palaeontologist at this great museum. His latest book, *Dry Store Room No. 1*, curates these memories to provide a hugely entertaining social history of the museum.

The Natural History Museum has seen some famous figures, among them nineteenth-century naturalists Richard Owen and Edwin Ray Lankester. Yet Fortey focuses on lesser-known characters, such as the ordinary (sometimes extraordinary) scientists who worked in the institution since it moved to its current site in 1883, when the natural history specimens of the British Museum were relocated to South Kensington.

Many of these people have devoted their working lives to one obscure twig of the tree of life or a single class of minerals. It is hard to contain a sense of bewilderment when introduced to someone for whom the maggots of carnivorous screw-worm flies are “almost like old friends”. Yet Fortey champions the importance of nurturing esoteric expertise. Making sense of the world's detail enriches our lives and reminds us what it means to be part of nature's intricate system. Sometimes, seemingly arcane knowledge can save lives. It was familiarity with parasitic screw-worm flies that helped quash a major disease outbreak in Africa that could have brought misery to millions.

Fortey's anecdotes about the scientists themselves paint a vivid picture of the characters

A bug's life: beyond the galleries, a researcher catalogues specimens at the Natural History Museum.

that make up this unsung research community. Commendably, he leaves few skeletons in closets. In one case, after the death of a museum botanist who worked on a family of tropical plants in the early twentieth century, his colleagues made quite a find. On clearing his office, they came across a card index of sexual conquests, filed alphabetically, each adorned with a sprig of pubic hair. “Once a curator, always a curator,” ventures Fortey.

As Fortey feeds on this rich human history, something interesting happens: the Natural History Museum comes alive. It appears as a bureaucratic beast evolving in response to selective pressures, such as changes in funding infrastructure, increasing pressure to publish, technological innovation (like DNA-profiling) and the escalating expectations of its public.

The final chapter confronts the evolutionary landscape ahead of the museum. It maps out an intriguing and optimistic future for natural history. A new breed of web-savvy amateur naturalists will pass on findings to professionals, Fortey predicts. The need for these experts “as guardians of the collections and as ‘quality control’ on the taxonomy

produced by the wider community” will become more pressing than ever.

Would I have enjoyed *Dry Store Room No. 1* as much if I'd not had the rare privilege of setting foot inside the eponymous room? If this were not a book about my favourite museum? If I didn't live in London or indeed in Britain? Almost certainly. The research connections are global: Fortey roves from Moroccan mountains in search of trilobites to the shores of Russia's Lake Baikal netting diatoms to Antarctica to collect meteorites. The scientists' stories are gripping, some with the implausible plot of a soap opera, many with the intrigue of a spy novel and others with the humour of a comedy sketch.

Ultimately, the goings-on behind the cathedral-like façade in South Kensington are similar to those taking place at any major museum of natural history and Fortey broadens his conclusion accordingly. The great museums, he says, may be the only places for future generations to find “the answer to the question: What have we done?” This five-star read is a perfect tribute to the cluttered wonder of the real Dry Store Room No. 1. ■

Henry Nicholls is the editor of the journal *Endeavour* and author of *Lonesome George: the Life and Loves of the World's Most Famous Tortoise*.