



**NatSCA**

Natural Sciences Collections Association

<http://www.natsca.org>

## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

---

Title: Book Review: Natural History Auction 1700-1972 A Register of Sales in the British Isles by J. M. Chalmers-Hunt

Author(s): Morgan, P.

Source: Morgan, P. (1976). Book Review: Natural History Auction 1700-1972 A Register of Sales in the British Isles by J. M. Chalmers-Hunt. *Biology Curators Group Newsletter, Vol 1 No 4*, 13 - 14.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/1497>

---

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.

BOOK REVIEW

NATURAL HISTORY AUCTIONS 1700-1972 A Register of Sales in the British Isles. J. M. Chalmers-Hunt. Sotheby Parke Bernet. £12.50.

This book is divided into two main sections; Introductory subject articles by specialists and the Register which is a date index of sales. The seven introductory articles are divided into Entomological, Zoological, Botanical, Ornithology and Oology, Fossil, Minerals and Shell sale accounts examining historical aspects of collecting and their later influence on material appearing for sale. The sections could have been longer and vary a good deal in their approach and depth of detail. As is to be expected within the broad sections comments reflect the authors main interest. They do show differences between the disciplines however and allow some analysis or thought to be given to present collecting policies and the future availability of material. Most of the sections are fairly comprehensive, given the available space, but comment must be made concerning the Ornithological and Oological section.

This section is far less comprehensive and objective than the others and although the oological side is well covered the ornithological side is patchy and subject to areas of disagreement. The rapid advance of ornithological knowledge in the 19 century is attributed to the great increase in (scientific) flat skin collecting by 'serious skin collectors'. It is true that fashions changed but many of the earlier mounted collections contained important material till very late in the 1800's. The point has been missed that the data for these was often kept in diaries and manuscripts and although separated from the specimen was not always missing. This has an important bearing upon the sale of material; previous ownership knowledge still allows this to be traced. Certain predudices are unfortunately all too apparrent, the oological collecting is strongly defended whilst the 'holocaust' of skin collecting is questioned. Although interesting as subject for debate these comments are not carefully linked with the Register of Sales, do not aid in interpretation and one feels should not have appeared within the context of such a book, especially given the approach in other sections. Too much emphasis is given to discussing individual specimens and a more general examination of a series of sales might have been more appropriate and informative. Curators in other disciplines may be critical of other sections but they appear far more objective and link comprehensively with the second part, the Register of Sales.

This section contains details of the sources of material, contents of sale, auctioneers, sale catalogues and reference

to their present whereabouts. Although looking comprehensive the net has not been spread very wide, few provincial sales being listed. Comments from fellow students on the Edinburgh Curatorial course reveals many gaps which could have been filled with reference to stock Books, accessions and archives in provincial museums. Most curators will find additions and amendments following consultation of their files and collections. Two examples illustrate this point; General Davies sale is recorded in the list of sales without indication of date or year, archives here show June 6th and 8th probably 1812. Tracing the 13th Earl of Derby collections and sale is difficult. For Earl of Derby see Smith E. which is not listed, it should refer to Stanley E. Smith which is listed both in the Index and Register. If one knows that the Early of Derby was Lord Stanley before acceding to the Earldom in 1834 this can be traced but otherwise not.

How widespread other mistakes are is difficult to say without reference but any errors should be corrected as soon as possible. Shortcomings and omissions are to be expected in the first edition of such a work and this is fully appreciated by the compiler who requests information. Note of this should be made by all museum workers and complied with. A later version combined with the Bibliographies of collections in preparation should also allow non-specialists to assess their collections. It is essential that provincial museum curators should co-operate in sending information, possibly publishing in the B.C.G. Newsletter at the same time ensuring rapid communication. If this is done the revised version may well be dedicated to the staff of provincial museums, the present register being dedicated to the staff of the B.M. (Nat. Hist).

Notwithstanding my comments this is a book desperately needed by all museums, filling an essential gap in our knowledge. One hopes it will be on every museum shelf with constant use and additions.

Peter Morgan  
Merseyside County Museums.