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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

Title: The International Conference on the History of Museums and Collections in Natural History. 3-6 April 1979 - A Personal View

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cultural significance. Committee agreed to make no formal comment at this stage but to continue to study the situation.

5. LONDON CONFERENCE 1979

Short reports had been prepared for some publications and M. T. agreed to write an account of the proceedings for the B. C. G. Newsletter.

The Systematics Association and S. B. N. H. were organising a conference for Easter 1981 on History in the Service of Systematics.

Members discussed ideas for the B. C. G. Conference in Autumn 1981, possibly joining with N. C. C. to discuss a range of topics connected with collecting and collections by government agencies, universities and museums. S. F. and P. M. would draft suggested programme etc., for next committee meeting.

6. FURTHER MEETINGS

Committee members will be urged to organise regional meetings to encourage better communication with members, but wherever possible to give them wide publicity (B. C. G. Newsletter, M. A. Bulletin) so that members from other regions can attend.

(S. F. will coordinate topics to avoid duplication!). S. F. to receive suggestion for A. G. M., Easter 1980.

7. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Committee Meetings. S. F. to prepare a cycle of meetings (provisionally May, September, February) and suggest dates for a meeting in Leicester in September.

(Leicester Museum, 13th September).

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THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE HISTORY OF
MUSEUMS AND COLLECTIONS IN NATURAL HISTORY. 3 - 6
April 1979 - A PERSONAL VIEW.

Although Scotland is a veritable paradise for the naturalist/geologist, living here does have certain disadvantages. One is the comparative scarcity of one's museum colleagues when compared for instance with the cheek by jowl museums of the English Midlands or North-West and another is the distance involved in travelling to any meeting or conference organised south of Edinburgh.

However, because of my own interest in the history of 'natural history', I could not miss the 'International Conference on the History of Museums and Collections in Natural History' and so boarded a British Caledonian One Eleven at Edinburgh for my first ever flight which after forty-five adrenalin filled minutes, touched down at Gatwick with a screech of tyres and a sigh of relief! - so much for the Biggles instinct!

Having been 'out of circulation' for almost a year, I looked forward to the start of the conference and the two AGMs which preceded it. The BCG's Annual General Meeting took place on the Tuesday morning at the BM (NH) and went off quite smoothly as most AGMs do, though it could have been better attended. Democracy works better when as many people as possible are consulted. Possibly members claiming three days London expenses for an AGM would have a hard job justifying a further day for an AGM.

This meeting was followed in the afternoon at Kew by the AGM of the Society for the Bibliography of Natural History. After a brief formal session, Mr. R. D. Meikle presented a most lively and entertaining history of Kew Gardens and its staff which might well have featured in the main conference programme. That evening, an 'informal gathering' (the first of many!) allowed those of us who had not met for some time to renew old acquaintances. It has been said many times before, but it really is surprising how much information comes to light during these often impromptu 'get-togethers'.

The conference 'proper' was divided into five themes: Collectors and Collections in Europe; Travellers and Explorers; Zoological Gardens; Books in the Museum and North American Collectors and Collections which formed a natural follow-on the SBNH's 1977 Easter meeting. Each one of these topics could have been the theme for a conference and despite the profusion of papers, could only wet one's appetite for more.

The way that the various papers were received varied of course with the interests and attitudes of the individual listener. Any delegates present who believed that such historical researches are irrelevant to contemporary museum work no doubt benefited little from their attendance. However, I am convinced that an increasing number of curators are well aware that the collections in their charge can only be properly 'curated' (in the fullest sense of the word) when as much as possible is known about the original collector, the motive behind the formation of the collection and the local scientific 'climate' at that time. This knowledge is basic to our understanding and assessment of the collections. The function of collections was

not dealt with but this was not the organisers brief and perhaps the future conference on history in the service of systematics will correct this to some degree.

There were various visits on the Thursday afternoon and I elected to go to the Chelsea Physic Garden. This oasis of green adjacent to the embankment is now surrounded on three sides by large blocks of red brick Chelsea flats but was originally in the countryside. It's history and important contribution to English botany is nicely dealt with in D. E. Allen's book 'The Naturalist in Britain'.

Another conference 'spin-off' was the magnificent exhibition of works relevant to the themes of the conference in the BM (NH) Library which included such gems as Darwin's Beagle notebooks and the MS. of the 'Origin', 'Museum Tradescantianum', Smith's 'Strata identified by organised fossils', Harris's 'The Aurelian' and many others. If only the catalogue had been annotated!

Being particularly interested in British collectors, I found the papers on Darwins plants (many of which are still unidentified), Wallace, Swainson, Cumming, Bruce and Hunter particularly edifying while from abroad the papers on Spencer Baird and his network of collectors; The Jardin des Plantes; Joachim Barrande, Ward's Natural Science Establishment (I recently found a volume of his catalogues in my own institution), and A. Agassiz also held my attention. The papers on Zoological Gardens at first glance seemed rather out of place, but it soon became apparent that their contribution to science has often been neglected and is considerable. The withdrawal of A. P. Harvey's paper on the history of publishing by museums was a disappointment to all delegates but will apparently appear in print with the rest of the conference proceedings.

One last point. I must confess to being ignorant of the protocol involved when inviting delegates from non-english speaking nations to present papers at conferences, but I hope that I am not being too critical if I suggest that their standard of English might be assessed first. It really was very courageous of some delegates to read their papers albeit in broken english, but I for one will have to wait until they are published in the Journal of the SBNH next year to find out what in fact they were saying.

However, I would like to add my thanks and BCG's to Judith Diment and John Thackray of the SBNH for all their efforts in organising an interesting, informative and successful conference.

Michael A. Taylor,
Keeper of Natural Sciences
Perth Museum

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