

On the objects and management of provincial museums : an address delivered at Canterbury, October, 1871, to a meeting of the East Kent Natural History Society / by George Gulliver.

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ON THE OBJECTS AND MANAGEMENT OF PROVINCIAL MUSEUMS.

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(An Address delivered at Canterbury, October, 1871, to a Meeting of the East Kent Natural History Society, by its Honorary Secretary and Vice-President, George Gulliver, F.R.S.)

Although every intelligent person knows more or less what these institutions are, and what they ought to be, there is probably no subject, connected with the modern means of education in natural science, concerning which so much misconception or ignorance is manifested and tolerated as in the Management and Objects of our Provincial Museums. The majority of them throughout England present such examples of helpless misdirection and incapacity as could not be paralleled elsewhere in Europe. Some noteworthy exceptions there are, as at Ipswich, Ludlow, and elsewhere; and in some parts of our own county, an intelligent spirit has of late been shewn. The municipal authorities at Folkestone have not only consigned their Museum to the care of the Natural History Society of that place, but have given besides some pecuniary aid, while the apartments are now gratuitously available for the scientific meetings. At our great Universities, too, such judicious and honest activity has prevailed as is beyond all praise and puts them out of the pale of strictures applicable to other quarters. And no wonder, seeing that at Oxford and Cambridge competent and eminent men are at work and not at all disposed to admit of the incubus of meddling and incompetent persons. But generally the managers or guardians of those Local Museums that are supported by public rates are precisely of this unfit class, and seem to have no more notion of their charge than as mere curiosity shops; and even display less intelligence than is shewn in such shops, where the cupidity or shrewdness of the dealer induces him at least to take due care of, and give a local habitation and a name to, his wares. But in the Provincial Museums even this care and tittle of information is withheld, and the visitors are left to do the best they can amid the surrounding bewilderment. This is commonly made up of a most puzzling jumble of heterogeneous miscellanies, arranged or rather scattered with an equally sovereign contempt for the convenience or instruction of the public, and indeed all in such admired disorder as may most plainly show how Chaos is come again and Confusion can make his masterpiece, and how every specimen added to the heap only tends to increase or perpetuate the miserable derangement. It looks as if the presiding

local genius had set his wits to work in order to prove how much time and money might be most effectually expended with the least profit to a knowledge of the natural history, or any history, of the neighbourhood; and indeed for exemplifications of the solution of this knotty point we have too commonly only to appeal to the Museum of the place. Instead of methodical illustrations of the natural history and antiquities of the district, we are likely to find a few good things overlaid by such a rabble-rout, such a multifarious and disorderly medley of outlandish and queer odds and ends, as are rather fitted for a laughing stock than a sober exposition of science. Thus we are met at once in the hall and saloons by such incongruous lots as effigies of double women, elephants' teeth, nose-rings, brain-stones, tomahawks, stuffed alligators, moccasins, New Zealanders' heads, Chinese slippers, cockatoos, canoes, Babylonish bricks, boas, javelins, lions and tigers, calumets, matchlocks, palm-branches, shields, monkey-stones, sugar-canes, Roman cement, Oliver Cromwell's watches, fabricated elephants, Egyptian mummies, and numberless other eccentric things of this motley and confounded order. The garniture of Romeo's apothecary's shop, or the countryman's museum on the barn-door, would be more instructive or intelligible and less ridiculous or perplexing.

It might be painful or appear invidious to inquire minutely by what means or under whose misconduct so many provincial museums have sunk into their present disgraceful confusion and uselessness; especially as it is little creditable to the intelligence of that community under the tolerance or approval of which this reproachful state of things exists. If the fault be attributable to the apathy or something worse among the majority of the ratepayers, it is one that the friends of popular government should hasten to correct. However this may be, it is enough for us to know that this notorious evil has increased, is increasing, and ought to be diminished; it will otherwise remain a foul blot on and a costly nuisance to the places under such miserable infliction. Hence every naturalist and antiquarian, every friend to the progress of education, every intelligent and honest member of the community, should be ready to lend his hand cordially to the good work of reform in this direction; and more especially so, as in truth the difficulty is by no means insuperable, but may be easily removed, while this consummation is devoutly to be wished, and would involve no addition to the customary and regular expense. The remedies are sufficiently obvious, and to point out how they should be used, after having described the disorder and the necessity for them, is the object of the present observations. To this end we have in the first place to consider what is desirable and practicable. To instruct ourselves and the rising generation, by means of local museums, in the elements of natural history generally, and in the local examples of it particularly, is obviously both practicable and desirable. For the first purpose, when indigenous specimens are wanting we must get exotic ones; and these should be limited to such only as are absolutely necessary for the elucidation of fundamental or comprehensive facts; for which purpose anatomical preparations, whether botanical or zoological, are chiefly, but not exclusively, to be esteemed. On the other hand, all and every species belonging to the district should be preserved and displayed

so far as they admit of it; partly for the knowledge they convey of the science, but principally for the information they afford of the natural history of the locality. Antiquarian objects should be treated in a similar spirit. Thus would be collected at one view, or at least under one roof, much of that important knowledge which is within the means and scope of any country Museum, so that every visitor to it might easily find therein both pleasure and profit on natural science in general and on the natural features of the locality in particular. The Museum would then also be in a condition to fulfil one of its leading offices, as a centre for the meetings, lectures, and conversations on the natural history and antiquities of the district, and in this mode be available for contributions in furtherance of the special objects of local societies, and likely thus to add to the general stock of knowledge. And happily this is now being regularly ventilated and popularized in many useful periodical publications. When will the *Times*, looking beyond the dense and sterile mists of the Education Boards, discover the fair and fertile field of instruction in the Provincial Museums now lying waste for want of culture?

As to such young persons as may show a taste for natural science, it is plainly our duty to give them fair opportunities of learning how and what to observe; and for this purpose judiciously conducted Provincial Museums would be eminently fitted. But attempts to cram or force the tender mind will not be successful. And for this reason we might question the sanguine expectations of the good effects of teaching in provincial or branch schools such curious specialties as animal physiology, light, heat, acoustics, magnetism, and electricity. Yet these were the very subjects, according to a report in the *Folkestone Express*, October 14th, 1871, so strongly recommended by the itinerant lecturer or inspector of the Kensington Science and Art Department, after he had warmly eulogized the generosity of the Government in furtherance of such views. But it is remarkable that there is nothing in the report of his lecture as to how that knowledge of anatomy is to be acquired, which is the very foundation of physiology; nor of the use in this and so many other respects that might be derived from Provincial Museums. Indeed, he seemed to ignore them altogether! And thus, at least, he has taught us what we have to expect from official and expensive Inspectors of Science and Art.

A reference to the "Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne," originally published in 1788, by the Rev. Gilbert White, will show how much even a single individual might achieve for a rural village and indeed for all time and every place. We cannot expect to make many Gilbert Whites; but with the local Museum properly managed, all its contents plainly marked, and the whole systematically described in the catalogue, we should at least diffuse a taste for and knowledge of natural science. In a collection made thus readily available, and ever before us, the masters and tutors of schools, and other teachers, would be induced by the facilities afforded to bring and help their pupils to the enjoyment of that banquet of free and easy instruction. To many competent persons again it would be a pure labour of love to explain or give lectures on the various departments thereof, and to enrich them by suitable donations. Thus these Museums would be rescued from their degraded position

of worthless shows, to fulfil some of their best purposes; and surely this is no more than we ought to expect and have a right to demand, not only for ourselves, but in behalf of the intellectual culture of the rising generation. It seems amazing that, amid all the Babel of late about public schools, this Museum question has never been properly recognized; but has been fatally swamped or smothered, it is to be hoped not finally, by sectarian rivalry, tonic sol-fa-ism, woman's claims, girls' rights to be taught drawing and how the laws of health and physiology are to supersede the needle and cookery, and much more of such a tangled web of gibberish as only a return to that balance of the faculties known as common sense can sweep clean away.

But how are you to get the desirable specimens, and what are you to do with them when they are at your disposal? Most of those wildernesses miscalled Museums already possess a large quantity of objects only awaiting and inviting intelligent attention. This will consist in a careful preparation, display, and description of them. After having been separately grouped under their respective kingdoms—the mineral, vegetable, and animal—they must be arranged, according to the method of their natural relations, in their respective classes, orders, families, genera, and species; then accurately numbered, ticketed, and catalogued. Thus the otherwise chaotic mass of particular facts will fall into an orderly method, and be always ready to convey an accurate knowledge to visitors. Still further illustrations will be requisite, especially as regards fundamental and comprehensive phenomena, by preparations to display the essential characters, at least, of the classes and orders, and of the anatomy and physiology of the members thereof; and a few careful dissections will commonly be sufficient for this purpose in each order. And now will arise the question, who is to do all this work? Certainly neither by nor under the direction of persons quite incapable of it can we expect any effectual labour of the kind. But with proper encouragement students of and even adepts in the different departments will, from a pure love of the subjects, not only be found to perform all this, but probably more, and without the least expectation of any pecuniary reward. Such persons will surely add important preparations and other objects to the collection, whenever it becomes manifest that their contributions will be duly appreciated and cared for; indeed, with regard to at least one Museum very zealous and skilful naturalists have only been prevented from giving such desirable aid by a knowledge that their work would simply be "missing," contemned, smothered, or destroyed, amid the carelessness and the maze of misplaced rubbish, there undergoing a like fate, and most significantly and effectually warning them, and others like them, what they might expect were they to attempt such services. Fortunately minerals and antiquities are commonly less perishable.

Having discussed what is desirable and practicable, we come to that which is neither one nor the other. And having somewhat irreverently adverted to the rubbish of so many provincial Museums, a further explanation may be necessary, and the more so as this very accumulation of jumbled and useless materials is the sad *bête noire* of these collections, and so vigilantly intrusive as to force admission and predominance against all reasons of fitness or

utility. Any disorderly materials when hurtful by being out of place fall into the character of rubbish, just as any plant is a weed when encroaching injuriously on the legitimate crop. In their proper place they may be very valuable; such they might be in the great general collection of the British Museum, or in a botanical garden. But nobody in his senses can suppose that it is either desirable or practicable for a provincial society to attempt an imitation of that vast and boundless metropolitan institution. This would be simply out of the question, and calculated only to provoke a smile, except peradventure among the guardians of the local Museums. Indeed, with all the excellent arrangement, the army of properly paid experts, and immense space and appliances, the British Museum has become so crowded and unwieldy, especially for reference and use concerning British products, that some steps for an extrication of them from the surrounding masses of exotic things has become necessary. Accordingly the worthy veteran, Dr. J. E. Gray, at the head of the zoological department, has had to rescue the British animals from their former inconvenient obscurity; and for this considerate foresight, and action thereon, that eminent naturalist is entitled to the cordial thanks of all students of British Zoology. But the guardians of the provincial Museums will reasonably ask, granting that we have so much rubbish, what are we to do with it? Sell it if you can, or give it away; but by all means get rid of it, and that swiftly; to which end a bonfire might be the best thing. And having thus learned by experience the noxiousness of such rubbish, most resolutely and remorselessly refuse any quarter to it in future. At present this sort of lumber only occupies space and involves expense that might and ought to be employed for more useful and legitimate purposes; and how and why has already been mentioned. At the execution of the sentence many a wailing throe will out, some natural tears be shed, for the o'erfraught heart will speak. The very civil and complacent local genius, especially when he is paid out of the public rates, will meekly plead for his idols, telling you how he loves them, and how some other equally wise and more potent individuals hold the same faith; and above all that the visitors to his temple have ever regarded all those very things with an admiration and delight amounting to veneration. He will refuse to be comforted by your sincere assurance that every one of his words is no doubt very true, though Punch and Judy, and Madame Tussaud, may be almost as delightful if not quite as good in their way; but that your way is to show how the provincial Museum may be made not to suppress or degrade but to develope and elevate the taste of the multitude; and that after all a good Museum will sooner or later become more popular than a bad one.

But the higher functionaries of the committees or managements will be less meek and docile than their subordinate official, less open to reason, most impracticable, and most active or rude in justifying their culpable neglect, precisely in proportion to their ignorance of their duties. However, supposing all these obstructions fairly removed, there will still arise further but petty difficulties in carrying out the needful details as to the treatment of the various objects which may be considered worthy of care in the provincial Museum, and, indeed, in any Museum. Among these the most constant and

vexatious are the tendency of valuable donations to be "missing;" to leave specimens without mark or number and out of the catalogue; to neglect due acknowledgments to the donors of objects; to see a lion in the way, unless somebody or his friend can be induced to frighten this bugbear; and above all for paid attendants to delegate little duties unreasonably, and to have heart and head anywhere rather than in the Museum. These, from a somewhat extensive experience, while your Honorary Secretary was in charge of the Museum of the Army Medical Department, and subsequently Chairman of the Museum Committee at the College of Surgeons, were the small details which he found usually requiring most vigilant attention. But they are easily overcome by judicious care, and sometimes never give any trouble. A plain Code of Rules for the Museum is quite essential. Everything received at the Museum should be entered by the keeper or porter, first in a Waste-book, and then submitted in due course to the proper authorities, by whom will be noted the destination of the specimen, as may be decided on; such as "thanks, but unfitted for the Museum;" or "thanks, and to be varnished, labelled, and catalogued," &c. And finally by turning to that simple Waste-book any one might see what had become of every addition to the Museum, whether acquired by purchase, donation, or otherwise, while that most curious article of all too well known as "missing," would be held in particular check. And the catalogue, being duly kept, would of course be the ever-ready record of precisely all that information which is to render our provincial Museum most valuable. And no excuse should be permitted for neglect or evasion of such essential points as all these assuredly are; nor should the keeper or porter be for a moment allowed to shirk or delegate the making of the preliminary registries, the lists of such books or other miscellanies as may belong to the collection, and the due care of every thing therein, including the correctness of the labels.

And now, having said so much of the Museums scattered throughout the country, we might be expected to look nearer home, and to answer a very pertinent question that may be put to us. "If you are so wise, why don't your Society put some of this wisdom in practice?" Simply because we have at present neither the apartments, servants, nor money which would be required for the purposes of a Museum. The Society is poor in everything but honest zeal, and has been heretofore struggling, in a small apartment and at large expense, to maintain its existence and usefulness to the best of its means, with little patronage by the public and still less by the great, and in the face of many difficulties, some of which have already been intimated. Yet we have succeeded and have a good prospect of still better speed. Something further we might be expected to say concerning the Canterbury Museum in particular. But this is better avoided. Former representations by respected members of the East Kent Natural History Society, Colonel Cox and Mr. Dowker, by its Honorary Secretary, by the Editors of the *Kentish Gazette*, and by other persons connected with the neighbourhood, have all been disregarded. Nor has the remonstrance in a late Report by your Committee, though unanimously adopted at the General Annual Meeting of your

Society, met with any better fate. And, indeed, nothing on the subject has received the least attention by the guardians of our City Museum but the last appeal from London by Mr. Frank Buckland. Whatever may be the fate of his kind interest in the subject, we should be thankful for his good intentions; and indulge the hope that the day may come when the City Museum and the East Kent Natural History Society will be found working harmoniously and usefully together. And it only now remains to add that the present observations are intended generally for those several Museums in different parts of the country that appear to have abandoned their duties, especially when these are owing to the ratepayers, and by no means for any special application to the Canterbury Museum. As already mentioned, this Institution has not profited by the former complaints or expostulations. Perhaps that untoward result may have been owing mainly to the supineness of the public, or a want of taste here for natural science; and if this be the fact, it is a surprising and deplorable one in the city where William Harvey was educated and George Newport was born. But, recognising the great truth, so well taught by John Ruskin, that all highest Art must be founded on Nature, we may still hope much from a city that has produced Sidney Cooper and Henry Weekes.

