

Book Review

Michael O'Hanlon, *The Pitt Rivers Museum. A World Within*. London, Scala Arts & Heritage Publishers Ltd, 2014. ISBN 978-1-85759-911-4. 168 pp., 108 col. illus., 13 b. & w. illus. £16.95.

This book belongs to that distinctive yet slippery genre that might be called the museum publication. Not quite a catalogue, it is a selection that – while certainly providing such basic identification of individual objects as ‘height’ or ‘length’, name of the people or country of origin, name of the donor, identification number – tells a story that is aimed at the visitor. The author, Michael O'Hanlon, Director of the Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM) Oxford since 1998, welcomes the reader across the threshold of the museum in his very first sentence. Beside the voice, which is personal, the text is interlarded with over 100 colour images of artefacts and archival photographs from the museum's collection. The book thus forms a paper museum of a particular sort. Unlike Malraux's *Museum without Walls*, O'Hanlon's *A World Within* acts like a magnet, drawing us into the place that itself constitutes a ‘single large composite artefact’ which ‘swallows’ (some) visitors. Given the long-standing status of the photographic collection of the PRM, it would be an understatement to describe this book as an illustrated guide to the museum. Instead, *A World Within* is a subtle and explicitly positioned work that employs several different forms of historiography: there is a biography of the founder General Augustus Pitt Rivers, the dynamic history of the museum's displays, the social lives of selected collection components; and the living history of some of the PRM's innovative curatorial projects. The book also has an autobiographical dimension: these are the reflections of a museum director on the various vectors that constitute a public institution such as the PRM: eccentric donors, quirky displays, collections of the everyday, and the projects of renewal that justify its existence.

The first chapter introduces us to General Augustus Pitt Rivers (1827–1900) who made the founding gift of his collection to the University of Oxford in 1884. The General was a man of the Victorian age: influenced by Darwin and Spencer, shaped by a military

career, inspired by the Great Exhibition of 1851, an inveterate collector initially of firearms and later of everyday artefacts, and a political conservative. The gift of his collection to Oxford was linked to a Chair in Anthropology, to which E. B. Tylor was appointed. Despite successfully stipulating that his collection should be displayed by type and function (rather than culture and ethnic group), Pitt Rivers was dissatisfied with the outcome and devoted himself to forming a second museum in Farnham, Dorset, after inheriting a 30,000 acre estate on the Dorset/ Wiltshire border. As Inspector of Ancient Monuments, with a large personal income, Pitt Rivers was able to pursue his archaeological and collecting interests. The Farnham ‘second collection’ was dispersed in the 1960s; puzzlingly, there is no explanation as to how the catalogue ended up in the Cambridge University Library.

The book's heart and soul lies in the second chapter on the museum displays. Saved by failed attempts at modernization, the PRM came to exercise a peculiar charm over late twentieth-century British audiences. Torrents of artefacts poured into the simple Victorian shed that was built as an annex to the Oxford University Museum of Natural History. The acquisition of artefacts was strongly connected with an internal dynamic of the series, to which further examples could always be added. The processes of casing in exposed wall screens, the addition of cases, cabinets and drawers to ‘eke out’ the space, combined with second-hand cabinets, created congestion but also latent aesthetic qualities that emerged over time. The lineage of curators who succeeded Henry Balfour, the first curator, tried to de-clutter and lighten (Penniman), to plan an ambitious new museum on a new site (Fagg), then desist and gradually refurbish (Cranstone, Schuyler Jones), before embracing refurbishment in the spirit of period style combined with a self-consciousness about history, a programme to digitize the collections, and a research institute and extension (O'Hanlon). The 1960s Powell & Moya and Pierre Luigi Nervi project for a new building is a particularly fascinating episode. The modernizing surge followed by a retrenchment coincides with the rise of interest in heritage in Britain, and the advent of the

National Lottery in 1994: the stage was set for a re-Victorianization of the PRM. This meant that new cases and ‘newly installed displays were in period style, and newly installed displays continued to be artefact-rich and typologically oriented’, while – somewhat paradoxically – the museum’s intention was now to highlight the diversity of cultural solutions for common human problems. This was also the moment when a programme of artists’ installations and interventions continued against the ‘background of this increasingly re-Victorianized building’. This move to illuminate, enhance, and give a second life to what was once considered obsolete reflects a watershed moment in the history of the museum, when poets, writers, artists, filmmakers and scholars start to re-position the PRM and to re-define its value through their own cultural productions.

The scholarly value of the museum’s collections is the subject of chapter three. Discussion in this chapter ranges from popular artefacts such as the Jívaro *tsantzas* (popularly known as ‘shrunken heads’); to literary artefacts (including the Arctic clothing and trepanned skulls which appear in Phillip Pullman’s work); to fictional objects (such as ancestor boards from Papua New Guinea which so trouble the character Clare in one novel that she ‘repatriates’ the offending object to the PRM); to the many artefacts acquired or commissioned by staff (such as Tuman’s Wahgi stone axe); to such ‘distributed artefacts’ as Joseph Banks’s brass copies of Maori *patu* which he had cast with his own coat of arms after encountering these objects during Cook’s First Voyage (1768–1771). Then there is the intriguing case of Malinowski’s missing collection, or ‘lost twin’ as O’Hanlon puts it: the collection that was given to the PRM by Bronislaw Malinowski (then at the London School of Economics) when he left for the United States in 1939. The family later re-claimed fifty-two artefacts which were then purchased by the University of California Phoebe Hearst Collection. Two curators of the PRM have led the way in establishing the contemporary significance of photographic collections in ethnographic museums: former curator Elizabeth Edwards and current curator Christopher Morton transformed through practice, use and scholarship our understanding of photographs as both images and objects. Wilfrid Thesiger’s collection of 40,000 negative and prints that underpin his written accounts of journeys (such as that to Arabia’s ‘empty quarter’ in 1946), exemplifies this crucial dimension

of the collections. Then there are the recycled objects – ranging from the World War I German helmet recycled into a Naga dance hat, to the Aboriginal pressure-flaking of glass into exquisitely coloured spearheads. This chapter in all its efforts to come to terms with the huge diversity of the PRM’s collections of the everyday is perhaps the least coherent – especially when compared with the acuity of chapter two and the engagement of the fourth chapter.

Left to its own devices the PRM would be a collection of oddities. The immense achievement of staff, under the leadership of O’Hanlon, is in transforming this unruly collection into a public attraction, a scholarly research enterprise, and an imaginative resource of mutual benefit for artists, writers, filmmakers and others – in short, an asset to the University of Oxford rather than the ‘burden’ it had become in the post-War years.

It is in the final chapter that we see the PRM collections actively engaged in externally-oriented projects and debates. As O’Hanlon remarks, ‘[c]ontested ownership has propelled curatorship of unethically acquired materials to assume frontline responsibilities, choices and opportunities’. If nineteenth- and twentieth-century exertions were directed towards acquisition, conservation and display, these have been balanced in recent years by efforts to enhance and digitize collection records and make them internationally available via the internet. This trend towards sharing is not limited to the virtual realm. The Blackfoot hairlock shirts, which were used in diplomatic exchanges and acquired as such by a Hudson Bay official in 1840, and donated to the PRM in 1951, exemplify the recent trends of consultation, collaboration and innovation between curators and the descendants of those who made and transacted this cultural property and for whom it represents an emotionally-loaded link with the past. The intervening history of marginalization and humiliation has transformed the shirts from being a currency of diplomatic exchange into resources for a form of cultural rehabilitation, in which museums such as the PRM can play a significant role. Just as the General’s original gift has been transformed from its Victorian meaning, so too has the museum in all its component parts.

It is instructive to compare *A World Within* with another Scala volume of the same series (and genre), Elliott and Thomas’s (2011) *Gifts and Discoveries. The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge*. While that ‘great eclectic

assemblage' shares some of the Victorian features of the PRM, there are many significant differences. The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology's roots in the Cambridge Antiquarian Society combined with several major benefactor/ collectors are among these. There are even greater differences in writing styles. O'Hanlon's metaphors, sometimes watery – 'torrents' and 'rivers' of artefacts 'pouring' into the PRM – engagingly capture what must have been major preoccupations during his office. To write a good book for a non-professional audience is a major achievement that few academics are

capable of achieving, requiring both a profound knowledge of the institution, its histories, displays, collections, and curatorial projects from the inside; and an almost museological sense of the printed page as well as turn of phrase and deployment of photographic image. It is this combination that makes *A World Within* such a distinctive document of the most recent museum age.

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