

Whose Story is it anyway? The Challenges of Conducting Institutional Histories

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This paper is based on my experiences as an oral historian on the *Museum Lives* project, a joint undertaking between Kingston University and the Natural History Museum in London, which seeks to record the lives and careers of the Museum's curators and scientists (retired and current). By focussing on scientists at a single institution the project becomes a study not only of individual scientists and the natural sciences but of the institution itself. As a result, in planning and conducting the interviews there are three narratives to be taken into account as narrators relate their stories: as practitioners within the science, as members of the institution and as individuals in their own right. In their accounts, the narrators talk for their science and for the Museum, but even more revealingly, perhaps for the first time, the project gives them space to talk of themselves, as members of the wider society. This paper will investigate the tensions that arise as a result of these separate but interconnected strands and the impact these tensions have on the stories that emerge.

'I was incredibly innocent, I didn't indulge in any of the things in the 60's that the other people did, I'd never held a cigarette, let alone [knew] what a drug looked like'. (Bryant 2009)¹

This brief extract is from one of many interviews conducted with staff from the Natural History Museum in London, for an oral history project entitled *Museum Lives*.² The project set out to collect stories of the lives and careers of people working in the Museum from a period spanning the second half of the twentieth century – with some slippage at either end. In the extract above, Jenny Bryant (a retired botanist) remembers her teenage self, who joined the museum in the late 1960s as a naïve eighteen-year old. This article is based on the experience of conducting an oral history project at the Natural History Museum and reflects on the challenges, as an outsider, of conducting such a study at a venerable institution.

In traditional oral histories most practitioners recognise the presence of two voices – the interviewee and the interviewer. Much has been written about the interrelationship between the two and how this can affect the tone, quality and content of the resulting interview (see for instance, Stuart 1993; McDougal 1994; Thompson 2000; Abrams 2010). But, by focussing on a single institution the project becomes a study not only of individuals and the science they practice, but of the institution itself. As a result, an additional 'voice' is added to the mix, even if it is a proxy voice – the voice of the institution, given expression through the words of its employees. The influences the institution brings to bear, consciously or subconsciously, on the responses of the individual have to be taken into account when both planning and interpreting the results of such a project. Mary Stuart (1993) makes the point

that to fully understand the oral history interview, knowledge of all participants is essential, by which she means the interviewer as well as the interviewee. In the case of *Museum Lives*, the third voice (the institution) must also be acknowledged and given due consideration. As a consequence, there are at least three narratives to be considered as narrators relate their stories: as practitioners within the science; as members of the institution; and as individuals in their own right. Hence the title of this article, 'Whose story is it anyway?'

In their accounts for *Museum Lives*, the narrators talk of their science and for the Museum, but even more revealingly, and perhaps for the first time, the project gives them space to talk about themselves, as members of a wider society; it is these stories that will be used to illustrate this article, as it focuses on childhood experiences of these life-long natural historians.

Project Origins

Museum Lives is a joint undertaking between Kingston University and the Natural History Museum in London (funded by a three-year AHRC grant), which seeks to record the lives and careers of the Museum's curators and scientists (retired and current). Oral history expertise was provided by University staff from journalism and history, while staff from the Museum's Library and Information Services Department provided the infrastructure for identifying and contacting potential interviewees, along with office space and support for the project.

Museum Lives originated from a realisation within the Museum that a number of key members of staff, who had joined in the late 1960s or early 1970s, were soon to retire. Concerned about the volume of tacit knowledge that would be lost, the Museum decided that an oral history programme should be established to capture this valuable resource. It was concerned particularly about the loss of information (which could be

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termed 'biographical') relating to individual specimens or collections within the Museum. 'Biographical' is a good term, as the information considered to be in peril related not to the scientific characteristics of the specimens (already recorded in detail in scientific communications), but to their journeys to and their 'life-stories' within the Museum. The scope of the project expanded quickly to encompass much broader objectives, particularly in relation to the history of the Museum in the second half of the twentieth century. Several official written histories exist, but none recent. They tend to follow the traditional approach to institutional histories, based on published material and the institution's archive, described by Hilary Young (2011) as 'bricks and mortar histories'. William Stearn's (1981) history of the Museum is a good example of this genre. An oral history would update these older versions and as Carl Ryant wrote (1988: 560), 'Oral history ... is a particularly valuable tool because it can fill in the gaps in the historical record'.

These two goals, while not entirely contradictory, can be seen as being at odds with each other and had ramifications for the choice of interviewees. On the one hand, to meet the Museum's desire to capture the 'biographical' information on collections, there was pressure to select scientists with personal and detailed relationships with individual specimens. This implied long service and would favour curators' stories over other members of the institutional family. On the other hand, in line with good oral history practice, University staff were eager to produce a collection that would be of use to researchers now and, more importantly, in the future. For such an enterprise a much broader selection of interviewees was required (see Shopes 2002). There is a body of work on conducting oral histories of institutions (of many types) and all insist that the interviewee cohort should be as representative as possible (Ryant 1988; Perks 2010; Young 2011).

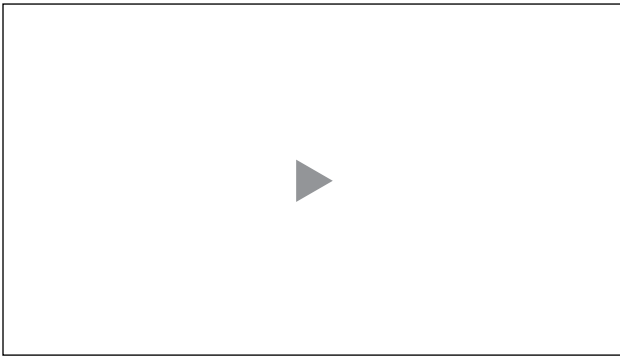
The structure of the *Museum Lives* project (that is the alliance between Museum and University, and the provision of funding by a third, independent research body), while producing the cultural challenges alluded to above, actually facilitated the job of addressing both imperatives. Institutional oral histories, often run (and, in many cases, funded) by the institution itself, face the temptation to predetermine outcomes through the selection of candidate narrators. There is a natural tendency to engineer conditions that will represent the institution in its best light, to cover up past mistakes and focus on successes. Rob Perks (2010) has written about this in the context of oral histories of business, and Young (2011) has noted a similar tendency in some oral histories of universities. In *Museum Lives*, the University (as the outsider) was able to act as a break on any tendency within the Museum to give in to temptations to glorify its past, while the Museum (with its insider knowledge) could brief University staff on recent history and individuals, enabling some of the pitfalls of outsider interviewing to be sidestepped.

History of Oral History in Institutions

A literature search for oral history *of* museums in the UK returns, predominantly, references to its use *in* exhibitions. The situation is quite different in the United States where there are many examples of oral history being used to create histories of all manner of institutions, including museums. The best known example is probably the oral history programme at the Smithsonian,³ which has been running since 1973 and has accumulated over 1,000 hours of interviews with 'administrators, scholars, craftsmen and craftswomen, technical staff, volunteers and visitors' (Smithsonian 2004; see also Henson 1999). Also in the US, the Johnson Space Centre runs oral history programmes collecting memories of the NASA moon project (Johnson Space Centre 2012), while the Chemical Heritage Foundation and the Neils Bohr Library of the American Institute of Physics both have ongoing oral history programmes to record the lives of chemists and physicists (Chemical Heritage Foundation 2012; Niels Bohr Library 2012).

In the US, the origins of modern oral history have been traced back to work by Allan Nevins at Columbia University in the 1940s, where the focus was on elites in business and government (Thompson 2000). In the UK, by contrast, oral history has more radical roots, being a tool of choice of leftist social historians, bent on capturing the everyday lives of the silent majority (Ritchie 2003). Perks (2010) points to this as an explanation for a perceived reluctance among British oral historians to venture into the world of business and elites. His work at the British Library on business projects such as *City Lives* (which records the lives of workers in the City of London) prompted much opprobrium within the UK oral history community.⁴ He writes, 'Among some oral historians in the UK there remains a debilitating ideological resistance to using their methodology to explore what they regard as an elite and privileged group in society ...' (2010: 46). Young (2011) encountered evidence of similar sentiments during her project to record the oral history of the Open University. But, as Alison Gilmore (2009) found, during a project on the British water industry, oral history (if used appropriately) can have a profoundly democratising effect on the creation of an institutional history. In her study, senior managers (the elite of Nevin's original projects) had a valid contribution to make; oral history enabled stories from across the broad range of employees to be juxtaposed. Further, if a 'life story' approach is taken, as opposed to a narrow focus of inquiry, even the 'elites' are liberated from their professional shackles, being granted permission by the process to reveal their more private personae (Shopes 2002). Talking about childhood, for instance, offers elite narrators such an escape, as Richard Lane, Director of Science at the Museum, demonstrates in his interview for *Museum Lives*.⁵

In this extract, Lane reminisces about his early interest in natural history as a boy in Australia, and about his passion for collecting wildlife and bringing it back to his parents' house:



Video 1: Richard Lane, memories of growing up in Australia (to play, see the online version of the article at DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/jcms.1011207>).

The only time they ever drew the line was dragging dead cats back – road kill – so you could put it in the garden and see what beetles turned up; and they thought, actually, in the tropics, dead cats in your garden is just too much' (Lane 2010).

In *Museum Lives*, childhood proved to be a very rich seam, which will be explored in more depth later in this article.

This reluctance of oral historians to engage with perceived 'elites' may also explain the lack of oral histories of museums, especially of prestigious national institutions. In the UK, unlike the US, there appears to be an almost complete absence of such projects. One of the few oral histories of museums identified to date was carried out in the early years of the twenty-first century, under the auspices of Resource: (the predecessor of the soon to be defunct Museums, Libraries and Archives Council). Stuart Davies and Crispin Paine (2004) described the project as a pilot, 'to record the reminiscences of some twenty senior museum curators'. They believed they were the first to use oral history to study the institutional history of museums and their contribution to cultural development in the UK.

The project identified twenty leading curators across the country. Anticipating accusations of elitism, similar to that experienced later by Perks, they justified their decision to interview only senior museum curators in several ways. First, they explained, the senior curators held 'knowledge and information which may not have been put down in writing' (Davies and Paine 2004: 55). Further, these experiences could make a valuable contribution to the training of young museum professionals. Finally, although considered elite in their field, such people rarely publish memoirs and therefore oral history was a useful tool to capture their otherwise unrecorded curatorial experiences. In deciding that the interviews should be conducted by Paine – a freelance museum consultant and former reputed curator – Davies and Paine came up against problems typical of insider interviews, which they readily admitted when reflecting on the experience. There was a tendency for politeness or the need for tact, which left important but delicate subjects unexplored, and a temptation to avoid such subjects altogether. As colleagues, there were also shared sets of prejudices or assumptions,

which left some areas unchallenged. As they point out, 'It was a given that museums were a good thing, that public money was rightly spent on them, that collections were at the heart of museums and should be inalienable, and so forth' (Davies and Paine 2004: 55).

A more recent example can be found at the Victoria and Albert Museum, where Linda Sandino is conducting an oral history of curatorial staff at the Museum, exploring diversity in curatorial practices. As she says, it is 'axiomatic that in order to answer the question 'What is curator?', one can begin by asking 'Who is a curator?', a very similar approach to that taken by the Museum Lives team (Sandino 2012; see Sandino, this volume).

The *Museum Lives* project, by deciding to use 'outsider' interviewers with no connection to the Museum, was able to sidestep this particular pitfall. Interviewers were able to question prejudices and assumptions within the narrators' stories, and more importantly (as a result of their own lack of familiarity with the work of curators) were given tacit permission to ask what the narrators might otherwise have classed as naive or unnecessary questions. As an example, being non-museum people, the interviewers were curious about the division of labour within the scientific staff of the Museum between 'research', which appeared to be privileged, and 'curation', which appeared to have less kudos. One of the Museum's eminent research scientists replied as follows:

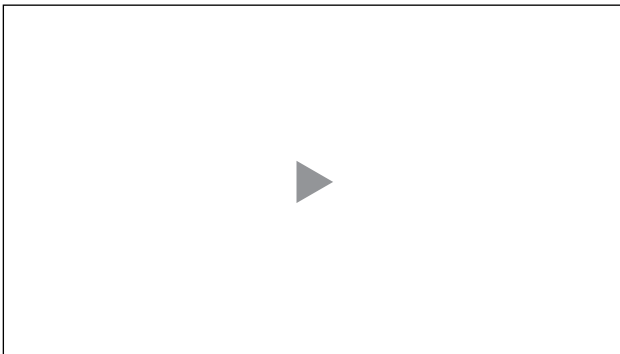
People who are curators of the collections or collections managers, tend to... get very, very involved in the management of the objects and forget that [the] objects that are there, the only reason they're there is for people to use them. They don't mean anything unless research is done on them. So, [when curation and research is separated] it, kind of, breaks that symbiotic link between research and the collections ... People like me are called curators in US institutions, and, you know, I do a lot of work on curation – I do identification, I re-file stuff, I do lots of what would be termed 'curation'; but [in the UK, at the Museum] 'curators' ... had this real chip on their shoulders about being second class citizens (Knapp 2010).⁶

This is just a short extract from Knapp's answer to a question about the role of curators and researchers at the Museum, but reveals the tensions that were present below the surface between the two streams within science at the Museum. If the interviewer had not been an outsider (and therefore neutral on the subject) would SK have been as open. Indeed, had the interviewer been an insider, would the question have been asked at all? More light was shed on these tensions in an interview with Peter Tandy, a curator in Mineralogy. Here, he talks about one of the many reorganisations he experienced in his lifelong career at the Museum, and perhaps his answer sheds light on the origins of tensions between research and curation:

Those who were Research Higher Scientific Officers went into the higher band. Those of us who were

curator HSOs went into the lower band.... They could've put all the HSOs into the higher band [but instead] they split them, deliberately, I think, because the people in charge at that time saw it as a university and not a Museum, and, therefore ... curators could stay but they could only stay at a lower level. Researchers... that was the place to be. (Tandy 2010).⁷

The importance of collections within a museum was a contentious area identified in the *Museum Lives* project – several retired curators and scientists were fearful that the inalienable position of collections (as they remembered it) was being threatened by a new drive for revenues and a focus on outreach. Gaden Robinson,⁸ an eminent entomologist who had worked at the Museum for over thirty years, was concerned about this tendency:



Video 2: Gaden Robinson: government funding for science research (to play, see the online version of the article at DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/jcms.1011207>).

We can't run on a commercial basis. By and large this is pure science ...it's renaissance stuff, we need the Medicis, we need the Department of Culture, Media and Sport.... If we can't justify what we do by saying, 'Look, this is part of the national cultural imperative', then we're doomed, because [if] all we are is a very good collection acting as a service industry for visiting scientists ... then I'd argue the collections are not worth keeping, they might as well be given to ... places in the US who can make better use of them (Robinson 2009).

Besides the question of elitism, institutional (or business) projects must negotiate some potentially dangerous pitfalls, the biggest of which are questions of money and control. Carl Ryant (1988) ascribes many of the pitfalls of corporate projects to a question of authority and purpose. Too many such projects lack clarity or focus, or are conducted primarily with the intent of generating good public relations material: past errors are ignored while triumphs are over emphasised (Ryant 1988; Shopes 2002). As Ryant says, however, (1988: 563) 'the firm that accepts responsibility for past errors [can thus establish] present credibility', and oral history can be a tool for discovering the story behind both. His conclusions are at odds with Phyllis Wentz (1981: 62), of multinational pharmaceuti-

cal company Eli Lilly, who cautioned that 'the palest ink is better than the clearest memory' and saw in oral history only a 'potential use, particularly to give perspective, in the writing of a business history'.

Museum Lives

The collaboration between the University and the Museum proved an effective partnership, as each partner tended to hold in check the biases or preconceptions of the other. With independent funding, control of funds did not have an unduly heavy influence on decision-making. Nevertheless, the project faced many of the challenges Ryant (1988) identified. Although this was a joint enterprise, there was a tendency for both parties to fall into the roles of client and provider – with the Museum taking the former role, commissioning work from the University. This tended to tip the balance of power in decision making in favour of the Museum. Selection of interview candidates was one area of (at times) heated negotiations; the Museum favouring their seasoned, media-savvy, scientists while the University's research team pushed for a broader, more inclusive list. The resulting list of interviews reflects both points of view, indicating the benefits to be gained from such joint ventures.

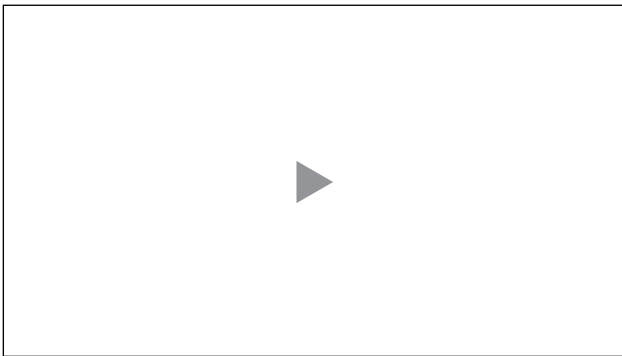
Another area of contention was the direction questions should take. To meet its objective of filling in the gaps of 'specimen life-stories', the Museum pushed for very object-orientated interviews. University interviewers, on the other hand, were more interested (and perhaps more comfortable) pursuing social history themes. This issue was not easily resolved, partly because some narrators proved reticent on the subject of individual specimens. One mineralogist, off-camera, responded with incredulity when asked what his favourite specimen was, while several others attempted a response, but obviously found the question irrational:

Well, I, usually, people always go straight for the bird wing butterflies. I suppose it's quite unusual within the entomological collection. You have got certain specimens with iconic status. The shot bird wings.... The famous ones are ... Ornithoptera Alexandri and ... Ornithoptera Victorii (Ackery 2009).⁹

Instead of responding with his most interesting specimen, Ackery reverted to public opinion instead, naming specimens in his collection that attract the most attention.

The question of themes was less contentious, and a list of five or so themes to be pursued in interviews emerged relatively quickly. One particularly rich theme, which resulted from the decision to take a life narrative approach to the interviews – and will be the focus of the rest of this article – was that of childhood. While the interviewers were interested in signs of an early engagement with natural history in their interviewees, this was not the sole reason for exploring childhood. Participants spanned a wide age range and their childhood memories will be valuable to social historians of the future, not just historians of science. As a result, the project has cap-

tured diverse stories of internment in Japanese prisoner of war and Nazi concentrations camps, flight from the Russians during the Second World War, and the swinging '60s in London. Some participants were reluctant to discuss childhood, finding it difficult to understand why it was of interest, while some clearly had prepared stories to hand; but others appeared to enjoy the 'permission' to return to childhood memories, recalling (sometimes by surprise) events that set them, they thought, on an almost inevitable course to the Museum. Frequently, the interviewees became so engaged with their early life stories that they had barely reached the point of joining the Museum when the first interview came to an end. Most commented on how quickly the time had gone and were surprised that they had spent two hours on their formative years. Sara Russell, a senior scientist in meteoritics recalled one of her earliest childhood memories, the moon landing in 1969.¹⁰ Barely old enough to remember the event she still insists:

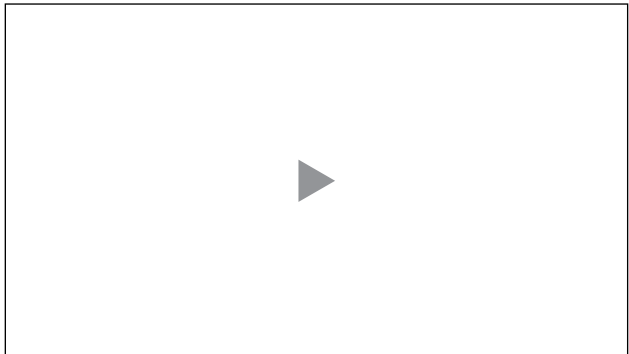


Video 3: Sara Russell: the moon landings and cosmic mineralogy (to play, see the online version of the article at DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/jcms.1011207>).

I just remember this sort of palpable excitement and everybody getting really excited, and it was the first time I'd seen adults being excited about something, so that really made a big impression on me ... I became a bit of a space nut and I used to read up about all the Apollo missions, then after that the Viking missions to Mars and I used to avidly watch what was happening on the news ... I was really, really into the whole space programme and ... planetary exploration. I wanted to be an astronaut (laughs) (Russell 2010).

Afterwards Russell commented on how the interview had encouraged her to revisit long forgotten memories from the past, and how interesting it was to consider that her path to the Museum might have been shaped by those momentous events in early childhood.

In another interview, Ollie Crimmen, a senior curator, recalled his early fascination with the Museum itself.¹¹ In the following clip, you can hear the young Crimmen's mystery and wonder in his adult self's description of the 'big brown doors' that separated the public from the Museum's inner life and the 'tantalising smells' that emanated from them.

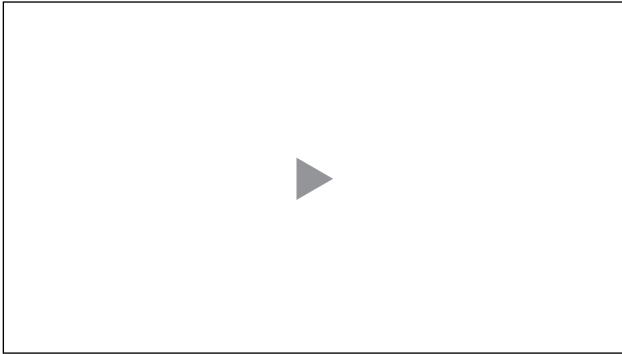


Video 4: Ollie Crimmen: a childhood visit to the museum (to play, see the online version of the article at DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/jcms.1011207>).

You ended up sitting on those ... mosaic stone floors in front of a case and drawing away. You still see kids doing it in front of the few cases that are still like that. And, of course, you're ... next to one of these anonymous-looking doors, these old hardwood doors, marked 'private' ... They've usually got pretty big, old, clunky locks on them. And one of those would open up ... right next to you at the floor level, you, sort of, ... get quite a shock when one of these doors opens up. And ... somebody would come marching off some steps into the ... gallery and, very often, they brought a waft of very tantalising smells with them ... from the world of, where the spirit and the formalin specimens were. And that ... always ... had a, a special mystique about it, what was behind the doors. I think behind the scenes at museums gets everybody, doesn't it? But ... for me the Natural History Museum and what was behind those doors was always very tantalising. And, yes, it occurred to me, you know, some people must be wonderfully lucky enough to actually work there (Crimmen 2010).

Crimmen's early interest in the Museum appeared to be overwhelmed by teenage inertia, and as he recalls, he could easily have taken a completely different tack when his friend's mother offered him a job in her estate agency business. In the end he chose the Museum, but as he recounted the story he mused on how things might have turned out: 'She said [to me], "I think you'd have been quite good in the job I was offering you ... You'll probably never be as comfortably off as you would be in the property business." [and] ...that's putting it mildly'. But the offer of a post as junior curator was a childhood dream come true, and Crimmen joined the Museum after his 'A' levels, never to look back.

Louise Tomsett, curator of mammals, had a childhood fascination with the Museum that seemed to verge on obsession.¹² After persuading her parents to take her there at every opportunity, she wore down the Volunteer Recruitment unit with the same tenacity, persuading them to take her on as a volunteer, even though officially she was too young. She describes her memories of those early visits to the Museum in the next clip.



Video 5: Louise Tomsett: volunteering at the museum (to play, see the online version of the article at DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/jcms.1011207>).

It was actually my father who influenced me and I'd been coming to the Museum since a very early age, and, apparently, although I don't remember it being this way, whenever we came up to London later on, [my mum would ask], 'Where do you want to go?', 'The Natural History Museum.' [And she would say], 'Again?' [and I would answer] 'Yes.' And we used to go to the Science Museum quite a lot, as well. (...) Getting the role here was very difficult. I think ... because I was a little bit too young to be a volunteer, and I wrote in to zoology and palaeontology, and I got letter after letter going, 'No, no, no, no.' And then, in the end, I think they just thought, 'Just give her something, stop her writing in' (chuckles). I managed to get a short-term [volunteers position], I think it was about two weeks, working in zoology with mollusca. One of the best things [on visits] was that I used to see people going behind those mysterious wooden doors in the galleries, and used to think, 'I'd like to do that and find out what's behind the doors.' So, that was one of the highlights of my first day [as a volunteer], I got to go through one of the doors (chuckles).

I think the main thing that struck me was I had no idea of the scale of what was behind the scenes. You know, you all have ... preconception of what things are like. But, I got to go down and just see the extent of one small section, in one department of the Museum, [and] it was incredible. ... I particularly loved being able to look round at all the old labels and see how things were. It definitely went beyond my expectations and I was very lucky to be working with a brilliant group of people who let me do all sorts of different things when I was there, and actually, even got to see some Darwin specimens as well (Tomsett 2010).

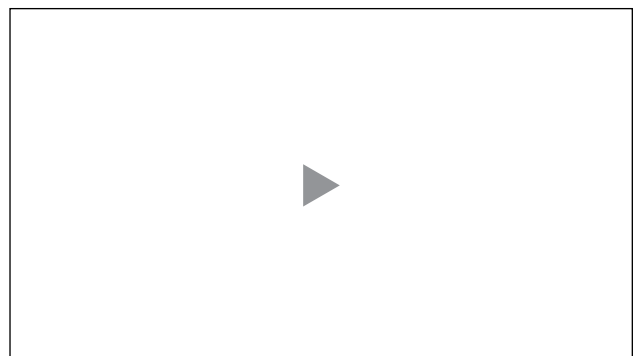
When you listen to Crimmen's and Tomsett's accounts, their tone of voice still betrays the childhood wonder they experienced – the thrill of what was behind the 'mysterious wooden doors' is echoed in both their narratives, and represents a common thread in many of the interviews. Even the most experienced of staff talked about the institution they had worked in for years with an awe that reflected their deep ties with the place's history.

Klaus Sattler had been an experienced scientist at the Munich Institute when he joined the Museum, but could not (even 40 years later) disguise the excitement he had felt on entering the Natural History Museum for the first time:

Well the Museum was love at first sight, this beautiful building, these fantastic collections, organised collections, libraries with it. Everything at your fingertips, well-trained, knowledgeable staff. It was out of this world! He continued, 'It was fantastic, it was morning to night, as long as I could, I could look at the collections ... I was blissfully happy. Nothing disturbed me, nobody disturbed me (Sattler 2009).¹³

When you hear the awe in these narrators' voices, talking about the building (and the institution, as the two are tightly entwined) it is no wonder that they want to protect it from outside criticism. A reluctance on the part of some to talk about the difficult times is laced with feelings of betrayal. In these long-serving employees the Museum evokes great loyalty, not necessarily to the twenty-first-century institution but to the Museum of the past. Throughout the interviews there are clues to the tight reins the past holds over the Museum's current incumbents. The memories evoked by the old buildings are ingrained in their minds.

Many of our interviewees were interested in the history of the Museum and its collections, and talked of being 'keepers' of their forefathers' work; going as far as to ponder what would be made of their work by future curators and keepers. Tomsett, the determined volunteer, was able to eventually secure a much-coveted permanent post as a curator in zoology. Her description of a particular specimen and her role in bringing it to the museum illustrates the connection the scientists feel with both past and future curators. This next clip describes Louise finding a dead fox just outside the Museum:



Video 6: Louise Tomsett: collecting a specimen (to play, see the online version of the article at DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/jcms.1011207>).

There's a fox specimen that I picked up just outside the Museum, so I've actually documented the story of that. [It] was found out on... Queen's Gate on my way into work, and I saw, sadly, this fox had obviously been hit by a vehicle and was on the side of the road, and as I was walking up I thought, (I've

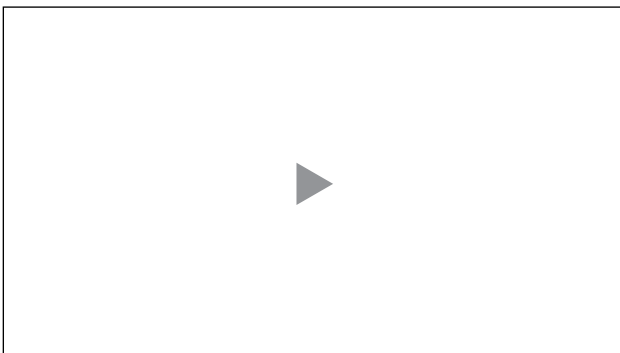
always got my eye out for a specimen for the collection), 'Oh, that's, you know, convenient, right next to the Museum. We could have that for the collection', 'cos we hadn't got many foxes from London. And there were two gentlemen, who were working on renovating a building, standing near it ... looking at it, sort of, discussing. So, I walked up to them and I said, 'Excuse me, are you going to do anything with that?' And they looked at me rather strangely, and said, 'No, we're not, we're just looking at it.' So I said, 'Do you mind if I take it?' And, you know, they gave me a rather strange look and I said, 'It's okay, I work at the Museum. It would be really useful for our collections for research.' And they were, like, 'Oh, okay, you're not completely crazy.' So, they kindly came out and brought me a rubbish bag and some gloves. So, I picked the fox up and put it in the bag, but it was too large, it was a big male, and his tail was sticking out of the top of the bag. So, I was walking along the street with the tail, sort of, flopping around in the bag, getting some very strange looks. But, I'm quite used to that (Tomsett 2010).

Tomsett went on to describe, in a matter-of-fact way, how she prepared the fox for the collection, but finished with an interesting aside:

[And] it's labelled in a box [with my name attached as the collector] and now people are actually using it for research. So, it's my own little story to add to the millions that there are (Tomsett 2010).

This one comment illustrated the connection and responsibility felt by curators not only to current collections and their users, but also to those of the past and the future.

Most of the retired entomologists had stories of idyllic-sounding childhoods spent collecting butterflies and moths, often accompanied by their amateur naturalist fathers. One of the most distinct memories came from Gaden Robinson, whose father was a civil servant and an experienced amateur lepidopterist (in the Victorian gentleman-naturalist tradition). He encouraged the very young Gaden to study butterflies and moths:



Video 7: Gaden Robinson: childhood interest in natural history (to play, see the online version of the article at DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/jcms.1011207>).

Dad had a moth trap in the garden and it used to be a morning ritual ... in those early years in Hampshire, ... by the time I was five, I was fairly used to handling specimens. I didn't have the dexterity I had three years on down the line say, because 4-5 year olds are not that dextrous, but I tried hard (Robinson 2009).

Much of Robinson's childhood exposure to lepidoptery was acquired in the Far East, as his father moved from one post to another in the Colonial Civil Service; and it is striking that several of his colleagues (in lepidoptery and other specialisms) had similar experiences. Is this revealing of a hitherto unrecognised benefit of colonial life – the training of young naturalists exposed to exotic flora and fauna? And, with the demise of the colonial service, is interest in this form of science on the decline among the young? These stories of roaming the great outdoors hunting for moths or butterflies or dipping in local ponds (whether at home or abroad) seem to represent a bucolic picture of a childhood long since submerged under concrete and tarmac. Do children still engage with nature in a way these interviewees described? At the Museum, the Education teams grapple with the challenge of luring children away from their electronic games and out into nature's playground, and are investigating how some of the content from *Museum Lives* interviews might be used for this purpose.

Of all the stories of childhood, Robinson's seemed to indicate that he was predestined to work at the Museum. The idea that childhood experience can precondition the adult to follow a particular path in life is a common assumption, and it is tempting for researchers to look for these connections in oral history and present them as evidence. Most of the *Museum Lives* interviewees related stories of childhood interests or experiences, which they believed influenced their later career choices.

But how much can these stories reveal about the impact of childhood experience on the development of natural historians? During the course of their recollections, many of the narrators spontaneously referred to a childhood interest in natural history, be it rocks and pebbles (mineralogists), butterflies and moths (lepidopterists), or wildlife in general (zoologists). Most identified the presence of an influential adult as being significant in their development, usually a parent or teacher. And some of the stories did seem to have been embellished somewhat, conjuring up idyllic images of Enid Blyton: long warm summer days spent in the countryside with nets and jam jars and lashings of ginger beer. So how reliable are they? And to what extent were the recollections (while not necessarily false) rather selectively edited or recalled by some subconscious desire of the interviewee to please the interviewer? Although the questions were never so crudely put as to ask, 'So what childhood experiences led you to become a ... lepidopterist?' for instance, interviewees were well aware of the context of the interview, and in preparing for it may have formulated these questions of influence and childhood themselves.

A study of museum workers conducted in the USA sought to uncover childhood influences of museums on future museum workers (Spock 2000). A number of experienced museum professionals were interviewed, and the project team were struck by the impact, revealed in the stories they were told, of 'early museum experiences on people who later found their way into museum careers'. In fact, only one percent of those interviewed actually made the connection between childhood museum visits and the career they eventually ended up in, throwing some doubt on the conclusions reached by the project team. Tellingly, the authors also concluded, 'It seems likely that more of our informants would have tied the start of their careers explicitly back to childhood museum experiences, if we had probed for those connections more aggressively' (Spock 2000). This was an 'insider' study, with museum professionals interviewing each other, and evidence of the problems this form of interview throws up can be found in their account of the project: 'Each storyteller is convinced that museums made a difference in the way they turned out ... why they ended up working in museums. The stories ring true for us, personally as well. They have many of the same features as memories each of us carry about the seeds of our own museum careers'. It would seem that the project team began with a notion of connection between childhood experiences of museums and decisions to enter the profession. Did they subconsciously transmit this desired outcome to their interviewees, and in the previous quote, were they regretting not having made these connections more strongly?

A conference (Science Voices) held at the Royal Society in 2011 presented findings from a number of projects, which aimed to discuss the opportunities presented when scientists and historians are brought together, to create a narrative through the scientists' own vibrant personal voices and testimony. ('Science Voices' Podcasts 2011) The issue of childhood influences on scientists was particularly vigorously debated.

Paul Merchant is one of the oral historians working on the British Library's project 'An Oral History of British Science', which aims to interview 200 leading British scientists. The project is taking a life-stories approach, as did *Museum Lives*, and not surprisingly therefore is uncovering childhood memories. In complete contrast to the US study, Merchant put forward an interesting and somewhat controversial thesis, in which he argued against 'the common, taken for granted view of the adult self as something that has an essence visible in childhood or that has origins in childhood, formed by the accumulation of formative experiences or influences' (Merchant 2011). He proposed that scientists who recognised themselves in 'images of the past' were operating selective recollection, recalling those memories which shored up their self-image as the adult scientist. Oral history, he claimed, could not, and should not, be used to uncover childhood influences on the adult self, denouncing the idea that 'childhood contains clues to the essence of a person or that it contains influences, moments or things that formed the adult self' (Merchant 2011).

Was Merchant playing devil's advocate in presenting this thesis, encouraging oral historians (and more importantly the end-users of oral histories), by being deliberately provocative, to think carefully before interpreting the outputs of projects such as *Museum Lives*? Surely he cannot have been suggesting that childhood influences play no part in future development of the child. Of course, memories recounted during oral history interviews cannot be taken as hard facts, and cannot be interpreted in isolation of a myriad of other considerations. It would be foolish indeed to conclude that all natural historians displayed a precocious interest in the subject from a very young age, or were predestined to work there after making a Disney-like promise to themselves as children, as Michael Spock confesses in his article:

But when I was five years old, I was visiting the fort in St. Augustine, Florida, and, it's reported to me by my mother – and I'm not going to argue with my mother – that I turned to my parents and said, 'You know, when I grow up I'd like to work in a place like this.' And from that point on, my career goal was to work in museums (Spock 2000).

He may not have actually said those words, his mother may have misremembered and his 'lifelong' determination to work in a museum may not be quite as enduring as this story suggests, but as Michael Frisch says, the story validates Spock's present self (Frisch 1990). In explaining how we got to be where we are, we all construct narratives that draw on past experiences and memories of those experiences, and oral history is one route into these narratives. So Merchant is quite right on the one hand to urge caution in the interpretation of oral history interviews. Memories related in such interviews may only be partial, they may omit incidents and experiences that do not fit into the narrative, but as Frisch says: '[Oral history is] a powerful tool for discovering, exploring and evaluating the nature of the process of historical memory – how people make sense of their past, how they connect individual experience and its social context, how the past becomes part of the present and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them' (Frisch 1990: 188).

This essay can only provide a window into the *Museum Lives* project and the array of stories it contains. The science in many cases takes a back seat to the personal stories of childhood obsessions, adventure, institutional loyalties (and tensions), and social commentary. As I noted, many of my narrators were surprised by the request to talk about their childhood, but in the end found it particularly liberating. Oral history traditionally has offered a voice to those deprived of one, and while eminent scientists have a loud voice in their own world, their personal voice is submerged. In *Museum Lives*, they have been given an opportunity to talk about themselves not merely as scientists but, just as importantly, as people. What they reveal about society in the second half of the twentieth and the first decade of the twenty-first century is just as enthralling as their scientific recollections.

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Notes

- 1 Interviewed for *Museum Lives* by Dr Sue Hawkins. ML002, 11 March 2009.
- 2 As part of the *Museum Lives* project, 50 current and retired members of staff at the Natural History Museum London were interviewed between 2008 and 2011. The interviews were audio-recorded and filmed. All interviews were transcribed and catalogued, and are housed in the archives of the Natural History Museum. The project website <http://www.nhm.ac.uk/research-curation/collections/museum-lives> is currently under construction and will provide access to a selection of clips arranged by theme.
- 3 The Smithsonian is the world's largest museum and research complex, centred in Washington DC. It comprises 19 museums and galleries, the National Zoological Park and nine research facilities. For more information about the Smithsonian visit its website at <http://www.si.edu/About>.
- 4 National Life Stories, the oral history project charity based at the British Library Sound Archive has undertaken a number of corporate oral history projects including: London's Square Mile in *City Lives*, the Post Office, brand consultancy Wolff Olins and the traditional industries of oil and steel. For further information go to *National Life Stories* and <http://www.bl.uk/oralhistory>.
- 5 Interviewed for *Museum Lives* by Prof Brian Cathcart. ML096 13 January 2011.
- 6 Interviewed for *Museum Lives* by Dr Sue Hawkins. ML007, 26 August 2010.
- 7 Interviewed for *Museum Lives* by Dr Sue Hawkins. ML068, 28 June 2010.
- 8 Interviewed for *Museum Lives* by Dr Sue Hawkins. ML021, 9 March 2009 and 16 March 2009. Sadly, GR passed away shortly after his final interview, and days before his retirement from the Museum.
- 9 Interviewed for *Museum Lives* by Dr Sue Hawkins. ML016, 30 January 2009.
- 10 Interviewed for *Museum Lives* by Dr Sue Hawkins. ML080, 1 June 2010.
- 11 Interviewed for *Museum Lives* by Dr Sue Hawkins. ML054, 29 September 2010.
- 12 Interviewed for *Museum Lives* by Dr Sue Hawkins. ML075, 23 July 2010.
- 13 Interviewed for *Museum Lives* by Dr Sue Hawkins. ML022, 23 April 2009.

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