

Book Review

Dorfman, E. (ed.) *The Future of Natural History Museums*, Routledge, paperback, £31.99, pp. 268.

This book grew out of two annual conferences of ICOM NATHIST (the ICOM Committee for Museums and Collections of Natural History) and is published as part of a series of 'ICOM Advances in Museum Research'. These conferences were 'The Future of Natural History Museums: Relevance, Balance, and Innovation' (Krapina, Croatia, 2014) and 'Natural History Museums: Building Our Future' (Taipei, 2015); both sought to identify and address challenges faced by natural history museums, against a backdrop of environmental change and challenges to the sector. Eric Dorfman sets out the book's positioning, that it is

about natural history museums. Not the old-fashioned, infamously dusty halls of dreary objects... but a new breed of institution, one that exists in the future – responsible and responsive to its community, employing newly developed methods to unravel the mysteries of the world and weave them into engaging stories for an eager and engaged public.

The book is divided into four sections. The first is devoted to collecting and preserving objects/specimens, and collections-based research. Chris Norris (Yale Peabody Museum), Emlyn Koster (North Carolina Museum of Natural History), Eric Dorfman (Carnegie Museum, Pittsburgh and Chair of ICOM Nathist) and Terry Simioti Nyambe (Livingstone Museum, Zambia) discuss natural history museums in the context of the Anthropocene – the 'age of us' – and the ethics of collecting. Hanna Pennock (Utrecht) discusses present and projected future risks to natural history collections, and the spate of recent thefts of rhinoceros horns and ivory from museums. Frank Howarth (Australian Museum) writes about possible future research directions, and discusses the ongoing decline of museum-driven research. There is a chapter on 'the essential role of museums in biodiversity conservation' by Felicity Arengo (American Museum of Natural History) and others, incorporating discussion on the importance of engaging people with nature conservation. The second section, 'The future of natural history museum visitor experiences', includes a chapter by Kara Blond (Smithsonian) on possible directions for natural history exhibitions, incorporating greater interactivity, social media connection and crowdfunding, and connecting with climate change, biodiversity issues and the Anthropocene. Colette Dufresne-Tassé (ICOM-CECA) and Pierre Pénicaut (Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris) explore formal and informal teaching programmes for schools and university students. Christopher Garthe (Studio KLV, Berlin) imagines a Natural Futures Museum, with a future-focussed frame and where interactivity is key, engaging people effectively with global challenges. In part three, 'Interfaces', Gerald Dick (WAZA), Anna Omedes (ECSITE) and Ernesto Páramo (Granada Science Centre and Museum) discuss the development and similarities of zoos and natural history/science museums. Lynda Knowles discusses national and international nature conservation legislation that relates to museums (e.g. CITES and the Convention on Biological Diversity), links between ICOM and UNESCO, and codes of ethics relating to natural history museums. Eric Dorfman writes on natural history museums as enterprises of the future, and the importance of identifying and focussing on a museum's 'main thing'. The final part consists of a commentary by Conal McCarthy (Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand) on the future of natural history museums. He notes the sense of crisis that pervades much discussion relating to natural history museums: internal crisis, in terms of funding and the demise of research; crises of understanding among funders and stakeholders, in spite of

the mass appeal and widespread interest in the subject matter of such museums, and crises of the environment in the face of extreme biodiversity loss and environmental challenges such as climate change. Finally, Eric Dorfman, Isabel Landim (São Paulo University Museum of Zoology) and Osamu Kamei synthesize the themes of the volume, noting the importance of authentic museum-public partnerships, indigenous rights relating to human remains, ethical collecting, technology and new business models, and increasing the transparency of museums and museum practices. Much of the book relates primarily to museums that are dedicated to natural history, rather than those with mixed collections, and some discussion on natural history in such museums would have been helpful.

Overall this is an extremely interesting and well-written book. It could have benefited from a critical exploration of some of the key terms involved, around 'nature', 'science' and 'natural history'. These terms are highly fugitive, notably when considering long timeframes, from the time of creation of most of the large natural history museums. The relationship between natural history museums, which mostly (but don't all) date from the latter part of the nineteenth century, and their relationship with science centres (which mostly date from the twentieth century) could have been usefully unpacked (see, e.g. Rader and Cain 2014, Berkowitz and Lightman 2017). Similarly, what constituted a museum before natural history museums were instituted reflects a broader range of institution types and experiences than we see today. In some ways, the emergence of new types of museum that address environmental issues sees a return to this diversity. The Climate Museum in New York is a museum without a venue, as is the Museum of Water in the UK. With a clearer discussion of what is meant by a 'natural history museum', these other types of museum may have found a place in the discussion. The culture of natural history, and the crisis of nature have their own history, as is well explored in Jardine *et al.* (1996), and the book could have benefited from greater interrogation of the social history of natural history. In that volume, Jim Secord identified two key questions regarding the place natural history: how was the hierarchy of sciences established, and how did natural history lose status? He called for an understanding of how natural history connected with imperialism, racism and the world economy. He noted how natural history 'can easily become a repository of anecdote and entertaining escape', but a more critically informed historical approach can help address contemporary issues: 'a new culture of natural history will flourish only if it is effectively rooted in – and draws upon – a critical understanding of the past' (Secord 1995: 459).

Natural history museums are in need of greater support within the cultural sector, both in the UK and worldwide. We have the perverse situation where funding for museums is in decline, while the need to conserve nature and engage people more effectively with their environment (locally and globally) is greater than ever. Global environmental change – climate change, pollution, over-exploitation, habitat destruction and invasive species – pose tremendous threats to humanity, let alone to habitats and species. Museums with natural heritage collections are ideally placed to help reforge or reconstruct links between people and nature and to support the necessary transition to futures that are less exploitative of the natural environment. This book is most certainly one step in the right direction. It should be read by those working in museums of all kinds with natural heritage collections, by those working in nature conservation and related research areas that could make better use of collections, and by those whose decisions affect the future of such museums.

References

- Berkowitz, C. and B. Lightman (2017) *Science Museums in Transition: Anglo-American Cultures of Display in the Nineteenth Century*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Jardine, N., J. A. Secord and E. C. Spary (eds.) (1995). *Cultures of Natural History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rader, K.A. and Cain, V. E.M., (2014), *Life on Display: revolutionizing U.S. museums of science and natural history in the twentieth century*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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Henry McGhie
henrymcghie@curatingtomorrow.co.uk

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