



The COBBE

AN ANGLO-IRISH

Cabinet of

COUNTRY HOUSE

Curiosities

MUSEUM

EDITED BY

ARTHUR MACGREGOR



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Part and chapter titles embrace the style
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for the sale in May 1837 of
Thomas Alexander Champion Cobbe's
Indian collection (see FIG. 271).

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FOREWORD

Museum'. What resonance that word had for us from earliest childhood! Not of a large public building in a city, but of the dark, locked, secret room in our own home, sandwiched between the library and the middle hall. A room of mystery and ghoulish things. The door into it from the library, my mother's sitting room, was permanently bolted, while that from the middle hall was locked by a stiff key too high for a child to reach. If my mother went into it she would shudder and say 'Ughh!' She hated the smell of it, the flaky snakeskins hanging on either side of the shuttered windows, the patches of mildewed damp on the Chinese painted panels papering the wall, the jars of unpleasant zoological specimens suspended in evaporating and varying discoloured liquids, and the general mess resulting from the room having become a repository for broken furniture and disused household items, layered with damp dust and cobwebs. Hardly ever entered by grown-ups, the museum was forbidden to children. When the housekeeper or our nursemaid stole in with us to gratify our curiosity, we were instantly fascinated and terrified. I was sure that a large mane of frightful hair was a witch (it was actually the tail of a yak), while on top of a high case was a vast eagle with snarling beak and wings spread wide, ready to swoop down and carry you off.

The horror and fascination were irresistible as we grew up. When my elder brother went off to boarding school, I used to spend long hours in the room, turning over all manner of things, marvelling at the strangeness of them. There were rocks with glinting gold flecks and jewelled Indian and Burmese objects that I was sure must be neglected treasure, and dusty exotic shells which when washed became objects of wondrous iridescence; a beautifully embroidered silken shoe from China had a flesh coloured model of a foot in it, which, if taken out, revealed the torturous binding of the toes, curled up to the under side. Worse still were two real human hands, one mummified and the other – in a special hand-sized glass and mahogany case – supposedly found in a bog, whose blackened skin was peeling away to reveal the bones. The latter, in tandem with the discovery elsewhere in the house of a Red Cross first-aid book with a diagram of a human skeleton, inspired me to memorize the name of every bone in the body by the age of six, and led to a decision to study medicine at university.

On an exeat weekend from school around 1959, when I was fourteen, there came a horrible shock. I was told the museum was gone. A Dublin antique dealer had offered to buy from my uncle the eighteenth-century Chinese decorations on the wall. Usually my mother strenuously opposed her brother-in-law's random urges to sell things out of the house, and was mostly successful. But in this instance she had her eye on the room as a potential sitting room to take the place of the unheatable library, whose east-facing bow window ushered in every icy winter gale. I rushed to the room and found it completely empty. The series of painted panels that had adorned it, scenes of Chinese life, linked print-room fashion by a network of découpaged hand-painted bamboo trellis work, had been taken away only a few days before and still scattered on the floor were fragments of the trellis borders. The realization dawned of just how transient and fragile was the powerful atmosphere of a place that had seemed so timeless but was now completely vanished. And, worse still, there was not a single photograph of the room to remember it by.

I gathered up some of the fragments of paper painted with bamboo trellis and put them away in a drawer. The cases and their contents, I soon found, had been relegated unceremoniously to the old meat larder in the basement, where they would plainly disintegrate from the damp. The next school holidays saw me move everything belonging to the museum out of the basement, up the stone back stairs to the top of the house and into dry lumber rooms, at the same time forming a determination, with the certainty of adolescence, that somehow the room would be restored one day.

The museum, as it continued to be called, made a nice warm sitting room for my mother – she even had a television, thanks to the recent installation of electricity in the house – and so it remained until my uncle's death in 1984. He bequeathed Newbridge to my brother and me, and the future of the estate that had been my family's property for over 250 years became traumatically uncertain. Dublin County Council wished to purchase it, and our trustees and most of my family were for making a clean break. Negotiations had almost been completed when the council expressed interest in brokering a deal along the lines of those often made by the British National Trust: the house would be restored and opened to the public, but the family would be able to remain in residence and keep the contents in situ. I was keen on this idea and entered into twice-weekly meetings with representatives from the council. In the extraordinarily short time span of six weeks we arrived at an agreement that was without precedent in Ireland.

It was a hectic period, and with one week to go before an attic sale of surplus and broken furniture (planned some months before the council had revealed its intentions to negotiate a future for the house with the family and heirlooms remaining), the museum, which had long been out of my mind, came flashing back in the middle of the night. Of course! Now it could be restored. All the cases had been lotted together for £30, and some saleable items such as a Fijian club, and an Indian ivory state barge had been included in the sale, also at modest estimates. To the frustration of the auctioneers I insisted that anything to do with the museum be now withdrawn. I then went through the upper rooms to see how much of what I had put there in 1959 was still there. Virtually everything. I hurried back to the meat larder to see if I had missed anything twenty-five years earlier. There were indeed items I had overlooked – including what I had supposed in 1959 to be a stand for a huge brass gramophone horn that resided in the old museum, which to a now more experienced eye was evidently an ethnographic specimen (actually an eighteenth-century Tahitian headrest).

The attic sale went ahead but so far as the museum was concerned there was one unfortunate oversight: I had failed to recognize a pair of Pleistocene giant deer antlers (usually accorded the misnomer 'Ancient Irish Elk Horns'), lying broken and camouflaged among a heap of horns and game trophies. When, in the sale, they were dramatically raised high in the air and bid up to a surprising £350, I still only half recognized my mistake. It would be some years before I discovered the true significance and amazing provenance of this Newbridge pair. When, decades later again, they reappeared in the London salerooms re-joined and restored, I was fortunately able to return them to the fold; they are duly included in the present review of the collection.

The museum was restored, but after a few years of public opening it became clear that its fragility would be unable to withstand the rigours of daily exposure. Panes of ancient, wobbly glass suffered breakages; a collection that had been kept permanently shuttered was being subjected to full daylight virtually every day, and much of it was susceptible to light damage. In 1988 I therefore decided to place a replica museum on display and keep the original museum in shuttered seclusion elsewhere. Its sequestration allowed cataloguing and research to begin: after more than twenty years, the present book is the fruit of this process.

By these means a typical country house cabinet of curiosities escaped the ultimate dispersal that was to be the fate of so many similar assemblages. As a result, the Cobbe museum emerges as a unique survivor in Ireland – and indeed in Britain – of a substantially intact collection still associated with the eighteenth-century museum furniture made specifically for its display.

ALEC COBBE

EDITOR'S PREFACE

The great princely cabinets of curiosities of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe are now comparatively well documented: much scholarly research has been directed towards understanding their composition and their multiple *raisons d'être*. Needless to say, the Cobbe collection is not one of those: its roots lie in the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment rather than the Renaissance, and, essentially, it was compiled in a domestic setting rather than a palace or a seat of learning. These characteristics relate it to a body of similar collections that was once much more extensive than the privileged *Kunst- und Wunderkammern* mentioned above, but which has been less intensively studied: just as earlier collectors privileged the extraordinary, the aberrant and the exotic while neglecting the commonplace, so the attention of historians of collecting has tended to be drawn towards the most eye-catching accumulations of material, while overlooking the more everyday. This situation is perfectly understandable, especially since the detailed documentation that often makes research into the grander collections so rewarding is nowhere to be found in the more ordinary, and indeed the very survival of such a collection in reasonably intact form is rare in the extreme.

Nonetheless, it remains striking that comparatively little attention has been paid in the past to the more customary aspects of collecting: no attempt has been made hitherto to set out in detail the character of such a comparatively modest cabinet or to analyse its contents, its place in contemporary collection history, or the particular aims of its founders. In the following pages, the contributors address these issues in relation to the Cobbe collection, thereby providing what may serve as a useful template for the evaluation of other private museums of this kind. The authors concerned are precisely those whose attentions are commonly focused on material deemed more 'significant' within their respective disciplines, so that the perspective they bring to bear on the Cobbe collection is rendered all the more valuable.

A variety of mechanisms brought this collection into being and the motivations of its several benefactors are redolent of the age in which it was formed – roughly between 1750 and 1850 – no less than are those that governed the formation of earlier cabinets. The burgeoning of country estates from the turn of the eighteenth century greatly increased the numbers of leisured individuals with the means and education to contribute to this movement; fashionable society promoted collecting as an appropriate pursuit for both sexes; preoccupations with agricultural improvement and with the documentation of the natural world brought a new purposefulness to collections, which were given enhanced coherence by the emergence at local level of specialist societies in which those with interests in natural history, antiquities and other subjects could share experiences and absorb the protocols of contemporary research; and the expanding horizons of exploration and of empire carried the scions of many families into the far corners of the world and promoted a reciprocal flood of exotic specimens in quantities quite unknown in earlier ages. Every one of these factors impinged on the Cobbe collection, which in turn adds materially to the range of physical evidence that can be brought to bear on future study.

The collection took shape in the form of a cabinet of curiosities (termed the 'museum') in the Cobbe family's residence at Newbridge House, an elegant Georgian mansion near Donabate (Co. Dublin). Today Newbridge remains the Cobbe family home, though it is now run in partnership with Fingal County Council and, since 1989, has been accessible to the public. As related elsewhere (pp. 7, 78–81), the museum room was initially reconstituted for opening to the public, but when the fragility of the original collection and the cabinets that housed it became all too apparent, a replica museum was installed at Newbridge and the original contents were removed to Alec Cobbe's home in England, Hatchlands Park,

a near-contemporary house at East Clandon (Surrey), a few miles to the east of Guildford, where a long-running programme of conservation and research could be instituted, and where the contents of the family archives could be interrogated for evidence relating to the formation of the museum as a whole and to its individual components.

The contents of the collection form a coherent group from within a well-defined date range, save for a few well-documented exceptions which arrived in the later 1800s. In the present generation, family inheritance and personal enterprise have brought further historical material into the collection, items treated here in a separate chapter dealing with the museum's continuing evolution (pp. 408–41). These developments are different in kind from those that brought about the collection's formation, but they resonate in contemporary fashion with many of the same stimuli that brought it into being.

The core of the present volume is divided into five parts. Following a broadly drawn, context-setting introduction, 'Establishing the Cobbe collection' provides essential background on the Cobbe family and its connections, on the formation and history of the collection as a whole, and on the associated display cabinets that are a rare and important survival. At the heart of the book, eighteen numbered chapters cover the original contents of the museum as they now survive; they are considered in three broad categories – specimens from the natural world, the antiquarian world and the exotic world – reflecting the preoccupations of private collectors of curiosities during the period in which the Cobbe family was active in the collecting field. Each contribution here (like the earlier essay on the museum furniture) ends with a catalogue in which the relevant items in the collection are listed (see also the 'Note to the reader', p. 13). The final part, 'The continuing collection', describes the efforts that have in recent years gone into retrieving lost items that once formed part of the museum, and extending its range with new acquisitions of appropriate provenance, all in the spirit of the family's eighteenth- and nineteenth-century interests.

We are fortunate that our efforts in compiling this volume have attracted the support of the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and of Yale University Press, not least because their involvement makes manifest the equivalence of this exercise to the more conventional research programmes with which they are normally concerned. Recognizing the special interest of this rare survival from the great era of country house collecting, both of these bodies have invested extraordinary resources in producing a work that reflects not only the academic interest of the collection but also its engaging character and its undiminished curiosity value.

The wide-ranging interests of the Cobbes, a leading Anglo-Irish family from the era of Dublin's emergence as a vibrant and elegant metropolis in the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, would have found resonances in well-to-do households up and down the British Isles, where a taste for natural history and antiquity (especially that of the classical period) coincided easily with an absorbing interest in exotic civilizations that still retained all the excitement of unfamiliarity. The subjects of the following essays, therefore, are not so much rarities as common elements – albeit now largely lost from view – in the fabric of polite society in the late Georgian and early Victorian era.

ARTHUR MACGREGOR

CONTRIBUTORS

T. RICHARD BLURTON is a Curator for the South and South-East Asia collections at the British Museum. His current research is in the eastern Himalayas, recording cultural change among the Monpa, a Tibeto-Burman-speaking group in western Arunachal Pradesh. His publications include *Hindu Art* (1992 and reprints), *The Enduring Image* (ed., New Delhi, 1997), *Visions from the Golden Land: Burma and the Art of Lacquer* (with Ralph Isaacs, 2000), *Burma: Art and Archaeology* (ed. with Alexandra Green, 2002) and *Bengali Myths* (2006). He has prepared fourteen exhibitions (mostly at the British Museum), the most recent of which was 'Between Tibet and Assam: Cultural Diversity in the Eastern Himalayas'. He is also a trustee of Akademi: South Asian Dance UK and of the Ancient India and Iran Trust in Cambridge.

MARK BROCH is an art historian specializing in Dutch seventeenth-century paintings and drawings. After studies in Amsterdam and apprenticeships at Christie's and the Rijksmuseum, he began working for the Cobbe collection in 1999. He was a contributor to *Clerics and Connoisseurs* (ed. Alistair Laing, 2001) and co-curated the exhibition 'Shakespeare Found' at Stratford-upon-Avon in 2009. He is also a dealer in Old Master drawings.

ALEC COBBE was born in Dublin and divides his time between Newbridge, where he grew up, and Hatchlands Park, Surrey. He studied medicine at the University of Oxford, before practising as an artist and training as a paintings restorer at the Tate Gallery and the Courtauld Institute; later he held posts at Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery and the Fitzwilliam Museum's Hamilton Kerr Institute, Cambridge. He has pursued a career in restoration and in the design of historical interiors. He has substantially enlarged the family collection of Old Masters and built a collection of historical keyboard instruments with composer associations. Together with Terry Friedman, he wrote *James Gibbs in Ireland* (2005) and in 2010 he published *Chopin's Swansong*, a study of the composer's pianos.

JILL COOK is Deputy Keeper and Head of Prehistory in the Department of Prehistory and Europe at the British Museum. As Senior Curator of the Palaeolithic collections she has published on collections of stone artefacts produced by pre-agricultural cultures around the world, as well as carrying out specialist research on bone, ivory and antler objects of the same period. Most recently, in 2013, she curated the exhibition 'Ice Age Art: Arrival of the Modern Mind' at the British Museum and wrote the accompanying book.

JEREMY COOTE is Curator and Joint Head of Collections at the University of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum, where he has curated many gallery displays and special exhibitions. He has published on Oxford's early ethnographic collections in the *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, the *Journal of the History of Collections*, *African Arts*, *Pacific Arts* and various exhibition catalogues. He is currently editing a collection of papers on the 'artificial curiosities' brought back from the voyages of Captain Cook and, with Alison Petch, writing a book on the collecting activities of General Pitt-Rivers.

ROSEMARY CRILL is a Senior Curator in the Asian Department at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, where she specializes in Indian textiles and paintings. Her publications include *Indian Ikat Textiles* (1998), *Marwar Painting: A History of the Jodhpur Style* (2000), *Chintz: Indian Textiles for the West* (2008), *The Indian Portrait, 1560-1860* (with Kapil Jariwala *et al.*, 2010) and contributions to many other catalogues and journals. She is currently preparing an exhibition on Indian textiles for 2015.

AILEEN DAWSON is a Curator in the Department of Prehistory and Europe at the British Museum, with responsibility for collections dating between 1660 and 1800. Among her publications are *Masterpieces of Wedgwood in the British Museum* (1984), *A Catalogue of French Porcelain in the British Museum* (1994), *Portrait Sculpture: A Catalogue of the British Museum Collection, c.1675-1975* (1999), *The Art of Worcester Porcelain, 1751-1788* (2007) and *English and Irish Delftware, 1570-1840* (2010), as well as essays and articles in books and journals.

JAMES EDE is Managing Director of Charles Ede Ltd., the leading London dealers in classical and pre-classical antiquities, and has published over 200 catalogues. He is a past chairman of the International Association of Dealers in Ancient Art and a current board member; he is also a past chairman of the Antiquities Dealers' Association in the UK, which he represents on the council of the British Art Market Federation. He is a valuer for the UK government's Portable Antiquities Scheme (which establishes the market value of antiquities found on UK soil), and is an official valuer for the Commonwealth of Australia. He has written a number of articles on the ethical issues surrounding collecting and dealing in antiquities and served on the government's Illicit Trade Advisory Panel (ITAP).

E. GEOFFREY HANCOCK is Curator of Entomology at the Hunterian Museum, University of Glasgow, after filling positions in various museums in the UK. He has published numerous journal articles on insects including the systematics of Neotropical Diptera. The history of science and museum collections gives an added dimension to his interests, and he is currently editing a book on William Hunter's collections, following the bicentenary of the opening of the museum in Glasgow in 1807.

LUCIAN HARRIS is an art historian and journalist based in London and New Delhi. His doctoral thesis explored British collecting of Indian art in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and he has written extensively about the history of collecting and of the art market, particularly in relation to Indian and Islamic art.

RALPH ISAACS taught English in Tanzania, where he collected insects and seashells. In Burma he directed the British Council and collected lacquerware, which he afterwards donated to the British Museum. He co-authored (with T. Richard Blurton) *Visions from the Golden Land: Burma and the Art of Lacquer* (2000), and his articles include 'Captain Marryat's Burmese collection and the *rath* or Burmese imperial state carriage', *Journal of the History of Collections* 17 (2005); 'Rockets and ashes: Pongyibyan as depicted in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European sources', *Journal of Burma Studies* 13 (2009); and 'Woven texts, woven images: The iconography of the *sazigyo*', in *Connecting Empires: Selected Papers from the 13th International Conference of the European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists* (2012).

C. E. JARVIS is a research botanist in the Department of Life Sciences at the Natural History Museum in London, and Scientific Coordinator of the museum's Centre for Arts and Humanities Research (CAHR). He has a particular interest in eighteenth-century botanical collections and has published extensively on the binomial names and the associated specimens published by Carl Linnaeus, culminating in *Order out of Chaos: Linnaean Plant Names and their Types* (2007). He has curatorial responsibility for the herbaria held by the Linnean Society of London, and also for the vast botanical collections assembled by Hans Sloane, now at the Natural History Museum. As one of the coordinators of the 'Reconstructing Sloane' programme, he is involved in research on varied parts of Sloane's collection and has published on Sloane's own plant collections from Madeira (*Taxon* 59, 2010) and James Cuninghame's Canary Island specimens (*Taxon* 60,

2011). He has also contributed to *From Books to Bezoars: Sir Hans Sloane and his Collections* (ed. Walker *et al.*, 2012).

JOHN LLEWELLYN-JONES was formerly head of the biology department and a regular science lecturer for GIFT, an organization offering extension work for the very able inside and outside school around the UK. His books include *Cambridge Vertebrate Cut-out Series* (1984), *Body Plans: Animals from the Inside* (1986) and, as a member of BELS Biology Group, *Biokeys* (1988); he is also a contributor to Dorling Kindersley's *Millennium Encyclopedia* (6 vols, 1997) and *Illustrated Family Encyclopedia* (16 vols, 2004). He has published a number of booklets, including *Marine Molluscs of Sandy and Rocky Shores* (1974); many papers, including 'Oyster shells from a Saxo-Norman well in London Docklands', *Journal of Archaeology* (1979); reports, including *Fauna and Flora of Pitsea Creek and Surrounding Areas* (for Basildon Council, 1982); and articles on all aspects of molluscs. Since 2001 he has been chairman of Mersea Museum, Essex. His current research is on mother-of-pearl, how it is produced and how it has been used through history.

ARTHUR MACGREGOR, formerly a Curator at the Ashmolean Museum, edits the *Journal of the History of Collections*. A regular contributor to other publications, his own books include (as editor and contributor) *Tradescant's Rarities* (1983), *The Origins of Museums* (1985), *The Late King's Goods* (1989), *Sir Hans Sloane* (1994), *Enlightening the British* (2003), *Sir John Evans* (2008); (as co-editor) *From Books to Bezoars: Sir Hans Sloane and his Collections* (2012); and (as sole author) *Curiosity and Enlightenment* (2007) and *Animal Encounters* (2012). He is also a general editor of the series *The Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo* (1996–).

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