

John Hewitt's 'mental blush': Race and racism in the Belfast Museum

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis of race and racism in our museums, exploring the topic historically and using the example to inform contemporary debates. The paper considers a display case on the biological interpretation of evolution in the Belfast Museum in 1930s. It considers what is revealed by letters objecting to interpreting biological evolution in the museum space, and compares that to art curator and poet John Hewitt's epiphany when looking at the case with his Chinese friend Shelley Wang. In this moment, after 7 years of working in the museum, he became aware of the racist interpretation of living peoples. Given the instances of contemporary racism, we must use the methods of activist curating to address racism today.

When Ulster poet John Hewitt (1907-1987) provides his account of working as art assistant in the municipal museum in 1930s Belfast, he describes his desk positioned 'in a narrow alley between tall glass cases' dating back to the old Belfast Museum of the 1831. In this back room, his curatorial predecessors are there with him. Hewitt cannot help 'imagining the faces and hands' of those individuals. He writes, as he glances at the glass cases, now and again:

I caught sight of the ghostly, distanced images of the bewhiskered Gordon Thomson, first settler at Sydney, of the spade bearded Canon Grainger, hoarder and bestower of querns and stone axes, of the bland Emerson Tennent ... who brought back from Ceylon the painted dancing masks upstairs, ... and, surely, the long bearded visage of the indomitable William Gray' (Hewitt [c1965] 2013:38)

With their ghosts apparent, Hewitt describes the back rooms of the museum as 'entering the past, as one does in a country graveyard' (Hewitt [c1965] 2013:40). For Hewitt this is not a menacing past, but one that is omnipresent and informing how he moves around the museum and applies his work. This resonates with the sentiments expressed by residents of historic properties who see themselves as 'living with the past'. In these homes, moving around these spaces, touching doors and banisters that predecessors touched, 'become benign, transparent anchors between past, present and future'; and with that becomes 'a sense of obligation, or responsibility' as 'custodians' (Lipman 2019:88).

Research in museums over the past two decades has shown a keen interest in exploring what we are custodians of when working in and with museums, and when visiting museums as researchers or with friends and family (Bennett 1995; Hooper Greenhill 2000; MacLeod et al. 2012). Combining past, present, and future, we must interrogate our museological inheritance. Against the legacy of the men just listed, we should think about how method, responses and ways of working gets passed down through museum generations with implications for the present-day museum.

The Belfast Museum in the 1930s

John Hewitt spent 27 years working at the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery (1930-1957, for explorations of his museum career see Coulter 2013; Quin 2019). When he applied for the post of art assistant the museum was only open 10 months; the new Belfast Municipal Museum was the much-anticipated amalgamation of the collections of the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society and Belfast Corporation. A fairly modest offer for British city museums of that era, annual reports record the preparations for opening including the development of six cases of ethnography relating to Africa; cases of geological exhibits; an English silk brocade dress, and three Chinese embroidered gowns that are 'mounted on special stands' and the large war canoe from the Solomon Islands, placed in the museum whilst the development work is ongoing (Belfast Corporation Annual Report 1926).

In his memoirs written in the decade after he left the museum, Hewitt reflects back on his period working in the Belfast Museum. He singles out one such exhibition case that he could never pass 'without a mental blush' (Hewitt [c1965] 2013:103), and it is that display which is the subject of this paper.

The display is the Ascent of Man, an exhibition considering biological evolution and placed in the natural history section of the museum (see <https://www.nmni.com/collections/picture-library.aspx> for the images). The museum curator was Arthur Deane, and in his enthusiast account of the new museum for the *Irish Naturalists Journal* this display was amongst 'the special exhibits dealing with the ancestry of the Elephant, Horse and Man' (Deane 1929: 215). By the time Hewitt started his employment in November 1930, the exhibition had already been the 'a fierce controversy' (Nesbitt 1979:36). A few months earlier, Belfast letter writers were outraged by a newly installed Darwin-inspired display. One of the contributors responded as follows:

It a most unjustifiable proceeding to teach this unproved hypothesis to young people, or to exhibit illustrations of it in a public museum, to which young as well as old are admitted. More especially is this the case, when the theory is, rightly or wrongly, regarded by the vast majority of the community as an affront to their intelligence and an outrage on their Christian feelings. *Belfast Telegraph*

This letter was well-crafted, for in just a few lines the author represented much of the objections vented by fellow-letter writers. The science is questioned: evolution is presented as an 'unproved hypothesis'. The setting of a museum has consequence, referring to the importance of the public space. There is a suggestion of having to give particular thought to the consequence of sharing such content with the young and old – proposing there is some vulnerability here, or these are audiences that need protected. Then the author admits that the Christian community is finding it difficult to adjust to the new thinking on human origins, describing that as an 'affront to their intelligence and an outrage on Christian feelings'. In contrast, an 'Evolution Student' refers to the 'fine evolution case in our new museum' and says that as a 'teacher interested in natural history I am glad to see that our museum is arranging their cases in an up-to-date education manner' and as a consequence 'hopes to see our schools taking full advantage of the museum' (*Belfast Newsletter* 17 June 1930).

Hewitt's moment of realisation

Hewitt took up his post in November 1930 and worked alongside the Ascent of Man without, it seems giving it much thought. It was to be seven years, before the display became offensive to him. His 'mental blush' was not how the narrative began, rather it was a concern with how it finished.

In his memoirs, Hewitt documents the experience of bringing his friend the Chinese socialist, poet and activist Wang Li Hsi (who introduced himself in Ireland as Shelley Wang) to the Belfast museum in 1937, where they found themselves in front of the display the Ascent of Man. The display was in three parts: the geological time periods; the skulls of antiquity; and the 'skulls of the living races of mankind in progressive order'. Standing in front of the exhibition with Wang, Hewitt sees the display in an entirely new way:

As I stood beside my friend looking, I suddenly realized, for the first time, that the tip of the treetop sat the White Man's skull, with the Mongolian and the Negro a good way down one on each side, with the Australian a bad fourth. Wang said not a word, but I knew that he had noticed it and my veins ran shame instead of blood. (Hewitt [c1965] 2013:103)

Here Hewitt is sharing a moment of realisation. In Wang's company, and having shared 10 days together discussing art and philosophy with Wang, Hewitt could see this display for what it really was. Hewitt continues with his memory of the 1937 experience in the museum:

Here was I, beside a good even a great man, a man wiser and richer in experience than I should ever be, a man who in the past days had been giving me largesse of his people's wealth of philosophy, folklore, art, history, literature, of a range and a depth far outreaching that of my own people; and yet as we stood together, inside the glass case mocking us the skull of his race was set below the skull of mine without comment or explanation.

That instant for all my shame I believe that I really became a man, not merely an Irishman or a European. And from that time I face all value-judgements on race with a cheerful scepticism. (Hewitt [c1965] 2013:103)

Hewitt's realisation was an outcome of the moment in front of the exhibition case with his friend Shelley Wang. Hewitt is described by biographers as a 'political maverick' because his socialist and political views were not typical of a Protestant in mid-twentieth century Belfast, and certainly not one in the employ of the Unionist-led Council (Crooke 2015). Yet, despite his liberal views, it was only by being in the company of Wang that Hewitt's mind was opened to the racism embedded in the museum that was so important to him (for exploration of the impact of Wang on Hewitt see Smith 2014).

This exhibition is clearly part of 'the uncomfortable legacies of racist displays in museums' (Tythacott 2011:131). In Tythacott's exploration of the displays in Liverpool Museum between in the early twentieth century, she describes how museum collections were presented as scientific 'facts' and 'objects from supposedly primitive cultures were taken as proof of the backwardness of these societies' (2011: 133). Prof Wayne Modest, Former Director of the Museums of History and Ethnography in Kingston Jamaica, and now Director of Content at the National Museum of World Cultures Rotterdam, has explored how black history embedded with 'cultural unworthiness', which passed down the centuries. This was replicated in museums and international exhibitions that placed black history in a lower order (Modest 2012); this is clearly evident in the display in the Belfast Museum. This format caused no controversy in 1930s Belfast, contrasting significantly to responses to biological evolution recorded in the letter columns of the local newspapers.

The museum space, display, objects and text combine to be a voice of authority. The museum label puts that into words, and the object is material evidence, that captures the imagination and reinforces the points made. Unlike the permanent object in the museum collection, the displays and text panels can be removed, destroyed and more easily erased. Until we see the stark reminder in text, for generations we hid the interpretation in the back store 'the country graveyard' that Hewitt had observed. Hewitt's encounter, written in his memoirs, is telling his readers about the racist interpretations in the Belfast Museum of the 1930s. Without Hewitt's description that fact is easily missed. If one was to rely on the newspaper record,

one would only learn of the objections to Darwin theories of evolution. Attention is not drawn to the ranking of living people – that is not up for discussion or rejection amongst the largely (but not exclusively) white Christian population of 1930s Belfast.

Hewitt tells us the exhibition ‘remained until the man responsible for it retired’; here Hewitt is referring to the botanist Arthur Deane who retired after the Annual Conference of the British Association of the Advancement of Science of 1952, its fourth visit to the city. Hewitt was still in post for the visit, reflecting on what followed he writes ‘although it was not my business, I rejoiced when the Keeper of Natural History demolished that place of skills and substituted his own conception of the Natural History of Ireland’. Here we see Hewitt remarking on the separation of disciplines in the museum: in mid-twentieth century curatorial departments and roles were clearly defined in museums (Sandino 2012). As a consequence, even if the display was abhorrent to Hewitt, as an art curator there was little capacity for him to act.

Conclusion

We are taught we need the past fostered through cultural practices and the work of museums and heritage. As this paper has demonstrated that is not always a desirable past; nevertheless, it is one that needs to be exposed. The presentation in museums is always a selective process– we choose the moments in our past we wish to remember, the people we want to mimic and the stories worth passing on. This is the past that bolsters, fosters pride and has purpose. Empire created our museums and our museums have reproduced empire. This happened at the height of empire, when travellers returned objects to Irish museums, and when individuals created museums in those places. The nature of that legacy is now made obvious by increasingly critical histories of museums (Barringer and Flynn 1998; Bennett 2013; Conklin 2013; Crooke 2000; Hooper Greenhill 2000). The methods of empire, even if long rejected, are silently reproduced in our collections. Even if the power imbalances and inequality of empire now repulse us, the legacy is built into the very existence of the objects, ordering of our knowledge systems; by what exists and what is absent, both materially and in other forms. Silences are evident by the absence of objects, and the absence of people to whom those objects may have belonged.

This paper has reflected a key moment for an art assistant in the Belfast Museum, a municipal museum with a collections history dating back to the nineteenth century but opening just as Northern Ireland was founded. John Hewitt wrote of the ghosts of the past and feeling the presence of his predecessors. Those meanings, put in place by our forefathers are passed on from generation to generation with increasing critique. Critical museum histories have been an essential project, and have given us the confidence to address institutional legacies. It is, arguably, a task that is relatively easy from the privileged position of hindsight. While their collecting legacies are evident in museum collections and histories, the more difficult task for museums is to identify and address contemporary racism. Increasingly, a call for action from museum practitioners, advocates and academics places awareness of institutional origins at the heart of contemporary activism (Naidoo 2005; Wajid and Minott 2019). The new *Inclusive Global Histories* exhibition at the Ulster Museum (opened March 2022) demonstrates that our collections can be used in a way that is both anti-racist and calls out instances of racism. This is evident in the inclusion of charred timber from the burning of the Belfast Multi-Cultural Association building in January 2021 and the label text pointing out the high level of racially-motivated hate crimes in the region. As we reflect on historical examples of empire and nation building, embedded in our collections and knowledge systems, we must use that to explore race and racism on these islands.

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Images of the Ascent of Man display, as well as other photographs of the Belfast Museum in the 1930s, are available as part of the Welch photographic collection found at: <https://www.nmni.com/collections/picture-library.aspx>