

Book Review

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The Secret Life of the Natural History Museum – ‘Dry Store Room No. 1’

Authored by Richard Fortey. Published by Harper Perennial, 2008. RRP £20.00

There is an aphorism that is well suited to this most extraordinary tome lent to me recently, ‘a good book informs you, a superior book informs and entertains, and a great book changes you.’

In every sense Fortey’s ‘Dry Store Room No.1’ is all three, as it informs, entertains and changes you!

Fortey was senior palaeontologist at London’s Natural History Museum until his retirement in 2006. His life times work was dedicated to trilobites, those ocean dwelling species with hard carapaces and found in ancient sediments laid down a mere 300mya.

This delightful book has been written with a passion for the natural world. Fortey goes behind the scenes of what must surely be one of the worlds greatest museums, unlocking doors revealing not only the collections but the secret and not so secret lives of those entrusted with their care down through the centuries. I suppose you would call it a kind of social history but extremely entertaining all the same with Fortey’s amusing prose.

He recalls a day in 2005 when the Keeper of Entomology, Quentin Wheeler and his associate Kelly Miller named a series of slime mould consuming beetles after President George W. Bush and members of his cabinet : *Agathidium bushi*, *A. cheynei*, *A. rumsfeldi*. Soon after publication The President of the United States of America telephoned Wheeler to say how he and his colleagues were honoured to be so immortalised in the names of beetles!

Fortey extols the virtues of Barry Bolton whom spent his entire working life on ants culminating in 2008 with a massive tome entitled ‘Bolton’s Catalogue of Ants of the World’ in which he describes some 14,550 species and subspecies of ants.

Chapter 5 entitled ‘Theatre of Plants’ was nothing but intoxicating from a botanist’s viewpoint. Fortey goes onto compare a skilled plant presser with a mortician ‘laying out a plant for pressing is like laying out a corpse before a wake.’ We are then informed that the process of pressing plant specimens was first described by the Flemish savant Adrianus Spigelius in his book *Isagoges in rem Herbarium* (1606).

Some of the oldest herbarium sheets in the Natural History Museum originate from the collections of Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753). The Sloane Herbarium

includes specimens of cacao (*Theobroma cacao*) collected by Sloane in Jamaica where he had been personal physician to the Duke of Albemarle. His own recipe of mixing milk with chocolate ‘Sir Hans Sloane’s Milk Chocolate’ was sold by Cadburys until well into the 19th Century.

With his gift of prose Fortey explains that the Botany Department has an entire floor devoted to cryptogams where curators are sequestered away in bays like grubs inside a peach!

Several pages are devoted to the Lichen Collections. He describes gravestones as the ideal indicator of estimating the average growth rates of these ‘Crypts’. The use of lichens in dating is known as lichenometrics. I was amazed to read that the British Lichen Checklist lists stands at 2,272 spp. despite the notorious air pollution over these islands. Perhaps the majority occur along the western seaboard where the Atlantic gales and rain purify the atmosphere?

He recalls that during the London Blitz in World War 2 at 4.30am on the 9th September 1940 two incendiaries and an oil bomb hit the roof of the Botany Department. Some seeds of *Albizia julibrissin* collected in China by by Sir George Staunton in 1793 got an unexpected soaking and proceeded to germinate 147 years after being collected!

He concludes in his final chapter ‘House of Muses’ the challenges facing all museums in keeping systematic research advancing in a fast changing funding culture. This sounds very familiar doesn’t it? Fortey deplores the time spent by scientists in trying to fundraise at a time when research has never been more important as ecosystems around the world collapse.

With mounting pressures upon the natural environment the great museums of the world may well turn out to harbour the very conscience of the natural world, not only merely to provide its catalogue of biodiversity. They may be the only places where future generations will be able to find answers to the question: What have we done?

I thoroughly recommend this 333 paged tome teeming with life and eloquent prose as a great winter read. With a strong hint of recalcitrance I will be returning my copy to its owner but not before reading it a second time!

Corrigendum

Correction to: Gardner, R.O. 2009: Identifying *Schoenus brevifolius*, *S. tendo* and *Lepidosperma filiforme*. *Auckland Botanical Society Journal* 64: 150-151.

The end of the third paragraph should read: "...the pith is septate in *S. tendo* too but is continuous in *S. brevifolius* [not *L. filiforme*] (Fig. 2)."

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