

Conference Abstract

Labels, Ledgers, Scribbles and Scraps: Uncertain Historical Data

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Abstract

Varying quality of legacy data is found on specimen labels, in accounts ledgers, and in registers dating from the origins of the Otago Museum in 1868. A recently re-discovered ledger book that lists the Museum's first acquisitions brings its own frustrations and more questions are raised than can be answered by the knowledge it contains.

Differing curatorial practices and record keeping over time have produced their own uncertainties of interpretation. In this sense the historical record is dynamic.

The legibility and reliability of scribbled notes, meaningful only to the writer perhaps, compound the known problems of fragmentary historical evidence. Whilst handwritten data is faithfully transcribed its meaning is not always clearly understood. Institutional knowledge is easily lost making once obvious comments on a record puzzling.

Despite the vagaries of historical record keeping a picture is emerging of the early history of the Otago Museum and the often overlooked role that it held in the small scientific community of late-nineteenth century New Zealand.

We should be thankful that some curators had a mania for list making. Inventory of New Zealand's weird fauna became the prime objective of Captain FW Hutton FRS (1836-1905) and he wrote many catalogues, culminating in his *Index Faunae Novae Zealandiae* published in 1904. His inveterate list-making also included books as well as the objects that he acquired during his tenure. His successor, TJ Parker FRS (1850-1897) introduced a

formal registration scheme across the various departments in 1893, after a trip 'home' to London where he had seen the latest methods.

Maintaining these records was a chore for subsequent curators. So that by the 1920s the ethnographer HD Skinner CBE (1886-1978) played a game of catch-up as he oversaw a data deluge associated with ever-increasing numbers of artefacts. A deluge that signified a change in emphasis from zoology towards anthropology and archaeology.

This paper contributes to the growing literature on the history of record keeping and archival practices. In turn this sub-field provides a way to reconsider the impact of changes in cultures of information gathering as we grapple with our own twenty-first century technological constraints. The present-day electronic information explosion has brought the problems of collecting, organizing, and disseminating data to the forefront of scholarly dialogues.

Keywords

History, Otago Museum, Nineteenth-Century, New Zealand, Zoology, Ethnology, Record-Keeping, Inventor

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