



NatSCA

Natural Sciences Collections Association

<http://www.natsca.org>

Journal of Natural Science Collections

Title: The Harrison Collection: Addressing colonialism in the collections of a Victorian big game hunter

Author(s): Middleton, J.

Source: Middleton, J. (2021). The Harrison Collection: Addressing colonialism in the collections of a Victorian big game hunter. *Journal of Natural Science Collections*, Volume 9, 29 - 34.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/2683>

NatSCA supports open access publication as part of its mission is to promote and support natural science collections. NatSCA uses the Creative Commons Attribution License (CCAL) <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/> for all works we publish. Under CCAL authors retain ownership of the copyright for their article, but authors allow anyone to download, reuse, reprint, modify, distribute, and/or copy articles in NatSCA publications, so long as the original authors and source are cited.

The Harrison Collection: Addressing colonialism in the collections of a Victorian big game hunter

Jim Middleton

Scarborough Museums Trust, Woodend CIC,
The Crescent, Scarborough. YO11 2PW

Email: jim.middleton@smtrust.uk.com

Received: 31st March 2021
Accepted: 30th Sept 2021

Citation: Middleton, J. 2021. The Harrison Collection: Addressing colonialism in the collections of a Victorian big game hunter. *Journal of Natural Science Collections*. 9. pp. 29-34.

Abstract

Scarborough Museums Trust holds the archive of a big game hunter James Jonathan Harrison (1857-1923) comprising of not only hunting trophies, but also a large number of photographs and nine hunting diaries. Shortly after his death, his collection was donated to Scarborough Corporation, where for many years it was displayed in the upper rooms of the library before eventually making its way to the town's Natural History Museum when it opened in 1952. The photographs and diaries give a unique insight into his privileged lifestyle and insatiable appetite for shooting. In 2022 the museum is planning an exhibition based around Harrison's photography which will address a number of difficult issues regarding not only the slaughter of hundreds of animals but also the exploitation of the indigenous peoples of Africa and especially the Congo. In 1904/5 Harrison brought six Mbuti, or Bambuti, people from the former 'Congo Free State', which at the time was ruled by King Leopold II of the Belgians, and toured them around UK Music Halls for nearly three years before returning them home. Historically, the popular media has told this story in a cheery, anecdotal way with only cursory, or apologetic regard for the clearly exploitative nature of the venture. Through the planned exhibition, this aspect of the narrative will be retold in a way which helps people think more about how selective interpretation of collections can perpetuate racism and that exploring these topics does not 'rewrite history'.

Keywords: Racism; Human zoos; Mbuti; Bambuti; Congo; decolonial approaches; hunting; natural history; museum interpretation; museum ethics; social justice

Introduction

Whilst the colonial origins of archaeological and ethnographic material has been subject to scrutiny for many years, it's only recently that the colonial and exploitative origins of some natural science collections have been explored (Das and Lowe, 2018). In that light Scarborough Museums Trust decided to re-examine one of its less explored collections, The Harrison Collection. A collection of trophy heads, various taxidermy, hunting diaries, phonographic recordings and several hundred photographs from his travels around the world amassed by James Jonathan Harrison (1857-1923), a Victorian/Edwardian big game hunter. He

was often criticised by his peers for his undisciplined collecting style (Powell-Cotton, 1902). Powell-Cotton parted ways with him during one trip through Ethiopia after Harrison had shot five small elephants in one day:

The net result of our hunt was, that H. killed five elephants, and W. and B. one each, while I had also seen two drop. As none of the natives here eat the flesh, it seemed a pity to have killed so many for the sake of such small ivory, and I was sorry I had taken part in the hunt.

(Powell-Cotton, 1902)



© by the author, 2021, except where otherwise attributed. Published by the Natural Sciences Collections Association. This work is licenced under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence. To view a copy of this licence, visit: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

They parted company shortly after this.

One of the key things we want to explore through the reinterpretation of this collection is how Britain's colonial past is so embedded in museum collections, that even relatively small local museums can hold collections with a dark legacy. The Museums Association actively encourages this approach and have issued the following statement:

"We unreservedly support initiatives to decolonise museums and their collections. Decolonisation is not simply the relocation of a statue or an object; it is a long-term process that seeks to recognise the integral role of empire in museums – from their creation to the present day. Decolonisation requires a reappraisal of our institutions and their history and an effort to address colonial structures and approaches to all areas of museum work."

(The Museums Association, 2020)

Several other organisations have already laid the groundwork for such projects. Recent works such as "Legacies of colonial violence in natural history collections" (Ashby & Machin, 2021) and the work Manchester Museum have undertaken in exploring the colonial origins of aspects of their geological collections (Gelsthorpe, 2021) have formed a solid framework for smaller collections to work towards. Popular exhibitions that have taken a decolonial approach such as the Grant Museums 'Displays of Power; A Natural History of Empire' show also there is a public interest in this work. The aim of our collections review is not only to reconsider the narratives but to prepare an exhibition with the Harrison collection at the heart of it. This article examines Harrison's relationships with the peoples he encountered, particularly

examining his relationship with the Mbuti people of the Congo.

Background and collection

Harrison was born on the 8th July 1857 in Selby, Yorkshire into a land-owning family who soon settled in Brandesburton, East Yorkshire (Figure 1). As was expected of his class, he attended Harrow, and then Oxford. He became an officer in the local militia on his return to Yorkshire and was a justice of the peace and was concerned with the dozen farms he owned. His private income allowed him to finance a number of hunting trips around the world.

Harrison's diaries provide some information regarding his travels. Though not complete, further information can be gathered from his photographs and a notebook listing the sizes of his 'best' trophy species. His first international hunting expedition seems to have been a trip to South America in 1885, followed in 1889 by a three month visit to South Africa, and a hunting expedition to North America the following year. In late 1891 he embarked on a hunting trip to India, by way of Egypt, returning home via Japan and North America. From 1896 all his expeditions were to Africa. The many trophies he collected were displayed in his home, Brandesburton Hall which he would regularly open up to visitors as well as giving illustrated talks on his expeditions.

Following Harrison's death in 1923 his large collection of game heads, taxidermy, photos, weapons and nine diaries came into the possession of Scarborough Council. It was donated by his widow on the provision that the trophies would all be on permanent display. The collection had

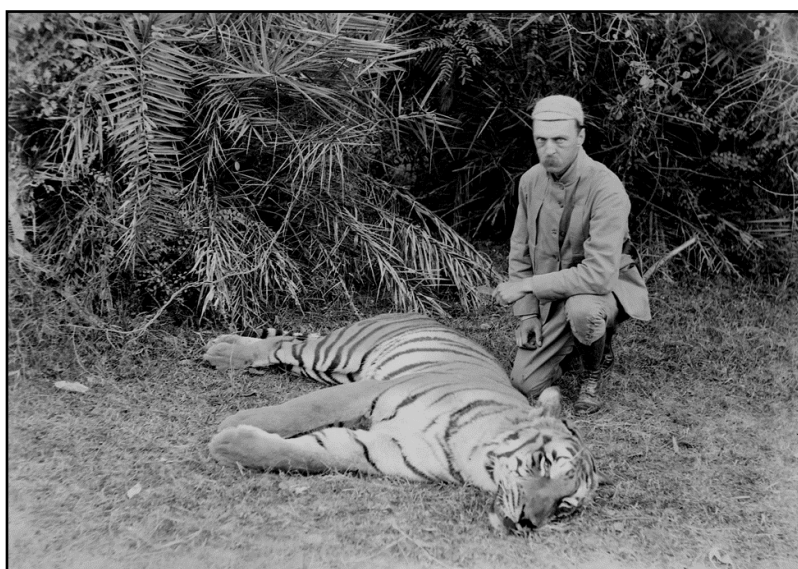


Figure 1. James Jonathan Harrison (1857-1923) Photograph of Harrison with a tiger taken in central India, January 1892. Scarborough Museums Trust.

initially been offered to Hull Museums, but they lacked the space to display them and it seemed a similar offer had been made to the Natural History Museum, London as can be seen in this extract from the Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer - Friday 13 July 1923:

“Mrs. Harrison's Gift to Scarborough.

A Scarborough correspondent tells that there is great satisfaction among the townspeople with regard the gift of Mrs. Harrison. The collection of birds, animal heads, curios, and weapons, which she has just presented to the Corporation was made her husband, the late Lieut.-Col. Harrison, during his big game expeditions in Central Africa, and is unique of its kind. It is an open secret that the authorities of the South Kensington Museum envy Scarborough Mrs. Harrison's gift. The collection might have gone to them, but there were conditions attaching to which they were unable to comply. Mrs. Harrison, who lives Brandesburton Hall, Beverley, is American lady.”

(S, E.G., 1923)

The collection was displayed initially in rooms above the library until the 1940s. During this time it suffered much neglect. Many of the mounts were subject to damage and were destroyed or disposed of. What is currently left is a fraction of the former collection and with little to no data attached, practically everything having been removed from its display cases. With a little detective work, a number of orphaned specimens have been identified and can now confidently be attributed them to this collection (Table 1). These specimens eventually formed some of the base for

Scarborough's Woodend Natural History Museum which opened in 1952 until its closure in 2006.

Hunting for Science

Harrison was primarily a big game hunter, and appears to have used scientific collecting and exploration as a justification and to seek funds. In 1899 he proposed a trip through the Howash Valley to Lake Rudolf in what is now Ethiopia. This was described at the time as being primarily a survey of the area although he conceded that it was “at the same time combining a sporting trip in which attention was to be directed to the beasts and the birds of the countries visited” (Harrison, 1901). A secret side to this trip was the aim of planting the Union Jack at the north of Lake Rudolf to re-establish the disputed border territory with British East Africa (Imperato, 1998).

In a review (Anon 1900) of Kirby's published account of their trip to Mozambique (Kirby 1899), the Ibis records the following “*Although Mr. Kirby's volume, as will be evident from its title, relates chiefly to his sporting adventures when in pursuit of the larger mammals, frequent allusions to birds will be found in it. His companion, Mr. James J. Harrison, seems to have collected bird-skins, but we are not aware that these have ever been examined by a competent ornithologist.*” Perhaps humiliated by this comment Harrison sent the skins from his most recent expedition to William Robert Ogilvie-Grant who was, at the time, temporarily in charge of the ornithological section of the Natural History Museum, London. Amongst the collection was recognised a new species of finch-lark, which

Table 1. List of species that can confidently be attributed to the Harrison Collection.

Species	Common name	'Locality'	Date
<i>Tragelaphus scriptus</i> (Pallas 1766)	Bush buck	Abyssinia, Ethiopia	1899
<i>Gazella granti</i> (Brooke, 1872)	Grant's gazelle (Trophy head)	Lake Rudolph, Kenya	1900
<i>Duiker</i> sp.	(Trophy head)		
<i>Gazella thomsonii</i> (Günther, 1884)	Thomson's gazelle (Trophy head)	East Africa,	1909
<i>Gazella thomsonii</i>	Thomson's gazelle (Trophy head)	Lake Rudolph, Kenya	1900
<i>Colobus guereza</i> Rüppell, 1835	Guereza or white mantled colobus		
<i>Litocranius walleri</i> (Brooke, 1879)	Gerenuk	Lake Rudolph, Kenya	1900
<i>Hylarnus harrisoni</i> (Ogilvie-Grant, 1900)	Harrison's pygmy antelope (Holotype)		
<i>Ourebia ourebi</i> Zimmerman, 1783	Oribi (Trophy head)	Abyssinia, Ethiopia	1899



Figure 2. Frederick Vaughan Kirkby, Mozambique, 1896. Photograph by J.J. Harrison. Scarborough Museums Trust.

Ogilvie-Grant named *Pyrrhulauda harrisoni* Ogilvie-Grant, 1900, this is now considered a sub-species of the chestnut-headed sparrow-lark *Eremopterix signatus harrisoni* (Ogilvie-Grant, 1900). This was published in *The Ibis* with an introduction by Harrison (Ogilvie-Grant, 1900).

Rarity seemed important and led him in 1904 to the Congo in search of Okapi, *Okapia johnstoni* Sclater, 1901. Okapi were a newly discovered species by Europeans, only described in Western knowledge systems 3 years earlier from skins and a skull sent to London by Sir Harry Johnston, British special commissioner in Uganda in whose honour it was named.

During his 1904 trip he encountered the Mbuti people of the Ituri forest and following his return to the UK was encouraged by friends who saw his photographs to consider bringing some individuals

back to England, and for another attempt at securing an Okapi, which had eluded him on the previous visit. The Mbuti are a hunter gatherer group of forest people and are one of the oldest indigenous people of the Congo region of Africa (Figure 3). Their average height is notably smaller than Europeans, which led to them being referred to as 'pygmies'.

Harrison arrived back in the UK in early June 1905 with six Mbuti; four men and two women ranging in age from 18 to 31, who were exhibited at the London Hippodrome for nearly 3 months before touring the UK and Germany for the following two years. Although ostensibly an educational display, for part of their visit they were accompanied by William Hoffman, who had been Stanley's servant during his 1887-1889 journeys through Africa, and gave an introduction to their way of life. Hoffman was a brilliant linguist and



Figure 3. The Congolese people in 'Native dress' taken in the grounds of Brandesburton Hall by J.J. Harrison. Scarborough Museums Trust.



Figure 4. Classified advertisement in *The Era*, 7 April 1906. British Newspaper Archive.

had been employed by the Force Publique in the Congo in the 1890s. However, this was clearly a novelty act, as can be seen in a cutting from *The Era* (Anon 1906), on the 7th April 1906 looking for engagements, where they are advertised between two performing dog troupes (Figure 4).

The public exhibition of Africans in the UK was well established by the time Harrison had started his tour. From the touring of Sarah Baartman beginning in 1810, Africans could regularly be seen on show both in London and in touring fairs and exhibitions. Often displayed in 'native dress' the paying public were keen to see the inhabitants of this newly explored country, and the more 'exotic' the better. From 'Farini's Friendly Zulus' in 1879 to the 'Assuan Village' at the 1903 Earls Court Exhibition, the entire length of the continent was on show.

It was into this atmosphere that the six Congolese began a near 3 year tour of the United Kingdom exhibited as little more than novelties in their 'native' dress and singing songs. At the same time as this was happening in the UK, a now more famous Congolian was being displayed in America. On the 8th September 1906 visitors to the Bronx Zoo would have seen Ota Benga in a cage in the monkey house. The story of Ota Benga is a sad one, clouded by racial anthropology, eugenics and social darwinism and eventually led to him taking his own life.

During their time in the UK, the six were subjected to an in-depth study at the Royal Anthropological Institute by Sir Harry Johnston (of Okapi fame, and one of the key players in the Scramble for Africa) and the study was intended for publication, although it is yet to be found. The party set sail from Hull aboard the cargo ship the Hindoo in November 1907, leaving on the 17th arriving in Mombasa on Christmas Eve and finally reaching their home again on the 21st January 1908.

Conclusions

From the work so far done, it is apparent that even small regional museums have collections seeped in a colonial past and historical interpretations are no longer suitable. In some cases, these are unintentionally racist through outdated language and a lack of recognition of the input of the indigenous communities involved. There has been some academic research into this story (Green 1999), but as this was carried out over 20 years ago, and the emphasis was in the context of black entertainers in the European music hall, it only looks at a small part of the story. Scarborough Museums Trust are currently working with a local historian Gifty Burrows, who ran the Africans in Yorkshire Project and are looking at ways to create a narrative that not only questions the imperialistic colonial attitudes of the time, but also looks at the after affects that are still being felt today. The planned exhibition is still in its infancy and will be guided by the findings of our collaborative work with Gifty Burrows who is reaching out to British Congolese to get their invaluable input into this discussion. As well as the named people, who were effectively enslaved and toured for the entertainment of privileged European audiences, there are hundreds of anonymous faces in the photographic collection, without whom none of Harrison's collecting expeditions would have been possible. It's now time for their contributions to be recognised.

References

- Anon, 1900. Recently published Ornithological Works. *The Ibis*. Ser.7:Vol 6. pp.198-217
- Anon, 1906. Classified Ad. *The Era*. 6 April. p. 32. [Viewed 3 March 2021]. Available from: <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>
- Ashby, J and Machin, R 2021. Legacies of colonial violence in natural history collections. *Journal of Natural Science Collections*, 8. Pp.44 – 54

Middleton, J. 2021. *JoNSC*. 9. pp.29-34.

- Das, S. and Lowe, M. 2018. Nature Read in Black and White: decolonial approaches to interpreting natural history collections. *Journal of Natural Science Collections*, 6. pp.4-14.
- Gelsthorpe, D. 2021. Decolonising Manchester Museum's mineral collections - a call to action. *Journal of Natural Science Collections*. 9. pp. 12-28.
- Gibbons, T. 2013 'The Pygmies who visited Edwardian England' BBC News, Yorkshire, 26 December. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-25350721> (Accessed: 18 May 2021).
- Green, J. P. 1999. A revelation in strange humanity. Six Congo pygmies in Britain, 1906-1907. In Lindfors, B. (ed.), *Africans on stage. Studies in ethnological show business*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999, pp.156-187
- Harrison, J.J. 1901. A Journey from Zeila to Lake Rudolf. *Geographical Journal*. 18 (3). pp.258-275
- Harrison, J. J., 1905. *Life Among the Pygmies of the Ituri Forest, Congo Free State*. London: Hutchinson
- Imperato, P.J. 1998. *Quest For The Jade Sea: Colonial Competition Around An East African Lake*. Westview Press. Oxford. Chapter 13. pp.221-229
- Kirby, F.V., 1899. *Sport in east central Africa : being an account of hunting trips in Portuguese and other districts of east central Africa*. London: R. Ward
- Ogilvie-Grant, W.R., 1901. On the Birds collected by Mr. J. Harrison between Zeila and Lakes Rudolf and Baringo, Eastern Africa. *The Ibis*. 8 (1). pp.278-299
- Powell-Cotton, P.H.G., 1902. *A sporting trip through Abyssinia : a narrative of a nine months' journey from the plains of the Hawash to the snows of Simien, with a description of the game, from elephant to ibex, and notes on the manners and customs of the natives*. London: R. Ward
- The Museums Association (2020) *Our Statement on Decolonisation*. Available at: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/decolonising-museums/our-statement-on-decolonisation/> (Accessed: 18 May 2021).
- S, E.,G., 1923. Mrs. Harrison's Gift to Scarborough. *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*. 13 July. p.6. [Viewed 18 May 2021]. Available from: <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>