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Author(s): Helen Fothergill

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BOOK REVIEW

Walter Potter and his museum of curious taxidermy
P.A. Morris 2008

You can buy *Walter Potter and his Museum of Curious Taxidermy* directly from MPM Publishing, West Mains, London Road, Ascot SL5 7DG
Soft-back (ISBN 978-0-9545596-8-7) @ £18.50
Hard-back (ISBN 978-0-9545596-9-4) @ £46.00

Review by Helen Fothergill
Keeper of Natural History (Plymouth City Museum & Art Gallery)

I would be amazed if museum bods working in the natural sciences have not seen or at the very least heard of the astounding Walter Potter. However if this is indeed the case, this publication about his life, works, heights and demise of his museum should be read.

For those of us lucky enough to visit one of the museum's many incarnations, it is a wonderful reminder of what we have lost as an "entity" and perhaps a warning to the museum world as a whole that we are in danger of not seeing the wood for the trees. Many of us operate within strict collecting policies that either limit the scope of what we collect or direct us to only amass "scientific" material. Walter Potter and later custodians were wonderfully free of these restrictions and collected what appealed. We, on the other hand, miss these wonderful eclectic groups that don't sit comfortably within our policies and the responsibility of preserving them usually falls to enterprising individuals (c.f. the Robert Opie collection). The foreword by Errol Fuller stridently sums up my feeling extremely well and the final chapter should give pause for thought to those responsible for acquisition budgets. Morris erroneously supposes no public museums were interested in buying from the final auction, but should be reminded that for natural history curators a purchase price of thousands is difficult to find.
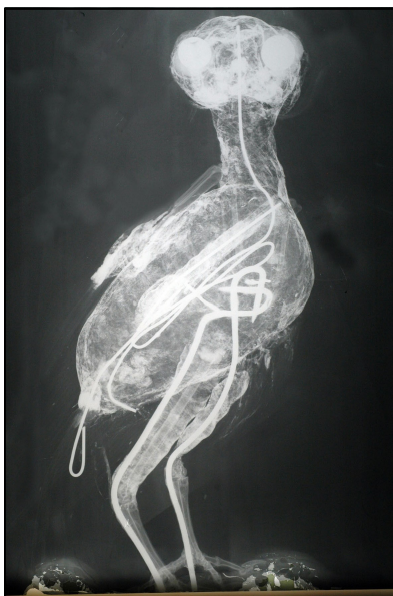
The book documents the techniques used in stuffing and mounting, modelling and arranging the tableaux. This includes x-rays of the stuffed animals with distinctive wiring and hand carved chalk blocks used to cast tiny tin instruments for guinea pigs to play; sourcing carcasses; discussions about the shortcomings of Potter as a taxidermist; illuminating the social commentaries of the tableaux; illustrat-

ions of the displays, publicity and publications and a little repetition. I particularly enjoyed the decapitated kitten's head as a page number marker!

There is some loose speculation and inference in the book, perhaps to make the reader consider what might have been going through MR. Potter's mind, but also due to the lack of much original documentation.

Never the less, it is an excellent commemoration of a remarkable man and museum: charting the transition from fascinating freak show and anthropomorphic animal tableaux to apologies and statements that none of the animals had been killed specially for the displays. It is not only a piece of museum and taxidermy history, but a graphic and beautifully illustrated representation of changing attitudes and perhaps as interesting in (our) modern overreaction to Victorian values as the snap-shot of those Victorian mores themselves. If the only place the history of Potter's collection survives intact is on the bookshelf, then perhaps we should at the very least ensure that this happens.