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Title: A new documentation initiative within the National Museum of Ireland - Natural History Division

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Source: Smith, A. S., O'Connor, A., O'Neill, R. & Vaucheret, S. (2010). A new documentation initiative within the National Museum of Ireland - Natural History Division. *NatSCA News*, *Issue 20*, 28 - 33.

URL: http://www.natsca.org/article/1370

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A new documentation initiative within the National Museum of Ireland – Natural History Division

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Introduction

The National Museum of Ireland (NMI) consists of four divisions: Irish Antiquities, Art & Industry, Irish Folklife and Natural History. The state-run National Museum of Ireland was founded as the Science and Art Museum in 1877 to manage the growing collections of the Royal Dublin Society (RDS), the Royal Irish Academy and Trinity College Dublin (Monaghan, 2000). The oldest natural history specimens in the Royal Dublin Society were acquired in 1792 (Monaghan, 2007; O'Riordan, 1983). Following the creation of the Irish Free State, the Science and Art Museum was renamed as the National Museum of Ireland in 1922.

The natural history collection of the NMI is split between two buildings. The publicly accessible museum on Merrion Square houses exhibits and the entire insect collection, as well as additional zoological and geological specimens in storage. Another building located in Beggar's Bush just over a kilometre away, contains the rest of the zoological and geological collections. These buildings are estimated to house roughly two million natural history specimens (Monaghan, 2000). The NMI's botanical collection was transferred to the National Botanic Gardens in 1970 (Monaghan, 2000).

In 2007, a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General (Comptroller and Auditor General, 2007 p. 23) emphasised the need for a complete collections record to be created:

> "The NMI needs to establish a plan to address its incomplete collection records. This should contain a statement of the current documentation situation, an estimate of object numbers or records to be processed, a statement of retrospective documentation to be performed and the timescale and resources needed to update the collection records."

As a result, the NMI put in place a five-year Documentation Plan, of which a museum-wide inventory project was a central part. This project officially started in September 2008 and is scheduled to run for five years. The aim is to have an inventory of the whole collection, whereby each object corresponds to a record. The project is being managed centrally by the NMI Registration Department and implemented by separate teams within each museum division. Each division contains a team of documentation assistants under the supervision of a documentation officer. This project will ensure that documentation throughout the museum meets SPECTRUM standards, the UK. standard for collections management (McKenna and Patsatzi, 2009).

This article presents an overview of the documentation procedures currently being practiced within the Natural History Division (henceforth referred to as the Natural History Museum).

Historical context - documentation within the Natural History Museum, Dublin.

Since 1877, specimens have been allocated a two-part registration number upon their accession into the collection. This registration number consists of the year of accession, and a sequence number indicating the order of accession. For example, the second specimen to be registered in the year 1909 was allocated the number 1909.2. These two-part numbers were noted in the register and in most cases included on a label with the specimen. Custom sometimes dictated that the year be placed second, so a specimen numbered 1909.2 may also appear as 2.1909. Information related to the taxonomy, provenance, donors, and collectors may also have been noted in the register and on a label attached to the specimen. These registers now form part of the NMI archives and paper registers are still used for new accessions. As systematic registration in this style was not in place before 1877, many specimens within the collections are unregistered. A large proportion of museum specimens accessioned after 1877 are also unregistered, mostly as a result of understaffing. In many other cases, specimens have been registered, but the connection between the specimen and register entry has subsequently been lost, making the determination of their original registration number problematic. This may be because specimen labels were never written, or have become detached, damaged

or lost. Over the years various paper-based or computer-based catalogues have also been compiled for some parts of the collection by curators and constitute a further source of information about the collection.

Inventory project – procedure

The following account outlines the inventory project protocol. The procedure can be divided into four discrete stages (Fig. 1).

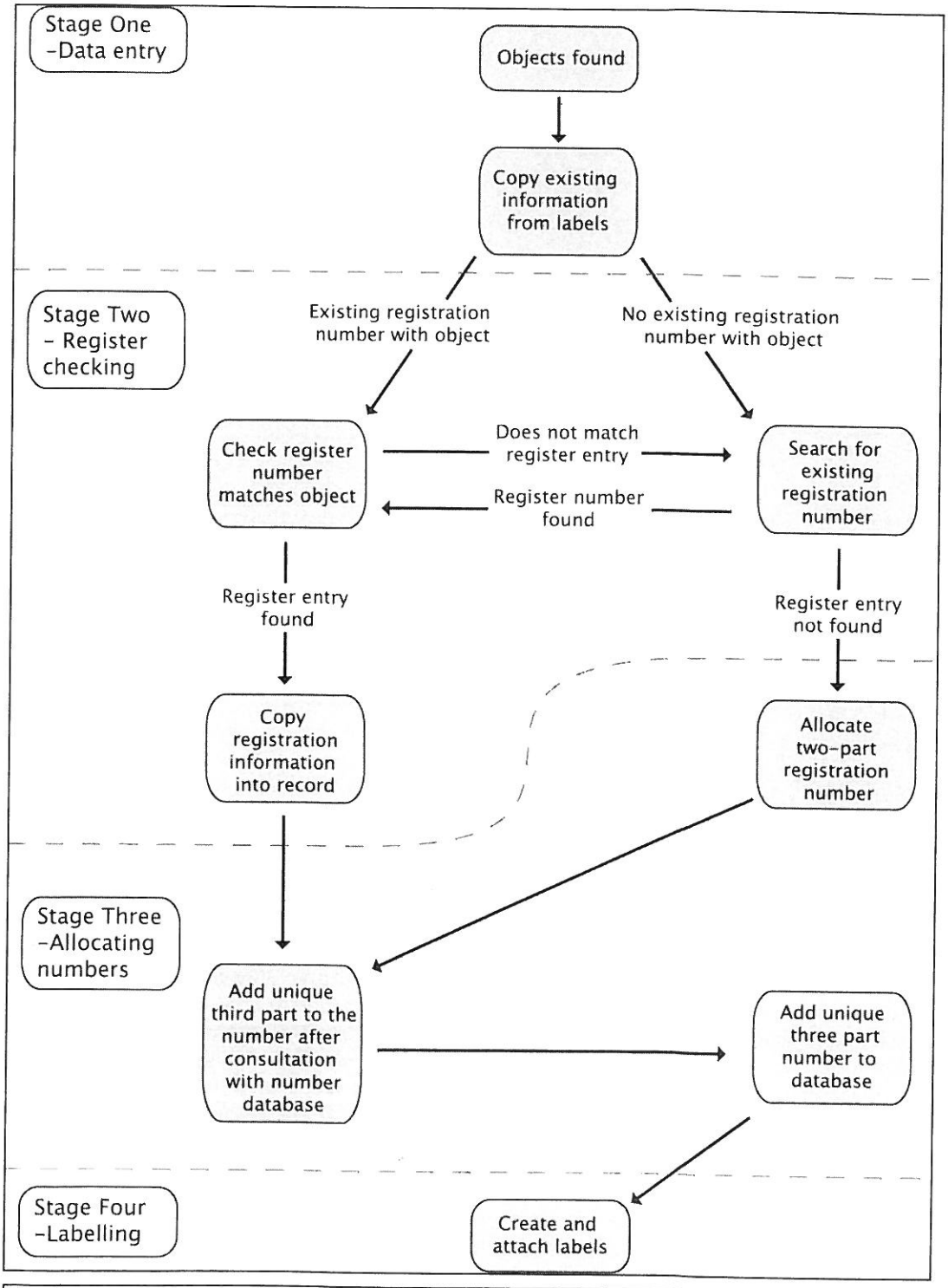

Fig. 1. Flow chart illustrating the documentation procedure within the National Museum of Ireland - Natural History Division.

Stage 1. Location-checking and data input

The documentation team moves systematically through the collections by location (Figs 1 and 2). Data is copied into an Excel spreadsheet from the labels of a manageable number of specimens. A manageable unit may be a storage cabinet or a display case, and typically consists of between about fifty to two hundred specimens. The data is structured in a format suited for eventual importation into an Adlib database (see "Progress and future direction" below). To meet a basic inventory-level standard, the following information fields are mandatory: registration number, storage location, storage unit, form (e.g. is the specimen mounted, in a round jar, bagged, etc.), object name (a general identification or common name, e.g. bird, mollusc, ammonite, etc.) and preparation (e.g. taxidermy, dried, formalin, etc.). When a registration number is present with the specimen it is recorded. The dated initials of the recorder are also included. If no registration number can be found with the specimen then a new registration number is allocated at stage 3. Additional information about each object is recorded only if it is written on an existing label. The existing catalogues are also consulted and any information therein is incorporated into the spreadsheet.

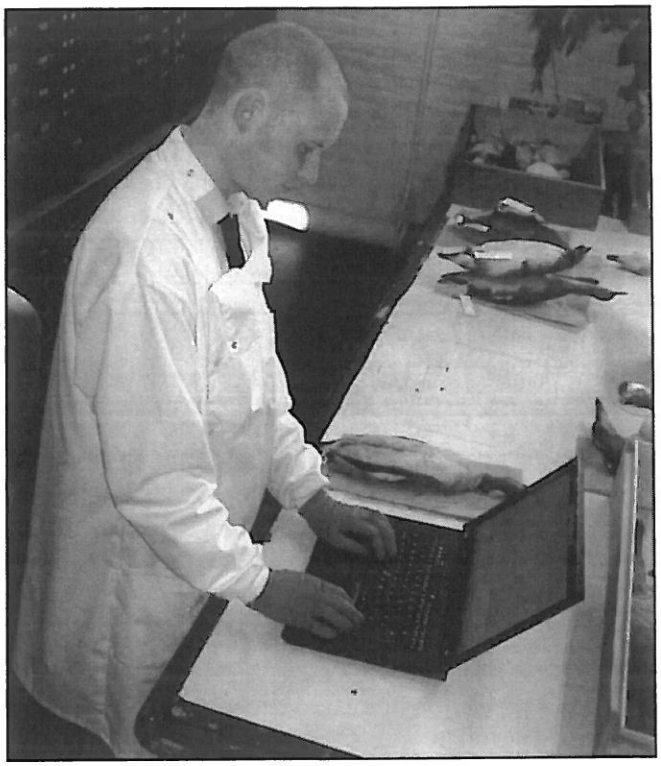

Fig. 2. A documentation assistant inputting data on bird skins.

Stage 2. Register checking

The gathered information is compared to and supplemented by information in the museum accession registers (Figs 1 and 3). Should the details in the register correlate with those on the specimen label, it is inferred that the number is correct and additional information from the register is added to the database. On rare occasions, the information from the specimen label does not agree with the register. In these circumstances, the mistake is far more likely to have occurred as a transcription error on the original label or during the data input stage. After double-checking what is written on the label and finding that it is still contradictory, a systematic search of potentially correct register entries is conducted. The original registration number for unnumbered specimens may be determined at this stage by a similar systematic approach using any information found associated with the specimen. Donor, date or locality information may prove useful for this purpose.

Stage 3. Allocating new numbers

Sometimes, a large number of specimens were accessioned in bulk, all being allocated the same two-part number. In these instances, it is frequently noted in the register that, for example, "a large number of marine invertebrates" were accessioned at this time. The practice of allocating the same registration number to a large quantity of individual specimens often resulted in several specimens having the same two-part registration number. In order that each specimen within the collection be accounted for, and easily found again,

it is important that they have unique numbers. To do so, the two part registration number is treated as a "stem number", with the date listed first. A third number is then added to the stem number in order to create a unique three-part number. For example, individual specimens with the stem number 1906.113, described in the register as "a collection of bird skins (52 specimens)", become 1906.113.1, 1906.113.2, etc. A prefix is added to these unique registration numbers to show the international institution code (NMI) and the collection the object belongs to (NH for Natural History). The full registration number mentioned above therefore becomes NMINH:1906.113.1.

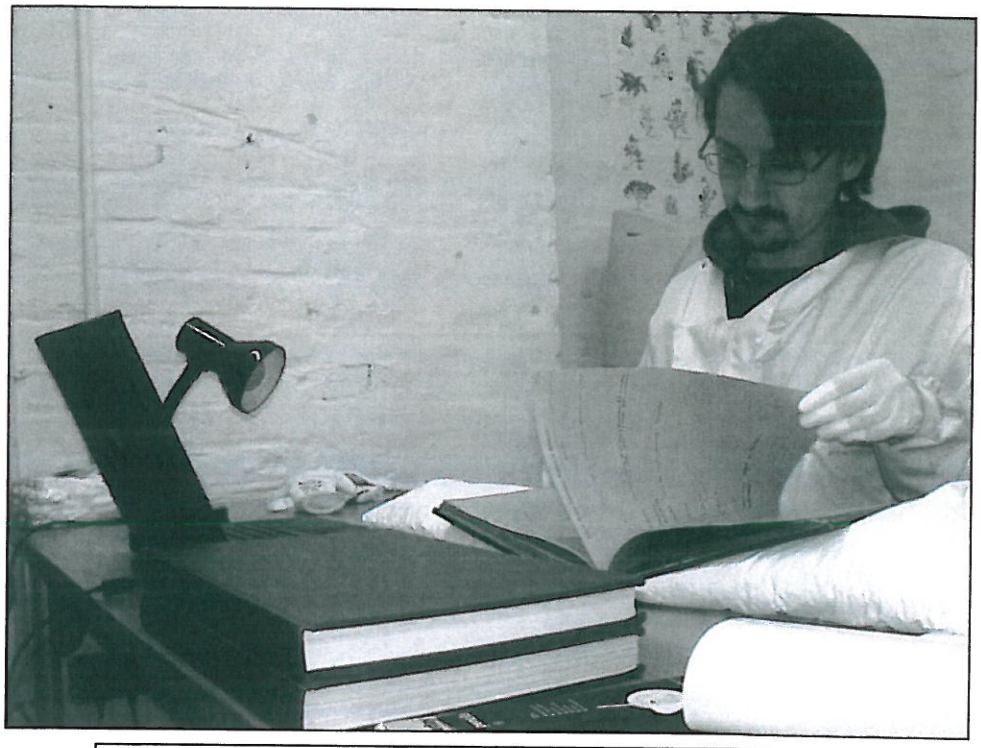

Fig. 3. A documentation assistant checking that data and numbers match the registers.

If an original registration number cannot be found, then the specimen is recorded into the register under a new two-part number. Obsolete and incorrect numbers are recorded in the notes for the specimen in the database. All numbers are retained in case they were previously used in a publication, or correspond to a different numbering system (for instance, a collector's list or a registration system from another institution).

Stage 4. Create and attach new labels

The new three-part numbers are hand-written on specimen labels and attached to the appropriate specimens during this final stage (Figs 1 and 4). The specific type of label and the method by which they are attached to the specimen differs depending on the type of specimen. In cases where a specimen had been found to have an incorrect number, the incorrect number is neatly crossed out but remains legible. This avoids future confusion without completely removing the erroneous information. All old labels are retained with the specimen.

Exceptions and special cases

Temporary numbers

Parts of the Natural History Museum consist of extensive collections of small and delicate specimens housed in jars and drawers, e.g. dry insects on pins, microfossils, microscopic specimens in tubes of alcohol, and microscope slides. These need to be handled by curatorial staff to avoid damage or destruction of the specimens. It would be unfeasible to allocate a unique number to every one of these specimens given the timeframe of the inventory project. As a result, temporary numbering series accommodate these containers. As well as having a different prefix (NMINC) they follow a different format to registration numbers so that they cannot be confused. These temporary numbers represent the cabinet and drawer number if appropriate and contain code to indicate the content of the container (Fig. 5.)

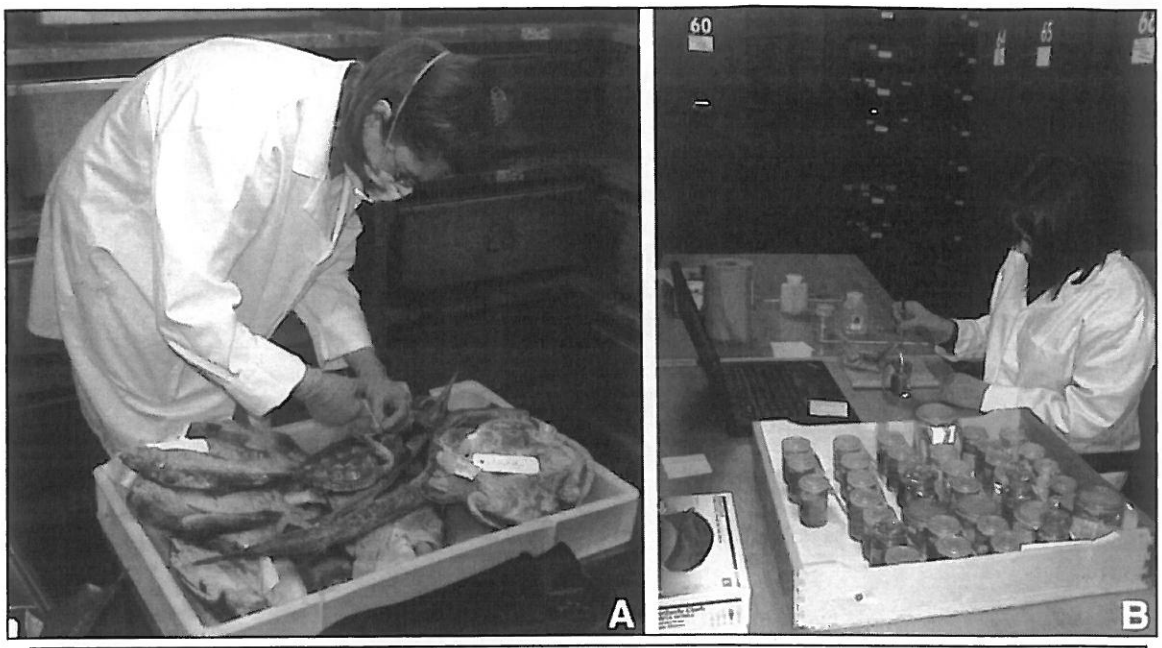

Fig. 4. Documentation staff labelling specimens with new numbers. A. large specimens in spirit tanks; B. invertebrate specimens in jars of spirit.

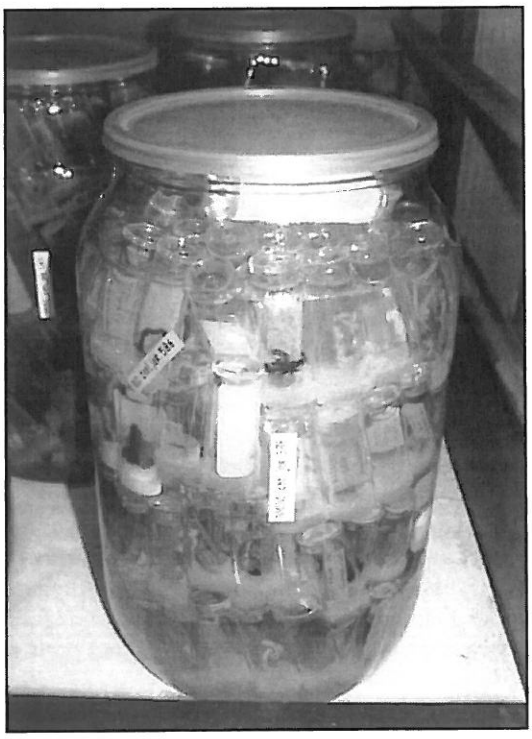

Fig. 5. Example of a container with a temporary number; a large jar containing several tubes (note that both dry and wet labels are present).

Separated specimens

Many vertebrate specimens were separated into bones and skins during their incorporation into the museum collection. In these cases the separate parts are frequently located in different areas of the museum and separate data entries are produced for each. Because they are part of the same animal, both parts are given the same three-part number. However, an additional suffix is added to their numbers in the database to distinguish between them and to denote their nature (e.g. bones, skin, skull, etc.). Once the Adlib database is operational (see "Progress and future direction" below), these data entries will be reunited in a single record to describe one specimen in multiple parts and locations.

Location and movement control
A location and movement control procedure has been introduced as part of the inventory project. Specimens may be moved only with explicit authorisation from a curator, or in the absence of a curator, from the keeper. The person moving the specimen is responsible for recording data related to the move, and for reporting these details to the documentation officer. The documentation officer, or a designated documentation assistant, will update the database to reflect the location change.

Progress and future direction
There is currently no specialised electronic database program within the Natural History Division. In the 1990s, MODES was used to catalogue the geology collections, but all other attempts to database the collection have been restricted to basic word processing and spreadsheet programs (Excel). This key issue is currently being resolved: Adlib-museum, a dedicated collection management computer program, is used elsewhere in the NMI and will be extended to the Natural History Division in time. In the meantime the documentation team undertaking the inventory project is temporarily compiling data in Excel in a suitable format to be imported later into the NMI Adlib database.

In September 2009, the first of a series of planned Inventory project audits within the NMI was carried out. Selected documentation staff audited work carried out in a division other than their own. The audit was carried out on a random selection of samples. Accuracy was assessed using a bi-directional approach: 1. confirming whether the correct specimens could be found based on the information in their database record, and 2. confirming whether specimens selected from the collection could be found within the database. 99% of the 600 natural history specimens tested in the first audit met inventory standards.

Documentation of all the zoological and entomological specimens in Merrion Street started in September 2008 and was completed in January 2010. As of January 1st 2010, a total of 38,007 specimens have been documented. The inventory resulting from this project will assist researchers and curators in their efforts to study and maintain the collection, and the database will eventually be published online to allow the information to be accessed by a much wider audience.

Acknowledgements
We wish to thank Paul Doyle, Registrar, and Raghnall Ó Floinn, Head of Collections, for valuable comments and suggestions.

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