13. Oxford University Museum of Natural History

I always think of this museum as the Natural History Museum. Like the Ashmolean I encountered it as a quite small boy. I was thrilled with the skeletons of animals old and new. Whales hanging from the arched glass ceiling and columns of polished stone from various parts of Britain. I thought little of the gothic architecture, it just seemed to be what museums should look like when I was a boy. Now I relish its high Victorian aura. It was formally opened in 1860. The museum became famous in my mind because of what came to be known as the Great Debate. This took place on 30 June 1860 when the Museum hosted a debate, under the auspices of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, between Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford (a.k.a. Soapy Sam), and Thomas Huxley, a biologist from London and grandfather of Julian and Aldous.



After Darwin published the *Origin of Species* Huxley became an ardent champion of its ideas, so much so that he became known as Darwin's Bulldog. It was in this role that he debated. As the debate unfolded, Wilberforce taunted Huxley about his possible ape ancestry, asking whether it was on his father's or mother's side Huxley claimed his descent from a monkey? Huxley replied "If then the question is put to me whether I would rather have a miserable ape for a grandfather or a man highly endowed by nature and possessed of great means of influence and yet employs these faculties and that influence for the purpose of introducing ridicule into a grave scientific discussion, I unhesitatingly affirm my preference for the ape."

The widely publicized "Huxley-Wilberforce debate" symbolized the nineteenth century conflict between religion and science. I think Barbellion had it better when he said "How I hate the man who talks

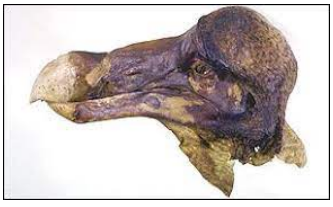
about the 'brute creation,' with an ugly emphasis on *brute*.... As for me, I am proud of my close kinship with other animals. I take a jealous pride in my Simian ancestry. I like to think that I was once a magnificent hairy fellow living in the trees, and that my frame has come down through geological time via sea jelly and worms and Amphioxus, Fish, Dinosaurs, and Apes. Who would exchange these for the pallid couple in the Garden of Eden?" If you have not heard of W. N. P. Barbellion please look him up. He was a remarkable man. Here is another quote from him which I cherish:

> *"To me the honour is sufficient of belonging to the universe – such a great universe, and so grand a scheme of things. Not even Death can rob me of that honour. For nothing can alter the fact that I have lived; I have been I, if for ever so short a time. And when I am dead, the matter which composes my body is indestructible—and eternal, so that come what may to my 'Soul,' my dust will always be going on, each separate atom of me playing its separate part – I shall still have some sort of a finger in the pie. When I am dead, you can boil me, burn me, drown me, scatter me – but you cannot destroy me: my little atoms would merely deride such heavy vengeance. Death can do no more than kill you."*

There are 28 Caen stone statues in the museum representing eminent scientists and philosophers through the ages. They were conceived to inspire visitors. The one of Darwin was carved by Henry Hope-Pinker.



The museum contains the only tissue remains of a dodo. The species, which lived solely on the island of Mauritius, became extinct in the late 17th century. The mummified skin from the head of the Oxford dodo is the only surviving soft tissue available for DNA research.



For me, especially as a young boy, but still so today, the jewel associated with the Natural History Museum is an other museum stuck on the back of the main one - The Pitt-Rivers Museum. It is a Wunderkammern on steroids. As a young man I fantasized of being a Victorian amateur scientist; of sufficient means to not have to work for someone and thus able to follow my heart and mind in the pursuit of science in a world just beginning to open up to rational scientific examination. The Pitt-Rivers slotted into this fantasy. The collection is arranged typologically, according to how the objects were used, rather than according to their age or origin. SO there would be cabinets showing the evolution of rifles across many different cultures and many different times. The space was tight and one wandered around a maze created by the glass cabinets. One contained shrunken heads another a variety of African knives.



The museum was founded in 1884, when Lt General Pitt Rivers, an influential figure in the development of archaeology and evolutionary anthropology, donated his collection of more than 27,000 objects to the University of Oxford. Since then the museum has grown to over 550,000 objects. Today is wrestles with its colonial past, for most of the collection was formed from objects brought back by colonial adventurers and bureaucrats. The shrunken heads have been removed and there are ongoing discussions about repatriation of some of its more notable pieces; and a good thing too.