

Cabinets of curiosities, mystery specimens and a giant bird

A history of the Tiegs Museum, 1887–1959

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When I first visited the Zoology Building at the University of Melbourne I went to the first floor. I walked along the corridor until I reached a large door on the right and met my guide. She led me through the door. Immediately I saw a large skeleton of a bird, a moa to be exact, an extinct bird from New Zealand. I continued through the long room, my eyes barely registering the fascinating surroundings. The walls were completely covered in large cabinets of curiosities: a vast array of zoological specimens, including a stuffed echidna, marsupial skulls, pickled rats, insects, stuffed birds, bones of a horse's leg and preserved earthworms. In the middle of the room was the skeleton of an ape and to the left, a vicious looking opossum. Suddenly, I found myself at the end of the room. I looked up and saw a glass panel hanging in front of the window. I discovered where I was: the Tiegs Museum of Zoology.

During 2009 I was completing a Master of Public History at Monash University. An important component of my course was to complete a research project with a historical organisation or association. This was how I came to be involved in the Student Projects Program with the University of Melbourne's cultural collections. For almost four months



I conducted extensive research about the history of the Tiegs Museum and its impressive collection of zoological specimens, under the supervision of the museum's Honorary Director, Dr David Young. The project covered the years 1887 to 1959, finishing just after the unexpected death of the museum's namesake, Professor Oscar Werner Tiegs. For my research I consulted both primary and secondary sources. The latter included some of the comprehensive histories of the University of Melbourne,¹ which led to further research areas

and sources such as Darwin's evolutionary theory, biographies of Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer and a history of the Melbourne Museum. There is not a vast amount of research or material available about the Tiegs Museum itself and because of this some avenues of investigation regarding certain specimens in the collection are still to be explored. The main primary document consulted for the project, which was the most interesting and a unique historical record, was the *Register of specimens in the museum*

of the *Biological School, University of Melbourne*. It was begun in 1893 as a record book for all the specimens that were purchased, donated and collected for the museum. The University of Melbourne Archives was also a great source for research and provided me with some very valuable information relating to the museum, in particular the official correspondence regarding the naming of the museum after Professor Tiegs.

The Tiegs Museum and its rich array of zoological specimens is an important cultural collection of the University of Melbourne. Not only are many of the specimens impressive works of taxidermy but the Tiegs collection, along with the cultural collections of other science departments, reveals much about the history of scientific teaching and research at the University. My aim was to put together an interesting and informative history of the Tiegs Museum which would serve as a useful accompaniment to the collection itself and the register. I wanted to give readers—whether animal enthusiasts, zoology professors, undergraduate science students or science historians—a window into the intriguing world of the museum, its stuffed, preserved and mounted animals and its fascinating history.

1887: Beginnings

The year 1887 was an exciting year in the Science Department at the University of Melbourne. New chairs for different scientific disciplines were being created in the wake of increased enrolments at the University and continued growth in the popularity of science in Victorian colonial society. One of the newly appointed professors at the University was Professor Walter Baldwin Spencer (1860–1929), who, in the years that followed, would have a major influence on the growth and breadth of science study and research at the University.²

Spencer was appointed to the new chair of biology, which would no longer be included under the umbrella of natural science, chaired by Professor Frederick McCoy.³ Spencer, along with Professor David Orme Masson, the new chair of chemistry, was committed to improving the study and research of science at the University. This commitment brought about various changes on campus that dramatically altered not only science education at the University but also its architectural landscape. In 1888, the three-year bachelor degree in science was introduced.⁴ Science education at the University was becoming more structured and

more professional. A new Biology Building (illustrated on page 35) was constructed according to Spencer's own specifications and it included state-of-the-art laboratories, an area for live animals to be kept for dissection, an aquarium and a greenhouse. The Biology Building was close to the National Museum of Victoria, which was owned by the government rather than the University, and was located in what is now the Student Union Building and run by Professor McCoy in his capacity as Honorary Director. The National Museum housed a rich and diverse array of zoological specimens from all over the world, but as these were considered too valuable to be handled by students, Spencer began his own museum of biological and zoological specimens to create a collection that could be used for teaching purposes.⁵

This was the beginning of the departmental zoology museum. The collection of specimens began even before the door to the museum opened. The groundbreaking evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin and his supporter T.S. Huxley heavily influenced Spencer and many other staff members in the School of Biology. Consequently Darwin's work on biology and zoology impacted

hugely on the study of these two disciplines at the University. Spencer and other staff such as the demonstrator and assistant lecturer Arthur Dendy spent much time collecting as many specimens as possible for the museum. Weekend field trips to the Dandenong Ranges, Port Phillip Bay and longer trips interstate and overseas were common.⁶

The collecting of zoological and other biological specimens was also popular in Melbourne society in general. There were numerous scientific societies such as the Royal Society of Victoria and the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria, whose members included professors from the University. In the past these institutions and individuals had donated to the National Museum of Victoria or kept specimens as part of personal collections. In the departmental museum's infant years, these societies and individuals donated specimens, particularly of Australian fauna, and continued to do so for many years.

Unfortunately, though it is evident that there was enthusiastic collecting of specimens from 1887, besides sketchy labels attached to some of the specimens, no other written records were made until six years later.



European toad (*Bufo vulgaris*), Coimbra, Portugal. Reg. no. 1, donated by Mr Boulanger, British Museum, 1893, Tiegs Museum, Department of Zoology, University of Melbourne. Photography by April Gloury.



1893: The beginning of the historical record for the Tiegs Museum

The *Bufo vulgaris*, a European or common toad, was the first specimen recorded in the register for the departmental museum. This acquisition was entered into the register in 1893, six years after the establishment of the museum. Between 1890 and the beginning of World War I, the most prolific amount of collecting, donating and purchasing of specimens occurred. In 1893, it appears the museum received numerous international donations. It is possible that these specimens were in the collection before 1893 and that no one had bothered to write down the specimen details until that date. Or it could be argued, and it is far more likely, that the toad specimen and others arrived at the University in large shipments in 1893 and the need for a register to record acquisitions became apparent.

The significant donors to the museum around 1893 were large scientific institutions such as the British Museum, the Royal College of Science in South Kensington, Manchester Museum, Oxford University Museum and the University of Edinburgh. These donations suggest a large international scientific community

sharing knowledge and excitement about the growth in all areas of science, especially significant breakthroughs in scientific research during this time. The Royal College of Science donated specimens to the departmental museum quite regularly for many years. These included specimens from Europe, Africa, Asia and Pacific islands.

It is not surprising that there were numerous large donations of zoological specimens from Britain at this time. Many, if not all, of the professors at the University were born in Britain and were recent immigrants to Australia, Professor Spencer included. The ties between Britain and Australia, particularly Melbourne, were at this time very strong.⁷

In the late 19th century, the specimens that arrived at the museum with all the necessary information were far outnumbered

by the specimens with little or no information or history at all. This has resulted in many sparsely filled and incomplete pages in the register. In later years when particular specimens were removed from the collection because of damage or poor preservation, rarely is a reason or date listed. These factors made my research quite challenging at times. I would spend hours crouched over the register trying to decipher the information contained in pages or rueing the absence of information about many of the specimens. Perhaps the gaps in the records reveal something about the history of the museum itself? Were staff members too busy actually collecting specimens to give thorough and definitive histories of them? We, the curious zoologists and eager historians, may never know the answer.

During Spencer's time as chair of biology (1887–1919), in addition to the large number of international specimens donated and purchased, the collection and donation of native specimens from all over Australia was prolific. The Biology School was called a 'society of log rollers' as students and staff spent much time on field trips turning over logs to see what kinds of creatures were underneath.⁸ Specimens would be brought back to the University

Skeleton of moa (*Dinornis robustus*), New Zealand (photographed in its new display cabinet, 2008). Reg. no. 2179, donated by Dr George Armstrong, 1935, Tieg's Museum, Department of Zoology, University of Melbourne.
Photography by Mandy Parfitt.



campus for dissection, research or display at the museum and would become the subject of discussions at meetings of the University Science Club, established in July 1888. Spencer and other science professors often attended these meetings to contribute to discussions. The exciting nature of discovery and growth in science gave rise to a genuine scientific community in Melbourne conducting new and interesting research about anything and everything related to science. It was a very active time for scientific societies and institutions including the Faculty of Science at the University of Melbourne and all its departments and student science clubs, the Royal Society of Victoria, the Royal Zoological Gardens, and the Royal Botanic Gardens. The increase and fervour of scientific thought and research during the late 19th and early 20th centuries went hand-in-hand with the dramatic increase in zoological specimens at the museum.

In 1899 Professor Frederick McCoy died and the National Museum of Victoria was moved to Swanston Street to join the National Gallery and the Public Library. Professor Spencer was nominated Honorary Director of the National Museum and it is from this time

on that a relationship formed between the National Museum and the departmental museum. They exchanged specimens and assisted each other with identification and classification. In 1968, this relationship graduated to a new level. A large portion of zoological specimens from the departmental museum was donated to the National Museum. This included numerous native fauna specimens which Spencer had collected on the Horn Expedition to central Australia in 1894.⁹

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries donations continued to pour in from institutions and individuals from all over the world. The donation relationship continued with many universities and colleges in Britain and continental Europe in the lead up to World War I. The National Museum in Prague donated a large collection of zoological specimens in 1902, all of which arrived properly identified and named, an occurrence duly noted in the register, for its rarity.¹⁰

The School of Biology during this time was one of the first departments at the University to have a large number of female students. It also employed the first full-time female lecturer at the University as well as the first two female acting

professors.¹¹ Dr Georgina Sweet (1875–1946), a graduate of the University, began working as a lecturer and demonstrator at the School of Biology in 1909. She conducted research into Australian mammals and collected many specimens for the departmental museum, some of which are still on display today.¹²

A new chair, a new chapter

The Great War and its aftermath had huge consequences for Victorian society, the University included. While during the war student numbers dwindled, peacetime afterwards saw a surge in enrolments and a dire need for more staff and proper scientific equipment. In 1919 Spencer retired from the chair of biology, which he had held for 32 years. This marked the end of a significant chapter in the Biology School. In 1919 zoology and botany were distinguished from biology and granted individual departments. The Biology Building became the Zoology Building. Professor Wilfred Eade Agar from Britain was appointed as the chair of zoology.

In the years after World War I, collecting, donating and purchasing specimens for the museum were slow to pick up momentum. It was not until about 1925 that specimens again



Attributed to Vera Leichney (née Hamilton, Oscar Tiegs' sister-in-law), but possibly the work of Lisa De Montfort, Portrait of Oscar Werner Tiegs, c.1954, pastel, miniature format. Private collection. Source: Wikipedia, December 2010.

started arriving at the museum with any regularity. These were no longer coming in such significant quantities from Britain and continental Europe, which were both attempting to recover and rebuild after the war. The year 1925 saw the first large donation from North America.¹³ This donation from the University of Michigan, along with others from organisations such as the American Museum of Natural History in New York and McGill University in Montreal, marked the beginning of many years of exchange with North American universities and scientific institutions. These donations expanded the variety of zoological specimens that could be displayed at the museum and also serve to highlight how the zoology departmental museum at the University of Melbourne was influenced by global shifts in power, influence and focus after the war.

The 1920s were years of enthusiastic collection and donation of many marine specimens for the museum. In 1925 Phillip Crosbie Morrison, a graduate of the University of Melbourne with an interest in marine biology, won a scholarship to spend six months on HMAS *Geranium* researching the marine life of Queensland's Great Barrier Reef. He brought back to Melbourne a vast number

of specimens, which he donated to the zoology departmental museum.¹⁴ Dr Gwyneth Vaughan Buchanan, a Zoology Department employee, also spent time in far north Queensland during the 1920s, collecting marine specimens. In Cairns she collected a sea cucumber, but it was never displayed at the museum. After the sea cucumber was identified and recorded in the register, it was prepared for cooking!¹⁵

There is mystery surrounding several specimens in the collection. Two of the most remarkable were donated to or collected by the museum in the 1920s or early 1930s. These two specimens are full skeletons of a lion (*Felis leo*) and a seal (most likely *Otariidae*). There is no record of their origin, who donated them or when they arrived at the museum. It is possible that the Royal Zoological Gardens had donated both skeletons but as the Gardens' records only go back as far as 1948, there is no way to check. In late 2009, both skeletons were transferred to their new display cabinet in the Tiegs Museum (funded by the Ian Potter Foundation).

During the 1930s, Australian specimens accrued at a steady pace despite the economic hardships of the Great Depression. International donations and purchases also

continued to arrive, though these were more isolated and in smaller quantities than donations of previous years. In 1935, Dr George Armstrong, also a former student of the University, presented the Zoology Department with a large skeleton and an accompanying display cabinet for its museum.¹⁶ It was the skeleton of the largest species of moa (*Dinornis robustus*), an extinct flightless bird from New Zealand. The skeleton is well over two metres tall and, though the moa is considered the most outstanding specimen in the museum, only its name was recorded in the register.¹⁷ Perhaps the specimen was so rare and obvious to most staff and students of zoology at the time that recording all the details of the donation in the register seemed unnecessary. In 2008, the moa was removed from the boxes in which it had been stored since the 1988 relocation of the Tiegs Museum from the Baldwin Spencer Building to its current location and assembled in its new display cabinet (funded by the Rowden White Foundation), where it can be viewed today.

A change of pace

After the outbreak of World War II, the collection and donation of specimens slowed significantly. There are virtually no entries recorded



Window, 'The Tiegs Museum'. Donated in 1959 in honour of Professor Oscar Werner Tiegs, Chair of Zoology, 1948–1956. Tiegs Museum, Department of Zoology, University of Melbourne. Photography by Anna Coultas.

in the register from 1942 to 1945, due presumably to the increased Australian war effort from 1942. A specimen worth noting, which travelled a long and treacherous path to arrive in Melbourne in 1941, was found in the bladder and liver of a human at the Cairo General Hospital. It was an example of the parasitic worms that cause the disease *Balharzia*.¹⁸ Though it was donated to the museum in 1941, it was not entered into the register until 1990. It was one of a number of specimens with a similar history. They were donated to or collected for the museum but not properly registered until many years later, mainly when the Tiegs Museum moved buildings in 1988. After World War II, the collecting and donating of specimens to the museum would never again be as prolific or enthusiastic as the time from the museum's inception in 1887 to the mid-1930s.

In 1948 another change occurred in the staffing of the Zoology Department. Professor Oscar Werner Tiegs (1897–1956), who had been a lecturer and an associate professor at the University since 1925, was appointed to the chair of zoology. In this role, Tiegs, like others before him, had his own influence on the study and teaching of zoology at the University. He regularly contributed

specimens to the museum and devoted much time and energy to its expansion and organisation, as is demonstrated by his cramped handwriting which fills so many pages of the register from 1925 to the early 1950s.

The end of the specimen golden age

On 5 November 1956 the much respected Professor Tiegs died unexpectedly at his home in Hawthorn.¹⁹ F.H. Drummond was appointed as acting Professor of Zoology. In 1958 Drummond wrote to the Vice-Chancellor asking permission to name the museum after Tiegs who had, in Drummond's opinion, 'devoted a great deal of time and thought to the preparation and display of material in the departmental museum'.²⁰ Drummond's request for a brass or bronze plaque to be made for display in the museum was approved and in either late 1958 or early 1959 the departmental zoology museum was officially renamed The Tiegs Museum. Above its entrance a glass window was installed, the new name inscribed in gold lettering.

Professor Tiegs was also honoured at a symposium in 1959 held by the Royal Society of Victoria, of which Tiegs had been an eager member.

It is interesting to note that this particular symposium was to honour not only Tiegs, but also the centenary of the founding of the Society, as well as the centenary anniversary of the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the origin of species*. It is fitting too that I completed this history of the Tiegs Museum in 2009, 150 years after the foundation of the Royal Society of Victoria, 150 years after the publication of *On the origin of species* and 50 years after the museum was named the Tiegs Museum.

In the years after the museum was named after Professor Tiegs, the collection and donation of specimens slowed almost to a halt. New restrictions and guidelines prevented the easy collection of species that would be interesting and useful for teaching zoology. By the 1960s the Tiegs Museum already had a large and diverse collection representing most if not all areas of the animal kingdom. There were a few isolated donations over the next 40 to 50 years but for the most part the golden age of specimen collection and donation had passed. Under a new professor, the Zoology Department took a new direction with teaching and research. Those changes also affected the Tiegs Museum, but the details are for another chapter of the museum's history.

Conclusion

The Tiegs Museum, with all the specimens in its collection, remains an important and relevant part of the teaching of zoology at the University of Melbourne. It is also an important part of the history of science education and research at the University. Its growth over the years and the types of specimens which were collected at particular times reflect changing trends in the teaching of zoology, the different passions of its professors through the decades, as well as the impact of external events such as war and economic recession.

I thoroughly enjoyed participating in the Cultural Collections Student Projects Program. It was stimulating, challenging and very rewarding. I feel privileged to have been able to conduct research in an area that has been little studied previously and to do so at a time which marked so many momentous anniversaries in science. I hope my work has highlighted the significance of the Tiegs Museum as a cultural collection of the University of Melbourne.

I leave the door open to other students in the hope that they will enjoy delving into the intriguing and wonderful world of zoology, taxidermy, science and the art of labelling—all of which are part of the history of the Tiegs Museum.

The Tiegs Museum www.zoology.unimelb.edu.au/tiegs/ is a resource for students, researchers and school groups. Access is by appointment; for further information contact Vivien Porter, email v.porter@zoology.unimelb.edu.au, telephone (03) 8344 7041.

Anna Coultas recently graduated from Monash University where she completed a Bachelor of Arts with Honours and a Master of Public History. She hopes to work in the professional historical field conducting research and organising exhibitions. Anna has recently completed an internship in Vancouver with the British Columbia Sports Hall of Fame and Museum.

Notes

- 1 Stuart Macintyre and R.J.W. Selleck, *A short history of the University of Melbourne*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2003; R.J.W. Selleck, *The shop: The University of Melbourne 1850–1939*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2003; J. Poynter and C. Rasmussen, *A place apart: The University of Melbourne: Decades of challenge*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1996.
- 2 Macintyre and Selleck, *A short history*, pp. 31–33; Selleck, *The shop*, pp. 374–382.
- 3 Carolyn Rasmussen, *A museum for the people: A history of Museum Victoria and its predecessors 1854–2000*, Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2001, p. 99.
- 4 Macintyre and Selleck, *A short history*, p. 34.
- 5 D.J. Mulvaney and J.H. Calaby, *So much that is new: Baldwin Spencer 1860–1929, a biography*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1985, p. 82; Rasmussen, *A museum for the people*, p. 99.
- 6 John Mulvaney, 'Baldwin Spencer: Evolution and Melbourne University', in J. Hoorn (ed.), *Reframing Darwin: Evolution and art in Australia*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2009, p. 86.
- 7 Macintyre and Selleck, *A short history*, p. 60.
- 8 *Melbourne University Review*, vol. IV, 1888, pp. 93–94; Science Club, 5 July 1888, in Mulvaney and Calaby, *So much that is new*, p. 85.
- 9 Various entries collected on Horn Expedition 1894, donated by Professor Spencer, *Register of specimens of the Biological School, University of Melbourne*. Tiegs Museum, Department of Zoology, University of Melbourne.
- 10 Entry nos 1208–1217, exchange from Museum Prague, 1902, *Register of specimens*.
- 11 Mulvaney, 'Baldwin Spencer', p. 87.
- 12 Entry no. 1968: *Echidna aculeata*, mounted skin, no location or date, donated and identified by Dr Georgina Sweet, no date recorded, *Register of specimens*.
- 13 Entry nos 1579–1594, donated by the University of Michigan, 1935, *Register of specimens*.
- 14 Great Barrier Reef Expedition, HMAS *Geranium*, 1925, *Register of specimens*.
- 15 Entry no. 1699: *Bichi de mer*, Cairns, Queensland, identified by Dr Buchanan, prepared for cooking, *Register of specimens*.
- 16 W.E. Agar, Letter to Vice-Chancellor, 6 November 1935. Registrar's correspondence, UM312, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 17 Entry no. 2179: *Dinornis robustus*, *Register of specimens*.
- 18 Entry no. 2698: *Balbarzia*, Cairo General Hospital, found in human bladder and liver, 1941, donated and identified by J. McNally, *Register of specimens*.
- 19 Carolyn Rasmussen, 'Tiegs, Oscar Werner (1897–1956)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 16, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002, pp. 393–394.
- 20 F.H. Drummond (Acting Professor, Department of Zoology), Letter to Vice-Chancellor, 17 June 1958. Registrar's correspondence, UM312, 1958/1405: Tiegs, Prof. O.W. Memorial. University of Melbourne Archives.