

HÉLÈNE LA RUE

THE 'NATURAL HISTORY' OF A MUSICAL INSTRUMENT COLLECTION

The history of the music collections in the Pitt Rivers Museum is dominated by the work of two men, General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers, the Museum's founder, and Henry Balfour, its first curator. Their work determined both the character of the collection and the excellence of its documentation.

General Pitt Rivers compiled the whole of his collection to show 'the successive ideas by which the minds of men in a primitive condition of culture have progressed in the development of their arts from the simple to the complex, and from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous'. This interest in the evolution of material culture was then the motivating force behind the whole of the General's collecting. However, he was not content with the simple amassing of a number of examples to prove his theories without good documentation of 'their history or psychology'. In his first catalogue he describes his dissatisfaction with the collections in contemporary museums which consisted

of miscellaneous objects brought home as reminiscences of travel or of such as have been most easily procured by sailors at the sea ports. Unlike natural history specimens which have for years past been selected with a view to variety, affinity and sequence.¹

He relates how these 'ethnological curiosities' 'not being supposed capable of any scientific interpretations, have not been obtained in sufficient number or variety to make classification possible.'²

It was in 1852 that Pitt Rivers began collecting from the material that was already in this country. From this he selected 'the commoner class of objects... which appeared to show connexion in form'. He aimed to build up complete sequences in a number of different series of objects; musical instruments were

one of these. These collecting policies have had a continuing influence on the Museum's music collections and of the two elements, the compilation of a complete series of the same type of instruments and the collecting of the 'commoner class of objects', it is the latter which accounts for its unique quality. Many other collections begun during the same period were more concerned with the acquisition of beautiful and unusual musical instruments which were not generally those representative of the actual playing traditions.

Much of the material already in this country was in the large private collections which had been gathered together out of curiosity. More rarely they had been made by the travellers or explorers themselves. The South African material belonging to Burchell was of the latter type, and much of this was acquired by Pitt Rivers. Burchell had travelled through South Africa in the first quarter of the nineteenth century and his collection provided the illustrations to the text of his travel book where their use is described. Others were not so well documented, but from sales of them Pitt Rivers acquired material to complete his series. When Pitt Rivers' collection was given to Oxford University, of the 14,000 objects just over 300 were musical instruments.

Henry Balfour, the man who unpacked the collections when they arrived in Oxford, became the Museum's first curator; he was to work with the collections until his death in 1939. Musical instruments were one of his greatest interests, and the strength of the present music collection owes much to his work. Throughout his career Balfour was to remain a follower of General Pitt Rivers' theories of evolutionary typology and both his museum exhibitions and his publications on musical instruments are based on these. In his paper 'A Primitive Musical Instrument' he writes

the absence or meagreness of historical record makes it necessary for us to depend largely upon such survivals from primitive times as we have, from various causes continued more or less unchanged in form, side by side with the often highly specialised forms which are actually descended from them, having been evolved, one may say, from these primitive types.³

Balfour used the General's collections as the beginning points of his articles; he describes how Pitt Rivers

introduced into the collection of musical instruments which formed part of his magnificent ethnographical collection, a small series from Africa, to illustrate, by means of modern survivals of earlier types, some of the principal stages between the more simple and primitive instruments allied to the bow of the hunter, and the more specialised harp-like instruments of that continent.⁴

Such articles as these both brought the Museum to the attention of the

academic world and were also a means of acquiring more information and instruments. In each of them Balfour inserts a plea for 'further information as to types and localities... and would be most grateful for any assistance in the matter of procuring specimens for the University Museum at Oxford...'⁵

In response to these requests information and specimens were sent from all over the world. Throughout his life Balfour built up a large correspondence with travellers, colonial administrators, ethnographers and ethnomusicologists as well as keeping in touch with his own pupils. Many of these correspondents would write to Balfour asking for his advice and guidance and sometimes he would write asking them to look out for specific examples. One such correspondent was D.J.Kipling, Curator of the Museum in Lahore, India, father of a more famous son. Kipling wrote to many friends trying to find evidence on Indian bagpipes for Balfour. His first letter tells that he has not heard of them in the North-West, the Himalayas, Shan States, Assam, among the Karens or in the Indian Plains; his next begins with triumph: 'I have found a bagpipe at last and I think it is unmistakably indigenous!' The enthusiasm and warmth with which correspondents such as Kipling wrote must in some measure reflect that of Balfour himself. It is certain that Balfour's charm encouraged many donations to the Museum. As he realised the importance of recordings and photographs, as well as field-notes, these also accompanied the gifts.

Advice given by Balfour to his correspondents formed the basis for his rewriting of the section on musical instruments in the 1929 (fifth edition) of *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*. These guidelines also show the information about instruments that Balfour tried to include in the collection's documentation. Some of the instruments obtained during this period are not those often thought of as 'musical' but in *Notes and Queries* this is explained:

Any object whether natural or artificial, and however simple, which is employed for the purpose of producing sounds (whether 'musical' in an aesthetic sense or not) should be included as a musical instrument.⁶

The classification used in this article was that which was used for the museum catalogue. Much criticism has been levelled at Balfour because of his use of what was by 1929 a severely out-moded system. It is certainly strange that in spite of his correspondence with ethnomusicologists who were much concerned with the problems of musical instrument classification he does not seem to have been influenced by their work. In his defence it must be remembered that Balfour, although interested in musical instruments, would in no way have considered himself to be primarily a musicologist; his time was devoted to the Pitt Rivers Collection as a whole and music was only a part of this.

When Balfour died in 1939 the musical instrument collection numbered over 4000 items. It still remained true to the General's original policy of containing the 'commoner class of objects'. Many of the music cases in the court today are just as Balfour left them, still containing his own hand-

written labels. Instruments showing the same methods of sound production are placed together so that in one case can be seen African *sansas* and a Swiss musical-box; in another, African and Indian drums close by a Cotswold morris dancer's tabor, all jostling for room with an Edison Bell phonograph recorder; in yet another case Peruvian panpipes from an archaeological site at Nasca, near to them Burmese gunpowder pipes. Liquorice panpipes from St Giles' fair, Oxford 1903, and acacia spine-bulbs which once whistled in the wind on a bush which Balfour passed on his Tanganyikan expedition of 1929.

During the following curatorship of T.K.Penniman much work was done on the organisation of the catalogues. At this time several new series were added: the small but representative collections of barrel-organs and musical-boxes, and the first keyboard instruments (which included the Italian virginals made by Marcus Jadra in 1552). There has never been the opportunity to display any of this material. Other musical instruments came in as part of wider collections from a single area. Penniman did not publish anything about the musical collection but he did encourage others. With his cooperation a description of the musical-box acquisitions was published. The most important publication of that period was Antony Baines' book *Bagpipes*⁷ which uses the Museum's bagpipes acquired by Balfour and remains one of the Museum's best-selling publications today.

Now almost a century after its beginnings in Oxford the Museum is able to plan exhibitions in new buildings: the music collection has been chosen to occupy part of these. This is then the right moment to reassess the value of the music collections, both to the general museum public and to the student and academic. It is also the time to plan both the new exhibitions and the activities which will enable the Museum to make a lively contribution to the future.

In the new Museum displays we hope that we will both continue with certain Museum traditions as well as making use of new ideas and techniques. We are very sensitive to the requirements of a collection such as ours; it would be a tragedy to destroy its essential and peculiar character but it would also be a disaster to allow it to fossilise. New exhibitions will once again show the instruments in their typological sequence. Balfour's series will not be broken up, but his classification system will be modified to that of Hornbostel-Sachs. This has two advantages: it will not make a complete break with tradition and it is an internationally well-known and accepted system. In the new galleries it will be possible for the first time to show some instruments or instrument-groups within their cultural settings. This will be linked to newly-acquired modern examples, some of which will be added as part of a collection specifically for use as 'playing' instruments.

One of the problems of the care of a music collection is that for most instruments the only method of preserving them is not to play them. To preserve the instruments fulfills one part of a museum's duty, but how can one educate or instruct when the objects on which one gives instruction have to remain uncharacteristically dumb? - particularly when our collection consists mainly of ordinary instruments that were never designed to be the

silent objects of admiration behind glass. Today this problem is far easier to solve than it was in Balfour's time. Thanks to his groundwork and Penniman's continuation of his policies, we do have some recordings which can be used to illustrate the collection. These will be supplemented with modern performances on instruments similar to those shown. Recordings can then be used in listening posts or as a background to slides.

Instruments that can be played by school parties or student groups will illustrate a well-documented display of this type. Obviously only the sturdiest of instruments would be suitable. One example of a complete scheme centres round the West Indian steel band. This is now familiar to everyone and is being used in schools. A steel band could be shown together with carnival costumes, making use of audio-visual equipment through which to illustrate the history of carnival. In the collection we have many costumes and masks which have never been shown together, and one or more of these could be used to illustrate the African roots of the West Indian custom.

It is vital that we bring this collection of musical instruments alive. If possible, in addition to the recordings in the galleries, we hope to be able to present lecture-recitals and public concerts and make the collection a real centre of the study of musical instruments. It would be tempting to allow the Museum's reputation to rest on the work of the past but we must also look forward to the next hundred years. A museum of ethnology is particularly relevant to our modern world. Today when the multi-cultural character of British society is most often seen as a problem we have the ability to show and make enjoyable its richness and diversity. Music and dance are international languages and through the enjoyment of them we may learn to take pleasure in other cultural traditions. England now, like Balfour's cases, incorporates all traditions, the Cotswold morris, the gaiety of West Indian carnival and the colour of the Chinese new year.

NOTES

1. Col. Lane Fox, *Catalogue of the Anthropological Collection Lent by Colonel Lane Fox for Exhibition in the Bethnal Green Branch of the South Kensington Museum, June 1874, 1877*, p.xi.
2. *Ibid.*, p.xii.
3. Henry Balfour, 'A Primitive Musical Instrument', *Reliquary and Illustrated Archaeologist*, Volume XI (1896), pp.221-224 at p.221.
4. Henry Balfour, *The Natural History of the Musical Bow*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1899, pp.1-2.
5. *Ibid.*, p.87.
6. *Notes and Queries*, 1929, p.2.
7. A.Baines, *Bagpipes*, Oxford: Pitt Rivers Museum, Occasional Papers on Technology 9 (edited by T.K.Penniman and B.M.Blackwood) 1960.

DEBORAH B. WAITE

THE H.B.T.SOMERVILLE COLLECTION OF ARTEFACTS FROM THE SOLOMON ISLANDS IN THE PITT RIVERS MUSEUM

I have a passion for curios. My collection... has now achieved [its] heaven in a museum. That is the true destiny of curios, but the realization of this fact does not immediately dawn on the young collector. When his cabin has become so choked with clubs that he is obliged to sleep on the deck, and when the spaces between the beams in the wardroom have become so crammed with long spears that meals are no longer endurable... the natural impulse is to pack them all up and send them home. If so, when the young collector follows his collection at the end of the commission, he must be prepared for disappointment. The precious and difficultly obtained spears, clubs, poisoned arrows, carved idols, and painted skulls, at first objects of horrified interest to his untravelled relatives, will now be found to have become... exiled to lofts or cellars and covered with dust.... The young collector will, therefore, find it more satisfactory to send his treasure, properly labelled, straight to a museum. There [the artefacts] will be perennially appreciated and displayed. There they may be hideous, and it will be gladly endured. They may be poisoned... the curator will cherish them.¹

So wrote Vice-Admiral Henry B.T.Somerville, a naval officer with a lifelong interest in collecting 'curios'. Somerville was born at Castletownshend, County Cork, on 7 September 1863. He spent the greater part of his life in the British Royal Navy with major tours of duty in the Pacific (e.g. Hydrographic Surveying Service in Australia and the Western Pacific, 1889-96, H.M.S. *Egeria*, 1897-1900), Persian Gulf (1902), and Indian Ocean