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THE END OF AN ERA: H.D. SKINNER'S MAORI GALLERY, OTAGO MUSEUM

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A programme for the reburishing of the Otago Museum's well-known and much loved Maori Gallery (often affectionately referred to as 'Skinner's Gallery') has recently been initiated. All the exhibits have been dismantled and the artefactual material placed in storage. A major redisplay of the maori collections is planned following the installation of Te Maori for a two months period late in 1986.

The gallery had changed very little since 1930 when it was first opened. It was set up by Dr H.D. Skinner, one of New Zealand's foremost anthropologists and museum directors. Skinner, who died in 1978, was the first anthropology teacher appointed to a New Zealand university, and trained many New Zealand archaeologists. Indeed, very few of us - especially those who live and work in the south - have failed to be influenced by him and his work. He was also a foundation member of the New Zealand Archaeological Association. This paper - read at the NZAA Conference in Cromwell in May 1986 - is offered as a tribute to Dr Skinner in acknowledgement of his considerable contribution to both New Zealand museums and anthropology.

The Otago Museum was founded in the 1860s following the very successful 1865 Dunedin Exhibition. On display at this exhibition were over 2000 geological specimens mostly from Otago, which had been collected by Sir Joseph Hector during a survey of the mineral resources of the Otago Province. Cultural material was limited to a few Australian and Indian pieces which had been brought to New Zealand especially for the exhibition.

After its closure, there was considerable pressure, from a number of interested persons, for the assembled material to remain in Otago. Most of the people involved were either businessmen, local politicians or wealthy settlers who were keen to establish cultural and educational facilities in the young settlement.

After much discussion and lobbying, particularly over the siting of the building and the Provincial Government's financial role in maintaining the collection, the Otago Museum opened its doors to the public in September 1868. There were three rooms of display located on the second floor of the then new Chief Post Office - one devoted to botany, one to geology and the other to zoology. This emphasis on the biological and natural sciences dominated the museum's administrative and collection policies for the next half century.

In 1877 the University of Otago assumed responsibility for the administration of the museum which it did not relinquish until 1955 when the Otago Museum Trust Board was formed. Dual appointments to the university chair of Natural History and curator of the Otago Museum were initiated at this time and continued until 1937. Under this arrangement the university acquired free and unlimited access to the museum and its collections and the Department of Natural History was housed in the museum (by now in its own building on the present day site, adjacent to the university).

The museum and especially the anthropology section was the poorer for its relationship with the university. It was regarded merely as a department within the university and a relatively unimportant one at that! There was little commitment to the general public or to anthropology. Although Dr T.J. Parker, who was the Professor of Natural History and curator in the late 1800s, opened the museum to the public in the mornings, his successor, Dr W.B. Benham, promptly closed it so that his students could work on the collections without interruptions from the public. The teaching of biology was considered to be the main function of the museum and its collections. This situation did not change until 1919 when H.D. Skinner was appointed to a joint position of lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Otago and assistant curator at the Otago Museum. Skinner set about to systematically develop and expand the Museum's anthropology collections and to encourage members of the public to participate directly in the functioning of the museum.

In this latter endeavour he was very successful. The Friends of the Museum Association which he was instrumental in founding in 1925 is still very active and has assisted the museum in many projects over the years. Public usage of the museum and its collections, which increased greatly during Skinner's era, has continued to grow to its present unprecedented level. It was, however, in the development of the collections that Skinner made his greatest contribution to the Otago Museum and to Pacific anthropology. His achievement in these areas cannot be over-emphasised.

Prior to his appointment, the anthropology collections were small and reflected the rather piecemeal approach to their acquisition. The Annual Report of the Otago Museum for 1908 - 1909 records the Ethnology acquisitions as follows:

"A North Queensland painted shield, an old flintlock pistol, a Japanese zither, a pair of Canadian moccasins and a series of seals struck in commemoration of Sir Walter Raleigh"

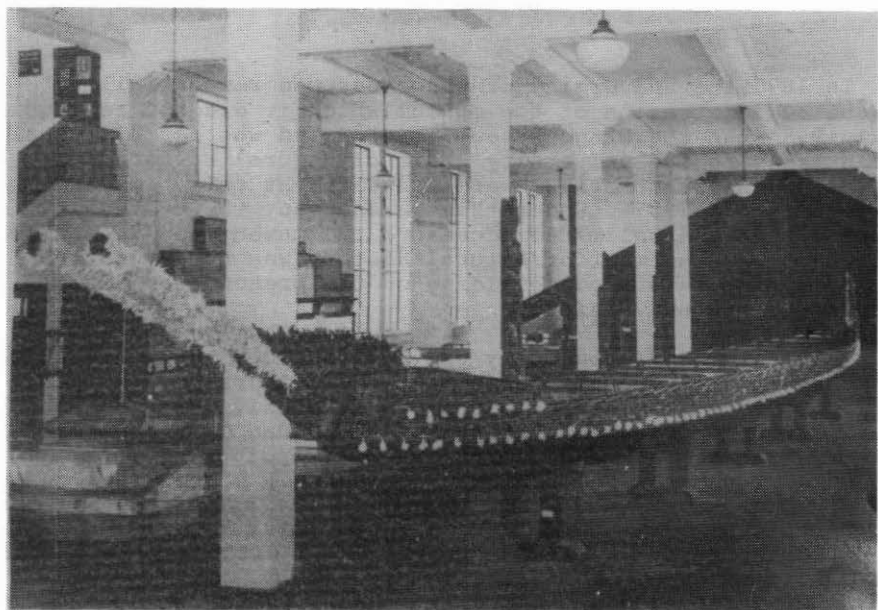


Figure 1. Skinner gallery in 1930 with Mataatua at east end.

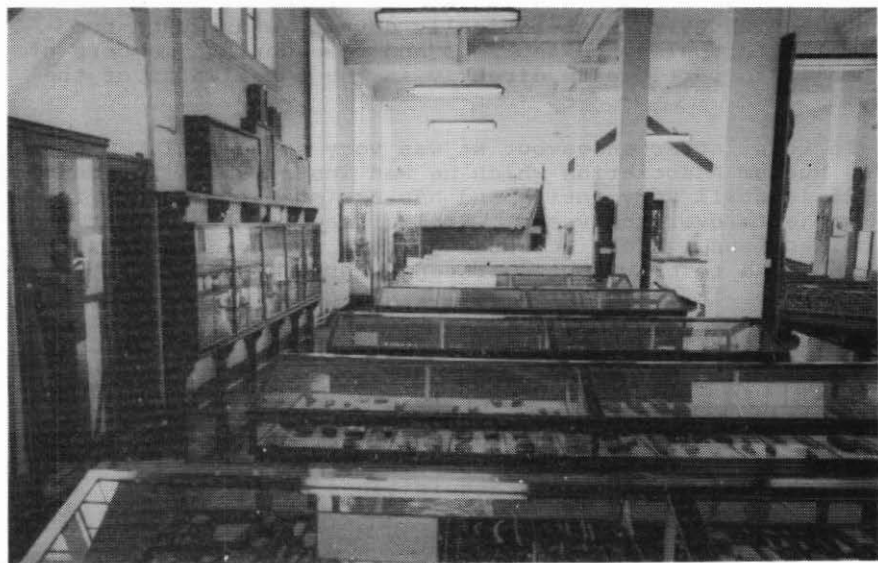


Figure 2. Murihiku cases in gallery.

The items placed on deposit consisted of:

"A fine head and horns of a koodoo, a curious Norwegian fiddle in a box, a Fijian kava bowl and bows and arrows from the Solomon Islands."

In general entries for other years around this time record a similar assortment of foreign 'curiosities'. There is little mention, in some years none at all, of any New Zealand material being received. Indeed, the only substantial collection received up until 1919 was Dr T.M. Hocken's magnificent collection of Maori artefacts. Most of it, however, was acquired by Hocken in the North Island and the material culture of southern New Zealand was grossly under-represented when Skinner arrived in the museum.

Skinner was a very energetic and determined man. Not long after he took up his appointment, while travelling up to Taranaki, he passed through Lyttelton. In the harbour was a boat on its way to the Chatham Islands. The material culture of the Chatham Islanders had long been one of Skinner's interests and the opportunity was too good to miss. There was no passage on the ship but that did not deter him - he simply stowed away (Simmons 1984). The Bishop Museum Bulletin which resulted from this field trip remains a basic text on the material culture of the Moriori.

This kind of determination and dedication is reflected in the museum's acquisitions during Skinner's time here. As early as 1919 Benham wrote of Skinner,

"It appears that people who have objects of this kind in their possession find it difficult to withstand his powers of persuasion."

The fossicking of Otago archaeological sites had started as early as the 1860s and a number of very large and important private collections were subsequently built up. Several of these were donated to the Museum in the first decade or so after Skinner's arrival including those of Charles Haines, James Murdoch, Murray Thomson, Sir Frederick Chapman and Willi Fels.

The 1920s saw the museum itself taking an active role in the field collection of archaeological material. Skinner himself undertook excavations with the Otago Institute at Murdering Beach and Little Papanui. Day trips, collecting with university anthropology students, were spent at Kaikai, Purakanui and various other local places. In 1929 David Teviotdale was appointed assistant archaeologist to Skinner and under the latter's supervision excavated a vast number of southern sites. Indeed, few

escaped his attention. Extended collecting trips were also made to the Kaikoura coast and Nelson areas. The North Island was not neglected either. Teviotdale joined a private excavation at Oruarangi on the Hauraki Plain in 1931 and as a result, brought back to Otago many artefacts from that site and others nearby. Most efforts, however, were directed towards Otago and Southland. This collecting policy continued in the 1940s and early 1950s with the appointment of Les Lockerbie, as Museum Education Officer and honorary archaeologist.

Mention must also be made of Willi Fels. He was Skinner's friend and fellow enthusiast and was, for many years, Chairman of the Management Committee of the Museum. His intellectual and financial input into the development of the museum and its collections was considerable. By the time Skinner retired in the mid 1950s, he had built up one of the most comprehensive collections of Maori and Pacific material ever made.

As early as the mid-1920s it was apparent that a new wing was necessary to display the anthropology collections acquired by Skinner. This extension, which was named in honour of Willi Fels, opened in 1930 and included a new Maori gallery (Fig.1).

"In the lower gallery, which measures 120 feet in length by 60 feet in width, are shown the Maori collections, the principal exhibit being the great communal house, Mataatua The rest of the ground floor is occupied by Maori material arranged on a basis of locality. A little less than half the case space is occupied by material from Murihiku From this area textiles and articles in wood are poorly represented, but material in stone and bone is extremely rich both in quantity and variety. The rest of the South Island is well represented except Banks Peninsula, North Canterbury and Marlborough. Taranaki and North Auckland are represented adequately, but the collections from the rest of the North Island need strengthening. The Morioris of the Chatham Islands are well represented."

O.U.M. Annual Report (1930:7)

Skinner's teaching and research interests appear to have contributed to the selection of artefacts for display as well as to their manner of presentation.

Skinner studied anthropology at Cambridge University, England between 1915 and 1918, at a time when anthropology was still establishing itself as a scientific discipline. The anthropological community was small and as a consequence, Skinner was taught by, and trained with, many of the world's leading anthropologists. The contacts he made at this time, subsequently played an important role in the development of the Otago Museum's collection of overseas ethnology and archae-



Figure 3. Canterbury table case and 'agriculture' display.



Figure 4. Skinner gallery 1986 — looking west.

ology. This was by way of exchange with other museums. Today we may decry and mourn the loss of important Maori carvings and stone and bone tools to overseas institutions but their exchange was the only means by which the under-funded Otago Museum could acquire such excellent collections of, for example, Australian and American Indian artefacts.

Skinner's major academic interest was in the origin and development of Maori culture. Much of his research was directed towards tracing the connections between the Maori people on the one hand and Polynesian and Melanesian and ultimately Asian and other Pacific area peoples, on the other. The answers he believed lay in the material culture of the peoples concerned - their adzes, amulets and pendants, fish hooks, weapons and domestic utensils. He studied Maori and Pacific artefacts intensely - their presence or absence in various areas, their shapes and sizes and changes through time and space and their decorative motifs. Taxonomic classificatory systems for adzes and fish hooks, evolutionary sequences for amulets and the development of Maori carving styles were determined.

Studies done on the material culture of the North American Indian tribes had led anthropologists there to divide the continent into discrete culture areas. Influenced by these ideas and the observed diversity in the material culture of the New Zealand Maori as well as linguistic differences throughout the country Skinner proposed that there were eight distinct cultural areas in New Zealand.

Murihiku, the area south of Banks Peninsula and including South Canterbury, South Westland, Otago and Southland, was one of them. When Skinner set up the displays in the new Maori gallery in 1930, the methods of arranging the artefacts reflected these views. The table cases on one side of the gallery (Fig.2) contained the southern (Murihiku) collections with individual case displays devoted to adzes, fish hooks, sinkers, needles and other bone points, combs, pendants and amulets, patu, stone blades and flakes, textile fragments and other artefacts all arranged in neat rows, while those on the other side of the gallery contained similar artefacts from various other regions in New Zealand, including Auckland, Taranaki, Hawkes Bay, Nelson, Marlborough, Canterbury (Fig.3) and the Chatham Islands. Visitors were thus able to compare artefact types and styles between areas, and in some cases, through time. The displays were therefore particularly valuable to students of New Zealand archaeology and anthropology.

Although the gallery did have some thematic displays - Maori clothing, food preservation, wood carvings and others - which did make an attempt to show how each piece was made

and used, Skinner emphasised the shape and style of each artefact rather than the story it has to tell. For example the display of eel and fish traps, nets and shellfish rakes contained little information as to how and when each was used, how the eels, fish, etc, that were caught were cooked and stored for future use, or their social and economic importance to the people who obtained them. Likewise, although there were several hundred adzes on display, there was very little information about their manufacture and what they were used for. Like most of his contemporaries Skinner was interested in finished articles, not those which were half completed and certainly not waste flakes, fish bones and midden shell, the things that delight present-day archaeologists.

Following Dr Skinner's retirement in 1955, changes to some displays were made by successive curators. However, these were, by and large, only minor modifications and in keeping with the original style of the gallery. It remained essentially Skinner's (Fig.4). Today public, and particularly Maori, expectations of museums, their collections and exhibitions are very different from those of 50 years ago. Display techniques and technology have also changed. Otago Museum's new Maori gallery will be very different from the old one. At least part of Skinner's contribution will remain unchanged, however, that is the superb collection of Maori material culture that is his legacy.

Reference

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