
Book Review

Brian Gill

The Unburnt Egg – More stories of a museum curator

Reviewed by Hamish Campbell*

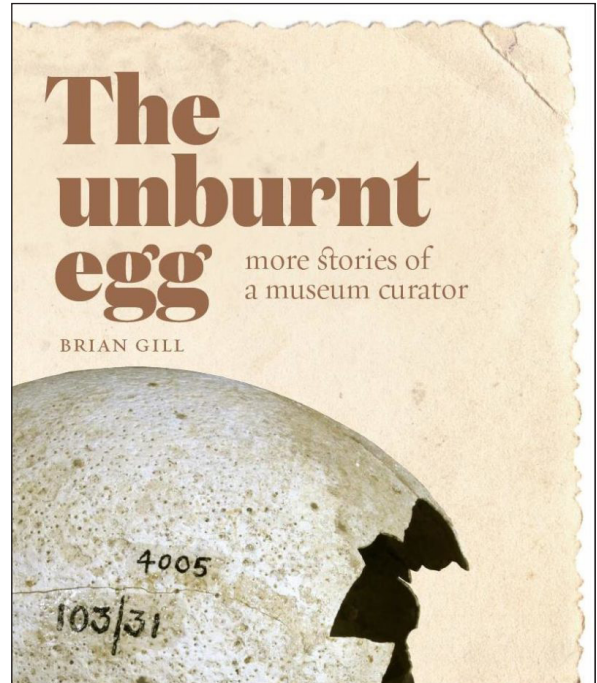
If you ever had any doubts or concerns about the value of museum collections or the merits of maintaining natural history collections at a regional museum, then this is a book that explains all. It is a superbly crafted set of 14 fascinating stories that collectively illuminate the immensely important role of museums within the world of science.

Each story is an episode of scientific enquiry and endeavour set at the Auckland War Memorial Museum where Brian Gill was employed for much of his career in the Land Vertebrates Department. Through these stories, we the readers, gain an amazing insight into the procedures and skills of a museum curator of natural history. In Brian Gill's case, his world is very much that of an ornithologist (birds), oologist (one who studies eggs), mammalogist (mammals) and herpetologist (reptiles and amphibians). His world embraces all land-dwelling vertebrate animals, but not just those of New Zealand; his reach extends well out into the exotic southwest Pacific. It is clear that Auckland Museum is serious about its 'regional' status not to mention its global significance.

There will be some surprises for most readers. For instance, I was delighted to learn that Walter Buller is not the biodiversity criminal that he is cracked up to be. Brian Gill argues, on the basis of sensible numerical evidence, the actual numbers of birds 'taken' by Buller (only 2,230 over a span of 50 years as deduced by Sandy Bartle and Alan Tennyson), that he was much less of a party to the extinction of certain bird species than has been suggested. And did you know that the huia was restricted to the North Island?! At least it was by the time Europeans arrived on the scene. I was also amazed to learn that about 1,000 bird species have been wiped out of the Pacific since the arrival of man, and in particular the spread of Polynesian peoples. One thousand! This is a very heavy burden to bear. As for the story of the 'Unburnt Egg', it is a sad story really, about Blanche Halcombe (a grand-daughter of William Swainson) who in later life became a recluse. But it is very instructive because there are many of us just like her, lost in our own natural worlds, with treasures so precious. What to do with them so as to avoid destruction? A subliminal message might be: act now and at the very least, get them formally registered and in time, lodged with your local museum.

If nothing else, I would urge all NZAS members and readers of *Science Review* to read the last chapter 'Further reflections'. It is a succinct verbal distillation of wisdom based on a life-time of experience as a scientist. We do not hear enough from such voices. In the light of my own background as a part-time earth science curator at the National Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa, I found Brian Gill's thoughts on the dangers of blending science with 'cultural relativism' slightly unnerving but refreshing and compelling. It is difficult for most of us to speak out and he does so well. It is as if he is expressing my own thinking, but transforming rather poorly-formed and uncomfortably non-PC thoughts into sharp clarity.

On the basis of numerous large-scale population surveys globally, museums are considered to be the most trusted entities within society. Brian Gill's writing exemplifies this trust. You cannot but be impressed by the scholarship he brings to bear



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on his subject matter, his choice of quest and his reasoning. His story-telling is sensitive and thoughtful and I love the way he describes and fuses his subjects (birds, eggs, mammals, lizards and snakes) with people, history, culture, time, place and philosophy. His stories are holistic and complete. He elegantly demonstrates the use and value of carefully curated collections of natural history specimens in museums.

I read this book from cover to cover over a series of flights between Wellington and Auckland, mopping up all that operational sitting-down-time in a distant seat near the back of the plane. So engrossing are the stories that time flew, irrespective of what the plane was doing, and I would surface as the last passenger off. If we all did this, the airline schedules would be seriously compromised! Nevertheless, I recommend this rich compendium wholeheartedly. It is perfect for all lovers of the natural world and a rare insight into what museum curators do and why they do it, and the quite extraordinary inherent relevance, value and power of museum collections in the contemporary world.