

THE TRADESCANT MUSEUM.

BY

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IN these days, when every town of any importance in this country boasts of a more or less well-equipped museum, it seems somewhat strange that the first English museum of which we have any knowledge or account was formed less than two hundred and seventy years ago, and that it owed its inception, not to a native of these islands, but to the enterprize of a Hollander and his son who had settled in this country.

This was the famous Tradescant Museum, an account of which was published in 1656 entitled :—

Musæum Tradescantianum : / or, / a Collection / of / Rarities./  
Preserved / at South-Lambeth near London / By / John  
Tradescant./

This small duodecimo work has now become very scarce owing to the fact that “ Prefixed to it were prints of both father and son, which from the circumstance of being engraved by Hollar, has unfortunately rendered the book well known to collectors of prints,\* by whom most of the copies have been plundered of the impressions.” Of the two Tradescants but little is known, and that partly conjectural. John Tradescant the elder was, according to Anthony Wood, a Dutchman by birth, and seems to have settled in this country during the reign of James I. As a young man he is said to have travelled and collected in Europe and Asia, and to have accompanied a fleet which sailed against the Algerines in 1620, and some few years after this we find him settled at South Lambeth, where he had “ a Physic Garden of the greatest extent.” In 1629 he obtained the appointment of gardener to Charles I., and seems to have died about 1650. He left a son of the same name, who inherited his father’s tastes, voyaged to Virginia, returned

\* Facsimile reproductions of the title page and the two Hollar prints accompany this article.

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L O N D O N,  
Printed by *John Grismond*, and are to be sold by  
*Nathanael Broske* at the *Angel* in *Cornhill*,  
M. D. C. LVI.

thence with a large collection of seeds and plants, and published the Catalogue of the Museum. As he informs us in an address "To the Ingenious Reader" :—

"About three yeares agoe (by the perswasion of some friends) I was resolved to take a Catalogue of those Rarities and Curiosities which my Father has scedulously collected, and my-self with continued diligence have augmented, and hitherto preserved together : they then pressed me with that Argument, that the enumeration of these Rarities, (being more for variety than any one place known in Europe could afford) would be an honour to our Nation, and a benefit to such ingenious persons as would become further enquirers into the various modes of Natures admirable workes, and the curious Imitators thereof : I readily yielded to the thing so urged and with the assistance of two worthy friends (well acquainted with my design) we then began it, and many examinations of the materials themselves, & their agreements with several Authors. . . ."

The book itself is a source of never-ending interest and amusement to the curious reader. As the late Professor Newton said in his address to the Museums Association in 1891, "Did time permit, I would gladly go over this little book page by page, for I believe there is hardly a leaf but would furnish the text for a sermon."

We must here content ourselves with some account of Tradescant's list of birds with which he occupies the first four pages of the book, and which he heads, "Some kindes of Birds, their Egges, Beaks, Feathers, Clawes, and Spurres."

Amongst the "Egges" in the museum he enumerates "Crocodiles, Estridges, Soland goose or Squeedes from Scotland. Divers sorts of Egges from Turkie : one given for a Dragons egge," and "Easter Egges of the Patriarchs of Jerusalem," while the "beaks or heads" include those of the "Griffin, Pellican, Shoveller, and thirty other severall forrain sorts, not found in any Author, and sixteen several strange beaks of Birds from the East India's," but it was amongst the "Feathers and Clawes" that the chief treasures of the collection reposed—here were "Two feathers of the Phoenix tayle" and

“The clawe of the bird Rock ; who, as Authors report, is able to trusse an Elephant.”

Beside these marvels, the “Legge and claw of the Cassawary or Emeu that dyed at S. James’s, Westminster,” is but commonplace, while among the “whole birds enumerated” space forbids us to mention more than “The Bustard as big as a Turky, usually taken by Greyhounds on Newmarket-heath” and “The Dodar, from the Island of Maritius, it is not able to flie being so big.” Of this last-mentioned bird, the famous Dodo, it may be interesting to give a short account. The specimen mentioned by Tradescant is thought by Strickland (*The Dodo and its Kindred*. London, 1848. pp. 22, 23) to be identical with that which Lestrange saw alive in 1638. O how it stirs the blood of the modern ornithologist to think of the good old days when live Dodos were exhibited in the London streets! Lestrange’s account (Sloane MSS., 1839, 5, p. 9) is as follows:—

“About 1638, as I walked London streets, I saw the picture of a strange fowle hong out upon a cloth, and myselfe with one or two more then in company went in to see it. It was kept in a chamber, and was a great fowle somewhat bigger than the largest Turky Cock, and so legged and footed; . . . coloured before like the breast of a young cock fesan, and on the back of dunn or deare colour. The keeper called it a Dodo. . . .”

Be this as it may, the sad and future history of Tradescant’s Dodo—which, by the way, the famous Francis Willughby inspected, “We have seen this Bird [*i.e.*, the Dodo] dried, or its skin stuf in Tradescant’s Cabinet” (*The Ornithology*, 1678, p. 154)—was as follows:—When Tradescant’s collection was bequeathed to Elias Ashmole the Dodo with other specimens passed into the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford. Here it remained entire till 1755, “when the Vice-Chancellor and the other Trustees, to whose guardianship the worthy Ashmole had confided his treasures, came in an unlucky hour to make their annual visitation of the museum . . . when this unhappy specimen, then at least a century old . . .



JOHN TRADESCANT, THE ELDER.

(After the engraving by W. HOLLAR.)



JOHN TRADESCANT, THE YOUNGER.

(After the engraving by W. HOLLAR.)

decayed by time and neglect was ordered to be removed." Fortunately, however, "a small portion of this last descendant of an ancient race escaped the clutches of the destroyer. The head and one of the feet were saved from the flames, and are still preserved in the Ashmolean Museum" (Strickland, p. 32).

We have no space to deal with the remainder of Tradescant's book here; it contains in all one hundred and seventy-eight pages of catalogue, of which by far the larger portion is devoted to his botanical collection, and ends with a list of "Principall Benefactors to the precedent Collection"—beginning with King Charles, and Queen Mary, and enumerating many of the most famous men of the day, including Elias Ashmole, with whom the younger Tradescant became acquainted in 1650, through his lodging at Tradescant's house. John Tradescant the younger died in 1662, and bequeathed his collection to his friend, to whom it passed in 1677 after the death of Tradescant's widow, and it then became incorporated in the famous Ashmolean Museum. Tradescant's Museum, or "Ark" as it was generally called, "attracted the curiosity of the age, and was much frequented by the great," and it is therefore not surprising to find that the ever-indefatigable Evelyn knew it well. Under date of September 17th, 1657, he notes:—

"To see Sir Robert Needham at Lambeth, a relation of mine; and thence to John Tradescant's musæum, in which the chiefest rarities were, in my opinion, the ancient Roman, Indian, and other nations' armour, shields and weapons; some habits of curiously-colour'd and wrought feathers, one from y' phoenix wing as tradition goes. Other innumerable things there were, printed in his Catalogue by Mr. Ashmole, to whom after the death of the widow they are bequeath'd and by him design'd as a gift to Oxford."

And, again, on July 23rd, he records: "Went to see Mr. Elias Ashmole's library and Curiosities at Lambeth. . . . The famous John Tradescant bequeathed his Repository to this gentleman, who has given them to the University of Oxford,

. . .” (*Diary of John Evelyn*. By H. B. Wheatley. Vol. II. pp. 94, 336.)

The Tradescants, father and son, lie buried in Lambeth Churchyard, under the family monument, which was erected in 1662 and repaired in 1770 by public subscription from drawings of the original in the Pepysian Library. To them “as the parents of British Musæology” our debt of gratitude is great, and may their memories long flourish.