

19

collecting

FROM
"DAVID ATTENBOROUGH"
LIFE STORIES

Collecting is a strange affliction. I have to admit to being a sufferer since childhood – stamps, magazines that were numbered in sequence, bus tickets, coins, fossils – and advancing years have not really cured me.

◁ Part of Darwin's beetle collections,
now in the Cambridge University Museum of Zoology.

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So today I collect – among many other things – books about New Guinea and if I find one, no matter how boring it is, I am likely to buy it for no better reason than that I don't have it.

Where does this urge to collect come from? Some animals, certainly, collect objects but all those that I can think of collect things that have a use – caddis fly larvae collect tiny sticks with which to build the little tubes in which they live and will collect coloured beads, if you keep them in an aquarium and provide them with nothing else. Bowerbirds, the most spectacular collectors among birds, also assemble coloured objects but that is in order to create a display that will impress females. Human beings on the other hand, collect things that have no practical use and often don't even show them to anyone else but keep them secret, hidden away in a back room.

But why? Psychologists have produced a variety of answers – such as over-severe potty training in infancy, for instance – which I personally don't find very convincing. I have a different theory.

It seems to me that the affliction – if it can be called that – is by and large more masculine than feminine. There have been, it is true, one or two spectacular women collectors – Lady Charlotte Schreiber, for example who had a passion for little china figures of shepherds, shepherdesses and such like and left thousands of them to the Victoria and Albert Museum. But that is nothing compared with Sir Thomas Phillips who, in the 19th century collected books in quite phenomenal numbers. Most of us, I dare say, are guilty of

buying more books than we actually read. But he bought forty or fifty a week and by the end of his life had a collection of forty thousand of them as well as sixty thousand manuscripts. And certainly most active collectors I know who scour shops, auctions and car-boot sales for the objects to which they are addicted are men – and men whose wives look at them with an affectionate even pitying tolerance when they spend yet more extravagant sums on something that is quite useless but which appeals to them irresistibly because they haven't got one exactly like it.

The male emphasis, I believe, is an important clue. There can be little doubt that there was a division of labour between the sexes early in mankind's history. The long period the human infant needs before it is capable of even walking by itself, let alone finding food, meant that women, by and large, remained in camp or cave, and men went off hunting for meat for the family. So the hunting instinct – the delight in finding prey, tracking it and catching it – is deep-seated in men. Indeed, it seems to me to be possible that men found a positive pleasure in the process and did not go off hunting only out of a sense of duty and responsibility towards their families. In short, I think the process of collecting objects is a way of satisfying the deep-seated urge to hunt – an urge that in modern life is not properly satisfied when all that a man brings back to support his family is a piece of paper or simply the information that a message has been sent to his bank.

Natural history objects – shells, birds' eggs, fossils, odd stones, skeletons – have been collected by people since the beginnings of scholarship. In the sixteenth century, Aldrovandus, the Italian author of the first great encyclopaedia of natural history, was said to have had four thousand five hundred and fifty drawers of specimens. Noblemen throughout Europe had their cabinets of curiosities in which they displayed anything – animal, vegetable or mineral – that seemed strange and remarkable to them. In the

nineteenth century, Lord Walter Rothschild, fuelled by his family wealth, assembled the biggest collection of natural history objects ever made by one man, paying over four hundred collectors to scoop things up for him from all over the world. Giant tortoises, bird skins, birds' eggs, butterflies, beetles – there seemed to be no product of the natural world that he was unwilling to acquire.

Charles Darwin, in his youth, was a passionate, fanatical collector of beetles. As an undergraduate in Cambridge he searched for them obsessively. 'No pursuit gave me more pleasure', he said. He didn't dissect them. He simply classified them. That is to say, he learned to recognise different species. He arranged them, both in practice and in his mind, in some sort of order. He put those that were most like one another close to one another. He divided them into families. And that process must have made him wonder why there were so many species and what processes might have brought them into existence.

He was still at this stage when he was invited to join the *Beagle*, the naval surveying ship that was about to set off on a round-the-world voyage to survey the coasts of South America. But he did *not* go as a beetle collector or any other kind of naturalist. His official job was simply to be a companion to Captain Robert Fitzroy, the autocratic and irascible commander of the ship and to provide him with gentlemanly conversation.

But the collecting mania still possessed him. Everywhere the *Beagle* went, young Mr Darwin eagerly went ashore and collected – fossils, plants, mammal skins, shells, everything natural in fact, that was collectible. And it was that passion and those collections that gave him the raw material for the theory of evolution by natural selection.

It may come as a consolation to some of us that, on occasion, even the great Darwin was less than perfect as a scientific collector. It is said that the idea of natural selection was sparked in his mind by

the claim made by a British resident in the Galapagos Islands that he could tell which island a giant tortoise came from by the shape of its shell. Those on drier islands which lacked a reasonable turf on which to graze had shells with peaks at the front of the shell that allowed their owners to crane their exceptionally long necks upwards and browse from the branches of tall plants. Darwin certainly brought back several shells and skeletons of these extraordinary reptiles but he had done the unforgivable. He had neglected to note which of them came from which island. So he couldn't use them to illustrate his theory. Instead he had to base it on the rather less dramatic mockingbirds that his assistant Symes Covington had not only collected but had meticulously labelled with their place of origin.

Darwin's son inherited his father's collecting mania. But in 1840 a new collecting possibility had arrived. Britain had invented the postage stamp and it had spread around the world. In 1862 Darwin wrote to one of his scientific correspondents, Asa Gray, the Professor of Botany at Harvard in the United States and asked him if he could possibly send his son some stamps. Not any old stamps, of course, but the Wells Fargo Company Pony Express tuppenny and fourpenny ones.

Stamps were still the rage when I was a boy but I sense that these days the passion has lessened with the sheer abundance of different issues. Very few contemporary ones are rare enough to quicken the collector's pulse. Modern marketing methods take care of that. Bus tickets, which back in my boyhood had different colours for different values, have now gone. Even train numbers, which were once in vogue, are no longer, I'm told, very interesting. More seriously, collecting many kinds of natural objects is now forbidden by law. For very good reasons, it is now illegal to collect birds' eggs or pluck rare wild flowers. Nor is it allowed, on many sites of geological im-

portance, for a boy without a permit to go in search of fossils as I once did.

And I worry about that, for it seems to me that the collecting impulse was responsible for stimulating an interest in natural history and ultimately giving people a love and an understanding of the natural world. Maybe some of us will be able to translate that passion to accumulate material objects into an equally satisfying way of collecting photographic images of birds and butterflies, dragonflies and flowers. I hope so.

But there is no need for us to feel too guilty about the passion for collecting. For many of us it was the trigger that led us to the deep pleasures that come from an involvement with the natural world and an understanding of how it works. And it led one man of genius to propose the most important and revolutionary theory in the whole of natural science.



While a student at Cambridge University, Charles Darwin became a fanatical collector of beetles.

One of his friends and fellow beetle-enthusiasts, Albert Way, drew this cartoon of him pursuing his hobby.

David
Attenborough

Life Stories