

National College of Art & Design Visual Culture Research Project

**‘The Irish Taxidermy Industry 1830- 1952 and its enduring
legacy today’**

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Submitted to the School of Visual Culture for the degree of BA in

Fine Art Painting/ Education

2023

School of Visual Culture

I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

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Date: 8 Jan 2023

Acknowledgements

- Nigel Monaghan (ex. National Museum of Ireland)
- Dr. Sherra Murphy (IADT)
- Kathryn Connolly (Westport House)
- Walter Phelan
- Dr. Amy Geraghty (National Museum of Ireland)

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Ireland's taxidermy industry 1830-1952 and its enduring legacy today.

Taxidermy is a craft which, despite a resurgence of sorts, has had its golden age. When most think of the practice of stuffing and mounting animals, they most likely imagine faded cases on pub walls, poorly mounted family heirlooms relegated to the attic, or the dusty halls of a natural history museum. This public perception of taxidermy need not be a negative one, after all it is more than 120 years since the Victorian age ended, and in the years afterwards much of its trends, fashions and practices, including taxidermy, had declined. Despite valid arguments by its advocates for its benefits and relevance, the fact remains that the heyday of the worldwide taxidermy industry was the mid to late 19th century and it seems certain that this will forever be the case. Ireland is no exception to this trend, with a number of taxidermy firms operating on the island at the time and producing generally a high standard of work, much of which indeed survives today as some of the most beloved taxidermy exhibits of the general public in the ever-popular Natural History Museum in Dublin. As such, it is indeed probable that the first image which an Irish person conjures in their head of 'taxidermy' is a piece by one of these taxidermists, who, aside from their work, also contributed on a large scale to the development of nature study in this country. Unfortunately, as often happens, things which have been in plain sight for so long often go unnoticed and are often under-appreciated by a public audience, and the same could arguably be said here. This research project aims to explore a keystone for the popularity of places like our Natural History Museum- Irish taxidermy- chronicling its history from the early nineteenth century to the 1940s. It also seeks to examine the enduring legacy of this industry to this day, exploring their close relationships with Irish naturalists, and particularly with bastions of natural science in Ireland such as the RDS and the Natural History Museum.

Beginnings (c 1830- 1860)

Taxidermy has been practiced in more or less its current form since the sixteenth century. (Eastoe, 2012, p.17). However, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, a number of factors combined that would see the practice skyrocket in popularity. Two of the most significant events to this end were the invent of arsenical soap, the most effective insect deterrent up until that period, and the phenomenal public interest in natural history brought about by the age of exploration, the scientific boom of the enlightenment, and the groundbreaking classification of flora and fauna of Carl Linnaeus (1707-78). (*Ibid*, p.18). The worldwide craze for taxidermy would see its heyday in the mid to late nineteenth century, however it is in the interest of this inquiry to initially attempt to establish the early history of Ireland's taxidermy industry and its scale in the 1830s and 1840s.

Records of Irish taxidermy are notoriously challenging to unearth- little attention was generally paid by museums to the taxidermist themselves, who was all too often simply regarded as a tradesperson. (O'Connell, 2022a). Indeed, taxidermists frequently did little to counter this vacuum of information by failing to label or sign their own work. Thus, the task of searching for information on the topic is challenging, and is especially difficult when attempting to deal with our earliest practitioners. Census records prior to 1901 are fragmented and unreliable. Records in Dublin's Natural History Museum prior to the 1880s are often scant, and the taxidermist has not been mentioned in many cases. The oldest known taxidermy mount in the museum's collection today is a poorly mounted head of an Irish wolfhound, dating to the 1830s, however the taxidermist is lost to history. (O'Connell,

2022a). The earliest record books in the museum archives appear to date from the late 1830s.

Early Irish Practitioners: Richard Glennon, James Thom and Henry Gordon

There were at least three sizable taxidermists operating in Dublin from the 1830s to the 1850s. The earliest one seems to be able to pinpoint a taxidermy business operating in this country is 1830, when a Richard Glennon of Dublin (1764-1861) appears in Wilson's Directory as a 'preserver of birds, beasts &c' (Wilson, 1830, p.75). Glennon's taxidermy business was evidently one of the larger Irish firms in the mid 19th century- an 1832 newspaper article describes sportsmen working on commission for him. (Anonymous, 1832). Four of Glennon's children followed in the business, and the surname appears in directories up until the 1880s.(Thom, 1883, p.1382) Another taxidermist of note in the 1840s is a James Thom & Co of Great George's St. South. Thom seems to have been the main taxidermist to the RDS in the 1840s, being paid a very sizable £239, 1 shilling and 6 pence by the society between 1840 and 1856. (RDS, 1840-56). From the 1850s, a Henry and Helen Gordon of Grafton Street- presumably husband and wife-were also dealing with the RDS, after which there is no mention of Thom & Co. (*ibid.*, 1852, 1853). Despite the scant records of taxidermy in Ireland at this time, it is very probable that the craft was undertaken semi-professionally by various individuals in the years prior; records may simply just not survive, if they indeed existed in the first place. (O'Connell, 2022a). (See Appendix A).



Fig. 1: Bird Diorama by Elizabeth Glennon, daughter of Richard. Image: Kate Haughey



Figs. 2 & 3: Golden Eagle and Hare Prey by Henry Gordon of Grafton St, Dublin. C.1850s. Image: Conor O'Connell.

Henry Gordon, Trade Label from above case. Image: Kathryn Connolly.

The ‘Golden Age’ of Irish Taxidermy: 1860-1914

Glennon’s business was evidently a valuable one as it generated a dispute between his widow and son, both potential heirs, upon his death in the 1860s. (Adelman, 2010, p19). One would of course struggle to imagine a taxidermy business of such stability in the present day. As the nineteenth century progressed, the taxidermy industry in Ireland gradually grew. As we have seen before, this period coincided with a spike in public interest in taxidermy, often in natural settings, and it became an important feature in the country house in Britain and Ireland. (Foster, 1997, p.517). These new developments in the world of taxidermy were also embraced by museums as the century went on, Dublin being no exception. Indeed two developments took place in this sector in the late nineteenth century which benefited Irish taxidermists enormously. The first of these took place in the 1870s, when the museum became state owned, and henceforth had a sizable budget provided from London.

(O’Connell, 2022a). This allowed large scale reordering projects which saw dealings with businesses like Williams & Sons skyrocket in order to dramatically expand both its display and research collections. (Adelman, 2005).

From a general standpoint, it is also important to remember the very practical factors which contributed to the popularity of taxidermy at this time. For example, the camera was a relatively new invention and certainly was far from capable of being of use to wildlife enthusiasts. There was certainly no video footage, and even binoculars were in their infancy. Taxidermy, therefore, was a hugely effective conduit for the study of both native and exotic fauna alike. (Eastoe, 2012, p.1). It is no coincidence therefore that we see Irish taxidermy reach new heights from about 1870 onwards, with the opening of some of the most well

known firms and the major development of the Science & Art Museum, Dublin which remains to this day a key reference for Irish historic taxidermy.

There were three notable firms of this category in Ireland this period, which had a particular influence on the landscape of taxidermy and the study of nature in Ireland. These were Alfred Rohu of Cork, Sheals of Belfast, and Williams & Son, Dublin. As the best example of a taxidermy firm, the case study below will be focused on one of these, Williams & Son. of Dublin.

The most valuable sources for establishing the scale and contribution of these firms to Irish natural history were record-books, correspondence and memoranda made available to me at the Museum archives, Swords, co.Dublin.



Figs 4 & 5: Close-up of a Kingfisher case by Sheals of Belfast, Natural History Museum, Dublin. . Image: Conor O'Connell.

Cased pair of pheasants by F.R Rohu of Cork. Image: lot-art.com

Williams & Sons, Dublin: A Battle of Bowlers and Birds. A Case Study.

The Williams family firm, due to the large amount of surviving records and correspondence, is a suitable firm to examine in detail in this enquiry.

Alexander and Edward Williams were the sons of a hatmaker, William Williams, and as detailed previously, their father was instrumental in encouraging their interest in ornithology and taxidermy, which quickly grew into a profitable enterprise. While initially taxidermy and hats were both produced in the same shop, the birds eventually won out over the hats in the 1870s, depicting the immense interest in taxidermy at the time (although the fact that taxidermy evidently became more profitable than hat making was even surprising to people at the time). (Barrington, 1906, p.21). As the years progressed, so did the business and the Williamses gradually established themselves not only as prominent taxidermists, but also respected naturalists. According to Gordon Ledbetter, eventually Williams' taxidermy business 'would become a locus for collectors, sportsmen and naturalists calling in and exchanging information' (2010, p.51).

Undoubtedly, the firm's relationship with the Natural History Museum, which was becoming increasingly popular among the public, contributed greatly to their success. No company records of Williams & Son survive, but one can get some sense of the scale of their business from the pages of the fascinating notebooks in the Museum archives recording specimens sent to taxidermists. Williams & Son were by far their main taxidermists. At the turn of the century, in 1900, the overall payment made by the museum to the firm for preparing and mounting skins totalled to £19.3.6d. (*Specimens sent to taxidermists, 1888-1909*). Dealings with taxidermists in general, and Williams & Sons in particular, increase dramatically from 1901 onwards, which coincides with a second major rearranging of cases on the ground floor

at this time. (Adelman, 2005, p.433). The lists of specimens being prepared by Williams' in the early years of the 1900s seem to go on endlessly. In 1901, the firm was paid £73 over the course of the year. This had increased further in 1902 to £107.14.6d. (*Specimens sent to taxidermists, 1888-1909*). This is compared with an apparent yearly income of £22 and 5 shillings from the museum in 1888. (*ibid.*) This of course excludes their private clientele- almost every country house was fashionably adorned with taxidermy- so much more income undoubtedly came from this sector also. To list some examples of the prices of the company at this time, a sparrowhawk cost 7 shillings to mount, a seal £2 and a python £6. The large case of a moor in summer cost a much higher £17 and 10 shillings, with the winter equivalent costing £12 and 10 shillings. The two backdrops for these cases, painted by Alexander Williams cost £11 combined. (*Ibid*). This was also a period when the cased diorama was a major trend in the modern museum (O'Connell, 2022a). Over the next decade, Williams & Son would produce some of the most well-known exhibits in the museum such as the fox, badger and otter family groups (1910, 1911 and 1913 respectively). (*Stuffing Specimens 1910-23*). Most items took on average 9 months to a year to complete. (*ibid.*).



Fig. 6: Summer moorland diorama scene with painted backdrop by Williams & Son.NHM, Dublin. Image: Conor O'Connell



Fig. 7: Close up of winter moorland scene by Williams, NHM. . Image: Conor O'Connell.

1910	Williams & Son.			Supplying	10 3 -
Oct. 14 th					
296-1910	2 Flying Squirrels	16 -	554-1910	Skin of 38 Barn Swallow	15 -
230-1910	Mounting Turbot	12 6	557-1910	" " - Stentor	8 6
116-1909	" Pilot fish	7 6	558-1910	" " - Greenhouse	4 -
509-1909	" Pipe "	7 6	561-1910	" " - Greenhouse	4 -
427-1910	Skimming Pt. B.B. Gull	5 -	562-1910	Black Tern	7 6
426-1910	" Herring "	4 6	564-1910	" " - Great Crest Grebe	5 -
429-1910	" Grey Crow	3 6	560-1910	" " - Grey Plover	5 -
455-1910	Supplying Seal Skull	5 -	559-1910	" " - Golden Plover	5 -
454-1910	" " Skins	10 -	562-1910	" " - 2 English Jays	8 -
450-1910	Mounting Alpine Accents	8 6	" " - Sparrows Hawk	2 -	
449-1910	Supplying 2 Lapwings	10 -	566-1910	" " - Water Hen	3 -
501-1910	" 1 Pelican	2 -	541-1910	" " - Murrel Thrush	2 6
447-1910	Group of Ruffs	2 -	542-1910	" " - Blackbird	2 6
250-1910	Skimming + dressing lion	1 -	551-1910	" " - 2 Starlings	5 -
555-1910	Skin of Sparrow Hawk	3 -	565-1910	" " - 2 Titlarks	4 -
544-1910	" " Black Redstart	5 -	545-1910	" " - 4 Grackles	8 -
547-1910	" " Goldfinch	2 6	548-1910	" " - Brambling	2 6
556-1910	" " Peregrine	7 6	546-1910	" " - Chaffinch ♀	2 -
		10 3 -	543-1910	" " - Stonechat	2 -
					14 11 6

Fig. 8: Example of a page detailing the extensive business of the NHM with Williams & Son. from a notebook *Stuffing Specimens*. This page dates to 1910 and one can see an example of the firm supplying the museum with specimens. Photo: Conor O'Connell

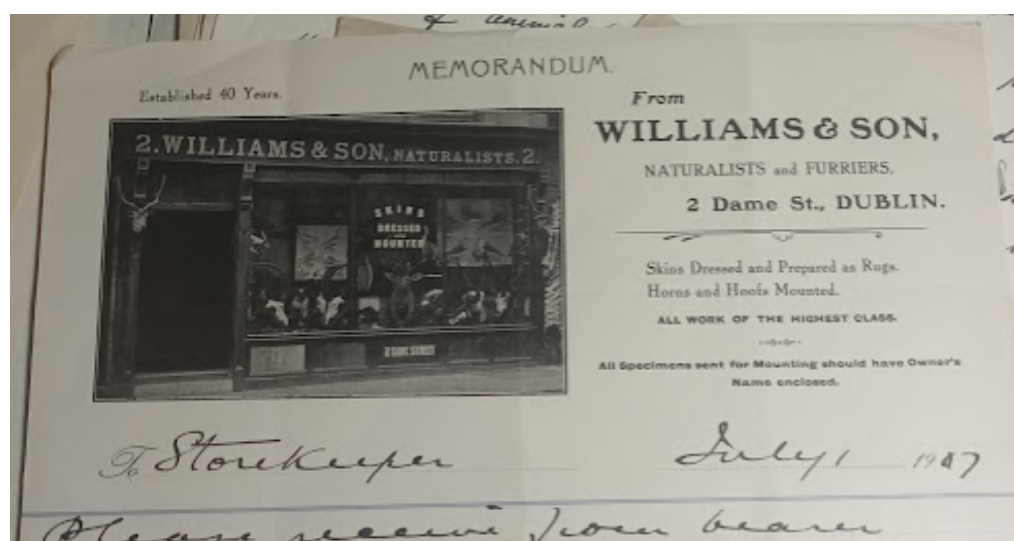


Fig. 9: Williams & Son letter- head from 1907. Photo: Conor O'Connell.



Fig. 10: Shoveler duck by Williams & Son. Image: taxidermy4cash.com.

Taxidermy could evidently be a quite prosperous enterprise in the early 20th century when run by shrewd businessmen: Williams himself had no other income but that from taxidermy, yet lived in some prosperity and raised a family of three. (Ledbetter, 2010, p.63). Not only did the firm operate from a fashionable address two doors down from Dublin Castle, but was on such a scale that apprentices and extra staff were employed full-time. From 1906, there were four full time employees working at Williams' (*ibid.*). In fact, three people in the Dublin area described themselves as 'assistant naturalists' in the 1911 census. One example of a worker at the Williams' firm was a Walter Connolly who appears in both the 1901 and 1911 census. (*Census of Ireland*, 1901, 1911). However, the fact must not be ignored that the majority of taxidermy firms of this time did not make their income solely from taxidermy; Williams & Son described themselves as 'Naturalists & Furriers' and F.R Rohu of Cork was a 'plumassier' in addition to a furrier. Presumably a large amount of these firms' businesses came from these trades.

1914-1952: Declinings

The decline of the taxidermy industry in Ireland coincided with the craft's steady decline elsewhere in Europe. I have listed 1914 as the beginning of the end of the golden era of Irish taxidermy firms due to the obvious connotations this year has- namely the outbreak of the First World War, and the rapid decline of many elements of pre-war culture, including taxidermy. In an Irish context, the year would signify the beginning of almost a decade of warfare and instability, after which taxidermy would never regain its former status. Added to these factors were changes in thinking, practices, and technology: Ideas of conservation gradually began to take hold among the scientific communities, photography was developing, and taxidermy as interior decor was ebbing out of fashion. (Ledbetter, 2010, p.61).

Leaving aside the social and political strife detailed above, on a more practical level the museums like Dublin gradually reduced their taxidermy purchases as they simply became full. (*ibid.*). This can be seen in the Dublin museum's purchase logs from this period, to the point where a year's purchases are reduced to a single notebook page by the early 1920s. (*Stuffing Specimens 1910-23*). Furthermore, in a notebook listing dealings from 1910 to 1923 no other Irish firm but Williams are mentioned. (*ibid.*). In the pre-War years, the Dublin Museum was fairly generously funded from London. However, after Independence, the museum obviously lost its funding by the British administration and was chronically underfunded for decades afterwards. (Murphy, 2008,p.43).

Despite these declinings in museum work, a large contingent of a taxidermist's dealings was with private individuals of game shooting and fishing circles. However, this sector would too be decimated by the Great War and its aftermath. What was a major industry in itself before

the war was immediately sidelined when a vast number of its members swapped their shotguns for rifles and headed in their hundreds for the Western Front, from which a large number would ultimately not return. The same was the case for the many supporting contingents of the industry such as gamekeepers, beaters and ghillies, which ensured that it never again reached its former heights. (O'Connell, 2022a).

The strife of the War and its aftermath was compounded in Ireland due to the revolutionary years from 1916 to 1923. In the years prior to independence, the Irish countryside was a 'playground for a wealthy colonial class' who did not lack the money to contract businesses like Williams, Rohu and Sheals to decorate their ever expanding trophy rooms. (Foster, 1997, p.545). Income for taxidermists was presumably dealt a hard blow with the loss of many of the members of these classes.

Age also began to take its toll on taxidermy firms. When an old experienced taxidermist retired, often the quality of work declined, further reducing numbers of customers.

(O'Connell, 2022a). In the case of Williams & Son, the business began to stumble towards closure after sole owner Willie Williams' death in 1937. Walter Connolly, Williams' former employee, was the last to run the business until its inevitable closure, bringing an end to the firm after almost a century. (Ledbetter, 2010, p.63).

More than just ‘stuffers’: The enduring legacy of Irish taxidermists and their contribution to Irish nature study and culture at large

Taxidermists as naturalists

Despite the common stereotype, It is simply essential that taxidermists are nature lovers and keen bird and animal watchers. Good taxidermy is only possible in tandem with this deep connection to the natural world and if an individual does not possess this then why spend years mastering such a difficult art that incorporates so many different crafts? It has largely become a thing of the past to hunt solely for taxidermy, as was often the case in its heyday. However, one must strive to put this in the context of the time- as discussed, in a world where the gun was one of the only methods of close-up study of wildlife, and human impact on species was not fully understood- this was perhaps an inevitability. But in terms of being dedicated to the study of nature, taxidermists of this era were no different to today. Therefore, it is perhaps inevitable yet staggering all the same to see just how much the Irish taxidermists of the 19th and 20th centuries contributed to the study of nature in this country.

We see this as far back as Richard Glennon in the 1830s. Glennon frequently contributed to the *Irish Penny Journal*, *The Zoologist*, and *The Irish Sportsman*. He was an honorary member of the Natural History Society and was routinely described as a respectable and reliable authority in areas such as the Giant Irish Deer. (Richardson, 1846, pp 38-39). His shop on Suffolk Street, Dublin, was a hub for Irish nature enthusiasts who often inevitably met at the premises and shared information. Naturally, Glennon’s workshop was where many rare species ended up, and his shop records provided Irish naturalists with very valuable data on countrywide birds and animals. (Watters, 1853). Glennon is frequently credited for information in Victorian natural history publications, such as John Watter’s *Birds of Ireland*

(1853) where he is mentioned countless times. This trend continues with later taxidermists. William Williams was a member of the Natural History Society and the Royal Zoological Society. (Barrington, 1906, pp. 21-22). His sons, Alexander and Edward Williams were also keen ornithologists; Edward published some 78 articles in the *Irish Naturalist* and the *Zoologist* between 1887 and 1905 which are still an important source for ornithologists today, such as in research for first records (*ibid.*, pp 25-26). Alexander was no different- also keeping extensive birdwatching diaries which also remain important for today's scientists (Ledbetter, 2010, p.). Robert Lloyd Praeger' noted that the Williams' firm's books 'contained a large amount of information relative to the identity and place of capture of interesting specimens, and were often consulted by ornithologists'. (1949, p.177). They also assisted in publications on natural history. (Foster, p.265). Frederick Rohu also contributed articles to *The Irish Naturalist* and was secretary of Cork Naturalists' Field Club for many years (*ibid*, p. 149). Like the Williams', he also aided in generating the data which developed Irish ornithology in the late 19th and early 20th century.

Champions of conservation?

Undoubtedly, the period discussed was largely a time where the idea of wildlife conservation was in its infancy. However, taxidermists of this era were not blissfully ignorant of biodiversity crises. By looking at correspondences etc over the course of a few decades, one can begin to see the origins of a more conservation-friendly viewpoint among these taxidermists, who evidently were not afraid of changing their opinions as new knowledge came to light. As an example, in 1908 Williams published a lengthy article expressing his approval of protective legislation on bird populations (1908, pp 119-22). He also collected news-cuttings in his extensive birdwatching diaries, most of which discuss the subject of

conservation, some sounding remarkably progressive even by today's standards. (Ledbetter, 2010, p.87). Another example comes from Frederick Rohu of Cork, in correspondence with Robert Scharff dated May 3, 1898. In this postscript to a business dealing, the taxidermist laments the unfaltering persecution of choughs and peregrine falcons in Ireland and seeks their protection:

‘Choughs & Peregrine Falcons will soon be extinct as a Mr. Lisshen is robbing their nests twice in the year from Donegal to Cape Clear and from that to Wicklow Head...Can we not try and do something to save these fine birds (especially the Chough) from total destruction? I am thinking of getting the question raised in Parliament.’(Rohu, 1898).

Contributions to the Natural History Museum

.One could hardly speak of the enduring legacy of these taxidermists without mentioning their involvement in building the collections of the Natural History Museum. We have looked at this from the standpoint of assessing the scale of various taxidermy businesses but it is well worth returning to the subject in this context. From the 1830s, Richard Glennon, James Thom and Henry Gordon stuffed and mounted specimens for the Royal Dublin Society's museum which opened to the public in 1857 and would become the Natural History Museum. (RDS, 1830-1850s). However, Williams & Sons became by far the main players in this as the 19th century drew to a close. Between 1888 and 1909 they are responsible for the vast majority of the 1000+ specimens mounted and/or supplied to the museum. (*Stuffing Specimens etc 1888-1909*). This trend continues, albeit on a smaller scale, as we have seen, in the years afterwards. Importantly, roughly half of the museum's dealings with Williams in the early years of the 20th century are in fact specimens *supplied* by the firm to the museum. This can be explained by the simple fact that Williams & Son, by the nature of its business, had a large

network of naturalists, hunters and fishermen to draw from. However this points to an extremely important link between museum and taxidermist and illustrates the scale of the firm's contribution to the museum's collections. In the case of countless specimens, it seems that if Williams' didn't mount it, they supplied it. (*ibid.*). These collections are still a hugely relevant and important source of information to today's scientific community in Ireland and further afield, especially due to the fact that countless species are now protected and newer specimens are difficult to source, examples of which are studied closely due to them often being the only accessible specimens. Bird skins, for example, provide a 'biological snapshot' in time and are invaluable to scientists studying birds over time, while also being useful for DNA analysis. (Pavid, no date). Many rare specimens were mounted by these firms and are still on display today. (Foster, 1997, p. 534).

Taxidermy's contribution to Irish society

These taxidermy firms have also left a sizable impression on Irish society at large. The Natural History Museum has been a cultural gemstone in Dublin city life for decades, not least because of its enthralling interiors which have changed little since the end of the 19th century, indeed prompting public unease every time renovations take place should its interiors be changed. (Murphy, 2008, p. 43) The museum preserves an intact view of the past; a way of looking at nature in a manner distant to the 21st century visitor and provides a fascinating insight into how people interacted with the natural world over a century ago. (O'Connell, 2022b.). Most of the exhibits which make up this interior are, of course, the work of Irish firms. As an example, the family groups of mammals on the ground floor are some of the most recognised exhibits in the museum, all of these having been mounted by Williams & Son. Whatever one's stance is on taxidermy, few can argue about the aesthetic beauty and artistic brilliance of these works, and they have fascinated generations of visitors. In a curious

step away from scientific accuracy, these dioramas unwittingly mirror the prevailing domestic norms of the day and are arguably interesting as social documents as well as anything else. (Murphy, 2008, p. 46). Exhibits like these, and therefore the stamp of taxidermists like Williams, have arguably shaped the perception of a family group of badgers, for example, for thousands of Irish people who first saw the displays as children. (O’Connell, 2022a). Due to its historical interiors, some forget that the museum still serves as a hugely important and relevant centre for scientific research and still remains hugely popular with the public- at least 400, 000 people a year passed through its doors before the museum recently closed for renovations. (O’Connell, 2022a). As described above, a large part of this is testament to the craftsmanship and skill of Irish taxidermy firms such as Williams & Son.



Fig. 11: Fox family diorama case, NHM, Dublin by Williams & Son. Image: Wikimedia.org

Conclusion: Art to die for

On 23 March 1952, a 92-year-old Alfred Rohu died peacefully in bed after returning home from his Castle Market shop. He had continued to work there as a furrier and taxidermist until the day he died. Rohu was the last surviving of the well-known Irish taxidermists and in this vein, the late 1940s and early 1950s marked a watershed of sorts- Williams & Sons also closed its doors for good around this time. These sorts of businesses had been on the decline since the First World War, however by the middle of the century they were gone for good. This ended the days of 'high street' taxidermists' shops in Ireland and while taxidermists have continued to operate in the country to this day, the trade would never reach the same scale again.

Taxidermy has made a comeback in recent years. When practiced ethically, the art has had a resurgence as home decor and even contemporary art, and historical taxidermy now fetches record prices in the salerooms. In this current climate, it is my opinion that an examination and reappraisal of our own Irish historical taxidermy was well overdue. There has been very little research into this topic in the past, despite a keen interest by the public in spaces like our Natural History Museum. The specimens contained within were expertly preserved by masters of the art of taxidermy, and despite the inevitable fading that has taken place on a handful of mounts, they do appear as they were when they were first completed. Such is a testament to skill of these individuals- poor taxidermy has unfortunately always been common! Added to their skills in taxidermy is the fact that the majority of these people, such as the Williamses, were naturalists and ornithologists in their own right, and to one degree or other aided in our understanding of Irish natural history, especially ornithology, today. It has been my aim in this Research Project to shed some much-needed light on this subject and on the overall enduring legacy of these taxidermists in Ireland today and I hope to have

demonstrated this to the degree which I feel it warrants. I believe it would be a great loss to both Irish natural science and Irish art if this subject were to forever remain in the shadows.

4387 words

Appendix A-

Some further information relating to some of the taxidermists mentioned in the above research essay

Richard Glennon: Preserver of Birds, Beasts & Quadrupeds

Richard Glennon (1764-1861) is by a large margin the most frequently mentioned taxidermist of this early period and operated from a premises at 3 Suffolk Street as not only this, but also as a purveyor of other curiosities such as fossils and antiquities, some of which he sold to the Royal Irish Academy. (Adelman, 2010, p.). Being 65 years old when his taxidermy business first appears in records, it is possible that Glennon initially learned his trade as a hobby or as an aside possibly as far back as the late eighteenth century, although no sources uncovered thus far can confirm this. Some of Glennon's work was exhibited at the Dublin Industrial Exhibition of 1853. (1853, p.83). Glennon, although seen in scientific circles as primarily as a businessman and not a 'gentleman naturalist', provided Irish naturalists with valuable specimens and information- he regularly contributed natural history articles to the *Dublin Penny Journal* (Glennon, 1833) as well as *The Irish Sportsman* and *The Zoologist*. His observations are frequently mentioned in John Watters' *Birds of Ireland* (1853). He was an honorary member of the Natural History Society and was routinely described as a respectable and reliable authority in areas such as the Giant Irish Deer. (Richardson, 1846, pp 38-39). As with numerous future Irish taxidermists, Glennon sold specimens to local institutions such as Queens College Cork, but also to the British Museum where he established a relationship of sorts with its Director, Charles Konig. (Adelman, 2010, p.19). Irish Elk skeletons and skulls were numerous in Ireland compared to any other country and were in particular demand not just at home but also overseas. Glennon was one of their key dealers in the 1840s.(*ibid.* ,p). Glennon undertook work for the Royal Dublin Society- his first mention is in 1836 being owed a bill of £7 and 13 shillings. He continued to sporadically deal with the society until the early 1840s. (RDS). Four of Glennon's children followed in the business: Elizabeth operated from both Suffolk St and Wicklow St at various times, and John Glennon of 9 Dawson Street was advertising in the *Irish Sportsman and Farmer* up until the 1880s. (Glennon, 1880) and appears in Thoms Directory in 1883 at 2 Merrion St. (Thoms, 1883).

An interesting insight into how taxidermy dealers of this era worked can be found in *Saunders's newsletter* for Monday 17 September 1832. The article describes a shooter working on commission for Glennon who upon bagging a rare bird along the coast, immediately took it to his shop where it was duly stuffed and mounted, and word being sent to a collector. (Anonymous, 1832).

James Thom & Co.

From at least 1840, James Thom & Co of 20 Great George's St South, Dublin was trading with the RDS. (RDS, p). Interestingly, Thom seems to have been the main taxidermist to the society in the mid nineteenth century- his dealings with the society dwarf those of Glennon and Gordon. The first mention I could find of this firm outside of the RDS proceedings was in Slater's Directory for 1845.

Henry Gordon

A Henry Gordon traded in Belfast as a bird-preserved from at least 1839. (Martin's, 1839, p. 60). From 1852, presumably the same Henry Gordon was operating from 35 Grafton Street, Dublin. For whatever reason, Henry and a Helen Gordon- presumably his wife- become the default taxidermists to the Society in the 1850s and there is no mention of Glennon or Thom after this point in the RDS Proceedings. A golden eagle with hare prey mounted by Gordon can be seen in Westport House, co. Mayo- a rare article of mid 19th century Irish taxidermy.

Other early practitioners

From 1845, a William Ashton Hackett of 32 Great Georges St, Cork appears alongside Glennon as a 'bird preserver' in Slater's Directory. (Hackett seems to have primarily dealt in fishing tackle with taxidermy as an aside).(1845, P). Hackett appears in Cork Directories up to 1916. (Guys, 1916, p. 211). Presumably his wife, a Mrs. Hackett appears occasionally such as in 1893 under 'naturalists'. (Guys, 1893, p. 297).

A Harold Owen of Clanbrassil Street, Dundalk, appears as a gun maker, fishing tackle vendor and bird preserver in a directory for 1840 (p.96).

A John Houston of Ballymeena, co.Antrim, is present in the 1901 census as a ‘stuffer’, aged 77, raising the possibility that he was at work in the early-mid nineteenth century (however it is just as likely that he simply took up full-time in his old age what was previously a hobby). (Census of Ireland, 1901).

James Sheals set up the well-known taxidermy firm in Belfast in 1858 and was subsequently succeeded by his two sons, as detailed in the main body of the essay. William Williams, father to the well-known Dublin taxidermists, inspired his sons’ interest in taxidermy from an early age; he practiced the craft as a hobby and supplied skins to the Natural History Society (now the NHM). He learned his trade from a member of the Evatt family from Co.Monaghan. (Ledbetter, 2010, p.23). This serves to suggest that there was a fairly widespread knowledge of the practice in the early to mid nineteenth century in middle class and scientific circles, even if this didn’t yet translate to a large abundance of professional craftsmen.

The earliest animal preserver in Belfast was apparently a George Whitfield of 17 Skipper Street who appears in a directory for 1831 (Matier, p.60) followed in 1835 by James Nichol at 26 Waring Street (Matier, 1835, p.117). A John Neil operated from 80 High Street in the late 1850s (1858-59).

The Royal Dublin Society

The Proceedings of the RDS from the 1830s to the 1850s occasionally throw up other names who could be taxidermists, however too little information is present to know for sure, relying on simple sentences in large lists of money owed. A George Roche appears frequently in the 1840s who almost certainly supplied wet specimens and made skeletons but may not have traded as a taxidermist per se. A John Galbraith was billed in 1838 for having supplied ‘birds for museum’ and ‘preparing subjects for museum’. Also frequently mentioned in the 1840s is a PA Leslie & Co, and in 1854 money was paid to an M.Baker, ‘stuffer’. (RDS).

It is interesting to note that from the late 1830s to the 1850s there are repeated calls for an in-house taxidermist to the RDS. On February 28th, 1839, Chairman, W.C Beatty declares:

"An Assistant, of some knowledge of Natural History, and capable of **preserving** birds and other specimens, would, therefore, be most important. Such a person could scarcely be procured under £100 per annum; but that sum would be well laid out, and could not much exceed the amount to be paid for specimens, if the Museum were what it ought to be'. (RDS, 1839).

They were apparently still calling for this in 1851, the then- chairman Walter Lindesay makes an almost identical proposition. (RDS, 1851).

Rohu of Cork and Dublin

The Rohu family of Dublin and Cork are a typical example of a family business in the craft in the mid to late nineteenth century. We are primarily concerned here with Frederick Raynor (F.R.) Rohu (Cork) and Alfred Rohu (Dublin).

Alfred Rohu (1860-1953) established a furrier and taxidermy business on Brunswick St. (Now Pearse St.) in 1890, stemming from a keen interest in the practice since childhood, and having returned from a successful tenure as taxidermist for the Natural History Museum in La Plata, Argentina, where he was hired on merit of his considerable skill compared to the museum's previous taxidermist (who was apparently incapable of stuffing and mounting reptiles). According to Rohu, the taxidermist was immediately given the position after showing the director a snail, 'horns and all' that he mounted around the age of 22. (Rohu, 1943). Humorous as this story reads, it is an anecdote which serves to depict the high degree of skill among Irish taxidermists, compared to countries like Argentina. (Connolly, 2017, p.45). Rohu, like the majority of Irish taxidermists, was outsourced by the Dublin museum for taxidermy jobs. (Rohu, *Specimens sent to Taxidermists*). Curiously however, despite the business being located in Dublin City, Rohu's undertakings for the museum are dwarfed compared to Williams & Son and later, even overseas firms such as Rowland Ward. (*ibid.*) Alfred Rohu lived a long life, even providing Radio Eireann with an account of his intriguing life in 1943. Rohu moved to 2 Castle Market in 1907 and continued to trade there as furrier and taxidermist until his death in 1953. This is the only business out of all those mentioned in this essay that is still in existence, in the same premises today, although after his death the business was taken over by Barnardos furriers and no

longer bears the Rohu name.

Frederick Raynor Rohu (1846-1930) originally attempted to channel his interest in ornithology into his position as an assistant lighthouse keeper with the Trinity Board (now Irish Lights), however in 1875 set up shop as a taxidermist at 72 Grand Parade, Cork. (Rohu, no date). (Along with Sheals of Belfast, F.R. Rohu was the largest taxidermy firm operating outside of Dublin, and is regularly listed in Cork directories and advertised in newspapers. Frustratingly, for unknown reasons, F.R. Rohu does not appear once in the record-books viewed by the author for the periods 1888-1923, however it would be most unusual if Rohu of Cork did not have some trade with the museum in a period of more than 35 years. Indeed, various correspondence between Rohu and the museum's director, Robert Scharff, exist which detail some dealings in specimens, although it does appear as if Rohu attempted to forge deeper commercial ties with Scharff who evidently preferred to deal with his nearer neighbours, Alfred Rohu and William & Sons. (Rohu, 1888).

James, Alred and Thomas Sheals, Belfast

Another main player in Ireland's taxidermy industry was Sheals of Belfast. Set up in the 1950s by James Sheas, the business reached new heights when run by his two sons, Alfred and Thomas. Sheals & Sons produced some of the highest quality taxidermy of the time and examples can be seen in both the Natural History MUseum in Dublin and the Ulster Museum, Belfast. Evidently the business did not pay; Alfred Sheals funeral costs paid for by his customers (RTÉ News, 1983).

Attempting to establish the scale of the Irish taxidermy industry from the 1860s and their contribution to Irish Natural History

It is much easier to find mention of taxidermists in Ireland in this period than the period looked at in the first chapter. As well as more comprehensive censuses and directories which survive, this was also a period where the industry flourished. However, this was a gradual development. According to

Thom's Directory for 1866, there were only three taxidermists in Dublin: Sarah Glennon of Frederick Street South and John Glennon of Wicklow Street- the daughter and son respectively of Richard Glennon whom we discussed earlier, as well as the brand new business started by Alexander and Edward Williams. (Thoms, 1866). Practitioners of the mid 1800s typically described themselves as 'stuffers' or 'bird preservers' but as the century progressed the terms 'naturalist' 'taxidermist' became more common. This diversity of terms can be a pitfall for research into this topic. In the Belfast directories, the term 'taxidermist' was first used by James Sheals in 1877. (1877, p.285). It can be difficult to calculate how many *independent* taxidermy businesses were operating around this time due to this range of terms and also the fact that often apprentices or staff members in firms such as Williams or Rohu describe themselves as simply 'naturalists' or 'taxidermists' in census records. For example, a Water Connolly listed as a 'naturalist' in the 1911 census worked at Williams and took over the business when it ceased trading in 1941. (Connolly, 2017, p.). However, interestingly there is both a male and a female 'assistant naturalist' in the 1911 census as well as a 'naturalists messenger'. (Census of Ireland, 1911).

Two results of particular interest from these years are a Henry Joliffe and his son Francis of Usher's Quay, Dublin, and an Edward McCourt of Wellington St, Derry. (Census of Ireland, 1901 & 1911). Judging by the nature of these census results, it is possible that these are two additional independent businesses, however I have not come across these names anywhere else at the time of writing, including in multiple taxidermy record-books of the Natural History Museum from this era.

There also seems to have been a Robin family (excusing the pun) operating in Belfast around the turn of the century- a William Robin and an M. Robin appear as taxidermists in Belfast directories from the 1890s (1890, p) and a James Robin lists his profession as a taxidermist in the Census of 1911. William Darragh (1813-1892), the curator of the Belfast Museum, can be found under 'curator of museum and animal preserver', and in 1880 his brother is listed as a taxidermist. (1880 p.139).

Museum Staff

Robert Pride (1839- 1908) joined the Science & Art Museum (now the Natural History Museum) in

Dublin as an in-house taxidermist in 1855 and remained in this position until 1904. His high quality work can still be seen in the museum today (Praeger, 1949, handwritten). There is a James Tank of York St. present in both of these censuses and he certainly mounted animals for the museum in the late 19th century. (Census of Ireland 1901, 1911, *Specimens sent to Taxidermists 1887-1949*). John Carroll also stuffed museum specimens. A person named Cullen made skeletons for the museum, however I have not seen any more mention of these two people outside of the Museum records. (*ibid*). Also of note is a James SS Hulbert, who succeeded Pride as in-house taxidermist here in 1904. (Praeger, 1949, handwritten notes).

Appendix B- Irish Taxidermists, 1830-1920

Below is the full extent of ‘taxidermists’, ‘stuffers’ and ‘naturalists’ I have come across in the course of my research to the extent which I feel they should appear on a list.

To my knowledge nobody has compiled a list of this kind to date and I am sure there are some names which have been unearthed for the first time in a century or more.

Also included are the full results for the 1901 and 1911 census.

Earliest Mention	Name and Address	
1830	Richard Glennon, 3 Suffolk Street, Dublin. (Last Mention 1862)	
1831	George Whitfield, 17 Skipper Street, Belfast.	
1835	James Nichol, 26 Waring Street, Belfast.	
1839	Henry Gordon, 4 Arthur Street, Belfast.	Moved to Dublin by
1852		
1840	James Thom & Co, 20 Great George’s Street, Dublin.	
	George Roche?	
	Harold Owen, Clanbrassil St, Dundalk	
1845	William Ashton Hackett, 32 Great George’s Street, Cork.	
1840s (du)	P.A. Leslie & Co?	
1852	Henry Gordon, 35 Grafton Street, Dublin.	
1854	M.Baker?	
1855	Robert Pride joins Natural History Museum, Dublin.	
1858	John Neil, 80 High St., Belfast.	
	James Sheals sets up in Belfast, 32 Corporation st.	Sheals of Belfast
established		
1866	Sarah Glennon, Frederick St South, Dublin	Last
Mention 1883		
	John Glennon, Wicklow St, Dublin	Last Mention
1883		
	William Darragh, Curator of Belfast Museum & Animal Preserver, 7 College	
Square	North, Belfast.	

	His brother Thomas listed as a taxidermist in 1880.	
	Robert Donnolly, Ballymacarrett.	
	George Dyer, Belfast, 9 Academy Street.	
	William Williams, Dublin	Williams & Sons
Established		
1881	Frederick Raynor Rohu, 61 Grand Parade, Cork.	F.R Rohu, Cork, First
Mention		
1887	James Magill, 4 York St., Belfast	
	James Tank, 50.5 York Street, Dublin	
	James Carroll	
	? Cullen	
	James Mawhinney, 9 Academy Street, Belfast	
1890	William Robin, 10, 12 Church Lane, Belfast	
1892	J.Darman, Duncairn Gardens, Belfast	
1897	J.H Atkins, Dunmanway, Cork	Naturalist & Bee-Keeper
1901	Henry Jolliffe, 31.1 Parliament St, Dublin	
1903	Edward Bolster, Mallow, Cork	
	J.N Halbert succeeds Robert Pride in NHM	

Appendix C- Census of Ireland Results 1901 and 1911

Census of Ireland 1901

Search results for 'taxidermist'

James Robin, Belfast	Age 19	Son of William Robin? His mother appears to be a widow
Alfred Sheals, Belfast	Age 45	
Thomas Sheals Belfast	Age 37	
Henry Jolliffe, Dublin	Age 37	
Michael Hennessey, Kilkee	Age 34	
John Rohu, Dublin	Age 37	

Search Results for 'Bird Stuffer'

John Houston, Ballymena Age 77

Search Results for 'Naturalist'

John Dorman, Clifton, Antrim	Age 58	
Walter Connolly, Dublin	Age 25	Assistant with William & Son
William Williams, Dublin	Age 88	
Edward Williams ‘‘	Age 52	
Hugh Williams ‘‘	Age 21	
William John Williams	Age 41	
James Tank, Dublin	Age 53	
Michael O’Mahony, Cork	Age 60	
John Langan, Cork	Age 42	
Edward Bolster, Cork	Age 35	
George Cole, Athenry	Age 47	
Thomas George Quinn, Portadown	Age 45	

Terence Connolly, Monasterevin	Age 27	
Adele Fay, Dame St, Dublin		Also 'Bird Merchant'
Joseph Cross, Clontarf	Age 64	Also 'Engine Fitter'
Alfred Rohu, Dublin	Age 41	
Frederick R. Rohu, Cork	Age 54	
Frederick B. Rohu, Cork	Age 21	Son
Charles Green, Kilmeena	Age 25	Board of Agriculture
George Philip Farran, Ballymakilly,	Age 24	Dept. of Agriculture

Other

Robert Pride,	Age 61	Museum Assistant
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Census of Ireland 1911

Search Results for 'taxidermist'

Charles David Head, Clontarf,	Age 42	
Henry Jolliffe, Dublin	Age 47	
Francis Jolliffe, Dublin	Age 15	Son
James Robin, Antrim	Age 30	
Alfred Sheals, Clifton, Antrim	Age 55	
Thomas Sheals	Age 47	
Edward Mc Court, Derry	Age 57	

Search Results for 'stuffer'

None

Search Results for 'naturalist'

James SS Hulbert, Dublin	Age 39	Succeeded Pride in NHM
Walter Connolly, Dublin	Age 35	Worker at Williams & Son.
William John Williams, Dublin	Age 51	
James Tank, Dublin	Age 63	
Edward Bolster, Cork	Age 48	
Annie Letita Massy, Malahide	Age 43	'Assistant Naturalist'
Arthur James Johnson, Dublin	Age 41	'Naturalist's Assistant'
Thomas Nolan, Dublin	Age 38	'Naturalist's Messenger'
Patrick Meade, Dublin	Age 62	'Retired Naturalist'
Frederick Rohu, Cork	Age 64	
Alfred Rohu, Dublin	Age 51	
Robert Steward, Dundalk	Age 38	Also 'Berd Staffer'
Arthur Wilson Stelfox, Rathdrum	Age 27	ARIBA naturalist
Rowland Southern, Dublin	Age 28	Naturalist in Irish Fisheries

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