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Abstract:

This article investigates the literature surrounding taxidermy in the nineteenth century and focuses on eminent taxidermist Rowland Ward’s biography A Naturalist’s Life Study in the Art of Taxidermy. This little-studied text reveals the gory foundations of the Victorian natural history museum and its preoccupation with the annihilation, manipulation, and sanitation of the animal body. Through these processes, the museum produces a clean and often beautiful specimen that may be used to instruct museum visitors as to the anatomy, characteristics, habitat, and behavior of a given creature. Ward’s writings, in both Life Study and the Sportsman’s Guide, help the modern reader to recover these backstage elements of the museum, the processes that result in the clean and shining halls and exhibits that are often taken as the museum’s whole, providing for a richer experience and a deeper understanding of natural history and scientific culture. Ward’s work is also discussed as a form of life writing, despite its preoccupation with death, and viewed in light of a rich culture of natural history that flourished during the nineteenth century.

Keywords: Rowland Ward, taxidermy, museum, nineteenth century, life writing, natural history

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The coming night ushers in a softening of the city’s edges, a quieting down of the day. Gas lamps begin to blaze, urban and low lying stars. The gentle halos ringing these lights are soon put to shame by the kindling of a more intense illumination – limelight shining behind the glass panes of Rowland Ward’s Piccadilly taxidermy shop, The Jungle. For a moment, indrawn breath rattles against the throats of the crowd that gathers at the window, stopped short by their shock at seeing light in fierce, predatory eyes that they only now recognize as glass. Adrenaline continues to sparkle through nerve ends as the watchers shift and laugh off their fright, admiring the lifelike tableau. Behind the glass, an Indian elephant trumpets terror from a jungle glade.¹ The tail of the attacking tigress bristles as she sinks her four inch claws into the elephant’s tough hide; her companion in the grass is all corded muscle and kinetic energy, poised to take part in the struggle once an opening appears.²

Although I cannot be sure that the incident I have just described happened exactly as I have described it, a scene like this one might have played out in 1886, the year that Rowland Ward exhibited a group mount featuring an elephant and two tigers as part of a display entitled “The Jungle” at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in London. Ward often arranged exhibits inside the windows of his shop, which served as “a popular meeting place” for Victorian sportsmen, naturalists, and travelers (Morris Rowland Ward 36). Such exhibits served to attract attention to his services and skill and a display which incorporated two tigers and a full-size elephant mount would doubtlessly have drawn its share of attention and admiration. Natural history scenes like this, as well as exhibitions of foreign weapons and newly-completed work, made the Jungle a predictable gathering place for naturalists, collectors, and customers awaiting completion of their trophies (Ward Life Study 18-19). (An imaginative reader may even consider how like their distant prey, a ring of animals around a Serengeti watering hole, these nineteenth-century gentlemen of Ward’s might have appeared!)

Rowland Ward (1848-1912), a famous Victorian taxidermist, lived a life profoundly influenced by the museum culture of the nineteenth century. His autobiography, A Naturalist’s Life Study in the Art of Taxidermy, and the writings surrounding his art attest to the influence of that culture, illuminate

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² This image may be seen on page 75 of Ward’s Life Study, first edition. All citations throughout refer to that edition of the text.
the visceral underpinnings of the museum enterprise, and demonstrate that life writing may be deeply steeped in death.

While the culture of natural history in the nineteenth century has recently received increased study, taxidermy remains a largely neglected topic among literary scholars. Yet, connections between Victorian literature and taxidermy do exist. Eminent zoologist and historian of British taxidermy P.A. Morris describes a typical Victorian taxidermist’s shop as “a small, cramped, and very dingy place, with plenty of specimens standing about and the furthest gloomy recesses hiding all sorts of mysterious and dusty secrets” (History of Taxidermy 166). Morris also attributes a particular bouquet to this scene, consisting of “paint, turpentine, and other volatile substances used for cleaning and degreasing,” topped off with boiling glue, dust, and drifting bits of stuffing that might have been made from “tow, cotton wool, wood shavings, hay, peat, etc” (Morris History 171, 170). Besides the boiling glue, a kettle would also be kept by the master of the shop for “making tea at suitable intervals” (Morris History 171). Compare Morris’s description to one of the few direct mentions of taxidermy in Victorian literature, Charles Dickens’s description of Mr. Venus’s shop in Our Mutual Friend. The reader comes upon Venus’s abode and faces “...one dark shop-window with a tallow candle dimly burning in it, surrounded by a muddle of objects, vaguely resembling pieces of leather and dry stick, but among which nothing is resolvable into anything distinct, save the candle itself in its old tin candlestick, and two preserved frogs fighting a small-sword duel.” The shop is then entered through a “dark, greasy entry” which contains “a little greasy dark reluctant side-door.” Inside, the smell is “musty, leathery, feathery, cellary, gluey, gummy’ all offset by water boiling for tea and a muffin “on the hob” (Dickens 78). Dickens, who had twelve ornamental birds and a pet raven stuffed, was clearly familiar with the culture of natural history as it applied to the taxidermy workshop (Morris History 231).

While connections as specific as these may be rare, there is a rich wealth of literature surrounding taxidermy. As imperial expansion brought British subjects into unfamiliar territories, they encountered new and exotic animals. Through the efforts of Rowland Ward and others like him, these animal bodies took on “emblematic power,” transformed into trophies that might symbolize discovery and adventure or dominance and masculinity (Miller 48). Numerous field manuals, travel guides, and travelogues sprang up around this imperial enterprise, including Van Ingen’s famous guide: The Preservation of Shikar Trophies printed in 1921. Ward, himself, published The Sportsman’s Handbook to Collecting, Preserving and Setting-Up Trophies and Specimens to

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3 See: Asma, Stephen T. and Simons, John for example.

better aid in the preparation of specimens in the field, the result of which would be higher quality taxidermy after the salted hides finally made it to his workshop. Advertisements, workbooks, ledgers, catalogues, style books, and brochures make up further objects ripe for literary and cultural study. P.A. Morris has recovered and examined many of these documents for census data, to determine the seasonality of particular hunts, and to illuminate his historical studies, but literary scholars can expand these investigations (Morris Van Ingen 103-109, 112-117 and Morris History 332-350). As a first step toward this goal, this study seeks to recover the writings of Rowland Ward as a form of life writing based in death and as an example of personal museum making. I also contextualize such writing in the culture of the museum and argue that the modern museum cloaks the blood and viscera which underpins both Ward’s writing and work and the specimens displayed to museum-goers today. A thorough study of Wardian literature may have implications for how modern visitors regard and interact with the natural history museum and its peripheral institutions.

I. Life and Death Writing

Even in the midst of the rich critical work that has been done on nineteenth-century biography, especially as related to gender and sexuality, it is not entirely surprising that Ward’s work has been overlooked. A Naturalist’s Life Study neglects or omits many aspects associated with biography; for instance, Ward never tells the reader where or when he was born and the narrative he constructs is loose at best. Victorian life writing has traditionally been dominated by “men of letters” who “fashion[ed]… the genre… in [their] own image and according to [their] own criteria of success” (Broughton 8). The focus on these “great Lives” as the proper or typical form of life writing has resulted in the “rigidifying [of] a canon of frequently cited texts” and a set of formal conventions with which readers and scholars expect to be met (Broughton 8). These expectations are founded on the “idea of a literary tradition honouring men of indomitable wills, written in the disinterested voice of tradition,” a view which “continues to exert an influence on an understanding of Victorian life writing” (Amigoni 11). A Naturalist’s Life

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5 Among these I would include the American tendency to decorate sporting stores and restaurants with taxidermy displays

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*Study* eschews the formal concerns of the Victorian biographic tradition; Ward even expresses “apprehension” about his use of the first person, as though he is an intruder in his own story (Ward *Life Study* 12). In place of a more traditional narrative, the taxidermist breaks his manuscript up into three distinct parts. The first consist of “Some Random Recollections,” the second section details the progress and development of his business, and the third indulges in serious name dropping as Ward describes the sportsman with whom he has crossed paths. This unusual system of organization makes for strange reading but may be better understood if examined as a form of life writing influenced by the natural history museum and its surrounding culture.7

Traditionally characterized by its recording of memories and experiences, life writing suggests that the life under study is valuable for one of any number of reasons: the writer’s insights, unique experiences, his or her impact on history or proximity to other historical actors, or the writer’s commentary on a given time period or event. Scholar and critic Martin Hewitt emphasizes the primacy of “life” to life writing, suggesting that Victorian diarists might possess “a conscious sense” of their writings as “book[s] of life” (30). Such diarists might use an “introductory memoir” stating aspects of their lives they might not remember, such as the time and place of their births, or “supplement the regular entries with material encompassing those parts of their life not covered by the diary” (Hewitt 30). These additions point toward the fullness of life and the desire to create a recognizable narrative that begins with the subject’s first breath. Life writing flourished in the Victorian period with an “outpouring of memoirs, self-portraits, and other first-person singular writing” proving popular with readers and providing modern scholars with ample subject matter (Lambert and Lester 18). Perhaps the natural understanding of life writing as a discipline concerned with the life of the subject rather than with hoards of dead objects has worked to exclude Ward from consideration. It has been argued that the creation of a canon of nineteenth-century life writing has worked to “cast much life-writing – including not only overtly counter-hegemonic narratives but also popular best-sellers and even, in some cases, non-standard life-writing by or about canonical authors – into literary-historical darkness” (Broughton 9). Ward’s writings can certainly be classified as “non-standard” but as a “broad realm of cultural production and reproduction,” life writing is a vibrant genre that can easily incorporate and encompass even a text that goes tramping off the beaten path (Broughton 9).

In order to investigate the quirks of Wardian life writing, it is important to understand the museum context in which Ward would have worked. As a taxidermist, Ward created specimens and mounts associated with the natural

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7 I am not interested in defining Ward’s work as a particular type of life-writing, but in examining what shapes its content and form.
Confronted with bones and stilled bodied, the museum-goer is attended “metaphorically speaking” by “the smell of death” “everywhere in the natural history museum,” while “the literal smell of death” actually “fills many of the backstage rooms” of the natural history museum (Asma 35). After death, animal bodies destined for display are skinned, their bones cleaned, and their skeletons reassembled into the scientific specimens “so ubiquitous [and] so ‘natural’” to the museum space that visitors do not question the processes that yield them (Asma 30-31). By destroying animal (including human) bodies, the museum enterprise creates valuable specimens that may be used for study or displayed as demonstrations of particular properties.8 A single specimen may even be arranged in several ways so as to provide “insights into medicine, natural history, anatomy, physiology, evolution, even God’s goodness” (Asma xiii). Once prepared, arranged, and displayed, such specimens attain value for their usefulness, their beauty, or their part in completing a collection. In other scholarship, I have called this a “vampiric economy,” a system that produces value from dead forms that it then provides with new “life” in the form of specimens or exhibits.9 The life of Rowland Ward was deeply influenced by and imbricated in a museal culture. Besides the normal exposure to museum culture that Ward would have received as a London-dweller in the nineteenth century, his work brought him into contact with collectors, sportsmen, naturalists and students of natural history, curators and scientists associated with the Zoological Society of London, and museum staff.10 Much of his work also appeared in exhibitions and was later donated to museums. This intense contact with museum culture from a young age led Ward to compose a record of his life that is rife with museum references and heavily influenced by the culture of the museum.

As might be expected in a text influenced by the museum, Ward’s autobiography begins with death. In attempting to “jot down some of the more personal recollections which... flit across the canvas of [his] memory” Ward begins with “the terrible ice disaster in Regent’s Park” (12). This “calamity which... sent a thrill of horror through the whole community” resulted in the death of several of Ward’s friends who froze to death or “dropped off” an iron rail which they were clinging to in hopes of rescue and could have resulted in his death, as well (London Review 84, Ward Life Study 12). Giving truth to the London Review’s claim that the Victorian era was “an age...fertile of disaster,” Ward follows the discussion of the Regent’s Park

8 For a discussion of human taxidermy, see Morris History 88-98.


10 See Altick 317-19 and Simons 4-5.
disaster with a list of the other tragedies that he has personally witnessed, including two fires, an earthquake, and a train collision (London Review 85, Ward 13). Ward relates these events as they come to mind, beginning the story of his life by noting moments of death at which he has been present. Perhaps these moments come to mind so early in his work because he has lived a life in which death is a daily reality and a key factor in his career and fame.

Though Ward begins with the loss of human life, Life Study, and much of Ward’s other work, is actually assembled around the destruction of other animal bodies. Descriptions of zoo animals that might come to Ward’s after their deaths, animal bodies in various states of processing, and finished mounts comprise the bulk of A Naturalist’s Life Study.11 These animals vary from domestic creatures like famous racehorses or “railways dogs” like London Jack, who was displayed under a glass case and used as a sort of mascot to collect donations for the London and South Western Railway Servant’s Orphanage, to exotic and sometimes sensational mounts like the example of a leopard mauling a young native boy (Ward Life Study 64, 67 and Morris Rowland Ward 33).

The animal bodies that entered the Jungle’s workshops yielded not only mounts and Wardian furniture but casts and death masks (Ward 43).12 Ward echoes the museum’s vampiric economy when he notes that such casts have “proved invaluable in [his] work” (Ward Life Study 43). These grisly plaster plaques aided in the taxidermist’s arrangement of the final product or served as a sort of reference library. Morris suggests that these masks “may have been another Ward innovation” (Rowland Ward 100). This “time consuming” and “costly” technique provided a three-dimensional picture for taxidermists that might never have seen the animal alive (Morris Rowland Ward 101). These masks would have stared out from the Jungle’s walls, their lifeless features giving silent testament to a life committed to giving a second life to animal bodies. Ward’s decision to include them in the account of his life gives his autobiography a basis in death which seems contrary to the mode and purpose of life writing.

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11 Zoos provided taxidermists with a great deal of work because the standard of animal care was lower than it is today and knowledge of animal behavior and needs was less. An example of the Jungle’s dealings with zoos may be seen in A Naturalist’s Life Study when Ward describes the acquisition of a lion from the zoo (94). Also, Morris notes that Ward’s employee Arthur Manning “lost count” of the number of zoo animals he had prepared (Rowland Ward 100).

12 Wardian furniture, or furniture made from or incorporating parts of animal bodies, debuted in 1872 with a series of zoological lamps whose bases were “comprised of birds or quadrupeds arranged in various attitudes” (Ward Life Study 51). The popularity of these lamps led Ward to create numerous designs and experiments utilizing most parts of the animal body, including , in the twentieth century, a “lamp standard... constructed from a whale’s penis” (Morris Rowland Ward 105).
Ward’s connection to the museum and the untraditional format of his first-person work does not render *A Naturalist’s Life Study* or his other works devoid of considerations with life. Indeed, the language of the text is much livelier than the reader might expect. For instance, in his popular *Sportsman’s Handbook*, which ran into ten editions, Ward begins by arguing that the “value” of a specimen may be “increased by displaying its beauty truthfully to life” (x). The nature of Ward’s work is such that the aesthetic value of his creations is substantially increased when they appear most alive. Ward takes such pleasure in having this quality recognized in his work that he even quotes articles that highlight it and praise his mounts as “almost life-like” or that recognize their glittering glass eyes as “literally endowed with life” (quoted in Ward *Life Study* 104, 95). These quotations result in a text that is underpinned by language associated with life even though the reader might expect the focus to be on the hunt or the lifeless trophy that is its result.

Achieving the effect of life in a creature that has been reduced to a hide requires an intense amount of effort, effort that Ward outlines in *Life Study*. In his “student days,” Ward created sculptures and models to begin his work, often modeling animals from observations made of the living beasts at zoological parks (35 *Life Study*). In one case, Ward even goes so far as to antagonize a pair of dogs into fighting so that he may better study the movement of their muscles under the skin! (Ward *Life Study* 35). Models made from observations led to a design – the pose in which the finished mount would be displayed (Ward *Sportsman’s Handbook* 81). A design was then made based upon this model, with boards and iron rods serving as muscle and bones (Ward *Sportsman’s Handbook* 82). The making of this design was a labor intensive process involving sawing, riveting, and covering the frame with wood-wool, clay, or canvas (Ward *Sportsman’s Handbook* 83-84). The hide was then placed on this design and final touches were made to ensure that it bears the “natural features of the animal” (Ward *Sportsman’s Handbook* 85). Final touches might include affixing the whiskers or claws of a great cat and the modeling of “muscular developments” too small or intricate to be worked into the initial frame (Ward *Sportsman’s Handbook* 85). “Lips, eyelids, and ears” were all arranged in order to achieve the animal’s desired expression and any loose skin was secured through pinning or sewing (Ward *Sportsman’s Handbook* 85). The tongue, lips, eyes, and nose were then tinted and “mucous surfaces” covered with wax to achieve a wet sheen (Ward *Sportsman’s Handbook* 86). Attention to these details results in a mount that appears on the verge of taking action, even though all that remains of the original animal is the hide and perhaps the whiskers or the claws. In the strange context of taxidermy “death is not the event horizon we might assume it to be” in that “biological death” turns out to be “the birth of the specimen,” making “biological death... only one moment, one narrative hinge of many (admittedly a particularly resonant one) in the life/afterlife of the animal” (Alberti 6). Ward’s labors turn that “one moment” into a potential eternity in
the form of a trophy or memorial that will often be most admired for that which it most lacks --- life.

The most important part of this sought-after illusion then (as now) is the eyes. Eyes are held to be “fundamental to success” in taxidermy, especially in mammal mounts, and it is to the eyes that an observer looks for a flicker of life (Morris History 84). These bits of colored glass were so valued at the firm of Van Ingen and Van Ingen that “they were kept in a locked cabinet of wooden drawers, each filled with sawdust to prevent the eyes being scratched” and their “positioning” in mounts was checked before finalized. The Van Ingen eyes even had a separate logbook so that they could be tracked (Morris Van Ingen 126). Excellent eyes, like those used by the Van Ingen firm, were hand painted to match the species (the black pupil “softened” in the case of leopards and the “hard, circular outline” left intact in the case of tigers) and unique to every mount (Morris Van Ingen 124-126).\(^\text{13}\) The search for “species-specific details of eye structure and coloration” through the use of painted “thin glass domes” may have been one of Ward’s innovations in the field of taxidermy and his contemporaries recognized his “novel treatment of the eye” and “its immediate surroundings,” praising the lifelike gaze that has come to replace the effect achieved by the “common glass eye” (Morris Rowland Ward 114, quoted in Life Study 95). The use of more accurate eyes contributed to the creation of mounts far superior to the stuffed animal forms of taxidermy against which Ward sought to distinguish himself (Ward Life Study 32).

Through these forms and their ability to mimic living animals, aspects of life return to Ward’s life writing even as he documents a career based in death.

Though Ward’s work is rooted in death and the destruction of animal bodies, his efforts to endow these forms with the qualities of the animals which gave their lives to make them includes an admiration for natural history and a veneration of nature. Rowland Ward lived during what Lynn Barber identifies as “the heyday of natural history,” 1820-1870, when “every Victorian young lady, it seemed, could reel off the names of twenty different kinds of fern or fungus, and every Victorian clergymen nurtured a secret ambition to publish a natural history of his parish” (13). One can imagine that such an environment would have provided a naturalist and taxidermist with rich conversation and correspondence, a fact which Ward attests to when he notes his acquaintance “with a number of distinguished scientific naturalists during the course of [his] career,” including Charles Darwin, Richard Owen, and Paul du Chaillu (Ward Life Study 25, 37).

This environment also helped to shape Ward’s interest in animal lives. This interest appears throughout Life Study, a book written for “all those who care for natural history in its various aspects” (Ward Life Study 12). Though

\(^{13}\) For an economically-minded scholar, there is, perhaps, an entire paper to be done on the economy surrounding the creation of glass eyes for taxidermy in the nineteenth century. See: Morris Van Ingen 124-127.
never a big game hunter himself, Ward sought to incite increased understanding of animals and animal behavior in order that the natural world would continue to thrive. The Jungle’s shop windows, for example, featured an exhibit that aimed to educate hunters about “selective breeding and good deer herd management,” topics still of concern to naturalists and sportsmen today (Morris Rowland Ward 36). Ward also credits himself with getting others to answer “the calls of the wild,” by “always [being] anxious to foster the wish of men of wealth and position to go and hunt wild beasts in all parts of the world” (Ward Life Study 33). While the modern reader may flinch a bit (there may be a mercenary motive, after all, in Ward encouraging all that hunting) it must be remembered that Victorians saw hunting and collecting as key activities in increasing their understanding of the natural world. In an era absent instant photography and the Discovery Channel, most animals could not be encountered in the flesh unless that flesh was first removed and rearranged for display by a taxidermist like Ward. Indeed, Ward’s appreciation for the natural world and its beauty is the very motivating force behind his work and behind the many animal illustrations that he made and that appear in Life Study. Today it may be difficult to accept that Ward’s admiration for the animal form found expression in the form of liqueur cabinets made from elephant feet or shields bearing the snarling heads of great cats but it is that very admiration, shared with other naturalists of his time, that led to much of the accumulated wealth that natural history museums possess today.

II. Exhibiting a Life: Museum Culture and Museum Making

Ward’s interest in natural history and the museal nature of his autobiography attest to the reach of museum culture in the nineteenth century. Ward’s contact with the museum was established at an early age through family connections; his grandfather worked as a naturalist and as a “dealer in animal skins and skeletons,” products perhaps destined for the museum, and his father Henry Ward achieved “considerable eminence as a practical naturalist” and companion to Audubon, who worked as a taxidermist and spent much of his life collecting for museums (Morris Rowland Ward 9, Ward Life Study 29, Ward Sportsman ix, Rhodes 42). Ward’s exposure to museum culture may have been atypical, but the museum’s ubiquity ensured that most Victorians encountered some of its methods, either through the museum proper, through museum literature like The Pictorial Museum of Animated Nature or guidebooks to the Crystal Palace, or through a host of peripheral institutions that borrowed the museum’s methods of exhibition and display such as the Punch and Judy Show, the fair, the freak show, public scientific demonstrations, waxworks, the menagerie and late-century imperial exhibits (Fyfe 196, MacKenzie 259). While the museum attempted to elevate itself as an educational and scientific institution dedicated to “attempting to educate visitors” and aiding in the production of “new types of conduct and self-shaping,” especially as regarded the working classes, museal spaces like
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those outlined above sought to draw on the museum’s methods of offering education and entertainment at once, and sometimes used catalogue, taxonomy, or display in ways that would have been familiar to patrons of the museum (Merrill 110). The breadth of museal culture and activities ensured that most Victorians encountered one or more of them during their lifetime. Ward estimates the number of visitors to his first “Jungle” exhibit at “over ten thousand... on August Bank Holiday alone” (Life Study 80).

Ward’s connection to the museum appears early in Life Study when he notes that The Jungle was “almost on the spot” of what had once been a museum of natural history specimens; there is something wonderfully appropriate about that museum being succeeded by a shop that would supply so many museums and collectors (Ward Life Study 33). Ward’s museum work extends as far back as his childhood, during which he once helped his father to “stuff the wonderful collection of humming-birds for that celebrated naturalist Gould, some of which are to-day exhibited in the Natural History Museum of South Kensington” (Ward Life Study 44-45). Besides hummingbirds, museum exhibits also featured Ward’s work in the form of “prize dogs,” racehorses, an albino hedgehog, and elephants (Ward Life Study 62, 65, 102, 112).

Naturally, the Jungle had a strong connection to the museum as nineteenth-century museums “were regular and reliable customers for commercial taxidermists” like Rowland Ward (Morris History 253). Ward and his associates prepared exhibits for museums, performed maintenance and upkeep on collections of specimens, presented at many of the era’s major exhibitions, and contributed to a deeper understanding of natural history through presentations to the Zoological Society of London (Ward Life Study 45, 66, 70, 98). Besides preparing mounts to be displayed in museums or preparing specimens that would eventually be donated to museums, the taxidermists employed at Ward’s also saw to the routine maintenance and upkeep of large collections, whether part of a public museum or owned by a single collector. In order to maintain the high quality of finished mounts, some of Ward’s staff were “entrusted with the task of working on customer’s specimens away from the workshops” (Morris Ward 98). This willingness to “make house calls,” so to speak, would have kept Ward and his staff in the good graces of wealthy patrons with large private collections, like the Duke of Orleans. The routine maintenance of Wardian products also ensured that the mounts remained in good condition and contributed to Ward’s fame.14

Furthermore, Ward’s fame was dramatically increased by the Jungle’s long list of contributions to those popular nineteenth century museal spaces: exhibitions. Following the Great Exhibition of 1851, which “came to be seen as

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14 Many Ward mounts still exist today. Some may be found in museum collections, such as The Natural History Museum in Paris and others are available for purchase online through auction companies or private collectors. Today, restrictions are imposed regarding what skins and mounts may be legally sold and counterfeiting of antique labels is a concern (Morris ward 152, History 371).
a model of commercial success” and “philanthropically inspired public education,” younger exhibitions “harked back to” the “perceived achievements” of the Crystal Palace “while trying to surpass them” (Qureshi 3). Though often remembered for its mechanical and technical displays, the Great Exhibition looked and operated “like [the] natural history museums of the period” with its use of “streaming natural light from above” and displays “arrayed like objets d’art or sacred relics;” it also featured taxidermy (Merrill 110). Anthropomorphic taxidermy displays inside of the Crystal Palace “excited the interest of Queen Victoria herself” and demonstrated the attention that mounted animals might garner (Morris History 123). The rich history of London exhibitions has been outlined in great detail by Richard D. Altick, who uses the culture of the exhibition (the museal) as an “indicator of what went on inside ordinary Londoners’ minds,” “the limitations, contours, and textures” of the cultural imagination (4). Ward and his animal groups would certainly have been a subject for this imagination to grasp and Ward did all that he could to ensure that his work gained notice in the public eye, often utilizing advertising and press releases when one of his works went on display (Morris History 164, Ward 30).

In Life Study, Ward makes several gestures to the popularity of exhibitions and, by extension, to the popularity of the culture of the museum. Exhibitions are so important to his work and to his life that he proudly claims, “I have never been late in the opening of an Exhibition in my life” (79). The reader may better appreciate the difficulty of maintaining this standard if Ward’s work for the Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886, held at South Kensington, is considered. Ward mounted four displays for this exhibition (including the scene described in the opening pages of this essay) (Ward Life Study 76). In order to better recreate the expression of angry tiger, the taxidermist even visited the zoo “and made a tiger snarl by rattling the bars and afterwards fixed the whiskers on [his] mounted tiger in exact imitation” (Ward Life Study 76). When not agitating the lord of the jungle in the service of accuracy, Ward worked to “show the fauna and flora of India” including “representative animals and birds... in illustration of their habits” (Ward Life Study 76). In order to accomplish this, the celebrated taxidermist and his associates had to rearrange existing mounts on hand in the workshop, borrow specimens from collectors, and create the illusion of a jungle through the use of banyan leaves, “natural palms and foliage from India” and “reeds, rushes, and dead trees” (Ward Life Study 77). Ward’s willingness to undertake such intensive labor indicates the importance of exhibitions to his working life.

Besides this showing, Ward also exhibited “two red deer stags fighting with a fury common to this animal” at the London International Exhibition of 1871 (Ward Life Study 79). Ward even claimed to have pioneered “the grouping of animals amid surroundings in imitation of nature...” and argued that he contributed to museum culture “some of the earliest evidence that the public could be attracted by displays of this kind” (Ward Life Study 70). At one of the international exhibitions held in South Kensington, Ward “contributed a
section illustrating the various quadrupeds and birds – both native and foreign, wild and domesticated – used for food in the British Islands” (Ward Life Study 74). He claims that this exhibit proved to be of “unusual interest, attracting a large store of public attention” and argued that it should have been placed on permanent display at the Natural History Museum (Ward Life Study 77). Other exhibitions followed, including an 1887 display of American big game trophies, the “head of a charger” shown at the Royal Military Exhibition in 1890, and others in 1895 and 1896 (Ward Life Study 103, 65, 80). These exhibitions proved effective, gaining Ward “many medals, diplomas, and other awards for quality and ingenuity” (Morris Ward 35). They also kept Ward and his work connected to a growing museum culture.

Ward even harnessed museal culture to draw attention to his business. As noted above, the windows of the Jungle operated as a sort of miniature museum that was constantly being reset. Ward also channeled the museum’s function as an institution of learning, using his window displays to teach customers about other cultures. These included an “exhibition of Zulu weapons and domestic utensils” in 1879 and an 1885 exhibition of “Sudan relics” (Ward 18). These were followed in 1893 by a collection of “curiosities and trophies collected in Africa,” including elephant tusks “of enormous dimensions” (Ward Life Study 19). Ward displayed Norwegian sledges and a lion arranged in a “striking pose” that showed the animal “wounded behind the shoulder, in a sitting position, howling with rage, while keeping a sharp lookout for his enemy (Ward Life Study 19, 94). A white rhinoceros would also enjoy a second life in the window, as would a trophy leopard that “received a great deal of attention” and “admiration from the public” (Ward Life Study 73). Ward’s decision to make his window front into a museal space is just another testament to the vibrancy of the museum as a cultural institution in the nineteenth century. Today’s museum gift shops could easily envy the Victorian museum’s its ability to draw customers to Ward’s door!

An entire culture of natural history flourished alongside the natural history museum for which Ward prepared so many specimens, and he is careful to document his active participation in this culture in Life Study. Besides exhibiting mounts at the Jungle, Ward also made presentations to the Zoological Society of London and engaged in debates that ran the gamut from the consideration of abnormalities in “wild hollow-horned ruminants” to deformities in the horn formation of an Asiatic ibex (Ward Life Study 97-98)15. As an active fellow in the Zoological Society, Ward described new species, exhibited finished specimens, and provided an expert opinion regarding animal anatomy, species development, and taxonomy (Ward Life Study 116).

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15 Following this discussion of horns, Ward demonstrates his concern with records of trophies and fakes. This concern may have been fueled by the popularity of his Records of Big Game Hunting, which noted the preeminent trophies for each species, the hunter who took the trophy, and its location, whether in a museum or private collection.
Ward even makes an eloquent argument for the need for proper taxidermy and its relationship to scientific discovery when he claims that "the placing of many new species and varieties [in a taxonomic framework] may have been lost to science or delayed by the simple carelessness of collectors or the ignorant treatment of specimens when they have been sent home" (Ward Life Study 117). In referencing carelessness, Ward is likely criticizing the collector's lack of knowledge which would have led to misidentification and the false promotion of a new species. The mistreatment of skins in the field was so common that Ward attempted to remedy it by providing detailed instructions in The Sportsman's Handbook. The inclusion of tradesmen such as Ward in the Zoological Society may have gone a long way toward correcting misidentifications and helping to disseminate information about the proper handling of animal specimens.

Big game hunters and explorers acknowledged Ward's contributions to natural history with a most appropriate form of tribute. Ward records (with pride, one imagines) descriptions of animals that could be found in the Natural History section of the British Museum bearing his name. These descriptions take up six pages of the manuscript and include a musk ox (Ovibus Moschatus wardi), an ibex (Capra sibirica wardi), a reedbuck (Cervi capra wardi), a lynx (Felis lynx wardi), a giraffe (Camelopardalis wardi), a bear (Ursus malayanus wardi), an aardvark (Orycteropus afer wardi) and an elk (Cervus asiaticus wardi) (Ward Life Study 152-156). Ward's use of the proper Linnaean form to describe these animals and others throughout his text testifies to his comfort in the world of natural history. Furthermore, even in an age of discovery as rich as the nineteenth century, the number of animals bearing Ward's name is significant and impressive and should draw additional scholarly attention to his work and life.

With his name firmly attached to several species of animals, his presence at exhibitions undisputed, and the windows of his store acting as a museum space, Ward's place in museum culture is easily established. Indeed, one can actually imagine the world transformed into a museum - an entire Wardian world - as a writer for The Globe did in 1884:

"If he chooses, the sportsman of to-day may be surrounded in the pleasantest way with souvenirs of the past. The hoofs of the horses he rode may be utilised - without exaggeration - in a hundred ways, each recalling some otherwise lost ripple on the gulf of time. He may rise in the morning by the chime of a clock in the frontal bone of his first red deer. He may breakfast with his walrus-horn egg-stand, emu's-egg sugar-basin, stag's-antler knife and fork. He may take his morning letters from a crocodile-hide bag, a trophy from the Savannah; or a hall-table bowl of a deer's skull,
This illustration shows that the sportsman could, through the use of Wardian furniture and taxidermed mounts, make his domicile into a perfect house museum, a memory chest wherein each treasure stood for fond recollections of a specific hunt. It can be argued that Ward’s book operated in much the same way for him, creating a personal museum for himself and for the Jungle.

Since much of Ward’s work ended up in museums, why would this famous craftsman have felt the need to create a printed museum? Part of this answer may be traced to the great proto-museum of the nineteenth century, The Crystal Palace, and the arguments that grew out of it. Taxidermy and the creation of useful products from animal bodies was not an art in the nineteenth century. Indeed, taxidermy is still considered a trade rather than an art today despite some of the artistic undertakings being done in the field. Following the display of manufactures at the Crystal Palace, some laborers sought to see their work recognized as art rather than as a trade and “aesthetes and journalists turned their attention to chintzes, calicoes, and wallpapers produced for mass consumption” (Kriegel 130). With such items being afforded critical attention, their creators were in a position to lobby for reform. In the 1860s, exhibitions focused on the working man “credit[ed] handicraftsman rather than employers for the goods they showed” which “brought increased prominence to working men as cultural consumers and political objects” (Kriegel 179, 178). Laborers could use this attention to challenge perceptions about themselves and about their work. It must be stated, of course, that Ward’s wealth and social status did not place him on the same footing as these individuals. However, as a taxidermist, he, like them, was regarded as “a mere technician” and “employed to perform a simple job, like a mechanic or a cook” (Morris Ward 149). Like them, he may have seen an opportunity following in the wake of the Crystal Palace. The Great Exhibition of 1851 generated increased attention and conversation about crafts, trade, and the definition of art. In this climate, Ward was free to lobby for taxidermy as an art. Naturalist’s Life Study is part of this argument.

In order to accomplish his goals, Ward set out a mission statement in both of his major works. In Life Study he states his “ambition” to “begin [his work] at that point in taxidermy where the old school had left off.” “Instead of merely stuffing the skins of animals,” he intended to “study nature and adapt

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16 Such a description may seem extreme or exaggerated, but Wardian furniture sold well and was continuously improved upon by Ward and his workers.

17 Life Study is not the only text that may be considered a Wardian museum in print. The author’s Records of Big Game acted as a museum for the hunter who bagged the biggest trophy, who was then “recorded for all time and for all the world to see” (Morris Ward 137).

18 For some of the art of taxidermy see: Morris History pp. 82-83 and Milgrom pp. 122-159.
it, in connection with modeling, to a taxidermist’s art” (Ward *Life Study* 32). The use of “art” makes it quite clear that Ward distinguishes between himself and the public perception of a taxidermist as mere tradesman. His mission statement is further elaborated in *The Sportsman’s Handbook*, made over into what Morris calls a “personal creed” (*History* 359). Noting that “it is only in comparatively recent times that taxidermy has been elevated to claim any real art position,” Ward celebrates his art’s ability to go beyond “preservation for the identification of details in anatomy or of outward appearance.” Furthermore, he states that taxidermy’s true value as an art “may be preserved and increased by displaying its beauty truthfully to life, while the beauty is recognised for its own sake even by the unscientific.” “This,” he concludes, “is the cause I advocate, and the end I have in view” (*Sportsman* x).

Beyond artistic statements, Ward also utilized the practical method of labeling his work. Morris groups Ward with those “better taxidermists” who “aspired to join [the] artistic fraternity” that included sculptors and painters. In order to accomplish this, taxidermists sought “to have their work recognized” through the use of custom labels (Ward 149). The Jungle labeled its products “as a matter of course,” with these labels serving to advertise the technical competence of Ward and his associates, draw in more business, and demonstrate their willingness to stand behind their work. Though small, such markers could be seen as “an aggressive statement of pride in good workmanship” (Morris Ward 149). Ward certainly felt pride in having his name attached to these beautiful, lifelike trophies. He relates the tale of a lion mount being transported in a railway car; the great beast was so magnificent, “a formidable monster” “with terrible open jaws,” that the porters mistook it for a live beast and “fled for assistance” (Ward *Life Study* 47, 46). Eventually the beast is confronted and one can almost hear Ward chuckling as he writes that the lion was merely a stuffed trophy “bearing my name on a label depended from its shaggy mane!” (*Life Study* 47). Alongside such stories, *Life Study* recounts the undertaking of vast labor and innovation required to make animal art. There is a hope that by forwarding this information, Ward may convince readers that what they are discussing is not a mere trade but an art form that requires sacrifice, long years of study, and the ability to understand the animal form in an artistic way. Ward’s *Life Study* is a material hope that his life and his work continue to be studied in and outside of the museum environment. With a second edition recently published in 2002, new readers may discover Ward and, through him, discover a new approach to the specimens they encounter in residences, businesses, and museums.19

III. **The Grim Foundations of the Museum**

19 For purchasing information see: [https://www.rowlandward.com](https://www.rowlandward.com)
The concluding section of this paper seeks to demonstrate that engagement with Ward’s writings can aid museum-goers in understanding elements of the museum that receive little discussion and often even go unconsidered. Above, I have discussed the natural history museum as a cultural institution of learning that owes much of its foundations to the annihilation, manipulation, and sanitation of the animal body. Through these processes, the museum produces a clean and often beautiful specimen that may be used to instruct museum visitors as to the anatomy, characteristics, habitat, and behavior of a given creature. Ward’s writings, in both Life Study and the Sportsman’s Guide, help the modern reader to recover the backstage elements of the museum, the processes that result in the clean and shining halls and exhibits that are often taken as the museum’s whole, providing for a richer experience and a deeper understanding of natural history and scientific culture.

As I begin to discuss the foundations of the natural history museum, I feel that it is important to state that I do not find the museum enterprise an unsavory one, nor do I think that museums possess any sinister motivations when they adhere to the traditional format of public viewing areas and private working ones. Some museums have even begun to encourage visitor access to these formerly closed off areas. For instance, on a recent visit to the Virginia Museum of Natural History, I got to peer through a viewing window to see paleontologists at work on a pile of bones. While it is hoped that the trend of access will continue, it is true that some aspects of the museum are best known to technicians, scientists, and curators.

There may be good cultural reasons for the museum’s “double-ness.” The public’s blindness to museum processes may be linked to a general, willing blindness about death especially in American audiences. After all, how often do we contemplate the processes a corpse undergoes prior to burial? Yet, that corpse’s “beatific… smile” is the result of “laborious backstage violence,” just as the “front-stage ‘art work’ of… museum specimens” may be traced back to many “quiet processes of degeneration and regeneration that go on all around us [in the museum] but are rarely perceived” (Asma 50, 30).

Museum exhibits rely on a great deal of willing blindness in order to work their magic. Take, for example, the gorilla family exhibit designed by Carl Akeley and displayed in the African Hall of the American Museum of Natural History. This display stops visitors in their tracks, just as Ward’s windows would have done in the nineteenth century. It also “hides all the physical activities that made it possible – the killing of the family, the stripping and manipulation, and sanitation of the animal body. Through these processes, the museum produces a clean and often beautiful specimen that may be used to instruct museum visitors as to the anatomy, characteristics, habitat, and behavior of a given creature. Ward’s writings, in both Life Study and the Sportsman’s Guide, help the modern reader to recover the backstage elements of the museum, the processes that result in the clean and shining halls and exhibits that are often taken as the museum’s whole, providing for a richer experience and a deeper understanding of natural history and scientific culture.

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The Victorian

preservation of the skins, their transportation... and their petrification within the reconstructed artifice of the museum” (Adams 3). Even if visitors take a moment to acknowledge “the stuffing and the artifice” taxidermy, when it “exert[s] affective power” hinges on a sort of reverse transformation in which the animal becomes alive and real again, in which its insides “become [living] viscera” instead of stuffing, even if the viewer originally perceived them that way (Asma 38, Swinney 225).

Ward’s writings work no such transformation. He recounts, for instance, a gorilla specimen from the Congo, sent to him enclosed “in a cask of rum.” He describes the cask’s contents as the “old man” gorilla, a “gruesome sight” composed of “many human traits – his sunken eyes and fleshy chest” among them (Ward Life Study 37). Poorly preserved specimens such as the “resurrected tiger” that came to Ward as “an awful mess... bare of hair in dozens of places,” remind the reader that these animals would have been killed and skinned a world away and then sent to the workshop by ship; even with pickling and preservatives, the smell upon opening such packages must have pervaded the workshop for hours (Life Study 40, 39). In The Sportsman’s Handbook the visceral nature of the work performed for museums is further elaborated.

Addressed to the “sportsman-naturalist,” the Handbook never flinches from or seeks to cloak the reality of preparing specimens. Thus, chemicals can readily and directly be praised when they enable a specimen to be sent home with “no unpleasant odour [sic]” (Ward Sportsman 31). Death-drawn insects are realities in the field and lamented as “indescribably vexatious” and their “immediate extermination is called for” (Ward Sportsman 28).21 Decomposing flesh appears on page after page as Ward instructs his readers in how to prevent feline teeth from chipping, or how horns can be removed from the skull and cleaned (Sportsman 32). The text even includes a list and illustrations of the several knives the sportsman should carry with him in preparation of bagging his prey, including a brain scoop (Ward Sportsman 38). Illustrations and careful instructions detail to the reader how the flesh may be removed from a number of birds and mammals so that the skin is left “in the form of tongue-pieces over the breast” (Ward Sportsman 41). Through these descriptions the reader learns that “the lips must be cut off close to the gums,” that the skin “must be cleared of superfluous flesh and fat,” as well as “muscle and sinew” (Ward Sportsman 42, 52). In the case of birds “blood stains or other impurities” should be removed from the feathers (Ward Sportsman 96). The Van Ingen text Preservation of Shikar Trophies, which was contemporary with Ward’s, calls for the same care of animal pelts noting that “all bullet holes and knife cuts should be sewn” while “the skin is still fresh and full of elasticity”
(qtd. in Morris Van Ingen 44). Such details help to restore the realities to taxidermy, which, in turn, reminds museum visitors of the work which goes into specimen production even today. Such a reminder is not meant to discourage anyone’s enjoyment in museums or the specimens which they display. Rather, a fuller understanding of the work done behind the scenes in the museum can allow for a deeper appreciation of museum exhibits and can lead visitors and scholars to ask new questions about collection, display, animal studies, and museum access.

In A Naturalist’s Life Study Ward states that “all my life has been spent in the art I love” (44). Scholars of literature (and of the museum) are lucky when they can echo this claim. It is not enough to say that Ward’s texts deserve renewed study because of his passion and affection for his work. However, the scholar who brings such passion and affection to the study of natural history, museum culture, and writings as forgotten as Ward’s may find him or herself richly rewarded with new perspectives on the culture of natural history, the nature of art, and the art that may (or may not) result from nature.

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22 The Van Ingen factory contained “a useful library of taxidermy books,” which included Ward’s Sportsman’s Handbook.


