

## P. T. BARNUM AND THE POPULARIZATION OF NATURAL HISTORY

BY JOHN RICKARDS BETTS

The study of natural history was promoted during the nineteenth century by classifiers and specialists from Cuvier to Agassiz, by the exploration of Africa and other little known regions of the world, by the development of geology, paleontology, zoology and biology into major scientific disciplines, and by the creation of scientific institutes, museums and zoological gardens. Little attention has been directed, however, to the popularization of natural history by the curiosity museum and the circus, and little credit has been accorded the man most closely associated with these two institutions in America—Phineas Taylor Barnum, world renowned Yankee showman.<sup>1</sup>

Scholarly interest in an earlier era had been encouraged through the investigations and works of the Bartrams, Wilson, Audubon, and others; Manhattanites had access to the Lyceum of Natural History and the Zoological Institute; James Raymond pioneered in menagerie collecting along with Isaac VanAmburg; public curiosity was fanned by museum proprietors like Charles Willson Peale and Moses Kimball; and schoolboys read about natural history in their textbooks or romped as children of nature in the woods. It was left to P. T. Barnum, however, to exploit to the fullest both the scientific and the commercial aspects of natural history for half a century.

Barnum purchased Scudder's old American Museum on Broadway in 1841 and quickly became a permanent fixture in New York and national affairs. To relics and curiosities of the old collection the showman soon added the New York branch of Peale's Museum. The years 1844 to 1847 saw him visiting art galleries, historical collections, science museums, zoological gardens, circus menageries, and exhibitions of mechanical wonders throughout western Europe. Barnum returned from Europe in 1846 with novelties for his New York emporium and the Baltimore museum he had recently acquired from the Peales. He was accompanied by "the only living Orang Outang in either England or America," a sensation which he had bought from the Royal Surrey Zoological Garden for \$3,000 and which the New York *Tribune* called "a curiosity worthy all lovers of natural history." Soon the world was informed that "she seems to be the Grand Connecting Link between the two great families, the Human

<sup>1</sup>The main sources for this study were found in the Barnum Museum, Tufts University (cited as TU); the American Museum of Natural History (cited as AMNH); the National Museum of the United States at the Smithsonian Institution (cited as NMSI); the Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library and the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Cambridge; the Massachusetts Historical Society; the New York Historical Society; and the American Antiquarian Society.

and Brute Creation." Not waiting for Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, P. T. had already abandoned a fake "What is it?" for an authentic simian as public interest in the origins of man was aroused by Robert Chambers' *Vestiges of Creation*.<sup>2</sup>

Branching out in 1850, Barnum leased the Chinese Museum and took over the famous Peale collection in Philadelphia, sharing its contents with the Boston Museum run by Moses Kimball. The Peale collection had been sold at auction in 1846, but the natural history section was kept intact and run by a group of Philadelphia naturalists who preserved the relics of the Lewis and Clark and the Stephen Long expeditions. P. T. held on to the mastodon (Masten or "Peale Skeleton"); most of the bird collection went to Boston.<sup>3</sup>

A ship sent by Barnum to Ceylon returned in 1851 with a cargo of ten elephants, the nucleus of the Great Asiatic Caravan, Museum and Menagerie. Along with a 2000-year-old mummy, the show under the management of Seth Howes featured Mr. Pierce in the lion's den. Upon disbanding the caravan in 1854, Barnum incorporated the menagerie with that at the American Museum. At the suggestion of Horace Greeley and Charles Dana, P. T. wrote to "dear old friend" Bayard Taylor, then accompanying Commodore Matthew Perry's naval expedition to open the ports of Japan. Barnum mentioned the

<sup>2</sup> New York *Tribune*, Feb. 4, 1842, April 29, 1846; New York *Atlas*, Aug. 14, 1842, Feb. 5, 1843, May 30, 1847; Liverpool *Times*, cited in Baltimore *Sun*, May 1, 1846. From his earliest years in show business Barnum played upon the scientific curiosity of the era. When, in 1835, he exhibited an aged Negress as the 163-year-old "nurse" of George Washington, the interest of the medical profession was exploited. See P. T. Barnum, *The Life of P. T. Barnum, Written by Himself* (New York, 1855), 172ff. Soon after taking over the American Museum he created a minor furor over a "Fejee Mermaid," which he claimed was on its way to the Lyceum of Natural History in London. Along with this novelty he featured various birds and animals "forming connecting links in the great chain of Animated Nature" (*ibid.*, 238). He capitalized on such exposures as that made by a group of Charleston scientists and aroused even greater public curiosity. See the Boston *Advertiser*, Feb. 17, 1843; Charleston *Courier*, March 20, 1843; Charleston *Mercury*, March 31, 1843. Although we have no inventory of the American Museum's holdings in 1842, it had acquired a sizable collection as early as 1823, when its proprietor described it as "the first Museum and most splendid collection in the United States." Cases contained a black bear, polar bear, albatross, penguins, mongoose, etc. There were bird, fish, reptile, mineral and shell collections, Indian implements and curiosities, a fifty-foot glassed display case of wild life (including the ant-eater, alligator, lion, stagwolf, etc.), not to mention individual coats of mail, Roman spears, jugs from Pompeii and Herculaneum, model ships, and historical paintings. Specific reference was made to 234 cases, the most extensive collection being that of rare birds. John Scudder, *A Companion to the American Museum* (New York, 1823), *passim*. The principal naturalist of the Museum was E. Guillaudeu.

<sup>3</sup> Charles C. Sellers, *Charles Willson Peale*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1947), II, 137n., 380-81; Max Meisel, *A Bibliography of American Natural History. The Pioneer Century, 1769-1865*, 3 vols. (Brooklyn, 1924-1929), II, 57.

Museum's interest in pictures, articles or curiosities.<sup>4</sup>

By the middle 'fifties the American Museum was accorded the reputation of being "one of the largest and best arranged collections in the known world." Few farmers from the hinterland or dignitaries from abroad (from Thackeray and Dickens to the Prince of Wales and the "Japanese Ambassadors") ever missed this new national landmark. When Henry Thoreau, the sage of Walden Pond, attended New York's Crystal Palace exhibition in 1854 he took time out for the American Museum, where he viewed the camelopards, large flakes of cutting arrowhead stone, and a hollow stone tube "probably from mounds." Other visits in later years interested the New England naturalist, particularly the aquarium with its fresh water tanks, breams and ferns: "The sea-anemones were new and interesting to me."<sup>5</sup>

As P. T.'s fame and operations reached the far corners of the world, Robert Browning wrote a friend from his poetical haunt in Florence in 1853: "What think you—Barnum has made a serious proposal to the Madiei . . . to exhibit them in the U.S. Fact!!!"<sup>6</sup> Of more national significance was Peter Cooper's establishment of Cooper Union in the late 1850's, he having been interested over the years in the old Scudder and the new Barnum museums.<sup>7</sup>

Barnum lost the American Museum in 1856 as a result of unwise investments in the clock industry, but he acted as its agent when he went to London. There he purchased glass aquariums from the Royal Zoological Gardens, thus commencing what was advertised as the first public "Aquaria" in the United States. Having recouped his fortune by 1860, he reacquired the Ann Street museum and soon took over the Aquarial Gardens in Boston. Proper Bostonians and a gullible public were showered with advertisements of "The Whale Harnessed And Driven Around The Great Tank By A Young Lady," but they could also see northern and eastern water fish varying from the tiny stickleback to the white whale.

Shortly after regaining the Museum and the attack on Fort Sumter Barnum exhibited the "Great Behemoth of Scriptures"—reputedly the first and only genuine hippopotamus to appear in the United States. The showman's plans were expansive. Padding the pockets of New York aldermen, P. T. gained permission to lay pipes to pump salt water from the harbor for his living sharks, porpoises,

<sup>4</sup> P. T. Barnum to Bayard Taylor, Dec. 16, 1852 (Miscellaneous MSS., New York Historical Society).

<sup>5</sup> Gleason's *Pictorial and Drawing-Room Companion*, IV (Jan. 29, 1853), 72-73; Bradford Torrey, ed., *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, 14 vols. (Boston, 1906), VII, 76, IX, 133, X, 442.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Browning to John Forsters, April 12, 1853, in William C. DeVane and K. L. Knickerbocker, eds., *New Letters of Robert Browning* (New Haven, 1950), 62.

<sup>7</sup> E. C. Mack, *Peter Cooper, Citizen of New York* (New York, 1949), 40, 259.

sea horses and other fish, and especially for several short-lived whales his agents had captured in the St. Lawrence River and off the Labrador coast. Fishing smacks were fitted out for the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean to catch colored tropical fish. Prizes of \$100 were offered for the best trout caught by anglers of the Empire State and surrounding areas, thereby exciting the youthful John Burroughs to compete. Museum visitors now viewed varieties of fish such as the angel, peacock, four-eyed cherub, cow, sturgeon, porcupine, and Spanish Lady as well as the squirrel, crimson cavaretta, parrot, grouper, zebra and yellow snapper.<sup>8</sup>

Old Grizzly Adams had sailed into New York harbor on the *Golden Fleece* in 1860 with an array of bears and western animals, and Barnum then opened the California Menagerie at 13th Street and Fourth Avenue. The Aztec Children, supposedly declared authentic by the celebrated Humboldt, entertained youthful and bearded scholars alike at the Museum. With thousands of soldiers passing through the city, the Civil War years were prosperous, the museum's halls thronged by spectators who came to see Kiowa, Comanche, Apache, Arrapaho and Cheyenne braves in their native costumes. The hippo was billed along with the whale, "the one a representative of the frozen regions of the New World, the other the Torrid Regions of the Old." And the testimony of Professor Louis Agassiz of Harvard, that the whale was a source of valuable information to him, increased the receipts of the affluent promoter.<sup>9</sup>

The Smithsonian Institution, the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences, and many of the colleges had assembled scientific collections and established museums throughout the first half of the century, the most noted of which was that developed at Harvard by Agassiz, but it was Barnum alone in the commercial community who maintained agents here and abroad to keep a vigilant lookout for items related to natural history.

The historic Museum was gutted by fire shortly after Appomattox, and soldiers and civilians enjoyed the fantastic tales circulated by the *New York Tribune*. The *Providence Journal* regretted omitting the story of "the flight of an ourang-outang into the *Herald* office with the idea of getting a place on the editorial staff" of James Gordon Bennett. William Cullen Bryant's *Evening Post* confessed that the curiosities and fish collection "drew even men of science to the Museum, where alone in this country they could see such a collection of animals," but it advised P. T. to commence a more worthy enterprise

<sup>8</sup> P. T. Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs* (Hartford, 1869), 567; *New York Times*, Sept. 6, 9, 1862; Clara Barrus, *The Life and Letters of John Burroughs*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1925), I, 54.

<sup>9</sup> Broadside, Dec. 16, 1861 (Harvard Theatre Collection).

and suggested the promotion of a great zoological garden by the one man most eminently qualified.<sup>10</sup>

Neither biting nor friendly criticism could obscure P. T.'s solid achievements. Many appreciated the claims of the *New York Times* that the American Museum had served science and education well. *Scientific American* noted its rare minerals and suits of armor. The Museum had housed many automatons and mechanical wonders, a glass works, a model steam engine, the giant Noor diamond, portraits by Rembrandt Peale, colonial coins, relics of the Revolution and the War of 1812, and other mementoes of the nation's past. Barnum's valuable collection of Catlin and Stanley Indian portraits proved a grievous loss, as the Smithsonian's annual reports later recognized. Spears, clubs, Indian bows, arrowheads, poisoned shafts, and weapons might be replaced, but what of the cases of stuffed birds, butterflies, insects, and mounted animals?<sup>11</sup>

A serious loss was a geological cabinet of some thirty cases of American specimens, said to have had no rival on this side of the Atlantic. The conchological, ichthyological, ornithological and zoological departments were extensive and interesting, no matter how dusty the shelves might be. And the "Aquaria," including tanks and forty large cases made of marble, iron and glass, was said to excel those of London, Paris and Dublin. Agassiz and other distinguished men wrote to Barnum regretting the demise of the Museum, and the *Tribune* remarked, "The destruction of no building in this city could have caused so much excitement and so much regret as that of Barnum's Museum."<sup>12</sup>

Yankee grit led the impulsive promoter to undertake a new museum farther up Broadway. Arranging a union with the famous VanAmburgh Menagerie Company, P. T. had his agents assemble "skins, tusks, heads, and skeletons of nearly every species of African animal, including rare specimens never before exhibited on this continent." Friends like Bayard Taylor came to his aid in building a new museum. Barnum now conceived the idea of erecting a public museum in New York; a memorial to that end endorsed by Moses Taylor, Simeon Draper, Moses Grinnell, William Cullen Bryant, Henry Ward Beecher and Horace Greeley, among others, was dispatched to President Andrew Johnson. After several rebuffs by Johnson and Secretary of State Seward, P. T. finally gained approval of his project through the intervention of Connecticut's Senator Lafayette Forster. President Johnson's directive ordered American ministers, consuls and

<sup>10</sup> *New York Tribune*, July 14, 1865; *Ed.*, *New York Evening Post*, July 14, 1865.

<sup>11</sup> *New York Times*, July 14, 1865; *Scientific American*, XIII (July 22, 1865), 49; *Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution . . . to July 1885*, Pt. II (Washington, 1886), 800.

<sup>12</sup> *New York Times*, July 14, 1865; *New York Tribune*, July 14, 1865.

commercial agents to give whatever assistance was "compatible with the duties of their respective positions, and not inconsistent with the public interests."<sup>13</sup>

The optimistic showman went to Washington to interview Johnson and secretaries Seward, McCulloch and Welles, as well as General Grant, all of whom "cordially approved of my plan for the establishment of a National Museum in New York." Intending to imitate the British Museum, he deplored the fact that, a small Central Park collection excepted, "the whole vast continent of America stands to-day with scarcely an apology for a free public exhibition of Natural History and Art." Destruction of his second museum by fire in 1868 forestalled his ambition to make it "the nucleus of a great free national institution" and to establish permanently in New York "an extensive zoological garden."<sup>14</sup>

Natural history had remained a feature of the showman's enterprises throughout the Museum years. A brochure in 1866 cunningly related natural history to education, scholarship, religion, science, and culture:

There is no study that is more important to the youth of a rising generation, or to adult age, than that of Natural History. It teaches man his superiority over the brute creation, and creates in his bosom a knowledge of the wisdom and goodness and omnipresence of a supreme and All-wise Creator . . . . Hence, it became necessary that man should study the history of animated nature, make himself master of a science on which his own happiness depended, and which, when developed, could not fail to advance the great causes of civilization and learning.<sup>15</sup>

The Barnum & VanAmburgh combination, calling attention to American failures in the exposition of the sciences, remarking on the fame of European museums and zoological gardens, and mentioning St. Augustine's advice to monks on the religious values of natural history, asserted a "deep interest in the cause of science." Scientists, poets, statesmen, and popular heroes were advocates of natural history. Barnum's agents had "traversed the burning sands of Africa, the morasses and jungles of Asia, the wilds of inland Europe, the pampas of South America, and the forests and mountains and regions of eternal snow of the northern border of this continent."<sup>16</sup>

Othniel C. Marsh, Yale's distinguished paleontologist and the man most responsible for displays of dinosaur skeletons in American mu-

<sup>13</sup> Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs* (Hartford, 1869), 693-699; Bayard Taylor to Barnum, July 25, 1865, quoted in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, Aug. 12, 1865. [Barnum's book went through several editions.]

<sup>14</sup> Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs* (Hartford, 1869), 698-700.

<sup>15</sup> *Illustrated and Descriptive History of the Animals contained in Barnum & VanAmburgh's Museum and Menagerie Combination* (New York, 1866), v-viii.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

seums, often told a favorite story of recognizing P. T. on the New York train, striking up a conversation, and discovering the showman's irritability over the handling of some Mexican items by his museum agent who did not realize their value. "And were they sold?" the professor cunningly inquired, to which Barnum replied, "Yes; some little cuss up in New Haven bought them." To Barnum's astonishment Marsh coolly announced, "I thought so. I was the little cuss." The museum came in for criticism, at times, and especially from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. An informant had described the abandonment of a rabbit in the cage of a boa constrictor. On visiting the Museum the Society's president, Henry Bergh, was persuaded by an attendant that humane interest would prevail, but the stunt was repeated. It was an irritable Barnum who answered Bergh by threatening to publish a letter from Agassiz concerning the natural habits of serpents in the devouring of live animals, and Bergh was naturally anguished at the action of "so eminent a Philosopher." This second Barnum Museum burned in 1868 and *Harper's* complained, "Who could remember that it was to him we owed the incomparable delight of hearing Jenny Lind, when we were listening, awe-struck, for the hollow roar of the Gorilla's bosom?"<sup>17</sup>

The rich and aging showman little realized in 1868 that his anticipated retirement was to be interrupted for more than two decades. The circus, to which he soon devoted his fertile genius and boundless energy, had shown little more than an occasional tiger, elephant or camel until the 1830's, when Yankee Carter, Herr Driesbach, John Titus, the June family, Aaron Turner, and "General" Rufus Welch came forward to rival Raymond and VanAmburgh. Menageries played an ever more important rôle in the attractions of travelling shows of the 'forties and 'fifties, but it was only in the years after the Civil War that zoos and natural history museums were established on a permanent basis in Central Park, New York City, as well as in Philadelphia, Cincinnati, San Francisco, Chicago, St. Louis, Atlanta, Buffalo, Detroit, Pittsburgh and other cities, thereby enabling circuses to quarter their animals or dispose of carcasses.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Schuchert and Clara Mae LeVene, *O. C. Marsh, Pioneer in Paleontology* (New Haven, 1940), 349; Henry Bergh to Barnum, March 7, 1867 (courtesy of Goodspeed's Book Shop, Boston); *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, CCXVI (May, 1868), 813. A scholarly appraisal of Barnum's contribution concludes that, although he was not a man of science, P. T. "probably did more than any other one person to popularize the museum idea." Mildred Porter, "The Educational Effectiveness of a Museum of Natural History," unpublished doctoral diss., Yale University 1937), 23. In addition, "He financed many expeditions not primarily in the interests of science, but their results have been of ultimate profit to scientific institutions. Like Peale's Museum, Barnum's American Museum should be recognized when considering the educational influence of museums on the public" (*ibid.*).

P. T. Barnum, Esq. could stand retirement less than two years, during which period he served as advisor of Wood's Museum, traveled from Havana to the Golden Gate, went buffalo hunting with Col. George Custer, and published a new version of his autobiography called *Struggles and Triumphs*. In 1870 he joined W. C. Coup and Dan Castello in the organization of Barnum's Great Museum, Menagerie, Circus, and Traveling World's Fair. The "Greatest Show on Earth" was variously described in its playbills, posters and brochures as a "Zoological Garden," "Polytechnic Institute," and "Colosseum of Natural History and Art"; the show was praised for "its mission of pleasing the masses of people, delighting the young, and giving them visible lessons in natural history and natural science which they will never forget."<sup>18</sup>

A zoological and ornithological "Institute" toured the southern states in 1872 while the main show covered the East. Along with its freaks and curiosities the circus, now transported by rail, exhibited Fiji cannibals, Modoc and Digger Indians, and representative types of Chinese, Japanese, Aztecs, and Eskimos. New Yorkers marvelled at the extent of Barnum's enterprises, one editor describing how P. T. telegraphed to the ports of New England and sent messages to San Francisco and Alaska in search of sea lions, a number of which were brought East in tanks over the Union Pacific lines.<sup>19</sup> Cages of alligators, crocodiles, sea lions, snakes and a rhinoceros, in addition to other animals, attracted huge throngs. The *Brooklyn Eagle*, in the midst of the scientific and theological war over Darwin's *Descent of Man*, facetiously declared, "He has crowded natural history into the spectacle of an evening; he has simplified for ordinary minds the Darwinian controversy by bringing all the animals concerned together and leaving them to speak for themselves."<sup>20</sup>

On his trip to the Vienna Exhibition in 1873 P. T. visited Cologne, Leipzig, Berlin, Dresden, and Prague, taking time "to see all that was interesting," but upon hearing that he could obtain a lease of the Harlem Railroad property in New York, he set to work on his projected Roman Hippodrome and within twenty-four hours was in communication with seventeen European cities: "I visited all the zoological gardens, circuses, and public exhibitions, wherever I went. . . . At Hamburg, I purchased nearly a ship-load of valuable wild animals and rare birds, including elephants, giraffes, a dozen ostriches, &c., &c." The *London Era* noted that he had sent agents to Spain and

<sup>18</sup> *Boston Evening Transcript*, June 16, 1871.

<sup>19</sup> Barnum to Haskell, July 2, 1871, cited in Charles Hamilton, "P. T. Barnum," *Hobbies*, LVIII (March 1953), 1320; *New York Daily Standard*, Dec. 28, 1871, quoted in Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs* (Buffalo, 1873), 863.

<sup>20</sup> *Brooklyn Eagle*, April 18, 1873, quoted in *Albany Argus*, May 12, 1873.



Africa and had himself visited "the Hippodrome in Paris, the Circus Renz at Vienna, Myers' Circus at Dresden, Salamonski and Carre's Circus at Cologne, the Zoological Gardens at Hamburgh, Amsterdam and other Continental cities, selecting and purchasing the choicest animals procurable, and engaging the most talented artists."<sup>21</sup>

The American consul in Paraguay aided in obtaining a jaguar; Barnum agents bought camels said to have been used by De Lesseps on the Suez Canal; winter crowds in New York attended the menagerie at the Hippotheatron on 14th Street; a taxidermist prepared several hundred specimens of birds and objects of natural history; and the show featured the only two-horned rhinoceros in the country. After another fire he continued to show his elephants and menagerie at the Empire Rink and at his Hippodrome, the original Madison Square Garden. The showmanship in him led P. T. to collect implements and portraits to take with a group of Indians he planned to send to the Vienna Exhibition. Huge monetary challenges were issued to circus rivals:

This superb and only exhaustive Zoological Collection in the United States, contains more costly and rare specimens of natural history, more monsters of the deep, rare birds, strange fishes, reptiles, amphibia, and wild denizens of every clime and country, than have ever been before presented to the public, to form a *Vast Living School of Instruction*, where the student may spend hours in wondrous contemplation looking "from Nature up to Nature's God."

Carl Hagenbeck of the Handelsmenagerie in Hamburg wrote in 1879 that the black dromedaries from Nubia were the only ones ever captured for exhibition except those secured by his hunters employed on Barnum's behalf: "No Zoological Garden or Menagerie in the whole of Europe possesses one of these rare animals."<sup>22</sup>

The restless promoter commenced the extensive winter quarters in Bridgeport in 1880 and proceeded to expend more than \$250,000 in the next three years on the show's animal department.<sup>23</sup> With his new partners, James A. Bailey and James L. Hutchinson, P. T. continued the expansion of the menagerie in succeeding years, but his self-styled rôle as educator and popularizer of science had taken a new bent. Starting down the sawdust trail in 1870, he became ever more deeply involved in the affairs of natural history museums—and especially in those of the Smithsonian Institution, the American Museum of Natural History in New York, and the Tufts College Museum he established on the outskirts of Boston.

<sup>21</sup> Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs* (Buffalo, 1889), 288-290.

<sup>22</sup> Carl Hagenbeck to Barnum, Feb. 13, 1879, quoted in *P. T. Barnum's Illustrated News* (Buffalo, 1879), 3, 14.

<sup>23</sup> *New York Clipper*, (Feb. 3, 1883), 742.

Through the years P. T. was to number among his acquaintances and friends in the world of science Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Louis Agassiz, A. D. Bartlett of the London Zoological Garden, Paul Du Chaillu, African explorer, and Joseph Henry, who had recognized the old Ann Street museum as "a *scientific* establishment" and had promised Barnum "he would send me for my new Museum one of each and all specimens of *impressions* or *casts* taken."<sup>24</sup>

Scientific museums in this era were highly dependent on circuses for the skins they mounted and displayed. Canvasbacks, faced with dismantling and transportation deadlines, had to cut up and burn carcasses while the Big Top came down, unless they could be shipped to nearby taxidermists or to a scientific museum. In the early 'seventies we find Barnum presenting a boa constrictor to the Boston Society of Natural History and buying sea lions in San Francisco, two of which he intended for the London Zoo. His arch rival, Adam Forepaugh, gave elephants to the University of Pennsylvania Museum, the Philadelphia Zoo, New York's Central Park collection, and the National Zoological Garden in Washington. By the 'eighties the United States National Museum in Washington was reporting that its accessions in exotic mammals were in great part due to "dealers in live animals and proprietors of menageries and zoological gardens," among them Lewis Sells of Cincinnati and C. and E. Reiche, who for years supplied Barnum's shows with rare animals.<sup>25</sup> This museum, a branch of the Smithsonian, received from Barnum shows animals and birds ranging from a Malayan tapir, giraffe, zebra, and ant-eater to an ostrich, flamingo, ape, and Bengal tiger—and, of course, the stuffed skin of a three-headed snake "made" in Japan!<sup>26</sup>

A number of public-minded New Yorkers were inspired by Albert S. Bickmore to found the American Museum of Natural History in 1869. As a young student Bickmore had been chosen from among the assistants in Agassiz's Museum of Comparative Zoology to accompany a fishing smack to Bermuda waters in 1862, the first of several expeditions fitted out at Barnum's expense. Bickmore added to the Harvard museum's collection as well as the showman's aquaria by catching "angle-fish, brilliantly colored sea anemones and other attractive specimens of tropical marine life."<sup>27</sup> The young scientist found this a rewarding adventure in the study of ocean fauna, an ex-

<sup>24</sup> Barnum to Spencer Baird, April 20, 1885 (NMSI).

<sup>25</sup> *New York Clipper* (March 11, 1871), 391; (Dec. 22, 1888), 659; (May 2, 1891), 134; *Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution . . . for the Year 1884* (Washington, 1885), 130-31.

<sup>26</sup> Accessions file, 1873-1886 (NMSI).

<sup>27</sup> Albert S. Bickmore, "An Autobiography with a historical sketch of the Founding and Early Development of the American Museum of Natural History," 2 vols., unpublished MSS. (AMNH).

perience he frequently recalled in later years while musing at his desk in the Museum of Natural History. In a report for the year 1862 the Museum of Comparative Zoology recorded its indebtedness to Barnum's Aquarial Gardens in Boston for continued donations of dead animals and to its owner for underwriting the Bermuda trip, during which Bickmore made "an extensive collection of the marine animals of that island, showing that its fauna is identical with the coast of Florida."<sup>28</sup>

In the first year of the American Museum of Natural History the showman promised, "If any of our animals die we will present them to your institution with pleasure—or perhaps may sometimes ask an exchange if you have duplicates."<sup>29</sup> When Barnum's Hippotheatron burned in December 1871, the animal skeletons were offered gratis, and when mastodon bones were excavated in a Wisconsin village their owner was advised to present them to the Museum of Natural History.<sup>30</sup> In 1872 P. T. sent the New York museum a fur seal, giraffe, baboon, iguana, phasmida and two snakes.<sup>31</sup>

Forgetting or disregarding his promise to Bickmore, Barnum wrote Joseph Henry in 1873, "Whenever any of my animals die my manager has instructions to telegraph Prof. Baird that they are at the disposal of the Smithsonian Institution."<sup>32</sup> In the annual report for 1873 the Secretary noted that, unlike the great museums in Britain, Paris, Berlin, and Cambridge, Massachusetts, the Smithsonian had to depend on gifts. "Among the most important contributions in the way of mammals," he reported, "are the specimens received from Mr. P. T. Barnum . . . transmitted to the National Museum from time to time by his agents, in compliance with his instructions." A resolution was passed: "That the thanks of the Board of Regents be tendered to P. T. Barnum, esquire, for his liberal donation of the bodies of animals to the National Museum, which form a very important addition to the collection of specimens necessary to illustrate the science of zoology." Grateful for this recognition, Barnum responded, "It is a satisfaction to feel that I have been of *any* service to such a noble and beneficent Institution."<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Annual Report of the Trustees of the Museum of Comparative Zoology, together with the Report of the Director, 1862* (Boston, 1863), 9.

<sup>29</sup> Barnum to A. S. Bickmore, Feb. 10, 1870 (AMNH).

<sup>30</sup> Barnum to Bickmore, Jan. 7, 1872; John Wilson to Barnum, Jan. 26, 1872; Barnum to Metropolitan Museum Co., Feb. 2, 1872 (AMNH).

<sup>31</sup> Accessions file, 1872 (AMNH).

<sup>32</sup> Barnum to Joseph Henry, April 17, 1873 (NMSI).

<sup>33</sup> *Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution . . . for the Year 1873* (Washington, 1874), 37, 47, 157; Barnum to Henry, Feb. 25, 1875 (NMSI).

After Professor Henry died in 1878 Barnum's relations with the Smithsonian continued on a friendly basis. Spencer Baird, the new Secretary, had developed over several decades a worldwide network of private and governmental agencies for the Smithsonian, and on May 1, 1882 he wrote:

Dear Mr. Barnum:

Will you please do us the favor to allow Clark Mills to make a face-mask of your countenance from which to prepare a bust for the National Museum, to be placed in our series of representations of men who have distinguished themselves for what they have done as promoters of the natural sciences.<sup>34</sup>

The showman, naturally, was flattered. He continued to tell the press of his amiable relations with the Smithsonian and of his thousands of dollars in gifts, immediately informing Baird of a misprint when the Boston *Star* mentioned "hundreds of thousands."<sup>35</sup> Since the Secretary of State had been none too helpful in the past, P. T. sought the aid of the Smithsonian to persuade the authorities of the Dutch colonies, New Zealand, Siam, and other distant realms that Barnum, Bailey & Hutchinson was a responsible organization. Apologizing to his Washington friends for failure to ship the carcasses of an elephant and rhinoceros (the veterinary surgeon claiming the rhino skin for his autopsy fee), Barnum was exasperated: "I try hard to beat it into my partners heads, that your institution *must* have all you want that die on our hands, & I will *keep trying*—but they are *showmen*—intent only on pushing the skin to a profit."<sup>36</sup>

An ornery elephant inspired the ingenious showman to ask for information on the possibilities of castration. William T. Hornaday, an assistant to Baird and a distinguished naturalist in his own right, stated that he had never heard of such an operation.<sup>37</sup> Word of this reached the sanctums of Harvard, where Professor Alexander Agassiz asked Dr. J. Collins Warren, "What shall I say to P. T. Barnum who is in the habit of castrating wild elephants?" But Warren and his colleague, Charles P. Lyman of the School of Veterinary Medicine, were interested. Recognizing this would be a "formidable" operation, they nonetheless felt it a pity to kill the miscreant without attempting castration. If the beast were killed they wanted to make ana-

<sup>34</sup> Spencer Baird to Barnum, May 1, 1882, quoted in Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs* (Hartford, 1869), 790.

<sup>35</sup> Barnum to Baird, June 20, 1883 (NMSI).

<sup>36</sup> Barnum to Baird, Oct. 25, 1882, April 11, 1883 (NMSI).

<sup>37</sup> Barnum to Baird, Oct. 28, 31, 1883; W. T. Hornaday "memorandum" to Baird, Nov. 6, 1883 (NMSI).

tomical notes, for "the available literature is very meager."<sup>38</sup>

The impulsive showman's partners agreed that on the death of the celebrated elephant Jumbo his skin or skeleton should go to the Smithsonian, the Barnum Museum at Tufts College to receive whichever was left. Citing the advantages of education in a scientific age, P. T. granted a sum of nearly \$100,000 during the last years of his life to the college, in addition to animals, apparatus, and other gifts. With "Yankee shrewdness" he bargained with taxidermists like J. Wallace in New York City and Henry A. Ward of Ward's Natural Science Establishment in Rochester. Pushing the idea of exchanging duplicates, a misunderstanding developed over some animals requested by the Washington authorities, but P. T. was mollified when the Institution expressed its "warm feelings" and regrets: "We have enjoyed your favor in this respect for so many years that the cessation has been a source of serious concern." In July 1885, Hornaday rushed up to Keene, New Hampshire to skin and box, with the help of four butchers, an Indian elephant given to the Smithsonian by the circus. P. T. also informed his Washington friends that it was his "*full intention*" to send them Jumbo's skeleton "as a *gift*." During this year there were over four hundred entries in the catalogue of the Department of Mammals, most of them from the Central Park Zoo, the Philadelphia Zoo, and Barnum's menagerie.<sup>39</sup>

Great pressure, P. T. claimed, was being applied to allow the skeleton to go to New York, "but I tell you confidentially (—strictly so—) that *I* shall *not* consent to it. . . ." <sup>40</sup> The Smithsonian had decided to send the college a series of marine invertebrates of the Atlantic Coast, and Hornaday lauded the old showman: "No one here knows so well as I do the value of what you have sent us during the last three years [1883–1886]."<sup>41</sup> Smithsonian reports recognized accessions from Barnum, Bailey & Hutchison and noted the assistance of circus menageries and zoological gardens (including Adam Forepaugh's show and the Central Park and Philadelphia zoos).

From the mid-eighties until his death in 1891 the story of P. T.'s relations with the Smithsonian was one of wrangling, reconciliation, and estrangement. His long record of gifts brought frequent reassurance that favors were not forgotten. Professor George Brown Goode

<sup>38</sup> Alexander Agassiz to J. Collins Warren, Nov. 1, 1883 (Massachusetts Historical Society); Warren and Charles P. Lyman to "My dear Sir," Nov. 6, 1883 (TU).

<sup>39</sup> Baird to Barnum, April 14, May 26, 1885 (TU); Barnum to Baird, Sept. 27, 1885 (NMSI); *Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution . . . for the Year Ending June 30, 1886* (Washington, 1889), Pt. II, 15, 44–45.

<sup>40</sup> Barnum to Baird, Sept. 27, 1885 (NMSI).

<sup>41</sup> Hornaday to Barnum, Feb. 1, 1886 (NMSI).

and Hornaday sent the Tufts museum the best collection of mineralogical duplicates ever assembled for another institution.<sup>42</sup> But P. T. also looked elsewhere, relying heavily on Ward in Rochester for glass models of invertebrates from Germany or the preparation of a rare "Rhino bicornis." By 1887 Ward felt that the college's series of minerals, rocks, and fossils was satisfactory and its vertebrates (mammals, birds, reptiles and fishes) was "so extensive that it takes rank with the best Museums of our country." Ward continued, "The animals which you are yearly adding to it (particularly if you can somewhere pick up a whale skeleton) are fast making its series of the rarer exotic mammals the finest in America." With this pitch the reliable Ward offered a cabinet of invertebrate animals he had purchased at the Southern Exposition in Louisville, claiming the college collection would then be second only to Harvard in New England.<sup>43</sup>

The eagerness of Barnum and Professor J. P. Marshall, the curator, to promote the Tufts museum presented increasing pressures on the Smithsonian. Marshall complained, "Country Academies get collections similar to the one sent us, by making application through the representatives in Congress from their districts." He resented Spencer Baird's doubting the need of a museum so near Harvard, and he praised the Boston Society of Natural History for its contributions to the college.<sup>44</sup> Hornaday reassured the disgruntled showman that the Washington authorities had not forgotten his "many & valuable favors," and he soothed his friend's feelings in writing that "Professor Goode has always . . . intended that you should have almost anything you might ask for from our duplicates."<sup>45</sup>

Friendly relations were restored, but the alienated Hornaday eventually proposed to a colleague that the Smithsonian pay off any debts, close all accounts, and henceforth accept nothing from Barnum & Bailey.<sup>46</sup> After sending minerals, plants, casts of meteorites and pre-historic stone implements, "the best collection the Museum has ever sent out," Hornaday found the college curator ungrateful and uncooperative.<sup>47</sup> P. T. stepped in as peacemaker, expressed his appreciation, and encouraged the establishment of a zoological garden in Washington. Samuel P. Langley, pioneer in the theory of flight, had become Secretary, but the tensions remained. Hornaday flared up

<sup>42</sup> G. B. Goode "memorandum" to Hornaday, April 24, 1888; Hornaday to Barnum, April 29, May 5, 1888 (NMSI).

<sup>43</sup> Henry Ward to Barnum, May 15, 1887 (TU).

<sup>44</sup> J. P. Marshall to Barnum, April 16, 1888 (TU).

<sup>45</sup> Hornaday to Barnum, March 31, 1888 (NMSI).

<sup>46</sup> Hornaday to Goode, Aug. 16, 1888 (NMSI).

<sup>47</sup> Hornaday to Barnum, May 5, 1888 (NMSI); May 6, 1889 (TU).

when Professor Marshall expressed disappointment in some fossils sent on by mistake—fossils which the Smithsonian prized and felt it could not spare. Although the college later received an Assyrian slab and “the best collection of invertebrates ever sent out” from Washington, the compounding of misunderstandings convinced the Institution that earlier promises of Jumbo’s skeleton would be forgotten.<sup>48</sup>

Meanwhile, Albert Bickmore, James Richardson and Morris Jesup at the American Museum of Natural History encouraged the showman’s good intentions, hoping that they might succeed “in a measure in interesting the public to a small extent of what you have done,”<sup>49</sup> but it remained Barnum’s intention that the pachyderm was finally to go to Washington, there being “a tacit understanding” that the National Museum at the Smithsonian should get the skeleton.<sup>50</sup>

From Washington came expressions of bewilderment at rumors that Jumbo was finally to reside in New York and an inquiry, “What says the King of Showmen?”<sup>51</sup> Barnum & Bailey proceeded to give an American bison and other wild life specimens to the New York museum; on returning from the London tour in 1890 the skeletons of the elephants Samson and Jumbo were placed on exhibition in New York, and, following P. T.’s death, his great circus partner James A. Bailey made a formal presentation to the Museum of Natural History.<sup>52</sup>

The closing years of the renowned showman’s life were busy and eventful. There were offers of Indian relics and petrified articles from Indiana, a fossil collection from Pennsylvania “that will beat the world,” a Zoographicon cabinet of 15,000 items from California, and similar propositions. Alert to public tastes for the sensational, Barnum capitalized on the old sea tales of New England whaling days: “The Pigeon Cove testimony proves what has before been firmly established—the existence of Monster sea serpents, & I hope ere long to pay \$20,000 for one as named in my offer through your columns last week.”<sup>53</sup>

After the disastrous Bridgeport winter-quarters fire in 1887, Barnum & Bailey immediately purchased a large part of the Paris Hippo-

<sup>48</sup> Hornaday to Barnum, May 6, 1889 (TU).

<sup>49</sup> Morris K. Jesup to Barnum, April 8, 20, 1889 (AMNH).

<sup>50</sup> Barnum to Jesup, Sept. 21, 1889 (AMNH).

<sup>51</sup> Hornaday to Barnum, March 29, 1890 (NMSI).

<sup>52</sup> See John Richard Saunders, *Natural History as Revealed in the American Museum of Natural History* (New York, 1952), 150.

<sup>53</sup> N. Schutz to Barnum, Aug. 2, 1886; E. M. Slawson to Barnum, Aug. 10, 1887; F. Gruber to Barnum, Oct. 8, 1889 (TU); Barnum to Clapp, Aug. 15, 1886 (Harvard Theatre Collection).

drome for the new menagerie, and sent agents to seek out specimens of the arts, sports, and manufactures of the Arabs. They considered the erection of museums of natural history and artificial curiosities in the principal cities of the country, each to be equipped with spacious lecture rooms for historical talks, scientific experiments and demonstrations.<sup>54</sup> Barnum published several juvenile books of jungle adventure and then accompanied the show to London in 1889, the *Times* noting the seriousness of his talk on education, the menageries, and natural history.<sup>55</sup>

Critics claimed Barnum's knowledge of animals inferior to that of some other circus men, and late in life P. T. admitted to the press his lack of expert information. Nonetheless, he had personally written or edited hundreds of brochures, visited countless zoos and museums, and corresponded with naturalists and hunters for half a century. And when the project of a National Zoological Garden was debated in the halls of Congress as he lay on his death bed, it was suggested that someone with a knowledge of animals like Buffalo Bill or P. T. Barnum be employed as consultant.<sup>56</sup>

Barnum recognized the appeal of both science and religion to men and women of the Victorian Age, and the moral overtones of natural history were always stressed. He had capitalized on public curiosity at a time when a knowledge of natural history was considered essential in the schools of a democratic society. Prince of Humbug and King of Showmen, this extraordinary Yankee lived to see the rise of scientific institutions which replaced the catch-all curiosity museums of earlier decades. Already the emphasis on research and analysis in highly specialized areas of the sciences was replacing the collecting tendencies of earlier naturalists. Natural history, however, had been the central current in the mainstream of nineteenth-century science. Museums, menageries, and zoos would always have an irresistible lure, at least as long as there are children and the young in heart. For his development of aquariums and menageries, his collections of zoological and geological specimens, his stimulus to the museum movement and his popularization of natural history, the American people would long remain indebted to the one and only P. T. Barnum.

Boston College Graduate School.

<sup>54</sup> *New York Clipper*, (Jan. 7, 1888), 686; *New York Sun*, March 24, 1891.

<sup>55</sup> *London Times*, Nov. 9, 1889.

<sup>56</sup> *Congressional Record*, XXII, Pt. III, 51st Cong., House of Representatives, 2208-9, Feb. 5, 1891. For the rôle of Senator Edmunds of Vermont and Representative Beck of Kentucky, see George B. Goode, ed., *The Smithsonian Institution, 1846-1896* (Washington, 1897), 449.