

THE SOCIETY FOR THE
HISTORY OF
NATURAL
HISTORY

Archives of Natural History

Volume 35
2008

Published by Edinburgh University Press
on behalf of the
Society for the History of Natural History

(registered charity no. 210355)

c/o The Natural History Museum,
Cromwell Road, London SW7 5BD

Early twentieth-century collection of extinct mammals from northern Siberia: the provenance of Bassett Digby's contributions to the Natural History Museum, London, and the British Museum

SUSAN A. DIGBY

Olympic College, 1600 Chester Avenue, Bremerton, Washington 98337-1699, USA (e-mail: sdigby@oc.ctc.edu).

ABSTRACT: The origin of the biggest of two relatively rare woolly rhinoceros horns in the collections of the Natural History Museum, London, was a mystery despite its extensive use in education. The aged label had dropped off. In 2003, research on natural historian, traveller, author and foreign correspondent Bassett Digby led to the re-attachment of the yellowed label with small spidery writing that provides the horn's serial number, collector's name and geographical origin. This paper connects provenance to this sparse information. The provenance also applies to other Siberian items Digby supplied: a tusk from an immature mammoth, tusk fragments of various colours, botanical specimens, and ethnological artefacts.

KEY WORDS: mammoths – woolly rhinoceros – travel – history of collection – Yakutsk – mammoth ivory.

INTRODUCTION

Bassett Digby (1888–1962) is a minor figure in the annals of natural history. However, he was one of the many who, without organized sponsorship, contributed to national museums and natural history knowledge in both Britain and the United States. Natural history knowledge is “the product of conglomerates of people, natural objects, institutions, collections, finances all linked by practices of different kinds” (Jardine and Spary 1996: 8). The same is true for the provenance of objects. Digby purchased or gave to the British Museum (Natural History) (BM(NH))¹ and the British Museum: zoological specimens including a woolly rhinoceros horn and skull, a tusk from an immature woolly mammoth, woolly mammoth tusk fragments of various colours; botanical specimens consisting of 92 plants, and ethnological items consisting of a comb and a box of objects, possibly game-pieces.

Details of Digby's life that relate to his avocation as a natural historian emerge from diverse fragments: museum and other public archives; his own published travel narratives in journals and newspapers; and three illustrated books: *Through Siberia: an empire in the making* (Wright and Digby 1913); *The mammoth, and mammoth hunting in north-east Siberia* (Digby 1926a); *Tigers, gold and witchdoctors* (Digby 1928). There is only a sketchy oral history of Bassett Digby, who was my grandfather. The most dramatic contributions to the stories of Digby's collecting are a series of photographs of a Siberian trader's tusk yard from the family album of a fellow traveller.

For Digby, travel, collecting and collections were sources of intellectual stimulation. They were connected to dreams of other places, stimulated mental and physical rejuvenation, and formed the basis for social and intellectual interactions throughout his life. About the act of collecting and collections Digby (1926b: 16) wrote: “you need never

grow old. You can always re-enter the portals of some fresh kingdom of enchantment and feel again the thralldom of a magic spell.”

EDUCATIONAL INFLUENCES

George² Bassett Digby was born in Hampstead on the northern outskirts of London on 25 January 1888. His early interest in natural history appears in a childhood scheme to keep bees in the nursery doll's house, in the hope that they would make honey (Digby 1933: 17). University College School, London, further cultivated his interests in the natural world and travel. The headmaster, Dr John Lewis Paton, was particularly influential (Digby 1923: 14). Paton was the first chairman of the large and active London CHA (Co-operative Holidays Association) Rambling Club formed in 1901. The club's philosophy linked intellectual and physical vigour; the reading circle discussed the works of Ruskin as well as travel and science (Taylor 1977: 210) and their holidays were designed to be improving through education about the natural world. Likely Paton's influence was particularly strong owing to the withdrawal of Digby's father from family activities in the several years prior to his death a few weeks after Bassett Digby turned 17.

By 1909, Digby was working for the London office of the *Daily news* of Chicago in Trafalgar Square and writing travel articles for other papers. Within a year he moved to America, travelling before finding work with the *Knickerbocker press*, a daily newspaper published in Albany, New York. Here he met Richardson Little Wright, editor for the paper's Sunday edition and the two developed a strong friendship built on their mutual interests in travel.

TRAVELS AND MAMMOTH HUNTING IN SIBERIA

In 1911 the two men in their twenties set off on an around-the-world tour sponsored largely by their travel accounts written for the Albany paper. This mode of funding travel had been popularized some forty years earlier by Mark Twain, then a young and impoverished journalist. The financial success of Twain's *The innocents abroad*, first published in 1869 (Twain 1992), probably inspired Digby and Wright. Upon their return to America, the two produced a collection of essays about Siberia and their adventures (Wright and Digby 1913).

By the end of their trip, Digby and Wright were both highly enamoured of Siberia and Russia, as was much of the United States of America.³ Wright wrote a second book about Russia (Wright 1917), and Digby returned to Siberia in 1914 after spending some time working for the *Philadelphia public ledger*. So how did Digby become interested in travelling specifically to Yakutsk to look for remains of extinct mammals, principally mammoth tusks? A number of influences converged: exhibits in a museum that he and Wright visited in Irkutsk; contacts within the Great Northern Telegraph Company (GNTC) who were familiar with travel routes within Siberia; an article on undiscovered areas of the world; the Royal Geographical Society's *Hints to travellers* (Reeves 1906); Digby's interest in natural history collecting; and international public fascination with mammoths. There was also an economic motive – Digby's need to fund his own travel. But, well beyond the financial potential of mammoth ivory, the unknown of Siberia and mammoths held great allure.

The museum at Irkutsk was probably one of the sites that influenced Digby in his decision to return to Siberia. Wright and Digby (1913: 89) noted that it "housed a remarkable collection of ethnological curios." Murray's 1893 handbook remarked that the museum contained "a collection of fossil Mastodons, abundantly found in Siberia" (Murray 1893: 355). The museum was also home to the East Siberian Imperial Geographical Society and had a library containing over four thousand books and 508 maps many of them relating to Siberia (Naval Intelligence Division 1918: 3: 384). Many of these maps had large blank areas – *terra incognita*.

Terrae incognitae were places imbued with romance and they were rapidly disappearing. Exploration was a frequent topic in newspapers including the *Philadelphia public ledger* that employed Digby. In addition to almost daily articles on exploration from a variety of locations, a full-page illustrated feature in the magazine section on 17 March 1912 reflected the state of world exploration following the spate of polar exploration: "What is left for the explorer to discover?" was tantalizingly sub-headed: "Now that the Poles have been found, there is an impression that little is left for man to explore but that isn't strictly true" (Adams 1912). Part of Siberia and Mongolia were among shaded regions on the map of the eastern hemisphere "showing roughly what the explorer still has undiscovered." On this small-scale map, Yakutsk's location is un-resolvable but undeniably close to the shaded sections – land alluringly undiscovered and ripe for exploration and specimen collection.

Museums and their hunger for specimens were intimately linked with travels into *terrea incognitea*. *Hints to travellers*, a handbook that Digby owned, was designed for "travellers and explorers" (Reeves 1906: 1: iv). Staff of the BM(NH) had contributed the section on natural history (Reeves 1906: 2: 82–105). A footnote advised travellers who intended to make zoological collections to "call on the Secretary of the British Museum (Natural History), Cromwell Road, S.W. He will be happy to supply any information required." The BM(NH) could also provide a small pocket-volume, *Handbook of instructions for collectors*, primarily written for "voluntary collectors" (Lankester 1907: iii) rather than professionals.

This handbook vigorously advocated collecting, as well it might; exhibits of exotic specimens and artefacts were enormously popular with the general public and public participation went beyond being an audience. The preface to the BM(NH) handbook stated: "collections have been greatly augmented and enriched by the donation of valuable series of specimens obtained by travellers and others whose vocations have necessitated their residence abroad in all parts of the world" (Lankester 1907: iii). Given Digby's later donations to, and contacts with the BM(NH), which continued to 1939, he probably visited the museum before going to Siberia.

Within museums and public imagination in both America and Britain, mammoths were what would now be referred to as a "hot topic". In America, Charles Robert Knight (1874–1953), painted panoramas including those for the central "Age of Man" hall of the American Museum of Natural History, in which mammoths roamed in snowy landscapes and northern tundras. With technical accuracy, Knight brought a long-vanished past into colour and substance within museums across America, and in books and periodicals including the *National geographic magazine* (Czerkas and Glut 1982: 19). Knight painted various extinct mammals but was particularly interested in mammoths. He spun visual stories about animals, colossal almost beyond belief, that until the start of the twentieth century had commonly existed as assortments of incongruous bones. Knight also illustrated an article by F. A. Lucas in *McClure's magazine* (1900) that was written to dispel the belief, generated by a fictional story printed several months earlier, that a mammoth had been found, killed, and

given to the Smithsonian Institution. There was some urgency to Lucas's article because the Smithsonian was "beset with visitors" and inquiries by people wanting to see this last mammoth (Lucas 1900). In Britain, mammoths were also noteworthy subjects; the *Illustrated London news* of 9 September 1911 carried a dramatic full-page artist's rendition of a mammoth hunt.

Although relatively little scientific information existed about mammoths, mammoth teeth were widely distributed in British curiosity cabinets and their tusks had been commercially traded for centuries. According to the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia britannica* there was "scarcely a county in England in which its remains have not been found" (Fairbairn and Lydekker 1911: 17: 531). The entry also noted the abundance and value of mammoth ivory in Siberia:

It is in northern Siberia that its remains have been found in the greatest abundance and in exceptional preservation. For a long period there has been from that region an export of mammoth-ivory, fit for commercial purposes, to China and to Europe. In the middle of the 10th century trade was carried on at Khiva in fossil ivory.

The mammoth ivory trade also involved England; mammoth ivory was first traded on the London market in 1611 (Pfizenmayer 1939: 183). The value of mammoth tusks was the stuff of legend and children's stories attached the dream of treasure to mammoth tusks (Frost 1877). Even a non-fictional account of arctic Siberian ivory (Hartwig 1878: 202) bore similarities to stories of London's streets being paved with gold; the account spoke of the possibility of astonishing and abounding riches:

Dozens of tusks are frequently found together, but the most astonishing deposit of mammoth-bones occurs in the Lächow Islands, where, in some localities, they are accumulated in such quantities as to form the chief substance of the soil. Year after year the tusk-hunters work every summer at the cliffs, without producing any diminution of the stock. The solidly-frozen matrix in which the bones lie thaws to a certain extent annually, allowing the tusks to drop out or to be quarried. In 1821, 20,000 lbs of the fossil ivory were procured from the island of New Siberia.

In the early twentieth century there was an active market for mammoth ivory, and Yakutsk was the location of tusk yards maintained by middlemen who bought ivory and other fossil finds from native peoples for sale to southern traders. Good quality mammoth ivory was used as an alternative to elephant tusks for such things as piano keys, combs, jewellery, chess sets and billiard balls. The pigment in "ivory black" paint was the fate of poorer quality ivory.

Digby's involvement in this financial side of mammoth ivory collection is unknown. His book, *The mammoth, and mammoth hunting in north-east Siberia* (Digby 1926a), provided what the reviewer for the *Geographical journal* described as the "first written comprehensive English-language information on this extinct animal" ([Brown] 1926). It is a book of popular science and discovery, and has only an oblique mention of trade. However, Digby's journey to Yakutsk was definitely enmeshed with the story of trade and potential riches. His acknowledgement read: "I wish to make my acknowledgements to a certain genial and enterprising gentleman who took a sporting chance on my being able to find a big hoard of mammoth-ivory for him" (Digby 1926a: 4). This acknowledgement, together with a collection of photographs in an album, suggests that he funded his travel and collecting interests by locating ivory for an ivory trader.

Digby was not unique in his interest in collecting. Educated in the flush of Empire that involved colonial collecting of the world, Digby collected at an early age. The prevailing belief was that collecting was socially improving (Pearce *et al.* 2002: xvi) and informal

juvenile literature supported this belief. Intense interest in natural history extended across all classes in Britain. Museums were rapidly expanding and loomed large in popular imagination throughout the early twentieth century. For example, an advertisement for Lifebuoy soap printed in the *Manchester guardian* on 6 September 1927, featured a mother looking at her sleeping child with the opening line in large print: "His pockets are like a museum" (Anonymous 1927).⁴ Collecting was a re-occurring theme in newspapers with columns such as "The making of a museum: a collection of a child's treasures" (H. C. D. 1930), "The collecting habit: tastes acquired during schooldays" (E. J. F. H. 1930), and "Relics of the coat pocket: the habits of depositors and collectors" (B. N. S. 1930).⁵ Children's collecting led to life-long and often expert engagements with museums. Browne (1996: 311) has noted the value of such knowledgeable collectors scattered about the globe: "Countless expatriates and colonial officials who would otherwise be lost to history became – for a short while – authorities on some point relating to the natural history of their area, and contributed information to the natural history bodies and journals proliferating in London and elsewhere."

Irkutsh to Yakutsk

In 1914, Digby journeyed to Yakutsk lured by multiple and diverse reasons: the romance and adventure of uncharted northern lands; the probability of interesting natural history specimens for the prestigious BM(NH); noteworthy cultural artefacts; the certainty of publishable stories; and the possibility of riches. His journey by horse-drawn carriages, rowboats and a steamer can be reconstructed from two illustrated stories in the periodical *Travel*. The first described his journey to Yakutsk (Digby 1916a), and the second described the "Siberian outpost" of Yakutsk (Digby 1916b). Digby and his party, about whom there are no details except that it included a Danish citizen, Martinus Adsbol, left Irkutsk in mid-June 1914. They clattered out of Irkutsk, their horses breaking into a showy gallop down the fashionable main street of stores and cafes known as the Bolshaya. The party travelled north across the steppe and into the taiga forests, stopping for the night at post-stations. Once they reached the Lena River they hired a series of punts before taking a steamboat; the entire journey took about three weeks.

Yakutsk

Yakutsk was the only settlement in northern Siberia of any importance; it had a population of more than 7,000 people, and a telegraph service established by the GNTC (Figure 1). The town was the meeting point for traders and indigenous peoples; oranges, tea, flour and ribbons were traded for furs, mammoth tusks and handicrafts. Digby (1916b) saw Yakutsk as a fascinating and colourful interface between a Europeanized Asia and an uncharted land of adventure, the Siberian north:

... the focal point of all the bridle paths and streams of the northern wilds, the magnet that draws the Yakuts and Tunguses, Samoyedes and Ostiaks, out of their forest lairs to barter skins for gaudy cotton stuffs, iron cook pots, scythes and leaden shot. Moreover, Yakutsk has a unique trade in Mammoth ivory, the Russ bartering his Moscow wares for the giant tusks of the huge, hairy brutes that died a quarter of a million years ago, brought in from the frozen Arctic tundras by nomad Yakuts wandering about in search of game.

In Yakutsk, Digby completed his financial obligations by locating a tusk yard containing large specimens. This was also the source of mammoth tusks purchased by the BM(NH). Finding the yard was probably challenging because established traders controlled much of

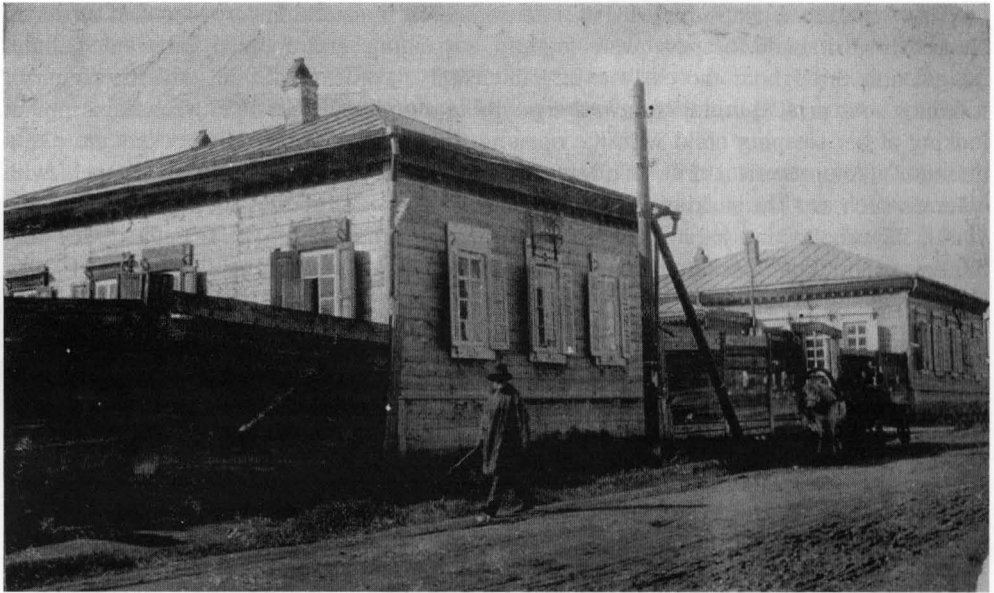


Figure 1. Post and telegraph office in Yakutsk 1914 (Adsbol family album).

the market and wares were not always openly displayed. Digby (1926a: 168–169) was ecstatic:

Our luck was in. One morning we located a really big hoard. A key was turned in a massive padlock. With a muffled clang the sheet-iron door was flung open. We stepped out of the blinding July sunshine into pitch-darkness . . . and, dimly at first, then more and more clearly, this great heap of Arctic loot appeared, like the slow developing of a photographic plate. Huge horns that curled this way and that. Straightish horns and horns that writhed. Horns curled in almost circular spirals. The hollows of horns and the tips of horns. Tips blunt and tips sharp. Horns as slim as a bullock's or as thick as a tree trunk. Horns smooth as satin or gnarled and rough as weather-worn old logs. No, not horns; but tusks, mammoth tusks by the dozen, by the score – hundreds and hundreds of them, cairn upon cairn, stack upon stack. Tons and tons of prehistoric ivory.

However, the most dramatic and immediate record of the tusk yard comes not from Digby's vivid descriptions and discussions of the variations in size, colour, shape and condition, but from photographs in an album belonging to Martinus Adsbol.

Mammoth tusk snapshots.

Adsbol's photograph album was acquired, serendipitously, from a bookseller specializing in Arctic literature and artefacts in Calgary, Canada. He had contacted my brother as the album contained photographs that also appeared in Digby's book on mammoths. Photographs of Yakutsk and mammoth tusks form a dramatic and abrupt discontinuity in the photographic record of the Adsbol family at home and on outings within Britain. The identity of the album's original owner, Martinus Adsbol, was traced through photographs of a London house. Adsbol, who appears at intervals through the album, is one of the Siberian travellers. The Siberian travels of Digby and Adsbol, including the journey to Yakutsk, are recorded in a series of 59 photographs densely mounted on both sides of five pages. The photographs are contact prints, their white borders unevenly trimmed.⁶ The Siberian section starts with unpopulated landscapes, non-European peoples and buildings, horse-drawn wicker carriages,

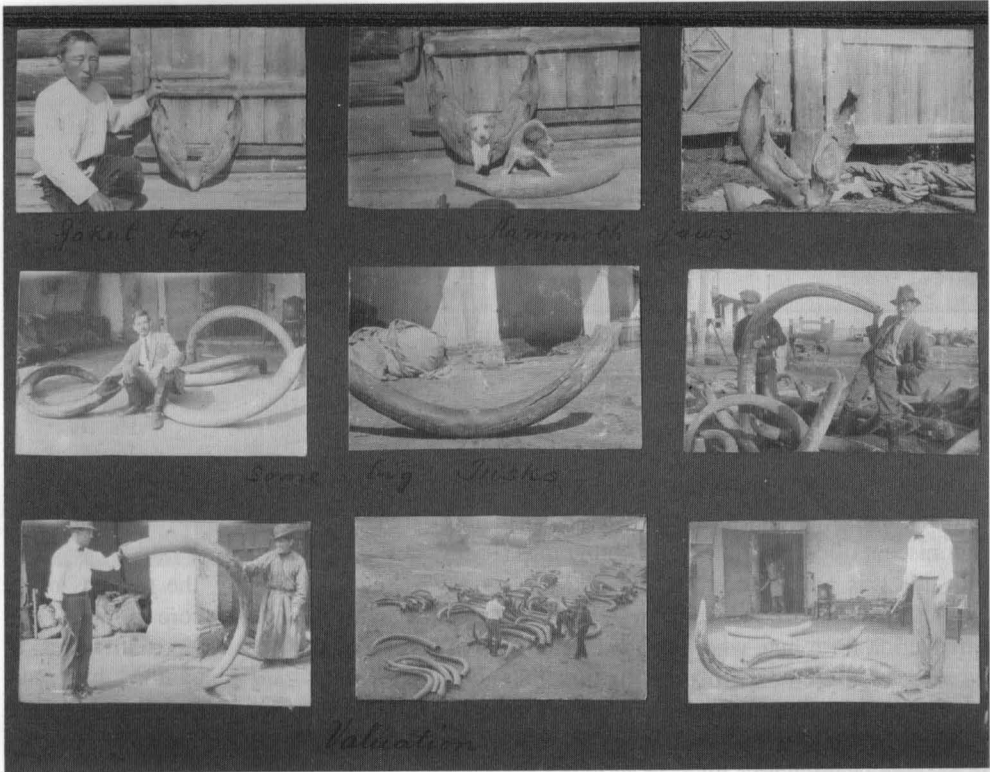


Figure 2. "Valuation": one of two pages in the Adsbol photograph album titled "Ivory Trade in Yakutsk."

camels, river-boat steamers, post-houses, strange burial sites and monasteries. It continues to Yakutsk where three photographs feature the town and 16 feature piles of mammoths tusks (Figure 2). Within these photographs, now worn and scuffed, Digby appears as do two other Europeans, apparently fellow travellers. These men are simultaneously familiar and anonymous as the same images appear as half-tone illustrations to Digby's book on mammoths, a second Siberian book, *Tigers, gold and witchdoctors* (Digby 1928), and his *Travel* article about Yakutsk (Digby 1916b).

I have selected two photographs (Figures 3 and 4) for further discussion because they tell an interesting story. Although these photographs appear as snapshots, the photographs involving Digby are as carefully composed as if taken in a formal commercial studio. The photographs are as much a construction as a depiction. Digby, a story-teller by profession, specialized in short stories, usually one-column articles that appeared in newspapers and weekly magazines. The stories were often about natural history, travel, objects and events, many of them quite ordinary but made fascinating by his telling. He wrote about doorbells, conversations in trains, rubbish heaps, butterflies, marriage customs and cats; many allegedly concerned his own experiences. Digby excelled in extracting magic from the fabric of the everyday; a conjuring trick by someone who loved words. In these photographs he has done something similar; he has constructed himself as an explorer, and a discoverer of the magnificent, within a relatively mundane commercial undertaking.

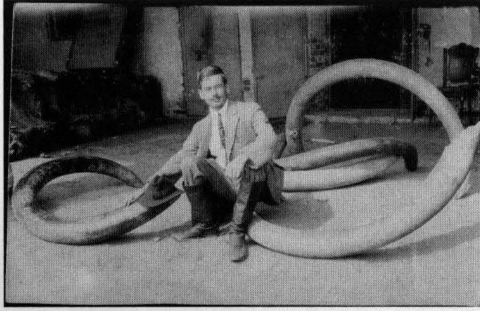


Figure 3. Bassett Digby with mammoth tusks outside Yakutsk warehouse (Adbol photograph album).



Figure 4. Trader with mammoth tusks outside a Yakutsk warehouse (Adbol photograph album).

Digby appears in Figure 3, smiling, posed confidently and at ease. In the background is a sheet-iron door, likely the one that was flung open to reveal the tusks that were brought “out into the sunshine one day, and we sorted them” (Digby 1928: 170). His performance is reminiscent of colonial hunting photographs (Ryan 1998: 109, 125). Digby sits on his “kill”, only his was not a blood-and-guts “kill”. It was an “intellectual kill”, the remains of an extinct mammal found in a warehouse, something with infinitely more promise and satisfaction for a man who belonged to the web of natural history knowledge and wished to be associated with expertise on mammoths.

The selection and arrangement of the mammoth tusks in the photograph are particularly interesting. The tusks, some of the biggest and most curled in the yard, are carefully arranged to provide Digby with a place to sit in the centre of a formal composition. Curving, the tusks draw the viewer's eye into Digby's body positioned at the centre of a visual vortex created by the tusks. Visually, the tusk on the right flows into his body, through the white of his shirt, and upwards to his head. The tusk on the left smoothly directs the viewer's eye up Digby's arm, again to his face. The far end of the tusk returns viewers to Digby. To counteract the mobile lines of the tusks, the composition is almost formally stabilized by the strong vertical and horizontal lines formed where the ground meets the walls and by the massive structure of the doors and the dark rectangle of the interior. This photograph is a careful composition constructed to tell the story of a glorious and adventurous find. It is not a casual snapshot.

In contrast, the other photograph (Figure 4) was taken in almost the same location with almost the same number of tusks and features an unknown European member of Digby's party. He is the person who is evaluating the quality of the mammoth tusks, and appears to be the person in charge of selection and arranging for transport. There is no effort to compose a picture to convey a magnificent discovery or the efforts of a specific individual; the tusks are not arranged for maximum effect and the trader's head is outside the frame. The photograph serves to document a process.

In these two photographs and in others on the same page (Figure 2) Digby was presenting tusks of astonishing magnificence and himself as an explorer and mammoth hunter. He was inhabiting a land of romance and adventure through his collecting. Whereas the unknown European is represented as a merchant, concerned not with near-mythical magnificence but with the need to get a job done, to cover travel expenses that were probably higher than anticipated and still make a profit. The trader was engaging in a centuries-old activity that routed tusks to commercial markets, bypassing museums.



Figure 5. Woolly rhinoceros horn and skull as displayed by Bassett Digby in Yakutsk (Digby 1926a).

Woolly rhinoceros horn and skull

The yard featured in these photographs of mammoth tusks, or another similar yard in Yakutsk, was also the source of a rare woolly rhinoceros horn (M10967) and skull now at the Natural History Museum, London. The rhinoceros find was featured in Digby's book on mammoths (Digby 1926a: 166) (see Figure 5). In this photograph, the horn appears, as it exists today, roughly trimmed by an axe to reveal growth rings.⁷ Digby as a calm, knowledgeable and authoritative natural history educator replaces Digby as the excited, heroic explorer. He positions the horn in the approximate position relative to the skull to convey the identity of the skull and horn as remains of a woolly rhinoceros.

Ethnographic artefacts

Digby also donated mammoth-ivory artefacts from Yakutsk to the British Museum. He commented that whereas mammoth ivory was a curiosity in Europe and "goes into the museums or cabinets of collectors of paleontological specimens" in northern Siberia "it is a commonplace raw material for making useful implements" (Digby 1924: 6). The artefacts (in the Department of Ethnography) consist of a comb, birch-bark box containing game-pieces, and a lip or ear ornament.⁸ These were probably purchased at the "native bazaar" (Digby 1916b), an open area surrounded by long, single storey log buildings containing small stores. Digby put the bazaar first in his list of the "three most interesting spots in town" (Digby 1916b) and elaborated on the variety of handcrafted wares that could be purchased. He described his purchase of the box of game-pieces destined for the British Museum (Digby 1926a: 185):

I obtained a birch-bark casket, ornamented with transparent strips of talc, containing a number of crudely carved little ivory birds, which stand up like chessmen. The crone who unearthed it was unable to give an intelligible account of it. She merely puckered up her wrinkled face in a propitiatory grin, poking the pieces and repeating: "Birds, Birds!" They may be merely carvings done for amusement, or they may be symbolic emblems connected with Shamanistic ritual. The casket and pieces I gave to the British Museum.

Botanical specimens and other natural history observations

Digby also contributed botanical specimens to the BM(NH).⁹ He hired horses on several occasions and rode out on day-excursions from Yakutsk on to the surrounding alluvial plain. Most of his specimens were probably taken from the low-lying valley of the Lena River. He wrote: "Out of the thirty or forty kinds of wild flowers that I collected, more than half were actual sorts to be found on our British and North American country-sides or closely allied species of familiar generi [*sic*]" (Digby 1916b). He went on to list the familiar plants and also the butterflies and other insects, birds, reptiles and small animals that he observed. Digby was enthusiastic about natural history collecting in Siberia: "The naturalist's Siberia is a wonderful land of great promise. The British museum [BM(NH)] authorities told me that the little collection of plants that I brought to it from the province of Yakutsk was actually the first of the kind to have been made for them" (Digby 1928: 313). Other plants donated by Digby to the BM(NH) came from Oleminsk⁹, a town on the Lena River where the steamboat stopped on the way to Yakutsk (Digby 1916a).

BEYOND SIBERIA

Digby's departure from Yakutsk, and the reason why, passed unrecorded. However, from the photographs in Adsbol's album showing tusk packing, and from *The mammoth, and mammoth hunting in north-east Siberia*, he apparently accomplished his work for the commercial venture. Soon after news of the start of World War One, Digby resumed working for the London office of the *Daily news* of Chicago as a foreign correspondent. He contacted the BM(NH) to enquire about the status of "pressed flowers from N.E. Siberia"¹⁰ before leaving for the Eastern Front (Anonymous, 1915). After a year of nearly continuous travel in countries including Greece, Russia, Finland and Bulgaria he reported from Petrograd (St Petersburg) until late 1916 when he moved to Stockholm. In March 1918 he became a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society (FRGS); his certificate of candidacy for election listed him as "writer and traveller".¹¹

After hostilities ended, in 1920 he travelled around the world with his wife, Dora, collecting in the South Pacific before returning to London via New York. His bulky load of specimens was purchased by the American Museum of Natural History. Although Digby did not travel beyond Europe again, he continued to collect, to be involved with museums, and to write about natural history. However, of all the places to which Digby travelled, Siberia was the country that most engaged him; Siberia was featured in many short stories. Digby's most significant work was the book on mammoths (Digby 1926a) in which he engaged in debates that are, even now, ongoing – the connection between mammoths and humans, and reasons for the mammoth's extinction.

CONCLUSION

The specimens and artefacts that the Natural History Museum, London, and the British Museum acquired from Digby in 1915 were the result of Digby's quest for a near-mythical beast in a land that had been "left for an explorer to discover". His travel to Yakutsk was a journey into a *terra incognita* of "romance and adventure" by a man on a constrained budget and without the support of large scientific or commercial organizations. By offering his

services to a trader, free-lance writing, and selling specimens and artefacts he was able to fund his travels as well as collect specimens of enduring value. Digby was one of many travellers who contributed expertise and objects to national museums. Behind the catalogue numbers on many museum objects are rich tapestries of stories. Reuniting these stories with their objects is enriching; it places them in their cultural, geographical and historical contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Andrew Current (Department of Paleontology, NHM, London) for his enthusiastic assistance, and James Hammill (Centre for Anthropology at the British Museum, London). Roy Vickery, Clare Bunkham and the late John Thackray, of the Natural History Museum, London, provided helpful information. I also wish to acknowledge David Pracy who identified the owner of the photograph album, Cameron Treleaven who located the Adsolb album, Robin Digby who helped reconstruct Digby's travels, and Dr Frank Carsey. I also thank Dr Denis Cosgrove, Dr Stephen Bell and Dr Saloni Mathur of the University of California Los Angeles. Comments from editors associated with this journal were most helpful. This work was funded in part by University of California Los Angeles.

NOTES

¹ The Natural History Museum, London (NHM), was separated from the British Museum in 1880. In Digby's time the NHM was named the British Museum (Natural History), hereafter referred to as BM(NH).

² The forename George is on Digby's birth certificate but he was not known by George, did not publish under that name, and appears not to have used the initial G after 1908.

³ An advertisement for Marshall Field Company in the *Daily news* of Chicago (12 February 1916) was illustrated with a Russian folk-art border and three figures in modified Russian dress. The text read:

Simultaneously with the Russian Ballet's appearance here we are displaying . . . Original Costumes designed by *Bakst* and worn by the artists in certain of the ballets. It will be interesting to note the effect of these Costumes on women's clothes of the moment – the new Suits, Coats, Frocks, Skirts and Blouses revealing this Russo-Oriental influence in pleasing modification.

⁴ The text below read:

Bless his heart! Marbles, bits of string, bits of rusty wire, grimy balls of putty, a terrible pencil-end – well chewed by somebody – a magnet. Through whose fingers did they pass before *he* fingered and played with them? Perhaps it's better mother doesn't know! But she doesn't worry, either. She has taught him the Lifebuoy habit. Without thinking almost, he washes his hands daily now – before meals, before bed – with the soap that *protects* and *purifies*. The Life-buoy habit is his safeguard – the best safeguard for the whole family against chance infection. Use Lifebuoy in *your* home!

⁵ Columns published in the *Birmingham post*; authors were only identified by initials.

⁶ The untitled photograph album is in the possession of the author. It contains 25 pages of heavy green fibrous cardstock with photographs mounted on both sides. Twenty pages contain 141 photographs of people, homes and recreational activities in England taken from some years prior to 1914 and 1928. Five pages in the centre of the album contain 59 photographs of Siberia taken with two different cameras.

⁷ A. Currant, BM(NH), pers. comm., 20 June 2006.

⁸ The game-pieces consist of twelve birds, possibly quail or cockerels, eleven horse heads with a stylized leg and hoof, and a tall pagoda-like object. All appear to be well-handled fragments of ivory, many consisting of outside sections of tusk (items PRNs: EAS35087–EAS35113 viewed October 2006 at the British Museum Department of Ethnography stores, courtesy of James Hammill).

⁹ A. R. Vickery, pers. comm., 9 July 1998.

¹⁰ B. Digby to BM(NH), 5 April 1915: original ms in Natural History Museum, London, Archives DF400 11/15.

¹¹ Archives, Royal Geographical Society, London. There is no record of the activities that led to him being sponsored and the signatures of his sponsors are indistinct.

REFERENCES

- ADAMS, C., 1912 What is left for the explorer to discover? *Philadelphia public ledger* 17 March: magazine section: 3.
- ANONYMOUS, 1915 How great war news service is manned: glimpses of results obtained by the daily news in the European field: its own army of writers: brief sketches of correspondents who have won high places as news gatherers. *Daily news* (Chicago) 31 December: 11.
- ANONYMOUS, 1927 [Advertisement for] Lifebuoy soap. *Manchester guardian* 6 September: 6.
- [BROWN], R. N. R., 1926 [Review of] The mammoth, and mammoth hunting in north-east Siberia. *Geographical journal* **68**: 351.
- BROWNE, J., 1996 *Biogeography and empire*, pp 305–322 in JARDINE, N., SECORD, J. A. and SPARY, E. C. (editors), *Cultures of natural history*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- B. N. S., 1930 Relics of the coat pocket: the habits of depositors and collectors *The Birmingham post* 14 June: 18.
- CZERKAS, S. M. and GLUT, D. F., 1982 *Dinosaurs, mammoths, and cavemen: the art of Charles R. Knight*. New York: E. P. Dutton Inc.
- DIGBY, B., 1916a Along a great Siberian river. *Travel* **25** (June): 18–21, 46, 47.
- DIGBY, B., 1916b Yakutsk – A Siberian outpost. *Travel* **25** (July): 18–21, 45–48.
- DIGBY, B., 1923 Memories of schoolmasters. *Manchester guardian* 3 October: 16.
- DIGBY, B., 1924 Mammothware. *Manchester guardian* 1 February: 16.
- DIGBY, B., 1926a *The mammoth, and mammoth hunting in north-east Siberia*. London & New York: H. F. & G. Witherby, D. Appleton & Co.
- DIGBY, B., 1926b Afterthoughts on hobbies. *Manchester guardian* 6 April: 16.
- DIGBY, B., 1928 *Tigers, gold and witchdoctors*. London & New York: John Lane, The Bodley Head Ltd; Harcourt, Brace & Co.
- DIGBY, B., 1933 Bees in the dolls' house: experiment of youth. *The Birmingham post* 1 April: 18.
- E. J. F. H., 1930 The collecting habit: tastes acquired during schooldays. *The Birmingham post* 20 February: 10.
- F[AIRBAIRN], W. H. and L[YDEKKER], R., 1911 *Mammoth*, pp 530–531 in *Encyclopaedia britannica: a dictionary of arts, sciences, literature and general information*. Volume **17**. Eleventh edition. Cambridge & New York: The Encyclopaedia Britannica Co.
- FROST, T., 1877 *The land of the mammoth: a boy's arctic adventures three hundred years ago*. London: Religious Tract Society.
- HARTWIG, G., 1878 *The polar and tropical worlds: a popular and scientific description of man and nature in the polar and equatorial regions of the globe*. Springfield, Massachusetts, & Chicago: C. A. Nichols & Co, H. Heron.
- H. C. D., 1930 The making of a museum: a collection of a child's treasures. *The Birmingham post* 19 June: 19.
- JARDINE, N. and SPARY, E., 1996 *The natures of cultural history*, pp 3–13 in JARDINE, N., SECORD, J. A. and SPARY, E. C. (editors), *Cultures of natural history*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LANKESTER, E. R., 1907 Preface, in *Handbook of instructions for collectors*. Issued by the British Museum (*Natural History*). Third edition. London: Hazell, Watson & Viney.
- LUCAS, F. A., 1900 The truth about the mammoth. *McClure's magazine* **14**: 349–355.
- MURRAY, J., 1893 *Handbook for travellers in Russia, Poland, and Finland including the Crimea, Caucasus, Siberia, and central Asia*. Fifth edition. London: John Murray.
- NAVAL INTELLIGENCE DIVISION, 1918 *A handbook of Siberia and Arctic Russia*. London: HMSO. 3 volumes.
- PEARCE, S., FLANDERS, R., HALL, M. and MORTON, F., 2002 *The collector's voice: critical readings in the practice of collecting. Imperial voices*. Bodmin: Ashgate. 3 volumes.

- PFIZENMAYER, E. W., 1939 *Siberian man and mammoth*. (Translated from the German edition by Muriel D. Simpson.) London & Glasgow: Blackie & Son Ltd.
- REEVES, E. A. (editor), 1906 *Hints to travellers: scientific and general*. Ninth edition. London: The Royal Geographical Society. 2 volumes.
- RYAN, J. R., 1998 *Picturing empire: photography and the visualization of the British Empire*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press with Reaktion books.
- TAYLOR, H., 1997 *A claim on the countryside: a history of the British outdoor movement*. Edinburgh: Keele University Press.
- TWAIN, M., 1992 *The innocents abroad*. New York: Book of The Month Club.
- WRIGHT, R. L. and DIGBY, B., 1913 *Through Siberia: an empire in the making*. New York & London: McBride, Nast & Company; Hurst & Blackett.
- WRIGHT, R. L., 1917 *The Russians: an interpretation*. New York: Frederick A. Stokes.

Received 11 September 2006. Accepted 9 October 2007.