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**Papers Given at the**  
**2004 Conference at**  
**National Museum of Ireland**

*“Natural History Is Cultural History”*  
*26-28 April 2004*

***Introduction & Welcome to National Museum***

*Raghnall O Floinn, Head of Collections, National Museum of Ireland*

I would like to extend a warm welcome to you all to the National Museum of Ireland's Museum of Decorative Art & History at Collins Barracks. This is, I understand, only the second meeting of this group and we are delighted that you have chosen Dublin as the venue for 2004 and we are glad to act as one of the conference hosts.

Yesterday, you will have visited the Natural History Museum as well as our stores at Beggars Bush, Trinity College's Geological Museum, Herbarium, Conservation Studio and Zoological Museum. From these purpose-built Victorian museums you move today to one of the most recent of the National Museum of Ireland's sites at Collins Barracks. Opened in September 1997 as the Museum of Decorative Arts & History, the site was the first purpose-built permanent barracks on these islands, built between 1704 and 1710 and was originally known as the Dublin or Royal Barracks. (The complex was later named after the first Commander in Chief of the Irish Free State, Michael Collins.)

Effectively the site is today the Museum's headquarters where the Administration, Services, Registration and Conservation departments are housed in addition to the Art & Industrial Division.

The complex now houses the Museum's collections of Decorative Arts with definitive displays of Irish silver, furniture costume and coinage as well as themed galleries and temporary exhibition spaces. A new Military History gallery is to open in late 2005 and a temporary exhibition gallery is currently being developed in what was formerly the barracks' Riding School. A new central block is planned to house main services and facilities and three galleries devoted to Irish History, Ethnography and Earth Science. This is shortly to be submitted to the planning authorities. Eventually, the Museum has plans to centralise all reserve collections (apart from those in the Museum of Country Life, located at Turlough Park House, Co. Mayo) on site.

The buildings at Collins Barracks pose challenges of access both of a physical and an intellectual nature and these are some of the themes being explored in your conference proceedings: the relevance of natural history collections; the relationship between national and regional museums; the need to develop new audiences and to improve access to collections as well as policy issues such as the place of human remains in public collections. These are questions which exercise all museums and which this institution is currently dealing with. On the question of improving access to collections, for example, we have arranged for guided tours of our newly-opened reserve collections of period furniture here at Collins barracks. Later this year, a new Visible Storage gallery is to open which will put on public access some 10,000 objects from the reserve decorative arts collections.

I would like to thank a number of people for the work they have put in to organising this conference, in particular Mr Nigel Monaghan, Keeper of Natural History and the many guides who have taken you behind the scenes at the various venues.

I hope that delegates get an opportunity to view the displays and facilities here in Collins Barracks and that your deliberations over the next few days both here and at the National Botanic Gardens will be of benefit to those of you visiting Dublin for the first time, to our natural science colleagues from sister institutions in Ireland and to our own Museum staff.

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### ***Conservation Education for Reflective Practice & Public Advocacy***

*Eve Graves, Principal Lecturer in Museology, Conservation Department, Camberwell College of Art*

If I am asked what I do for a living I say that I work in conservation education. I have often had the response 'Oh, conservation, trees and stuff, how nice!' I used to patiently explain that I was involved in the preservation of cultural material, to begin with mostly prints, drawings and books. But the more I have become immersed in the discipline the more I have come to feel that the conservation of the natural world is continuous with that of the cultural world and that conservation of the natural environment is, in many important ways, conservation of the cultural environment. It is hardly surprising, then, that I see natural history collections, and their conservation, as a vital part of this spectrum. I would like my students to think of themselves as part of a community of professionals involved in looking after the world, in all its aspects, natural and artificial, for future generations. Conservators, of course, however enlightened and skilled, cannot do this alone. They need the co-operation of the global community. The world needs advocates for conservation. This means that we need the conservators of the future to really care and to be good communicators, to really understand the values embedded in material, natural or artificial, and to want it to endure. At a time of frightening world events and threatened resources there is a pressing need for all of us to understand our world and ourselves.

From these ideas came my research questions - How can the new generations of conservators of all types of material be educated to become reflective practitioners with a genuine desire to engage with the public? How can we help our students to be sensitive to intangible values and to understand how these values may be embedded in material things? How do we involve students in learning that is deep, flexible and lifelong?

I will briefly explain the context that gave me the opportunity to try to find answers to these questions.

Some years ago I was asked to take over the theoretical aspects of three conservation degree programmes. Previously the students on these programmes had attended art history lectures with all the other students in the college. These were seen by most of them as *add-ons*, and not, in many cases, particularly relevant to their major studies. Having the opportunity to rethink the entire approach I decided to experiment with letting the students design their own curriculum by encouraging them to reflect on the richness and contemporary relevance of the subject they were studying. In other words instead of telling them 'Here's the lecture programme - these are the issues that you need to know about' I wanted them to discover for themselves what they needed to research and discuss. As potentially the decision makers of the future they needed to understand their broader role within society, how their discipline had developed and how it was continuing to evolve. I wanted them to understand the multi-disciplinary nature of conservation and to encourage them to take a co-operative approach with other professionals and with the public. A major part of this was to encourage them to reflect on how cultural material of various kinds acquires meaning and value. For most importantly as I have suggested, I wanted them to think about values and the ways in which they are embedded in different aspects of people's lives. There is no time here to go into the detail of this but I will briefly give the outline of the procedure.

The starting point for study is the idea of the exhibited collection, loosely understood to encompass a wide range of material from art gallery or historic house to archeological site or botanical garden. Students are introduced to a range of institutions and meet professionals working in different areas (conservation, curation, education, information, administration, management, exhibition design and so on) so that they start with an idea about how professionals work together to look after, exhibit and interpret collections. They are asked to keep a Reflective Journal about the development of their understanding of their discipline. In order to provide a starting point and focus, they are asked to choose an exhibited item or small group of items and interpret the chosen material for the rest of the group by reflecting on the reasons for the collection and exhibition of the material and by examining any issues raised. They do this in their Journals and then use