

CHAPTER 11

Science

The good thing about science is that it's true whether or not you believe in it.

Neil deGrasse Tyson

LIBRARY: AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY RESEARCH LIBRARY

Address: Central Park West at 79th Street

URL: <http://www.amnh.org/our-research/research-library>

Telephone: (212) 769-5100

E-mail: libref@amnh.org

Access: Open to the general public from 2:00 to 5:30 Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/sharer/sharer.php?u=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.amnh.org%2Four-research%2Fresearch-library%2Fabout-the-library>

Flickr: <https://www.flickr.com/search/?q=american%20museum%20of%20natural%20history>

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/user/AMNHorg>

Transportation: Subway: B & C lines, 81st Street. Bus: M79

I visited the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) library in April 2015. I am a museum member, so that made it extra easy when I had to show the guards my ID before I went up to the top floor to see the library. With its whales, dinosaurs, dioramas, planetarium, gift shop, and IMAX theater, the museum is a wildly popular stop in New York City. The tone of the crowd is more like Macy's the week before Christmas than a somber institution of learning.

I have tried in vain to visit the museum at an off hour, but on this day the library was practically empty—it was a Friday, so museum goers cannot just walk in like they can from Tuesday through Thursday. I was there to meet Tom Baione, whose official title is Harold Boeschstein Director, Department of Library Services, AMNH. Also, the reference librarian, Mai

Reitmeyer, who had first discussed my visit, was there that day. Even though the library was mostly empty, it was still humming with intense reference questions over the phone, so I had several minutes to look around the shelves and check out exhibits like the glass case with a detailed model of the HMS *Beagle*. The reference books were all cataloged using Library of Congress classification, supported by an Innovative Interfaces, Inc., online catalog (III catalogs are the mark of a library that is truly prospering). On the east wall near the reference desk, there is a large metal plate with an original page of *Birds of America*.



Copper plate of Birds in America.

The reading room is spacious, well lit, and appealing. It is the tip of a giant information iceberg.



Main public reading area.

When Baione was finally finished with telephone reference, he took me on an energetic and eye-opening trip through Wonderland. The library began in 1869 with the founding of the museum by Theodore Roosevelt's father and others. An annex building was constructed in 1993 to house an enormous collection of books, journals, portable dioramas, photographs, model dinosaurs, motion pictures, manuscripts, and memorabilia.

Past the card catalog (still accurate, though not updated since 1993) the first stop is the new acquisitions room, where new titles are available for inspection by the museum's faculty members, who number in the hundreds. A second room contains recent acquisitions of paper periodicals. Baione said that the library is moving heavily in the direction of electronic journals for its thousands of subscriptions, and most of the paper titles that are left are either journals that do not publish online or, more likely, journals that sell only subscriptions that include both formats.

Further in, there was a room for preview of new paper journals, and clearly there were a lot of empty shelves. "We are going to reassign some of this space to reflect the new realities of library service," I was told. We walked through an

area with seemingly dozens of scanning stations feeding a massive digitization program. Then we were off to the elevators to visit a dizzying array of staff-only floors filled with compact shelving—and treasures beyond description.

The first stop was a room with giant floor-to-ceiling freezer cabinets. These were for the preservation of nitrate negatives, which famously disintegrate in upsetting ways if they are not properly maintained. Baione said that the negatives need to be relocated every other year so that the freezers can be defrosted.

Next we saw a room with racks of motion picture films, many or most of them in 16-mm format. There was also storage for glass-plate negatives. The standard size was 8 by 10 inches, although a few special landscape camera negatives were as big as the windows in my house. Further along there was a large collection of videos. If you were an audiovisual education student in the 1980s you know what is meant by 3/4 inch Umatic format, and the rest of you have not missed much. Obviously, the library is interested in saving these to a more friendly format, but with this much to do, priorities must be established. More shelves contained lantern slides with scripts. These were the forebears of the film strips that we used in the 1950s, which begat slide/tape sets and finally video. This floor also contained a large selection of portable dioramas about the size of a medium suitcase that circulated to schools in the area.



Dioramas to go.

The memorabilia area is figuratively, if not literally, filled with the ghost of Charles R. Knight. Baione described him as the Dinosaur Whisperer. Knight could look at a fossil skeleton and see what any of the old creatures looked like, and he had the artistic talent to bring this to life for the rest of us. Most of the models fit on a standard library shelf, ranging from tiny up to the size of a standard poodle. Many of them look eerily real. Another floor contained many ranges to hold the papers of Neil deGrasse Tyson, the museum's media superstar. This was a logical choice for his archive because Tyson grew up in Brooklyn and got his first look at the stars inside the Hayden Planetarium. Afterward, they say, he grew up with the museum.

By this time, after covering eight floors of holdings, I had no sense of direction or height, but eventually we were in the storage room next to the reference desk. The room contains cabinets full of photographic prints. I was told that there were more than a million, and that 10,000 of them had been digitized so far.



Photography files.

As a librarian with a history of digitization work, I approve of this ratio. It is good practice to digitize enough to get people interested and motivate them to visit the library and hold the originals in their hands. At the end of the room, as you walk back to the reference desk, you see a sight that helped

me summarize the experience of visiting this library. In front of me was a large model of a dinosaur, probably a brontosaurus. Behind that, on the next range of shelves rested a rather weather-beaten sled. “That’s something that Peary brought back from the Arctic,” Baione told me.



Items from the past and the far past.

The collection of nearly half a million books is reference-only to museum visitors, but AMNH faculty members may borrow them, even titles in the rare books collection. They take the title “faculty” very literally, since the museum has a long-standing partnership with Columbia University. Also, the most surprising fact of my visit concerns the museum’s educational program. They have two degree-granting programs. One is a Ph.D. in comparative biology. The second is a Master’s degree program to send science teachers out to the local community. Students must have a bachelor’s degree in earth science, and they must not have any teaching experience. The few lucky students who enroll here are taught entirely by in-house faculty members, and they are farmed out to schools in the area who are highly motivated to hire them. Also, there is no tuition for this program.

The library regularly works with the museum staff to create displays based on their holdings. Some of this work inspired a series of beautiful full-color books, displayed at the reference desk. Tom went to the back to bring out a copy of *Natural Histories*, and autographed it to me. Not for the first

time in this project I left feeling very proud to be a librarian and very proud to be a New Yorker.

LIBRARY: THE EXPLORERS CLUB

Address: 46 East 70th Street, New York, NY 10021

URL: <https://explorers.org/about/research/library>

Telephone: (212) 628-8383

E-mail: researchcollections@explorers.org

Access: By advance appointment

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Explorers-Club/691604090855340>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/explorersclub>

Since my early teen years I have been an amateur astronomer and arm-chair explorer. I followed the space program every day as we went from 15-minute flights over the atmosphere to that day in August of 1969 when Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walked on the moon. My favorite movie in those days was *Lawrence of Arabia*. On a similar note, favorite books included titles like Geoffrey Moorhouse's *The Fearful Void*, about a camel trek across the Sahara. Despite the obvious connection to my interests, the Explorers Club was not on my first list because access looked a bit too restrictive. As in the case of most libraries, they turned out to be very welcoming.

The entrance to the Club was so unassuming that I walked right past it, but double-checked the address before I crossed the wrong street. The first sight is of an elegant mansion, completely wood paneled. In the room to the left there are display cases with items from an arctic expedition and models of NASA vehicles. Straight ahead on the way to the elevator, there is a very large world globe that I would find out later was used by Thor Heyerdahl to plot his trip across the Pacific. The elevator was one of those antiques that was, I suspected, original equipment.

On the fifth floor I knocked at the door to the library and archive and was quickly met by Lacey Flint, a young and enthusiastic archivist. I soon found out that the library owns 14,000 volumes, 1400 of which are considered to be rare. The organization has been around for more than a century, and there was a library from the beginning—it was a small library of about 50 volumes until the 1920s, when most of the volumes came into the collection via James B. Ford, member and past Club president. The charter members of the organization included David Legge Brainard, survivor of

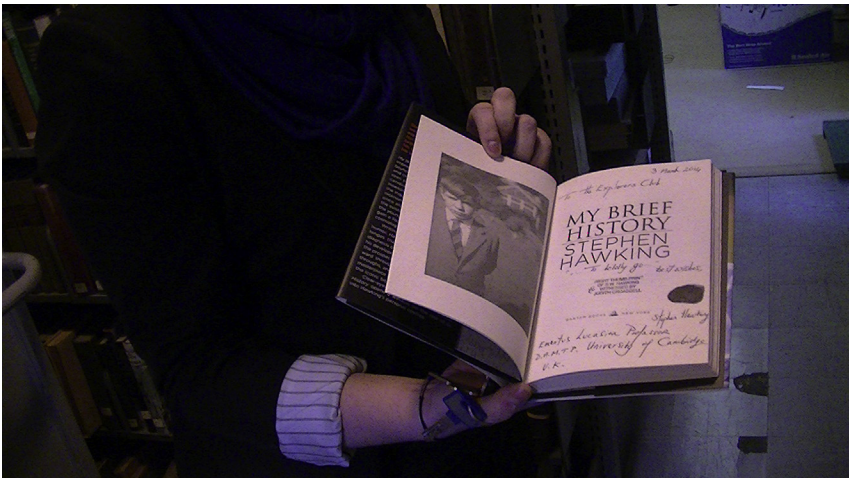
the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition of 1881, and Frederick Cook, surgeon to the Peary expedition to the Arctic.

When I first sat down, I noticed a block of wood about six inches wide and high, with a brass marker on the front. I asked about that, and was told that it was a piece of balsa from the original Kon Tiki.



Kon Tiki remnant.

When I asked my standard question about which famous person had used the library, I was told that their visitors included most of the men who had been to the moon. Stephen Hawking had met with club officials and “signed” a copy of his book by adding an inked thumbprint.



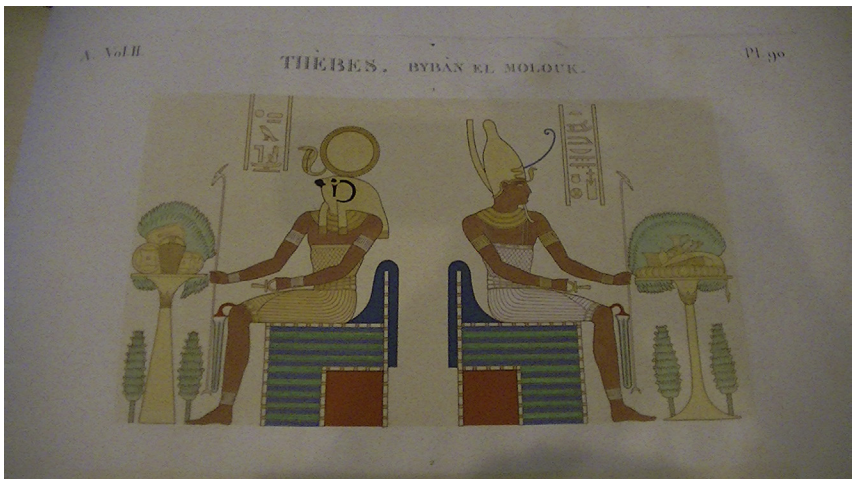
Hawkings' "autograph" of his book.

Eventually we walked up half a flight of stairs to the Trophy Room, which reminded me quite a bit of the trophy room at Theodore Roosevelt's Sagamore Hill. Flint said that the room should remind me of Roosevelt because the long table in the center of the room was used by the president to plan the construction of the Panama Canal.



The Trophy Room.

She then set up a foam book holder to show off the library's most prized possession—a multivolume set of reports from Napoleon's 1799 expedition to Egypt. In addition to troops, he brought along a large force of scientists, archaeologists, and artists to record what they could find of the antiquities. The volumes, published substantially in full color, are magnificent.



A portion of Napoleon's Egypt report.

Flint asked me “Do you hear that grinding sound?” I did, and it seemed to be coming from the fireplace. “When I first started working here, we were in the room at night and I was starting to wonder.” We were getting into an area that I wanted to cover at many libraries but never had the nerve to ask. “Any ghostly activities in your 100-year-old library?” In this case, the answer turned out to be more prosaic. The sound of the weather vane atop the roof was drifting down the fireplace.



Guardian of the Trophy Room.

We went back to the archive and finished talking. I asked about a box on the shelves nearby labeled “Roosevelt.” These turned out to be lantern slides of Theodore Roosevelt’s various journeys. They were hand-tinted views of his trip to the Nile, as well as images of his postpresidential visit to the Amazon region, where he led a team of American and Brazilian explorers down an Amazon tributary known as the River of Doubt, because nobody at the time knew exactly where it went. There is a shot of him staring proudly at the camera as the expedition was about to begin. It turned out to be the most dangerous and grueling expedition of his life, and not everybody made it back. Owing to exhaustion, starvation, and illness, Roosevelt was almost one of the casualties.



Roosevelt lantern slides.

After my visit, I went downstairs past the world globe that had been used by Thor Heyerdahl and took Flint up on her offer of coffee. Sitting in the reception room, I was surrounded by models of NASA spacecraft and relics from Polar expeditions. As the receptionist made me a fresh pot of coffee, I could not help but think, “This is as good as it gets.”

FURTHER READING

Charles R. Knight, dinosaur artist: <http://www.charlesrknight.com/AMNH.htm>.

Charles R. Knight's Prehistoric Vision: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/charles-r-knights-prehistoric-visions-16099537/?no-ist/>.

Eleven awesome things you can see at the Explorers Club: <http://mentalfloss.com/article/57025/11-awesome-things-you-can-see-explorers-club>.

Neil DeGrasse Tyson official page: <http://www.haydenplanetarium.org/tyson/>.

Tom Baione's book “Natural Histories.” <https://www.waterstones.com/book/natural-histories/tom-baione/9781454912149>.

You Tube Video “Inside the Explorers Club:” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z6YrFs1DKNA>.