‘The dawning of museum professionalism’: Constructing the UK museum profession in the 1970s and 1980s

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Abstract

In the 1970s and 1980s, museum curators embarked on a project to establish a new professional identity. People in the museum sector organised themselves into more than a dozen specialist groups, concerned with particular aspects of museum work. They established a code of ethics and an accreditation scheme for museums to ensure minimum standards. New, systematic and highly labour-intensive approaches to museum practice were developed. A contemporary museum practitioner described one of these new approaches as ‘the dawning of museum professionalism’.

However, the project of professionalisation was shot through with contradictions and tensions. These are particularly related to the institutional context of museums. This paper considers the way in which the bureaucratic setting of museum work shaped the nature of museum professionalism. The professionalisation described here took place against a backdrop of changes within museums which challenged curators’ power and status. This period also saw significant changes in the broader public sector and this paper looks at the extent to which a hostile political climate and a background of reduced funding shaped the nature of the identities that were created. It will also consider the impact of the Manpower Services Commission, which during this period supplied museums with hundreds of low-paid trainees whose labour was crucial in implementing the new approaches to practice. The presence of these trainees highlighted the anxiety and ambiguity in the sector about the distinction between professional and amateur, expert and trainee, underlining the fragility of curatorial professional identity.

Introduction

The museum sector is too small, and perhaps too inward-looking, to have engaged the interest of most writers concerned with professionalism and professionalisation. Nevertheless, people who work in museums – and curators in particular – have at times self-consciously set about the process

of professionalisation, deliberately adopting the tropes of professionalism recognisable from other sectors and identified in the sociological literature on the professions. This paper looks at one of these moments of professionalisation. The study is historical in its methodology, drawing on archives of professional publications, such as the newsletters and journals produced by professional associations and groups. But, with its emphasis on the relationships both between individuals and between individuals and institutions, this research can be situated in a broader tradition of inquiry which Jenkins has labelled 'generic sociology' (2002, p. 22).

In this paper, I intend to consider the way that museum curators professionalised their activities and identity from 1970 to 1985. This period makes an appropriate focus because some museum curators made concerted efforts to develop some of the trappings of professionalism during this period. For example, in 1977, the Museums Association (MA) – the body which represents museums and the people who work in them across the United Kingdom – agreed a code of ethics for the first time. The MA also launched an accreditation scheme for museums in the mid-1970s, with the aim of improving standards of practice. Although take-up of the scheme was limited, it paved the way for a sector-wide, government-backed scheme which followed in the late 1980s. The MA also led initiatives to improve approaches to practice, notably the recording of information about objects in museum collections, with a view to making use of emergent computing technology (Lewis, 1989, p. 76).

While the MA was at the centre of these moves towards professionalisation, its authority was also challenged during this period by the establishment of a large number of specialist groups, representing different parts of the sector or particular curatorial disciplines. The first of these was the Geological Curators Group, established in 1974. By the end of the 1970s, museum archaeologists, geologists, biologists, social historians and curators of costume and textiles and science and technology all had their own specialist groups. Of the groups representing different aspects of museum practice or different parts of the sector, the Association of Independent Museums (AIM) became particularly influential and I shall discuss its impact on the nature of professional identity in museums later in this paper. All of these groups ran their own training courses, newsletters and conferences, offering many new opportunities for individuals working in museums to debate, develop and define their professionalism.

The process of professionalisation, sketched in terms of these developments, looks like a textbook example of an occupation turning itself into a profession. But beneath these headline achievements, I hope to

demonstrate that the project of professionalisation was shot through with tensions and contradictions and that the sense of identity which emerged was fragile and fragmented.

A museum profession?

This paper is concerned with the professional identity of curators, rather than of any other museum workers. Abbott's 1988 study of the professions interprets professionalism as an ongoing struggle for 'jurisdiction': that is, a struggle for the right to control the way in which society deals with particular problems (Abbott, 1988). The scope of curators' jurisdiction has, perhaps, never been entirely clear.

Many municipal museums were formed from the collections of learned societies. In the very early stages of these museums' development in the 19th century, specialist knowledge often resided not with a paid curator, even if the museum employed someone in that role, but with honorary curators who were amateurs and members of the founding learned society (Knell, 2000, p. 93; Hill, 2005, p. 66). This sometimes led to power struggles and an uneasy working environment for the paid curator, who may have been little more than a caretaker (Hill, 2005, p. 64). By the 1970s, most sizeable museums had a paid curator responsible for developing collections and researching and recording them, although some museums had only made such appointments for the first time in the 1960s and many continued to make use of volunteers, some of whom had considerable expertise, to support paid staff (Brears and Davies, 1989, p. 117). The result was a long tradition of paid curators competing with amateur experts for jurisdiction over the work of researching and understanding collections in museums. In the 1960s, museums began to appoint more educators and other specialist communicators and, as such appointments became more common in the 1970s and 1980s, curators could be seen as competing with these new kinds of paid museum workers. Towards the end of the 1970s, museums also began to employ professional fundraisers and marketing officers, further challenging the autonomy and professional pre-eminence of curators (Foster, 1979, p. 57).

By the early 1980s, competing professionalisms were operational in museums: museum education work had a higher status and curators were starting to lose control over the way that museums presented their displays and communicated with the public. Interpretation and exhibition-planning emerged as specialisms in their own right in museums. Some interpretation specialists argued that museums had paid very little attention to how visitors learnt and how they communicated, sometimes suggesting that subject experts were unlikely to make good communicators. For example, Roger

Miles, head of a new department responsible for public displays at the Natural History Museum, wrote in a handbook on exhibition-planning: ‘the inability to empathise is particularly likely to afflict specialists who tangle with the problems of how to educate the general public’ (Miles, 1982, p. 27, emphasis in original).

A central aspect of the work of a museum curator had been to bring specialist knowledge to a wide public, through displays as well as lectures and publications. The challenge to this aspect of the curator’s role chipped away at the foundations of curatorial practice during the period under review. It is significant that the attempt to establish a professional identity founded on curatorship under consideration here took place at a time when the power of curators within museums was beginning to wane and their jurisdiction was starting to be challenged.

Professionalism in an institutional context

The professionalism of curators has to be understood in an institutional context. Museum professionals operate in public institutions. In this respect, they differ from what sociologists have tended to see as the typical early professions such as medicine and law, where professionals had been sole practitioners in a direct – and often financial – relationship with their client (Abbott, 1988, p. 3). Museum professionals are not in a direct financial relationship with a client and, in the 1970s, most curators would not have understood themselves to be in a client relationship at all, rather construing their professional obligation to be to a broad, undifferentiated public. In this, museum curators are typical of a number of professions that emerged or became stronger from the 1960s onwards. The nature of professionalism in Britain underwent a notable shift during this period and museum curators can be seen as part of a ‘swelling chorus of those emergent and expanding occupations which shared in common the goal of professionalisation’ around this time (Johnson, 1984, p. 19). Millerson’s (1964) study of professionalism identifies a contemporary trend for more and more people who would aspire to professional status to work in bureaucracies and draw a salary, rather than earn fees. Millerson’s identification of this trend is confirmed by later historical studies of the period under review, notably Perkin’s (1989) monumental historical survey of the emergence of professional society.

Millerson’s study is particularly useful because it offers contemporary insights into professionalisation in the 1960s. It places emphasis on the potential conflict of interest for salaried professionals between the values of the profession and the values of the employer (1964, p. 8). Millerson also suggests that there was less public recognition for professionals working

within bureaucracies than for those working independently. He argues that the public respect doctors and lawyers because their professionalism is visible in a way that the professional expertise of people working within bureaucratic structures is not:

> *Also bureaucratization produces new specialists, and experts within specialist fields, which may have no equivalent outside the organization. As a result, they may fail to attain wide recognition as professionals, unless they already happen to be accountants, engineers, scientists or some generally known type of professional. Status ambiguity may follow*
>
> (Millerson, 1964, p. 8-9).

'Status ambiguity' does seem to have been a characteristic of museum curators in this period, who exhibit much anxiety about their professional standing and autonomy, or lack of it. It is significant that museum curators were working out their professional identity within the context of public sector organisations. This institutional setting gives rise to the possibility of a conflict between institutional and individual motivations. In one of the few other studies to have considered the history of the museum profession, drawing on a series of oral history interviews with senior museum curators, Paine and Davies found that during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s 'some of the senior figures felt that they were increasingly pressured to choose between loyalty to the values of their profession and loyalty to the values of their employers' (2004, p. 58-9). This conflict of loyalty may have been heightened by changes to the museum sector during the 1970s and 1980s.

The changing museum sector

Museums of different kinds saw significant changes in the period under review. The UK museum sector is a mixed economy, with museums run and supported by several different types of governing bodies. The national museums (for example, the British Museum, the National Gallery, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the National Maritime Museum) have direct funding from national government. Museums run and funded by local authorities range from large institutions in big cities such as Birmingham and Glasgow, with collections of international significance, to smaller museums in market towns with collections that tend to be of local interest. Independent museums are typically, although not exclusively, single-subject museums, often focused on social and industrial history. They are run by charitable trusts, although they often receive significant funding from local government and other public

sources (MA, 1987)[1].

A large number of municipal museums were established after the Libraries, Museums and Gymnasiums Act of 1845 gave town councils of at least 10,000 inhabitants the power to levy a rate to enable them to set up public museums; most major cities and many larger towns established a museum at this time (DES, 1973). A majority of the UK's national museums were also established during the second half of the 19th century, including the group of national museums in South Kensington which were founded using proceeds from the Great Exhibition of 1851. (A few national museums, including the British Museum and the National Gallery, have their roots in the 18th century and a few, such as the Imperial War Museum, are 20th-century foundations (Bennett, 1995).)

A new kind of museum

The first comprehensive statistical overview of the UK museum sector, published in 1987, identified 2131 museums in the UK, of which three-quarters had been established since World War Two and half since 1971 (MA, 1987). As many as 1000 museums opened in the UK in the period under review, a rate of growth not seen in the sector since the second half of the 19th century. Many of the new museums of the 1970s and 1980s were independent museums, often established in places that had seen the decline of heavy industry with the aim of preserving buildings and machinery associated with former industries and providing alternative employment and infrastructure. They were established in a very different intellectual and political climate as compared to their predecessors. During the period under review, a majority of national and local authority museums remained essentially Victorian institutions which had not significantly reinvented themselves and were still freighted with expectations that they would be committed to serious scholarship, offer opportunities for self-improvement and, in the case of local authority museums, contribute to building the prestige of their town or city. Museums established in the 1970s and 1980s were often more oriented towards providing leisure and tourist opportunities as part of a new approach to post-industrial regeneration (Myerscough, 1988, p. 76). This divergence of ethos added a further layer of complexity and difficulty to the attempt to establish a sense of a museum profession.

Although established at a time when existing museums were complaining of a funding squeeze, independent museums were able to generate their own

[1]Universities, the armed services and independent bodies such as the National Trust also run museums, but people working in these museums were usually less active in the project of professionalisation under discussion here.

income through admission fees and shop sales, and relied on large numbers of volunteers, giving them a lower cost base. The use of volunteers is significant in understanding curatorial attitudes to professional identity and is discussed below. Independent museums were also able to access non-traditional sources of public funding – for example, from regeneration budgets and initiatives to help deal with the results of high unemployment and from tourism development funding, at a time when governments were starting to realise the economic potential of tourism.

Many in the museum sector and beyond were concerned about what they saw as a period of unregulated growth in the museum sector during the 1970s and early 1980s, with this uncontrolled expansion leading to the dilution of the sector's values. Criticism of the expansion of the museum and broader heritage sector was most extensively rehearsed in Hewison's (1987) influential book, The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline. The subtitle encapsulates Hewison's sense that the museum 'boom' reflects badly on the society that created it: 'When museums become one of Britain's growth industries, they are not signs of vitality, but symbols of national decline' (1987, p. 84). The book is an attack on what Hewison sees as the simplification and commodification of history. Much of his criticism centres on the idea that cleaned-up heritage, stripped of the dangers, difficulties and struggle of properly researched history, is being presented to the public as entertainment. He criticises museums that recreate historic events or sites based on an emotionally soothing approach, rather than an intellectually rigorous one. He describes the heritage centre at Wigan Pier, for example, as 'an emotional experience, a symbolic recovery of the way we were' (p. 21).

Hewison sees the commercial basis of independent museums, and their need to raise revenue from visitors, as being at odds with the more traditional ethos of museums, with education and self-improvement at its heart:

> *A change in cultural perception has taken place which narrows the imagination and cramps the spirit. In the nineteenth century, museums were seen as sources of education and improvement, and were therefore free. Now they are treated as financial institutions that must pay their way, and therefore charge entrance fees... And as the marketing managers of the heritage industry get into full swing, the goods that we are being offered become more and more spurious, and the quality of life more and more debased*
>
> (Hewison, 1987, p. 129).

People who worked in independent museums were clearly stung by Hewison's criticisms and responded by asserting the rigour of their scholarship. This was accompanied by a pragmatic acknowledgement, however, that history had to be made palatable for a paying public looking for an enjoyable day out. Responding to Hewison, then-Chairman of AIM Chris Zeuner reflected on the way that independent museums tell histories:

> *... [W]hat we don't want to perpetuate is a nostalgic, unhistorical view of the past. If we are to be accused of this, then our response must be to establish and underline the nature of the museum, its purpose and the historical approach which it adopts. It is nothing for us to be ashamed of if, within this framework, visitors appear to be enjoying themselves*
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> (Zeuner, 1987, p. 2).

The commercial pressures on independent museums forced the curators who worked in them to undertake a renegotiation of their professional identity, which embraced entrepreneurialism as well as scholarship. The pioneers of the independent movement depicted themselves as revitalising the sector as a whole, with an injection of energy and vision:

> *Many [independent museums] cover subject areas which, for one reason or another, have been neglected by existing museums; they have a worthwhile record in the fields of research, conservation and interpretation; and they have done a great deal to encourage the habit of museum-going, especially among people who would not previously have dreamt of crossing the threshold of a museum. The best of them have willingly come to terms with the need to blend pleasure and education in a profitable way*
>
> (AIM, 1978, p. 1).

This article went on to assert that the success of independent museums was proof that they:

> *[M]ust possess some special qualities or advantages which cause them to stand out in this way, some extra ration of imagination, entrepreneurial spirit, good management or freedom, which adds liveliness to the museum world as a whole*
>
> (AIM, 1978, p. 1).

The differing ethos of independent museums and the longer-established museum sector, and the rivalry evidenced here, was a further factor complicating the attempt at building a professional identity in the museum sector.

Changes to local government

While the museum landscape was reshaped by the establishment of many new independent museums, there were also significant changes to the context within which curators operated in local authority museums. Local authority museums were profoundly affected by the significant reorganisation of local government in 1974 which imposed a uniform system of two-tier local government on all but the largest cities in England and Wales. Museums were not treated consistently in the reorganisation. The Bains Report (1972), which paved the way for reorganisation, suggested that museums might belong in either county or district authorities. The Department for Education and Science (DES) had commissioned a report to consider how museums might best respond to the opportunities presented by local government reorganisation (DES, 1973). But the sector was slow to come up with a framework for a consistent national museum service; its response to the DES proposals was not published until 1978 (Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries, 1978). Consequently, there was a piecemeal approach to provision and duplication in some areas, with both county and district local authorities running parallel museum services. In Shropshire, for example, while the county council considered establishing a county-wide service, some districts opted to 'go it alone' and run their own small services, rather than become part of a larger county service (Shropshire Leisure Activities Committee, 1973). A few new county councils did manage to establish well-funded, county-wide museum services. But museums were commonly held to have done badly out of the changes, with museums moved further from the seats of power and influence in local authorities. They became part of larger departments – whether education or leisure and recreation – and the people who ran them mostly lost their direct access to elected members through the local authority committee system. For example, Max Hebditch, a senior local authority museum director, argued that this threatened the 'integrity of museums as academic and educational institutions and the professional integrity of the staff who serve in them' (Hebditch, 1974, p. 43).

This sense of being subsumed in departments which did not understand or respect the special nature of museums or their work shaped the context in which curators' professionalisation occurred during this period. For example, the professional newsletter, the Museums Bulletin, published several

complaints in this period from museum curators who were no longer allowed to sign their own correspondence, so that even a reply to a public enquiry about the collection had to be signed by the Director of Leisure. One curator argued in a letter to the Bulletin that this reflected ‘the loss of autonomy, the decision-making process and the academic principles on which the whole service has been built over the last century or so’ (Howarth, 1975, p. 107).

In addition to the pressures brought by restructuring, there was a serious funding squeeze on local authority finances from the mid-1970s. In 1975, Tony Crosland, Secretary of State for the Environment, famously warned ‘the party is over’ for local government spending (Warman, 1975, p. 1). Detailing the results of this financial restraint for museums, a prominent member of the MA’s Council commented ‘the great majority of museum staff can fairly reply: “What party? We’ve never seen the invitation”’ (Boylan, 1977, p. 128). And in the 1980s, there was even more pressure on core local government spending under the Thatcher government. In his Presidential address to the MA conference in 1980, Dennis Farr spoke of ‘fierce pressure’ to constrain spending, asserting that times were harder for museums even than in the recession of the mid-1970s (Farr, 1980, p. 131).

Changes to national museums

The national museum sector was also subject to financial pressures and to administrative changes in the 1970s and 1980s. The national museums were given a new status as arms-length bodies in 1983. This offered administrative freedoms for national museums, such as control over their staffing structures. But it also meant that they had to undertake all the services that had previously been provided centrally by government agencies, including the maintenance of their buildings. They were freer to raise money from donations and sponsorship, which assumed a new importance given the constraints on public funding. As a consequence, the national museums had to appoint a whole new range of specialists in fundraising, marketing, finance and estates management. Management structures in which senior curators had responsibility for running the organisation had to change. These changes were controversial, most notoriously at the Victoria and Albert Museum where a restructure in which a number of senior curators were made redundant caused a national and international media storm (Adams, 2010). These changes to the management structures and ethos of the national museums lessened the power of museum curators. This challenge to the status of some of the most influential curators in the museum sector may have had the effect of making an emergent sense of professional identity more fragile, while perhaps making the need to assert professional status more urgent.

Developing new professionals: training and entry to the profession

The project of professionalisation in museums found expression in the establishment of new approaches to training. University courses in museum studies had first been established in the late 1960s and the numbers of students undertaking such courses increased significantly throughout the 1970s (Lewis, 1989, p. 72). The establishment of university-based training courses for professional work has been widely seen by sociologists as a common stage in establishing professional identities (for example, Freidson, 2001, p. 71). The purpose of university-based professional training may be more than merely utilitarian. Abbott cites librarianship as an example, arguing that the presence of a body of associated academic knowledge, such as the theory of indexing systems, serves to enhance the status of a profession, legitimising it and increasing its cultural worth, so that 'the true use of academic professional knowledge is less practical than symbolic' (1988, p. 54).

However, if the establishment of university courses in museum studies was a potential source of prestige, it was also a source of tension within the museum sector, with some established curators disparaging the value of the training, and others suggesting that an emphasis on museology was undermining subject-based scholarship:

> *There has been a tendency for us to subordinate our discipline to something we call museology. Academic integrity is taking second place to professional competence. Curatorship is more than a body of technique. It is the marrying of these skills to scholarship*
>
> (Davies, 1978, p. 123).

This controversy about university-based training reflects an ambiguity about the nature of curatorship and a long-standing debate about what is at the heart of curatorial practice. Is curatorship defined by specialist knowledge of collections, or by skills that can be applied to any collection or subject area? This debate is as old as the museum sector itself, emerging, for example, at MA conferences in the late 19th century (Lewis, 1989, p. 4). Museum curators had, up until the establishment of university courses, tended to be trained on the job with informal 'apprenticeships' by which junior curators had the opportunity to build knowledge by working with collections over a long period of time, learning from more senior curators and through prolonged study of objects. This tradition was challenged by a public funding squeeze, as well as by the emergence of university-based training.

This unease about the foundation of curatorship and about how an individual can become a curator can be seen at work in the debate about the use of trainees on the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) schemes. From the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, both Labour and Conservative governments invested heavily in job creation and training through the MSC. The MSC's first training programme, the Job Creation Scheme, had a very broad remit: any organisation could apply for trainees to work on almost any project that could be shown to have community benefit. Museums made extensive use of the scheme for a huge range of activities. A number of new open-air museums used MSC labour to rebuild historic buildings, or to clear and renovate derelict, ex-industrial sites.

Many established museums used trainees to create better records of their collections. Before the 1970s, approaches to the documentation of collections had been highly localised and idiosyncratic. The period under review here saw a determination to standardise practice. In particular, the inelegantly named IRGMA, the Information Retrieval Group of the Museums Association, had been established in 1967 with government funding to establish ways of standardising museum documentation, with a view to its eventual computerisation. The group began by developing a series of record cards, with the aim of there being one for each museum discipline, along with an instruction book describing how the cards should be used. By 1980, there were 20 cards and 18 instruction books available (Roberts, Light & Stewart, 1980). These cards and instruction books, each worked out by a group of curators from the relevant discipline, represented an attempt to standardise and professionalise the hugely disparate and individualised approaches to documentation of collections. Drawing up the cards and instruction manuals was an ambitious and onerous task, largely undertaken by curators giving up their spare time to contribute to committees for each curatorial discipline. Filling in the cards, once completed, was enormously time-consuming: there might be tens or even hundreds of thousands of objects in a museum collection, and the system required a separate record card to be completed for each one.

Had it not been for the availability of free labour in the form of the MSC trainees, many museums would not have been able to complete the indexing of their collections using the IRGMA system. There is a central paradox that people working in museums saw the rigour of the new system as evidence of their professionalism, but the people responsible for implementing the system were not themselves recognised as professionals. In one telling exchange, Philip Doughty – a leading geology curator and a prominent advocate of new approaches to practice – argued for continuing funding for IRGMA, asserting that its withdrawal would be a blow to 'the hopes of a generation of museum

workers' who had invested energy in IRGMA, having seen it as 'the dawning of museum professionalism' (Doughty, 1976, p. 85). In reply to Doughty, another curator, Elspeth King, queried: '[if] IRGMA is indeed meant to herald "the dawning of museum professionalism" why are we employing amateurs to work the system?' (King, 1977, p. 2). King goes on to answer her own question, noting that under-funding leaves most museums with no choice but to make use of the availability of unskilled trainees who are like 'manna from heaven' to under-resourced museums (p. 2).

Were the trainees indeed 'amateurs'? Some had undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications in a relevant discipline which provided them with general background knowledge and, in a few cases, detailed relevant expertise. While some were undoubtedly starting their training from a relatively small knowledge base, for others their 'amateur' status pertained only to their lack of museum experience. Unease about the presence of these trainees reflects a long-standing ambivalence in the museum sector about the use of volunteers. As discussed above, the earliest curators were often subordinate to knowledgeable amateurs. It is clearly undermining to a sense of professional identity if volunteers or trainees who lack full professional status can undertake similar or identical work, and this may have complicated attitudes to professionalism in the museum sector at a time when so many trainees were used on projects close to the heart of museum practice.

Young Turks and the Old Guard

As noted above, one feature of professionalisation in museums in this period was the emergence of a number of specialist groups dealing with particular aspects of curatorship. These specialist groups provided practical help and advice to members but were also highly political and the language of their publications and conference debates was often polemical. Curators participating in these groups exhibited a particular tendency to define their professional identities by asserting their distance from the sloppy practice of previous generations, or other current practitioners. For example, one social history curator, writing about the problems facing museum social history in the Social History Curators Group newsletter, provocatively suggests that the real problem may be 'the quality of curators. Many have no interest in the present (or even the twentieth century) and their job provides the perfect excuse to escape from it' (Marsh, 1984, p. 4).

Several of the specialist groups undertook surveys of the state of practice in their area, as a first step towards planning a programme of improvement. Introducing a report on the state of UK geological collections, the geologist Doughty describes the current state of collections as:

> *A situation of disorder, neglect, mismanagement and decay on an unsuspected scale, with a mere handful of curators lacking any formal professional cohesion, struggling, generally ineffectually, in the face of impossible odds*
>
> (Doughty, 1981, p. 50).

This exasperation with old ways of doing things, coupled with a determination to develop new, more rigorous approaches, seems to be a means of shaping professional identity: the new-style professionals define themselves by what they are not, as much as what they are.

These criticisms of practice represent exasperation by a new generation with the failings of older practitioners, who were often still in positions of authority. They are echoed by some contemporary public criticism of the sector's inadequacies. Lord Redcliffe-Maud was a diplomat, civil servant and academic who had led a government inquiry into the possible reorganisation of local government in the 1960s. He was commissioned by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, at the instigation of the Arts Council and the Standing Commission of Regional Arts Associations, to report on the state of arts funding in Great Britain in 1976. His report expresses frustration with museums, arguing that museums '[are] at their best, exciting, educational and entertaining. At their worst they can be boring, confusing and depressing' (Redcliffe-Maud, 1976, p. 150). Although he diagnoses the urgent need for central government support to improve buildings 'and to remove the fusty Victorian atmosphere that many of them have' (p. 151), he also deprecates the sector's failure to help itself. Noting that an opportunity to rethink museums as cultural centres had been missed, he notes 'some curators resist such ideas and indeed seem reluctant to welcome increasing numbers of visitors for any purpose' (p. 153). He argues that change will only happen 'when the objections of the more old-fashioned curators are overcome, and more money becomes available from national as well as local sources' (p. 153).

The criticisms of museum practice in both internal and external reports can be understood in part as an argument for additional resources: demonstrating the depth of the problem helps reinforce the need for additional investment. But criticisms in the internal reports can also be read as part of a project to differentiate between rigorous and energetic newcomers and a less-committed old guard. This tactic was identified as being characteristic of emerging professions in Millerson's study of the professions: new professions typically display 'concern with low standards, bad workmanship, indifferent handling of clients' (1964, p. 12). A conflict between those content with established ways of doing things and new entrants to a profession or group

has also been identified in studies of other sectors. For example, Becher and Trowler (2001) have written about the process of intellectual change within academia, which shows significant parallels with museums. Academic disciplines, they argue, are inherently conservative:

> *In many fields, it takes time and trouble to acquire the necessary expertise to make a significant research contribution... And as with investments of a more familiar kind, there is a consequent wish to capitalise on them, recouping in collegial credit the efforts spent in laborious endeavour. A new development that threatens seriously to undermine the value of one's existing intellectual shareholding is unlikely to be welcomed with much enthusiasm*
>
> (Becher & Trowler, 2001, p. 98).

They argue that in universities, newer members of the academic profession are more likely to make major changes to the intellectual paradigm, being less implicated in the status quo:

> *The familiar contest of the Young Turks against the Old Guard can also readily be explained in such terms. Those who have as yet made no major intellectual commitments have little to lose by investing in potentially high-risk, high-profit commodities; those who already have a substantial blue chip portfolio tend to see the emergence of rival markets as a threat rather than a promise*
>
> (Becher & Trowler, 2001, p. 99).

Again, the parallels with museums are clear. In the case of the museum sector in the period under discussion here, the 'rival markets' were sometimes new areas of knowledge, or new approaches to knowledge, but were more often characterised by changes to practice, typically standardisation replacing idiosyncratic, in-house systems.

Writing more broadly about apprenticeship models, Lave and Wenger have set out to connect 'issues of sociocultural transformation with the changing relations between new-comers and old-timers in the context of a changing shared practice' (1991, p. 49). Their work has described 'cycles of social reproduction', the process by which incumbents in senior positions in an organisation or group are replaced by new practitioners. This process of reproduction is, they argue, 'inherently problematic' and marked by 'the contradictions and struggles inherent in social practice and the formation of

identities'. Tension inevitably arises as new entrants join a group because developing new participants implies 'the replacement of old timers' (p. 57, emphasis in original). At a time of self-conscious professionalisation, with the accompanying rejection of old or substandard ways of doing things, this tension between new entrants and 'old-timers' is likely to be particularly acute.

Conclusion

Museum curators acquired many of the trappings of professionalism in a short period in the 1970s and 1980s. They saw their activities as constituting the 'dawning of museum professionalism' (Doughty, 1976, p. 85). However, the sense of identity that emerged was fragile and fragmented. It was undermined by external processes: changes in local government tended to marginalise museums and the people who worked in them, while administrative changes at the national museums lessened the power of curators. Developments within museums also complicated a sense of professional identity and made it more diffuse. These developments included new approaches to training, new approaches to display and communication within museums and the extensive use of trainees to undertake large amounts of important work within museums. The pressure to offer better experiences to visitors and to compete in a more crowded leisure and tourism market also changed the nature of curators' work.

Professionalisation in this period involved an uneasy relationship between new entrants to the profession and longer-standing adherents, as new entrants were at once dependent on the knowledge learned from senior colleagues and simultaneously seeking intellectual distance from them. The presence of large numbers of trainees prompted unease about what it was that constituted professional status.

The attempts to professionalise the work of curators in this period may not have succeeded in establishing a secure and widely accepted sense of professional status and identity. Tensions between different kinds of museums and different areas of practice within museums have continued in the decades since the 1980s. Indeed the MA has, since the 1990s, distanced itself from the notion of a museum profession, avoiding the use of the terms 'profession' and 'professionalism' and attempting to address its services to a wide range of people who work in museums, not just curators (Taylor, 2011). Significantly, its main qualification, the Associateship of the Museums Association, once largely a curatorial qualification, is now open to anyone working 'in or for' museums, including volunteers, the kind of 'amateurs' whose work in museums caused some anxiety between 1970 and 1985.

In this sense, the project of professionalisation undertaken in the museum sector in this period may be said to have failed. On the other hand, many of the practical manifestations of the new professionalism have survived, flourished and changed the nature of museums. Almost everyone who goes on to work in curatorship, education, communication or collections care in museums now completes a university museum studies course, for example, and the kind of systematic approaches to collections care and documentation advocated by those agitating for improved standards in the 1970s and 1980s are now commonplace. If the rhetoric of professionalisation now looks outdated, the changes its adherents advocated have made a lasting difference to the UK museum sector.

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