

DUBLIN ZOO : An Illustrated History Book Review

The author of this lovely book is Catherine de Courcy who obtained her M.A. with a thesis on the history of Melbourne Zoo and never got over the fascination she developed for these complex institutions. She is now internationally known for her skill as a zoo historian as well as desert travel and history generally. She lived and wrote in and about Ireland, Papua New Guinea and Australia and now resides in Ireland.

I mention the author first because we became acquainted personally at the Zoo History Symposium entitled "From Royal Gifts to Biodiversity Conservation: The History and Development of Menageries, Zoos and Aquariums" held at the Chester Zoo where we both gave presentations. Afterwards Catherine wrote to me asking if I'd like a copy of her book and where to send it. Having visited Dublin Zoo during a CBSG and WAZA meeting rather long ago, I was particularly interested to read its long history, so I was delighted to find the book among my mail when I went to my office in India.

Moreover the delight didn't end when I began reading and found that Dublin Zoo is one of the oldest zoos still standing, a fact that escaped my attention while I was there. Dublin Zoo was founded in 1833 which puts it in a category of history belonging to Schonbrunn Zoo, Vienna (1752), Jardin des Plantes, Paris (1793), Barrackpore Park, Bengal (1806), and London Zoo, London (1828).

Clearly the fathers of the zoo were influenced by the London Zoo and its administration, the Zoological Society of London, because first they started their own Zoological Society of Ireland, later enhanced by the prefix "Royal" that was turfed out about 150 years later. The influential members of the Zoological Society had a variety of reasons for starting what amounted to the third significant zoo in the western world, among them a supply of animals for study, both alive and dead, the promotion of the study of natural history, the provision of stimulating entertainment for various classes of people and ... its the "fashionable" status with "elegant gardens" as the other 3 zoos of Europe boasted. On 1 September 1831 the Dublin Zoo opened both to Members who paid a



**Southwest view of the original "lodge" in Dublin Zoo 1833
(Photo: *Dublin Penny Journal*)**



**Copy Map of the Dublin Zoo Phoenix Park 1839
(Photo: Quote from *The Life and work of Sarah Purser*, by John O'Grady, 1996)**



**Albert Tower, design to house giraffe and elephant, completed in 1845
(Photo: courtesy of The Board of Trinity College Dublin)**

significant fee to join themselves and their family as members, as well as to the ordinary citizen who could entire on payment of a modest fee. In this permission for the common man to enter the zoo on Day 1, Dublin Zoo, differed greatly from London Zoo which was open only to paid Members of a certain level of Society.

It is not the task of a book review to tell the whole story. Suffice it to say that the attraction would not satisfy the youngest child today, but in that age, a little went a long way and the visitors delighted in what we would consider today just a few animals and a shabby collection of structures to contain them. The story of the growth and development of the Dublin Zoo is one of almost continuous nail-biting fear that almost any day it would have to close for lack of funds to operate. It was deadly difficult to raise funds for even food for the animals as, at first, the gate fees did not begin to cover the expenses. In 1838, just five years after the zoo opened, the zoo Secretary wrote that they would have to convert the garden to a puppet show or carousel to attract sufficient public to pay the bills ... their receipts were less that three pounds a week!

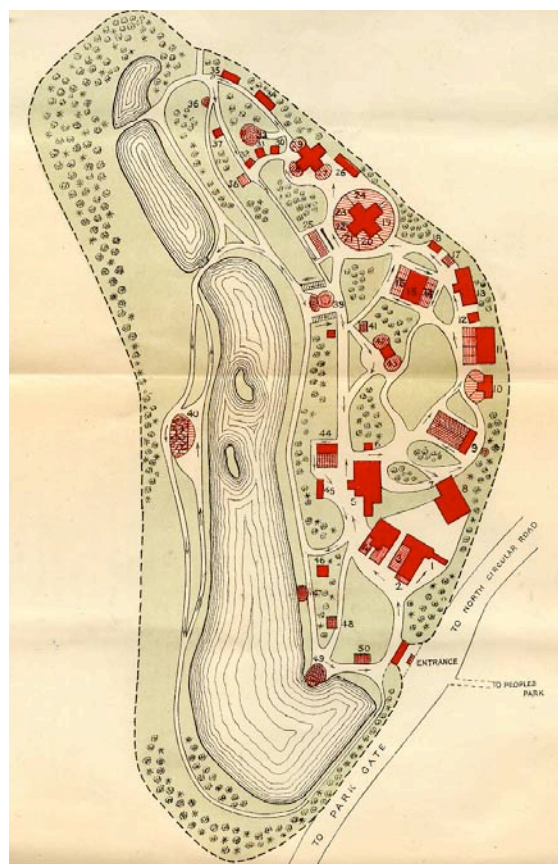
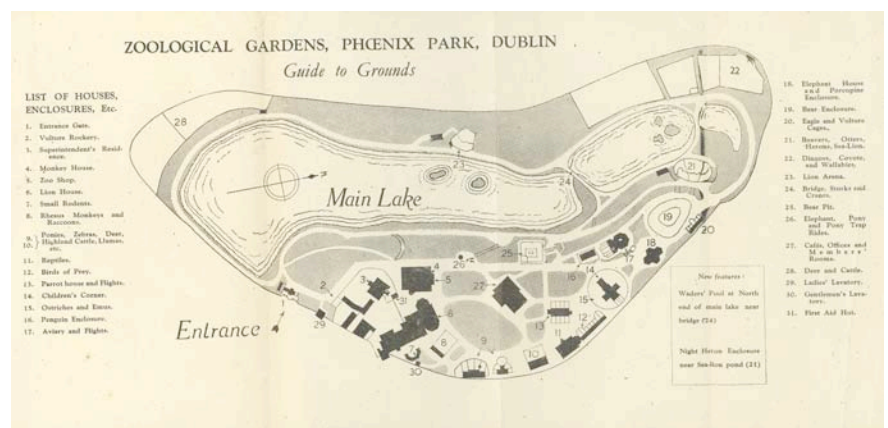
The author has told the story remarkably well but perhaps as much as the story itself, the reader benefits from a literal plethora of pictures ... first the black and white photos and etchings of the days when photography was in its infancy and colour photos were probably not even a dream. There is, literally, an illustration on almost every page or if the illustration was the page, every other one.

But the zoo continued somehow and even managed to inspire a coveted government grant and attract enough members and visitors to survive, acquire some interesting animals and also provide them with better and better accommodation. The zoo had its share of injuries and deaths, both of animals and of human beings, some staff and even some foolish visitors who took insane risks.

Despite its ups and downs the zoo somehow never lost its "society" status. Although members waxed and waned from time to time there were always enough to maintain its prestige.



**Girl in communion dress walking through to zoo in the spring
(Photo: Dublin zoo collection)**



**Old maps of the Dublin Zoo from de Courcy's book
(Photo: Dublin zoo collection)**

As time went on the “society” aspect of the zoo was its deliverance and mainstay as the members formed various committees and planned all manner of social events at the zoo which of course could be attended only by Members at first (so more people joined) and with an entry fee. It was probably this which saved the zoo many a time. The social events varied from ice skating parties to High Tea to dances and dinners. The zoo was fortunate to have a lake nearby which froze admirably so that ice skating was possible for some time. There were almost disastrous skating accidents to which the “Ice Committee” responded, saving hapless skaters and insuring the profit from this venture continued year after year for the benefit of the zoo.

The authoress has covered a variety of interesting periods in the zoo’s life, among them the difficulties at wartime. All zoos have it rough during a war and the difficulty of procuring arcane foodstuffs for animals when human could not find sufficient common food to sustain them was a nightmare. Zoos in cities targeted for bombing had the additional agony of having to destroy their large, dangerous animals so that they did not get out and roam the city in the instant of bombs damaging their cages. It was a heart-breaking scenario which could not be helped.

The zoo celebrated its 150th Anniversary with great enthusiasm and popularity with the public but the years of struggle to enlarge and enhance the zoo with better animals, without proper attention to some of the mainstay principles of modern zoos, that is conservation, education, research and recreation, brought about a very low period from which it almost didn’t recover. Literally “winding up” the zoo was discussed by the council in 1989, not the first time actually. It seems more than miraculous that the outdated enclosures and practices, continuing paucity of funds, failing Irish economy and additional problem of anti-zoo sentiment so strong during the ‘eighties’ did not put an end to the Dublin Zoo. Really, two powerful entities brought about a practical miracle which saved it, e.g. the enormous and loyal public support and the intervention of a government Interior Minister, Bertie Ahern who had grown up visiting the zoo. Ahern came to the rescue several times, as the zoo clamored out of its difficulties roller



Young polar bear being rescued from a rubbish dump in Canada. Dublin Zoo named him “Spunkey” (Photo: Dan Guravich /Polar Bears International.org)



Sumatran Tiger drinking in the Dublin Zoo tiger forest (Photo: Neil McShane)



A Dublin Zoo Crew (Photo: courtesy of Mark Hogan)

coaster style rather than that of a straight up ride to the ski jump. You must buy this book and read of the roller coaster ride in which hopes rose and fell, Council handed over its tight control to staff, staff focused on the four principles for a modern zoo (conservation, education, research and recreation) until they got it all right. In the decades from 80' till now, life at Dublin Zoo must have been interesting. One day no hope at all and then a 25,000 pound grant from the Government Lottery, smooth sailing for awhile and then crisis again.

Today Dublin Zoo is without doubt a "world class" zoo with all it entails -- contemporary immersion exhibits such as Kaziranga Forest Trail and African Savannah, a well staffed and stocked Education Department and Programme, breeding agreements and loans with outstanding zoos around the world, participation in *in situ* or international animal conservation programmes, ISIS involvement, WAZA membership ... the works.

Catherine de Courcy has done the zoo and herself proud. She has not minced words when describing the problems and dreary prospects of the zoo at different periods in its history nor when relating its great achievements and innovations. The book is in an A5 format with a lavish 356 pages of expertly mixed text and illustrations. There are two appendices list Presidents of the Zoological Society of Ireland and the Royal ZSI and the Superintendents and Directors of Dublin zoo. There is also a generous Endnotes section full of information and explanation and also Picture Credits. There is also a very welcome and useful Index.

Every zoo worth its admission should have a copy of this fascinating book. And every zoophile should read it. Even zoo-"dis"-advocates should read it so that they can understand what lengths zoo people will go to keep their animals safe and healthy and how very difficult and dangerous the job can be.

Today the Dublin Zoo is entering a phase where one million visitors a year is not a pipe dream. After the "edge of your seat" ride through its history, one is happy to know that there is a happy ending.

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**Arrival of Giant Pandas at the Dublin Airport
(Photo: Dublin zoo collection)**



Giant Pandas and their visitors, 1986 (Photo: Dublin zoo collection)

