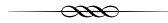


## Exhibiting Extinction

### Thylacines in Museum Display

*Kathryn Medlock*



Australia's largest marsupial carnivore, the Tasmanian tiger, wolf or thylacine (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*) became extinct only 133 years, 11 months and 29 days from the date of the European invasion of Tasmania to establish a British penal colony in 1803. From that date, marking the start of European interactions with thylacines, they were consistently regarded as a major pest that hindered the establishment of agriculture and the development of a profitable wool industry across the island. The last-known thylacine died in the Beaumaris Zoo in Hobart on 7 September 1936.<sup>1</sup>

Between 1803 and 1936, the thylacine became increasingly rare, as it failed to survive an organized regime of victimization. The reasons for its extinction are a combination of factors. As European agriculture and sheep farming expanded across Tasmania, thylacines suffered the effects of habitat alteration and loss, as well as a reduction in the availability of prey species when favoured habitats were converted to crops and pasture. Many private landholders, such as those that managed the large Woolnorth property in north-west Tasmania, as well as agricultural societies such as the Buckland and Spring Bay Tiger and Eagle Extermination Society, established in 1884<sup>2</sup> (hereafter referred to as the Buckland Society), willingly paid a reward for dead thylacines.<sup>3</sup> The Buckland Society initially relied on subscriptions from farmers, but it soon ran out of funds to pay the promised £5 reward, which resulted in some of its members, with support from other Tasmanian farmers, campaigning for the government to pay for tiger extermination.<sup>4</sup> Eventually, in 1888 after an ex-

tensive campaign, the Tasmanian government passed legislation to pay a bounty of £1 for each adult thylacine killed, and 10 shillings for young animals.<sup>5</sup> To the Tasmanian public, the thylacine was always portrayed as a pest to be destroyed by any means, but the government scheme now gave farmers, bushmen and farm labourers a way to make some money to support their small wages.

Although some of the animals killed under the Buckland scheme were subsequently obtained by the Tasmanian Museum (now the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, TMAG) in Hobart, the rules for the government bounty stipulated that specimens had to be destroyed to prevent a second claim being made, thus cutting off the supply of thylacines for museum purposes. This resulted in the curator of Hobart's Tasmanian Museum, Alexander Morton, proposing that specimens should be sent to the museum for payment of the reward.<sup>6</sup> The strategy was not particularly successful as it was far easier for bounty claimants to transport animals to the nearest police station than send them to Hobart. Therefore, few specimens from the government bounty scheme came to the museum, but 2,209 claims for dead thylacines were paid.<sup>7</sup>

Tasmania's first museum, established by the Royal Society of Van Diemen's Land for Horticulture, Botany and the Advancement of Science (now the Royal Society of Tasmania, RST, but hereinafter 'the society') began operations in 1848.<sup>8</sup> At this time, Tasmania was still a penal settlement, officially known as Van Diemen's Land, and thylacines were still found in the areas where sheep farming had not progressed. This society, the first scientific society in the Southern Hemisphere, was established under the patronage of Sir John and Lady Jane Franklin in 1842, and from the start it announced its desire to establish a museum in the young colony. Opened in 1848, the newly established museum emphasized natural history and ethnography, exotic specimens and curios.<sup>9</sup>

It was not until 1856 that the first thylacine skin was donated to the museum by two businessmen, Lade and Morris, who had caught and killed the thylacine at Falmouth on Tasmania's east coast.<sup>10</sup> The donation, announced via the society's published proceedings as the 'skin of dog opossum (hyena) or tiger',<sup>11</sup> was undoubtedly thought to be an important acquisition; but, on arrival, it was found to be incorrectly prepared for museum purposes because the skull and the leg bones had been removed. However, the society secretary, Joseph Milligan, wrote to Lade and Morris explaining the correct method of preparation for museum taxidermy, as well as asking for a Tasmanian devil (*Sarcophilus harrissii*).<sup>12</sup> As the first thylacine to be acquired, this was a valuable addition for the fledgling museum, and despite the condition of the skin on arrival, it was mounted and placed on exhibition.<sup>13</sup>

I will now provide an overview, the first of its kind, of the exhibition history of the thylacine at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. This research shows how changing display practices reflected the social values of the time and reveal shifting attitudes towards the thylacine and its cultural significance.

Although Lade and Morris's thylacine was the first for the fledgling museum, this was not the first thylacine to be obtained by a museum. Several specimens had already been sent overseas, by Tasmanian naturalists, many of whom were members of the society. By the 1850s thylacines were held in the collections of Bullock's Museum, London (1812), the Linnean Society of London (1824), the private museum of Joshua Brooks (1827), Leyden, Holland (1827), the Zoological Society of London Museum (1829), the Royal College of Surgeons of England (1846) and the British Museum, London (1843).<sup>14</sup> The first living thylacine arrived at London Zoo in 1850.<sup>15</sup>

Public interest in overseas fauna was at an all-time high in Britain during the early 1800s as new species flooded in from colonial outposts and exploration voyages. For example, kangaroos were highly sought after by London scientists, showmen and menageries, and were viewed with wonder and awe.<sup>16</sup> The thylacine on display in William Bullock's Egyptian Hall – also known as the London Museum and Pantherion, in Piccadilly, London – was claimed, in the museum's official guide book, to be the 'only one known in any collection'.<sup>17</sup> As the first to display a new species, and with visitors flocking to see such spectacles, Bullock was able to get an edge over the competition and ensure a paying audience. Not only was his museum considered groundbreaking for displaying previously unknown species, but it also presented those animals in a suggested natural setting among rocks and vegetation, rather than in individual cases. Bullock's museum became an extremely popular attraction for the London public, but not with the scientists of the day, who wished to establish collections along scientific lines, and complained that the sensationalist displays hindered their studies of valuable new specimens.<sup>18</sup>

It was not until 1858 that the society's museum obtained a second thylacine. Donated by a member of Tasmania's House of Assembly, Charles Shum Henty, this valuable donation was publicly announced in the local press. Noting that the thylacine was 'nearly obsolete', and using language attesting to Henty's bravery and service to the public in obtaining such an animal, it was described as having 'a very formidable appearance, the mouth, like that of the devil, being large, and furnished with long and very strong teeth, as white as ivory, and the jaws extending far into the skull'.<sup>19</sup> This new specimen was clearly valued by the society. It was reported that local taxidermist Mrs Touch was asked to prepare the specimen for dis-

play, and a photograph was commissioned. Mrs Touch was actually Mrs Tost, a well-known Hobart taxidermist and naturalist who was frequently contracted to do preparations for the society. The photograph no longer exists, but no doubt the completed specimen accentuated the large teeth and fierce nature of the thylacine in order to support Henty's bravery and public service.

The 1850s also saw the start of a series of international exhibitions spearheaded by the Great Exhibition in London in 1851. International representation such as this gave Tasmania an unprecedented opportunity to display and promote Tasmania's natural and economic resources. Exhibition commissioners, mainly from the Royal Society, oversaw the Tasmanian contributions and organized the construction and shipping of exhibition items.<sup>20</sup> The Tasmanian court primarily promoted economic industries such as timber, whale products, minerals, furs and agricultural products. A taxidermic platypus drew the attention of the *Illustrated London News* of 25 July 1851, noting that it looked like a 'small polecat with a duck's beak sewn on its muzzle'. Only a single tanned thylacine skin described as 'with the hair on' was sent to the original exhibition by William Rout of Hobart, a member of the Royal Society.<sup>21</sup> Displayed with other Tasmanian fur products, the thylacine was not a prominent feature. The Tasmanian exhibition products were selected to boost Tasmania's industry and reputation internationally (even though it was still a penal colony), so perhaps thylacines were not deemed interesting enough (unlike the platypus), not commercially valuable (unlike the possum and wallaby furs on display), or not worth promoting (because of their perceived negative impact on agricultural enterprises).

When the exhibition closed, it was moved to a new site where it became popularly known as the Crystal Palace.<sup>22</sup> A major difference from the earlier 1851 exhibition was that, as well as promoting industry, exhibits could be sold. Therefore, the displays effectively provided a shopfront from which museums, collectors and businesses could purchase products and specimens.<sup>23</sup> When the Crystal Palace exhibition was initially proposed, the Tasmanian commissioners asked the community for gifts of suitable items, but when few put their hands up to provide their products at no cost, the commissioners decided they would pay for items. Predictably, this resulted in a large number of people offering to be part of the exhibition.

Prior to shipment, the entire collection was put on display in Hobart. In the centre of the display hall was a pyramid covered with the skins of Tasmanian animals. The newspaper report of this display describes that 'the two ends of this pyramid are terminated by the antlers of fallow deer, and on the top there is a stuffed specimen of the native tiger. The walls are lined with skins of the opossum, native tiger, tiger cat, and kangaroo'.<sup>24</sup> Clearly,



thylacines had somewhat redeemed their reputation as worthy of inclusion because, when the exhibition opened again in the Crystal Palace, it included an entire thylacine family consisting of a male, female and young. Perhaps to encourage a museum purchase of the group, they were displayed in the ethnology department, an area where museum buyers would be more likely to find items of interest. The strategy proved successful, and the whole remarkable group was sold to the Liverpool Museum in 1863 for an unknown amount.<sup>25</sup>

During the second half of the nineteenth century, as museums evolved and increasingly opened their doors to the public, they began to move away from the static scientific displays of previous years. In such displays, specimens were typically arranged in neat rows intended to show the wonders of God's creation, new discoveries, and to encourage an overall appreciation of nature.<sup>26</sup> Alternatively, they were displayed according to their geographical region, which mirrored the illustrations found in natural history books that depicted a range of animals under general headings. Displays of Australasian species might include koalas, kangaroos and thylacines in a single display, creating the (misleading) impression that they lived together in a semi-natural setting.

As museums grew, they increasingly focused more on their audiences, keeping research specimens separated from the public galleries, using methods designed with an educational focus, and integrating popular appeal.<sup>27</sup> Display techniques also started to depict animals in more naturalistic poses and settings. Representing species as a nuclear family, a concept that could easily be understood by nineteenth-century museum visitors, was a way to gain public appeal as well as showing both sexes and young in close proximity to each other.

When the Tasmanian Museum received a female thylacine and her four young from William Turvey, the secretary of the Buckland Society in October 1884, they were immediately prepared for display. Hobart's *Mercury* newspaper reported that, 'Mr Morton has arranged the young ones with graphic ingenuity, and the exhibit is one of which any museum might well be proud'.<sup>28</sup> The group was initially posed with the mother resting on the ground and her young gathered close by, enabling easy movement between the protection of her open pouch and the outside world (Illustration 20.1). Although hailed as a resourceful and imaginative exhibit when it was prepared, in later photographs of the same group, the idealized 'nuclear family' is completed by the addition of a large unrelated male thylacine placed prominently at a higher level than the female and her young, as if protectively guarding his family (Illustration 20.2).

The frequency of portraying male and female specimens in natural history displays was the subject of a study undertaken at the Manchester



**Illustration 20.1** A female thylacine with her four young, presented to the Tasmanian Museum by the Buckland and Spring Bay Tiger and Eagle Extermination Society. Photographer: Edmond Haldane Cotsworth, c. 1885. Collection: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. Q4451.

Museum in England in 2008 examining gender bias in natural history displays. The author found that, although family groups are less common in displays, male specimens significantly outnumber females, and are usually placed at a higher level than females.<sup>29</sup> The Tasmanian Museum family group, always with the added male, remained the mainstay of its thylacine exhibit until at least the late 1920s, when three new thylacines – an adult male collected from the wild in 1926, and an adult female and a younger animal (not related) – were obtained from the Hobart Zoo in 1928.<sup>30</sup> Initially displayed in a case in the museum’s foyer, the three unrelated mounts were later used to create a new thylacine family, and this remained on display for approximately forty years.

Of these three family groups, only the most recent survives. The Liverpool specimens were unfortunately destroyed by a Second World War bombing raid on 3 May 1941, and no photographs of it are known to exist.<sup>31</sup> The Buckland group was destroyed in 1935, the year preceding the death of the last captive thylacine.<sup>32</sup> The destruction of these specimens appears to be an example of massive negligence by museum staff. However, closer inspection reveals that the Tasmanian Museum, despite the efforts



**Illustration 20.2** Female thylacine with her four young with the addition of a large unrelated male thylacine. Photographer: John W. Beattie, c. 1890s. Collection: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. Q4450.

of the Board of Trustees, had become extremely run down due to consistently poor funding. When a new director, Joseph Pearson, arrived in 1934, he reported that ‘the Zoological Section is of very little value, and is the worst part of the Museum’.<sup>33</sup> The only storage available was in two basement rooms that had become severely overcrowded. In 1935, at the height of the Great Depression, two unemployed men were hired to clean out the stores. The thylacine family became a casualty of this operation, but the annotation recording their destruction in the museum’s register is signed with the initials of a full-time staff member.<sup>34</sup> It was not done by mistake, it was done to make space.

Just before Pearson’s arrival in Tasmania, the Carnegie Corporation of New York had conducted a study of museums across Australia. The results contained in their report praised some of the Tasmanian Museum displays, but severely criticized display techniques across Australia generally, claiming that Australian museums ‘lacked the flair of exhibition’.<sup>35</sup> This report may have influenced the Tasmanian Museum trustees, as a taxidermist and an educator were soon employed, and valuable public spaces were taken over for the establishment of a dedicated education section, a laboratory and a taxidermy room. In 1937, the Carnegie Corporation sponsored a

trained taxidermist, Mr Frank Tose from the California Academy of Science, to instruct Australian staff in taxidermy techniques, as well as in the design and construction of habitat dioramas. Whilst in Tasmania, he spent two weeks in Hobart working with museum staff,<sup>36</sup> and gave a lecture to the Royal Society of Tasmania on modern museum methods.

By 1940, four new habitat groups had been installed in TMAG, including one using the three 1920s thylacines placed in a forest setting and posed as a nuclear family<sup>37</sup> (Illustration 20.3). This new diorama was always popular, but demonstrates how human bias can infiltrate a natural history display. Although there are many reports of thylacine in small family groups, the make-up of these groups has not been determined. It is not clear if thylacines actually lived as discreet nuclear family units (male, female and young), or if the display diorama thylacines had been related to each other. Paddle argues for the existence of family groups,<sup>38</sup> but given that so many aspects of thylacine social behaviour were not studied while the species was still alive, the true situation is not known.

As Ashby observes, museums are places made by people, and therefore they are not immune to human stories and biases infiltrating the displays.<sup>39</sup> Clearly the ideal nuclear family group is something that was, and still is,



**Illustration 20.3** Thylacine Diorama, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. This diorama was on display for approximately forty years. Photographer: Don Stephens, 1965. Collection: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. Q8778.

very familiar with the public, and it certainly conformed with ideas of family composition during the first half of the twentieth century when the diorama was constructed. A second misleading aspect of this diorama is the Tasmanian forest background. Closed forests cover a large proportion of Tasmania, yet do not support large populations of mammals because prey is scarce. Ideal thylacine habitat was relatively open mosaic grassland and woodland habitats that could support an abundance of prey whilst at the same time providing the necessary cover. Perhaps the thick forest scene was intended to convey the thylacine as a species that is hidden, yet awaiting rediscovery.

As the threat of extinction became a reality, the desire for museum specimens increased. Warnings of thylacine extinction were well known, and had been promulgated since Professor Richard Owen predicted extinction when addressing a Zoological Society of London meeting on 12 December 1843. Others added their voices, including Tasmanian naturalist Ronald Campbell Gunn, as well as the famous publisher of zoological monographs, John Gould.<sup>40</sup> Paddle identified seven instances from different Tasmanian authors relating to thylacine rarity that specifically mention extinction before 1888.<sup>41</sup>

In 1871, the director of the Australian Museum in Sydney, Gerard Krefft, writing about thylacines, acknowledged extinction yet still encouraged collecting by advising: 'Let us therefore advise our friends to gather their specimens in time, or it may come to pass when the last Thylacine dies, that the scientific men across Bass's Straits will contest as fiercely for its body as they did for that of the last aboriginal man not long ago'.<sup>42</sup> He understood the advantage of having many specimens. In 1866, he had arranged for the Australian Museum's collector, George Masters, to collect in Tasmania, where he was provided with assistance by the Royal Society and the Tasmanian Museum. Masters subsequently returned to Sydney with a total of 297 specimens, representing 23 species of Tasmanian mammals, and the society added a thylacine pouch young to his already large collection. On his return to Sydney, the collection included 25 thylacine specimens.<sup>43</sup>

Despite knowledge of increasing thylacine rarity, the collecting of rare and unusual specimens of species could prove profitable for museums. Excess specimens were regularly exchanged with other museums so that each museum could improve their holdings for display and for research. Many of the specimens collected by Masters were subsequently exchanged with other museums, giving the Australian Museum the opportunity to expand its own collection, the only costs being packing and shipping charges.

Museums wanted thylacines, as much as possible to fulfil the aim of forming an entire species inventory through a comprehensive collection.

Thylacines are also known as a striking example of convergent evolution between placental canids (dogs and wolves) and the marsupial thylacine due to their similar skull and body morphologies, despite evolving separately. So famous is this as an example of convergence that thylacine or dog skulls were often used in university examinations to test students' ability to spot the difference between the skulls of marsupials and those of placental mammals.<sup>44</sup> Many thylacine displays in museums around the world still emphasize this important evolutionary concept through their displays.

After the last-known thylacine died in Hobart Zoo in 1936, Tasmanian fauna authorities immediately implemented efforts to find out where thylacines might still occur. Museum director Pearson offered £50 for a living thylacine in good condition.<sup>45</sup> He was not successful. Over subsequent years many searches have been conducted – none have succeeded. To date, there has been no road kill, no remains found in the bush, and no verified killing or capture. A few films and photographs occasionally appear, but none have proven to be that of a thylacine.

The acquisition of a living thylacine for a zoo or a dead one for a museum, to prove evidence of its continued survival in the wild, never occurred. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature currently deems a species to be extinct when no evidence of its continued existence has been found, despite extensive surveys in known habitat, and there has been a time lapse of fifty years since the last verified evidence. Therefore, on 7 September 1986 the thylacine was officially declared extinct. Many still cling to the hope of finding one in the wild, driven by the understanding that an absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, however, no search has been successful.

The story of the thylacine is one of the best-known extinction stories, capturing the imagination of people around the world as much as those other famous extinctions, the dodo, the passenger pigeon and the great auk. It has become an extinction icon and, although its extinction could have been prevented, it is still commonly used as a symbol to represent Tasmania and all things Tasmanian (in the same way that symbolic lions are associated with the English Test cricket team and the Royal Family).

Thylacines feature on the Tasmanian coat of arms, the current Tasmanian government logo, and branding for sporting teams. The thylacine continues to inspire tourism ventures, artists, furniture makers, writers, filmmakers and poets. If the whole animal is not depicted, the distinctive banding pattern, or even an abstract representation of the pattern, is enough to convey a Tasmanian message. The anniversary of its death, 7 September, is the Australian National Threatened Species Day.

In response to the anomaly of the thylacines' transformation from hated pest to Tasmanian icon, in 1998 the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery



developed a major touring exhibition on the thylacine. Called 'Tasmanian Tiger: The Mystery of the Thylacine', its themes included biology, history, persecution, extinction, art, design and its use as a Tasmanian symbol. As it travelled to all of Australia's major natural history museums, it inspired talks and seminars on extinction. As the tour coincided with the announcement of a project to clone the thylacine and thus reverse the mistakes of the past, there were also discussions about the ethics of cloning.

In museums with relatively recent displays, thylacine specimens are no longer used only as an example of the largest carnivorous marsupial of modern times alongside other Australian mammals, or as the best example of evolutionary convergence. Instead, they are often depicted in displays that highlight how human behaviour can lead to extinctions. Now they are sometimes included in special galleries devoted to extinction, providing a sober demonstration of how, despite warnings, extinction occurred before anyone cared enough to prevent it happening.

At the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, thylacines now occupy a dedicated gallery. The display consists of a mounted specimen, a male and female skeleton and a flat skin. Films of thylacines are projected on the walls. Framed photographs adorn the space, skulls of thylacine, dog and wolf demonstrate convergent evolution, and artefacts related to some of the searches and historical hunting methods are displayed in cases. Significantly, a panel explains how, despite the accepted 1936 extinction date, in reality, thylacines were functionally or ecologically extinct well before this date. Extremely low population numbers during the early twentieth century almost certainly meant that the species' role as the apex predator in ecosystem regulation was already negligible. The healthy ecological system that existed prior to European colonization had already been significantly disrupted well before 1936.

Today, thylacine collections in museums are in more demand than ever. Researchers increasingly seek access to specimens as they continue to work out aspects of thylacine biology and ecology in order to understand the legacy and impact of extinction. Museums were amongst the players that killed and collected thylacines and transported them around the world. However, they also lobbied for thylacine protection as extinction loomed prior to becoming a reality.

As Anthropocene climate change increasingly alters conditions for all life on earth, and extinction rates increase, museum thylacines, whether on display or stored in collections, continue to be used to educate audiences and facilitate research. They are greatly valued collection items and are frequently named in lists of collection highlights. The specimens have the power to promote feelings of sadness and guilt about a human-induced extinction that could have been prevented, and as a reminder of our ability to

disrupt nature with catastrophic results. Although the display of thylacines in museums has altered over time, due to changes in museum philosophy, management and practice, as an example of a recent human-induced extinction their future power is inestimable. Every thylacine specimen is a primary biological and physical reference to a species that, until recently, was integral to the Tasmanian environment. Unfortunately, it is no longer with us.

On 7 September 1936, the Royal Society of Tasmania held its regular monthly meeting in their dedicated space at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. The subject of this meeting was a special lecture to honour the services of Clive Lord, who had died in 1933. Lord had been the director of the museum and an active member of the Royal Society of Tasmania and had actively pushed for thylacine protection through his role as the museum representative on the Tasmanian Fauna Board. As the society members entered through the museum's foyer, they passed by the case containing the three thylacines obtained between 1926 and 1928. They had no idea that only a few miles away, in Hobart Zoo, the last-known thylacine, locked out of its cage, was to die that night.

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**Kathryn Medlock** spent her career working in curatorial roles in the vertebrate zoology department at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, where she was responsible for the development, preparation, care and display of the collection. She has actively participated in research projects on reptiles, birds and mammals, including cetaceans, and has curated several museum exhibitions, including one in 1998 on the thylacine. In 2003 she was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to study Tasmanian birds and mammals held in museums in Britain, other parts of Europe, and North America. Currently, her work is focused on the zoological, cultural and historical aspects of thylacine collections around the world, and on the origins of the specimens held in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. She is passionate about promoting the use of natural history collections for both research and education, as it becomes increasingly urgent to gain an understanding of the implications of habitat loss and extinction.



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