

# B&C CONSER

**PROFILE:** Henry Fairfield Osborn (1857-1935)

By Leonard H. Wurman B&C Regular Member

## American Museum of Natural History

The Boone and Crockett Club was founded in 1887 with three membership categories. Regular Members, as today, must have taken mature males of three of North America's big game species. A second category, the Associate Members, were active conservationists who may not have been hunters. This category is known today as Professional Members, whereas "Associate Members" refers to a category created in the last 20 years.

Henry Fairfield Osborn was admitted in 1899 as an Associate Member and by 1913 had been elected to the third of the original categories, that of Honorary Members. Even today, only 35 Members have been so honored. Osborn was the pre-eminent vertebrate paleontologist (one who studies ancient

life forms) of the early twentieth century, and his story is absorbing.

Like so many early Club Members, Osborn grew up in New York City of wealthy patrician parents. He was born on August 8, 1857, two years before Darwin published *On The Origin of Species*. His father and maternal grandfather joined forces to purchase the financially strapped Illinois Central Railroad and turned it around. By age 31, Henry's father had made his fortune. Both sides of Henry's family were strict Scottish Presbyterians; the youngster studied the bible daily and attended church regularly.

### Princeton

Osborn graduated in 1877 from Princeton, from where he also earned his Ph.D. four years later. Despite his father's attempts to bring him into the business, Osborn remained at Princeton to teach and do research.

Osborn's research by 1885 brought him into the field of vertebrate paleontology. As he would for the rest of his life, Osborn tried to assimilate science with religious doctrine. Unlike many religious leaders of that time, Osborn believed that the theory of evolution was correct, although his perspective differed from that of Darwin.

Darwin concluded that animal and plant mutations were constantly occurring, and as environments changed, those mutations would survive that were most fit to meet the challenges of the new environment. Osborn reconciled his religious beliefs with his research by regarding evolution as linear. God predetermined orderly changes. Built into each organism's "germ plasma," he purported, were the directions for its future characteristics.

Wealthy residents, including Theodore Roosevelt's father, founded New York City's American Museum of Natural History in 1869. It soon became a hodgepodge of gifted and purchased collections, was poorly attended, and in debt. In 1881 Morris Jesup, a wealthy railroad broker, became the museum's president. Jesup appreciated the importance of vertebrate paleontology. Large prehistoric skeletons excited the public, and fossils were the best physical evidence of evolution. When the Boone and Crockett Club was formed six years later, its Members, some who were already museum trustees, began to donate their own personal collections to the museum.

Osborn in 1890 was recruited from Princeton back to New York to take a joint position at the museum and at Columbia College. The trustees at both institutions knew of Osborn's connections with New York's wealthiest families, such as Cornelius Vanderbilt, J. Pierpont Morgan, Jay Gould, and William Dodge. Henry's younger brother, Frederick, had been Theodore Roosevelt's best friend. The trustees of both institutions hoped that Osborn would solicit donations from these wealthy industrialists, bankers, and merchants. They were not disappointed.

Osborn taught paleontology and evolution at Columbia and did his research at the museum. Columbia in the 1870s was a small, unheralded undergraduate college having a loose affiliation with several autonomous graduate schools. By the time Osborn resigned from Columbia in 1895 to work full time at the museum, he had become the Dean of Columbia's Faculty of Pure Sciences and had transformed Columbia into an expanding university offering multiple Ph.D. programs.

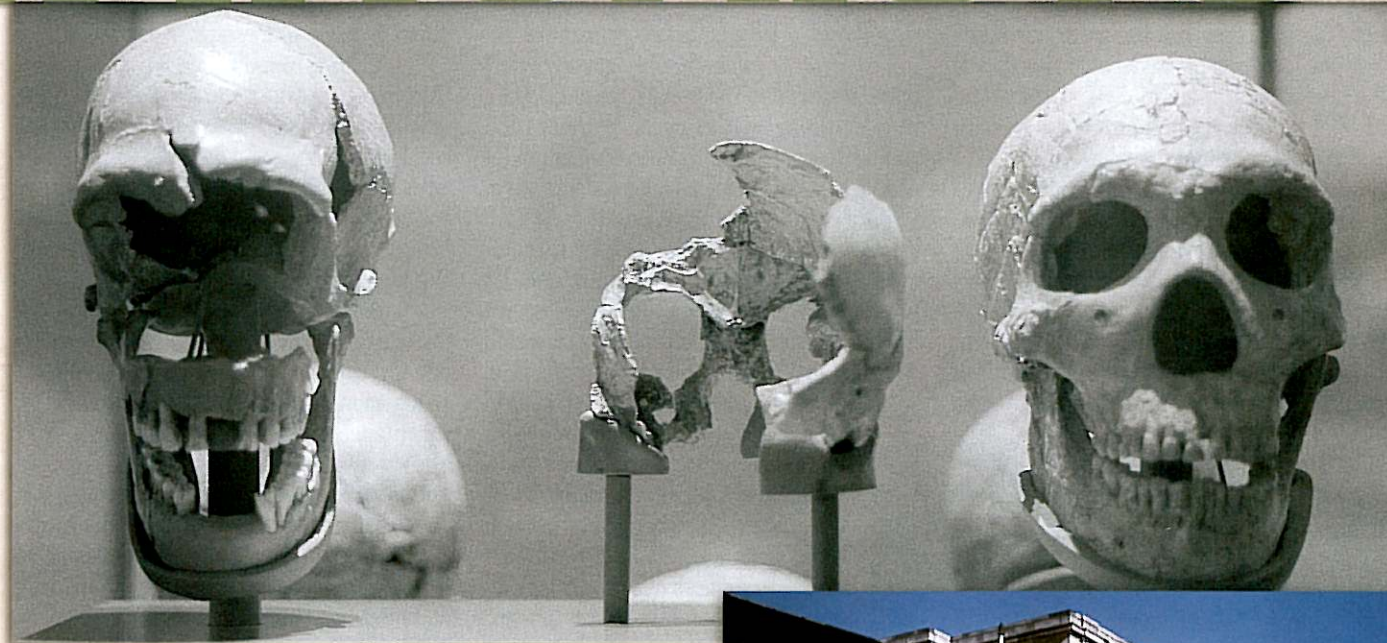
At the museum, Osborn received no salary. To the contrary, he personally contributed thousands of dollars yearly to his Department of Vertebrate Paleontology. His father's railroad connections helped in two ways. Railroad excavations often exposed fossil beds, and the railroads transported fossils inexpensively back to New York.

Osborn's Department of Vertebrate Paleontology became a favorite of the museum's trustees. Osborn started publishing the *American Museum Journal*, predecessor to the museum's present monthly magazine, *Natural History*. In 1901, he was elected to the museum's board of trustees, shortly



**PORTRAIT OF HENRY FAIRFIELD OSBORN TAKEN IN 1909.**

# EVOLUTIONISTS



became a vice president, and in 1908 was elected the museum's president, a position he held for 25 years.

Osborn was responsible for many of the museum's successes. He secured large donations and organized numerous collecting expeditions both stateside and abroad. Other leading museums, such as the Field in Chicago and the Carnegie in Pittsburgh, purchased their specimens from independent collectors. By offering good salaries and educational opportunities, Osborn was able to recruit and keep many able assistants and send out the museum's own staff to do the collecting. He created the largest and most dominant vertebrate paleontology department in the Americas.

His own interest turned to mammalian paleontology. The museum displayed seven mounted prehistoric horse skeletons, beginning with a small dog-sized creature, to show the evolution of the horse over millions of years. The Hall of Mammals was the first great hall within the museum. Realizing the popular appeal of dinosaurs, Osborn sent out a steady stream of fossil-finding expeditions and accumulated the world's largest collection of dinosaur bones. The Dinosaur Hall opened in 1905. Osborn himself coined the name *Tyrannosaurus Rex*.

But there was a dark side to Osborn. He was arrogant, insisting that everyone address him as Professor Osborn, and often treated his assistants in a condescending manner. His self-promotion and professional pretensions often engendered contempt and bit-

**ABOVE: OSBORN BELIEVED THAT THE HEAVY-BROWED NEANDERTHALS WERE DIMWITTED AND THAT MODERN MAN HAD DESCENDED FROM A RACE NOT YET FOUND. HOWEVER, YEARS LATER THE EXHIBIT OF FOSSILS TRACING MAN'S EVOLUTION OPENED WITH MORE SCIENTIFIC HOOPLA THAN ANY OTHER SINGLE DISPLAY AT THE MUSEUM.**

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**RIGHT: THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY IN NEW YORK.**

terness within his department. Osborn published a large number of books and articles, some indeed innovative, but his assistants did most of the writing. He insisted on determining what exhibits would be shown, and in what form, and then took credit for paintings, mounts, and murals when his contribution was minimal. He was convinced of the greatness of his work, that he was invariably correct, and that he was Darwin's successor. Yet most of his staff disagreed with his religious and social interpretations of evolution. It's interesting that Osborn encouraged the work of those he liked, even if they did not support his theories. But for those

who left the museum, he was not apt to write a good recommendation.

## **Paleoanthropology**

The 1908 discovery in France of two caves containing prehistoric art piqued Osborn's interest in the evolution of man. After touring European human paleolithic sites in 1912, Osborn made paleoanthropology (the study of early man) his dominant interest. He sent Roy Chapman Andrews, another B&C Club Member, to central Asia, from where Osborn believed man had originated. Andrews led five elaborate and publicly acclaimed expeditions to Mongolia in the 1920s and found



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extensive mammal and reptile fossils, including dinosaur eggs. But he never found the "missing link" to support Osborn's theory that the first humans lived in Asia. Discoveries in 1924 in Africa pointed to that continent as the source of human evolution.

Osborn believed that the heavy-browed Neanderthals were dimwitted, the high-browed Cro-magnon man was intelligent, but that modern man had descended from a race not yet found. The distant ancestor of man, he theorized, was not a prehistoric ape, but rather the hypothetical "dawn man." He felt that the modern Nordic peoples, the

from the wild was causing modern man to descend into racial suicide and extinction.

Expecting the eventual demise of many of the world's large mammals, museums were busy mounting representative specimens and zoos were established to keep breeding populations of each endangered species alive. Osborn became very active in the New York Zoological Society, the organization that created and administrated the Bronx Zoo. By presenting the zoo animals in their "native habitat," Osborn hoped that viewers would be stimulated to promote wildlife protection.

Osborn agreed with the early B&C Club Members that rugged outdoor individualism and the preservation of traditional values were needed to counteract the negative effects of modern urban thinking. Perhaps hypocritically, Osborn himself did very little fieldwork, but rather stayed in his labs and drew on the source material of others.

Osborn believed that American Society was also being degraded by urban and technological development, and that its fauna and flora must be protected from the exploitation of timber, game, and other natural resources. His speech, "Preservation of the Wild Animals of North America," was the keynote address at the Boone and Crockett Club's annual meeting in Washington, D.C. on January 23, 1904.

Osborn represented the New York Zoological Society at meetings that led to the passage of the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. In 1917, he and two other Boone and Crockett Club Members, Madison Grant and John C. Phillips, toured the land north of San Francisco and were alarmed by the unrestricted logging of the remaining redwood forests. They formed the Save the Redwoods League and eventually prevented many of those old groves from being lost forever.

Osborn rejected economic, social, and political change, would not support woman's suffrage, and believed that women should not even be teachers. He became active in the eugenics movement, with its emphasis on breeding better humans and removing the "unfit" from the breeding population. He promoted sterilization and immigration restriction. In the 1930s, he supported Hitler's and Mussolini's programs of racial hygiene. His egotistical elitism engendered irritation and repulsion from most of his assistants and colleagues. The museum itself had over 100,000 visitors a year. All found it entertaining and educational, but

few ever understood or accepted Osborn's moral or religious message.

Calling himself a macro-evolutionist, Osborn rejected the trend toward microbiology in the universities, with its emphasis on embryology, cytology, and genetics. He associated this "experimental biology" with agnosticism and couldn't understand why paleontology was being replaced by the newer laboratory sciences. But he was swimming against the tide.

Osborn's efforts had a dichotomous influence on the field of vertebrate paleontology. On the one hand, his colleagues rejected his staunch and uncompromising views on inheritance and the causes of evolution. They also distanced themselves from his preoccupation with eugenics and immigration. But on the other hand, he had made the museum the premier center for vertebrate paleontology with its large and diversified staff and its sponsorship of numerous, well-publicized expeditions. Ironically, it was the large fossil collections at the museum and the expensive, museum-financed expeditions that allowed Osborn's colleagues to arrive at conclusions different from those of their boss.

In the 1930s, the Boone and Crockett Club proposed a "Hall of North American Mammals" at the museum. Osborn agreed and requested that the Club "take this hall under its special care." After its dedication, the hall became the traditional location of the Club's annual meeting. From 1935 until 1962, Olive M. Clearwater at the museum also functioned as the Boone and Crockett Club's paid secretary. Some of the Club's records are still located in the museum's archives.

Long dependent on the support of wealthy donors, the museum saw its private sources dry up with the economic depression of the 1930s. Osborn resigned as president in 1932 and died November 6, 1935. An audit in 1942 found that Osborn had channeled museum money into his pet projects in order to substantiate his particular scientific interpretations. His department was dissolved, reestablished several years later on a smaller scale, and later integrated into modern biology.

Osborn had been a huge success as a promoter, administrator, and fundraiser, but his attempts to integrate his social and religious beliefs into his science negatively affected these endeavors. His labors in such Boone and Crockett efforts as the Bronx Zoo, the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and the Save the Redwoods League put Henry Fairfield Osborn high on the list of America's early twentieth century conservationists. ■



**OSBORN SENT OUT A STEADY STREAM OF FOSSIL-FINDING EXPEDITIONS. ONE SPECIFIC TRIP TO MONGOLIA HEAD-ED UP BY FELLOW CLUB MEMBER, ROY CHAPMAN ANDREWS, YIELDED MANY FOSSILS INCLUDING DINOSAUR EGGS. BOTTOM: OSBORN HIMSELF COINED THE NAME TYRANNOSAURUS REX.**

Scandinavians, Scots, and English, had descended from nomadic peoples, whose contact with nature had given them the highest qualities, and were therefore superior to the southern and eastern Europeans. Modern man must emulate what was natural and pure. The mixing of races and humanity's isolation