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THE IDEA OF A MARITIME MUSEUM

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by DR. C. NORTHCOTE PARKINSON

In attempting to interest you in the idea of a Maritime Museum in Liverpool, I shall begin by pleading such right as I have to be heard. My first plea is that I am a Lecturer in Maritime History and, so far as I know, the only one in existence. I have a scarcity value, and I mean to make the most of it. More than that, I was, nearly fifteen years ago, one of the late Sir Geoffrey Callender's assistants. When the National Maritime Museum was formed—and before it opened its doors to the public—I constituted fifty per cent of the staff. I knew then—I think I know now—how a Museum is formed. I have seen it happen. While, therefore, I concede that you might reasonably have hoped for a paper from one who knew far more, you might also, I maintain, have had to listen to one who knew even less.

Granted so much, you may still doubt whether a newcomer to Liverpool can expect to grasp the complexity of the problems which surround the Shipping Gallery and the Bluecoat School site. But a newcomer's position has its advantages. Such knowledge as I have of Liverpool ends, as I readily admit, round about 1815. Facing a Liverpool audience in the year 1808, say, I should have known, more or less, what topics to avoid. But now I am happily unaware of the toes on which I may trample and the feelings I may outrage. My ignorance, which I have been careful to preserve, although powerless to improve, must be my protection.

What I am discussing is the *idea* of a Maritime Museum—of a Museum in the abstract. I am in no position to argue the merits of this site or that. Leaving that to the experts, I shall stick to principles. I ask not “where is it to be?” but “what is it to be?” And you will notice that I have partly answered that question—in the very title of my paper. For I have used the word “Museum” and not the term “Shipping Gallery.” That I shall continue to do. I never saw the Shipping Gallery and have read only one description of it, apart from the catalogue. Even from that, I should think the name imprecise. Granting, however, that the term “Shipping Gallery” fairly described what Liverpool used to have, I should still maintain that it is not what Liverpool *ought* to have. What is needed is a Museum.

At this point I may be asked to define my terms. What *is* a Museum? The word has, for many people, rather gloomy associations. We picture to ourselves a wet Saturday afternoon in November, the bored attendant at the turnstile, the catalogue (2d.), the lovers disturbed by giggling children at the moment when they thought themselves alone. We visualise all this against a dusty background of skeletons, Zulu weapons, pampas grass and a scale model of the Parthenon. There is that bust of Garibaldi, those Roman coins, the blunderbuss, the coaching horn. Overhead the rain falls pitilessly on a grimy skylight and in the next room someone is lecturing as pitilessly on we know not what. We are tired and depressed, and mainly anxious to go home. These visions of ours relate, of course, to some distant period, and (naturally) to some other City. Since our young days things have changed. A Museum is no longer a collection of objects under glass, grimly surveyed by people whose sole care is to prevent their being stolen. A Museum is nowadays a more enlightened, a more lively institution than that.

The change could best be summarised perhaps by saying that a Museum consists primarily to-day of people rather than things. By people I mean those who work in it, those who endow it, those who support it and those who frequent it for their use and pleasure. Without all these people, a Museum is dead. Without them, it scarcely exists. Just as a playhouse, with its lights and curtain and scenery, is nothing without players and audience, so is a Museum nothing without its active friends. I would urge you to think of it, first of all, in terms of people. We must, from the start, visualise its public; interested, excited, pleased and entertained. I do not say that things do not matter. I only plead that people matter more.

Does all this bring us any nearer a definition of the word "Museum?" I think it does. Discarding our more painful recollections and fixing our attention on Museums that are alive, we might frame a definition on these lines: a centre of public resort for instruction and entertainment, mainly by means of exhibits. Let us assume that this definition will pass muster for the time being. A Maritime Museum would then seem to be a centre of public resort for the instruction and entertainment of those interested in the Sea.

There must be exhibits. What are they to be? Taking Greenwich as our model, we might list the exhibits under these headings:—(I) Ship models, (II) Marine paintings, prints,

drawings and photographs, (III) Printed books, (IV) Manuscripts, (V) Instruments and (VI) Relics. Those are the obvious categories, but the arrangement would, of course, be according to subject and period. The ideal (almost unattainable) would be to show, say, the model of a Liverpool West Indiaman with, nearby, a painting of the same ship, a portrait of her owner, a page (in facsimile) from her log, a chart pricked out with the routes she normally followed, her actual house-flag and a telescope which her last captain is said to have used. I urge that this is better than scattering these things round the town—the portrait in a Gallery, the chart in a Library, the telescope in private hands, and the house-flag in a Museum of Local Antiquities.

Then there must be books. Let us agree not to rob any existing Library of a single volume. Our Maritime Museum should have a Library just the same. How else could the assistants answer the questions which are hurled daily at every Museum of any reputation? When was this ship launched? Which harbour does this painting represent? From what period does this model date? Without a reference library these questions could never be answered. As for the acquisition of such a library, it is easy—only provided that we all make our Wills. True, we have to die before any good comes of it. But those of us who use the Liverpool trams must always feel on the brink of eternity, and should act accordingly.

This brings me to my next point. We cannot make our bequests because there is no existing body we can name. Every month—every week perhaps—our future Museum, if there is to be one, is losing the gifts and bequests which it would receive if already established. I know of several, even in the short time I have been in Liverpool. Many present will know of more. And the moral of this is—let's get on with it! Whenever this subject is discussed we tend to get bogged down in arguments about where the Museum should be. That is a question for a later stage. I am convinced that no useful purpose can be served by discussing it now. Let the Museum exist before we seek its home. I was with Sir Geoffrey Callender, remember, when the National Maritime Museum was founded, and I can assure you that a Museum must grow underground—probably for years—before it can open its doors. There *must* be a temporary Museum; a storehouse and office. There must be time to accumulate the exhibits, train the staff and convert the public. It does not matter, for the present, where the final home is to be. But it does matter that the Museum,

as a corporate body, should be brought into existence, and with the least possible delay.

I wonder if I have, so far, gained some measure of agreement? I hope so, because my next point may well arouse opposition. It is this: such a Museum as I have tried to describe should *not* be housed as part of a larger Museum. It is wrong, as I think, to group (in effect) several Museums under one roof. Why? Well, first, because the best Museums are relatively small. True, there is the British Museum, and such a place, on the national scale, is justified. But one thinks with more pleasure of the Musée de Cluny, the Musée des Arts Decoratifs, the Casa d'Ore or the Kirke Collection at York. Apart from size, however, considered as a disadvantage in itself, there is a stronger reason for keeping Museums apart; a reason connected with human fatigue. People who have been through a Museum may want a number of things. They may want to sit down. They may want tea. They may even want brandy. What they *don't* want is another Museum. There is nothing, you may say, to prevent them going only to the bit they want to see. Perhaps not. But that is not what happens. In practise the seeker after Chinese pottery has to run a gauntlet of stuffed giraffes. And people who like ships are not (as a rule) equally enthusiastic about butterflies, fossils, flint arrow-heads or surrealist art. Perhaps it will be urged that Museums which do not connect can still adjoin. They can. But why should they? *Administrative Convenience*? Of that expression we have heard enough.

My next plea is that our Maritime Museum should be controlled (not necessarily owned by) a body of Trustees, and not preferably by the City of Liverpool as such. My plea is founded on two main considerations. First, I maintain that the scope of the Museum should stretch—and must stretch—far beyond the municipal boundary. Such a Museum should serve the educational needs not only of Liverpool but of Birkenhead, Manchester, Chester and Whitehaven. I will go further than that. The Museum should have the closest connection (just as Liverpool has always had) with Boston, Philadelphia, Halifax and Newfoundland. Were I to choose a name for it, I should call it THE ATLANTIC MUSEUM. Second, I maintain that the Liverpool Shipowners are the men without whose support the Museum must fail. I am not asking for their money. I suspect that there are enough people doing that. No, what the Museum needs is their support, their archives, their builders' models. One does not expect a Firm to make

the Museum an immediate gift of, say, the dockyard model of the *Queen Elizabeth*. But in twenty years time, when all up-to-date vessels are being driven by atomic energy—what then? Well, even in twenty years time, I suggest, a Firm would be rash to hand over its treasures to any body of Trustees on which the Shipowners, as such, were not directly represented.

Since I have the audacity to be appointing the Trustees in all but name, allow me to add one more to the list : the Director of the National Maritime Museum, whoever he may be. It should be made clear from the beginning that we intend no harmful rivalry. Greenwich must always remain the national centre and we would not have it otherwise. In things strictly naval, for instance, there would be no competition at all. But should anyone propose that the local collections of models and paintings should go down to Greenwich, I should say, "No." Greenwich is too far away. We cannot send our schoolchildren there to see in what sort of ships their forebears used to sail. But there should be close co-operation and we should not be ashamed to ask advice.

Sometimes I allow myself to dream of what a Maritime Museum here in Liverpool could be. I think its main theme should be the story of transatlantic shipping—it would be the point, as it were, where Liverpool and Boston should be drawn most closely together. The main sections would be three in number : the age of sail ; the age of transition ; and the age of steam. But other galleries would be needed, too. In one we should see the growth of Merseyside. In another we might see what an 18th century Counting House looked like, with the tall desks, the great ledgers, the glimpse of the quayside from the windows. Models would show how a merchantman was laden and how her guns were fired. We should see the portraits of 19th century Sea Captains—some of the finest men this country has ever produced—and we should see how a 20th century vessel is built and launched. The Museum might include—I think it should—a restaurant (serving dishes, presumably of burgoo and lobsouse), a cinema, a lecture-room and (for members of this Society) a Club. One room might be a memorial to Nathaniel Hawthorne ; a place to which Americans would be especially welcome. In another a floating model would demonstrate exactly how a sailing ship really works. Here and there the building itself would look rather like a ship. And somewhere near the entrance I can imagine a statue of John Masefield, the poet of Merseyside and perhaps our greatest poet of the sea.

Suppose it agreed that such a Museum, or something remotely like it, is desirable, what are the immediate steps to take? The first step is to urge on the City the appointment of Trustees. The second is to begin enrolling the people on whom the future Museum is to rely. This Society is the nucleus but it is not more than that. We must seek more widely for help and encouragement. It is only by the co-operation of the City, the University, the neighbouring Boroughs, the Ship-owners and Shipbuilders, together with such Societies as this, that our Museum can ever come into being.