

Julius Brenchley: Exploring the Explorer

He fell inside an active volcano, was shot in the neck with an arrow, dressed as a miner to avoid attack in the American West, became friends with the King of Hawaii, and travelled to 6 continents but still Julius Brenchley remains a relatively unknown English explorer. Born in 1816 near Maidstone, Kent, it was expected that he would go into the clergy but when he travelled to Europe in the mid-1840s with his father, he seems to have resolved to travel. He was, fortunately, in a position to do this as there was substantial family wealth that had been made through brewing. He spent the next 40 years travelling extensively, around the world, including extensive trips to North America and the South Pacific. His collections were shipped back and parts were displayed at his home, in Bearsted, Kent, whilst much of the giant collection was stored in the roof space. It started to go on display at Maidstone Museum from 1867. This puts Brenchley at an interesting point, his collection reaching the public set against the travelling exhibition of George Catlin in the 1840s, at the time when Darwin's theories were being digested, and not long before Buffalo Bill's Wild West Shows came to Britain to a rapturous reception. Buffalo Bill even staged a show in Maidstone in the summer of 1903.

Whilst Julius Brenchley is himself a fascinating and relatively little known figure, what is also interesting is the time at which the collection of Native American artefacts was displayed in Britain and how it helped contribute to the way in which Native Americans and the American (Wild) West was perceived.

Julius Brenchley left Europe in 1849 and after spending winter living in the depths of a forest in the northeast he proceeded west to the Mississippi River. Starting in the spring of 1850, and with the aim of reaching the Northwest Pacific coast by way of the Rocky Mountains, Brenchley set off from St. Louis on a steamer along the Missouri River and then continued to travel by mule following the Oregon Trail. He passed notable landmarks associated with westward expansion, following in the footsteps of thousands before him, he encountered travellers, traders and emigrants, and saw the names of thousands more who had inscribed

their names onto the surface of Independence Rock in Wyoming whilst passing through. During the epic five month excursion, recording the flora and fauna as well as collecting various objects, he stopped at a succession of American trading posts, met the renowned frontiersman Kit Carson and interacted with several bands of Indian tribes. Upon reaching his planned destination of the Oregon coastline and Fort Vancouver in Washington, Brenchley continued his travels by joining a voyage to the Sandwich Islands (so named by James Cook, and today known as Hawaii). There, he met the French traveller and naturalist Jules Remy with whom he forged a lasting friendship that would see them travel together extensively. In 1855, after four years exploring the Hawaiian Islands, during which time Brenchley became an acquaintance of the King, Brenchley and Remy sailed to San Francisco. One of the aims of the second leg of his American journey was to see the growth of Salt Lake City, which had been founded in 1847 by a group of Mormon pioneers. After further travels around New Mexico Territory (acquired as a result of the Mexican-American War of 1848, it was not a state at this point) and California (made a state in 1850) Brenchley made his way (now 1857) up to the Canadian Lakes and then descended the Mississippi river from its source to return to St. Louis. Shortly after, both Brenchley and Remy sailed from New York and returned to England.

Brenchley's objects and his stories were received in Britain at a time when it was commonly believed that American Indians were a vanishing race, that perhaps this had something to do with different races, cultures and the 'survival of the fittest,' and at a time when people were already, as in America itself, beginning to re-imagine the wild west now that the frontier had 'closed,' accompanied with stereotypes and white expectations of what 'Indian-ness' really was. The demographic evidence appeared to bear this out with a steep and significant decline in Native populations from in the region of ten million at the time that Columbus landed in the Americas to, at the turn of the twentieth century, a population of approximately 250,000. Wild West Shows, world fairs, art and literature contributed to a sense that Indians were soon to be extinct, that they were on the brink of becoming historical relics and memories. Placing objects in museums added to the process of regarding tribes as having passed into history. The place of Native Americans in the British cultural imagination is a fascinating one, and the objects that were left to Maidstone Museum played their part in both reflecting and strengthening conceptualisations of both Indians and the American continent as a whole.

British perceptions had been constructed through periodicals and newspaper articles, reports of battles between Indians and American troops, accounts of and interviews with Indian visitors to Britain, sensationalist narratives of captivities and ambushes, works of racial science, missionary narratives, early anthropological work, and through numerous works of fiction, poetry and art. The speed with which American attitudes were circulated and often replicated in Britain is significant.

The American frontier rushed westward in the mid-nineteenth century toward the Pacific Ocean underpinned by an ideological belief in Manifest Destiny - the idea that America had

been chosen to be a unique and exceptional country - by the drive to expand slavery in the southern states, and by a population increase fuelled by mass immigration. As more and more states were created and added to the Union so more pressures were placed upon indigenous communities who were often seen as being 'in the way' of civilisation and progress. The most rapid expansion of the United States occurred in the nineteenth century and the 'Indian Problem' was discussed often, leading to various government policies for dealing with tribes. These included the physical removal of tribes through legislation, military campaigns to break resistance, and the establishment of a reservation system whereby tribes would end up on much smaller pockets of land under direct supervision and control. Some historians have argued that government policies resemble what would now be called ethnic cleansing and/or genocide. There were, unfortunately, numerous massacres conducted throughout the century, including the Sand Creek Massacre, Colorado, in 1864 and the massacre at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in 1890.

'Official' removal in the southeast started with the Removal Act of 1830, legislation that witnessed over a decade of military units marching tribes off their land and leaving them in 'Indian Territory,' which would in time become the state of Oklahoma. This removal included the infamous forced march of the Cherokee through wintry conditions that led to the loss of some 3500-4000 people and is known as the 'Trail of Tears.' Other examples of removal recurred through the century, including the Long Walk of the Navajo in the southwest. There were examples of 'unofficial' removal that occurred shortly before Brenchley travelled in the west, as waves of people moved toward the Pacific in search of gold (the gold rush of 1849 in California) forcibly displaced hundreds of Native Americans and the influx of whites led to many tribes enduring a fractured and difficult future.

After the government had militarily subdued tribes across the country, the next question concerned their future place in the nation. The last armed resistance, led by Geronimo (Apache), ended in 1886 when he surrendered in the face of overwhelming odds (In the end he was being hunted by a quarter of the entire US army), the majority of Indians lived on reservations and any hint of disturbance was often met with harsh repercussions. For example, in the mid-1880s the phenomenon of the Ghost Dance became popular amongst many tribes in the northern plains regions. In the face of such rapid and damaging change to their lives, the Dance represented a form of spiritual and cultural resistance that, if conducted properly, would lead to a return of how the world was before white people arrived. Sparking apprehension and fear among the US military, they proceeded to round up and arrest dance leaders, one such encounter ending in the massacre at Wounded Knee (1890).

The government embarked on a policy of forced assimilation, often referred to as Americanisation. As it was so widely believed that Indians would soon disappear, an aggressive policy of assimilation was thought by many to offer the best chance to 'help' Indians join mainstream white America. In essence, it was an attempt to 'whiten' Indians so they could melt away into the general population and was characterised by drives to destroy Indian culture, language, tribal society, religion and families. It was to be achieved through the Dawes Act of 1887 that compelled the break-up of tribes as the land was divided up into individual allotments with the expectation that everyone would become sedentary and self-sufficient farmers, and through the establishment of Indian boarding schools. The most famous school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, was run by Colonel Richard Pratt

whose dictum 'Kill the Indian to Save the Man' was inscribed above the entrance, a concept that epitomises the process of Americanisation: if the inferior characteristics of Indians are removed, there's an opportunity to fashion a worthwhile member of society.

Brenchley's collection was unveiled to the public 3 years after the Sand Creek Massacre in which over 400 Cheyenne and Arapaho men, women and children were slaughtered and mutilated, and people visiting in the next ten years would have been familiar with the defeat of Lieutenant Colonel George Custer at the Battle of Little Big Horn (already mythologised as Custer's heroic 'last stand') featuring leaders such as Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull. Those in the next 20 years would know the name of the 'savage' Geronimo, whilst those within 25 years would be aware of the Ghost Dance and the massacre of Wounded Knee. The artefacts offered a glimpse of people and cultures that would surely vanish.

Given the historical events shaping the backdrop of Brenchley's collection, there are some more specifically English factors that can contribute to an understanding of how the British public was influenced in their conception of American Indians. Brenchley can be usefully slotted into the context of George Catlin, Charles Darwin and 'Buffalo' Bill Cody.

Catlin, Darwin, Buffalo Bill

When the American painter George Catlin brought his gallery of Native American portraits and artefacts to Britain in 1840 it carried with it a certain amount of ideological baggage. As Stephanie Pratt writes, he gave "provision of a route back to a pristine world", a glimpse of a vanishing culture, and in so doing presented the British public with a Native apparently pre-destined to fade in the path of westward expansion. His work remains "the single greatest influence on the artistic and popular conception of North American Indians."¹

Catlin's show was, in some ways, a forerunner of Buffalo Bill's in that he began to model the costumes he brought over using local actors, and demonstrate the use of the weapons. This was enhanced when a group of Ojibwes joined him and embarked on a tour of England and Europe. This group met, as would Cody, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. Catlin believed the plight of the Indians was terminal, that tribes and cultures were disintegrating, and that he was a "final contributor to the study of American Indians before all their lands were absorbed.....I have, for many years, contemplated the noble races of red men who are now spread over these trackless forests and boundless prairies, melting away at the approach of civilization...I have flown to their rescue – not of their lives or of their race (for they are doomed and must perish) but to the rescue of their looks and their modes...the monuments of a noble race"²

It's unclear whether Julius Brenchley saw himself in the role of Catlin-like rescuer of their culture, capturing monuments of a noble race. His travels were wide-ranging and eclectic, and unlike Catlin there was no specific focus on American Indians. It is probable that, like

many, a belief that Indians were in terminal decline stood for the condition of all 'primitive' people, wherever they were in the world and so he was simply rescuing from around the world.

But he certainly sprang from a Britain that had been conditioned to perceive that American Indian culture had to be seen before it disappeared. When the objects were displayed in the late 1860s, they would be received by a public that was exposed to the work of Charles Darwin, whose *Origin of the Species* had been published in 1859. Although not intended to make comments about human society at that time, his theories were nevertheless seized upon and used by those who argued that there were innate differences between the races in terms of biology, intelligence and even character. Social Darwinism suggested that races and culture battled with each other in an evolutionary contest in which the fittest would survive and the weakest would, inevitably, become extinct. The objects, poorly curated, might have presented the impression of a rather chaotically collected group of items that were relics of a dying race, a group that was simply not surviving in the midst of civilisation. The collection in its un-curated state allowed for a fertile mish-mash of stereotypes to be transposed onto the items – a mix of fantasies of nature, wilderness, the ideal, savagery, fear and death. What might have been supposed to inform was reflecting a set of popular distortions and preconceptions.

This replication of distorted attitudes was taken even further by the phenomenon of Buffalo Bill and the way in which Indians were already being presented as completed history. Buffalo Bill travelled to Britain on three occasions, the first trips with his Wild West Show and the last time with his Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World that had added Cossacks, English Lancers and Japanese Cavalry. One source estimates that over one million people saw the show during its first visit. It was Mark Twain who encouraged Cody to take his show to Europe, to show them something truly American and the result was a spectacle. His first visit was in 1887 for Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee and as he made his way to Earl's Court thousands of people lined the streets, and over 28,000 people watched the opening night. There were 18 buffaloes, 181 horses, 4 donkeys, 10 elk, 5 longhorn Texan steers, 2 deer, a Deadwood stagecoach and over 800 people including the famous Annie Oakley and dozens of American Indians hired to add authenticity.

The timing did much to raise interest – the tour came in the midst of the Ghost Dance, the Indian spiritual revitalisation movement that in many ways ended at the Massacre of Wounded Knee, the tour came a year after the surrender of Geronimo, and the idea that there might be one more final Indian battle was a romantically compelling notion that buoyed up enormous popular interest, with audience commonly standing at 30-40,000. Over the span of three tours he was watched by millions and his visits shaped not only how the American West was to be perceived now that the frontier had 'closed' and civilisation had reached every corner of the 'wild,' but it affected the way in which Indians were 'frozen' in time, forever associated with the wilderness, savage attacks on pioneers or clashes with the cavalry, war whoops, tomahawks and headdresses.

Brenchley's collection was viewed by people whose popular perceptions were being shaped by Buffalo Bill's highly culturally distorted dramatisations of the way in which civilisation had triumphed over savagery on the American continent. In the shows, Indians attacked wagon trains, ranches and the Deadwood stage, all the fundamental building blocks of a cultural

view so long replicated and enhanced by Hollywood. It often ended with the re-enactment of the Battle of Little Bighorn, or as it was then billed, 'The Fall of Brave General Custer and his Entire Command', depicted as an Indian ambush

Edward Curtis

A fourth influence on how the transatlantic public constructed their image of American Indians, and one that perfectly exemplifies the ways in which images, preconceptions, stereotypes interplayed, is the American early twentieth century photographer Edward S. Curtis. Commencing his long-time project in around 1900 he photographed, recorded and filmed American Indians for over thirty years at an estimated cost of over one and a half million dollars. He made over 10,000 wax cylinder recordings of Indian language and music, took over 40,000 photographic images from over 80 tribes and even made an early silent movie provocatively and inaccurately entitled 'In the Land of the Head-hunters' in 1914. In 1907 he noted that "the information that is to be gathered ...respecting the mode of life of one of the great races of mankind must be collected at once or the opportunity will be lost."³ He, too, believed that Indians were a 'vanishing race' and whilst his images clearly form an unquestionably monumental collection he received, for many years, a mixed critical reception as some argued that he manipulated images of Indians to make them look untouched by modern Western society. He is known to have paid people to dress and pose in certain ways so that his subjects would live up to the stereotypical expectations of Indianness. On his travels he took a box of "Indian paraphernalia, wigs, blankets, painted backdrops, clothing, in case he ran into Indians who did not look as the Indian was supposed to look."⁴ Whilst it is highly doubtful he intended any harm or disrespect, he became part of a process that wove together American Indians and preconceptions.

To the museum going public, Brenchley's objects presented romantic stereotypes in close up. Here was the real arrow that actually ripped through his neck. The success of the Wild West shows likewise rested, in no small part, on the fact that unlike the later Hollywood film portrayals of Indians, there were genuine Indians participating (notably Kicking Bear, Short Bull and One Bull, nephew and adopted son of Lakota chief Sitting Bull, all three had been present at the Battle of Little Bighorn) and this element of authenticity resonated in the collection Brenchley acquired. The romantic distortions were amplified by the haphazard way in which the items were displayed, doing little to unsettle preconceptions of Indianness and allowing the public to imagine them in any way they wanted.

Brenchley was not an overt publicist and his travels did not become as well-known as those of others. *Jottings during the cruise of H.M.S. Curaçoa among the South Sea Islands in 1865*⁵ was published in 1873, as was *A Journey to Great Salt Lake City* in 1861⁶, but his leather-bound early European journals that fired his interest in travel remain in the local Kent archives as do his writing about more local travels in Kent and the Southeast. Whilst the Salt Lake City journey is published, the journals that he kept for the bulk of his North American travels have never been located.

This makes Brenchley an elusive and fascinating character, a mid-19th century traveller whose motives may have been affected by a belief in the vanishing Indian, and more broadly, the disappearing 'primitive'. Probably unconsciously, he played a part in consigning Indians to the imagination, at a time when reality and myth-making/theatre often blurred. Typical of the time, the objects are not described, can be easily misinterpreted, and taken out of context that would appear to hint at a disregard or non-comprehension of cultural significance, a homogenisation of Indians. However, like Curtis and Catlin, Brenchley almost certainly did not aim to mislead but to document in a time before the disciplinary rigours of anthropology.

The timing of the objects becoming available for public viewing lets us assign an important role to him in the process of shaping British perceptions to American Indians that is so often dominated by Buffalo Bill. In her 2009 book, *The Transatlantic Indian*, Kate Flint suggests that "the Indian is a touchstone for a whole range of British perceptions concerning America during the long nineteenth century and plays a pivotal role in the understanding and imagining of cultural difference." What was shared as a "dominant nineteenth-century trope, on both sides of the Atlantic," however, was the idea that Indians belonged to the past – "either to a mythical past or to an anachronistic, atavistic world that needed to be rapidly abolished."⁷

The resistance and survival of American Indians throughout the twentieth century, a fundamental revisionism concerning the way in which Indian history and artefacts are presented in museums, and a widespread popular interest in Native America means the Brenchley collection is as important and fascinating as ever. Whilst approximately ten objects have been on show at Maidstone Museum, his entire collection of over two hundred more are now available to view on the Brenchley Project website and amongst the information will be short essays that discuss a range of issues including stereotypes and representation, repatriation of objects, the role of the museum as well as historical essays on subjects such as removal, westward expansion and the controversial question of whether nineteenth century treatment of American Indians should be talked about in term of ethnic cleansing.

In the process of unveiling the collection, which has several items of international importance, it is hoped that Julius Brenchley will become a more widely known national figure.

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Notes

¹ Stephanie Pratt and Joan Carpenter Troccoli, George Catlin exhibition notes, National Portrait Gallery, 2013

² George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians*, 1841

³ Linda Batis, Carnegie Museum of Art Magazine, 1998. See:
http://www.carnegiemuseums.org/cmag/bk_issue/1998/mayjun/feat1d.htm

⁴ Thomas King, *The Truth about Stories* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 2003) p.34

⁵ Both books have been digitised and the full text can be accessed here:

Read 'Jottings' here: <http://archive.org/details/jottingsduringc01friggoog>

⁶ Read 'Salt Lake City' here: <http://archive.org/details/ajourneytogreat00brenooog>

⁷ Kate Flint, *The Transatlantic Indian, 1776-1930* (Princeton University Press, 2008) p.2; p.5