

Ethnographic collections in Northern Ireland and the Solomon Islands *tomako* (canoe) at the Ulster Museum, 1898–2023

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ABSTRACT. *The World Cultures collection at National Museums Northern Ireland is an essential source for the study of Irish collecting in the wider British Empire. The 2022 redisplay of the collection in the Ulster Museum's exhibition, Inclusive Global Histories, is part of a staged engagement with local and source communities. Given the critical importance of the global museum decolonisation work of which the exhibition is an example, a fresh consideration of this ethnographic collection's history is timely. This article reviews the collection within the context of the three museums that have housed it, and investigates how curators within the institution understood, represented and displayed the collection. It does so through a case study of a war canoe (tomako), that was taken from the Solomon Islands, by John Casement, a captain in the Royal Navy, and is the largest and among the most significant items within the collection. The canoe's centrality to the gallery — built around it in 1925 — that now contains Inclusive Global Histories reveals complex social networks between nineteenth- and twentieth-century collectors, curators and photographers, and aids understanding of how global human cultures have been regarded in Northern Ireland's civic life.*

Having been powerfully engaged as a child by the Solomon Islands *tomako*¹ in a gallery at the Ulster Museum that was used, between the 1970s and early 2000s, for ethnographic collections,² I was disappointed not to see it when visiting in 2015: it had been walled in to make space for temporary exhibitions on Irish and Northern Irish themes. In the concertedly decolonial 2022 exhibition, *Inclusive Global Histories*, the canoe is revealed again. This article argues that though its disappearance for the intervening period stemmed from a pragmatic decision to

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¹ National Museums Northern Ireland, BELUM.C393. *Tomako* is the Roviana word for a war canoe, but other words are used depending on the island. See dbpedia.org/page/Tomako (accessed 15 July 2023). As the exact island from which it comes is still unknown, another term may more appropriate and, therefore, this article uses *tomako* and 'canoe' interchangeably.

² This article uses the terms 'ethnographic' and 'world cultures' as they have been used in museums to refer to collections from former regions of the British Empire and from colonised cultures. This is not intended as an endorsement of these terms.

facilitate other displays,³ this was not the first time that the *tomako*'s importance had been overlooked.

The World Cultures collection at National Museums Northern Ireland (hereafter N.M.N.I. or National Museums N.I.), of which the canoe is part, is an essential source for the study of material culture in Ireland from the wider British Empire, and its 2022 redisplay is part of a staged engagement with local and source communities. Given the critical importance of the global museum decolonisation movement, a fresh consideration of the collection's history before the twenty-first century is timely. This article reviews the collection within the context of the three museums that have housed it: the Belfast Museum on College Square North (1831–1910), Belfast Public Museum/Belfast Municipal Museum/Belfast Art Gallery and Museum on Royal Avenue (1888–1929), and Belfast Museum and Art Gallery/Ulster Museum in Botanic Gardens (1925 to the present). In the course of this historical overview, the article investigates how curators within the institution understood, represented and displayed the collection.

Although planned from 1909, when Belfast Corporation acquired the collections of the Belfast Natural Historical and Philosophical Society, the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery (now the Ulster Museum) did not open until 1929. Therefore, while the impressive new building afforded space to reflect curatorial interest in Irish imperial collecting, the eventual displays were also shaped by attitudes moulded before the First World War, and by the Easter Rising and establishment of Northern Ireland. An evolutionary perspective on the collections was followed by a turning away from the global, and increased emphasis on art and local history.

The Solomon Islands *tomako* is the largest and among the most significant items within the collection, and its history helps to shed light on these developments. This article provides the first sustained study of the canoe, and argues that its centrality to the gallery now containing *Inclusive Global Histories* — one built around it in 1925 — reveals complex interpersonal relationships between nineteenth- and twentieth-century collectors, curators and photographers. Concentrating on the period since it arrived in Belfast in 1898, the canoe offers a case study for understanding how colonised global regions have been regarded in Northern Ireland's civic life.

I

The Northern Ireland Museums Council's *Survey of Museum Collections* (2007) is the most recently published source that assesses the size of ethnographic collections north of the Irish border. Providing a snapshot of all holdings in the museums that were at that time endorsed by the UK Accreditation scheme,⁴ the *Survey* included the four sites that were then part of National Museums N.I.: the Ulster Museum, Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, Ulster American Folk Park and Armagh County Museum.⁵ A primarily quantitative study intended to establish

³ William Blair (National Museums N.I. Director of Collections), email to Briony Widdis, 11 Sept. 2019.

⁴ Accreditation is a national standards scheme that assesses museums' public services and collections care. See *Accreditation* (2021), Northern Ireland Museums Council (N.I.M.C.), <https://www.nimc.co.uk/accreditation>.

⁵ The Armagh County Museum has since been transferred to Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council.

‘what is in these collections, how they are currently being cared for and what improvements are required to ensure that they may be fully enjoyed in the future’, the *Survey* found that 3,180 ethnographic items were held by N.M.N.I., 610 by local authority-owned museums and twenty-two by independent museums.⁶ National Museums N.I. has since revised its own number to 4,500.⁷ As, therefore, the largest global human history collection in Northern Ireland, this is vital as a source for understanding how and why the Irish accrued collections from other parts of the British Empire, and how these were regarded once they had arrived in Ireland.

The primary sources for this article include the N.M.N.I. photographic collection,⁸ archives connected with the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society (B.N.H.P.S.), Belfast Town Council and Belfast Corporation; records in the United Kingdom National Archives; and historical newspapers. It brings together these sources to explain gaps in the publication of the collection and of the canoe. The most prolific writer on the collection has been Winifred Glover, the Ulster Museum’s curator of ethnography from 1978 to 2012. She started work at the Ulster Museum in 1967 as secretary to the keeper of antiquities, Laurence Flanagan, who encouraged her to pursue her interest in the ethnographic collection which was not then being actively curated by others.⁹ The research underpinning this article draws on her unpublished correspondence, and on interviews and correspondence with her. Secondary sources include Glover’s exhibition catalogues, articles and chapters;¹⁰ Noel Nesbitt’s widely cited *A museum in Belfast* (1979);¹¹ and Jonathan Jeffrey Wright’s chapter on the B.N.H.P.S. as the collection’s founding institution.¹²

In her publications, Glover described the social networks on which collectors relied, noting in her exhibition catalogue, *Polynesia*, for example, that most ‘were Ulster men and women who either collected “in the field” or were related to those who had themselves travelled among the Islands’.¹³ A preponderance of her writing and public talks focused on biographies of these individuals, in

⁶ N.I.M.C., *Survey of museum collections in Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 2007), pp 1–8. The fact that all 3,180 ethnographic items in N.M.N.I. were within the Ulster Museum was communicated by email from Chris Bailey, director of N.I.M.C., based on data produced for the *Survey*, 12 Nov. 2015.

⁷ N.M.N.I., ‘Inclusive Global Histories: the World Cultures collection’ (<https://www.nmni.com/collections/Inclusive-global-histories-at-National-Museums-NI.aspx>) (3 Dec. 2021).

⁸ Available in digital form at *National Museums N.I.* (<https://www.nmni.com/collections/history/photographs>) (8 Sept. 2022).

⁹ Winifred Glover, interview with Briony Widdis (19 June 2018). See also Winifred Glover, ‘The folks back home: connections between Ethnography and Folk Life’ in *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, ix (1997), p. 21.

¹⁰ Winifred Glover interview, 19 June 2018, and associated communications (30 Aug. 2018, 31 Oct. 2018) during Ph.D. research at Ulster University (ethical approval 27 Apr. 2016); unpublished interview, 24 Sept. 2021, and associated communications (3 Nov. 2021) during postdoctoral research at Queen’s University, Belfast (ethical approval 20 Aug. 2021).

¹¹ Noel Nesbitt. *A museum in Belfast: a history of the Ulster Museum and its predecessors* (Belfast, 1979), pp 12, 16, 32, 45, 67.

¹² Jonathan Jeffrey Wright, ‘A depot for the productions of the four corners of the globe’ in Diarmid A. Finnegan and Jonathan Jeffrey Wright (eds), *Spaces of global knowledge: exhibition, encounter and exchange in an age of empire* (London and New York, 2016), pp 143–66.

¹³ Winifred Glover, *Polynesia: the Polynesian collection in the Ulster Museum Belfast* (Belfast, 1987), p. 5.

particular on the global traveller, Gordon Augustus Thomson (1799–1886), and the colonial settler in Port Phillip (Melbourne), John Lewis Von Stieglitz (1809–1868):¹⁴ the collecting practices of both are now the subjects of reframing in *Inclusive Global Histories*.¹⁵ Including a Hawai’ian feather cloak from King Kamehameha III, and a barkcloth *atua* from Rapa Nui that, along with two others in the Peabody Museum, is one of only three in the world,¹⁶ the collection contains highly culturally-precious items. The canoe is the largest, and unquestionably one of the rarest, of these, but aside from brief mentions in Glover’s writing and a few other sources cited herein, has been overlooked up until this point. The following historical overview helps to explain why this is.

II

The histories of the canoe, and of the N.M.N.I. World Cultures collection as a whole, involve the entanglement of objects in multiple Irish institutions and lives. The collection began to be assembled through the founding, in 1821, of the Belfast Natural History Society (renamed in 1842 as the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society),¹⁷ which between 1831 and 1910 ran the Belfast Museum on College Square North. The ethnographic items in the society’s collection initially resulted from its appeals to its networks of ‘travellers, merchants, officers of the Army and Navy to assist in securing specimens to stock the Museum’.¹⁸ Wright’s analysis of how the society’s displays were conceived and arranged helps compensate for an absence of surviving interior photos: in short, this was a practice of ‘representing global ‘others’ ... inextricably bound up with the expansion and exercise of imperial power’.¹⁹

The subsequent founding collection was in the town council’s museum, which opened in 1888 in the Belfast Public Library building on Royal Avenue (now the Belfast Central Library). The name of this institution was in flux at the turn of the nineteenth century: it can be found in original sources as the Belfast Free Public Library Art Gallery and Museum; the Belfast Art Gallery and Museum; the Belfast Public Museum; the Belfast Municipal Museum; and the City of

¹⁴ Winifred Glover, *Travelling at Port Phillip: the Australian aborigines at the time of European contact* (Belfast, 1988); eadem, ‘In the wake of Captain Cook: the travels of Gordon Augustus Thomson (1779–1886), principal donor of ethnographic objects to the Ulster Museum, Belfast’ in *Familia: Ulster Genealogical Review*, ii, no. 9 (1993), pp 46–61; eadem, ‘Power and collecting: big men talking’ in *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, xv (2003), pp 19–24; eadem, ‘Here, there and everywhere: the origins of the Ulster Museum’s Ethnographic Collection’ in Séamas Ó Siocháin, Pauline Garvey and Adam Drazin (eds), *Exhibit Ireland: ethnographic collections in Ireland* (Dublin, 2012), pp 73–86; eadem, ‘In the wake of Captain Cook: the travels of G. A. Thomson, 1799–1886’ in Anthony Shelton (ed.), *Collectors: individuals and institutions* (London, 2001), pp 203–22.

¹⁵ ‘Inclusive global histories at National Museums NI’ in *National Museums NI*. (<https://www.nmni.com/collections/Inclusive-global-histories-at-National-Museums-NI.aspx>) (27 June 2023).

¹⁶ Steven Hooper, *Pacific encounters: art & divinity in Polynesia 1760–1860* (London, 2006), p. 144.

¹⁷ Arthur Deane (ed.), *The Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society. Centenary volume 1821–1921* (Belfast, 1924), p. 12.

¹⁸ Nesbitt, *A museum in Belfast*, pp 9–22.

¹⁹ Wright, ‘A depot for the productions’, p. 153.

Belfast Municipal Museum. To create further confusion, the institution was re-named as the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery following its move to Botanic Gardens in 1925–9.²⁰

Describing how in nineteenth-century British cultural institutions, natural and historical sciences were synthesised so as to read ‘the evidence of things themselves that stretched the known and the unknowable past back beyond the reach of writing’, Tony Bennett argues that the distant past and the anthropological present were conflated as ‘pasts beyond memory’.²¹ In the Royal Avenue building, the town council intended to deploy the work of people in distant places for meeting local ends, setting out to exhibit ‘the manufactures of foreign countries ... thereby bringing before the eye the work of the artisans of other countries, and stimulating the industries of our own’.²² As shown (from 1906) by the *Quarterly Notes* of one of its curators, Arthur Deane (discussed below), this municipal museum centred at first on art and on geological and zoological specimens.²³ It was also the recipient of personal collections, including the well-known and sizeable collection of natural historical, archaeological and ethnographic items given in 1891 by Canon John Grainger;²⁴ a collection of spinning wheels donated by John Horner in 1907–08, ‘ranging from the primitive machines of India ... to the most elaborate kinds in use in Europe to-day’;²⁵ and, in 1919, from Thomas Edens Osborne, ‘the largest collection known’ of bicycles.²⁶

John Horner, an engineer (who would later join the Public Art Gallery and Museum Committee²⁷ and become a frequent donor to, lecturer at, and writer for it) was also on the executive committee, chaired by the lord mayor, that in 1895 organised the Industrial Exhibition at Belfast’s Linen Hall.²⁸ This was apparently a more ambitious exhibition than a previous one in 1876,²⁹ and alongside the Harland and Wolff Chairman, Viscount Pirrie, Horner was in charge of Section B, ‘Scientific and Mechanical Appliances’. His fellow B.N.H.P.S. members, William Gray and Robert Young, composed Section E, which included ‘natural history and geography, fossils, minerals, shells, plants, stuffed and otherwise

²⁰ The timing of these changes is best understood through the Belfast Free Public Art Gallery and Museum stock book (now in N.M.N.I.); Arthur Deane’s *Quarterly Notes* and J. A. S. Stendall’s *Bulletin* for the period 1906–40; in inscriptions on photographs in N.M.N.I. archives; and through newspaper articles. For secondary sources, see Nesbitt, *A museum in Belfast*, pp 25–7 and Andrew Sawyer, ‘National Museums in Northern Ireland’ in *Building national museums in Europe 1750–2010* (Bologna, 2011), pp 625–52.

²¹ Tony Bennett, *Pasts beyond memory: evolution, museums, colonialism* (New York, 2004), p. 152.

²² *Belfast News-Letter*, 20 Jan. 1888, p. 5.

²³ Available at P.R.O.N.I., D2519; Queen’s University, Belfast (Q.U.B.) Special Collections, LAS122.B4.

²⁴ Deane, *The Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society*, pp 77–9; Nesbitt, *A museum in Belfast* p. 23; K. W. James, *Canon Grainger: country rector, magpie collector and father of the Ulster Museum* (Belfast, 1991).

²⁵ *Northern Whig*, 4 Nov. 1909, p. 12. See also G. B. Thompson, *Spinning wheels (The John Horner Collection)* (Belfast, 1974); Nesbitt, *A museum in Belfast*, p. 27.

²⁶ Arthur Deane, ‘Historical cycles: The Edens Osborne Collection’ in *Quarterly Notes*, xlviii (1924).

²⁷ *City and County Borough of Belfast. Twenty-fifth annual report of the Committee of the Public Art Gallery and Museum 1913–14* (Belfast, 1914), p. 1.

²⁸ Deane, *The Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society*, p. 86.

²⁹ *Belfast News-Letter*, 16 May 1876, p. 2.

preserved animals, aquaria, antiquities, ancient armours, manuscripts, printing, maps, and drawings'. From comparisons with other sections (A 'Fine Arts', C 'Economic Products' and D 'Textile Fabrics'), it is clear that in the 1895 Exhibition, natural history, archaeology and items grouped as 'antiquities' were aggregated as 'the rest', being listed above only the 'suggestions for improving ... workers' houses' contained in Section F.³⁰

The 1909 newspaper account that described how John Horner's spinning wheels ranged from the 'primitive' in India to the 'elaborate' from Europe was, therefore, indicative of a continuous conceptualisation by Belfast's turn-of-the-century civic leaders of the material culture of living cultures on the other side of the world as being cognate with both extinct local cultures and with items extracted from the natural environment. As Raymond Corbey and others demonstrate, nineteenth-century British display practices, as represented in the 1851 Great Exhibition in London and in regional industrial exhibitions (such as that in Belfast), ranked artefacts according to their positioning on supposed evolutionary spectra that relied on typological systems of classification such as that popularised by Pitt Rivers. These tended to compare rural and working-class European artefacts and the products of colonised regions at a disadvantage in relation to those of western elites.³¹ As the following shows, the typological and evolutionary approach pertaining to the Belfast Industrial Exhibition was comparable to that shown in the displays at the Royal Avenue museum.

In 1909, the B.N.H.P.S. confirmed a 1907 decision to transfer its collection to public ownership under the auspices of Belfast Corporation, although this was contingent on the corporation's undertaking to house the collection in a new museum. In the meantime, the municipal authorities would rent the old Belfast Museum building from the B.N.H.P.S. and use it to store the society's collections. The municipal curator (1907–42), Arthur Deane, was the corporation's primary negotiator of the arrangements.³² In addition to this role, Deane became a long-standing honorary secretary of the B.N.H.P.S. (1919–45), and its president (1947–50). It is from his account of the society that much of our knowledge about its first century comes.³³ In 1910 he recruited a new assistant curator, J. A. S. (Sydney) Stendall, to work in the old museum building to compile a catalogue that would amalgamate the B.N.H.P.S. collections with those of the corporation's museum.³⁴ Deane also oversaw the building of the new civic museum in Botanic Gardens that is now the Ulster Museum and the move of the combined collections to that place. He stewarded the planning and fitting out of the new museum building, and was the most senior staff member when it opened in 1929.

Noel Nesbitt describes Deane as having been, at the start of his career while at the Art Gallery and Museum on Royal Avenue, 'anxious both to build upon the new independent foundations of the [municipal] Museum and to bring its new image to the notice of the public'. He did so through a variety of initiatives, from relabelling exhibits and making the museum 'brighter and tidier', to introducing a display

³⁰ *Belfast News-Letter*, 1 Oct. 1894, p. 6.

³¹ Raymond Corbey, 'Ethnographic showcases, 1870–1930' in *Cultural Anthropology*, viii, no. 3 (1993), pp 338–69.

³² *Belfast Telegraph*, 6 Mar. 1942, p. 5.

³³ Deane, *The Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society*.

³⁴ *Belfast News-Letter*, 23 Feb. 1907, p. 5; *ibid.*, 25 Sept. 1909, pp 8–9; *ibid.*, 6 May 1910, p. 5; Nesbitt, *A museum in Belfast*, p. 28.

of live bees to attract children, to publicising the museum through handbooks and issuing his aforementioned *Quarterly Notes*.³⁵ Through the *Quarterly Notes*, Deane published lists of the museum's accessions: in the earliest, in 1906, he recorded, under the division of 'Ethnography', a *sansa* (thumb piano) from Congo and a stringed instrument from Lagos, alongside other items grouped under 'Irish Religion' and 'Antiquities'.³⁶ By 1907, Deane was distinguishing 'Ethnology and Antiquities' as a separate division from 'Art', 'Natural History' and 'The Local Collections'. This section comprised 'weapons', 'clothing', 'domestic appurtenances', 'boats', 'musical instruments' and 'Peruvian and Egyptian antiquities'. He also included John Horner's spinning wheels in this list.³⁷

Deane's categories of either 'ethnology' or 'ethnography' were not at this point fixed, and whether or not he applied the terms to international collections appears to have been subject to his whims, or perhaps to the available space in his publications. In September 1908, for example, he listed, under 'Antiquities', an arrow from North America, a war club from New Guinea, a war-spear from Admiralty Island, a shepherd's pipe from Palestine, and a bomb shell from the Franco-German war, alongside locally collected items including a sepulchral urn from Magheralin, samples of flax, worked flint from Larne, Toome Bridge and Mahee, an anvil stone and flint from Dundrum, and ox, horse and goat bone fragments found in Ballykinlar.³⁸ In 1909, 'Antiquities' included an African mat donated by Horner and a boomerang from Queensland from Stanley Wright.³⁹

The *Quarterly Notes* therefore show Deane separating items from imperialised global regions into whatever groups appeared reasonable to him at the time and also reveal his view that they contributed not so much to a discrete or separate discipline, but more to a *bricolage*. Other museum publications in this period demonstrate that he was collecting items from outside of Europe reactively but concertedly, for his acquisitions continued during the early years of the First World War. The City and Council Borough of Belfast's Public Art Gallery and Museum Committee that he served reported seven, 174 and thirty-six 'ethnology' accessions in 1913–14, 1914–15 and 1915–16, and thirteen and seventy-nine under 'ethnology' and 'ethnography' respectively in 1916–17. None were mentioned in the four-year report for 1917–21.⁴⁰

Given that a grasp of Deane's worldview might be pivotal to understanding how, in this critical period in Irish history, those working in the Belfast Art Gallery and Museum conceptualised ethnographic collections, it is frustrating that he left so little first-hand testimony in the public record — only two letters, one of them covered in soot, suggesting that a bonfire was made of the rest.⁴¹ Glimpses of him are

³⁵ Nesbitt, *A museum in Belfast*, pp 26–7.

³⁶ Arthur Deane, *Quarterly Notes* (March 1906), p. 12.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, (Dec. 1907), p. vii.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, (Sept. 1908), p. 18.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, (June 1909), p. 16.

⁴⁰ *City and County Borough of Belfast. Twenty-fifth annual report of the Committee of the Public Art Gallery and Museum 1913–14* (Belfast, 1914); *City and County Borough of Belfast. Twenty-sixth annual report of the Committee of the Public Art Gallery and Museum 1914–15* (Belfast, 1915); *City and County Borough of Belfast. Twenty-seventh annual report of the Committee of the Public Art Gallery and Museum 1915–16* (Belfast, 1916); *City and Council Borough of Belfast. Twenty-eighth annual report of the Committee of the Public Art Gallery and Museum, 1916–17* (Belfast, 1917).

⁴¹ Arthur Deane letters (P.R.O.N.I., D3263.B.B.1.214-5).

retrievable in newspapers. It may have been he, for example, who in 1929 contributed the promotional ‘Critic’s Impression’ to the *Times* that spoke of ‘the “middle ground” between art and industry’ that had been achieved in the newly opened Belfast Museum and Art Gallery in Botanic Gardens. ‘The ethnographical collection [wrote the author] is one of the best that the writer has seen. There is the finest collection of spinning-wheels in the world.’⁴²

Because Horner’s spinning wheels had been arrayed in the Industrial Exhibition in evolutionary perspective, it is interesting that this review of the new museum juxtaposed them with (or included them in) the ethnographic collection. That Deane regarded the collection, most of it dating to the (recent) nineteenth century, as archaic is evident in newspaper articles with his byline that compared cultural practices in prehistoric Britain and Ireland with those of the present-day on the other side of the world. For example, he wrote in 1930 that the new museum ‘record[ed] the customs and habits of our ancestors, as well as the customs of races in all corners of the earth’.⁴³ As has been shown, Deane had distinguished his ‘Antiquities’ and ‘Ethnology’ collections by subscribing to the same imperialistic traditions that had produced the Great Exhibition in 1851. Although his mental categorisations appear to have fluctuated, his interest in the works of people from colonised cultures was clearly underpinned by a belief that they represented ways of life long since surpassed in Europe. In 1909, he began to spatially translate these attitudes through his plans for the new Belfast Museum and Art Gallery.

In that year, following the B.N.H.P.S. confirmation that it would donate its collection, the Corporation’s Library and Technical Instruction Committee ‘advertised for sites centrally situated ... holding in view the primary object of diffusing useful information to cultivate the public taste’. On the counsel of a Mr Matheson K.C., a site in the corner of Botanic Gardens was selected and in 1912 the committee issued a ground plan as part of a design competition. In May 1913 Deane set out the accommodation that would be required, zoning the display areas as ‘Zoology’; ‘Geology and mineralogy’; ‘Botany’; ‘Children’s room’; ‘Ethnographical gallery [including weapons and implements; domestic utensils; clothing; personal ornament, etc.]’; ‘Egyptian and Peruvian antiquities’; ‘Irish antiquities and ethnology’; ‘Belfast room’; and ‘Spinning wheels and hand looms’. In addition, there would be a large ‘Fine and Applied Arts’ area, to be divided into sections including ‘Textiles and embroideries’; ‘Metalwork and woodwork’; ‘Pottery, glass and enamels’; ‘British Oil Paintings’; ‘French Oil Paintings’; ‘British water colours’; ‘French water colours’; ‘Patterson collection of paintings’; ‘Old Masters’; ‘Local artists’; ‘Sculpture (Greek)’; ‘Loans gallery’; and ‘Students’ copying room’.⁴⁴ These divisions were modelled on those of the Warrington Museum (where Deane had previously worked),⁴⁵ and of the Victoria and Albert and British Museums: in a scrapbook he compiled in 1908–09, postcards of their galleries, organised along similar lines, surround a plan of the site for the new Belfast Museum and Art Gallery in Botanic Gardens.⁴⁶

⁴² *Belfast Telegraph*, 23 Oct. 1929, p. 3. It is also possible that Robert Welch, a frequent correspondent on museum matters, authored this article.

⁴³ *Belfast News-Letter*, 15 May 1930, p. 7.

⁴⁴ ‘Accommodation for new Municipal Art Gallery and Museum in Belfast’, 1913 (P.R.O.N.I., D4228.7.6).

⁴⁵ Nesbitt, *A museum in Belfast*, p. 26.

⁴⁶ Arthur Deane, ‘Belfast Art Gallery and Museum Scrap Book, Vol.1’ (c.1908–09) (N.M.N.I. archive).

John Burnett (LL.D.) was commissioned to assess the sixty-nine submissions (which were displayed in the Ulster Hall in May 1914) and selected the Edinburgh architect, James Cumming Wynnes.⁴⁷ When invited to comment on Wynnes's plans, the first director of the National Museum of Wales, William Evans Hoyle, suggested that 'it would seem more logical to group all the natural sciences together at one side of the building and applied art at the other, with ethnography and archaeology between them'.⁴⁸ Wynnes responded, but no discernible steps to develop the building were undertaken between 1914, when the city accountant advised that 'it would be impossible during the war to obtain the necessary loan for the erection of the building', and 1920, when the committee met to discuss Wynnes's plans again.⁴⁹

As well as delaying the building of the new museum, the First World War distracted Deane from collections research. In this period, he concentrated on 'exhibits of economic problems of the day ... food value and the economy, and infant care and child welfare'.⁵⁰ He turned to providing utilitarian guidance on 'How Plants Grow' (Summer 1916); 'Weeds and how to combat them' (Spring 1917); 'Hints to plowholders and others' (Summer 1917); and 'The seed and the young plant' (Spring 1918). From Autumn 1919, Deane recruited outside authors for his *Quarterly Notes*: the majority covered domestic appliances, metalwork, local biography and art.⁵¹

Although under Deane's direction Sydney Stendall had been appointed in 1909 to incorporate, at least on paper, the B.N.H.P.S. collections, they were not moved from the old museum premises until well after the war. In 1922 Deane noted that they were

still stored in the building known as the Museum, College Square [number] 11. To display the material housed there would place Belfast in the front rank of the Museum Movement. It contains in addition to type and rare specimens, abundant material to illustrate the Geology Botany, and Ancient History of Ulster ... together with a large collection of Ethnographic objects impossible to procure to-day'.⁵²

The first mention of ethnographic exhibits during the period when the Botanic Gardens museum was being planned comes in the committee's 1923–5 report, which records that, in the museum on Royal Avenue, 'Two cases have been arranged illustrating the ethnography of Australia and New Zealand. Three other Ethnographic exhibits – Polynesia, Melanesia and S. Africa have been completed and are ready for exhibition'.⁵³ This entry dates the photo (fig. 1), taken by Robert

⁴⁷ Arthur Deane, 'Public Art Gallery and Museum' (report to the Libraries, Museums and Art Committee, 16 Mar. 1920) (P.R.O.N.I., D4228.6.3).

⁴⁸ W. E. Hoyle, 'Report from Dr. Hoyle, Cardiff on Plans for New Art Gallery and Museum, Belfast', July 1914 (P.R.O.N.I., D.4228.6.2.).

⁴⁹ Deane, 'Public Art Gallery and Museum', p. 4.

⁵⁰ J. A. Doran and Arthur Deane, *Report of the Committee of the Public Art Gallery and Museum for four years ending 31st March 1921* (1921).

⁵¹ Arthur Deane, *Quarterly Notes* (1914–22).

⁵² Arthur Deane, *Necessity for proposed New Art Gallery and Museum, Botanic Gardens Park* (1922).

⁵³ *Report of the Committee of the Public Art Gallery and Museums for two years ending 31st March, 1925* (1925), p. 6.



Figure 1. *Displays at the Belfast Art Gallery and Museum on Royal Avenue, described in the 1923-5 Report of the Committee of the Public Art Gallery and Museums. c.1925, Robert Welch. By courtesy of National Museums NI. BELUM.Y.W.10.21.244*

Welch of the ethnographic displays in the Royal Avenue building, an image that makes visible Deane's typological approach to the collections and his association of them with Horner's spinning wheels: the mounted antlers confirm, if it were needed, the colonial backdrop to the collection. As will be explored below, the reason why these items could be newly arranged in 1925 was that the Solomon Islands canoe had been removed from the same area of the gallery a month previously.

In 1926 coverage of the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery's development, the *Belfast News-Letter* stated that, although 'the property of the citizens of Belfast', the museum would be one 'to which the people of the whole of [the newly established] Northern Ireland will look for light and leading'.⁵⁴ The institution's educational horizons are suggested by how, on its opening day, 2,672 visitors saw, on the ground floor, displays of pictures donated by Thomas McGowan showing the growth of Belfast; on the first floor, applied arts, Irish antiquities, an ethnographic room and two rooms of natural history specimens; and on the second, galleries showing sculpture, oil paintings, watercolours and an art collection gifted by Sir John Lavery.⁵⁵

This was similar to the division of exhibits Deane had planned for in 1909. Deane explained in a 1929 account of the new museum building that ethnographic items were positioned between Irish Antiquities and Applied Art, and that Edens

⁵⁴ *Belfast News-Letter*, 9 Jan. 1926, p. 12.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 25 June 1930, p. 12; *Northern Whig*, 11 July 1929, p. 10.

Osborne's cycles (displayed, as photos below show, on top of the ethnographic cases), 'rang[ed] from the boneshaker up to modern types'.⁵⁶ Therefore, on this 'middle ground' floor, in contrast with the representations of Belfast and the art displays on the other levels, extinct and extant cultures were visually presented as interconnected on an evolutionary spectrum.

Given the potential of this approach to essentialise human cultures, Deane's view of eugenics is relevant.⁵⁷ This was a field with which he had contact through his membership of the B.N.H.P.S. In 1926, while Deane was its secretary, the society's president, E. J. Elliott gave a lecture in the museum on 'The Races of Europe'.⁵⁸ Deane himself wrote in 1924 that 'Ireland is noted for the material remains of successive races' and that 'in [French] palaeolithic art there was no attempt at grouping or composition to form what we now call a picture, such as we find in the rock-drawings of the South African bushmen'.⁵⁹ Here, he was comparing the European art of 20,000 years ago with that of Africans made as recently as the nineteenth century.

That the new museum cast the colonised as subordinate can be further inferred from a photograph taken by Robert Welch of a case dubbed in newspapers as 'The Ascent of Man'. This shows skulls in an evolutionary hierarchy. They are arrayed around branches representing a tree, divided by a taped line above which are shown 'living races'. At the pinnacle of the tree is an especially white (in colour) skull representing 'white and yellow races': skulls labelled 'negroid' and 'Australian aborigines' are lower down (fig. 2). Although after 1929 the impressive new edifice afforded more space for the display of non-Western cultural items, this clearly did not yet correspond with equality for the people who had made them.

At the new museum, Arthur Deane illuminated visitors on the lifestyles of people that he associated with the ethnographic collections, through showing a variety of films on subjects including 'kangaroo hunting', 'Fiji islands' and 'Sierra Leone'.⁶⁰ But while he had oversight of the museum's displays and of its education programmes, he was a botanist by background, not an anthropologist or natural historian,⁶¹ and it is likely that the primary creator of the 'Ascent of Man' case was not Deane, but Sydney Stendall. Stendall was an avid nature conservationist and communicator.⁶² After his death, Deane's son and a fellow ornithologist, Campbell Douglas Deane, stated that

⁵⁶ Arthur Deane, 'The New Belfast Museum' in *Irish Naturalists' Journal*, ii, no. 11 (1929), pp 215–18.

⁵⁷ For a recent discussion of the connections between evolutionary theory, eugenics and essentialism, see Jonatan Kurzwelly and Malin S. Wilckens, 'Calcified identities: persisting essentialism in academic collections of human remains' in *Anthropological Theory*, xxiii, no. 1 (2023), pp 100–22.

⁵⁸ See E. J. Elliott, 'Presidential address' in *Proceedings of the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society* (1926), pp 1–3.

⁵⁹ Arthur Deane, *Quarterly Notes* (autumn 1924), pp 3, 9.

⁶⁰ *Report of the Committee of The Public Museums and Art Gallery for the year ending 31st March 1930* (1930).

⁶¹ 'Deane, Arthur' in C. D. Waterston and A. Macmillan Shearer, *Former fellows of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, 1783–2002* (Edinburgh, 2006), p 246 (<https://rse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/RSE-Fellows-BiographicalIndex-1.pdf>).

⁶² See, for example, J. A. S. Stendall, 'Problems and responsibilities' in *British Association for the Advancement of Science* (1952), pp 305–31.



Figure 2. 'Ascent of Man' case, Belfast Museum and Art Gallery. Robert Welch, 1929. By courtesy of National Museums NI. BELUM.Y.W.10.79.46

'few people have done as much ... to popularise natural history and make it understandable to the masses'. Given Stendall's involvement in cataloguing the B.N.H.P.S. collections, he must have known them well and he was also instrumental in arranging the displays upon the move to Botanic Gardens.⁶³ That Stendall had composed the 'Ascent of Man' case is also suggested by his friendship with its photographer, Robert J. Welch. When Welch died in 1936, Stendall was one of three executors to the will that saw Welch's photographs transferred to the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery.⁶⁴ Photography was Welch's occupation and conchology was his primary passion, but obituaries penned by his extensive network of friends show him to have been a polymath and, as Robert Lloyd Praeger noted, ethnography was one of many interests.⁶⁵ Welch was a member of the B.N.H.P.S., Belfast Naturalists' Field Club and the Royal Society of Antiquaries,⁶⁶ and, thus, it was surely he who as 'R. J. W.' wrote to the editor of the *Northern Whig* in February 1928 that 'the fine collection of ethnographic objects would give any museum a good standing in the

⁶³ C. D. D. and A. W., 'Obituary: J.A.S. Stendall (1887–1973)' in *Irish Naturalists' Journal*, xviii, no. 1 (1974), pp 8–9; *Belfast Weekly Telegraph*, 27 Aug. 1910, p. 2; *Larne Times*, 26 Oct. 1929, p. 6; *Belfast Telegraph*, 31 Oct. 1932, p. 9.

⁶⁴ E. S. Evans and B. S. Turner, *Ireland's Eye: the photographs of Robert John Welch* (Belfast, 1977), p. 2.

⁶⁵ R. L. Praeger, 'Obituary: Robert John Welch. 1859–1936' in *Irish Naturalists' Journal*, vi (Nov. 1936), pp 131–3.

⁶⁶ *Proceedings and reports of the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society Session 1925–1926* (1926), p. 102. See also *Belfast News Letter*, 3 Sept. 1890, p. 6.



Figures 3–4. *The canoe in December 2015 and June 2019 in the ‘boat room’ at the Ulster Museum. In the first, the canoe is just visible behind an exhibition of local photographs. In the second, which is taken from the other end of the gallery, it is behind a temporary exhibition of Irish maps. Author by courtesy of National Museums N.I.*

world’.⁶⁷ As well as the ‘Ascent of Man’ case, Welch took several photographs showing how the collection was displayed.⁶⁸

Stendall wrote of the ‘Ascent of Man’ case in 1929 that, ‘There is a series of British mammals and ancestry cases dealing with the elephant, horse, and man, the last being graphically illustrated by an ancestral tree with skulls of various cultures correlated with types of implements connected with each culture.’⁶⁹ He was interested in human remains and evolution: in 1932, for example, he chaired a Belfast Naturalists’ Field Club lecture on ‘palaeolithic man’ by the Manchester osteologist, J. Wilfrid Jackson, who had recently returned from an Egypt Exploration Society dig in Luxor.⁷⁰ Also in 1932, Stendall gave a talk at the museum, ‘commencing with the Evolution of Man case’, on ‘primitive man’s work down the ages, with information on “survivals” of various sorts to our own times’.⁷¹ In 1934, Arthur Deane invited the Association of Engineering and Shipbuilding Draughtsmen to the museum and Stendall acted as their guide.⁷² Decades later, as head of biology at Ashfield Comprehensive School, Stendall authored a textbook on *The science of man* that categorised ‘races’ into Caucasoid, Mongoloid, Negroid and Australoid.⁷³

If the inference that Stendall curated the case is correct, Deane supported his interpretation, resisting conservative local pressure to change it, in a defence of

⁶⁷ *Northern Whig*, 2 Feb. 1928, p. 8.

⁶⁸ See, for example, the photos taken by Welch: N.M.N.I., BELUM.Y.W.10.21.242; BELUM.Y.W.10.79.50; BELUM.Y.2666.

⁶⁹ J. A. S. Stendall, ‘New Belfast Municipal Museum and Art Gallery in Belfast’ in *North Western Naturalist*, iv (1929), p. 1.

⁷⁰ ‘When British Isles were joined: lecture on primitive man’ in *Belfast Telegraph*, 6 Apr. 1932, p. 5.

⁷¹ ‘Relics of 500,000 Years Ago’ in *Belfast Telegraph*, 31 Oct. 1932, p. 9.

⁷² ‘Draughtsmen at Belfast Museum’ in *Belfast Telegraph*, 31 Oct. 1934, p. 9.

⁷³ J. A. S. Stendall, *The science of man* (London, 1969), p. 36.



Figures 5-6. *The tomako as currently displayed in Inclusive Global Histories, with its label. Author by courtesy of National Museums NI.*

the museum's (supposed) scientific credentials. Between June and September 1930, the Belfast branch of the British-Israel World Federation raised concerns, later championed by Alderman Robert Pierce, that the exhibit 'shows man's development from the lower animals ... and thus discredits ... the Bible itself' (the intervention resulted in the tongue-in-cheek headline in the *Belfast Telegraph*: 'Museum Exhibit Critic Wishes Card Removed: Abraham not a Gorilla').⁷⁴ Deane's argument that the case's removal would 'result in a futile attempt to sidetrack Belfast progress and leave us open to ridicule in the scientific journals of the United Kingdom and the rest of the world',⁷⁵ persuaded the Libraries, Museums and Art Committee that it should remain intact.

Clearly, then, the attitudes of both leaders of the new museum to 'other' 'living races' was, at the least, hegemonic. This was epitomised in 1925, when they removed the Solomon Islands canoe from its gallery space in the Royal Avenue museum to Botanic Gardens. The choices made in fitting this large and fragile object into its new setting were shaped by practical considerations, and also by burgeoning tensions between support for imperialism far away and the rise in anti-imperialist discourse in Ireland. As this article will conclude, the presence of the *tomako* in the past has prompted practical and creative conundra both in the Belfast Art Gallery and Museum in Royal Avenue and the Belfast Museum Art Gallery (now Ulster Museum) in Botanic Gardens, and in the present raises questions about museum decolonisation.

III

Apparently based on the Belfast Art Gallery and Museum's Stock Book, Winifred Glover stated that the Solomon Islands canoe is thirty-nine feet long

⁷⁴ *Belfast Telegraph*, 31 Oct. 1930, p. 9; *ibid.*, 8 Sep. 1930, p. 12.

⁷⁵ 'The Ascent of Man: Belfast exhibit to remain' in *Belfast News-Letter*, 25 June 1930, p. 9.

although, as discussed below, it is recorded in some sources as 40 feet long, and is likely to have been longer in its original condition than now.⁷⁶ The prow is incised with the head of a crocodile and it is topped with a finial of a carved wooden double human head.⁷⁷

The exact location from which the *tomako* comes has not yet been proven. After the death of the donor, John Casement (1854–1910), Commander of H.M.S. *Rapid* at the time the canoe was captured, his wife, Maria (Mya) Young (1861–1943), gave the museum a canoe prow carving.⁷⁸ Due to the connection between the canoe and the carving (via Casement), Winifred Glover projected that the two go together.⁷⁹ The art historian, Deborah Waite, identifies the *carving* as having come from the island of Choiseul,⁸⁰ and this was why in 1994 Glover, having corresponded with Waite, published the *canoe* as having also derived from there.⁸¹ However, a later correspondent with Glover suggested that Casement captured the canoe at Mbili, and that the people of Mbili may in turn have captured it on a raid in Marovo Lagoon. This suggestion was based on a finding that Mbili was the last stop recorded on the log of the *Rapid* on her route between the islands of Gavutu and Nggatokae in 1897.⁸² In 2000, in a statement that raises further questions about whether the canoe and the carving were ever joined, Deborah Waite identified the canoe as coming from Roviana.⁸³

Tomako were once ‘the most valued possession’ in the Solomons.⁸⁴ One in the British Museum is similar to that in Belfast, but it is dated to over a decade later (1910) and was commissioned for use by Ralph Brodhurst Hill, then district officer in the Solomon Islands. This has been described as ‘the largest water craft in the collections’, ‘one of the admired highlights in the Ethnography galleries for 40 years’ and a ‘highly significant cultural heritage object’.⁸⁵ Lord Leverhulme purchased this canoe from Brodhurst Hill in 1913 and brought it to Britain, and the

⁷⁶ Winifred Glover, *Realms of the Pacific* (Belfast, 1994) p. 43; B.F.P.L. [Belfast Free Public Library] Art Gallery and Museum stock book, volume 1, p. 59 (N.M.N.I.), henceforth Belfast Art Gallery and Museum stock book.

⁷⁷ Both *Realms of the Pacific* and the current label (fig. 6) describe this double headed form as a *janus*. As it is not applicable to the cultural context of the canoe, this article avoids the term.

⁷⁸ The canoe prow carving is catalogued in the stock book alongside the canoe as BELUM.C963.

⁷⁹ Winifred Glover letter to an external correspondent, 25 Oct. 1990 (N.M.N.I.). This statement is repeated in the *Inclusive Global Histories* exhibition.

⁸⁰ Deborah Waite, ‘Toto Isu (NguzuNguzu): war canoe prow figureheads from the Western District, Solomon Islands’ in *World of Tribal Arts*, v, no. 3 (1999), pp 82–97; eadem, ‘Canoe carvings from Western Solomon Islands’ in *Pacific Arts*, xxi, no. 1 (2021), pp 76–106.

⁸¹ Glover, *Realms of the Pacific*, p. 43.

⁸² Correspondent email to Winifred Glover, ‘Re: Western Solomon Islands artefacts’, 18 Apr. 2005 (N.M.N.I.). See also Rhys Richards, *Headhunters black and white: three collectors in the western Solomon Islands 1893–1914* (Wellington, 2012).

⁸³ Deborah Waite, ‘An artefact/image text of head-hunting motifs’ in *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, cix, no. 1 (2000), p. 117.

⁸⁴ R. J. A. W. Lever, ‘Canoes of the Solomon Islands’ in *South Pacific Bulletin* (Apr. 1963).

⁸⁵ Mona Hess, Stuart Robson, Francesca Simon Millar and Graeme Were, ‘Niabara – the Western Solomon Islands war canoe at the British Museum’ in *15th International Conference on Virtual Systems and Multimedia* (London, 2009) (discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1305320/1/1305320.pdf).

museum in turn acquired it from the Lady Lever Art Gallery in 1927. For the British Museum canoe, unlike the one in Belfast, there is specific provenance: elders on Vella Lavella told the Western Solomons government employee, Graham Baines, that the maker was Jiosi Angele, at Njava.⁸⁶ The British Museum has another comparable canoe, from Roviana, taken by Sir Cecil Rodwell, governor of Fiji (1918–24) in 1920,⁸⁷ and there are further examples in Cambridge, the Vatican and Melbourne.⁸⁸ With the intervention of missionaries and others, *tomako* continued to be built and used for racing between islands during the twentieth century, and since 2012, they have appeared in substantial numbers at annual festivals in the Solomons.⁸⁹

Therefore, the ‘Belfast’ canoe is rare and is of significant contemporary interest and its limited publication hitherto is notable given that it is among the earliest surviving examples. Winifred Glover’s 1994 *Realms of the Pacific* exhibition catalogue states that the canoe was brought up the coast of Ireland to Belfast ‘lashed’ to the steamship S.S. Pladda, in 1896.⁹⁰ (The Pladda, owned by the Clyde Shipping Company,⁹¹ is shown by contemporary newspapers to have travelled up and down the west coast of England and Scotland and on the east coast of Ireland). In the same publication, Glover suggests (based on the log of H.M.S. Rapid which she had consulted at The National Archives) that the canoe may have been captured on 10 August 1897.⁹² Both cannot be true and so clarification is required.

Given that John Casement was the donor, it is most plausible that he was responsible for taking it from its rightful owners. From 1 November 1895 Casement, a Royal Navy commander (and from 1908, rear admiral), captained H.M.S. Rapid at the Australia Station.⁹³ The Belfast Art Gallery and Museum’s stock book records the donation date as 4 April 1898, and the entry reads:

Native War Canoe from the Solomon Islands, 39 feet long by 3ft 6 in. beam; also Ten Paddles for same. The plans are stitched together with split rattan, after being chopped to shape by means of stone hatchets. This canoe was fighting in a ‘head hunting’ (cannibal) expedition in 1896.⁹⁴

⁸⁶ The British Museum, ‘canoe’ (www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Oc1927-1022-1-a-m) (13 July 2023).

⁸⁷ The British Museum, ‘canoe’ (www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Oc1922-0309-12) (25 June 2023).

⁸⁸ Bob Holtzman, ‘Indigenous boats: a Solomon Islands canoe at the Vatican’ (2016) (indigenousboats.blogspot.com/2016/12/canoe-paddles-and-models-exhibit-at.html) (30 June 2023).

⁸⁹ Australian Museum, ‘Tomako – War Canoe: E23373’ (australian.museum/learn/cultures/pacific-collection/melanesian/tomako-war-canoe-e23373) (30 June 2023).

⁹⁰ Glover, *Realms of the Pacific*, p. 60. The source for it having been transported on the *Pladda* is not given. This is repeated in a typewritten note on the canoe in Winifred Glover’s correspondence file (N.M.N.I.). A press release for *Realms of the Pacific* (1994) states (source unknown) that the canoe was first transported from the Solomons by Royal Navy destroyer (N.M.N.I.).

⁹¹ T.N.A., BT110/190.

⁹² Glover, *Realms of the Pacific*, p. 43. Glover stated in an email to the author (11 Jun. 2019) that she had researched the ship’s log in T.N.A.

⁹³ John Casement service record (T.N.A., ADM196/40/0/94).

⁹⁴ Belfast Art Gallery and Museum stock book, p. 59. The paddles are not currently displayed with the canoe and a project to identify them is currently underway.

Based on this entry, Winifred Glover states that ‘the reason given for taking the canoe was that the natives had been head-hunting’.⁹⁵ Whether or not Casement took the *tomako* as a result of its involvement in head-hunting is still unproven, but *tomako* were used for raids between islands and for head-hunting expeditions.⁹⁶ As Aoife O’Brien shows, after the establishment of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate in 1893, Charles Morris Woodford (1852–1927), a naturalist and (from February 1897) first resident commissioner to the Solomons, and Arthur Mahaffy (1869–1919), district commissioner in the western Solomons, collected canoes and other sacred objects in order to disrupt cosmological beliefs and confront traditional practices. Mahaffy was the Dublin-born son of the Trinity College, Dublin classicist, John Pentland Mahaffy, and many of the items he collected are now in the National Museum of Ireland.⁹⁷ Collecting was also, in Mahaffy’s case, a means of pursuing a prolific hobby; for Woodford, it was also a way to amass social capital in the metropole.⁹⁸ Woodford’s *Colonial report* for the year 1897–8 mentions the *Rapid* in the context of its visit to the Solomon Islands Protectorate,⁹⁹ but makes no reference to head-hunting. This is striking given that he did mention, in his 1898–9 Annual Report, that Captain Freeman of H.M.S. Mohawk had investigated and arrested, at Simbo, ‘an important chief of that island for the blood-thirsty murder of 10 native women during a head-hunting raid’ and that ‘The arrest, and subsequent detention pending trial ... has produced a most excellent effect among the natives of the western portion of the Protectorate where the practice of head-hunting prevails’.¹⁰⁰

H.M.S. *Rapid*’s log makes no reference to the canoe’s capture in 1896, but there are two references to a canoe (or canoes) in 1897. The first entry, on 26 April, was made during a trip from Gera to Guvatu. This referred to communication with a canoe in the morning, and in the afternoon Charles Woodford came on board, after which Woodford’s whaling boat was sent ashore.¹⁰¹ David Lawrence explains furthermore that Woodford had previously, in March 1897, been travelling on the *Rapid* on an anti-head-hunting raid:

In March 1897 Woodford left Suva with his police and a 27-foot open whale-boat on HMS *Rapid*, her last patrol duty of a 12-year attachment to the Australia Station. This was to be her ‘most exciting cruise’ ... The *Rapid* took Woodford to Gavutu and then, accompanied by Woodford, made the

⁹⁵ Glover, *Realms of the Pacific*, p. 66.

⁹⁶ Deborah Waite ‘An artefact/image text of head-hunting motifs’; Deborah Waite, ‘Toto Isu’.

⁹⁷ For Mahaffy, Woodford and their collections, see Rachel Hand, ‘From Empire to Independence’ in *Exhibit Ireland: Ethnographic collections in Ireland*, pp 23–55; eadem, *Entangled histories: how the Irish collected the world* (forthcoming, Dublin, 2023); Aoife O’Brien, ‘Collecting the Solomon Islands: colonial encounters & indigenous experiences in the Solomon Island collections of Charles Morris Woodford and Arthur Mahaffy (1886–1915)’ (Ph.D. thesis, University of East Anglia, 2011).

⁹⁸ O’Brien, ‘Collecting the Solomon Islands’.

⁹⁹ *Colonial Reports — Annual. No. 251. British Solomon Islands. Report for 1897–8* (Nov. 1898) (T.N.A., CO1071/44), p. 13.

¹⁰⁰ *Colonial Reports — Annual. No. 251. British Solomon Islands. Annual Report for 1898–9* (Oct. 1899) (T.N.A., CO1071/44), p. 16.

¹⁰¹ ‘Ship’s Log. H.M. Ship *Rapid*. Commencing 29 Feb 96. Ending 16 May 97’ (T.N.A., ADM53.15271).

annual visit of a British man-of-war to the Solomon Islands where the sailors avenged the deaths of traders at Rendova, New Georgia, Nggatokae and Vella Lavella. The warship then met with the Burns Philp steamer, the *Titus*, at Gavutu ... on board were whaleboats that traders were now selling to local people to replace tomako. The crew of the *Rapid* also took away a large wooden carving said to be 'a hideous wooden god with shining and monstrous eyes', most likely a beku carving of an ancestor or chief, and a war canoe seized from Vella Lavella. Both were given to the British Museum.¹⁰²

If, as the article states, a Vella Lavella canoe was given to the British Museum in 1897, this cannot be the same one as that (mentioned above), dating to 1910 and made for Brodhurst Hill. Furthermore, the mention of Woodford's whaling boat, the fact that this incident took place on *Rapid* and the route of the *Rapid* described suggest that this March 1897 reference may relate to the 'Belfast' canoe. The *Sydney Morning Herald* article on which Lawrence's article draws gives more detail on the *Rapid* crew's activities on this voyage than does her log book. They burned settlements and held chiefs hostage, and seized three canoes, two of which they destroyed. It describes the retained canoe as 'about 40 ft in length'¹⁰³ — one foot longer than the canoe donated by Casement, which was damaged by storms at sea by the time it reached Belfast (see below). Furthermore, it is possible that the 'hideous wooden god with shining and monstrous eyes' to which the extract alludes, that Casement had on board, is the aforementioned canoe prow carving, which has shell eyes, given by Casement's widow to the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery.

The second reference to a canoe in the *Rapid's* logbook is the 10 August 1897 entry used by Glover in 1994, which records that, while sailing from Gavutu to Gatukai (Nggatokae) and Ugi (Uki Ni Masi), members of the crew landed for an expedition, returning at 10.30 in the morning with a canoe, which was hoisted onto the ship. Having proceeded a distance, at 11.07 the log records, 'Stopped. Hoisted out canoe. Landed 3 natives'.¹⁰⁴ Glover did not mention the canoe having been hoisted out again, a mark perhaps of uncertainty over the salience of this log book entry: the detail provided by the *Herald* article suggests that March 1897 is the more likely date. It is possible though that neither of the two references in the H.M.S. *Rapid* log book, nor the occasion described by Lawrence, are the correct candidates: in fact, if the (otherwise unsubstantiated) note in the Museum's stock book stating that the canoe was captured in 1896 is true, then Casement could have had it on board prior to any of these dates and, as the log book suggests, he could have been using it regularly for transport to shore.

In summary, more research is needed to ascertain exactly when the canoe was taken, and from where. However, it can be surmised that the claim in the stock book that it had been used for head-hunting — presumably based on a testimony at the time of the donation — is true. It can also be speculated that, for Casement as for Mahaffy and Woodford,¹⁰⁵ the item symbolised personal success

¹⁰² D. R. Lawrence, 'The British Solomon Islands Protectorate: colonialism without capital' in idem, *The naturalist and his 'beautiful islands'* (Canberra, 2014), p. 186.

¹⁰³ 'Cruise of a warship: villages burnt and murders avenged', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 Sept. 1897, p. 5.

¹⁰⁴ 'Ship's Log. H.M. Ship *Rapid*. Commencing 17 May 97. Ending 21 Apl 98' (T.N.A., ADM53/15727).

¹⁰⁵ O'Brien, *Collecting the Solomon Islands*, p. 194.

and that donating it to the Belfast Museum was a lasting means of securing his naval reputation in Ireland.

IV

John Young (1826–1915), the donor of the *tomako* to the Belfast Art Gallery and Museum on John Casement’s behalf in April 1898, was father to Casement’s wife, Maria, and resident at Galgorm Castle, County Antrim. It is probable that Casement himself was on the *Rapid* at the time of the donation since he was not granted leave until October 1898.¹⁰⁶ Frederick Freeman, the above-mentioned Commander of H.M.S. *Mohawk*, had relieved Casement on the *Australia Station* on 13 October 1897. Casement, still in command of *Rapid*, left the station in December 1897,¹⁰⁷ sailing via Port Said, Malta and Gibraltar to Devonport where he arrived in late March 1898, before being paid off at Plymouth on 21 April.¹⁰⁸ It seems unlikely, therefore, that Casement would have been able to travel to Ireland before giving the canoe to the museum in early April. Research is still needed to find dates and ports for the removal of the *tomako* from the *Rapid* upon her arrival in England and for the *tomako*’s journey to Ireland on board the *Pladda* (if indeed it was on *Pladda* that it was transported). Why Casement (or Young) decided to give it to the museum in Belfast is a further mystery. Perhaps, as the *Sydney Morning Herald* article suggests, Casement had offered it to the British Museum first, or perhaps his father-in-law could not, or would not, accommodate it in Galgorm. Records of any relationship between Casement, or Young, and the Belfast museum’s staff are elusive; and there is as yet no reason to believe that the donation had been solicited.

Handwriting evidence from the diary of Charles Elcock, suggests that he authored the 4 April 1898 stock book entry registering the canoe into the collection.¹⁰⁹ Primarily a microscopist and foraminifera specialist, Elcock, whose watercolours in the Whipple Museum in Cambridge show his enthusiasm for Irish archaeology (and for the Grainger collection),¹¹⁰ was curator of the Belfast Art Gallery and Museum from 1896–1905; and, like Deane, had previously worked at the Warrington Museum.¹¹¹ On the same day as he registered it in the stock book (4 April 1898), Elcock recorded in his diary, ‘war canoe presented by Capt Casement per Hon. Jno. Young delivered this pm. — considerably damaged in a storm en voyage’.¹¹² An apparently later annotation to the stock book entry, undated but also in Elcock’s handwriting, claims again that

¹⁰⁶ John Casement service record (T.N.A., ADM196/40/0/94).

¹⁰⁷ John Bastock, *Ships on the Australia Station* (Sydney, 1988), p. 110.

¹⁰⁸ *The Times*, 10 Feb. 1898, p. 10; *ibid.*, 4 Mar. 1898, p. 11; *ibid.*, 25 Mar. 1898, p. 11; *ibid.*, 20 Apr. 1898, p. 14.

¹⁰⁹ ‘Campbell’s Quarto Diary for 1898, Charles Elcock, Curator of Belfast Museum + Art Gallery’ (henceforth Charles Elcock diary, 1898) (P.R.O.N.I., D4228.2.2).

¹¹⁰ Not yet separately catalogued at the time accessed (Dec. 2022). See Whipple Museum, ‘The Foraminifera slides and working tools of microscope slide maker Charles Elcock’ (www.whipplemuseum.cam.ac.uk/explore-whipple-collections/microscopes/foraminifera-slides-and-working-tools-microscope-slide-maker).

¹¹¹ Nesbitt, *A museum in Belfast*, pp 23–5.

¹¹² Charles Elcock diary, 1898, p. 32.

The Canoe was damaged by storms en route, and the broken parts were stitched together after arrival here, the stitches being (mainly) covered with putty; the places of the missing pieces of pearl were painted in white, so as to clearly distinguish our work from that of the natives. Nearly 1000 pieces were missing.¹¹³

On 20–25 May, Elcock recorded that a man called Bob was ‘mending the canoe’.¹¹⁴ He clearly planned that it would be displayed, for by 22 September, he was ‘fixing railing’ around it.¹¹⁵

The discovery in the same year of an ancient canoe during works to install a new double track railway line in County Armagh led Elcock to write to the directors of the Great Northern Company (a draft dated 3 August 1898 survives):

Gentlemen I have seen through the kindness of your Electrical Eng[ineer] A. Wakeman, the ancient Irish dug-out canoe found near Portadown which was recently found & as such will make a valuable addition to the Irish antiquities etc. assembled to the city by the late Canon Grainger & hereby ask if you would present same to this museum.¹¹⁶

On 12 August the Great Northern Railway Company donated the ‘dugout canoe found in excavations at Portadown’, and on 9 December Bob was mending it.¹¹⁷ At the bottom of the draft letter, Elcock scribbled what appears to be a design for a stand on which this canoe would be placed. After this, the *tomako* is not mentioned in any of Elcock’s surviving diaries. However, the two canoes would be displayed together for decades on the same stand — the very recent one from the Solomon Islands above, with the prehistoric one from Ireland below.

V

The earliest definite photo found so far of the ‘Belfast’ *tomako* is also the first of any item in the ethnographic collection and was taken in April 1908 by Robert Welch. This photograph (fig. 7) was taken below the sloping ceiling of the top floor of the Belfast Public Museum (Belfast Art Gallery and Museum). In it, the canoe stands in front of a reproduction plaster triptych, below which stands a glass case containing a ‘Bengal Tiger’, apparently surrounded by live plants. The divestment from the canoe of apposite cultural references is all the more apparent given that the details surrounding it have been bleached out for a postcard that was circulated by the museum that June (fig. 8): this gives it, to a contemporary eye, an atmosphere of isolation.¹¹⁸

For the photo, two individuals held a white sheet to form a blank backdrop for the postcard. One, whose feet only can be seen, is possibly Welch’s assistant, William Alfred Green (1870–1958). Although later an important photographer in his own

¹¹³ Belfast Art Gallery and Museum stock book, p. 59.

¹¹⁴ Charles Elcock diary, 1898, pp 45–6.

¹¹⁵ Charles Elcock diary, 1898, p. 81.

¹¹⁶ Loose draft letter, inside Charles Elcock diary, 1898.

¹¹⁷ Charles Elcock diary, 1898, pp 69, 103.

¹¹⁸ *Belfast News-Letter*, 9 June 1908, p. 6; Belfast Art Gallery and Museum scrap book, vol. 1 (unpaginated) (N.M.N.I.).



Figure 7. *Earliest known surviving photograph of the Solomon Islands canoe, taken by Robert Welch in April 1908, in the rooms on the top floor of the Belfast Art Gallery and Museum (labelled on the image as the Belfast Public Museum, now the Belfast Central Library). By courtesy of National Museums N.I. BELUM.YW.10.21.245.*

right, Green was apprenticed to Welch between 1905 and 1910 — in another reminder of how close museum networks were in Belfast at the time, he was great-nephew to Elcock's wife, Harriet.¹¹⁹ At the other end of the sheet stands a blurred figure: this could be Deane, who had succeeded Elcock as the museum's curator by the time the photo was taken.¹²⁰

The postcard caption describes the *tomako* as:

WAR CANOE, length 40 feet, from the Solomon Islands; took part in a Cannibal Expedition in 1896. Made of planks chopped into shape by stone hatchets, and fixed together by split rattan; inlaid with peak and decorated with 'poached egg' Shells (ovula ovum) and bone pendants, similar in form at both ends.

The typeface on the reverse of the postcard helps to date a label on the canoe (fig. 9) to the same period. This label records similar information (although sets the length at 39 feet), but with the addition that the donor was Captain Casement of the Royal

¹¹⁹ From Elcock and Green family trees built by the author at www.ancestry.co.uk. See also W. A. Maguire, 'Professional amateurs: Welch, Hogg and Green' in idem, *A century in focus: photography and photographers in the north of Ireland, 1839–1939* (Belfast, 2000), pp 87–118.

¹²⁰ When compared with Deane's image in Nesbitt, *A museum in Belfast*, p. 26.

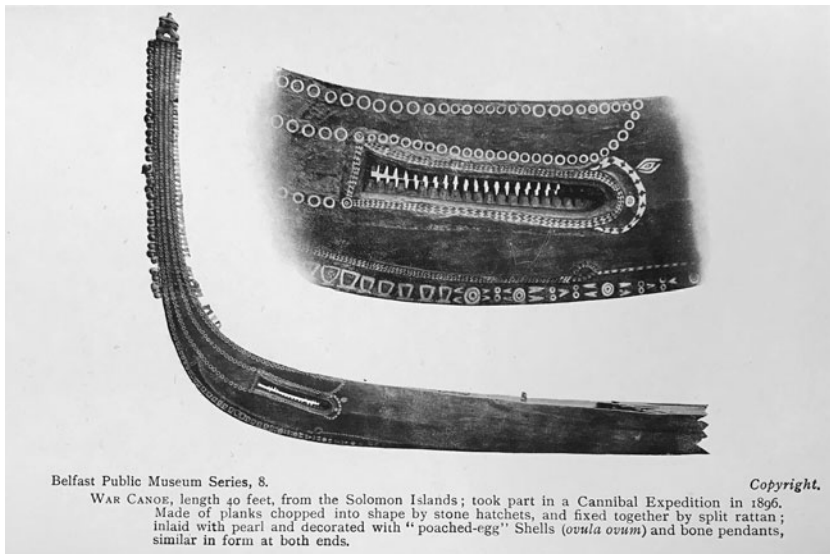


Figure 8. Postcard produced using the photo in fig. 7. 1908. By courtesy of National Museums N.I.

Navy ('R.N.'). The inclusion of his name on the label, which is still on the canoe, is important, because as explored below, mention of it waxes and wanes.

Two contemporaneous photos (see fig. 10),¹²¹ taken in the museum's Grainger Room by William Green, are later, since Green did not set up his own studio until 1910,¹²² and because in the foreground of one, the 1908 canoe postcard is pinned on a pillar. Surrounded by Grainger's antiquities, the *tomako* sits in front of Homer's spinning wheels.¹²³ That Deane regarded it primarily as a curio is suggested by how he had allowed it to become squeezed between the surrounding cases. Did he feel, now that the museum was filling up with other things, that it was getting in the way?

The differences between Welch's 1908 postcard photo and those of Green a few years later show the *tomako* in the process of being reconsidered as the B.N.H.P.S. collections began to be incorporated, and as others, given by influential museum contacts, were added. Furthermore, photos taken by Welch, from 1925 onwards in the new Belfast Museum and Art Gallery, show that process continuing: there, the canoe began to be used less as an abstracted witness to Irish imperialism, and more as a tool in the active generation of ideas about the 'other'.

The continuous position of the canoe in the new Belfast Museum and Art Gallery (now the Ulster Museum) was made possible by the fact that, as Glover later reported, the gallery in which it stands, by her time dubbed the 'boat room', was built around the canoe. She noted that to facilitate its removal to the new site, 'the prow and stern pieces were cut off and the canoe re-assembled and repaired in a room in the Museum that was specially built for it. This is now [1994] the permanent Ethnography Gallery although it is still popularly known as the Boat

¹²¹ See also N.M.N.I., HOYFM.WAG.3786.

¹²² Maguire, 'Professional amateurs'.

¹²³ The spinning wheels are shown in N.M.N.I., HOYFM.WAG.3786.

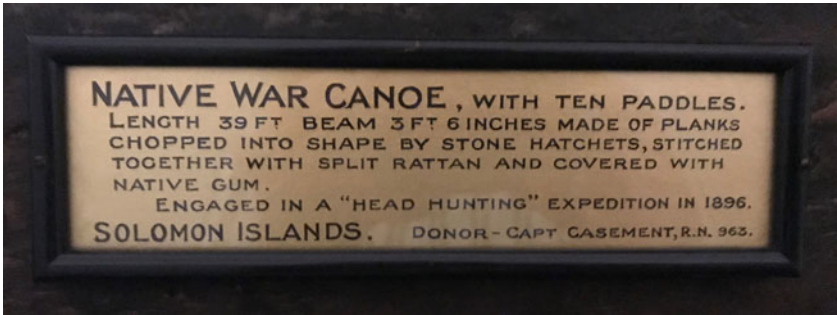


Figure 9. Label (c.1908) still attached to the canoe. Author by courtesy of National Museums N.I.



Figure 10. The canoe in the Grainger Room in the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery (Belfast Public Museum) on Royal Avenue. W. A. Green, c.1910–15. HOYFM.WAG.3785. By courtesy of National Museums N.I.

Room.¹²⁴ Glover drew on images, taken by Robert Welch, of the canoe in that space while it was under construction. In the first (fig. 11), from 1925, the room lacks plaster, flooring and windows.¹²⁵ In a May 1928 image (fig. 12) these have been added, and glass cases, still unfilled, have been installed.¹²⁶ In October 1929, the *Belfast Telegraph* advertised ‘the ethnography room in the new museum.

¹²⁴ Glover, *Realms of the Pacific*, p. 67; Glover, ‘The folks back home’, p. 21.

¹²⁵ ‘Belfast New Public Art Gallery and Museum’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 14 Nov. 1925.

¹²⁶ *Belfast Telegraph*, 8 May 1928. See also *Belfast Telegraph*, 25 Jan. 1928, p. 12; and N.M.N.I., Robert Welch images, c.1929, BELUM.Y.W.10.79.33.



Figure 11. *November 1925, Belfast Museum and Art Gallery, Botanic Gardens. Robert Welch. BELUM.Y.W.10.79.31. By courtesy of National Museums N.I.*



Figure 12. *May 1928, Belfast Museum and Art Gallery, Botanic Gardens. The canoe is photographed from the opposite end as Fig.11. Robert Welch. BELUM.Y.W.10.79.32. By courtesy of National Museums N.I.*



Figure 13. c. 1929. *The canoe in the same gallery, showing the Portadown dugout canoe hung below, surrounded by other ethnographic material and Edens Osborne's bicycles.* BELUM.YW.10.79.34. By courtesy of National Museums N.I.

In the centre is the only head-hunter's war canoe ever brought whole from the Solomon Islands' (see fig. 13).¹²⁷ But by 1939 (fig. 14), the ethnographic collections had been removed in favour of a Royal Irish Constabulary uniform, archaeological axes and Irish harps.¹²⁸

Returning to the damage to the canoe, based on the photographs, it is discernible that some post-dated its transit from the Solomons. A 1925 *Belfast Telegraph* article by Robert Welch, publicising the development of the new Belfast Museum and Art Gallery in Botanic Gardens, featured his photo of that date (fig. 11). He stated,

In the photo, the first of the exhibits to be housed in the new building may be seen the great war canoe captured from a raiding party by Captain Casement, R. N. and brought home in one piece — not cut in two as usual for ease of carrying. It is the finest war canoe in Europe.¹²⁹

The 1908 photo taken by Welch for the postcard (fig. 7), when compared both with Green's c.1910–15 image (fig. 10), and also Welch's from 1925–9

¹²⁷ *Belfast Telegraph*, 19 Oct. 1929, p. 10.

¹²⁸ This article dates the photo as c.1939 because in October that year, Sir Neville Chamberlain's Royal Irish Constabulary dress uniform went on display: see *Belfast News-Letter*, 11 Oct. 1939, p. 6; *City of Belfast Museum and Art Gallery Quarterly Notes* (Sept. 1939).

¹²⁹ *Belfast Telegraph*, 14 Nov. 1925, p. 10. Welch re-stated that Casement had brought the canoe whole to Belfast in *Belfast Telegraph*, 11 Oct. 1927, p. 9.



Figure 14. *The canoe in the same gallery, showing Edens Osborne's bicycles, Irish harps and other items. c.1939. boatroom_lookingsouth29. By courtesy of National Museums N.I.*

(figs 11–14), suggest that the canoe was shortened in Deane's time. Whereas in 1908 the end of the canoe appears flat in section before rising to the finial, in the later photos the same end has a more steeply-curving crescentic form. The canoe, therefore, may have been shortened, possibly while it was being moved out of the upper floor gallery in the Belfast Art Gallery and Museum building on Royal Avenue (of which more below).

In addition, while Elcock's diary recorded 'Bob' fixing the canoe shortly after the museum received it (in 1898), and his stock book entry had noted the addition of white paint, this is not reflected in the earliest Deane-era photo (1908), in which the canoe seems uniformly dark in colour. However, white paint does appear in the 1925–39 photos. This suggests the possibility of further damage to the *tomako*, possibly that occurred when it was being moved to Botanic Gardens under Deane's direction. If this happened, it is surprising (given Deane's usual diligence) that he did not make sure that it was recorded. A possible explanation is that he regarded the *tomako* as less of a priority than the local and art collections.

VI

The canoe's donor, John Casement (1854–1910), was from Ballycastle. He was a half-cousin to Roger Casement (1819–77), a Captain of the King's Own Regiment of Dragoons. This Roger was father to John Casement's better-known

contemporary, Roger David Casement (1864–1916), the Irish revolutionary leader,¹³⁰ who was regularly in contact with the Youngs of Galgorm while attending Ballymena Academy; and, therefore, must have known John. As is widely known, following service as a British consul in French Congo, Roger the younger authored a report on abuses of indigenous peoples perpetrated under Leopold II, King of Belgium. Later, again as a consul, he investigated slavery and violent exploitation on rubber plantations in Brazil, Peru and Colombia.¹³¹ It was for his subsequent report, advocating anti-slavery campaigns in Britain,¹³² that Casement was awarded his knighthood, of which he was stripped when convicted for treason, and executed in 1916.¹³³

Despite the fact that the ‘boat room’ was built around it in 1925, ‘John Casement’s’ canoe is not mentioned in the 1909–22 plans (discussed above) as a central exhibit, and there is no direct record, from either Deane or Stendall, to show what they thought of the item. It is suggestive, though, that in his foreword to the Belfast Art Gallery and Museum’s *Quarterly Report* on 11 September 1915, as a prelude to an essay from Stendall on birds’ eggs, Deane stated: ‘It is hoped that now more space is available in the Grainger Room by the removal of the long Solomon Island canoe, to arrange similar exhibits of Natural History.’¹³⁴ That year’s report from the Art Gallery and Museum Committee stated that

Owing to the crowded condition of the very limited amount of available Exhibition space, [it had] decided to erect a shed at the rear of the building to store the long Solomon Island Canoe and some other large objects which occupied a good deal of floor space. By this means it has been possible to make a much-needed re-arrangement of some of the exhibits which has been appreciated by the visitors.¹³⁵

It seems an interesting coincidence — or not — that, at exactly this time in the Belfast papers, Roger Casement’s name was beginning to become prominent. Two weeks previously he had been reported as having sought to raise an Irish Brigade in support of Germany.¹³⁶ It would be an overstatement to claim that, with Roger in the news, John Casement’s association with the canoe was covered up. Deane’s

¹³⁰ Roger Casement snr (1819–77) and John Casement (1854–1910) were the products of the respective first and second marriages of their grandfather, Roger Casement (1756–1832). A family tree tracing the connection has been constructed based on data at <http://lordbelmontinnorthernireland.blogspot.com/2014/06/magherintemple-house.html>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Casement; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roger_Casement; and on www.ancestry.co.uk.

¹³¹ W. R. Louis, ‘Roger Casement and the Congo’ in *Journal of African History*, v, 1 (1964), pp 99–120; Angus Mitchell, *16 Lives: Roger Casement* (Dublin, 2016).

¹³² Jordan Goodman, *The devil and Mr. Casement: one man’s battle for human rights in South America’s Heart of Darkness* (New York, 2010).

¹³³ Roger Casement, *The Amazon journal of Roger Casement* (London, 1997). See also Angus Mitchell, *Sir Roger Casement’s Heart of Darkness: the 1911 documents* (Dublin, 2003).

¹³⁴ Belfast Art Gallery and Museum, *Quarterly Notes*, xxx (autumn 1915), inside cover.

¹³⁵ *City and County Borough of Belfast. Twenty-seventh annual report of the Committee of the Public Art Gallery and Museum 1915–16*, p. 7.

¹³⁶ *Northern Whig*, 27 Aug. 1915, p. 6. There are several other mentions of Roger Casement in the Belfast newspapers between August and October 1915.

1908 label recording John Casement as the donor remained stuck to the canoe, and John's name appeared when in 1925 Welch's *Belfast Telegraph* article celebrated its installation in the new museum. The donation by Casement was mentioned by Winifred Glover in her twentieth-century exhibitions and publications.¹³⁷ Even so, given the canoe's importance to its makers and its rarity and impressive size, the dramatization in its documentation of Casement's capture of it and its centrality to the history of the 'boat room' gallery, it is noticeable that neither what it meant as an act of imperial theft, nor Casement's connection with it, have ever been developed as part of its interpretation.

The laying of the foundation stone of the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery, first planned in 1909, was delayed until 1924.¹³⁸ The coming to fruition of Deane's building project, therefore, coincided not only with the First World War, but also with the Easter Rising, partition and the establishment of Northern Ireland, and this changed forever how ethnographic items connected with the British Empire, of which the canoe was the most prominent example, would be exhibited in Belfast.¹³⁹ Given that the Easter Rising in which Roger Casement was an agitator had precipitated an anti-imperial war and that the canoe given by his cousin John Casement celebrated, or at least commemorated, Irish involvement in the creation and administration of the empire, it can be suggested that the canoe presented an interpretative conundrum. In addition to these political considerations, there was also the legacy of the half-hearted display of the canoe during the 1910s in the Grainger Room at the Belfast Art Gallery and Museum on Royal Avenue. As the 'boat room' gallery at the Botanic Gardens building was created around it, the canoe may have been intended as a centrepiece for the 'middle ground' floor — perhaps even as the focus of a diorama, a popular approach in the period to the interpretation of colonised cultures.¹⁴⁰ But the photographic sequencing above shows that this never happened. Instead, the museum's references to John Casement appear to have diminished over time; and the canoe continued to be compared with the Portadown dugout (the two still being displayed together). As shown in the early twentieth-century photographs and right up until the opening in 2022 of *Inclusive Global Histories*, the items displayed around it were not only from Oceania, nor even only ethnographic, but were also Irish, British and European.

The exception to this trend was the long period during which Winifred Glover worked at the Ulster Museum. She stated in conversation for this research that, throughout her career, she was obliged repeatedly to defend the canoe's position in the gallery. Such challenges, she felt, were symbolic of the uneasy position of the ethnographic collections overall: it was also significant that this section had never been accorded an acquisitions budget.¹⁴¹ In 2006, she stated in an internal

¹³⁷ Glover, *Realms of the Pacific*, p. 66; Jill Hassell, 'Notes on Oceanic objects in 'Treasures of the Ethnographic Collection' exhibition at the Ulster Museum' in *Museum Ethnographers Group Newsletter*, xxii (Aug. 1988), p. 92.

¹³⁸ Nesbitt, *A museum in Belfast*, pp 28–9.

¹³⁹ See Roisín Higgins, 'The politics of commemorating the Easter Rising' and William Blair, 'Myth, memory and material culture: remembering 1916 at the Ulster Museum' in R. S. Grayson and Fearghal McGarry (eds), *Remembering 1916: The Easter Rising, the Somme and the politics of memory in Ireland* (Cambridge, 2016).

¹⁴⁰ D. E. Marsh, 'Reassembling the social life of a medicine man: reassessing otherness, agency and authorship in the Wellcome archives' in *Journal of Material Culture*, xx, no. 202 (2015), pp 211–45.

¹⁴¹ Winifred Glover interview, 19 June 2018.

memorandum that, having been carefully conserved following damage within recent history, the canoe was too fragile to be moved.¹⁴² After 1908, no labels for the canoe appear to have survived until one made in 2009. By then, the canoe was described as an archetype:

The Solomon Islanders practised head-hunting as part of their religious customs. They considered the head to be the most sacred part of the body, with those of their enemies having particular power. Headhunts took place during times of celebration, such as marriages and the all-important yam harvest. Special canoe houses were erected to protect canoes when not in use.¹⁴³

As this article has shown, any lack of prioritisation of the canoe was due not to lack of staff commitment, care or knowledge, but more to the fact that its provenance and the Casement connection had been lost sight of since 1898. For a long period in the institution's history, attitudes toward ethnography overall were hegemonic, reactive and half-hearted; and over the nearly 130 years that the Solomon islands *tomako* has been in Belfast, interest in it has at times been intense, but on the whole indifferent. One exception to this was Welch, who repeatedly photographed the *tomako* and alluded to it in newspapers, describing it as the 'finest war canoe in Europe'. However, the prestige accorded to it by the museum appears to have fallen during his time, as the twenty-six counties south of the border withdrew from the Empire. From the 1960s onwards, Glover researched and did her utmost to keep it in the public eye.

Meanwhile, National Museums N.I. has botanical specimens that Roger Casement collected in Congo and donated to the Belfast Museum, and displays the camera that he is thought to have used to record these activities.¹⁴⁴ It also displays the spectacles that he wore in Pentonville Prison where he was hanged and propaganda medals issued in Germany after his execution.¹⁴⁵ There is, too, a framed memo written in pencil noting a 'pilgrimage' walk to take place on 4 August 1916, the day after he was 'cruelly murdered'.¹⁴⁶ In the *Remembering 1916: Your Stories* exhibition, staged as part of the Ulster Museum's contribution to the *Living Legacies 1914–1918* programme, the latter was shown alongside a contemporary booklet, 'Dublin and the Sinn Féin Rising'.¹⁴⁷ The tension between Roger's anti-imperial activity while a British diplomat in Congo and South America, and his revolutionary stance in Ireland, has been extensively explored. The British imperial actions taking place within his family circle, and among

¹⁴² Winifred Glover memo, 'The Solomon Islands Canoe' (2006) (N.M.N.I.).

¹⁴³ From a label found beside the canoe in June 2019, 2009 is given here as its date due to its design and format, and because this was the date of Winifred Glover's most recent exhibition, *Rites of Passage: Birth, Marriage and Death Customs Round the World*: exhibition list received by email from Winifred Glover, June 2018.

¹⁴⁴ Glover, 'The folks back home', pp 21–2. See also 'Struggles for Power' in the Ulster Museum's Modern History Gallery (2009).

¹⁴⁵ 'War and Revolution' and 'A War Like No Other' in the Ulster Museum's Modern History Gallery.

¹⁴⁶ 'Pilgrimage for Roger Casement' (collections.nationalmuseumsni.org/object-belumw2011-1316) (18 July 2023).

¹⁴⁷ 'Home Rule to Partition: War and Revolution' (Ulster Museum Modern History Gallery).

people well known to him, so vividly represented in the form of the Solomon Islands canoe, adds a further dimension to his life and work.

The way that the *tomako* poked its prow above the wall when I visited and photographed it in 2015 and 2019, reminds us that heirloom objects can raise awkward questions. Now, with increasing calls for a reassessment of colonial afterlives in Ireland, it is time to understand its multiple meanings in greater depth. Decolonisation calls for deeper, more considered engagement with colonised objects. This article has explored the Irish dimensions of the canoe's story, but work with Solomon Islanders on its specific provenance is needed. Whether the people from whose ancestors it was taken are from Choiseul, Mbili, Nggatokae, or Roviana — or somewhere else — this is their story to tell. For the time being, the *tomako* is still central to the gallery, from which it cannot be moved without being deconstructed again and risking further damage. The 2022 *Inclusive Global Histories* exhibition surrounding it conveys its potential role in decolonisation. The exhibition includes multiple speakers on video, and is distributed across three cases, themed, consecutively, 'telling stories from our past', 'challenging our present' and 'shaping our future'. As this article has shown, the *tomako* has the power to do all three.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ With sincere thanks to all at National Museums N.I., Queen's University Belfast Special Collections, the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland and The National Archives (Kew), and to Aoife O'Brien, Rachel Hand and Polly Bence. Particular thanks to Winifred Glover. Research for this article was funded by the Northern Ireland Department of Employment and Learning via Ulster University and by U.K. Research and Innovation via Economic and Social Research Council NINE (ES/V00767X1). Data Access Statement: The sources of all public archive data supporting this study are as cited in the citations. Due to the ethically sensitive nature of the research, interviews and correspondence cited are closed.