

# The quest for Roualeyn Gordon Cumming's rhinoceros horns

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**ABSTRACT:** The longest horn ever recorded for the White Rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simum*) was one measuring 158cm, shot by Roualeyn Gordon Cumming (1820–1866) in the South African interior between 1843 and 1848. The quest for the present whereabouts of this trophy led from Gordon Cumming's museum in Fort Augustus, Scotland (which existed from 1858 to 1866), to auction sales in Inverness and London, across the ocean to the American Museum run by circus magnate P. T. Barnum in New York. While the horn actually remained in family custody, it apparently disappeared recently.

**KEY WORDS:** White Rhinoceros – *Ceratotherium simum* – trophy horn – P. T. Barnum.

## INTRODUCTION

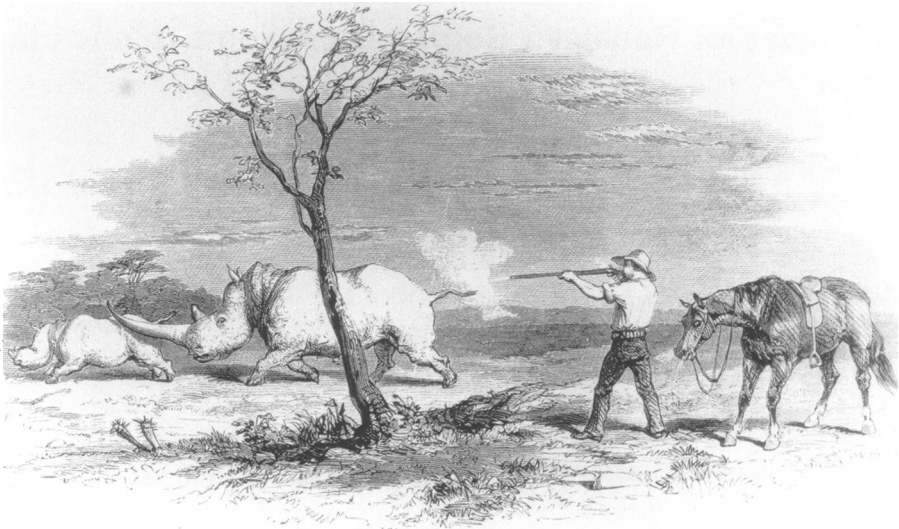
According to the 1907 edition of Ward's *Records of big game*, the longest anterior horn of a White Rhinoceros, *Ceratotherium simum* (Burchell, 1817), was owned by W. Gordon Cumming and measured 62½ inches (158cm) in length and 22½ inches (76.5cm) in circumference. While researching the history of the rhinoceros in southern Africa during the nineteenth century, I had come across Roualeyn Gordon Cumming (1820–1866), author of *A hunter's life in South Africa* (first published in 1850). This paper describes my quest for the present whereabouts of the horn. I hope to show not only how difficult it is to retrieve specimens held in private collections, but also the importance of a circle of colleagues with similar interests and the current power of the Internet for historical research.

## ROUALEYN GORDON CUMMING

Roualeyn Gordon Cumming was born at Altyre, near Forres, Scotland, on 15 March 1820, son of Sir William (1787–1854), the second baronet of Altyre and Gordonstown, and Lady Eliza Maria (née Campbell) Gordon Cumming. While basic biographical details were recorded by Cassada (1980), Roualeyn Gordon Cumming (henceforth referred to as RGC) remains an elusive figure in the absence of any personal papers or contemporary biographies.

RGC was a big-game hunter, collector and, we must add, an eccentric. After serving in the British army in India (1839), Newfoundland (1840–1843) and South Africa (1843), he decided to make big-game hunting his career. For that purpose he undertook five expeditions in the regions of the Upper Limpopo River in South Africa and across the border in present-day Botswana, from 1843 to 1848. He returned to Britain in 1848, where he soon published his adventures in two volumes (1850).

In *A hunter's life*, RGC (Figure 1) wrote about shooting at least 12 white rhinoceroses and 17 black rhinoceroses (*Diceros bicornis* (Linnaeus, 1758)).<sup>1</sup> His trophies included



Hunting the White Rhinoceros.

Figure 1. Roualeyn Gordon Cumming hunted big-game in the region of the Limpopo River in South Africa and Botswana during 1844–1848. This sketch of his exploits against the rhinoceros is found in *A hunter's life* (1850: 2: 338).

the longest horn recorded for the white rhinoceros; at least we presume so. Ward (1907) attributed the record horn to Colonel William Gordon Cumming (RGC's younger brother) with the date 1898, together with another horn (the third in the list) of 52½ inch (133cm). I have found no statement in RGC's books that he actually was aware that he had the longest horn on record, but it still seems likely that he did in fact shoot the animal and carried the specimen to England.<sup>2</sup>

RGC displayed his hunting trophies in the Great Exhibition staged at Crystal Palace in London in 1851. As the public was enthusiastic, he afterwards opened a permanent South African Exhibit in Piccadilly, London. Captain Frank Vardon wrote to his companion in African travel, William Cotton Oswell, on 12 August 1851: "Cumming's Exhibition still goes on, and Methuen tells me that a black fellow parades up and down in front of it in a leopard kaross, to attract visitors! I never thought any of us African wanderers would have come to this" (Oswell, 1900: 1: 260). RGC, however, treasured his popular nickname 'The Lion Hunter', and entrance fees to the exhibition, income from book sales, together with fees for public lectures, enabled him to purchase a permanent museum in Fort Augustus.

#### A MUSEUM IN FORT AUGUSTUS

While the museum in Fort Augustus was mentioned by Cassada (1980), I was unable to find further details. After an enquiry at the Tourist Information Office in the Scottish town, Mrs Marion Nicholson referred me to *Glen-Albyn*, a book published by the Abbey of Fort Augustus. According to this anonymous work, RGC bought a building situated at the

south-east corner of the canal bridge in 1858 (Anonymous, n. d.: 76–78). Apparently, the building no longer exists, because it is said that the site was later occupied by a wooden hall next door to the Catholic School. Furthermore, the roof of the museum was used to cover the Established Church, while the timbers now serve “as the framework to an honest Presbyterian congregation, and form a setting to the Geneva gown.”

[‘The Lion Hunter’] delighted in marked eccentricities of dress and might be seen parading Princess Street in Edinburgh in top-boots, a Gordon tartan kilt with plaid to match fastened by a large brooch, huge shirt frills, surmounted with a brass helmet as a head-piece and quantities of jewels, with silver fish-hooks in his ears. On wet days the whole was secured with a ponderous umbrella. At Fort Augustus he used to meet the tourist steamers with a number of retainers similarly attired in grotesque costume, and, preceded by a magnificent goat, would lead the way to the museum. In warm weather he discarded his gorgeous raiment and went about clad only in a shirt and stockings. Sometimes his hair was allowed to hang in long ringlets down over his shoulders, and at other times caught up in a lady’s net and fastened with numberless hairpins. (Anonymous, n. d.: 78–79.)

It is a pity that no portrait of ‘The Lion Hunter’ thus attired seems to exist, for one suspects that part of the charm of the museum came from the presence of its owner. That he actually guided the visitors to inspect the trophies is known from an undated poster advertising “Gordon Cumming’s Exhibition” (Figure 2), which invited the public to see the famous collection alongside of the Canal Locks, “where there is a delay of about one hour in getting the steamers through” affording ample time. I have not found any contemporary description of the contents of the museum, but when the collection was still in London, RGC published *An illustrated catalogue of hunting trophies, natives arms and costumes*



Figure 2. This undated poster advertized Gordon Cumming’s Museum which existed in Fort Augustus between 1858 and 1866. (Present whereabouts not known.)

(1851).<sup>3</sup> This little booklet, now extremely rare, listed a skull of a white rhinoceros, another of a black rhinoceros, and four different sets of horns.

Having established that the museum was in Fort Augustus from 1858 and no longer existed, the next question was when it had actually closed. This probably happened soon after RGC's death on 24 March 1866, but where could I find confirmation of this date and, just as important, what happened to the collection? None of the sources available to me gave any clue. I wrote an e-mail to Dr Andrew Kitchener, Curator at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, asking if he had any idea. He could confirm that there were no RGC specimens in Edinburgh or in the Natural History Museum in London. Perusing a recent edition of the *Who's who?*, he found a listing for Alexander Gordon Cumming. This great-nephew of 'The Lion Hunter' told Kitchener on the telephone that according to family tradition the game trophies were sold to Barnum and destroyed in a fire. However, an odd rhinoceros horn might have survived with his cousin, Sir William Gordon Cumming in Forres. Sir William, when contacted, confirmed that there was no inventory of the collection in Fort Augustus, that the trophies had been sold by public auction in London, where Barnum bought most of the lots, and that the specimens burned while with Barnum. The good news was that he still had one of the rhinoceros horns, while some of the family's papers and correspondence were preserved in the National Library of Scotland.


## AUCTION SALES

Not the entire collection of 'The Lion Hunter' had been auctioned in London. *The Inverness courier* on 19 April 1866 noted:

The sale of the miscellaneous effects of the late Mr Roualeyn Gordon Cumming was held at Fort Augustus on Tuesday. From the peculiarity of the articles to be sold a large number of purchasers attended, including among others, representatives on behalf of Lord Saltoun, Sir George MacPherson-Grant, Lochiel, Seaforth, and other well-known collectors. The principal interest was shown in regard to the shepherds' crooks, walking-sticks and ornamental hazel, numbering over a thousand, and selected with great care by Mr Cumming himself during the last five years, forming a perfectly unique collection, as may be supposed from the fact that single specimens were sold at from 22s [shillings] downwards, even the rough undressed sticks fetching large prices in lots. We observe that the hunting trophies are now for sale by private bargain; but ... we understand that they will in all likelihood be brought to the hammer at London. (Anonymous, 1866c.)

On 29 March 1866 the same newspaper had noted that the "remains of deceased were sent from Fort Augustus by the Canal steamer, and passed through Inverness to the Altyre burying ground at Michael Kirk, Gordonstown" (Anonymous, 1866a). The current chaplain of Michael Kirk confirmed that Roualeyn's name appears on a stone as part of the mausoleum occupied by the Gordon Cumming family.

The public auction of RGC's effects is listed in the register of natural history auctions published by Chalmers Hunt (1976). The London auctioneer J. C. Stevens sold 583 lots of mammal specimens from the collection of the late R. Gordon Cumming on 1 and 2 June 1866, and 324 lots of British oology (eggs) and exotic shells on 4 June 1866. The Natural History Museum, London, holds a copy of the sales catalogue. The title-page of this catalogue (Figure 3) stated that the collection included two rhinoceros skulls with horns, 62 rhinoceros horns, and some walking sticks made from rhinoceros horn.<sup>4</sup> The horns were sold in 30 separate lots with a total of 63 rhinoceros horns, the longest of which was 3 feet 4 inches (130cm), three lots of rhinoceros horn walking sticks – with the information that Prince Jerome Bonaparte had paid £7 for one of these – and two lots of skulls: a


(18)

No. 2649  
*The Sale to commence at Half-past 12 o'Clock precisely.*

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**A CATALOGUE**  
 OF THE  
 VERY VALUABLE AND INTERESTING  
*Museum of Natural Curiosities,*  
 OF THE LATE  
**R. GORDON CUMMING, Esq.**

INCLUDING AMONG OTHER SPECIMENS THE FOLLOWING:

25 Skulls of Lions, Tigers, Bears and Panthers; Giraffe Head Stuffed,  
 2 Elephants' Heads with Tusks, 8 Heads of Hippopotami, 2 Indian  
 Buffaloes, 10 African Buffaloes, 2 Rhinoceros with Horns, 10 Sable  
 Antelopes, 5 Roan Antelopes, 12 Oryx, 10 Koodoos, 2 Wapitis,  
 1 Fossil Irish Elk, 13 African Waterbucks, 10 Highland Rams,  
 30 Red Deer, 9 Fallow Deer, 50 Roes, 17 Carpathian Stags, 62  
 Rhinoceros' Horns, 10 Lions' Skin, Robes of Leopards and other  
 Skins, and Walking Sticks of Rhinoceros' Horn and Shields; also  
 Heads of Hartebeest, Gnoo, Springbok, Blesbok,

AND MANY OTHER SPECIMENS;

Also the DIORAMA OF SOUTH AFRICA, as exhibited by  
 the late R. Gordon Cumming, Esq., in London and other  
 Cities.

WHICH WILL BE SOLD BY AUCTION,  
 BY

---

**MR. J. C. STEVENS**

---

AT HIS GREAT ROOMS,  
 38, KING STREET, COVENT GARDEN,  
 On FRIDAY, 1st JUNE, 1866, and following Day,  
*At Half-past Twelve o'Clock precisely each day.*

May be Viewed the Day prior and Mornings of Sale, and Catalogues had  
 of Mr. STEVENS, 38, King Street, Covent Garden. If for the Country,  
 enclosing two Stamps.

Printed by J. DAVY & SONS, 137, Long Acre.

Figure 3. Title page of the catalogue used during the auction of Gordon Cumming's collection in the house of J. C. Stevens, London, on 1 and 2 June 1866. (Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of The Natural History Museum, London.)

black rhinoceros skull with horns measuring 2 feet 3 inches (68cm) and 12 inches (30cm) respectively, and a white rhinoceros skull with horns of 2 feet 11 inches (89cm) and 11 inches (28cm). The sales catalogue is annotated with a few prices on the second day of the sale, but not with names of buyers. The highest price for a pair of horns was £7, but most secured less than £3. The white rhinoceros skull must have been bought by the Royal College of Surgeons of England, London; in a catalogue dated 1884 the specimen is listed as from RGC's collection, purchased in 1866 (Flower, 1884). We must assume that this skull no longer exists, as most of the College's museum specimens were destroyed on the night of 11 May 1941 during enemy action.

### P. T. BARNUM'S AMERICAN MUSEUM

It is quite possible that P. T. Barnum, or one of his agents, attended the sale in London. This circus man, later of international fame, might have been attracted by the last lot of the sale which offered "The South African Diorama, as exhibited by the late R. Gordon Cumming, Esq., in London and other cities, consisting of about 30 beautiful and highly finished scenes, 13ft. 4in. by 9ft. 6in., on rollers, and quite portable." To learn more about this Barnum connection, I contacted Richard Reynolds, a fellow rhinoceros enthusiast and at the same time very knowledgeable about American circus history, who immediately involved Fred Dahlinger of the Circus History Museum in Barraboo and Dr A. H. Saxon, author of a bibliography on *Barnumiana* (1995). From them I learned first that while Barnum (1811–1891) today is known mainly for his circus activities, he only started this rather late in his career, in 1871 when he was 60 years old. Before that he was a museum operator, owning the highly successful and popular American Museum in New York City amongst others. A *catalogue or guide book of Barnum's American Museum, New York* (not dated but probably issued between 1860 and 1865) included in the Seventh Saloon a "Rhinoceros head" as part of a Grand Skeleton Chamber, containing "the most complete variety of skeletons in America" (Barnum, c. 1860<sup>s</sup>). This, however, is a far cry from the trophies that Barnum could have picked up at the RGC sale. If Barnum brought the specimens over in 1866 and kept them in his American Museum, which could well be correct, it is quite likely that they all burned. The first fire in this museum occurred on 13 July 1865, too early for RGC's animals to have been affected. The museum was rebuilt, restocked and reopened on 6 September 1865, only to burn down again on the night of 2–3 March 1868. This seems to confirm rumours surviving with RGC's family.

### GORDON CUMMING'S LEGACY

Not all was lost, however. The manuscripts in the National Library of Scotland, I am informed by the curator Dr Iain G. Brown, probably contain very little pertaining to 'The Lion Hunter'. The record rhinoceros trophies had been kept in the family. There are unconfirmed rumours that the longest horn was stolen and exported to the Far East, where it probably became an ingredient of the traditional medicine for which so many rhinos all around the world have lost their lives. Sir William Gordon Cumming, however, still possesses the second rhinoceros horn. A photograph of this was published in the 1907 edition of Ward's

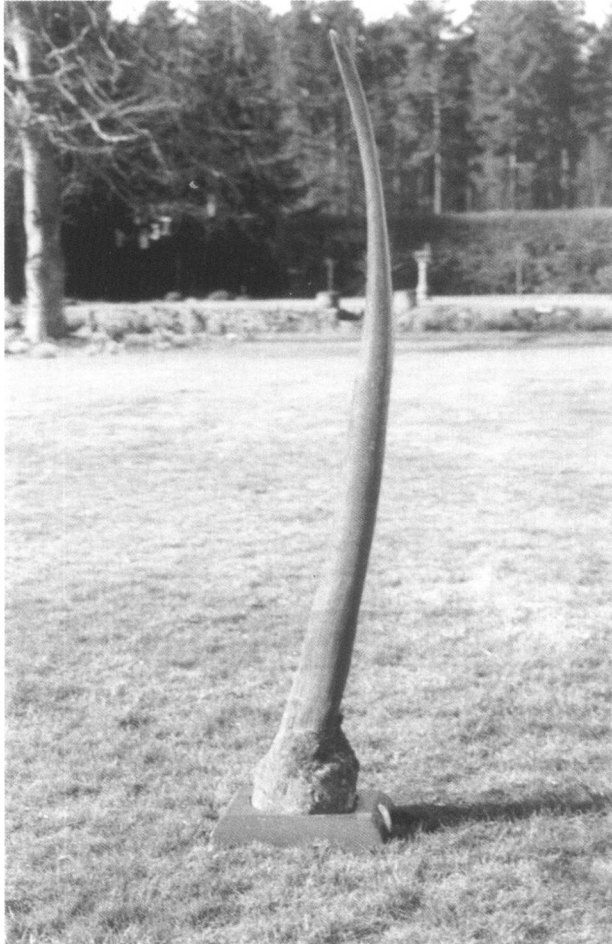


Figure 4. A horn of the white rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simum*) in private collection, a relic of the African travels of Roualeyn Gordon Cumming. The horn measures 133cm and is the third longest recorded in Rowland Ward's *Records of big game*. (Published with the permission of the owner.)

*Records*, but it is gratifying to be able to publish a recent photograph of this White Rhinoceros horn (Figure 4), presumably one of the very last remnants of the South African hunts which had made Roualeyn Gordon Cumming famous and had filled his life.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This search for RGC's trophies has been exciting and could have not led anywhere without the time and efforts of the following: Dr Andrew Kitchener, Curator of Vertebrates, National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh; Richard J. Reynolds, Atlanta, USA; Fred Dahlinger, Circus History Museum, Barraboo, USA; Dr A.H. Saxon, Fairfield, USA; Ann Datta, Natural History Museum, London; Gina Douglas, Linnean Society of London; Marion Nicholson, Fort Augustus; John Macdonald, Editor of *The Inverness courier*; Sir William Gordon Cumming, Forres; Alexander

Gordon Cumming (information to Kitchener); Dr Iain G. Brown, National Library of Scotland; and Andrew T. Greaves, Gordonstoun School, Elgin. I am very grateful to all of them.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> According to Gordon Cumming (1850), he shot 12 white rhinoceroses: in 1844 on 6 June, 22 August, 6 September; in 1845 on 3 September, 23 September (2 specimens); in 1846 on 10 August, 19 September, 17 November; in 1847 on 8 August and in 1848 on 16 November (2 specimens). He shot 17 black rhinoceroses, in 1844 on 4 June, in 1845 on 6 June (2 specimens), 17 July, 3 September (4 specimens), 8 September, 23 September, in 1846 on 19 September (4 specimens), 16 October, 17 November, and in 1848 on 8 August.

<sup>2</sup> RGC recorded twice that he shot white rhinoceroses with exceptionally long horns. On 6 September 1844, while at Mangmaluky (22° 46' S, 26° 50' E), in present-day Botswana, he chased a female rhinoceros carrying "an unusually long horn" (Gordon Cumming, 1850: 2: 13). Again, on 16 November 1848, on the north bank of the Mariqua River (24° 30' S, 26° 27' E), close to present-day Gabarone, Botswana, he came upon another female with a very long horn (Gordon Cumming, 1850: 2: 349).

<sup>3</sup> There is a second edition of the same catalogue dated 1853, with a different title, but text, print, and pagination are identical (Gordon Cumming, 1853).

<sup>4</sup> The title of the sales catalogue (Stevens, 1866) provides a summary of the contents of the collection: "25 skulls of lions, tigers, bears and panthers, giraffe head stuffed, 2 elephants' heads with tusks, 8 heads of hippopotami, 2 Indian buffaloes, 2 rhinoceros with horns, 10 sable antelopes, 5 roan antelopes, 12 oryx, 10 koodoos, 2 wapitis, 1 fossil Irish elk, 13 African waterbuck, 10 Highland rams, 30 red deer, 9 fallow deer, 50 roes, 17 Carpathian stags, 62 rhinoceros' horns, 10 lions' skins, robes of leopards and other skins, and walking sticks of rhinoceros' horn and shields; also heads of hartebeest, gnoo, springbok, blesbok, and many other specimens; also the Diorama of South Africa, as exhibited by the late R. Gordon Cumming, Esq. in London and other cities."

<sup>5</sup> Copy in Circus History Museum, Barraboo.

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