



# THE R RAILKE

WHO IS  
STEALING ALL OF  
EUROPE'S HORNS?

IN 2012  
THIEVES BROKE  
INTO THE MUSEUM  
IM RITTERHAUS  
IN OFFENBURG,  
GERMANY, AND  
STOLE A HORN,  
PART OF AN  
EPIDEMIC OF  
TAXIDERMY  
LARCENY

# HINDO

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BY  
ADAM

HIGGINBOTHAM

When the phone rang at about 3 a.m. on April 18, Nigel Monaghan was asleep on the floor in his office in Dublin, tangled in a sleeping bag. In his job as Keeper of the National Museum of Ireland's natural history section, he was overseeing filming of the latest episode of a children's TV special, *Sleepover Safari*. Ten children, their parents, and a film crew were spending the night in the museum, known locally as the Dead Zoo, surrounded by Ireland's foremost collection of taxidermy.

The call was from the museum's central security office. Four stuffed rhino heads—ones Monaghan had sent away for safekeeping a year earlier—had been stolen from the museum's storage facility near the airport. At 10:40 p.m., three masked men forced their way in, tied up the single guard on duty, and found the shelves where the heads were kept. The trophies were heavy and awkward. Expertly stuffed and mounted by big game taxidermists at the turn of the 20th century, they were monstrous confections of skin and bone, plaster and timber, horsehair and straw. When Monaghan and his team had come to move the largest—that of a white rhino shot in Sudan in 1914, with a horn more than three feet long—it had taken four men just to lift it down from the museum wall. But the burglars were undeterred, and soon they had every head in the back of their white van. They took nothing else, and within an hour they were gone.

Monaghan couldn't go back to sleep. He turned on the office lights, sat at his computer, and began writing a press release. It seemed the Rathkeale Rovers had struck again.

**Rhino horn is one of the world's most valuable illegal commodities**, part of an international trade in endangered species estimated to be worth \$10 billion a year, according to Global Financial Integrity, a research organization that tracks underground commerce. Over the last century, rhinos have been hunted to the brink of extinction, and traffic in rhino products is now regulated by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). In Asia, powdered rhino horn has long been a valued part of traditional medicine. It's recently become more prized by a new capitalist elite in Vietnam—where it's mixed with wine at parties, an emblem of conspicuous consumption—and China.

Word of the fortune hidden in rhino horns spread quietly at first. For years, horns mounted before 1947 were exempt from the export regulations of CITES and could be legally exported from Europe. But in 2006 antique horns began achieving unprecedented prices at auction; over three years their cost rose tenfold. In 2010, after a single horn sold at British auction for a world record £99,300 (\$164,000), European authorities announced an export ban on antique rhino trophies.

Ten years ago a single horn weighing up to 30 pounds would have sold in the U.S. for a maximum of \$20,000. "Now horn in the United States is selling anywhere from \$8,000 to \$20,000 a pound," says Edward Grace,

deputy assistant director for law enforcement at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Washington. "By the time it gets to Asia, a single horn can easily be worth \$500,000."

Although powdered rhino horn pound for pound is now worth more than cocaine or heroin, the prison terms for trafficking in it are a fraction of those for the equivalent weight of narcotics. The sentence for a first-time offender smuggling a kilo of heroin in the U.S. is a minimum of 10 years in prison; according to Grace, a first-time offender smuggling a kilo of horn would get off with less than a year, and more likely a fine. "It's a high-profit, low-risk crime," he says.

The first signs of an Irish connection in the world of rhino horn trafficking went almost unnoticed. In January 2010 customs officers at Ireland's Shannon Airport confiscated eight horns from the baggage of two passengers on a flight from Faro, Portugal. Officials weren't even certain a crime had been committed; they had never seized a rhino horn before. No arrests were immediately made, and the evidence was sent to Dublin Zoo for analysis. The passengers were Jeremiah and Michael O'Brien, Irish brothers who said they were traveling antique dealers who spent most of their time living in French and German RV parks. If any international alert was transmitted about the O'Briens, John Reid, then the Irish police force's liaison to Europol, never received it.

During the summer of 2010, however, Reid noticed something unusual in the intelligence traffic reaching him from other countries. Identification requests containing the same names and vehicles were coming in from Scandinavia, France, and Belgium, and sometimes from different agencies in the same country, just weeks apart.

The queries shared many common elements, including a British-registered vehicle driven by a man who said he was Irish, or vice versa, who was involved in a petty scam—fraudulent contracting or selling counterfeit electrical generators or power tools. Often the individual had presented a U.K. driver's license and given a vague or transient address in England; sometimes a German or French policeman had written down a phonetic version of the suspect's place of origin as "Raheel" or "Rackeel." When questioned, the men were aggressive; their names were infuriatingly similar; they sometimes had multiple identities; frequently every word they said was a lie. They proved impossible to track in police databases. "Shadows, floating in and out," Reid says. At the end of a crime report detailing the activities of one Irish suspect, the Scandinavian author broke out of formal bureaucratic language to add a plaintive postscript: "Is there anybody that knows how to deal with these people?" Reid decided to look into it.

### RHINO HEADS AT IRELAND'S NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM THAT WERE STOLEN IN APRIL 2013



Across the Atlantic, Grace at the USFWS also began hearing strange complaints about Irishmen attempting to purchase rhino horns illegally. In July 2010 a man calling himself John Sullivan sent a message to a taxidermist in Commerce City, Colo., claiming he was decorating a castle in Ireland with an African theme; he needed rhino trophies. The taxidermist, knowing that transporting rhino products from the U.S. to Ireland without a valid certificate from the USFWS was a felony, reported the solicitation to federal authorities. He continued the correspondence as an informant.

Over the next two months, Sullivan arranged for his “brother” to fly to Colorado to finalize the purchase of four horns from the informant. “Only interested in rhino,” Sullivan wrote. “The more rhino u get us, the more money u get ur self.” On Sept. 9, 2010, accompanied by undercover Special Agent Curtis Graves of the USFWS, the informant met two men with thick Irish brogues, Richard O’Brien and Michael Hegarty. O’Brien said he knew rhino horn couldn’t legally leave the U.S., but they were in the antiques business and getting the horn out of the country wouldn’t be difficult: They had sea containers filled with furniture going to Britain every few weeks. Graves told the Irishmen that his cousin had four horns he could sell them for \$8,500.

On Nov. 13, Hegarty and O’Brien returned from Ireland to make the purchase, handing over €12,850 in cash, and were promptly arrested. They admitted to investigators that they were buying on behalf of Sullivan but otherwise stuck to their story: The horns were to be decoration in an Irish castle.

Even as the federal trap was closing in Colorado, another Irishman was quietly shopping for rhinos in Texas: In late September, Michael Slattery Jr. attempted to buy a stuffed rhino head from a taxidermist in Austin. When told that the sale would be legal only to a Texas resident, Slattery and his accomplices recruited a homeless man to make the \$18,000 purchase for them. Three days after O’Brien and Hegarty were arrested in Colorado, Slattery arrived in New York, where he and his accomplices sold four horns, accompanied by falsified Endangered Species bills of sale, to a Chinese buyer in Queens for a total of \$50,000. Later that day, Slattery took a plane out of the country. The rhino horns were sold twice more in New York before they, too, left the U.S.—this time for China.

A few days later in Washington, Grace of the USFWS was introduced to a colleague from Europol. When Grace mentioned the peculiar case he’d been dealing with in Colorado, the colleague told him it sounded familiar.

By the beginning of November 2010, working at Europol headquarters in the Hague, Reid, the Irish police force’s liaison for Interpol, had spent several months collecting and analyzing intelligence from across Europe. With help from detectives of Dublin’s Criminal Assets Bureau, or the CAB, a multi-agency investigative unit established in part to combat organized crime in Ireland, he assembled a detailed briefing on a criminal group that had come to be known as the Rathkeale Rovers. They are part of a network of clans called the Irish Travellers, a nomadic and often secretive ethnic group that maintains its own distinct customs and language.

**The Rovers have been of interest to the CAB for much of the last decade but have proved hard to prosecute—not least because they rarely seem to commit any crimes in Ireland.** Unlike a conventional criminal gang, set up and directed to accomplish a single illegal enterprise, the Rathkeale Rovers operate within the extended families of the Irish Traveller network, a tangle of relatives who work together in all enterprises, both legal and illegal.

They spend most of every year on the road, living in trailers—known as caravans in Britain and Ireland—at campsites and trailer parks for months at a time. According to Eugene Corcoran, head of the CAB, they originally earned their name traveling in Britain and Europe doing road-paving work, which may sometimes be legitimate but is more often part of a long-running

# HORN HEISTS

SINCE 2011, EUROPOL HAS TALLIED

**67** RHINO HORN THEFTS

ACROSS **15** EUROPEAN NATIONS

RATHKEALE, IRELAND: HOME OF THE ROVERS

= SITE OF THEFT



## ESTIMATED VALUE OF ILLICIT INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN...

WILDLIFE	\$10.0b
TIMBER	\$7.0b
COUNTERFEIT CIGARETTES	\$2.6b
SMALL ARMS	\$1.0b
DIAMONDS AND GEMS	\$0.9b

GRAPHIC BY BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK. DATA: EUROPOL, GLOBAL FINANCIAL INTEGRITY

scheme to defraud vulnerable people, taking cash for substandard asphalt paving of driveways. Other favored scams include burglary and fraudulent white-line-painting operations, often using water-soluble paint. (“There’s a regional airport in France, as soon as it rains, the runway will disappear,” says CAB detective Paul Fleming.) Recently the Rovers have expanded their range to include Canada, Hong Kong, Russia, and the Dominican Republic. In addition to paving, they trade in furniture, carpets, cars, and especially antiques. Renowned for their sharp entrepreneurial instincts, they prefer cash transactions and often drive thousands of miles on short notice to do a deal.

At the end of each year, the Rovers return to a small rural town two hours’ drive from Dublin—Rathkeale, in County Limerick. As they gather there in November and December, the narrow streets

**“THE COMMON DENOMINATOR WAS IT ALL CAME BACK TO RATHKEALE”**

clog with BMW and Mercedes SUVs, and the clans compete to stage the most ostentatious wedding of the season. Those who have made the most money stand to rise in the clan hierarchy and like to flaunt their wealth with shows of extravagance. “Gucci Travellers,” Fleming says. “That’s how they’re known amongst their own.”

Richard “Kerry” O’Brien is known as the King of the Travellers in Rathkeale. He’s one of the wealthiest Travellers in Ireland. According to the CAB detectives and Eamon Dillon, the crime correspondent for Dublin’s *Sunday World* newspaper and author of two books about the Travellers, O’Brien has made money by importing furniture from China, where he travels several times a year, and for a while owned a factory manufacturing aluminum gutters which other Travellers sold door to door. O’Brien, like his fellow Rathkeale clan leader Michael “Levan” Slattery, is renowned as a world-class expert in antiques. Over the past 20 years, the Rathkeale Rovers have become regulars on the international auction circuit, bidding on furniture, paintings, and other rare artifacts. Many are said to be millionaires.

The Kerry O’Briens and Levan Slatterys are just two of the dozens of Rathkeale clans, many of whom share the same family name and go by nicknames so they can tell one another apart: The Kerry O’Briens, for example, differ from the “Turkey” O’Briens, the “Bishop” O’Briens, and the “Pa Turkey” O’Briens. The families are large and complicated further by a tradition of giving fathers, sons, and cousins the same first names. It was Richard Kerry O’Brien’s son, also named Richard, who was arrested by the USFWS in Colorado for buying rhino horns—and, along with his brother-in-law, Michael Hegarty, later served six months in federal prison for smuggling; the Michael Slattery Jr. buying horns in Texas was Michael Levan Slattery’s son. Michael and Jeremiah O’Brien, the brothers stopped at Ireland’s Shannon Airport who were later arrested and convicted of illegally importing eight horns, are members of the Bishop O’Brien clan. The duplicate names have made tracking them hard. “If Dan O’Brien opens a bank account in Germany, which Dan O’Brien is it?” says Fleming. “There’s 15 Dan O’Briens in Rathkeale.” They have one other thing in common, says Fleming: “They’re always on the lookout for the next commodity to make big money from.”

On Nov. 17, 2010, a few days after O’Brien and Hegarty were arrested by the USFWS in Colorado, Reid convened a meeting in the Hague with Europol intelligence analysts and fellow liaison officers from a dozen member states. He explained how the rash of crimes they had been reporting all originated with a single criminal network of Irish Traveller families; and for the first time he revealed their involvement in the illegal rhino horn trade. As a result of the meeting, the Rathkeale Rovers became the target of a pan-European investigation designated Operation Oakleaf.

Even as the police forces of 33 European countries—and the USFWS, which soon sent agents to operational meetings at Europol—began coordinating their efforts against the Rovers, the gang’s quest for rhino horn intensified. In South Africa, two Rathkealers were caught trying to hire gunmen to poach rhinos. In Europe they abandoned their trucks and their door-to-door frauds to begin flying from place to place, visiting castles, stately homes, and natural history museums. The curators of dusty trophy rooms and taxidermy collections in every corner of the continent soon faced an epidemic of burglaries.

On New Year’s Eve 2010, a single horn was stolen from the All Weather Zoo in Münster; in February a complete rhino head was torn from the wall during a break-in at an auctioneer in Britain. By the end of summer 2011, there had been 19 more thefts or attempted robberies from museums and collections in France, Holland, Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and the U.K. An increasing number of robberies were daylight smash-and-grabs: In Paris, thieves attacked guards at the Museum of Hunting and Nature in the Marais with tear gas before making off with a horn. “The common denominator,” says Fleming, “was it all came back to Rathkeale.”

The evidence was scattered—a telephone intercept here, some video footage there, a license plate. In many museums the robberies were preceded by visits from men described as Irish, who arrived asking to see rhino exhibits or other unusual items and left after taking pictures. When the thieves were caught in the act, they rarely turned out to be the Rathkealers themselves, but workmen the clans employed on asphaltting jobs or criminals hired from Britain for the purpose. Few were experts. After a break-in at Portugal’s Coimbra museum one night in April 2011, during which two 18th century rhino horns were lifted, police isolated the traffic logged on the nearest cell phone tower during the robbery. They found that a call had been placed from inside the building at 1 a.m. to a number with an area code of 086—an Irish cell phone registered to the wife of a senior member of one of the Rathkeale clans. The thieves apparently were calling for last-minute directions.

As the robberies continued, Operation Oakleaf began to disentangle the Rathkeale network. Investigators broke down the clan structures and affiliations and identified the two dozen most significant figures in the rhino trafficking ring. In September 2011, Portuguese police stopped an Australian antiques dealer, not named by authorities, at the Lisbon airport as he and his son prepared to board a flight to Dublin. A search of their luggage revealed €100,000 in cash and six rhino horns, with an estimated total value of more than \$500,000. According to the CAB detectives, the dealer was based in Shanghai and had been flying into Europe as often as once a week to meet members of the Rathkeale Rovers in France, Spain, and Portugal. Charged with smuggling offenses under CITES, the Australian is suspected of being the original middleman in the clans’ trafficking ring, responsible for selling stolen and smuggled horns to customers in Asia.

Back in Ireland, Michael Kealy of Rathkeale was arrested on a European warrant for his involvement in the daylight robbery of a rhino horn from an auctioneer in a McDonald’s parking lot in Britain, and later served three months in prison for his part in the crime. John Quilligan, of Roches Road in Rathkeale, was later picked up in Dublin in connection with two thefts of rhino horns in Vienna and extradited to Austria, but released soon afterward, according to CAB detectives. In January 2013, a series of coordinated raids across eight European countries led to the arrests of 30 more individuals with Rathkeale connections.

On Sept. 13, 2013, the climax of Operation Oakleaf, police staged simultaneous raids on eight locations in the U.K. and Ireland. As dawn broke, officers of the Cambridgeshire constabulary used a crowbar and a battering ram to smash open the door of a caravan parked at the Smithy Fen Traveller encampment in England and arrested Richard Kerry O’Brien, the King of the Travellers himself. O’Brien slumped on a couch in his underwear, hands cuffed behind

**“THEY’RE ALWAYS ON THE LOOKOUT FOR THE NEXT COMMODITY TO MAKE BIG MONEY FROM”**

his back, as the police searched the caravan. Taken in for questioning, he was later released on bail; four rhino horns were found during the raid. In Rathkeale, the CAB and armed Irish police seized artwork and computers from O'Brien's house.

The following day the USFWS finally caught up with Michael Slattery Jr. at Gate 55 of Newark Liberty International Airport. Slattery was preparing to leave for London when he was arrested by agents from the bureau, part of an investigation into rhino horn trafficking named Operation Crash. In November, Slattery pled guilty to a single charge of conspiracy to violate the Lacey Act, which forbids trade in illegally obtained wildlife. Brought before a judge in Brooklyn, he burst into tears. He will be sentenced this month.

**At first, Rathkeale seems much like any other rural town in the lush countryside south of the River Shannon.** A winding main street with pubs and a beauty shop carries agricultural traffic and the occasional tourist. As Detective Paul Fleming and his partner, Detective Sergeant Cyril Claffey, turn their car onto the loop of Roches Road, they point to the rows of modest single-family homes lining the street. Most have been immaculately refurbished with stone cladding and new windows and porches. "Every single one of these houses, they're all owned by Travellers," Fleming says. "They all have the same characteristics: big iron gates, shutters on the windows. And you won't see a blade of grass anywhere." The steel screens that cover the windows protect the houses during their owners' long absences; in front of each, gardens and lawns have been paved over to accommodate vans and SUVs and the expensive-looking caravans parked outside. These are often connected to the house by an electrical extension cable, drawing power from inside. The houses themselves are rarely lived in at all. "They stay in the caravan even when they're home," says Fleming. "The house," Claffey explains, "is a bit of a trophy."

The Rovers have spent the last 20 years systematically buying up Rathkeale, often arriving with suitcases full of cash and offering homeowners two or three times market value. Corcoran believes the property and the cars are being used to launder the proceeds of crime committed abroad. Recent estimates suggest that the Travellers now own 80 percent of property in Rathkeale.

In a prime hilltop position in the town, opposite the parish church, is the imposing brick house owned by Richard Kerry O'Brien; when Fleming pulls up outside, the gold-painted wrought iron gates stand open, and a child's scooter lies at the top of the driveway, in which an SUV is parked. Fleming points out the adjacent land, where O'Brien has built 20 new homes he's recently sold to other Travellers. Claffey advises against

### BRITISH POLICE RAIDED A COTTENHAM TRAVELLERS SITE IN SEPTEMBER AS PART OF AN INVESTIGATION INTO THEFTS FROM MUSEUMS AND AUCTION HOUSES



### JEREMIAH AND MICHAEL O'BRIEN OUTSIDE ENNIS CIRCUIT COURT IN IRELAND, WHERE THEY WERE EACH FINED €500



taking photographs. "They expect us around here," he says, "but they get a bit touchy if we start using cameras. Last Christmas a whole gang of them started throwing bricks at the car."

In the wake of Operation Oakleaf, the epidemic of rhino horn burglaries in Europe has subsided, and those taken from the natural history museum of Ireland's storage facility in April 2013 are among the last to have been reported stolen. (Those heads have not been recovered, and no arrests have been made, but law enforcement officials say they have little doubt the Rovers are responsible.) The thefts have slowed partly because museum curators, now more aware of the horns' value, have removed them from display or replaced them with resin replicas. But it's mainly because the Traveller clans have already taken everything they could. "They've exhausted the rhino horns that were available," says Claffey.

With even the stuffed animals in the Dead Zoo hunted to extinction, the Rathkeale Rovers have turned to the quest for another rare commodity. More than recovering rhino horns, the British operation that led to the arrest of Richard Kerry O'Brien in September was focused on reclaiming 18 Chinese artifacts from the Ming and Qing dynasties, stolen in two separate museum robberies in Britain in 2012. The objects, more than 400 years old, were valued at £20 million and almost certainly stolen to order. Recently, security guards at the Chester Beatty Library at Dublin castle reported a visitor who seemed especially interested in its collection of antique Chinese jade. He didn't much resemble the other whispering aesthetes examining the library's renowned Eastern treasures, but he took a few pictures with his iPhone. Soon after he left, the museum curators took the precaution of removing every last piece of jade from display.

"It's rhino horns today and Chinese artifacts tomorrow," Claffey says. "God knows what it will be next week."