

THE NATIONAL PAST

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photo: George Serras



The nation and its history have always been contested, not least in recent public debates. Historian Geoffrey Blainey's contention that the pendulum of Australian history swings periodically between the 'black armband' and 'three cheers' schools of Australian history is now widely known and quoted.

In recent decades the very idea of the nation became suspect in the academy, as successive studies argued its symbiotic relationship with modernity and a modern condition that was increasingly the subject of theoretical critique. Similarly, the museum's own history as a national apparatus implicated in a 'spectacle of power' that sustained the State was unpacked in Foucauldian readings, such as those of Tony Bennett.

Cultural soothsayers also predicted the decline of the nation and nationalism in the face of increasing global flows. The passage of people, capital and information across national borders was held to be the harbinger of a new world order that would render the national frame redundant. Yet precisely at the moment when the nation was being dissected and its future dismissed in the academy, popular feeling for it began to grow. Among others, Stuart Hall has written of the need to explain the strong re-emergence of national feeling in late industrial societies.

This is difficult terrain for a museum charged with reflecting the nation to itself, particularly when it is asked to arbitrate on a contrived divide between plural or consensual views of the Australian past. Adherents of the plural view consider that the nation draws strength from a hybridised and differentiated national culture, while advocates of the latter claim that there must be something shared and common about the nation to explain its enduring – even growing – hold on people.

James Curran's recent book *The Power of Speech* has examined the political genealogies of national self-regard, as expressed in the speeches of Australian prime ministers since Sir Robert Menzies. The book suggests that national leaders from Harold Holt to Paul Keating have attempted to promote Australian national identity as ethnically diverse and plural, while more recently John Howard has re-invigorated Britishness alongside a new vision of 'Australian multiculturalism'.

The apparently arbitrary division between pluralism on the one hand and consensus on the other presents difficulties for a national museum. Both necessarily involve choices from the museum's representational lexicon of objects and images related to Australian cultural experience. The selection of object, storyline and text – however carefully and adroitly this is handled – inevitably encourages a view of what it means to be Australian. Whether a curator favours cultural narratives that articulate a shared consensus or those that spruik a differentiated, plural view of national life, the effect is inevitably much the same – both seem to define the nation by determining Australianness, however narrowly or broadly described. How then do we accept the need to address the nation, to explain its enduring significance to people, while avoiding the pitfalls of determining a national culture with the sort of single-mindedness that invariably invites criticism?

In a recent paper published in the *Griffith Review*, Mark McKenna discerns a popular mood for inclusion of a reference to the country's territory, or 'land', in any new preamble to the Australian Constitution. McKenna writes that:

By emphasizing the centrality of the land to any new constitutional preamble, perhaps non-Aboriginal Australians are also wishing to end the sense of alienation and exile that is embedded within their colonial experience. Home is no longer elsewhere. The mother country is here.

McKenna is pointing to the way that a 'sense of place' informs our national dreaming. Recent scholarship that examines the histories of Australian landscapes also emphasises the 'located' character of Australian experiences. The work of Tom Griffiths, Peter Read, Tim Bonyhady, Libby Robin and Jay Arthur, among others, suggests that the NMA's national reach may be addressed by cultural histories of Australian places, rather than by attempting to define and represent a national type or identity.

Griffiths has written on the possibility of strengthening the theme of 'Land' in the NMA's exhibitions, a point taken up by the Review of the National Museum published in 2003. Instead of defining ourselves by arguing shared traits or national character, why not interrogate the Australian past through stories of shared places and locales? Such a focus may also enlarge the NMA's sensitivity to regional experiences. As an indication of what this may mean, I am thinking of Raimond Gaita's remarkable biography of his father, located firmly in the country near Maldon, in central Victoria. Gaita's narrative of migrant passage and personal adversity was played out in a simply evoked Australian place that was immediately recognisable, even to those of us who had never been to the area before reading the book. In 'recognising' that place, there was something shared and familiar in readers' apprehension of migrant experience. And yet the detail of Romulus Gaita's personal history of that place remained his own – it was keenly drawn, particular and precise.

At another level, a focus on place may also allow the NMA to deal with what George Seddon describes as the breathtaking architectures of the iron ore mining industry in the Pilbara, at the same time as acknowledging issues related to the industry's environmental sustainability. Such a focus is not limited to rural or remote locations – the histories of Lygon Street in Melbourne, Oxford Street in Sydney, or indeed of St George's Terrace in my home town, Perth, are just as compelling.

In some ways this would take the NMA full circle, back to the original hopes for the Museum expressed in the Pigott Report. That report argued that a continental purview would provide a frame within which our national stories might be expressed. At its best, this approach opens up the possibility of exploring layered historical meanings of Australian places and recognises the obligation to include Indigenous and non-Indigenous voices in any understanding of our national past. There are dangers, too, of course. Heavy-handed representation of cultural histories of place might appear environmentally deterministic, or could reinvigorate a recurring nationalist impulse to contrive a stoic bush type as classically Australian.

Yet exploring the located histories of people and their experiences across the continent would allow for diverse histories to be refracted through a common prism, maintaining narrative unity while employing a precision and care for different experiences. Places can be common to us all, even if our experiences of them are particular and specific to ourselves. 🗨️

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