

Landmarks: People and Places across Australia, a gallery bringing together over 1500 objects, explores the history of Australia since European settlement.



Every place has a past ...

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On 6 June 1835, grazier John Batman and his servants met with a group of Indigenous Kulin people beside a stream flowing into what is now known as the Yarra River. Batman persuaded Kulin leaders to sign what he saw as a treaty giving him land in exchange for tools and trinkets and a promise of supplies.

Batman represented the Port Phillip Association, a group of entrepreneurs interested in the wide grasslands of the Port Phillip district because they could no longer obtain free land grants in Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania). They believed the treaty gave them exclusive claim over more than 200,000 hectares of prime grazing land.

In the end, the association was unable to enforce its claim and within a few years, colonists were flooding into Kulin country. The place where Batman negotiated his treaty was soon overlaid by the houses, roads and farms of a quickly growing colonial settlement. Today, the site's exact location is unknown, but it must lie somewhere in Melbourne's northern suburbs.

The story of the making of Batman's treaty leads us into a longer history of Melbourne that reveals how the first years of European settlement in Australia continue to shape our lives today. Melbourne straddles the Yarra because settlers, like the Kulin people, needed to camp near fresh water. The city's grid of streets embodies European visions of an ordered town intersecting with the Yarra's sloping valley, and the centre's wide thoroughfares reflect the need for easy passage of bullock carts.

Of course, today's Melbourne also incorporates evidence of later decades. A beautifully painted panorama scroll from the mid-nineteenth century shows Melbourne enjoying a gold rush boom, with buildings such as the Treasury and a Flinders Street train station, already in evidence. Not shown are sites such as the 'native camp', where the commandant of the Melbourne settlement tried to corral local Aboriginal people.

Today, the site is part of the Royal Botanic Gardens where Kulin guides explain traditional uses of local plants for food, tools and medicine.

Batman's treaty and the panoramic scroll are two of more than 1500 objects featured in the National Museum of Australia's new Landmarks gallery. This new permanent exhibition presents a history of Australia since European colonisation of the continent in the late eighteenth century. It considers ten themes in Australian life, exploring each through the stories of places and their peoples. It asks visitors to consider how each place has a past and how that past has shaped our lives today.

The gallery begins with the first British colonies in Australia, exploring the histories of Sydney, Hobart, Melbourne and Adelaide. This section considers how early settlers envisaged new societies on the Australian continent and struggled to survive in unfamiliar new environments. The Sydney exhibit, for example, includes objects such as a rare Wedgwood medallion, made from clay sent by Governor Phillip in Sydney Cove to Sir Joseph Banks in England so that it could be tested for its suitability for ceramics. Wedgwood returned some of the clay to Phillip in the form of a medallion emblazoned with classical symbols expressing hopes for the prosperity of the new colony.

This medallion is displayed alongside a set of early fish hooks made by the Eora people of the Sydney region and the spear point extracted from Phillip's soldier after an altercation with Eora man Wilemaring. These pieces reveal both settlers' ambitions for the new colony and the realities of occupying an already inhabited land.

This first section of the gallery introduces two of the major narrative threads in the exhibitions. A place-based history brings sharply into focus the centrality of the interwoven histories of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians - the complicated history of colonisation – to any understanding of the Australian past. Stories throughout Landmarks consider how settlers and Aboriginal peoples encountered each other as Europeans moved into the continent, how they fought and negotiated for access to land and resources, and developed sometimes amicable and sometimes disastrous modes of living together.

Similarly, Landmarks' attention to place reveals how Australian communities have emerged through people shaping – marking – local landscapes, plants and animals, and simultaneously being shaped and marked by them. The gallery explores how Australians have sought to realise certain ambitions or ideas about the kind of communities they wanted to build; but also how people, and their ideas, have engaged, responded and over time adapted to the character and realities of Australian geographies and ecologies.

From the first European settlements on the Australian continent, the gallery moves to traces journeys of exploration around and across the continent.

The stream anchor from HMS Investigator introduces an exhibit on the Recherche Archipelago, off Western Australia's southern coast. In 1803, British naval officer Matthew Flinders, in order to avoid being dashed on rocks, was obliged to cut loose the anchor in the archipelago. It remained on the sea floor until the 1970s, when a later generation of explorers located and raised it.

Like many of the exhibits in Landmarks, the Recherche Archipelago display brings together objects from across the span of European history in Australia, inviting visitors to consider how ways of engaging with place today connect with those of earlier decades. Investigator's anchor is displayed alongside other material relating to Flinders' 1802-3 circumnavigation of Australia – the first to be completed – including Flinders' sword and sextant and botanical specimens collected in the Recherche Archipelago by one of Investigator's 'scientific gentlemen'. These objects are joined by specimens of flora and fauna collected on a range of scientific expeditions that visited and sought to document the archipelago's bio-geography during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The story of exploration and investigation is brought right up to the recent past, with a multi-media element allowing visitors to explore the Marine Futures project, which, between 2006 and 2008 mapped Western Australia's major marine habitats, including continuing Investigator's work of documenting the flora and fauna of the Recherche Archipelago.

Some of the places featured in Landmarks will be familiar to many visitors, others less so, depending on where they come from. Few may have travelled to Elsey station in the Northern Territory, one of a series of places exploring the history of pastoralism, but many may have read *We of the Never-Never*, Jeannie Gunn's iconic account of her time in the north. Landmarks features a range of objects illuminating Gunn's life on Elsey station, exploring how she developed a deep affection for the place and its people, coming to understand the country not as a forbidding and dangerous place, but one to be admired if also respected.

Some of Gunn's possessions, including small tokens of remembrance given to her by the Elsey station cook, Ah Cheong, are displayed in the gallery adjacent to an imposing Intercolonial Boring Company Simplex windmill that stood originally on Kenya station, near Bowen Downs station, in central Queensland. The windmill turns slowly in the gallery, adding the distinctive sound of creaking metal to the exhibition's soundscape. Just as Gunn's story tells of a process of coming to know a place, the Kenya windmill reveals a long history of pastoralists experimenting with ways of watering their stock on the grasslands.

It suggests both how damming and drilling enabled cattle industries to flourish in this landscape, but also how the realities of water availability reshaped pastoral enterprises here. No history of Australia would be complete without an account of the gold rushes and their impact on Australia. Landmarks traces how gold shaped ideas about representation and government on the Victorian goldfields, and challenged law and order in the Lachlan valley of New South Wales. A lavishly decorated Chinese costume, used for many years in Bendigo's Easter parade, evokes that community's efforts for recognition as equal citizens. Four tiny specks of gold, sent by a digger from Emu Creek (now Grenfell) to a friend in England, evokes the dreams of wealth pursued, within and without the law, on the alluvial fields of the Lachlan.

Just as visitors will encounter both new and known places in Landmarks, they will also be able to learn more about both well and little known characters. A series of exhibits explore struggles for equal opportunity and social justice in Australia. Relics of Mary MacKillop's life evoke her work providing schooling for poor Catholic children in Robe, South Australia, and part of a larger story about efforts to ensure all children have access to education. A 1911 Sunshine stripper-harvester tells the story of industrialist H. V. McKay, who once owned one of the largest manufacturing operations in Australia. Today, McKay and the union men who worked for and battled with him have largely dropped from public consciousness, but at the beginning of the twentieth century, they were at the heart of debates about the rights of working people. The 1907 Harvester judgement, which used McKay's factory as a test case, set the first national minimum wage in Australia.

One of the key ideas in Landmarks is the way that places are shaped, over time, through interactions between people and the land and the plants and animals with which they live. This idea is powerfully explored in a series of exhibits tracing the history of agriculture in Australia. Early settlers imported to the new continent the idea that a stable, prosperous society was one in which large numbers of people were settled on small family farms. This is an idea that still plays powerfully in national debates about agricultural industries and subsidies.

Landmarks explores how this 'yeoman ideal' has shaped agriculture in Australia. The Sunshine stripper-harvester made at McKay's Harvester Works was used for many years on a family farm near Wagga Wagga in New South Wales. From this perspective, the harvester reveals the realities of small-scale agriculture at the turn of the nineteenth century, connecting with stories of large families labouring on the land, scientific advances in wheat production and intensive land-clearing and cropping, and the deleterious impacts of these practices on soil stability. The Wagga exhibit brings the harvester together with a fantastic pyramid display of prize-winning wheat samples, collected over many years by one dedicated farmer, and objects illustrating the early work of the NSW Soil Conservation Service.

'Place' can mean many different things. It can refer to a specific town or station, to a geographic area, to a building or house, or even to the parts of an infrastructure project. And, of course, each place is connected to many others. One section of Landmarks explores histories of science, education and ideas in Australia, including the founding of the Australian National University in Canberra. A set of stunning bark paintings suggests how the ANU has been intimately connected over time with other places around the country. The exhibit includes paintings and other objects collected by anthropologist WEH Stanner from artists of the Murrinh-patha people of Wadeye (formerly Port Keats) in the Northern Territory. Stanner brought these works back to his office at the ANU and they became central parts of his work developing his ground-breaking understanding of the concept of the Dreaming.

Phar Lap's heart is one of the National Museum's most requested objects. In Landmarks, it forms the centrepiece of an exhibit on Flemington Racecourse in Melbourne. The 1934 Melbourne Cup, silks from the 1890s and the 2000s, and jockey Jim Pike's riding equipment evoke the excitement and action of race day at Flemington, while other objects tell histories of how the Cup has been broadcast out across Australia (and now the world) connecting far distant people to Flemington and each other.

The gallery's heaviest object anchors exhibits exploring changes to Australia's post-World War Two economy and society. A 15.2 tonne excavator bucket used in mining iron ore at Mount Tom Price sits like a great steel sculpture in the gallery. Together with objects relating to prospector and businessman Lang Hancock and Ngarluma artist Loreen Samson, the bucket reveals both the enormous wealth promised by the Hamersley Ranges' mineral deposits and the scale of transformation wrought by mining operations.

Nearby, the Holden No. 1 prototype, one of three experimental cars brought to Australia by General Motors Holden engineers, as the start of the post-war project to build an 'Australian car', is the centrepiece of an exhibit on Fishermans Bend. This display focuses on both the design and development of the first Holdens, and also the experiences of GMH employees, many of whom stayed with the company for their entire working lives.

Landmarks' final section examines urban life in Australia, visiting Castlecrag in northern Sydney, Bowen Hills in Brisbane, Rottnest Island off Perth and Bennelong Point in Sydney. This last exhibit revisits the place where the gallery started – Sydney Cove and its environs, the site of the first European settlement in Australia – tracing how this peninsula has been transformed over more than two hundred years, from a significant Gadigal camping ground, to the site for Bennelong's house, to a gun battery, a landing wharf, tram depot and finally the site for the Sydney Opera House.

A series of objects narrate this history, with a shell-covered sculpture of the Opera House by Bidjigal artist Esme Timbery sitting beside a huge mooring chain embedded in sandstone which was excavated from the site and a 1:96 sectional model of Utzon's design for the House.

We often talk of Australia as if it is a singular entity, as if all Australians are the same and 'the nation' an undifferentiated concept. In contrast, Landmarks explores how all Australians live in particular locations and how the tenor and trajectories of our lives are both similar to and shared with Australians in other places and different from others' experiences. In a way Landmarks offers a kind of imaginative tour of the country – the opportunity to 'visit' different places around the country, to explore how they have emerged, and to ask how, together, they create a history of Australia.

Landmarks asks how the places we live in today have been shaped over many generations, as people have pursued dreams and ambitions for particular kinds of lives, as they've responded to and been shaped by local landscapes and ecologies, and as they've fought, negotiated and worked with each other to build Australia's distinctive communities. Landmarks invites visitors to discover how every place has a past, and how that past shapes our present and future.