

**Submission from the Director  
Australian Centre for Indigenous History**

**History Program  
Research School of Social Sciences  
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To whom it may concern,

I wish you all the best in your work on this important review. As the Director of a new Centre, the Australian Centre for Indigenous History, which has been set up by the Australian National University, I have a strong ongoing interest in the exhibitions and programs of the National Museum and the issues as outlined in the review's terms of reference. Having previously worked for two years as Director of the Society and Nation Program at the National Museum, (responsible for the Nation and Horizons galleries only) I am a recent employee of the Museum and therefore have some insights from both an insider and an outsider perspective. In this submission, however, I confine myself to discussing issues that are of special concern in my current role as Centre Director and to my scholarly interests as an academic historian. This submission addresses exhibition issues rather than public programs issues.

Our Centre's aim is to promote research on the history of Indigenous peoples and their written, oral, pictorial, multi-media and performative expression. Australian Indigenous History as studied within the Centre is understood as central to Australian history in its colonial and national transformations. The principal objective of researchers at the Centre is the study of the history of Australian indigenous peoples in their own right and in their relations with immigrant and overseas populations. Trans-national and comparative perspectives will also be emphasized.

**Gallery of First Australians** Regarding the presentation of indigenous history in the National Museum's Gallery of the First Australians, I find it to be a painstakingly balanced account that incorporates much of the best recent scholarship. It balances issues of co-existence with contestation over land. Accounts of earlier history are matched by strong accounts of contemporary culture. Historical issues such as missionary impact, child removal and frontier conflict are not avoided, though the small space provided for frontier conflict does not allow for a sustained exploration of the issues. Important documents of British colonialism such as Batman's treaty and extracts from significant

governor's proclamations are prominently exhibited. The voices of indigenous Australians of past, present and future generations are evident alongside contrasting voices. The 'Welcome Space' and 'Milky Way' star installation at the entrance makes both Australian and international visitors aware of cultural protocols, prior indigenous ownership of land and traditional cosmologies and creation stories. The richness and dynamism of cultural traditions such as dance, weaving, art, tool-making are exemplified by material culture examples that can be appreciated as an aesthetic or an education experience. The discrete space dedicated to the Torres Strait Islander gallery is also useful and is again a very positive history of a proud culture wishing to showcase its achievements and the changes embraced over time, including their incorporation of strong Christian beliefs. The urban/remote areas mix across the gallery works well. The exhibitions give the impression that relevant members of indigenous communities were carefully consulted and that the community custodians of history made input into the presentation. A sense of multiple voices and multiple perspectives on different stories is often available.

Overall the tone and mood of the Gallery of the First Australians is celebratory. Exhibitions emphasise cultural adaptation and the joy as well as pain of being an indigenous Australian.

The ample size of the gallery is appropriate given the long history of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander occupation of Australia; this is our continent's ancient history. As one of the greatest strengths of the National Collection is in this indigenous field, an impressive display of such items therefore meets a key Museum function. Furthermore, it satisfies the requirements of the Act (Part2, 5i) and exhibition development and maintenance has involved highly effective community consultation.

When the Museum opened, the sense of pride and ownership shared by so many diverse indigenous communities was palpable. The strong level of indigenous participation and visitation of the National Museum was an unusual feat given the strong political differences and contrasting historical legacies of indigenous Australians. (It might be noted that all communities and individuals share such differences and will therefore desire a varied agenda in their National Museum.) For indigenous Australians, however, the opening of the National Museum of Australia marked a key moment in their history; through the NMA, the recognition for which they had long argued had finally been achieved in a tangible, entertaining and pride-building fashion. This is an achievement for which this government should also take pride.

The Gallery of the First Australians seems to intentionally underplay violence in order to give primacy to the positive contemporary story of survival. This was certainly the mood of the 1988 Bicentennial Celebrations conducted by indigenous Australians and even the Olympics opening ceremony component organized by the indigenous community. Although there are notable exceptions, a warrior tradition is not as strong for Australian indigenous identity as for example, amongst American Indians. Whilst only too aware of a violent and distressing history, indigenous Australians have often emphasized conciliation and cooperation.

On the ‘frontier conflict’ module, however, many senior scholars – local and overseas – have commented to me about the comparatively small space it takes up. This is probably one of its key problems. There is not the room to explain the complexity of the issues that remain confronting to some Australians. I can understand that the NMA’s decision to relegate a small space may have been made because of the Gallery curator’s wishes to create a celebratory tone and to convey positive messages about the indigenous community today. My own historical accounts, such as *‘Born in the Cattle’: Aborigines in Cattle Country* (1987) have sometimes been labeled as being too positive about northern indigenous experiences, but I was wishing to convey the pride of senior indigenous people in their dynamic accomplishments and leadership in cattle work. What was sometimes overlooked was that the book’s first chapter ‘The Battle for the Waterholes’ actually set the scene by discussing the violence, kidnapping, rape and murder that left an aftermath of trauma on generations of indigenous people. Although we may wish it were otherwise, the negotiated co-existence and co-operative work arrangements of the inter-war years were underwritten by frontier conflict. One story informs the other and they are closely interconnected and highly complex.

**Other Galleries and Research Issues** In regards to the relationship between stories of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, the Nation Gallery, Eternity and Tangled Destinies do not ignore the entangled nature of indigenous and non-indigenous histories. Indeed, the stories are brought together on many occasions. This is a real strength and a reflection of the up to date research involved in preparing the exhibitions. Experts of different political and historical persuasions were consulted at many stages of the exhibition development process and the standard of curatorial research has been high. In any future strategic thinking, I would suggest that the NMA ensures it maintains and strengthens its high standards of in-house curatorial expertise, and that it further encourages staff continuity and intellectual autonomy. It should simultaneously maintain and strengthen its past and present practices of inviting the most senior outside experts to inform exhibition planning.

**General Comments on Museum Presentations of History** From my own perspective as a scholar aiming to conduct innovative research in the future, I consider the National Museum’s exhibitions have already laid pathways upon which future historians can build. Many traditionally trained historians are not well-attuned to the possibilities of using three dimensional, multi-media and multi-sensory techniques of telling historical stories. The National Museum is a model of ways in which the discipline of history may be extended to a more holistic, multi-sensory educational experience that is only partly reliant on text as a presentation device. In a global context that is increasingly multi-media and high technology oriented, the National Museum demonstrates new possibilities for both younger and older students. The potential training and collaborative opportunities it offers are enormous.

When I introduced a group of senior scholars from the Academy of Humanities and the Academy of Social Sciences to the museum’s exhibitions in 2001, I anticipated a rather conservative response from an older generation cohort of text-based experts. However, I found them to be already cognizant of, attuned to and indeed, endorsing the National

Museum's aims. They were excited by the exhibitions and found them up to date and instructive.

Any expert in any field will see that the National Museum, like any other institution, could do more – different themes, different presentation techniques, deeper and broader layers of interpretation. Building on the kind of high level collaborations and expert input that the National Museum has already developed, this will happen in future exhibitions and redevelopment of existing exhibitions.

### **Comments on General issues before Review Panel**

Regarding the Review's Terms of Reference (2) on the National Museum Act, I note that it contains a great deal of gender specific language referring to 'man' and 'he' that now looks like an outdated message to be sending our younger generations. However, unless there was to be a blanket updating procedure to be implemented on all current legislation incorporating such exclusionist language, I am not convinced that this warrants amending the Act.

In my view, the National Museum of Australia has built a solid foundation under the current Act in a very short time and is therefore in a strong position to further build upon its achievements. In my view, its Director, Dawn Casey, has played an outstanding if not exemplary role in ensuring the government's broad and futuristic vision comes to fruition and that the NMA's complex functions as laid out in the National Museum of Australia Act have been complied with. They do not only comply, they fire the imagination and provide a model to visitors internationally. They may already be 'world-class'. (In 2002, a visiting delegation of history Professors and senior museum curators from Japan's Tokyo University and the National Museum of Japanese History stated that the NMA's Exhibitions exceeded anything they had seen elsewhere on indigenous themes; a top curator from the Museum of London made similar comments about the overall exhibitions.) The Collections have grown and clear strategies put in place; the exhibitions display significant items from the National Collection; ongoing and temporary exhibitions of high quality have been organized or in train; quality research backs up all projects; marketing and sponsorship strategies have been formulated and implemented.

Universities and other research bodies are keen to collaborate with the NMA, as evidenced by the number of organizations approaching the museum to support collaborative ventures. I hope the NMA builds on its existing research base in collections and exhibition development.

In such a large and diverse Museum, there will always be room for enhancing exhibitions and public programs based upon audience and expert responses. For example, in the Gallery of the First Australians, a module might be devoted to explaining the different uses and techniques of historical presentation – the commonalities and differences between indigenous and non-indigenous methods, traditional and modern. Misunderstandings abound about 'oral history', yet there is no one tradition of 'oral history' or 'memory'; these traditions and innovations differ amongst communities and cross-culturally they have very different meanings. We should not allow the debate to

deteriorate into simplistic adversarialism reduced to who is 'right'? who is 'wrong'; or what is 'history' and what is not. It reminds me of the somewhat pointless debates historians once had about 'high culture' and 'popular culture', yet I don't think we all wish to give up television for the opera. There are a diversity of historical practices, professional and popular and the community should be considering, debating and better understanding the commonalities and differences.

Nor will there ever be one ultimate interpretation of history. Sometimes it would therefore be more appropriate for the curatorial or authorial voices to be acknowledged with credit panels placed in specific exhibitions or modules. This would ensure that the NMA is not unrealistically seen as responsible for being a kind of 'authentic voice of the nation' – or national ventriloquist – who must create a unified or homogenized historical interpretation from 20 million mouths.

I would also suggest that any specific recommendations for new directions for exhibitions be seen as based on the NMA's already solid foundations that have been laid and implemented under the current Act. The NMA is a young institution that is still growing and developing. Any individual, however learned, can come up with alternative worthy themes and directions, but it is important that strategies are considered on an ongoing basis by wider expert panels. Any one historical narrative (grand or not so grand) will quickly be displaced by newer narratives or debunked altogether, so I consider that the NMA's approach of enabling different voices and inclusive broad themes to be explored in its exhibitions and public programs has been an acceptable and feasible means of achieving a generally balanced account. This approach and its historical and curatorial methodology, however, are not as transparent as assumed, so curatorial methods and approaches may need to be spelt out and explained a little more fully.

Thank you for providing an opportunity for me to make this submission.

Yours sincerely

Professor Ann McGrath