

# COLLECTING THE PAST

Good collections make good museums — can we agree on this at least after the incandescent debates over the future of the National Museum of Australia?

It's not the only thing, of course, given museums increasing reliance on 'gee-whiz' technologies, audience development and public programs. But iconic pieces that delight audiences — the Carroll Review argued for numinous artefacts, invoking their 'sacral glow' — still lie at the heart of the museum business.

I was reminded of this leafing through books and manuscripts offered for sale at auction in a chill Melbourne hall a few weeks ago. The National Museum was interested in two manuscripts: the first, a memorial to the Colonial Office in London, signed by the 'founder of Melbourne' John Batman and other members of the Port Phillip Association, and the other a letter sent by surveyor John Helder Wedge to Batman in Tasmania.

Both were fine artefacts, but the Wedge letter was a stand-out. In a clear, firm hand the surveyor wrote from Bellarine Point, near present-day Geelong, on 10 August 1835, telling Batman that the site he intended to settle lacked water. Instead, argued Wedge: 'From what I have at present seen, I think the freshwater river (the Yarra) at the head of the Port will be the place...' So it seems Wedge, not Batman, selected Melbourne's site!

Wedge also pleaded the case of the celebrated convict escapee William Buckley, who had lived with the Wathaurong people for 32 years after fleeing an earlier camp at Sorrento. He wrote that Buckley, who had recently emerged from the bush, should be pardoned as his knowledge might prove useful to colonists.

The Wedge letter — one of the earliest sent from Port Phillip Bay — has that rare quality of evoking a distinct time and place. Reading it, you almost see a ship standing off Indented Head while the surveyor rushes to finish his note, scrawling a last few lines in the margins. 'This place is hopeless', he's thinking, 'we'll find water further up'.

It's a treasure worth every bit the \$85,000-odd the Museum spent to buy it. Melbourne's foundation is not just Victoria's history, it's a pivotal national story. Already, there are several places in the permanent galleries the document might be displayed, either complementing the Batman 'Land Deed' which the Museum already holds, or in another area.

At their best artefacts like this bring historical experience almost within reach. Like Proust's madeleine, it's as if they embody past and present at the same time. The past isn't something separate

and distant, but rather lived, experienced, felt. These feelings can be recalled almost physically when we see something, or hear music, or sense the smell of a past event.

But there is a difference between provoking personal recollection and the awkward task of carrying a community's collective memories. Curators are trying to contrive that moment of recall and make it universal. They hope that people's historical understanding may be deepened by what they see on display. Yet, the difficulty lies in finding objects that have meaning for us all.

One trick may be to search for things that feed off familiar stories but are foreign enough to stimulate thought. Studies of visitors to museums have shown that exhibits work best when they connect what people know to what they don't.

In *Making Museums Matter* (2002), American museologist Stephen Weil suggested that 'rather than communicating new information...the primary impact of visiting a museum exhibition is to confirm, reinforce, and extend the visitor's existing beliefs'. We need stories we recognize to help us make sense of those we don't, to be affirmed and challenged at the same time.

Another tactic may be to accent the connection between artefacts and places. Museums have tended to locate objects in time — by their association with people, events or themes of a certain period — rather than by the place they were made or used. Yet reading the Wedge letter evoked a place as much as a time. An imagined Bellarine Point remains the overriding image in my mind.

This makes sense when we think about our own experience. Daily life isn't something that we play out in time alone, it's as much a product of the places we inhabit. Writers such as Patrick White, David Malouf and Robert Drewe have been alive to that, as have historians Geoffrey Blainey, Peter Read and Tom Griffiths, among others. Some of this work has already inspired elements of exhibitions at the National Museum.

Locating objects in time and place helps the Museum address its national brief, giving it a continental and chronological repertoire. But our emphasis will still be on finding objects that sing their stories strongly, whether of landmark events in Australian history or the experiences of everyday life. This work to extend the Museum's program of acquiring compelling artefacts — such as the Wedge letter — is a continuing and long-term exercise. A strong collection, as well as an active loans program, can help advance the Museum's standing as a storehouse of national life and experiences. 📍

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