

DEVELOPING

Creating a Country

- *Extending the Farmlands*: Exploring agricultural development and innovation.
- *Connecting the Nation*: Tracing the emergence of communication and transportation networks.
- *The Australian City*: Examining the growth of cities as sites of housing, work and leisure.
- *A Spirit of Inquiry*: Looking at practices in science, education and ideas.
- *Post-War Economies*: Tracing the diversification of the Australian economy after the Second World War, with growth in the manufacturing, mining and finance sectors.
- *Land of Opportunity*: Exploring efforts to realise social justice and equal opportunities for all Australians.

We see each thematic title, not as a descriptor of a period or topic in Australian history, but rather as signifying an 'idea' – an ambition or philosophy or problem – that has impelled people in their approach to living in this country. We want the exhibition to explore how people have actively sought to make their lives in this continent, how and in pursuit of what goals they have acted to shape their places and their communities.

We decided early in the exhibition development process that we wanted to avoid contested discussions about what constitutes an Australian identity or a national character. Such attempts would lead inevitably to the exhibition representing concepts of 'Australianness' that were singular and narrow, and on which it was impossible to achieve a consensus. While we wanted to look at historical experience across the continent, we wanted to avoid creating a historical narrative that featured an abstract 'nation' as its protagonist, or that suggested the unfolding of an ahistorical national genius. We wanted *Creating a Country* to tell a general history, but not a generalised one; and to avoid elevating particular experiences into abstract symbols of a shared, homogenous national experience.

Port Macquarie Observatory, where local astronomers have perpetuated the practice of studying the night sky in the area for over 40 years.
Photos: Anthea Gunn



Flinders Highway, Pentland, Queensland, where curator Anthea Gunn stayed while visiting some of the gold mining sites on surrounding properties. A welcome storm arrives at the end of a very hot November day.
Photos: Anthea Gunn

In 2010 the National Museum of Australia will open *Creating a Country*, a major new exhibition to replace the current *Nation* program. *Creating a Country* will present a general history of Australia that explores the distinctive social, economic and political conditions that have evolved in Australia since European colonisation of the continent in the late 18th century, while also attending to the features of everyday life and popular culture as they have evolved over this time.

How is the curatorial team developing *Creating a Country*? We began by asking how people have responded to the challenges of living in the Australian continent. How have people encountered Australian landscapes, adapted to new physical and cultural realities, and developed distinctive social, political and economic practices? We want to understand how people in the past have experienced living in Australia, and how they have sought to make their lives in this continent.

We decided early in the exhibition development to structure *Creating a Country* around 10 key themes in Australian history, envisaging that each of these themes would eventually become a module on the gallery floor, allowing the exhibition's conceptual structure to map the architecture of the display.

Creating a Country is structured around the following themes:

- *On the Edge of the World*: Examining moments of colonial foundation and the cultural encounters these precipitated.
- *The Colonial Gaze*: Exploring processes of exploration and settlement in the early phase of colonisation.
- *Never Enough Grass*: Tracing the expansion of the pastoral industry.
- *Gold and Chartism*: Looking at the 19th century gold rushes and the impact of mass immigration on changing social patterns.

We identified 'place' or 'locale' as a powerful frame through which to explore historical experience in Australia. Rather than *Creating a Country* describing a national reach through defining or representing a national type or identity, we see the gallery as bringing together a series of 'located histories'. Each located history will explore the conjunction of ideas, peoples and landscapes in particular times and places. We are bringing together in *Creating a Country* a series of small histories that together suggest the sweep and variety of historical experience in Australia.

To begin with, we envisaged that our interpretation of each place would focus on a specific moment in time, as well as in place. As we have worked on *Creating a Country*, however, this focus on a particular time as well as a particular place has blurred and dissipated. Over the last year or so, members of the curatorial team have been travelling across the continent, visiting the places and communities we plan to feature in the gallery. What has emerged from these encounters is a strong sense of how experience in place is connected *across* time; and how it is possible to read in contemporary communities the legacies of past choices, ideas and challenges, as well as the ongoing power of the land to shape human action. Photographs and captions accompanying this article illustrate some of these places, and aspects and features of the local environments that most resonated with the members of the curatorial team who visited them. Pip McNaught's article later in this magazine, on her exploration of the route of the Burke and Wills expedition, is a more developed example of this process.

Exhibitions are not books: they are distinctive forms of history-making defined by the purposeful arrangement and display of objects in three-dimensional environments. Meaning – history – is made in exhibitions as visitors move through the display space, encountering evidence of the past, connecting objects, images, sounds and text, and asking what these artefacts can tell us about the experiences of other people.

This sense of the nature of history-making in the museum has strongly informed our choice of 'located histories' in *Creating a Country*. I believe a focus on place – or rather objects in place – will allow the exhibition environment to come into its own. Objects embody information about the past that is highly specific to their own particular histories of manufacture, use and circulation. You can display objects as 'hooks' for more abstract general themes, but to do so tends to obscure their communicative power. It is only when we pay attention to the particular history of an object or objects that we begin to understand and to see how they illuminate the past.

Creating a Country will live and breathe through its displays of collections. The process of identifying collections for use in the exhibition has strongly informed the choice of the places we will feature in the gallery. In truth, any place in Australia could feature in *Creating a Country*, with many able to find a home in many of the themes; but we cannot tell a story about a place if we have no artefacts to display.

How then have we chosen places to feature in *Creating a Country*? It is important that the exhibition includes at least some of the more recognisable and well-known places, events and moments in Australian history. A significant portion of our visitors expect that, when they visit the Museum, they will learn about events such as the British landing at Port Jackson in 1788 or the Eureka uprising in 1854. Others will expect treatments of significant projects, such as the Trans-Australia Railway and the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme; or powerful social movements such as the struggles for female suffrage or equal pay for Aboriginal Australians. We cannot include, at any one time, all the better-known historical landmarks that some visitors will expect – but we certainly plan to include some of them and include more of



The ruins of the residential wing of the former Lake Innes House near Port Macquarie, where young diarist Annabella Innes (later Boswell) recorded sighting a comet in 1843, and painted wildflowers. Photos: Roslyn Russell

them over the 10-year life of the gallery. We hope, however, to provide something of a fresh 'take' on these recognisable events, through asking how they emerged from the encounters between different peoples in place.

We decided to include a number of places in *Creating a Country* simply because there was a strong resonance between the thematic structure and the Museum's existing collections. Developing *Creating a Country* is an organic and iterative process. From one perspective, the content of the exhibition is emerging as we negotiate competing demands to address recognised themes and 'milestones' in Australian history, to provide a fresh take on the past, to avoid a generalised and abstracted national history, to maintain a representational breadth in the gallery in terms of its geographic and temporal coverage, and to display the collections that will captivate, provoke and move our visitors.

These complex claims on the gallery reflect the realities of working in a national cultural institution. The Museum is a place for all Australians and we try to engage with a wide range of different audiences – from the young to the old; from the well-educated to those who have little knowledge of history; from those attending as part of a broader school program to folks who simply turn up for the afternoon while on holiday from Korea.

Our hope in *Creating a Country* is to provide a number of different ways for visitors to engage with the content. Some may choose to follow the basically chronological path through the gallery that is established by the thematic structure and that shapes each module; others may wander around enjoying encountering different places; while others still might pay more attention to exhibits that speak to their own experience as urban dwellers, or wheat farmers or the children of miners.

Creating a Country is developing as we engage with people around the country, talking to them about their places – about their communities, their families, their landscapes, and about the artefacts that embody and express their histories.

This article has been adapted from a presentation, 'Creating a Country – National Narratives and Located Histories', by Kirsten Wehner, Senior Curator, Gallery Development, to the Australian History Summer School, January 2008