

Understanding Museums:

Australian museums and museology

Des Griffin and Leon Paroissien (eds)



Museums and history

In the years following World War II, history in Australian schools, universities and museums generally continued a long-standing focus on the country's British heritage and on Australia's involvement in war. However, by the 1970s Australia's history and cultural development had begun to take a more important place in literature, in school curricula, and in universities, where specialised courses were providing training for future historians and museum curators.

The essays in this section recount the way museums in Australia have dealt with crucial issues of the formation of national memory and identity.

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Image credit: Ludwig Leichhardt nameplate, discovered attached to a partly burnt firearm in a bottle tree (boab) near Sturt Creek, between the Tanami and Great Sandy Deserts in Western Australia.

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Understanding Museums - Introduction: Museums and history

Introduction

by Leon Paroissien and Des Griffin

In the years following World War II, history in Australian schools, universities and museums generally continued a long-standing focus on the country's British heritage and on Australia's involvement in war. However, by the 1970s Australia's history and cultural development had begun to take a more important place in literature, in school curricula, and in universities, where specialised courses were providing training for future historians and museum curators.

The essays in this section recount the way museums in Australia have dealt with crucial issues of the formation of national memory and identity. Peter Stanley argues that the treatment of war in Australian museums is disproportionate to its place in the country's history, overshadowing many other important events and themes. He argues for more inclusive and diverse approaches in the way Australia's museums address war - highlighting, for example, the civilian experiences of war, the consequences of war, and frontier conflict involving Australia's Indigenous peoples.

Tim Sullivan reviews recent debates about the teaching of history and outlines the work that Sovereign Hill, a significant 'open air' regional museum in Ballarat, Victoria, is doing with teachers in order to present history through directly meaningful, first-hand experiences, while avoiding fragmentation or repetition.

Margaret Anderson points to 'history' being one of the primary terms of reference of the 1975 Pigott Report on museums in Australia. The Report recommended that museums be places where the daily life of past generations can be experienced at first hand. Anderson subsequently traces the development of social history programs and related issues and controversies in major museums throughout Australia in the later twentieth century.

Kevin Jones reviews maritime history in Australian museums, including the role of community-based initiatives shaped by volunteers in championing and preserving particular boats – and the positive agency this offers in preserving, developing and ensuring enriched interpretation of collections in the future.

Meanwhile Viv Szekeres, writing on immigration museums, reveals how the profound shifts in the composition of Australian society brought about by migration and the diversity of immigrants who came to this country are reflected in a comparable richness of social experience to be mined in new museum programs and dedicated institutions and collections. These younger types of museum, with their ever-growing oral archives and other forms of first-hand records, provide enduring and eloquent testimony to migrants' roles in our nation-building.

In facilitating contact with actual objects as both primary evidence and irreplaceable vehicles of first-hand experience, and in their ability to mediate a range of different engagements with collections and the rich interpretations they may arouse, museums are agents of both human record and 'presence' in the portrayal of history. In unique and irreplaceable ways through the collections and resources they house, museums provide vital evidence of lived experience and encounters in the world. They thereby complement the literature, documentary evidence and other kinds of educational experiences of history prepared for students in the classroom.

History in museums inevitably becomes the focus of special interest groups. As some parts of the national story continue to evolve, be told differently and even arouse sharp contestation at times, museums have recently become far more experienced and resourceful in anticipating how to support and sustain a multiplicity of views about our past or present, promoting inquiry but without retreating into sectarian division or alienation.

In their ever more skilful handling of the volatility of responses that may be aroused by particular collections or exhibitions that interpret our social history, museums not only nourish a more lively interest in the complex texture of storytelling and first-person witness to history, they demonstrate one of the most important roles that museums play today in the fostering of democratic exchange of researched knowledge and respectful opinion, thereby making a valuable contribution to civil society.

Understanding Museums - Museums and history

War and Australia's museums

by Peter Stanley

The Anzac legend would have us believe that the Australian nation is a war-baby. Not only did the Australian colonies federate during the 1899–1902 war in South Africa, but more importantly, it is widely believed that on the cliffs of Gallipoli a consciousness of Australia as a nation was born. Its military past continues to impinge upon modern Australia. One of its two national days, Anzac Day, commemorates Australia's losses (and increasingly its achievements) in war. Local war memorials are visible in towns and suburbs (though arguably less apparent as the capital cities grow and as highways bypass country towns) and its federally-funded national war museum is among the country's leading tourist attractions. Many old Australian families maintain a strong interest in the war service of their forebears: the National Archives is currently receiving over 30,000 requests for copies of military service files each month. Military history remains a staple of popular publishing, and reading military history seems to be a more popular pastime in Australia than in comparable nations.

War's impact in shaping the composition, politics, and ideology of Australian society can be over-rated. Environment, economy, demography and culture may in the long term come to impose more profound changes. Still, war was undeniably one of the shaping forces of twentieth-century Australia, particularly in terms of individual and family experience. The importance and impact of, say, Gallipoli, Pozières, Kokoda, Changi and Vietnam in individual and communal life and memory must be accepted as fundamental to the lives and memories of many individuals and groups. Whether and how Australian museums have reflected this importance forms one part of the substance of this chapter. The question of how museums can or should document and interpret military experience forms another.

As this enterprise recognises, *Museums in Australia 1975* – the Pigott Report – became the catalyst for the single most wide-ranging and long-lasting change in Australia's museums. While not all of its recommendations were accepted (notably the formation of an Australian Museums Commission), the report stimulated the creation of a strong museum sector, with professional management and trained staff, leading to the development of better documented, stored and conserved collections and galleries that helped visitors to explore and understand museums' collections and themes. The growth to maturity of the Australian museum sector in the 30 years following is the Pigott committee's greatest legacy. Many contributors to this venture owe their careers to the changes that the report produced or assisted. How have Australian museums in their most dynamic decades reflected the changing place of war in our historical consciousness?

However we may strive to escape its influence, war occupies a privileged place in our thinking about the past, presumably not just because of its impact, but because it is the trauma most closely connected to the nation state and indeed, in Australia, to the creation of the nation. However – paradoxically – the striking feature about Australia's treatment of war in its museums is not that there is so much of it, but that it is so absent. If war is of such importance in Australian history (and it seems to be), why is that importance not reflected commensurately in its place in the nation's museums?

Though the Pigott Report referred only in passing to war or military historical collections – reflecting the greater interests among the committee in natural and cultural collections – Australia's museums broadly seem to reflect that impact. Every local museum has a display case of campaign medals; of kit brought back from one of the world wars; of posters, leaflets, ration cards or the ephemera of conflict. War's artefacts are rightly inescapable in the collections that document the historical experience of the Australian people. But museums don't merely collect and document historical experience: they interpret it too. And it is in the interpretation of Australia's conflicts that the characteristics of Australia's military museums become interesting.

War has clearly been an important part of Australia's historical experience, though our appreciation of its role has changed over time. Indeed, one of the major changes in Australian history that has occurred over the past 30 years is that we have come to recognise that 'war' now encompasses more than it did at the time of the Pigott Report. All but the most obdurate neo-revisionist now

accept that an intermittent war of conquest accompanied the European settlement of the continent. Museums recognise and explain this fact, though not as fully as the magnitude or extent of conflict might suggest. The only major institution to devote a substantial area to frontier conflict is the National Museum, through a section of its Gallery of First Australians, opened in 2001. This display attracted heated criticism and controversy, not least from Keith Windschuttle, author of *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History: Volume One: Van Diemen's Land 1803–1847*. [1] The fact of the existence of this display - and that it remains substantially intact - is a reflection both of the degree to which the existence of frontier conflict is recognised, and the strength of the research on which the National Museum's presentation was based.

All the same, this conflict, though profoundly disruptive for Aboriginal society, was not primarily military. Rather cultural, biological, ideological or economic impacts led to what Charles Rowley called *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*; more Aboriginal people died from germs than guns. [2] Curiously, the largest single treatment of the fact and impact of frontier conflict can be found in the National Gallery of Australia's powerful installation, *The Aboriginal Memorial*, comprising 200 hollow log coffins from central Arnhem Land. *The Aboriginal Memorial*, the Gallery explains, 'commemorates all the indigenous people who, since 1788, have lost their lives defending their land'. [3] State museums variously acknowledge or document the dispossession of the continent's original inhabitants. To anticipate one of the themes of this discussion, one of the least consequential presentations of frontier conflict can be found in the 'colonial' gallery of the national war museum, the Australian War Memorial. This seeming failure to recognise one of the most widespread and portentous military experiences in Australian history in its museums deserves more detailed analysis. [4]

Several kinds of museums deal with the Australian experience of war: private military museums; local or regional museums; the major state museums; Defence Force museums, notably those of the Australian Army; and national museums, notably the Australian War Memorial.

Private museums

No one knows how many private military museums exist in Australia, and the number fluctuates over time. They vary in size and quality, but tend to concentrate on simple displays of kit, guns and uniforms, and adopt an uncritical stance towards the Anzac legend. Perhaps the clearest manifestation of the style of the private museum is the East Point Military Museum, Darwin. The creation of a group of devoted retired army officers, the museum is housed in a former battery site on Darwin harbour and displays a range of military artefacts with a natural bias toward artillery and the defence of the north. The effort of collecting and preserving this material in the face of Darwin's climate is commendable. The display, however, is eclectic and – it must be said – amateurish, reflecting its creators' enthusiasms and interests: a display of Nazi memorabilia and hand-guns sits beside a room of naval artefacts. Technical descriptions prevail over interpretation, in the classic manner of the hobbyist. The East Point Museum reflects the best and the worst of the amateur tradition in Australian military collecting. Their work, and that of their counterparts, is worthy of more detailed study, and deserves the support of the professional museum sector created by the Pigott Report.

Local or regional museums

Here we encounter a paradox. Almost all local or regional museums display the material culture of war, but almost none use this material to interpret war in any sustained way. The items displayed in local museums differ from those seen in museums like the East Point Military Museum. They will typically hold relics of military service – medals and commemorative items – rather than larger weapons. They tend to be strong in the artefacts of groups generally under-represented in military collections – citizen soldiers and servicewomen, and civilians through items such as ration cards. Because Australian military experience and war service invariably occurred far from home, those responsible for local and regional collections find difficulty in incorporating this material into rooms or galleries devoted to pioneers, settlement, occupations and professions and the life of a town or district. They are often relegated to a display reminding visitors of the world wars, often accompanied by reminders of recent celebratory ventures – Australia Remembers certificates from 1995 or Veterans' Affairs posters, or merely Australian flags.

While local historical museums' collections might be disparate and their presentation artless, it may be that in the aggregate they reflect a genuine popular attitude to the importance of war. Much like local (as opposed to formal state and national) Anzac Day services, they express popular attitudes toward military experience, to what it is and is seen as, to how it affected particular communities,

and to its significance in comparison to other aspects of a community's existence and identity. This too deserves greater scrutiny and support.

State museums

Arising largely from a sense of wonder at Australia's (or the world's) natural history, an interest in Australia's Indigenous culture or an interest in its productive geology, Australia's great state museums have tended to come late to the history of European Australia, and still less to conflict as a part of that historical experience. As a result, state museums collect war-related material with discrimination. Some state museums (such as the South Australian Museum and the Western Australian Museum) do not interpret overseas war history at all. Others (such as the Melbourne Museum) present war within a spectrum of broader social history. While individual items might relate to war – and the most striking example must surely be the German A7V tank, 'Mephisto', displayed at the Queensland Museum – the Australian experience of overseas wars is largely absent from the state museums.

Defence Force museums

The armed services' museums await a formal history, though various internal reviews have documented the growth of collections of historical material collected for various purposes – as 'training aids' or the means of enhancing *esprit de corps*, for instance. Both the Royal Australian Navy and Royal Australian Air Force maintain large museum collections, including in the case of the RAAF Museum at Point Cook some 20 aircraft. [5] The Royal Australian Navy maintains historical collections at several shore establishments, and in 2005 opened the RAN Heritage Centre at Garden Island. While the RAN's service in war and especially its losses are treated in the galleries of the Australian War Memorial, the Navy's history is also displayed and interpreted through the major *Navy* gallery in the Australian National Maritime Museum. [6]

The largest distributed collection is that of the Army Museums network, managed by the Army History Unit (AHU). Formerly the product of the devotion of individuals, enthusiasts and particular units, Army museums for many years remained a very mixed bag. Often their facilities and management did not match the size or historical worth of their collections, and they were often unseen by the general public. This uneven management and support changed in the 1990s. The Army now maintains seven regional and 10 corps museums. [7] The regional museums occupy historic buildings, some of outstanding significance, and all care for large, diverse collections of artefacts and other historical sources ranging from the colonial period to the present. The corps museums range in size from the large collection of technology at the Army Museum, Bandiana (home to most of the Army's logistic corps collections), to the small Royal Australian Army Pay Corps Historical Collection. In addition, many Army units maintain 'Unit History Rooms', necessarily smaller and lacking professional support, but often including items of great significance. All the Army's museums have developed in all areas, of management, documentation, conservation, display and interpretation, in the decade since the AHU became responsible for them.

Obviously, military museums deal fundamentally with military experience. They are the product of a military organisation, whose history and heritage they document in abundance (the Army museums network collectively holds material equal in magnitude to the Australian War Memorial's). It would not be surprising to find that they concentrate upon the history of formal military units, mainly in times of conflict, mainly in action. These after all, are high points of drama, and conflict engenders collections – trophies, souvenirs, bullet-pocked helmets documenting violent death; medals testifying to heroism. But how do they interpret war as a human experience? Given their diverse origins, their evolution from essentially private collections, the relatively limited resources available to them (even under AHU's vastly more supportive regime) and the number of museums and their respective curators, it is not surprising that they treat the experience of war in very different ways.

Each of the Army's regional museums also includes displays that illuminate the reality of war experience. The Army Museum of Western Australia, for example, devotes a large room to the experience of prisoners of war held by the Japanese. Realistic tableaux depict aspects of the ordeal of the Burma-Thailand railway – such as the excision of tropical ulcers - that leave little to the imagination. These life-size, realistic mannequins depicting the reality of starvation and brutality without any concession to good taste are far in style and gravity from the showcases of militaria that dominate many military museums. [8] Likewise, the Army Museum of South Australia, though hampered by a severe contrast between a shortage of space and a large collection, includes in its busy galleries displays dealing with the place of women in the predominantly male military history

of the state. Its displays include not only treatments of servicewomen, but also of civilian volunteers. This area includes a recognition of the voluntary Cheer-Up Hut, the centrepiece of which is a piano from the Cheer-Up Hut's Adelaide 'rooms', bearing the signatures of hundreds of service personnel (all of which have been transcribed). [9] Most impressive of all is the cell in the Military Museum of Tasmania, housed in a magnificently preserved 1840s garrison prison, devoted to conflict between Aboriginal people and settlers in Van Diemen's Land. [10]

Hampered by geographical dispersion, a relative lack of funding and an understandably parochial focus (whether on the state or the corps), the Army's museums comprise a museological resource whose potential has yet to be realised.

National museums

Australia has few national museums, arguably only four: in order of opening, the Australian War Memorial, the National Gallery of Australia, the Australian National Maritime Museum and the National Museum of Australia. These major museums observe a genteel demarcation from their significant state counterparts. High art generally goes to the national or state galleries; 'natural history' is the province of major state museums; only Indigenous culture is reflected more widely. They dine at separate tables, and always have. 'War' remains almost the exclusive preserve of the War Memorial, whose subject remit enables it to collect and display art as well as artefacts. It is not only the oldest national museum, pre-dating its counterparts by 60 years, but also holds arguably the broadest and most diverse collection. The collection (at the heart of the interpretation offered) encompasses traditional museum artefacts – 'relics' in the Memorial's jargon - but also vast and varied collections of art, photographs, sound, film and multimedia, as well a huge library and an archive of private and official records, ephemera and maps. Inevitably uneven in some aspects across the range of its collection, it documents Australia's experience of war abundantly – rightly the envy of less fortunate nations.

Beginning in 1917 with Charles Bean's vision that a museum would become a fitting memorial to the men he had seen die on Gallipoli and the Western Front, collecting began with the creation of official records, official photographs and soon after works of art (apparently inspired by a Canadian innovation). Bean and his lieutenant, John Treloar, urged Australian troops to gather souvenirs and trophies. By the war's end the basis of a collection existed, to be displayed in temporary exhibitions and by 1941, a permanent home in Canberra. In the meantime, Treloar began to collect the private records – letters, diaries and personal papers – often donated explicitly in memory of the war dead, that have become such a jewel in the Memorial's diadem. With a second world war official collecting began again, though with a greater emphasis on photographs and art than on relics. At first a memorial to the dead of the Great War, the Memorial's ambit broadened between 1948 and 1980 to encompass Australian military history from 1788 as a whole. [11] Despite this broad scope, the Memorial consistently focused on war rather than military history in peacetime, except for a significant recent interest in peacekeeping deployments. With the increasing involvement in peacekeeping operations following the first Gulf War of 1990–91, the Memorial formed close links with the Defence Force to gather records, photographs and artefacts in the field, and has revived commissions to artists and photographers and cinematographers to document and record commitments overseas. This collaboration has strengthened in recent years following the commitment of Australian forces to Afghanistan and Iraq.

While almost all conflicts have been documented thoroughly in art, photographs and official archival records, the gathering of private records and – surprisingly – artefacts has generally lagged behind. With notable exceptions such as prisoners of war, especially of the Japanese, collecting during and after the Second World War garnered a fraction of the material relating to the Great War. Negligent collecting in some conflicts compelled retrospective acquisition long after by energetic curators. The most notable examples were Peter Burness's single-handed creation of a large and impressive Boer War collection between about 1975 and 1990. The collection has grown since then, sporadically, through curatorial pushes, serendipity and increasingly by the recognition within the national community that the Memorial is a fitting repository for war records and artefacts. This tendency to donate is tempered to an extent by state parochialism – a potential donor from Toowoomba might ask why precious family papers should go to Canberra rather than, say, Brisbane – and by the understandable doubt that with such a large collection much must inevitably remain in storage. Despite some attention to civilian organisations and experience, the collection remains heavily biased toward the uniformed services and combat; a reflection of its origins and purpose in commemorating those who died at the hands of the enemy.

This predilection would not matter if Australia's experience of war were addressed by other

museums of comparable standing (by major state museums, say). But it is not. This places more of a premium on the need for a treatment of war that encompasses a range of attitudes, values and interpretations. For example, the history of opposition to war or military service has always been almost entirely disregarded by the Memorial because it has been assumed that displaying objects opposing war at all – some wars in particular or military service in general – somehow constitutes either an endorsement of the cause, or is somehow insulting the memory of those who died in war. Likewise, some groups continue to be largely excluded from the Memorial's record of Australian experience of war, such as industrial workers and merchant seamen. While some galleries (such as the gallery *Echoes of the Guns*, opened in 1993) explicitly recognise the cost of war and the duration of its impact, other galleries focus narrowly on the battle front. Indeed, the history of the Defence Force in peacetime has never been treated, despite its inclusion in the Memorial's mandate. This partly reflects the Memorial's traditional concentration on those who fought and died, rather than those who merely supported the war effort. But for merchant sailors, who died directly in combat at the hands of the enemy in Australian waters, it seems to be an absurd continuation of wartime politics.

Still, whatever qualifications are made about its use, the Memorial's collection constitutes a vast treasure. Its magnitude gives it a versatility and value available to few other institutions, at least in Australia. And while the future will inevitably broaden and liberalise the scope of the interpretation it offers, the collection will sustain that growing recognition of diversity, provided the institution embraces opportunities to do so.

While war has been of significance to the history of Australia in the twentieth century – especially the world wars fought by citizen servicemen and servicewomen – it has been documented unevenly by Australia's museums. The largest single share of the national collection is held by one institution and then by specialist Defence Force museums, while it is ignored by other significant sectors (the state museums), or is treated variably at the local level.

The consequence of this concentration has been to allow one interpretation – essentially the classic statement of the Anzac legend, one valorising white males in combat – to prevail over a broader, more inclusive interpretation. In its concentration of ownership the War Memorial has become the Rupert Murdoch of the Australian museum world. This lack of diversity is perhaps inescapable given the intention and history of the Defence Force museums, but in relation to the major public war museum a more generous or liberal attitude would seem to be merited. The challenges of the future will be to recognise frontier conflict, the civilian experience of war, the consequences of war and the different attitudes Australians have expressed toward it, while not diminishing the strong empathy it has traditionally conveyed toward those who have served in war and in uniform. A more inclusive ethos would not, it would seem, be impossible to achieve. Such an approach would strengthen the value of museums interpreting war and connect them more securely to the broader national stories that museums can tell.

Footnotes

¹ Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History: Volume One: Van Diemen's Land 1803–1847*, Macleay Press, Sydney, 2002.

² CD Rowley, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1980.

³ <http://www.nga.gov.au/memorial/index.html>

⁴ Since writing this chapter (in 2007) I have presented a paper, "All of this Frontier War stuff": interpreting frontier conflict in Australia - from ignorance to denial', at the conference Tutu te Pueho: New Zealand's nineteenth-century wars, Massey University, Wellington, February 2011.

⁵ For RAAF Museum, Point Cook see <http://www.airforce.gov.au/raafmuseum/>

⁶ For the Australian National Maritime Museum's Navy Gallery see <http://www.anmm.gov.au/site/page.cfm?u=1338>

⁷ Royal Australian Armoured Corps Memorial & Army Tank Museum; North Fort & Royal Australian Artillery National Museum; Army Engineer Museum; Royal Australian Army Corps of Signals Museum; Royal Australian Infantry Corps Museum; Museum of Australian Army Flying; Museum of Australian Military Intelligence; Army Museum, Bandiana; Royal Australian Army Pay Corps Historical Collection; Royal Australian Corps of Military Police Historical Collection. The Army History Unit website, <http://www.army.gov.au/ahu/Museums.asp> gives details of and links to the various museums under its stewardship.

⁸ Army Museum of Western Australia, <http://www.armymuseumwa.com.au/>

⁹ Army Museum of South Australia, <http://www.amosa.org.au/>

¹⁰ Military Museum of Tasmania, <http://militarymuseumtasmania.org.au/main/>

¹¹ For a history of the Memorial see Michael McKernan, *Here is Their Spirit: a history of the Australian War Memorial, 1917–1990*, UQP and AWM, Brisbane, 1991.

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Understanding Museums - Museums and history

History in the new millennium or problems with history?

by Tim Sullivan

At the beginning of the new millennium, Australian history was experiencing its most important hour on the public stage since the 1988 Bicentenary. Debate on the study and uses of the subject were characterised by what is now known as the 'History Wars', by a review of the interpretation of Australia's story in the National Museum of Australia's exhibitions, and by a process to revise and reinvigorate the history curriculum in schools.

The History Wars

On Australia Day 2006 the prime minister, John Howard, announced his intention to renew the teaching of Australian history in schools, saying:

I believe the time has also come for root and branch renewal of the teaching of Australian history in our schools ... Too often, it is taught without any sense of structured narrative, replaced by a fragmented stew of 'themes' and 'issues'. And too often, history, along with other subjects in the humanities, has succumbed to a post-modern culture of relativism where any objective record of achievement is questioned or repudiated.

The announcement was met with a mixture of excitement and scepticism. It was exciting to have history in a national discussion which might lead to a much-needed transformation of Australian history teaching, and greater public awareness of the uniqueness of our history. [1] The scepticism was a product of the milieu from which the prime minister's statement had emerged.

Prime Minister Howard viewed the history curriculum as it was being taught as having been corrupted by academic fads and fashions and politically-driven revisionism for their own sakes, and that this was distorting the ways in which a generation of Australians viewed their history. He also saw history as a parable-like narrative of human progress. For him, history existed as a singular, truthful narrative which could be translated into a nationally mandated curriculum, and which would be equally relevant for all students in every corner of our nation continent.

The announcement was inevitably seen as a continuation of combat in what has become known as the 'History Wars' that raged between 2002 and 2004. Similar arguments took place in the United States in the 1990s when Lynn Chaney, then Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, attacked the emerging draft of the national history curriculum. The result was abandonment of national curricula, which were left to the individual states. Historian and education writer Diane Ravitch observes that:

History should be as exciting to young people as anything on television, but their textbooks turn it into a listless parade of names, themes, wars, and nations. Among all the subjects tested by the federal government, U.S. history is the one in which American students register the worst performance, even though almost all students are required to study it. [2]

In Australia the debate emerged earlier in the context of the 1988 Bicentenary and the focus it generated on understanding the consequences of colonisation on Australia's Indigenous people. [3] The most recent 'History Wars' were fought on two fronts: firstly, a renewed focus on the methodology of some historians in interpreting colonial massacres of Indigenous people; and secondly, in the 2003 review of the National Museum of Australia's exhibitions designed to identify political and revisionist bias in the interpretation of Australia's history, and propose an outline of content appropriate for a national museum for Australia.

In another time the review could have presented an exciting opportunity to re-imagine the intersections between the general public's engagement with Australian history, the state of play in teaching history in our schools, and the role of museums in supporting learning about our heritage. Whilst the review of the National Museum [4] was important in revisiting the role of a national museum for Australia, the wars themselves were an ugly, personalised, and futile period of infighting within the history profession. They created an unproductive climate of cynicism in which

the motivations for the review of history teaching were considered.

Starting points

The most important activities in sustaining an interest in the past are those which are personally relevant and meaningful, where there are opportunities for interaction with others, where there is the possibility of new discoveries and knowledge, where skills can be learned and applied, where there are tangible artefacts of the research, and where there is freedom to set the agenda. Personal narratives are pathways to exploring larger historical narratives.

Historians Roy Rosenzweig of George Mason University and David Thelen of Indiana University, in their important study of the ways in which Americans use history in their lives, [5] found that people most often make sense of history through a very personally relevant framework – that is, through their own experiences and memories, or through stories they have been told by others they trust (typically family or extended family members). Visits to museums and historic places, movies and programs on historical subjects, books, and heritage events were recognised as much more relevant and important in sustaining an interest in history than what was taught in school. They found that those who are most strongly connected to the past are engaged in a variety of activities that interest them and others in their networks, particularly sharing photographs and memorabilia.

Australians also achieve the deepest long-term connection with the past through experiences other than their schooling. [6] Narratives relating to their families and themselves are the most powerful pathways for connecting strongly with the past. The most important areas of content for Australians are Australian history and family history, both mentioned by more than 50 per cent of respondents to an important survey by the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). The most commonly used media for connecting with those narratives are objects or artefacts that are meaningful in telling those stories; visiting places that are important in connecting to those narratives is also significant.

The experiences that are most important in creating a connectedness with the past are family gatherings (43 per cent); museum and historic sites visits are less important, as are public commemorations which were significant for around a quarter of respondents. School studies were most important for just 12 per cent of respondents.

More generally, taking and sharing photos was the most frequent activity in engaging with the past for more than 80 per cent of respondents to the study, followed by a range of research and collecting activities (photographs, heirlooms, family history) which were considered as 'making history', followed by attending reunions and visits to museums and historic sites for more than 50 per cent of respondents.

The UTS survey [7] found that museums were the most trusted sources of history for 56 per cent of respondents. In second place were academic historians (33 per cent). Politicians scored the highest ranking for untrustworthy sources at 39 per cent! However, high school teachers rated seventh out of 11 as trustworthy sources: it was concluded that this could relate to whether teachers had kept-up-to-date in their knowledge and teaching practice.

Graeme Davison, now Sir John Monash Distinguished Professor at Monash University, also considered family history to be an important engagement in lifelong learning and the development of historical literacy in the community. [8] Museums intersect with this popular interest in history because of the richness of artefacts available and the contextualising narratives offered in museum interpretive programs.

The distinguished American museologist Lois Silverman, who has conducted extensive research on museum visitors, connects this understanding of how people engage with the past to the skills used by museum visitors to make sense of the history presented in museums: the use of others as sources of information; the use of life stories to connect and understand experiences; the use of objects and artefacts as evidence; the use of museum-like skills in organising the artefacts and stories of our lives; and the value of first-hand experience. [9]

This knowledge of how people develop and sustain an engagement with the past – with their uses of historical knowledge and skills – over their lifetimes is an important context in which to consider the place of learning history in schools. It is intriguing that, with so much voluntary effort in the community to sustain interest in Australian history, the linkage with what is learned in school is so

weak in nurturing that interest.

The 2007 History Summit held as a result of Prime Minister Howard's Australia Day announcement was a curious mix of the predictable and the unexpected. Predictably, there was a focus on defining the essential content for understanding Australia's history by identifying significant events and milestones, important people and ideas that students must study. The selection or non-selection of those elements was predictably and endlessly arguable.

The surprises lay in the consensus that history is best learned through open questions – big questions that engage students and teachers in exploring multiple perspectives and debating the consequences of decisions made in the past. Narrative was identified as important in helping learners make sense of it all.

One of the key participants in the Summit, Professor Tony Taylor of Monash University, demonstrated the wide gap between the ideal and the real capability of schools to deliver on curriculum change. [10] Taylor identified the systemic causes of the poor state of history teaching in schools – particularly the impact of the subject having been buried in the wilderness of SOSE (Studies of Society and Environment) – with normative disciplines such as Social Studies and Geography. Those history-trained teachers who had survived were fighting to justify their existence, living in intellectual isolation, and lacking a community of peers to enrich their development. History was too often being taught by teachers not trained in the subject and lacking an adequate domain of historical knowledge, poor understanding of historical method, and little awareness of resources to support innovative teaching practices. The outcome for students in the classroom was predictable – boredom and disengagement.

Students are not anti-Australian history – most of them have typically never been challenged by it in their classrooms. [11] They are frustrated by the repetition of content through their school lives, and the lack of pizzazz in teaching it. They are frustrated by the passivity with which it is taught, by the lack of argument and contest, by the often narrowly parochial content, and bored with text-based approaches. They are desperate for richer experiences in the use of media, in visiting the places where history has been made to engage with the artefacts of that history, to meet people with stories to tell of their experiences in the historical events being studied, and to have memorable experiences in encountering history.

It was disappointing that the History Summit communiqué did not include museums (and other cultural institutions) as resources to support teachers and students in learning about our history. Given the extent to which people develop museum-like skills in pursuing their interests in Australian history, and the way in which constructivist learning principles have influenced the design of museum programs to connect people with larger, contextualising narratives, it is a regrettable omission. Museums are replete with the tools of engagement that students crave in learning about our history.

After the Summit there were further panels engaged to develop a narrative outline of the content in a national history curriculum, but the distance identified by Tony Taylor – between the hoped-for outcomes and the capacity of the school system to deliver them – remained as wide as ever.

Sovereign Hill

In 2001 Sovereign Hill began consultations with teachers to follow up on Professor Taylor's report. We found his assessment of the circumstances in which history-trained teachers found themselves was accurate. The history teaching environment is far from being manhandled by relativists, post-modernists, post-structuralists, Maoists, Bolsheviks or Jacobins – it is inherently conservative! If there is an unsatisfactory stew of 'themes' and 'issues', it relates more to the capability of teachers and the resources available to them than to a politically driven subversive agenda.

We began by seeking discussion on ways to support teachers as fellow history professionals within a community of practice. The teachers told us to focus on outcomes for the students who have a passion for the subject – to help them sustain and extend their interest.

As a result, we have run programs with teams of students and their teachers researching exhibitions on local history themes, using our collections, discussing ideas, and producing exhibitions which are a part of our public program. Student ownership and involvement has been high and the exhibitions have been excellent.

But we have also learned that we were talking initially with teachers trained in history and for whom it is a passion. Over time, we have seen the desperate need of teachers beginning their history teaching careers – newly-graduated teachers and those shoehorned into history from a range of other disciplines – who need help in developing imaginative teaching strategies, and in building awareness of ways to use museums, galleries, libraries and archives as a part of their teaching.

It's an important linkage with the visit. Museums can do so much to enrich the learning of Australia's history by telling stories well – using the arts of theatre and film, sound and music, images and texts and artefacts to tell powerful stories with drama that engages the mind and emotions as well as the hands.

We have a wonderful chapter of Australia's national story to interpret for our visitors at Sovereign Hill. [12] We focus our interpretation on aspects of life on the Ballarat goldfields between 1851–61 – the high tide of Ballarat's heyday as the boisterous, energetic expression of that first gold rush generation's aspirations to make something of themselves. Every dimension of our colonial life – social, cultural, political, economic, technological – was utterly changed by the wealth generated by gold mining.

There are patterns of change in that tumultuous period that resonate today. Driven by a tenfold increase in the population in the decade after the discovery of gold in 1851, Melbourne grew from a small town to become 'Marvellous Melbourne' – one of the great cities of the British Empire. Ballarat itself developed almost incredibly from a rude goldfields encampment of bark and canvas and bush poles into something that rivalled Melbourne's claim to marvels.

It was a time when the fabric of a pastorally-based colonial life was unravelled and rewoven into something new and exciting. An intriguing liberal-conservative tradition of political and social reform emerged: the secret ballot, a form of universal male suffrage, the 8-Hour Day, a new Constitution, a new Legislative Assembly – all were achieved in that first golden decade.

The mass migration to Victoria was an immense human drama fuelled by expectation and hope of life-changing discoveries. There was bloodshed: the Eureka Uprising in Ballarat in the summer of 1854 shocked everyone. The changes that flowed from the inquiry that followed created a fairer and more efficient regulation of mining and gave mining communities a voice in the running of their affairs.

It also planted the seeds of governmental restrictions on Chinese migration and racially discriminatory taxation. A review of the historiography of the Chinese experience has informed the redevelopment of our Chinese Camp. The government sought to herd thousands of migrating Chinese miners into camps where their interactions with the European mining community could be managed.

It was a period in which the Indigenous people of the goldfields were dispossessed of their traditional lands. New work is showing that some Indigenous people sought ways to participate in aspects of the exotic new life around them, others left their country for good, others took up jobs on pastoral stations abandoned by gold seekers, many were left with nothing and nowhere to go. [13]

Bringing these new research perspectives to our interpretation in the Outdoor Museum has required the model of 'authentic' recreation to shift incrementally. Thematic interpretation, issues-based interpretive theatre techniques, and a wider portfolio of storytelling are powerful tools for us because they are built on an understanding of the nature of learning in good interpretation [14] – they are an 'ideal strategy for realising the "constructivist museum", an environment where visitors of all ages and backgrounds are encouraged to ... find the place, the intersection, between the familiar and the unknown, where genuine learning occurs'. [15]

In recent years, our interpretive theatre program has become more issue-based rather than re-enactments of known events. Technology has enabled us to tell the story of the Eureka Uprising using the entire Outdoor Museum by night in *Blood on the Southern Cross*; of the protests by Chinese miners in one of the Protectorate camps in Ballarat against the racially-based taxation imposed on them; of one of Ballarat's unique deep lead mines – the Red Hill Mine – where the massive Welcome Stranger nugget was discovered and changed the lives of 22 hard-working and determined Cornish miners. In the Quartz Mine, video technology has enabled mine guides to show visitors otherwise inaccessible historic underground workings created by nineteenth-century

miners. Two chambers are used to tell stories of the Chinese experience of gold mining and are delivered in Cantonese, Mandarin and English. One, *Woah Hawp Canton Gold*, tells the story of a quartz mine in Ballarat owned and operated by Chinese entrepreneurs and miners, an unusual scenario when the conventional historiography of the Chinese experience is focused on their involvement in alluvial mining (also interpreted in *The Secret Chamber*). [16]

The Outdoor Museum is an immersive stage upon which stories can be told and shared. [17] It includes the Red Hill Gully Diggings; businesses (shops, trades, manufactories present in Ballarat in the period); domestic dwellings interpreting the diversity of economic success of their inhabitants from small weatherboard cottages to elegant brick bungalows; kitchen and ornamental gardens and orchards; an extensive horse-drawn vehicle collection and carriages built in our on-site coachbuilding manufactory operating in the streets; and one of the largest operating heritage steam plants in the world.

The use of primary source materials from our collections is writ large in building the Outdoor Museum. The illustrations of ST Gill, François Cogné, Thomas Ham, David Tulloch, Samuel Huyghue, Thomas Strutt, Eugene von Guérard and technical drawings and town planning documents, commercial directories and business archives and more have been invaluable resources on which much of the built form of the Outdoor Museum is based. They enrich the diversity of private accounts, journals, and books about gold rush experiences which have informed our interpretive strategies.

The work of many academic historians, [18] and the specialised expertise and experience of local historians and others with deep knowledge of the heritage of our region, have been invaluable in developing programs to interpret the significance of the gold rushes and the profound impact they have had on our national development.

In 2004 the University of Melbourne held a symposium to discuss the significance of Eureka 150 years after the event. The University of Ballarat likewise held an international symposium to discuss perspectives on Eureka and its relevance in Australia's history, its democracy, and international perspectives on protest. New perspectives on the development of mining unions are particularly interesting in understanding the emergence of the Labor Party. The complexity of the Chinese experience on the goldfields is emerging through new scholarship that will reinterpret the role and significance of the Chinese as miners, not simply as artefacts of the development of White Australia.

This new work has promoted what Melbourne University historian David Goodman has described as 'edgy' interpretations of goldfields history – a 'need to recover a sense of the gold rushes as dangerous, edgy events with unpredictable outcomes'. [19]

The first decade on the Victorian goldfields was a ferment of political ideas, of new opportunities. It is so interesting because there was so much change in so many dimensions simultaneously. It was dangerous, edgy and unpredictable. But so are the times in which we live now. Democracy still cannot be taken for granted.

These new perspectives fill in some of the gaps in our understanding, they flesh out what has been poorly understood, and they enrich the field for interpreting this dramatic period in our history. Museums around Australia are engaged in thoughtful processes of researching our heritage and communicating its significance for contemporary audiences. They are engaged in looking outward to relate events in our national development with what is happening elsewhere in the world – engaged in the flow of ideas and issues and the exchange of knowledge that is characteristic of the best in civic institutions.

Concluding comments

It is the peculiar task of museums to bring scholarship together with material artefacts and strategies for communication in our interpretation that will engage the senses, the mind and the soul. The deepest learning moments are achieved when the head and the heart are moved together, when our visitors can see something of themselves and their story in the larger narratives we tell.

In November 2003, the *Contest and Contemporary Society* symposium at Sydney University explored the ways in which museum visitors react to controversial topics. The research work for the project reinforced the trust visitors have in museums as sources of information and knowledge.

Visitors are not afraid of controversial material, but are sceptical of attempts to court publicity through contrived controversy, and dislike a polemical style. They expect that museums will provide authoritative scholarship and a variety of perspectives or voices in their interpretation.

A root and branch renewal of the teaching of Australian history in schools could well begin with an awareness of the journey a citizen will take over a lifetime, of the ways in which an interest is sustained beyond the school years, and the importance of museums as resources in lifelong learning about our history. A national curriculum in schools may help to overcome the issues that so frustrate students, but only if that curriculum responds to the stages of learning for young people over their school lives, respects the diversity of learning styles and stages in their intellectual development as learners, and provides them with the skills to be thinking, thoughtful citizens.

Museums sit at a unique intersection of interests in the study of Australia's history. The public is engaged with Australia's history when it takes forms that are useful to them in their diversity of learning styles and knowledge. Like any good storytelling, interpretation of history is best when the audience can see something of themselves in the story. That's our constant task, that's the continuing challenge of relevance in our work with a contemporary and changing audience.

Footnotes

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Understanding Museums - Museums and history

Museums, history and the creation of memory: 1970–2008

by Margaret Anderson

The first decade of this century has been a turbulent time for history in museums. Exhibitions have been scrutinised by press, parliament and public in an unprecedented dissection of public culture, as the 'history wars', [1] let loose by John Howard's Liberal government, engulfed museums. The stories museums told about the past, and the way they told them, suddenly mattered profoundly. Our 'national identity' was at stake. I have wondered from time to time what the authors of the Pigott Report would have made of this new-found political fascination with the nation's past? Would they have been delighted or dismayed? Ironically, at least one of the members of that committee of inquiry, historian Geoffrey Blainey, was also a protagonist in this new debate – on the conservative side. It was not always so.

Within museums the Pigott inquiry has been associated for so long with advocacy for a Museums Commission and the preservation of collections that it is easy to forget that one of its primary terms of reference concerned the place of history in museums. It was charged both to advise on 'the functions of an Australian Institute to develop, co-ordinate, and foster collections, research and displays of *historical*, cultural and scientific material of national significance', and to 'institute new developments and institutions, with particular reference to the establishment of a national museum of history in Canberra'. [2] Committee members projected a clear view of the kind of new museums they envisaged – not mere storehouses of 'ancient objects', but

vital places of education, entertainment and research where facets of the daily life of past generations of Australians can be seen and where our heritage of old trades, crafts and skills can be displayed and practised. [3]

The preoccupations that later bore fruit in Blainey's engaging study of some of the 'lost' aspects of daily life [4] are already evident in the concepts underpinning the Pigott inquiry. In its final report the committee argued strongly that the major museums in Australia had failed to satisfy what they identified as the 'quickenning public interest in Australia's recent history'. 'It is fair to say', they concluded, 'that so far no museum in Australia has attempted, even on a modest scale, to depict the history of Australia since the coming of the British'. [5]

This was not strictly true. By the mid-1970s a number of what we now call public historians had formed tentative beachheads amidst the battalions of natural scientists in the major state museums. Both the Western Australian Museum and the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery had appointed curators of history (Western Australia in 1970, the Tasmanian Museum in 1973) and in 1975, as the Pigott inquiry collected its evidence, the Western Australians were already embarked on their second major display program. The first broadly interpretive history exhibitions opened in the Fremantle branch of the Western Australian Museum in 1970, and indeed these exhibitions attracted some praise in the Pigott Report, although more for their bold use of large photographic images [6] than for their interpretive content, it must be said. A second series of exhibitions opened in the Perth Museum in early 1976. Although inaugural Curator of History David Hutchison was appointed too late to influence the Fremantle displays to any extent (these were prepared by the museum's design department on the then common premise that history was an amateur pastime), he oversaw the redevelopment of the Old Gaol in Perth and conceived its extensive series of exhibitions. Hutchison was an admirable inaugural curator, who brought a unique combination of skills and experience to his pioneering position. His first degree was in engineering, his second in history, and he had taught for many years in a prominent boys' school in Perth. He was therefore able to bridge the gap with the scientists rather more successfully than most, and he had a genuine affinity with the extensive technology collection already accumulated in the museum. Moreover he understood the importance of communication through exhibitions and taught all of us who were fortunate enough to work with him about the discipline of constructing exhibition labels. Hutchison also conceived and developed the first classification system for use in cataloguing history collections, a system which in its variously modified forms still informs collection management today. [7]

The collections Hutchison and others (including the author from 1976) had to work with at that

time had not been collected by systematic fieldwork in the manner of the science collections, or in the way that the Pigott Report recommended. Most of the major museums had accumulated collections of history and technology almost incidentally, although the museums of applied science in Sydney and Melbourne had initially sought technological innovation quite specifically. [8] These technology collections were leavened by items of domestic life, often associated with prominent families who claimed 'pioneer' associations. There were small collections reflecting the various states' war histories, but little else associated with broader social or political movements of the twentieth century, as the Pigott Report rightly observed. Perhaps unconsciously, this tendency was reflected in Western Australia in the division of the history collection, for cataloguing purposes, into two halves – technology and 'colonial history'. It was a notional division: in the later 1970s and early 1980s collecting priorities certainly expanded well beyond the colonial period, but it did reflect the 'first principles' from which the collection grew.

In many respects the vision for history reflected in the Pigott Report was refreshingly original. Although the gendered language now jars, the concept of exhibitions reflecting on 'European man' in the Australian environment – and even more radically for museums at that time, the *history of 'Aboriginal man'* [9] – suggested a very different approach to museum history. In 1975 no museum in Australia, or elsewhere for that matter, had attempted to present environmental history, not surprisingly, since there was no secondary literature to speak of at that point. *Aboriginal history* was also a novel concept. Throughout the 1970s a fairly rigid apartheid system was maintained in museum collections and displays. Historians researched and exhibited white history: Indigenous culture was the preserve of anthropologists and archaeologists. This was still (mostly) the case 16 years later when Gaye Sculthorpe, the first Indigenous curator in any Australian museum (at the then Museum of Victoria), advocated an interdisciplinary approach to Indigenous history and culture. [10] In the meantime, with one notable exception, exhibitions about Indigenous society and culture studiously ignored contact history.

The fate of the Pigott Report is well known. Tabled on 11 November 1975, just as the Whitlam government fell, its principal recommendations languished. An embryonic Museum of Australia was certainly established, but without proper facilities it could realise little of the Pigott vision for museum history. Elsewhere however museum history flourished. In South Australia three new history museums were established within seven years [11] – an unprecedented investment in that normally parsimonious state – and a new historical organisation, the History Trust of South Australia, was created to manage them. The History Trust remains unique in Australia, with a brief to research, interpret and exhibit the state's history. Its closest cousin is the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, now a far larger organisation, but with a focus more aligned with heritage conservation and site interpretation than the general history of the state. However, both organisations probably grew out of the increasing public interest in history observed by the Pigott committee. By the mid to late 1980s departments of history had also been created in most of the major state museums. [12]

These newcomers were not always welcomed. Scientists in some of the older state museums resented what they saw as a diversion of scant resources to new research and collecting areas, and were openly sceptical about the research credentials and research methodology of these interlopers from the humanities. There was probably a gendered dimension to this response too, especially in the 1970s: from the beginning the vast majority of the new history curators were women – and young women at that. Moreover they showed a distinct predilection for presenting exhibitions, rather than a 'proper' focus on research. All in all there was a sense that history represented the thin end of the museum wedge!

There was probably more than a grain of truth in this assumption, because arguably it was the history exhibitions that ushered in many of the new trends in museums that are now common practice. Most of these new curators were graduates of history programs that had been heavily influenced by what was known in the 1970s as the 'new social history'. Also known as 'history from below', it followed the lead of the group who founded the History Workshop in Britain [13] – to shift the focus of historical enquiry from the 'great men and events' approach of the past, to the texture of everyday life and the lives of ordinary people. It was in every sense an approach in tune with the political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and indeed drew some of its energy and passion from them. Although Geoffrey Blainey was never overtly associated with this approach, elements of 'history from below' inform the Pigott vision, along with support for studies of material life, probably inspired by the exciting work of historians of the *Annales* school in France at that time. [14]

But in the final event it was to be museums in Adelaide, Hobart and Sydney, rather than Canberra, that first tried to present 'new' social history exhibitions. In Sydney the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS) opened its first displays in the newly restored Hyde Park Barracks. [15] Curator Margaret Betteridge oversaw the development of a series of evocative displays about the convict system and conditions for convicts that have stood the test of time. Amongst early temporary exhibitions shown in the Barracks was a splendid exhibition of trade union banners, curated by Ann Stephen and Andrew Reeves. It was the first attempt to document these extraordinary expressions of labour iconography; the resulting catalogue is still the only study of union banners in Australia. [16] Reeves, in association with Maryanne McCubbin, later presented several labour history exhibitions at the Museum of Victoria and instigated an active collecting policy in the area in both Canberra and Melbourne. [17] Some years later, Ann Delroy at the Western Australian Museum directed an extensive collection, documentation and oral history program as one iconic business in the West, the Arnott, Mills and Ware Cake and Biscuit Factory, closed its doors in Fremantle after a century of operation. An evocative exhibition about life on the factory floor followed in the Fremantle branch of the museum. [18]

At about the same time – the late 1980s – historians formed a special interest group of the Museums Association to promote discussion and research in new approaches to history collecting and exhibiting. [19] It promoted much lively discussion at conferences and continues to this day. The Historians' SIG, as it was abbreviated, did much to promote new social history approaches to museum history and instigated some of the first discussions about the research potential of material culture. This impact of new social history approaches to museums in Australia was noted by Tony Bennett in his 1988 study of global trends in museums. [20]

An attempt at a new form of historical museum – or perhaps exhibition centre is a more appropriate term – opened in the historic Legislative Council building on Adelaide's North Terrace in 1979. Burdened with the name 'Constitutional Museum' for the first years of its life, before sense prevailed and it was re-named Old Parliament House, this museum eschewed collections, to base its displays on an immersive, audiovisual 'experience' presenting highlights of the state's political history. It was immensely successful for some years, before the program palled (it was quite long) and visitors began to prefer to avoid the expense of a ticket to the main show in favour of free entry to the temporary exhibitions the museum began to offer. Perhaps to counter this delinquent visitor behaviour, Old Parliament House introduced an overall entry fee in 1987. It was a disastrous decision. In the following year visitor numbers plummeted from 89,000 to 39,000, where they remained, making it much easier for the state Liberal government to justify resuming the building for use by Parliament in 1995. This marked the end of a bold experiment. Despite considerable political furor and many passionate speeches on both sides of the House at the time, neither side of politics has shown any interest in relinquishing the building since then. [21]

However, the Constitutional Museum introduced another novelty that has stood the test of time, to be adopted with considerable success by other museums – a community access exhibition space called 'Speakers' Corner'. Inspired by the informal forum in Hyde Park in London, Speakers' Corner provided a small space for political groups to present their own temporary displays about topical issues. The museum imposed few rules, insisting only that exhibitors be *bona fide* political groups and that they observe the laws of libel and obscenity. Speakers' Corner also carried a prominent statement disassociating the museum from the views expressed by any group, for what this was worth. It did work well for some time: Speakers' Corner was a very successful experiment in direct community engagement with the museum, until one fateful exhibition tested the limits of community tolerance too far.

In April 1983 the museum allowed the extreme right-wing political group, the Australian League of Rights, to exhibit in Speakers' Corner. If not openly fascist, the League of Rights certainly shared elements of fascist ideology with other neo-Nazi organisations, including denial of the Holocaust. Although the Holocaust was not the primary focus of the exhibition, display texts included reference to the classic neo-Nazi proposition that the Holocaust was a vastly exaggerated historical invention of worldwide Jewry. There was immediate outrage and almost universal condemnation of the museum. Jewish organisations picketed the museum and demanded that the government intervene, while protestors jammed North Terrace outside. This was one occasion on which the museum's position, cheek by jowl with the current Parliament, was a decided disadvantage. In vain the director of the History Trust, Peter Cahalan, a former director of the Constitutional Museum, tried to argue that the League of Rights, as a legal political organisation, was entitled to present its views in the museum like any other political group. The intellectual niceties of the argument were lost entirely in the general outrage and media frenzy. The museum was roundly condemned,

including by its previous supporters in the academies, who deserted their former colleague in droves. [22] An offer to allow Jewish organisations to present an exhibition in rebuttal immediately afterwards did not restore its tarnished reputation.

The League of Rights exhibition presents an interesting early case study of the degrees of political tolerance that museums can assume when they test the limits of public debate. It was not the first controversial exhibition presented in Speakers' Corner. A display presented by a gay rights group in July 1982 had similarly outraged some more conservative elements in the community, who had also demanded government intervention to direct exhibition content. In terms uncannily similar to those employed in the 'history wars' 20 years later, critics condemned the capture of a public facility by a so-called 'vocal minority' at the expense of 'the decent majority'. [23] But on this occasion the museum's liberal supporters defended it strongly, insisting that the expression of pluralist views was an important component of modern democracy. These same supporters were amongst the most vocal of opponents of the museum's decision to allow access to the League of Rights. The result for the Constitutional Museum, and for a time for the History Trust, was a far more cautious approach to Speakers' Corner [24] and to exhibitions in general. Peter Cahalan watched the early development of the Migration Museum with some trepidation, scrutiny that I found irksome at the time, but have come to understand rather better since. To his credit, he did not intervene directly in the construction of texts that presented, by the standard of the time, a fairly radical reassessment of the South Australian settler narrative.

Controversies like this underline the fact that historians in museums take risks that those in the academies seldom face, or at least, seldom faced. The legacy of the Howard years probably prompts revision of that first observation. And while commentators reflecting on the bitter controversy over content at the National Museum of Australia in the years after its much-delayed opening in 2001 tend to assume that *national* museums bear a particular burden in constructing public memory, [25] there were many other examples of exhibitions exciting public controversy even before the determined neo-conservative campaign of the recent past. Julia Clark courted public censure in Hobart on many occasions during her highly creative period at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in the 1980s and, but for timely political support, might well have shared the fate of those at the National Museum. Clark was the first to present Aboriginal history in any Australian museum. An archaeologist by training, she showed a unique interest in presenting accounts of the more recent past in exhibitions and was the first both to use the term 'invasion' to describe the advent of Europeans in an exhibition, and to refer to frontier conflict as a 'war' of invasion that provoked systematic 'resistance'. [26]

Some years later she curated a photographic exhibition presented by the Corporation of the City of Hobart as its bicentennial gift to the people of Hobart. The exhibition set out deliberately to challenge the generally celebratory approach of many bicentennial events, emphasising the hitherto 'hidden' history of Hobart through images that revealed the divisions in Hobart's social, economic and political life. Clark admitted candidly:

We may have overstated the case in our determination to act as an emetic to the genteel antiquarianism of the 'Georgian splendour' school of history. We probably did, but the public loved it anyway. Or most of them did. [27]

The exhibition provoked passionate debate and widely diverging responses, from those who dismissed it as 'socialist muck', to others who welcomed the chance to see 'the truth at last.' Of course the adherents of the 'socialist muck' school wielded far more public influence than 'the truth at last' faction and, but for the steadfast support of the mayor, the exhibition would have been removed summarily from the Town Hall. As it was, the sheer weight of visitor numbers determined that it was exhibited on three more occasions, while the resulting book was the third best selling title in Tasmania that year. [28] A sequel followed some years later. Strategic political support was the key here, just as the lack of it was the nemesis of the National Museum just over a decade later. The Pigott Report may well have recommended that the 'museum, where appropriate, should display controversial issues'. 'In our view', the committee observed, 'too many museums concentrate on certainty and dogma, thereby forsaking the function of stimulating legitimate doubt and thoughtful discussion'. [29] But when is it 'appropriate' to explore controversial issues and what constitutes 'legitimate' doubt and *thoughtful* discussion? These have proven to be highly volatile concepts over the years.

Progressive as some of the Pigott committee's recommendations were in 1975, the report contained no hint of other new directions in scholarship that were beginning to influence historians

in museums and prompt them to review their approaches to collecting and exhibiting. The first was awareness of cultural diversity, often more narrowly interpreted to mean ethnicity, but capable of a far more expansive definition, as Viv Szekeres suggests. The second was gender. Nineteen seventy-five was a pivotal year in many respects in Australia, not least because it saw the publication of the first of many texts that were to redefine approaches to history making over the next few decades. [30] These first avowedly feminist history texts inspired a generation to question the gendered hierarchies of representation in all aspects of Australian cultural life, including museums. Once again this new approach to history drew its initial impetus from the wider feminist and women's liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. [31] In museums it fell on fertile soil, since the vast majority of history curators were women and many, perhaps most, were also feminists.

A steady stream of exhibitions designed to redress the balance of existing history displays followed. They included both 'permanent' and temporary exhibitions [32] and represented an important attempt to document, and exhibit, women's lives in the past. In Adelaide both the Constitutional Museum and the Migration Museum included an identifiable thread of women's history through displays. One of the first temporary exhibitions in the Constitutional Museum celebrated the women's suffrage movement and South Australia's pioneering (in Australia) extension of the suffrage to women in 1894. At the Migration Museum we were committed to incorporating women's history in all displays, but were certainly assisted by the fact that the museum was housed in the former women's section of a Destitute Asylum. The temporary exhibition galleries were once wards in a lying-in hospital. This was a perfect setting for displays exploring gendered economic and political structures, as well as the rigours of nineteenth-century motherhood. Julia Clark in Tasmania included significant sections of women's history in two long-term galleries – those on Aboriginal Tasmanians and the convict system [33] – while in Sydney the newly opened Powerhouse Museum included an extensive exhibition on women's work in the home in its opening galleries. Entitled *Never Done*, it drew extensively on that museum's large collection of 'domestic technology'. Another attempt to document aspects of women's working lives through the material culture of domesticity was undertaken by Liza Dale at the Museum of Victoria, [34] while in Queensland Judith McKay presented a series of exhibitions during the 1980s and 1990s. [35] Also in Queensland, Brian Crozier curated a major temporary exhibition on the *Women of the West* in the late 1990s; these are only a few of the projects undertaken. An indication of the extent of the work underway in 1990 is found in the first issue of the new *Museums Australia Journal*. Entitled *Out of the Box*, it was described as a 'special issue on women in museums'. [36]

Women working in museums also drew together to discuss issues of representation and to mentor each other. A women's 'special interest group' of the museum professional association formed in the late 1980s, with Julia Clark as its first convener. There was considerable cross-over in membership with the historians' group, and both groups promoted some very lively discussions at conferences. More controversial was the decision to hold a women's only dinner at the annual museum conference. This excited some resentment amongst male members of the profession (including an attempt to gatecrash it on one occasion), but the dinner was gradually accepted, and then, just as abruptly, ceased. Perhaps by this time women working in museums did not feel the same need for support from other women. The validity of women's history was also more securely established, while the numbers of women in senior management positions in museums steadily increased. There are now six women directing major museums in Australia and those appointments no longer excite comment. [37]

Exhibitions exploring environmental history took much longer to appear, partly because there was initially little secondary literature to underpin them, and partly because the complexity of working in multidisciplinary teams that combined the humanities and natural sciences was an enormous challenge. It is also fair to suggest that, had the National Museum proceeded earlier, such exhibitions would have appeared sooner. As it was, one of the earliest attempts at a broadly based survey of environmental change in Australia was presented by the natural historians of the Australian Museum. *From Dawn to Dust* presented a graphic overview of what we would now probably call 'climate change' from deep time to the present, and drew stark conclusions about the impact of Europeans on the fragile Australian environment. It had no sequels until the Western Australian Museum opened its interdisciplinary gallery *Western Australia – Land and People* and the National Museum simultaneously opened *Australia – Land and People* in 2001. *Western Australia – Land and People* was a complex project, managed by historians Ann Delroy and Sue Graham-Taylor, with a team drawn from most of the specialist areas of the museum. It was probably the first exhibition that brought together curators from the humanities, social and natural sciences in a single project.

Although some elements of these new environmental history exhibitions induced disquiet amongst conservative commentators, it was the new approaches to exhibiting Indigenous history that eventually provoked the most heated public debate. The National Museum endured intense political pressure to recast its displays, both before and after opening, while at Museum Victoria elements of the tabloid press conducted a 'trial by media' of the new Indigenous gallery, *Bunjilaka*. Once again, the political context of the time was critical. Initially however, exhibitions exploring Indigenous issues seemed to enjoy public support. At the Museum of Victoria Gaye Sculthorpe presented several very successful temporary exhibitions, at least two of which documented aspects of women's Indigenous history to great effect. [38] The Australian War Memorial highlighted the role of Indigenous soldiers in the Great War in *Too Dark for the Light Horse*, an exhibition that finally acknowledged the extent of postwar discrimination against Aboriginal returned servicemen. [39] It was, however, a touring exhibition presented by the Australian Archives that perhaps excited the greatest emotional response. Displayed before the inquiry into Indigenous child removal had presented its report, Rowena MacDonald's *Between Two Worlds: The Commonwealth Government and the Removal of Aboriginal Children of Part Descent in the Northern Territory* [40] engaged and shocked visitors wherever it was shown. It was a powerful exhibition, linking documentary evidence with oral testimony to great effect, and it moved many visitors to tears.

One year later the Howard government was elected and almost immediately announced that it would build the long-delayed National Museum of Australia. In the following year the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's report on child removal practices was published and all Australians learned about the 'Stolen Generations'. [41] For some, the knowledge was unwelcome. It was the National Museum of Australia's profound misfortune that its eventual debut coincided with the most concerted attempt since the 1950s to shift political and cultural debate significantly to the right. The contours of this debate have been explored extensively in recent publications and I will not rehash them here. [42] Suffice to say that one of the most public casualties of the 'history wars' was the interpretation of Indigenous history – both Indigenous history in general [43] and Indigenous history in museums. It remains to be seen what the long-term effects of this episode will be.

The exhibitions that provoked this furore had been a long time coming. Arguably, the Pigott Report first laid the groundwork for the research-based, multidisciplinary exhibitions finally presented in partnership with Indigenous communities around the turn of the new century. In the three years between 1999 and 2001 four Australian museums opened major long-term galleries interpreting Indigenous culture and history. Those in Sydney, Perth, Melbourne and Canberra, [44] opened in that order, shared much in common. All documented Indigenous dispossession, all explored the issue of frontier violence and all presented something of the history of the 'Stolen Generations', despite the challenges involved in presenting these emotional and difficult histories in a museum context. [45] There is little material evidence for much of this history, and yet its significance to all Australians demands that it be told in museums. I well remember the insistence of Aboriginal Advisory Committee members in Perth that we reserve a section of the new gallery for the stories of child removals in that state, despite the fact that the collection base was sparse. Although there had been issues in the past between Indigenous communities and the museum, [46] the committee recognised the institution's public authority and sought a place for their history within its walls. Working with this committee was one of the great privileges of my professional life.

Visitors to these galleries almost always emerged profoundly moved by them. And yet there was a minority – it is impossible to say how sizeable it was – who found these histories unpalatable. The established settler narrative in Australia posited peaceful settlement, not violent invasion, and found imputations of genocide, argued particularly in the context of the stolen children, insulting to their forebears. As prime minister, John Howard famously refused to apologise for the wrongs of past generations, despite the fact that most state premiers had already done so, and this accorded political legitimacy to those who opposed the new historiography. From the mid-1990s those alienated by the new histories found a political voice in the trans-Pacific, neo-conservative backlash against 'postmodernism' and 'political correctness' that consumed sections of the media in Australia and the United States [47] for more than a decade. Ironically, if there was any truly postmodern museum in Australia at this time, it was probably the Museum of Sydney. This museum had also attracted its critics over the years, but nothing on the scale of the concerted media and political campaign that greeted the new Indigenous galleries.

I have argued elsewhere that most of us in museums were unprepared for the ferocity and determination of this assault on our scholarship, and on our commitment to presenting pluralist views in exhibitions. [48] Although John Howard had made no secret of his views, [49] we were

slow in museums to realise the extent of his determination. We clung to the fiction of intellectual independence as its very foundations were being bulldozed beneath us. In a paper presented to the Museums Australia conference in 1997 I expressed concern about the Howard view of history and about what it might mean for the future of history exhibitions, but still concluded optimistically that the new historical knowledge would prevail over conservative ideology. [50] I was wrong. First in Melbourne in response to Gaye Sculthorpe and others' exhibition, *Bunjilaka*, and then in Canberra, neo-conservative critics led a chorus of complaint, citing left-wing bias, 'political correctness', inadequate scholarship and tarnished sources – the latter a particular attempt to discredit research based on oral sources. In Canberra this followed concerted attempts – over the several years before the National Museum opened – by conservative members of the Museum's council, who sought to direct interpretation in accordance with their views. Eventually Director Dawn Casey was forced to refer all texts for review by independent historian Graeme Davison, selected on the recommendation of Geoffrey Blainey (who apparently thought it unwise to attempt it himself). Both Casey and Davison have written accounts of this period and they make salient reading. [51] Ultimately, the government appointed a formal review panel, headed by conservative sociologist John Carroll, who recommended a range of changes to some of the exhibitions but stopped short of suggesting wholesale revision of the Indigenous exhibitions. [52]

Assessing the direct impact of this uncomfortable period on the histories presented in other museums is not easy. Few curators were prepared to reflect publicly on their interpretive decision making, although in private conversations many were more open, acknowledging a new climate of timidity and self-censorship in exhibition planning. Curators at the Smithsonian have identified a similar response in that institution. [53] As I argued earlier, both community and official tolerance of controversial exhibition content has varied in the past 30 years, reflecting the landscape of specific local memories and the balance of local politics, but the concerted ferocity of the Howard-led assault on pluralist interpretation was without precedent. It exposed the fragility of Australians' commitment to intellectual freedom of inquiry and expression and profoundly undermined widely held assumptions about the independent authority of museum scholarship. It remains to be seen whether museums can reclaim a central role in both critiquing and celebrating the nation's memory. To do this well will require courage from both directors and curators. Not to do so courts irrelevance.

Footnotes

¹ Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*, Melbourne University Press, 2003.

² Commonwealth Government, *Museums in Australia 1975. Report of the Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections* (Pigott Report), Australian Government Printing Service, Canberra, 1975, para. 1.2. My emphasis.

³ Pigott Report, para. 1.2.

⁴ Geoffrey Blainey, *Black Kettle and Full moon: Daily Life in a Vanished Australia*, Penguin, Melbourne, 2003.

⁵ Pigott Report, para. 12.9.

⁶ Pigott Report, para. 12.16

⁷ It was further developed and eventually published by Patricia Summerfield. It is generally known as the Summerfield classification system.

⁸ In Sydney the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (although it had various names over the years) and in Melbourne the Science Museum. See Graeme Davison and Kimberley Webber (eds), *Yesterday's Tomorrows: The Powerhouse Museum and its Precursors 1880–2005*, Powerhouse Publishing, Sydney, 2005, for the Sydney story.

⁹ Pigott Report, recommendation 2.11 and paras 12.2–12.

¹⁰ In an article published in the (short lived) *Museums Australia Journal* in 1992. Gaye Sculthorpe, 'Interpreting Aboriginal History in a Museum Context', *Museums Australia Journal*, vols 2–3, 1991–2, pp. 49–56. The other exception was Julia Clark.

¹¹ They were, in order, the Constitutional Museum (later Old Parliament House, 1979–1995), the Migration Museum (1986) and the South Australian Maritime Museum (1986). A Motor Museum (later the National Motor Museum) was acquired by the South Australian government from its private operators and added to the

History Trust stable in 1981.

¹² The exceptions were the South Australian Museum (the History Trust was created to fill this gap) and the Australian Museum. In Sydney the Powerhouse also embraced history.

¹³ Exemplified by the pioneering work of Raphael Samuel, EP Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm and others in Britain. The group created the *History Workshop Journal*, published continuously from 1979.

¹⁴ Following in particular Fernand Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400–1800*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1973.

¹⁵ Now in the stable of the Historic Houses Trust but at that point managed by the MAAS.

¹⁶ Andrew Reeves and Ann Stephen, *Badges of Labour, Banners of Pride: Aspects of Working Class Celebration*, Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences with George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985.

¹⁷ Andrew Reeves, *Another Day Another Dollar: Working Lives in Australian History*, Carlton, McCulloch, 1988.

¹⁸ The exhibition opened in 1996.

¹⁹ I first initiated an informal discussion group which grew into the Special Interest Group.

²⁰ Tony Bennett, 'Museums and "the people"', in Robert Lumley (ed.), *The Museum Time-Machine: Putting Cultures on Display*, Routledge, London, 1988.

²¹ The visitor figures are recorded on History Trust file CR/1999/0039, document 2008/00809.

²² See for example 'How to Abuse Free Speech', *Sunday Mail*, 3 April 1983, p. 6.

²³ See History Trust file CR/2000/0001, vol. 1, note dated 2 June 1982.

²⁴ The terms of reference for Speakers' Corner were reviewed, but the intention to reflect broad political debate was retained. History Trust of South Australia, Minutes of the Board, 26 July 1983.

²⁵ Graeme Davison has presented this argument on several occasions. See 'Conflict in the Museum', in Bain Attwood and SG Foster (eds), *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 2003, pp. 201–14, and 'What Should a National Museum Do? Learning from the World', in Marilyn Lake (ed.), *Memory, Monuments and Museums: the past in the present*, Melbourne University Press, 2006, pp. 91–2.

²⁶ The exhibition was *Aboriginal People of Tasmania* and it opened in 1982.

²⁷ Julia Clark, "'Socialist Muck or the Truth at Last": The Bicentennial Exhibition of the Corporation of the City of Hobart', *Museums Australia Journal*, vols. 2–3, 1991–2, p. 108.

²⁸ Julia Clark, *This Southern Outpost: Hobart 1846–1914*, Corporation of the City of Hobart, 1989.

²⁹ Pigott Report, para. 12.16.

³⁰ Miriam Dixon, *The Real Matilda: Women and Identity in Australia 1788–1975*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1975; Beverley Kingston, *My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Ann: Women and Work in Australia*, Thomas Nelson, Melbourne, 1975; Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1975.

³¹ For an overview of these movements in Australia see Barbara Caine (ed.), *Australian Feminism: A Companion*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998.

³² There is not space to discuss these exhibitions in any detail here, but I did review some of them in a number of articles in the 1990s. See for example Margaret Anderson, 'Engendering public culture: women and museums in Australia', *Images of Women Conference Papers*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 1994, pp. 116–133. See also Margaret Anderson, Julia Clark and Andrew Reeves, *When Australia was a Woman: Images of a Nation*, Western Australian Museum, Perth, 1997.

³³ The convict exhibition opened in 1992.

³⁴ See the published catalogue, Liza Dale, *Work in the Home*, Museum of Victoria, Melbourne, 1989.

³⁵ One example was her wonderful exhibition of the flower paintings of Ellis Rowan, with its accompanying catalogue. Judith McKay, *Ellis Rowan: A Flower-Hunter in Queensland*, Queensland Museum, Brisbane, 1990.

³⁶ Volume 1, 1990. The volume included a useful select bibliography of published work on women in museums.

³⁷ That said, around the table of the Council of Australasian Museum Directors there were only six women amongst 21 members in 2008.

³⁸ They were *Daughters of a Dreaming*, an exhibition based on Koori family photographs (c. 1990–91) and *Keeping Culture Strong: Aboriginal Women and Work* (1992).

³⁹ It was presented in c. 1988 and toured nationally.

⁴⁰ There was an accompanying catalogue: Rowena MacDonald, *Between Two Worlds: The Commonwealth Government and the Removal of Aboriginal Children of Part Descent in the Northern Territory*, IAD Press, Alice Springs, 1995.

⁴¹ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*, Sydney, 1997.

⁴² Notably in Macintyre and Clark, *The History Wars*.

⁴³ For an overview of this debate see Henry Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told?: a personal search for the truth about our history*, Viking, Melbourne, 1999, and Bain Attwood, *Telling the Truth about Aboriginal History*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2005.

⁴⁴ The galleries were: *Indigenous Australians* (Australian Museum), *Katta Djinoong* (WA Museum), *Bunjilaka* (Melbourne Museum, Museum Victoria) and *Gallery of Aboriginal Australia* (National Museum).

⁴⁵ A fifth gallery, opened at the South Australian Museum, preferred a more traditional ethnographic approach and is not discussed here.

⁴⁶ One of the most difficult episodes had concerned the Museum approving, under fierce ministerial pressure, mining on sacred land at Noonkanbah in the 1970s. This was still remembered with pain by many Aboriginal people in Western Australia in the 1990s.

⁴⁷ There is an extensive literature on this phenomenon in the US, but for a sense of its impact on museums see Roger D Launius, 'American Memory, Culture Wars and the Challenge of Presenting Science and Technology in a National Museum', *The Public Historian*, Vol. 29, No. 1, Winter 2007, pp. 13–30; James B Gardner, 'Contested Terrain: History, Museums and the Public', *The Public Historian*, Vol. 26, No. 4, Fall 2004, pp. 11–21.

⁴⁸ Margaret Anderson, 'Contested memory and history museums in Australia', in Marie-Paule Jungblut and Rosmarie Beier-De-Haan (eds), *Museums and Universal Heritage: History in the Area of Conflict between Interpretation and Manipulation*, International Committee for Museums of archaeology and History, Luxembourg, 2008, pp. 70–79.

⁴⁹ He indicated his determination both to make Australian history a political issue in opposition to what he called the left-wing revisionism of the academies in league with the Keating Labor government, and to direct the re-writing of history along the lines he preferred. See, for example, Hon John Howard, MP, *The Liberal Tradition: The Beliefs and Values Which Guide the Federal Government*, Sir Robert Menzies Lecture, 1996.

⁵⁰ Margaret Anderson, 'The Changing Museum – Rhetoric or Reality? Exhibiting History in a Post-Politically Correct World', *Unlocking Museums*, Museums Australia, Darwin, 1997.

⁵¹ Davison, 'Conflict in the Museum'; Dawn Casey, 'Reflections of a National Museum Director', in Lake, *Memory, Monuments and Museums*, pp. 110–23.

⁵² John Carroll, Richard Longes, Philip Jones and Patricia Rich, 'Review of the National Museum of Australia, its exhibitions and public programs: a report to the Council of the National Museum of Australia', Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Canberra, 2003.

⁵³ See Gardiner and Launius above.

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Understanding Museums - Museums and history

Redeveloping ports, rejuvenating heritage: Australian maritime museums

by Kevin Jones

Introduction

Many proposals were put to the Australian government's Committee of Inquiry into Museums and National Collections in 1975 (the Pigott Report). The Committee, however, decided that only three themes deserved special attention. They recommended that 'priority be given to a national maritime museum in Sydney, and to a national aviation museum at a growth centre such as Albury-Wodonga, and that later consideration be given to locating a Gallery or Museum of Australian Biography, within the Parliamentary Triangle in Canberra'. [1]

In the event the Australian National Maritime Museum opened in 1991, years before a generalist national museum or a national portrait gallery, and an aviation museum has had scant mention since.

The priority given to the Australian National Maritime Museum may be an acknowledgement the central role of maritime history in the European exploration and settlement of Australia. It was built as a project marking the Bicentenary of the First Fleet arriving in Sydney Harbour. It was also built as an Australian government contribution to the rejuvenation of Sydney's disused shipping terminal, Darling Harbour.

Today, more than 30 years after the Australian government's Inquiry, Sydney Heritage Fleet's website holds a list of maritime museums and collections in Australia. It names 71 specifically designated maritime museums including 20 in New South Wales and 15 each in Victoria and Queensland, plus another 106 museums with substantial maritime collections. It also lists 232 sites and associations dedicated to preserving maritime heritage, be it a lighthouse, an archive or sailing a class of timber boats. The numbers are compelling.

From the Queensland Maritime Museum to the Maritime Museum of Tasmania and the Australian National Maritime Museum, there is almost universal agreement on what such organisations should be called. Beyond their titles, however, the museums have different organisational histories, different resources, priorities and different audiences. Some were established by enthusiasts wanting to save historic vessels; others to save shipwrecks or archaeological collections; and still others to bring audiences to disused ports to promote tourism, sustain a community or find a use for a historic precinct.

Biting off more than you can chew and chewing like hell

Most maritime museums, such as the Sydney Maritime Museum, the Melbourne Maritime Museum (*Polly Woodside*) and the Queensland Maritime Museum, were begun by dedicated volunteers whose efforts were crystallised in the goal of saving a single important vessel.

Sydney Heritage Fleet records its origins in its journal, *Australian Sea Heritage*, in an article entitled 'Biting off more than you can chew and chewing like hell'. It is proud of its audacity in taking on enormous projects and succeeding against the odds. It can certainly cite a proud list of acquired vessels, including the Edwardian steam launch *Lady Hopetoun*, the steam tug *Waratah* and the coastal steamer *John Oxley*, all restored in the late 1960s.

The major turning point in the museum's growth came in 1971 when it decided to retrieve the hull of the sailing ship *James Craig*. The *James Craig*, built in 1874, traded to Europe, Australia and America. It had rounded Cape Horn many times, climbing to the highest peak of nautical mythology.

There was a great deal of debate within the organisation about the project; about the realities of resources and the values of conservation and restoration. Some believed their resources were already stretched and such a large project could break them. They also argued that there was so little remaining of the original vessel that the project would end up building a replica on an original

keel. Others believed the restoration of a large sailing ship would balance the Fleet's strength in steam.

Sydney Maritime Museum began retrieving the *James Craig* in 1972. It became a 30-year project that took the ship to Sydney in 1981 and finally to its recommissioning in 2005. There were technical challenges to be overcome in reviving extinct trades such as hot-riveting, but the biggest challenge was undoubtedly resources. The museum raised over three million dollars by raffling Porsches and received a bicentennial grant of \$1.5 million from the NSW government, but it lost badly on predictions that visitors to the newly developed Darling Harbour would pay to see the *James Craig* being restored. However, the vessel also won the support of the Albert family, who provided the funding needed for the project to go ahead. It was a 20-year project but, once the funding was assured, 80 per cent of the work was completed in two years.

The Queensland Maritime Museum was formed as a branch of the World Ship Society in 1969. Two years later it acquired its first vessel, purchasing the steam tug *Forceful* for one dollar from the Queensland Tug Company. The state government provided the disused South Brisbane Dock and the Brisbane City Council offered support. Radio promotions attracted 50 members and the museum continued to grow from the dreams of enthusiasts. One of its largest achievements was acquiring the Second World War frigate HMAS *Diamantina* to fill its dock in 1981.

For Melbourne Maritime Museum the founding inspiration was the *Polly Woodside*, a three-masted barque built in Belfast in 1885. It had rounded Cape Horn 16 times and by 1968 was the last square-rigged ocean-going ship in Australasia. The National Trust of Victoria bought the *Polly Woodside* from Howard Smith for one cent. It restored it from 1962 to 1968, planning to keep the vessel afloat in a dry dock and open it to visitors. The Victorian government provided the use of a historic dock. In 1988 the project was awarded the World Ship Trust Medal for supreme achievement in conservation. In 2006 *Polly Woodside* was added to the State Heritage Register and the Victorian government provided a grant of \$100,000 for a condition survey.

Both the Queensland Maritime Museum and the Melbourne Maritime Museum have exploited opportunities presented by the redevelopment of disused waterfronts. Queensland Maritime Museum won funding from Brisbane City Council as part of a plan to lift tourism to South Bank. In 2000 Melbourne Maritime Museum began a redevelopment program to broaden its collections and focus on the Port of Melbourne. A new exhibition building was provided as part of the billion-dollar construction of an exhibition and convention centre and opened in December 2010.

Maritime archaeology and the Western Australian Maritime Museum

There are clear parallels between those museums that were inspired by the urgency of preserving historic vessels and the origins of the Western Australian Maritime Museum. Myra Stanbury, curator, observed that 'The Western Australian Maritime Museum is essentially the product of maritime archaeology. At the root of its conception, initiation, development and culmination is a wealth of archaeological material recovered from historical shipwrecks.' [2]

The process began in 1963 when two extraordinarily significant shipwrecks were discovered. They were both Dutch East Indiamen, the *Batavia*, built in 1629, and the *Vergulde Draeck*, built in 1653. The wrecks extended the European history of Australia centuries beyond the popular understanding that it began with James Cook charting the east coast in 1770. The wrecks also captured the public imagination with tales of sunken bullion and stories of murder and mutiny. [3]

In 1965 Fremantle City Council, with support from the Western Australian Museum, developed a proposal to convert Fremantle's convict-built asylum into a maritime museum and sought state government funding for the project. The museum opened in 1970 and maritime archaeological material formed the basis of the first displays. Myra Stanbury recalled that the development of the new museum:

provided display staff with a stepping stone into a new era of design concepts and interpretive philosophy. The displays represented a radical move away from cabinets of inanimate stuffed birds and animals to more contextual displays related to the discovery of the Great Southland; early Dutch voyages; the trading activities of the Dutch East India Company; and social and cultural life in the Netherlands. [4]

The exhibitions also portrayed the role, methods and recovery techniques of the new field of maritime archaeology. While today that may involve opening the process to question, in 1970 it

was simply intended to 'give a balanced view of the objectives of maritime archaeology'. [5]

The exhibitions were part of a broader museum program. Lobbying from divers persuaded the Western Australian Museum to employ a maritime archaeologist in 1971 and the work was supported by the voluntary labour of amateur divers. Together they raised an enormous amount of significant material, including 27 tonnes of sandstone building blocks, and timber from the stern section of the *Batavia*.

The material was too large to be included in existing museums and demanded an imaginative solution to bring it to life. In 1977 the historic Commissariat Store in Fremantle became available and funding was provided to transform it into a museum. The Western Australian Maritime Museum opened to the public in September 1979 in time to celebrate the state's 150th anniversary. Today, the display of a large section of the *Batavia* and the stone arch carried by the same ship is one of the richest, most evocative exhibitions in Australia.

The maritime archaeology program developed by the museum became known worldwide for its achievements, and the team of archaeologists worked with several countries on underwater sites in the Indian Ocean.

While the histories of other maritime museums are accounts of enthusiasts establishing museums as incorporated associations, in the case of maritime archaeology in Western Australia enthusiasts lobbied the Western Australian Museum and the state and Australian governments to take responsibility. Along with the development of the Western Australian Maritime Museum, laws were passed by the Western Australian government in 1973 (the *Maritime Archaeology Act*) and the Australian government in 1976 (the *Historic Shipwrecks Act*) to protect wrecks by preventing divers from retrieving objects from the sites.

From the periphery to the mainstream

Professor Frank Broeze was rare among historians in describing himself as a maritime historian. Most of his contemporaries who wrote about maritime history saw themselves as generalists who simply happened to be working on maritime history at the time. In 1989, two years before the Australian National Maritime Museum opened, Frank Broeze wrote an article, 'From the Periphery to the Mainstream', in which he argued that maritime history needed to claim its place in the mainstream historiography of Australia. He pointed to examples where maritime affairs were clearly part of the main history.

He observed that many maritime historians and archaeologists focused on the technical detail because of their passionate fascination with the vessels and the artefacts, rather than on the people who used them. Professor Broeze's arguments were very much in line with those arguing for social history in museums. Such ideas were expressed in the South Australian Maritime Museum that opened in 1986, the Australian National Maritime Museum that opened in 1991, and the Western Australian Maritime Museum's new exhibition galleries that opened in 2002.

All three museums were led by urban renewal projects and were intended to help revive disused ports. The stimulus for those museums came from the aim of building an audience, be they tourists or local communities. It did not come from the collections. Indeed, in the case of the Australian National Maritime Museum, to begin with there was no collection at all.

South Australian Maritime Museum

Port Adelaide's Inner Harbor had been the focus of trade since the colony was proclaimed in 1836. However, in trends that have been seen in ports around the world, technology changed. Accelerating in the decades after the Second World War, shipping was rebuilt and new bulk handling and container terminals were established. These new facilities were built downstream rather than on existing sites. This meant that there was a disused port left intact that became South Australia's first historic precinct.

A maritime museum was seen as part of the answer to revive the community and lead the redevelopment of the port. It would attract tourists, build on the ambience of the historic port and demonstrate commitment to reinforcing community values.

Like Merseyside Maritime Museum in Liverpool and South Street Seaport Museum in New York, the South Australian Maritime Museum aimed to colour its precinct. It was spread over several sites that included a wharf shed, a lighthouse, a stone-built bond store and a timber sailmaker's loft.

The museum built a collection of vessels that included an 1883 coastal trader (*Nelcebee*), a 1949 steam tug (*Yelta*) and a 40-foot naval launch (*Archie Badenoch*).

The museum presented a series of innovative thematic exhibitions with the aim of taking maritime heritage to a broad audience. Exhibitions explored the experiences of immigrants and related them to the local community through a database that enabled South Australians to find the ships that brought their immigrant ancestors to the state. They emphasised the experiences of those who crewed the ships, and expanded maritime history to include areas that might seem trivial to a specialist but might more easily relate to visitors who rarely go to sea. Much was made of nostalgia for the gulf trips that gave South Australians cheap cruise holidays in their local waters and of recreational fishing, surfing, swimming and seaside entertainment.

At the same time, the museum was not a total break from the past. It presented displays that appealed to specialists and enthusiasts. Its largest floor space was a cargo shed that provided berths for its vessels and a hall to exhibit a collection of large objects that included a teak cabin from a coastal steamer, the hull of an 1870s trading ketch, wharf cranes and sail craft.

The museum also presented the oldest nautical collection in Australia, that of the former Port Adelaide Nautical Institute. Part of the nineteenth-century movement for self improvement, the Institute began in 1851 as a subscription library and began a museum collection with an honorary curator in 1872. When it became part of the new maritime museum in 1986, it was presented as a museum within a museum, exhibiting the charm and the mystery of a collection of the past. Designer Quentin Mitchell said the aim was to present the Nautical Collection as if it had been picked up by an egg slide and placed in the new building.

Australian National Maritime Museum

Amongst those who lobbied so effectively for the establishment of a national maritime museum were the nautical enthusiasts of the Sydney Maritime Museum.

One of the foundation documents for the National Maritime Museum was based on an alliance between academic history and amateur nautical history. A draft collections and exhibitions policy was produced in October 1985 by Peter Spearritt and Vaughan Evans. Professor Spearritt was head of the School of Social and Political Enquiry at Monash University and had published in Australian history. Vaughan Evans was a founder of the Australian Association for Maritime History and a long-time editor of its newsletter. In that role he bridged the gap by founding an organisation with a majority of amateur historians but producing a journal edited and refereed by academics.

It was a partnership that crossed the constituents of maritime museums. Within the report they deftly summed up the ideal relationship between amateurs and professional historians:

Unlike many thematic museums the National Maritime Museum starts with the enormous advantage of having a ready-made body of enthusiasts and experts to draw on, from the Royal Australian Navy, the Australian Association for Maritime History and the Sydney Maritime Museum ... The National Maritime Museum must capitalise on the knowledge and goodwill of the enthusiasts and experts, but it must not become captive to them. The great majority of visitors to the Museum will know little of our maritime heritage and even less about maritime technology or what working on a ship was really like, for officers or crew. [6]

They sketched out themes around which the collection should be based: 'Given the fact that the NMM does not yet have a major collection of maritime items and that it has to open in 1988 we recommend that collecting, in the first instance, should be based around particular themes'. [7]

The concept of arranging collections as well as exhibitions around themes was seen as a contemporary approach. Some saw it as a sound rejection of traditional practice that focused on object types and technology rather than ideas. Others saw it as a temporary expedient that was necessary to produce the opening exhibitions. They believed that, once the museum opened, curatorial work should be arranged around the objective of developing the collection, and that should be done by giving curators responsibility for categories of objects such as paintings or models or boats, rather than themes such as navy or sport.

The museum's opening exhibitions were originally founded around the five themes of naval history, commercial history, sport and leisure, exploration, and immigration. A sixth theme, of Australian and American maritime relations, was added as the result of a gift of \$7 million from the United

States Government to mark Australia's Bicentenary.

Immigration perhaps held together most clearly as a theme. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century immigration presented accounts of convicts and free settlers. In a few short years a credible collection was assembled that included shipboard newspapers, logs, the bower anchor from the *Sirius*, the flagship of the First Fleet, and a rare painting of the *Borrowdale*, a store ship from the same fleet. Exhibitions on twentieth-century immigration were based on material donated or lent by postwar migrants, displaced persons, refugees and 'ten pound Poms'. It also included accounts from the *Hong Hai*, a ship on which Vietnamese refugees fled their war-torn homeland in the 1970s.

Exhibitions on Australia's commercial maritime history included the history of whaling with a focus on Western Australia, accounts of fishing for tuna in South Australia and rock lobsters in Tasmania, and presented a history of the Adelaide Steamship Company as representative of coastal shipping. There was also an exhibition on trade unions, which forged a continuing association between the museum and maritime unions.

The exhibition, *Discovery: Finding Australia*, focused on European exploration and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activities. It was the first core exhibition to be changed after opening. The name was clearly erroneous and the concept of a single theme encompassing Indigenous and European history was questioned. The area was reconfigured to present two discrete, if related, exhibitions. The European section was named *Navigators*.

The Indigenous exhibition was named *Merana Eora Nora – First Australians*. It presented contemporary stories from the Torres Strait, the Kimberley Coast and the Northern Territory, and emphasised living cultures and continuing connections with heritage and place.

A second gallery included two themes, leisure and naval history. Leisure was seen to be especially Australian, stretching definitions of maritime heritage to include surf lifesaving and beach culture. Alongside a flotilla of suspended yachts and a naval helicopter were displayed the biggest and the brightest and the fastest boat in the world – *Spirit of Australia* and the 1983 America's Cup-winning yacht, *Australia II*. The exhibition was rich in personal stories, from Enid Nunn who almost won a water speed record on Kogarah Bay in the 1950s to the rough and ready crew of Wee Georgie Robinson's 18-foot skiff.

The Navy exhibition drew on the repositories of the Royal Australian Navy, including material from naval brigades that steamed off to the 1900 Boxer Rebellion in China, through both World Wars and the war in Vietnam. The destroyer *Vampire*, the patrol boat *Advance*, the espionage boat *Krait* and the launch *Epic Lass* were all berthed at the museum's wharves and a submarine was later added to the fleet. The dominance of the Navy in the collection could be weighed in shiploads.

The Australian National Maritime Museum's exhibitions were developed by staff who broadly shared the goals of social history that were articulated by Professor Broeze. Many of the exhibits sought to focus on the people – ordinary seafarers, wharfies and surf bathers – as well as the artefacts and the vessels.

That had been one of the goals of Vaughan Evans and Peter Spearritt in developing the original themes. The exhibitions on exploration and immigration, in particular, were able to build on large bodies of research. Curators also looked to the work of amateur historians, particularly in areas such as sailing and surfing, which had not been addressed by mainstream history.

History in a tourism development

I have discussed how maritime museums interpreted history by looking through the observations of historians and curators and the vision of enthusiasts who saved heritage that was under threat. There were other dimensions to the position of maritime museums in Australia. They were based on government expectations of what a cultural attraction such as the Australian National Maritime Museum should be doing in the new tourism development of Darling Harbour. In an issue of the maritime history journal, *The Great Circle*, marking the opening of the Australian National Maritime Museum, its Director Kevin Fewster wrote:

While not denying the wider trend in museums towards social history, I would contend that the pursuit of this approach at ANMM and Port Adelaide is, at least in part, a result of the museums being developed within major urban renewal programs. The pressures and

opportunities associated with being located within a tourist precinct have required the museums to maintain a strong focus on their visitor appeal. While not ignoring traditional curatorial responsibilities, these maritime museums readily accept as part of their mission the need to attract a broadly based audience. [8]

He went on to say that the government has stated that the Maritime Museum would be different to other collecting institutions. It would be an 'exhibitions oriented institution'. The term was widely debated in the early development of the museum.

There were genuine debates within the museum profession about the need to focus on audiences and public programs. However, the term came from a report produced by the Department of Finance titled *What Price Heritage* and was essentially a cost-saving measure. Its intention was to limit the growth of the museum's collection to save the costs of collecting and preserving and to limit the number of staff.

Within the museum the concept of an exhibitions-oriented institution was widely debated. It was a debate about whether the museum had a broader research role or whether research should be confined to exhibition production. It was also a debate about the size of the museum's collection: to meet government expectations, the museum's objective was articulated as developing a 'small core collection' rather than aiming to collect representative examples of all object types.

Emphasis was placed on an active and popular exhibitions program and on presenting education programs and public events. International blockbuster exhibitions became a staple of its programming: the American exhibition *Whales: Giants of the Deep* and the British show *Mary Rose – Life on a Tudor Warship* were instrumental in raising the museum's visitor numbers after opening. That emphasis was broadly consistent with the public programs of both the Powerhouse Museum and the Australian Museum.

It was only in 2007 that the Australian National Maritime Museum launched a major research project that was not related to exhibitions. That project was the launch of a national register of historic vessels that has all the credentials to build a comprehensive catalogue on the provenance and significance of vessels, as well as recording their technology.

Redeveloping ports, rejuvenating heritage

The principal engine in providing the funding for the development of maritime museums has been the redevelopment of disused ports. The energy and the ideas have come from nautical enthusiasts and amateur historians who have rescued, researched and restored historic vessels. They have come from social historians who were part of those generations who aimed to find broader views of history and broader audiences for maritime history. They have also come from maritime archaeologists who extended the reach of European history. And some of the best projects presenting aspects of Australia's maritime history and heritage have built alliances across these interests.

Footnotes

¹ PH Pigott et al, *Museums in Australia 1975 – Report of the Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections*, AGPS, Canberra, 1975, p. 4.

² Myra Stanbury, 'Maritime Archaeological Material: a catalyst in the development of the Western Australian Maritime Museum', in LM Akveld (ed.), *VIIth International Congress of Maritime Museums Proceedings*, Amsterdam 1987, p. 104.

³ Stanbury, 'Maritime Archaeological Material', p. 105

⁴ Stanbury, 'Maritime Archaeological Material', p. 107.

⁵ Stanbury, 'Maritime Archaeological Material', p. 107.

⁶ Vaughan Evans and Peter Spearritt, 'A Draft Collections Policy for the National Maritime Museum', October 1985, unpublished, Vaughan Evans Library, Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney, pp. 1–2.

⁷ Evans and Spearritt, 'Draft Collections Policy for the National Maritime Museum', p. 8.

⁸ Kevin Fewster, 'Down to the Sea in Monorails: Urban Renewal and Recent Maritime Museum Developments',

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Understanding Museums - Museums and history

Museums and multiculturalism: too vague to understand, too important to ignore

by Viv Szekeres

How interesting to be thinking about museums and multiculturalism at a moment when the idea of Australia being importantly and centrally multicultural is fast disappearing. When I first joined the Migration Museum in 1984 there was an incredible sense of optimism and energy in my field of interest which was, and still is, the history of immigration and settlement. This energy came from an understanding that the demographic changes that followed Australia's mass migration program after the Second World War had created a society for which 'multicultural' was a true descriptor. However, 'culturally diverse' became a more commonly used term to refer to the many different 'ethnic' cultural identities that had joined Australia's predominantly Anglo-Celtic society. There was nothing subtle about the analysis. In the public mind multiculturalism was synonymous with immigration. [1] Anglo-Celts were the 'mainstream' and 'ethnic' minorities were the 'other'. I am also ashamed to say that the cultural identities and histories of Indigenous Australians, the first peoples of Australia, hardly featured at all.

We (a small group of museum workers) were fairly intoxicated with the possibilities of collecting stories and objects from an ever-increasing pool of people who now felt confident enough to claim, even proclaim, their cultural origins, and who knew they didn't need to be stuffed to be in a museum. It is always difficult to pinpoint the origins of change in a society as complex as ours, but there were two reports commissioned by the Australian government in the 1970s that were seminal. They not only captured and described a prevailing reality but also had a long-term effect on the museum industry and on the wider society. The Pigott Report, *Museums in Australia*, was published in 1975 [2] and the Galbally Report on *Migrant Programs and Services* was published in 1978. [3] They were totally unrelated to each other. Pigott articulated ideas about a grassroots history and community museum movement; Galbally highlighted the existence of communities of shared interests and pasts and raised awareness of issues about cultural identity. Viewed in retrospect and together, these reports have influenced and changed the way many, perhaps even most, museums operate across Australia today.

The Pigott Report identified that the majority of museums in this country were local and had been founded in the 1960s. In brief, it reported that this was the result of a quickening interest in Australian history and identified this interest as a 'movement' whose influence lay outside the capital cities.

At the 1998 the International Council of Museums (ICOM) conference in Melbourne I was asked to give a paper about regional museums in a multicultural society [4] and took my audience on a brief, imaginary excursion to visit a 'typical' local museum in a regional centre. It was housed in an old courthouse and run by a local historical society. My 'fictitious' museum was not entirely serious, though it was based on conversations that I had enjoyed with Geoff Speirs, who was at the time the Museums Officer for the former History Trust of South Australia's Museums Accreditation and Grants program. [5] I described the membership of the management committee of my local museum as predominantly Anglo-Celtic. Neither was it fiction when I also described this group as being like hundreds around the nation who cared passionately about history, which was why they had been prepared to work as volunteers for long hours over many years. I concluded that, on the whole, the version of history that they presented was a pioneering and settler story that excluded both the 'ethnic' and Indigenous stories of their region. To reinforce my point I added that, even though women often outnumbered men on the management committees, the history being told was from the perspective of white, Anglo-Celtic, Protestant men who also tended to be middle-aged and middle class.

Even by the late 1990s my description was probably not far off the mark for the majority of local museums staffed by volunteers. One notable exception was the Pioneer Women's Hut in Tumberumba (NSW). However, there were two museums in the Barossa Valley and Adelaide Hills in South Australia that might be seen as exceptions in terms of reflecting more culturally diverse regions. The museums in Tanunda and Lobethal were developed in the early 1960s by local

historical societies whose memberships were either descendants of the early German settlers who had retained their Lutheran, East Prussian origins, or those who strongly identified with the region and took an interest in its history. [6]

The Barossa community especially had a sense of pride in its German origins. This was in spite of periods of persecution as enemy aliens during both World Wars, but particularly the 1914–18 war. Their consciousness of the past meant that the material culture of everyday life had been valued and kept by individuals and families and often ended up in museum displays. The Lobethal and Tanunda museums certainly had strong connections with the East Prussian 'ethnic' origins of the regions, but I am not sure that we can call them 'ethnic-specific' museums, as they seem more connected to the 'local history museum movement' of the early 1960s described by Pigott.

It would be some years before the next group of community museums emerged on the museum scene in Australia. The Lithuanian Museum opened officially in 1967 and the Latvian Museum in 1972, both in Adelaide. These museums were established by two groups of Displaced Persons (DPs), who were refugees from the Second World War. They had formed the Lithuanian and Latvian associations in 1949 to continue their cultural heritage and traditions. As Galbally was later to report of many similar groups, especially from Eastern Europe, they had an active choir, folk and dancing group, arts and sports group and language school. Mara Kolomitsev, the current curator of the Latvian Museum, says 'the establishment of the museum emerged in the 1970s as the next step'. [7] But even for communities that already had other cultural activities, establishing a museum was a huge commitment.

The Latvian and Lithuanian DPs in Australia, however, had a strong sense of cultural and national identity, which flourished especially during a brief period of national independence between the two World Wars, an independence which ended under Soviet and German occupation during the Second World War, and USSR annexation over the following five decades.

Probably the Latvian and Lithuanian DPs, together with others from Eastern Europe, believed that Soviet occupation would be short lived. While they waited to return to their homeland they kept their patriotism and nationalism alive with folk dancing, singing and other arts and crafts. As the years passed, the Baltic States' diaspora clung to its conviction that independence must surely return to their countries. In Adelaide, the establishment of these museums can be seen both as a symbol of the pursuit of cultural continuity and as a means of keeping alive and in the public arena the injustice of Soviet occupation. By the time Lithuania regained its independence in 1990 and Latvia in 1991, Lithuanian and Latvian DPs and their descendants were well established in Australia.

The Ukrainian Museum opened also in Adelaide in the late 1970s to 'mark 30 years of settlement' of Ukrainian DPs. [8] It was the responsibility of the Ukrainian Women's Association, who bought a small property near the Ukrainian Community Hall to house their artefacts and archives for the 'benefit of the wider Australian community'. [9] Lydia Rostek, one of the volunteer curators, said 'the symbolic and creative aspects of culture, such as ethnographic material that includes costume and embroidery has always been the domain of women'.

According to Margy Burn, [10] the Estonian community developed its own historical archives in Sydney as early as 1952, but did not open a museum. People from South Australia's Polish community also had a strong sense of their history and cultural identity and formed an historical society in the early 1980s. It was not until the late 1990s, though, that they opened a small social history museum at Polish Hill River in the Clare Valley, where Poles, who had arrived in the colony as early as 1838, had settled.

According to Professor James Jupp in his book *Immigration*, [11] the public declaration of Australia as a multicultural nation was made by Al Grassby, the Minister for Immigration in the Whitlam government. It was a term taken from Canada where it had been in use since 1968. By the mid-1970s Ethnic Communities Councils had formed in most Australian states. Both Liberal and Labor politicians began to recognise that there was an increasing electoral force amongst immigrant communities. Jupp suggests that Fraser's most important initiative was to implement the Galbally Report of 1978. [12] Amongst Galbally's recommendations was official support for community languages and media, the establishment of migrant resource centres, and SBS as the ethnic radio and television broadcaster, and the establishment of an Institute of Multicultural Affairs.

The previous government policies of assimilation and integration of new migrants into mainstream Anglo-Celtic culture were seen to have failed. It was clear that by the early 1980s there was

widespread consensus, particularly amongst communities of non-Anglo background, that Australia was a multicultural nation. It was now acceptable to have an 'ethnic' cultural identity in addition to being Australian, without fear of ostracism or racism. This shift is reflected in the opening of two museums by the Chinese and Jewish communities.

Chinese and Jewish immigrants had begun to arrive along with the British in 1788. A small number of Chinese men arrived as indentured labourers, convicts and free settlers, and were followed by much larger numbers after the discovery of gold in Victoria in the 1850s. The first Jews to arrive were a handful amongst 750 convicts who were transported from Britain on the First Fleet.

Nearly 200 years later in 1977 Rabbi Ronald Lubovsky suggested the establishment of a Jewish Museum of Australia. It opened in Melbourne in 1982 and was followed two years later by the opening of the Holocaust Museum, also in Melbourne. That two museums dedicated to Jewish history should open in Melbourne is hardly surprising, for it has the largest number of settlers of Jewish origin in Australia and, outside of Israel and the USA, probably the largest number of Holocaust survivors. The other community with a long history of settlement in Victoria was the Chinese. They opened a museum of Chinese history, also in Melbourne, in 1985. In a very real sense, all of these museums were community initiatives. However, the Chinese Museum did receive development funding from the state government as part of Victoria's sesquicentenary, whereas both Jewish museums were funded from their own constituencies.

I would suggest that this flowering of community-initiated museums, begun in 1967 by the Lithuanians, was a direct consequence of a new public and community consciousness about the future identity of the nation. The communities involved in developing these museums had a number of factors in common. Their members had been settled in Australia for at least 30 years; certainly long enough to produce new generations who would probably not have been aware of the histories of persecution and oppression that their families had experienced in varying degrees of awfulness. As Carol Duncan said, 'Museums can be powerful identity defining machines'. [13] The main function of a museum is to preserve the material evidence of the past, but in the process it also legitimates that past. I would argue that the arrival of a 'clutch' of new ethnic-specific community museums came from an increased confidence of belonging. Their previously tenuous hold on membership of the wider society was more secure and could be celebrated, promoted and enjoyed.

Like the Chinese Museum in Melbourne, the Migration Museum in Adelaide was another sesquicentenary project, but this time a South Australian celebration. The idea for the museum in Adelaide was the result of recommendations made to the state government by the Edwards Report. It said that 'given 25% of the State's population had been born overseas ... there had been little attempt to preserve and display items with migrant history, little or no research into ethnic cultures' and 'a failure to inform the public about them'. [14] Edwards also added that 'there was a need to recognize the tremendous contribution immigrants have given to South Australia in its social, economic and cultural life'. [15] The Migration Museum opened to the public in 1986 under the auspices of the former History Trust of South Australia, a statutory authority established in 1981 to 'accumulate and care for objects of historical interest' and 'to manage and administer museums'. [16]

In the history of the development of museums that presented immigration and settlement history and reflected multiculturalism, the arrival of the Migration Museum was a significant event. It heralded a change in the agenda nationally for museums and multiculturalism. Firstly, it was an acknowledgement by a state government, through an ongoing financial commitment, that the history and culture of immigrants was worth collecting and keeping. Secondly, it gave control to an independent organisation without a vested interest in a specific ethnic culture. The Migration Museum might involve ethnic groups but they would not run it. Whilst there was local and community support for the idea of a migration museum, there was probably also a certain amount of scepticism amongst local ethnic communities as to whether it would work and what political line it might take. But the social and cultural capital that came from government support and the fact that the government bureaucracy maintained a 'hands off approach' has enabled the museum to weave its way through the complexities of ethnic politics, enlarge its audience, and maintain its independence and momentum.

In 1988 'a landmark conference' [17] was organised by the Victorian Branch of Museums Australia and the Library Council of Victoria for 'museums, libraries, archives and historical collections towards a national agenda for a Multicultural Australia'. As the conference convener, Morag Loh,

said in her welcoming address to *New Responsibilities – Documenting Multicultural Australia*, ‘we are gathered here from all over Australia and represent a diverse range of institutions and community groups. Our concerns are of national significance’. [18] It was the first time that national and state institutions and community groups had come together to present papers about the importance of documenting and collecting the history of immigrants and ‘ethnic’ cultures. By the time the conference papers were published six months later, the organising committee was able to inform readers that ‘they may like to note that the Prime Minister, Mr Hawke, released the National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia on 26 July 1989’, and that the National Agenda ‘has taken up recommendations put forward by the Conference’. [19]

This was heady stuff, especially as it was followed by the establishment of the Federal Consultative Committee on Cultural Heritage in a Multicultural Australia. The Committee’s long title might have been a bit convoluted but its task was simpler: to assess whether or not the collections and public programs of collecting institutions reflected the nation’s cultural diversity and the contribution made by immigrants. The committee met between 1990 and 1991, but it was hard to make much headway. It was clear that collecting the material which might reflect Australia’s cultural diversity was definitely outside the current practices and policies of most collecting institutions.

But during one quite intense discussion on this committee, I came to realise that up until now cultural diversity had been defined as being exclusively the domain of ‘ethnic minorities’. When the definition was expanded to include class, gender, age, religion, region and sexuality as well as ethnicity, there was a seismic shift away from the folkloric and anthropological approach which equates ‘cultural difference’ with the exotic and quaint. The wider definition was much more suited to a social history approach, which focused on individual and collective stories and interrogated the idea of tradition and nationalism in an historical context, rather than accepting it as an unchanging reality of ethnic culture.

I have argued elsewhere that social history is one of the more democratic disciplines in that it has opened the academic door for historians to study the history of ‘ordinary people’. [20] For museums in the 1980s interested in Australia’s post-Second World War immigration history there were virtually no academics who were interested in this aspect of Australia’s past, with the exceptions of Professors James Jupp, Jerzy Zubryzcki and Mary Kalantzis. The dearth of secondary sources meant that curators interested in telling the stories of non-English-speaking migrants had to go out into communities to search for this history themselves. One of the positive outcomes of this practice was that the process of engaging with individuals and community groups also brought people into the museums to participate and take ownership of the way their story would be told. It also influenced policy in some museums, which provided an exhibition space for communities to tell their own stories in their own way, in some cases without it being filtered through the curator’s interpretation. [21]

From the late 1980s until the late 1990s there was a veritable explosion of exhibitions about immigration and settlement history in museums large and small across Australia. When the Powerhouse Museum opened in 1988, funded by the state government of New South Wales and the federally funded Australian National Maritime Museum opened in 1991, both included important exhibitions about the contribution to society made by immigrants and their cultures. In the museum industry multiculturalism was an accepted part of Australia’s cultural history. At museum conferences there was now an identifiable group of museum curators and directors with an interest in the history of immigrants. Ironically, it was also a period during which the concept of multiculturalism came increasingly under attack, especially from conservatives in government as well as in some academic circles.

There was definitely some nervousness from the Department of Arts, Sport, Environment, Tourism and Territories (DASETT), the Australian government department then responsible for museums, and at the Council of Australian Museums Association conference in 1990, I was asked to address the issue of ‘whether or not culture-specific museums promoted separatism and the creation of a ghetto mentality’. [22] I was not entirely surprised by this request, given that criticism of the Labor government’s policy of multiculturalism was regularly making headline news in the media. The attack was being led by Professor Geoffrey Blainey, who had accused Hawke in 1988 of ‘turning Australia into a nation of tribes’. [23]

Those who agreed with Blainey must have been horrified when two more ‘culture specific museums’ opened. In Bendigo in 1991 the Golden Dragon Museum presented the local history of the Chinese, and in 1992 the Holocaust and Australian Jewish History Museum opened in Sydney.

This was followed in the same year by a groundbreaking collaborative exhibition project developed between the Jewish Museum of Australia, the Italian Historical Society Co.As.It, and the Museum of Victoria at its Swanston Street building in Melbourne. *Bridging Two Worlds: the Jews and Italians of Carlton* captured the way two communities had developed. Carlton reflected the unique aspects of both Jewish and Italian culture, but had grown its own Australian-Jewish-Italian identity which was inclusive and multicultural in the truest sense of the word.

In 1996 a public review at the Western Australian Museum supported the installation of a major exhibition called *A New Australia: Post War Immigration to WA*, and in Darwin another state-funded museum opened *Sweet and Sour*, an exhibition about the Chinese at the Museum and Gallery of the Northern Territory. But at the same time there was a new assault on the concept of multiculturalism. John Howard won the federal election and promptly closed the Office for Multicultural Affairs and the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research. Pauline Hanson, the new Member for the seat of Oxley, repeatedly called for 'multiculturalism to be abolished'. [24] In Adelaide *A Twist of Fate*, an exhibition about refugees and racism, opened as a direct critique of the broader political agenda of the Australian government and a reminder that 'anyone, anywhere and at any time can become a refugee'. [25]

Ignoring the new federal political agenda regarding multiculturalism, the NSW and Victorian state governments supported new museum initiatives in 1998 dealing with immigrants and refugees. A 'virtual museum' at the Migration Heritage Centre opened in Sydney 'to research and promote the contribution made by immigrants to the State and the nation'. [26] In Melbourne, the Immigration Museum opened in the splendid Old Customs House. The project was strongly supported by Jeff Kennett, who was then Premier of Victoria and who also enthusiastically supported the establishment of a Hellenic Archaeological Museum in the same building. One could call this political opportunism, depending on your level of cynicism, but since Melbourne almost certainly had the largest population of immigrants from Greece it probably made good common sense.

It is significant that, for all the growing recognition of the contribution made by immigrants to Australia, the only other museum in Australia entirely devoted to immigrants and their culture, other than the Migration Museum in Adelaide, was the Immigration Museum. There was one notable difference between the two. In Adelaide, the Migration Museum as a division of the History Trust had complete intellectual freedom and independence to plan, research, develop and mount its own programs; whereas the Immigration Museum in Melbourne became a venue managed by the Museum of Victoria. Historical research, curatorial control and exhibition planning remained firmly with the parent body. But with two museums of immigration history in Australia this was clearly not just a 'politically correct fad' that would go away.

Ian Galloway, the Director of the Queensland Museum, summed up one of the reasons why immigration history might have become such a popular theme for so many museums when he said that, 'Developing diverse audiences is one of the key priorities of the Queensland Museum'. [27] For museums trying to meet performance targets and constantly increase visitor numbers, attracting new audiences became essential to long-term survival. Exhibitions about immigrants seemed to be popular, particularly with visitors from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

One important issue, which had an impact on museums, was the growing awareness of the Reconciliation movement and Indigenous history. The public conscience and consciousness was almost certainly raised by the boycott by Indigenous people of the celebration of Australia's Bicentenary in 1988. Invasion, it was said, was nothing to celebrate. Whilst there had been Aboriginal membership of ethnic Advisory Councils from 1989, multiculturalism was often criticised because it did not seem genuinely concerned with Aboriginal issues. [28] In terms of museums that presented programs about immigration history and cultural diversity, there was a certain amount of confusion as to how to represent Indigenous issues. On the whole museums solved the problem by sidestepping it. They mounted exhibitions about Indigenous people and separate exhibitions about immigrants.

By early 2000 it was clear that former Prime Minister Keating's vision of Reconciliation as the way forward for the recognition of Indigenous people had ground to a halt. But some of us working in the museum industry had become committed to this vision, and began to explore ways in which immigration history might address Reconciliation as part of a wider historical perspective. If immigration and settlement history was analysed as an 'outcome' of British colonisation, then this could allow the story to include not only the impact that settlement had on Indigenous people, but also the reality of Aboriginal survival and the role of Indigenous people in the nation's history and

the current debate about national identity.

These were certainly some of the issues that faced the National Museum in Canberra when it began to develop its exhibitions. Jerzy Zubryzcki, one of the leading architects of Australia's multicultural policy, was employed in the 1980s to provide the framework for the National Museum's multicultural collecting which he had 'focused around the experiences of specific ethnic groups'. [29] But when the National Museum officially opened in 2001 as part of the Centenary of Federation celebrations, there was some disappointment that the 'migration section' was 'small, constrained and sometimes misleading and inaccurate'. [30] Perhaps it was harder on a national scale to build meaningful and ongoing relationships with community groups and individuals that formed the heart of exhibitions on cultural diversity in other locally based museums.

How far have we come since the Lobethal or Lithuanian museums opened in the 1960s? I believe there would be few Australian museums of history today that would produce programs that completely ignore the role of immigrants in the development of Australia since the Second World War. Some museums have curatorial units where the level of scholarship and experience rivals any Australian university history department. Many museums now have collecting policies that represent the culturally diverse nature of society, and research practices that are more inclusive of the constituencies they represent.

But on the whole the celebratory aspects of immigration history and multiculturalism have been easier to present than some of the more difficult and complex issues. In spite of programs such as *Getting In* at the Immigration Museum, and exhibitions that explore the origins and consequences of racism at the Jewish and Chinese museums, there have been few museum programs that have dared to go beyond the superficial and the safe. Yes, there are obvious constraints. Individuals and community groups trust us with their stories and often their secrets. There are limits to how much we can reveal to the visiting public. The internal divisions within communities and the centuries-old antagonisms that still survive here are hidden and silent. Even the generational differences that can be found in most cultures are tucked away out of sight.

However, if we were to do an audit on museums that present programs about immigrants, refugees and multiculturalism, I believe that the majority have weathered and survived the attack on history which has been dubbed 'the history wars'. [31] Most museums have avoided a return to interpretations which are exclusively from 'the white Anglo-male position'. We have mostly ignored an exhortation [32] to stick to 'the 'happy migrant story' which is now firmly in a category labelled 'the construction of myth'. With some exceptions, the majority of museums have been immune to changes in policy and attitudes that since 1996 have undermined the multicultural reality of Australian society. We may not use the word 'multiculturalism', but exhibitions are still being developed that explore the concept. [33] The history that is presented in most of these exhibitions is an inclusive history. It has the power to touch people on an intellectual as well as an emotional level. It gives voice to people who have previously been silent. Above all, it has made, and continues to make, a significant contribution to the debate about who is Australian.

Footnotes

¹ The Fitzgerald Committee was appointed to review immigration policy under the Hawke government. Quoted in James Jupp, *Immigration in Australian Retrospectives*, Sydney University Press in association with Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. 109–10.

² *Museums in Australia 1975. Report of the Planning Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections including the report of the Planning Committee on the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia*, chaired by PH Pigott.

³ Galbally chaired the report on *Migrant Programs and Services*, 1978

⁴ Viv Szekeres, 'Regional Museums in a Polycultural Society', ICOM Conference, Melbourne 1998.

⁵ The History Trust of South Australia is now called History SA.

⁶ One of the enthusiastic local historians who helped start the Lobethal museum was a Lithuanian refugee, (DP) Mr JK Vanagas who later moved to Adelaide and developed the Lithuanian Museum.

⁷ Mara Kolomitsev, conversation /email with the author.

- ⁸ Lydia Rostek, conversation with the author 4 July 2007.
- ⁹ Rostek, 4 July 2007.
- ¹⁰ Margy Burn, Assistant Director-General, Australian Collections and Reader Services, National Library of Australia, 'Melting Pot or Monoculture: archives and cultural diversity in Australia', paper presented at the Australian Society of Archivists Annual Conference 2002, Past Caring? – what does society expect of archivists?
- ¹¹ Jupp, *Immigration in Australian Retrospectives*, p. 101.
- ¹² Jupp, *Immigration in Australian Retrospectives*, p. 101.
- ¹³ Carol Duncan, 'Interpreting Objects and Collections', in Susan Pearce (ed.) *Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship*, Routledge, London, 1994.
- ¹⁴ Robert Edwards, 'Museum Policy and Development in South Australia', Final Report. 1981
- ¹⁵ Edwards, 'Museum Policy and Development in South Australia'.
- ¹⁶ *History Trust of South Australia Act 1981*.
- ¹⁷ Margaret Birtley and Patricia McQueen (eds), *New Responsibilities – Documenting Multicultural Australia*, a record of the conference for Museums, Libraries, Archives and Historical Collections, 'Towards a National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia', 11–13 November, Melbourne, 1988.
- ¹⁸ Birtley and McQueen (eds), *New Responsibilities – Documenting Multicultural Australia*.
- ¹⁹ Birtley and McQueen (eds), *New Responsibilities – Documenting Multicultural Australia*.
- ²⁰ Viv Szekeres, 'The Importance of Museums in the Development of Changes in Social Thinking', lecture given to the Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre, Adelaide, 2005.
- ²¹ Dr Peter Cahalan, the Director of the Constitution Museum, first introduced community access spaces in Australia in 1978. They were introduced in the Migration Museum in 1986, in the Powerhouse Museum in 1988 and in the Immigration Museum in 1998.
- ²² Viv Szekeres, 'The Role of Culture Specific Museums', CAMA Conference of Australian Museums: Collecting and Presenting Australia, Canberra ACT, 21–24 November 1990.
- ²³ Jupp, *From White Australia to Woomera*, 2nd edition, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2007, p. 107.
- ²⁴ Jupp, *From White Australia to Woomera*, p. 115.
- ²⁵ *A Twist of Fate: An Experience of War, Pain, Torture and Survival* was opened in 1998 by the Migration Museum in Adelaide.
- ²⁶ Migration Heritage Centre.
- ²⁷ Ian Galloway, correspondence with the author.
- ²⁸ Jupp, *From White Australia to Woomera*, p. 91.
- ²⁹ Louise Douglas, Rachael Coghlan and Mat Trinca, 'An Australian Journey: building a National Museum in a Multicultural Society', The National Museum of Australia presented at the Large/National Museums in A Global World Conference, Copenhagen, 2007.
- ³⁰ Jupp, email correspondence with the author.
- ³¹ The 'History Wars', as it was known by the media, was a debate between academics about interpretations of history and whether there was a 'single national narrative' about Australian history that should be told.
- ³² In 1995 a federal politician from the Liberal Party representing a South Australian electorate, after being taken around the Museum, wrote to the Premier of South Australia complaining that the Migration Museum was a 'museum of misery' and 'should tell the happy migrant story'.

³³ The most recent was the South Australian Museum that opened its exhibition about Afghan Cameleers.

Viv Szekeres worked at the Migration Museum in Adelaide first as a curator (1983–1986) and then as Director (1987–2008).

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