

Submission to the

National Museum of Australia

Review of Exhibitions and Public Programs

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This submission is made on behalf of the History Trust of South Australia. The issues raised here were discussed and approved at a meeting of the Board on 27 February 2003 for transmission to the Review Panel. The Board considered the implications of the Review significant enough to warrant a formal submission on their behalf.

The History Trust of South Australia

The History Trust of South Australia was established in 1981 under the History Trust of South Australia Act (1981,1988) as a statutory authority reporting to the Minister for the Arts. There is no equivalent organization elsewhere in Australia. The Trust has a broad brief to research and interpret South Australian history, to acquire historical collections and to advise Government on historical matters. At present the Trust manages three historical museums – the Migration Museum, the South Australian Maritime Museum and the National Motor Museum. It also assists and advises community historical societies and advises and accredits community museums through a Community History Unit. The History Trust's Museums Accreditation and Grants Program has been the model for the other fledgling museum accreditation programs in Australia.

Debating South Australian history

The Trust's three museums attract a loyal audience within South Australia and are widely respected both nationally and internationally. The Migration Museum in particular often presents programs at the cutting edge of history and contemporary politics. Its right to do so has been strongly defended by both sides of politics in South Australia and it has won widespread respect for its independence. Programs at all museums are firmly grounded in historical research and historical debate is encouraged. Points of dispute, or differing historical interpretations, are often highlighted in exhibition text and visitors are encouraged to consider alternate ways of looking at the past. This avoids an overwhelming 'curatorial voice' and seeks active engagement from the visitor.

Community engagement

Community engagement has been a feature of the Trust's programs from the beginning. At the Migration Museum and South Australian Maritime Museums, this takes the obvious form of Community Access Galleries – small exhibition spaces in which community organizations are assisted to present displays on aspects of their history. At the Migration Museum this space is booked solidly four years in advance. The Migration Museum also provides pin boards for visitors to respond to exhibitions or to comment on contentious issues. Many take the opportunity to do so and to respond to each other, in a lively debate that is much appreciated by visitors. At a less obvious level, all programs consult widely with their communities and as a matter of policy, actively involve community groups in program development. As a result each museum has built a solid level of community support, often from quite disparate sections of the community.

The History Trust considers that its record in managing successful historical museums over more than two decades, means that it is uniquely placed to comment both on exhibitions at the National Museum of Australia and on the process and conduct of this review. In addition Margaret Anderson draws on her experience spanning 27 years of researching and interpreting Australian history in museums and universities in South Australia, Western Australia and Victoria.

The National Museum – Exhibitions and public programs

The vision for the National Museum and ‘celebrating the nation’

While much of the vision for the National Museum changed between the early 1980s, when it was first established, and the present, its commitment to presenting exhibitions spanning three broad themes – Indigenous history, history of the environment and history of the Nation – remained intact. In the 1980s this was a new and innovative approach to Australian history: by 2001 it was much more mainstream, but no less relevant for that. We looked in vain for reference to these themes in the background material to this review. And yet they were and remain, central to the brief given to the Museum by successive Governments.

Dealing with complex issues in museums

None of these themes is simple and exhibitions devised to explore them must, of necessity, be complex and contested if they are to engage in any meaningful way with the wealth of historical research produced over the past two decades. Governments cannot instruct museums to foster research on the one hand and expect them to ignore it in their public programs, in the interests of a ‘celebratory’ view of ‘our journey as a nation,’ on the other. The public has a right to expect that the exhibitions they see in museums will reflect the latest historical research, just as they do for science or art museums. After all we would not expect our science museums to present exhibitions based on popular conceptions of scientific issues. Why then would we suggest that history museums should do so?

Debate in museums – the notion of the museum as forum.

Nor should we assume that visitors to museums are incapable of assessing differing points of view and engaging in debate over historical questions. The experience of the Migration Museum in the past two decades has shown overwhelmingly that visitors not only can do this, but that in visiting museums they actively seek such intellectual engagement. One question that might be asked of the National Museum’s exhibitions is whether they do, in fact, engage the visitor sufficiently on this level. Some of the perceptions of ‘bias’ in exhibitions might, in fact, stem from a failure to spell out the nature of historical debates, rather than a determination to push a particular interpretive line.

Honesty and integrity

The themes nominated by Government for the main galleries at the National Museum are by their very nature challenging. Indigenous history and environmental history are bound to throw up views of the past that are uncomfortable for some. I doubt that even the most determined of revisionist historians would seriously argue that colonisation was effected without great cost to Indigenous people, however hotly he or she might debate the actual number of people killed in violent encounters. The Prime Minister acknowledged this himself in his Menzies lecture in 1996. Nor can the members of the Stolen Generation be denied an acknowledgement of their history, however much we may debate points of detail, just as we now accept that many child migration schemes after both world wars were poorly conceived.

Museums and integrity

Museums occupy a privileged position in the cultural life of the nation. In return the community expects that the information they encounter in museums will be properly researched and honestly presented, even if some of it reflects the nation in a less positive light. This is the basis of the museum’s integrity. Party politics has no place in this mix. In fact it is their independence from the political process that distinguishes museums in democracies from their counterparts in totalitarian and other repressive regimes. And their authority in the community ultimately rests on their capacity to present information unfettered by political constraints.

Some of the criticism of displays at the Museum has suggested that the Museum has compromised its integrity by presenting displays with a consistent left-wing bias. We see no basis for this criticism. Nor did Professor Graeme Davison when he reviewed the Museum's exhibition texts before opening. In fact we suggest that the general interpretive tenor of exhibitions at the National Museum is broadly consistent with the views of the community on a range of relevant issues.

If through reviews like this one, museums in Australia begin to be directed in the content of their exhibitions, or if they are encouraged to avoid presenting exhibitions pursuing a critical or adventurous interpretive approach because they fear political reprisal, Australia's cultural life will be infinitely diminished.

Difficult histories in museums elsewhere

Australian museums are not alone in confronting difficult questions in the life of the nation through history museums. Significant new institutions developing in Europe at present face these dilemmas also. In Germany the new German Historical Museum, the Jewish Museum, numerous former concentration camp sites and the former Stasi Prison in East Berlin challenge Germans to confront their past as a means of moving forward. Museums of Resistance in Europe explore questions of collaboration under Nazi occupation, alongside stories of heroic resistance. These museums are funded and supported by governments and attract many thousands of visitors – both locals and tourists. There is widespread recognition that in honest historical enquiry lies one defence against repression. Our own Prime Minister has been a trenchant critic of the Japanese Government's selective memory in its textbook approach to the Second World War. In this sense his speech at the opening of the National Museum seemed to support the notion of the museum as a legitimate forum for review and debate.

'Celebrating the nation' in a pluralist society

A preoccupation with exhibiting only the achievements of the nation seems to be peculiar to settler societies. While European nations derive much of their sense of self and their national pride from the past, they accept that their patrimony includes both good and bad. Magna Carta may be celebrated as a tentative step towards democracy, but no one pretends that King John was a hero. Similarly the Danes derive enormous satisfaction from the archaeological wealth of their country, but they have few delusions about the antics of their Viking ancestors abroad. Perhaps we still lack cultural maturity.

That being said, it may be that in choosing a rather rigid thematic structure for its exhibitions, the National Museum missed an opportunity to present the stories of the past that still make history intelligible for most people.

Historical evidence

Some of the more critical press comment on exhibitions at the National Museum has centred on the use of oral history texts as evidence. It has been suggested that oral evidence is not 'proper' historical evidence. Historians have long recognized both the strengths and weaknesses of oral evidence. It is assessed in the same way that any historical evidence is assessed - for internal consistency, consistency with other forms of evidence, motive of the source, etc. In general historians have found oral evidence to be particularly useful when there is little written, or more formal, evidence, or when the weight of formal evidence leans overwhelmingly to one side of a story. This is sometimes the case in evidence of early massacres, although it should be stressed that there is abundant formal evidence of massacres also – in contemporary press reports, court records and the letters and diaries of early colonists. There are two other compelling reasons for considering oral evidence in writing and presenting Aboriginal history – the need to consider evidence from members of what was originally a non-literate society and the

obligation to reflect the perspectives of each of the participants in these encounters.

The National Museum and future displays of Indigenous history

There has been some speculation that this review might recommend to the National Museum that in future it should curtail, or avoid altogether, displays of Indigenous history. This would be shameful. Indigenous history has only recently been acknowledged in museums: such displays are less than a decade old. We cannot allow our national history museum to perpetuate the selective amnesia of the past. It would also be poor business strategy, because Indigenous history is now an area of great interest to both the Australian community and to visitors. Both would expect to see such displays in Australia's national history museum. It is our view that Indigenous history should continue to be a major theme in future programs at the Museum.

Other aspects of the Museum's brief

Contemporary techniques and new media

Any museum planning new exhibitions will make use of 'new techniques' and of new media to the extent that it can afford. In the National Museum's case the use of the 'latest' techniques became something of a mantra in pre-opening presentations and media releases. For some years before opening the museum world was informed that the National Museum would be unlike other 'traditional' museums in Australia and that it would present programs in quite new ways. We might all be forgiven for wondering what the fuss was about. We might also question whether some of the dissatisfaction expressed with the Museum's displays reflects just this preoccupation with the media, rather than the message.

In our view the more important question to ask is to what extent these 'new' techniques (whatever they may be) have resulted in a more effective, informative, or entertaining product. We are not convinced of this. In fact we found many of the exhibitions unsatisfying. We visited deliberately to see what had been publicized as the cutting edge of museums, only to be disappointed and mildly irritated. As visitors we found some displays disjointed, difficult to follow and ultimately incoherent. This was partly the result of poor design (perhaps over design), partly the effect of small, awkward spaces, but also partly the result of poor conceptual planning. (The Nation gallery is a case in point here.) Some tend to superficiality and here we are thinking in particular of the exhibition on Emotions – a case of the self-evident combined with poorly thought-out story lines, so that vital contextual information was often omitted. (See, for example, the module on *Blue Hills*, which assumes the visitor knows not only what *Blue Hills* was, but also why it was considered significant.) It may be that the determination to do something 'different' overrode more rigorous questioning of ultimate outcome.

The introductory film is particularly unsatisfactory: superficial and content free, it wastes a wonderful opportunity to introduce the Museum and its programs in a thoughtful way. It needs to be remembered that new media cannot, in themselves, compensate for poorly researched, or superficially conceived content.

On the other hand we found the Torres Strait Islander Gallery coherent, informative and ultimately satisfying. It was particularly valuable to see this little known history explored.

Limitations of the building

Some of the difficulties with exhibitions undoubtedly stem from the awkward spaces curators and designers had to deal with. Compared with other major museums in Australia and most notably in New Zealand, the National Museum's 'permanent' galleries are small, poorly designed spaces. It would have been very difficult to devise probing, thoughtful exhibitions on issues as complex as environment or

Nation. This might explain why the result sometimes suggests superficiality, incoherence, or even bias. The wisdom of appointing architects on the basis of a design competition might be questioned here, but the real problems probably stemmed from an architectural planning process that effectively marginalized the Museum. No doubt subsequent cost-cutting also played a part.

Experience and leadership

Some of the problems identified in the Museum's introductory exhibitions may well stem from the relative inexperience of most of its staff, including its directors. A long period of stagnation saw initial enthusiasm evaporate, but the Museum also seems to have found it difficult more recently to retain its few experienced staff. The repeated practice of recruiting directors from the bureaucracy, rather than from leading practitioners, has served the Museum poorly over time. Leadership has been a recurring issue. This review should recommend strongly that the Council of the Museum make the question of professional leadership of paramount importance in making further appointments.

Partnerships

National institutions can play a vital strategic role within their professional communities. This is rightly identified as a key Government aim for the National Museum. From our perspective however the National Museum has found it difficult to embrace this intention. Over the years it developed a somewhat embattled, inward-looking culture it has found difficult to outgrow. Partnerships require communication, commitment and mutual respect. They also require a certain generosity of spirit. Repeated, somewhat brash assertions of superiority win few friends.

The National Museum of Australia Act. (1980) The Museum Council and political independence

The Board of the History Trust identified the political independence of the Council of the National Museum as an issue of particular importance. They are concerned that recent press speculation about the National Museum has the capacity to undermine the credibility of all cultural institutions in Australia.

Almost all Australian cultural institutions operate as statutory authorities, with independent boards of management, for the precise purpose of separating cultural outcomes from political direction. The convention that the government of the day should refrain from directing either research or interpretation in museums has been universally respected in Australia and is vital to preserve. In considering the National Museum of Australia Act we ask that consideration be given to safeguarding the autonomy of the Museum's Council. We also believe that authority for appointing the Museum's director should lie with the Council of the Museum, rather than the Minister, regardless of general public sector requirements for executive appointments.

The Review

Although comments have not been sought on the conduct of this review, we wish to make the following points.

- It is most unfortunate that the Council's apparently genuine desire to review the Museum's exhibitions has been politicised to the extent that it has. This has the capacity to damage the integrity of the Museum.
- The History Trust believes strongly that the Review Panel should have included practising historians of note, along with museum practitioners. The convention of peer review has served both cultural organizations and academia well in the past, ensuring separation from the political process. It ought not to have been abandoned for a task as important as this.

- We find it inconsistent with the independence of either the Museum's Council or the Review Panel, that briefing and secretariat services have been provided by the Department, rather than by the Council.
- The timeframe allowed for submissions to this review does not suggest a genuine commitment to consultation.

We would appreciate the opportunity to support these points in a discussion with the Review Panel.

This submission was prepared by:

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