

Keith Windschuttle

PO Box 433
Paddington NSW 2021

Telephone 02 9331 4403
Fax 02 9331 7368
Mobile 0419 219 314
Email:
keith.windschuttle@macleay.edu.au
ABN 98 816 403 742

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Ruth Ashe
National Museum of Australia Review secretariat
Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts
E-mail ruth.ashe@DCITA.gov.au

Dear Ms Ashe,

Submission to review of National Museum of Australia

I would like to draw your attention to three articles of mine of relevance to your inquiry. In particular, I would like to draw attention to my arguments in the first two articles that the concept of social history, which the museum has taken as its standard, is an inadequate tool to fulfill the objective of depicting national history, which I believe it was the intention of the 1980 Act to require the museum to pursue. The articles are:

“How Not to Run a Museum: People’s History at the Postmodern Museum”, *Quadrant*, September 2001

“Social History and Aboriginal Legends: A Reply to Gary Morgan”, *Quadrant*, April 2002

“Doctored evidence and invented incidents in Aboriginal historiography”, in Bain Attwood and S. G. Foster (eds.) *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 2003

Let me make two additional points about the museum’s Contested Frontiers display.

1894-1897 Bunuba Uprising

The museum’s exhibit of this historical incident claims:

Jandamarra led fellow warriors in a guerilla war until he was killed in a running gun battle with police trackers in 1897.

I would draw your attention to the newly published book *Protect and Serve: A History of Policing in Western Australia*, (Western Australia Police Service, 2002) by Peter Conole. He discusses the Jandamarra case on pages 128-131, using a number of both primary and secondary historical sources. On page 129, he has this to say about Jandamarra (Pigeon) and his gang:

It is an anachronism and a travesty of history to describe them as guerillas; they had no ideological framework, no clear aims and did not lead a mass movement. There is no way a handful of police officers could have suppressed a real rebellion in such terrain and bring under control an insurgent people without large-scale armed back-up.

Since Peter Conole is a professional historian and has used proper historical methodologies in his investigation, and since his views are diametrically opposed to those displayed by the museum, I would suggest that unless the museum adapts its exhibit to at least acknowledge the existence of

this counter perspective, it will not be doing a responsible job of informing the public about the history of these events.

1823-1825 Wiradjuri War

In the articles listed above I have complained that the centerpiece of the Contested Frontiers exhibit, a photograph of Bells Falls Gorge which implies that many Aborigines were killed at this site in the 1820s, is grossly misleading since there is no contemporary evidence that anyone was killed there at the time. The “Bells Falls Gorge Massacre” derives from mythology rather than history. All the “evidence” about this incident is based on oral tales told in the twentieth century.

I would like to add now that this exhibit is also misleading in asserting that there was such a thing as a “Wiradjuri War” or “Wiradjuri country” in 1823-1825. This is because there was no group of Aborigines known as the Wiradjuri in existence in the 1820s. The term “Wiradjuri” does not derive from Aboriginal culture. It was invented by the white anthropologist John Fraser in the 1890s. I quote Norman Tindale’s *The Aboriginal Tribes of Australia* (1974) p 156:

By the time of John Fraser (Threlkeld, 1892: Introd.) there was such a literary need for major groupings that he set out to provide them for New South Wales, coining entirely artificial terms for his “Great Tribes”. These were not based on field research and lacked aboriginal support ... During the 1890s the idea spread and soon there was a rash of such terms, especially in Victoria and New South Wales. Some of these have entered, unfortunately, into popular literature, despite their dubious origins. I list some of them for the guidance of those interested:

Bangerang Nation—Victoria
Booandik Nation—Victoria and South Australia
Barkunjee Nation—New South Wales
Kurnai Nation—Victoria
Thurrawal Nation—New South Wales
Wiradjuri Nation—New South Wales
Malegoondeet Nation—Victoria

I trust the enquiry will recognise that, in claiming there was a “Wiradjuri War” and “Wiradjuri Country” in the 1820s, the museum has not only made an embarrassing mistake but is again promoting mythology rather than the history which the 1980 Act requires it to pursue.

The design of the building

Let me repeat the case I have made in the articles listed above about the relationship between the design of the building itself and the history it was meant to symbolize.

Designed by Howard Raggatt, and built at a cost of \$155 million, the National Museum borrows its central structure — shaped as a lightning bolt striking the land — from the Jewish Museum in Berlin, signifying that the Aborigines suffered the equivalent of the Holocaust. The director of the museum, Dawn Casey, has claimed in the press that she and her council were not aware of this symbolism when they approved the plan. “We endorsed the plans as a whole for their imaginative and creative solution to the task at hand. Hindsight is a fine thing and, had we known, we may well have asked for that particular reference not to be included.” However, one of the council’s own publications explaining the signs and symbols of its construction, *Building History: The National Museum of Australia*, praises this very connection: “The most dramatic of the architectural references is in the form of the First Australians gallery, with a zigzag footprint, or outline, which closely resembles the recently completed Jewish Museum Berlin designed by Daniel Libeskind.” As the Melbourne architectural critic, Conrad Hamann, has written

(approvingly), the building is “clearly one in the eye for the Howard government, who have been bashing away at Aboriginal council groups for some time.”

I would advise the board to reconstruct that part of the building that provides the lightning bolt symbol. This would remove the current connection between the fate of the Aborigines and the fate of the Jews of Europe. The Aborigines did *not* suffer a Holocaust. To compare the policies towards Aborigines of Governor Arthur Phillip or Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur, or any of their successors, with those of Adolf Hitler towards the Jews, is not only conceptually odious but wildly anachronistic.

There were no gas chambers in Australia or anything remotely equivalent. The colonial authorities wanted to civilise and modernise the Aborigines, not exterminate them. Their intentions were not to foster violence towards the Aborigines but to prevent it. They responded to violence by the Aborigines towards white settlers cautiously and reluctantly, and their overriding concern was to prevent retaliatory violence by settlers and convicts from getting out of hand. None of this is remotely comparable to what happened in Europe during the Second World War.

For the Australian government to construct a permanent, national structure that advertises such a grotesque historical misinterpretation is an insult to the nation and to all its members, white and black. It is a monument to nothing more than the politically motivated allegations of one particular school of historiography whose former dominance of the field is now visibly eroding.

Yours sincerely

Keith Windschuttle