

5 Kirwan Street
Floreat, W. A. 6014
6 March 2003

National Museum of Australia: Review

My background: I was appointed to the Western Australian Museum in 1961 as Curator of Anthropology and Archaeology, and retired at the end of 1991 as head of the Division of Human Studies. During that thirty year period, the staff dealing with cultural material rose from three to around thirty, and the WA Museum developed an international reputation in Maritime Archaeology. Other departments under my supervision were Conservation, History and Aboriginal Studies. I regard myself as a museum professional: before my initial appointment, I was, as a student, familiar with the collections in the then National Museum of Victoria, and I had done some voluntary work at the British Museum. My post-graduate degrees are in history, archaeology and anthropology. Following my retirement, I have published a book based around Aboriginal oral traditions about contact on the north-west coast of Kimberley.

Circumstances: My visit to the NMA was made in a private capacity. I was not drawing on museum contacts to give me any special treatment, as I wanted to view the displays in the same way as any other visitor to the museum. Of course, I wanted to look at the Aboriginal displays in particular, but I was not looking at the displays in terms of the NMA Act, the charter or other documents, which I have to say, I was unable to download from the NMA web site.

Comments: Like any other museum professional, I examined the displays very critically, with questions in mind such as what message do they convey, do they do this successfully, and would I have done them differently. To my mind, the Aboriginal displays presented selected aspects of Aboriginal heritage, but perhaps lacked an over-view. It is inevitable that

museum displays are constrained by the material in the collections, so I was not surprised to see an emphasis on Arnhem Land cultural material, but I was delighted to see more from Victoria. Western Australia, I thought, under-represented here, as indeed it is throughout the displays - but this might be my parochial feelings coming into play! I suppose I felt that, at this level, some sort of synthesis of Aboriginal heritage would have been appropriate. This would be a difficult task, and may not be achievable with the existing collections.

I thought the post-settlement displays were excellent. If anything, I wondered whether Dawn Casey had, to some extent, pulled her punches a little, perhaps not wanting to confront the feelings of the non-indigenous visitors too aggressively, and in the light of her own Aboriginal background. If I were to criticise these displays, it would be that they under state the extent of suffering to Aboriginal people caused by nature of settlement and by misguided government policies. These themes are there, and the personal statements are powerful, but the displays would have failed, in my opinion, had they done any less.

My main criticism of the museum would be the way in which the architecture intrudes on the displays. I did not like the building, and the extent to which sharp and abrupt walls constrain the spaces, and disorient the visitor.

Overall, I would congratulate the museum on the high quality of its exhibits: they are powerful, interesting and relevant to modern Australia. I would not like my comments to be taken out of context: they raise issues about the displays of a professional nature. I think the staff have done a terrific job

Yours sincerely



Ian Crawford, BA (Hons), MA, PhD, Dip Prehist Archaeol.