

# **National Museum of Australia**

## **Review of Exhibitions and Public Programs**

### **Submission from Vision Australia Foundation**

#### Background

Currently 18% of the Australian population has a disability, a figure that looks certain to rise dramatically due to an ageing population. A sight disability is the most common accounting for 34% of all disabilities.

Vision Australia Foundation currently provides services for more than 20,000 Australians with a disability, with a particular focus on blindness and vision impairment. It also lobbies for greater access to museums and galleries for people with disabilities in areas ranging from building design to the need for information to be produced alternative formats and for increased representation of the history of blind Australians. As an organisation that was very involved in early rights and achievements for blind people it has accumulated a large and significant heritage collection. More detailed information on Vision Australia and its heritage collection is enclosed.

#### History of Australians with blindness and vision impairment

Australia was at the forefront of world change for people with disabilities, particularly for those who had a sight disability. Many rights and services were amongst the first in the world and paved the way for other countries. Some highlights in the history of blind and vision impaired Australians include:

- The invention and spread of blind cricket. Blind cricket was first played in Melbourne in 1922 whilst the first sports ground was developed at Kooyong in 1928 and is still used today. From these origins blind cricket spread to other Australian states and internationally to England, India and Pakistan. A world cup is now held every four years.
- The story of how the first voting rights for blind Australians were legislated in 1902 allowing a blind person to take a polling officer into the booth with them. Before this time blind people were unable to vote if they couldn't write with a pen. A hundred years later in 2002 Braille ballot papers were used for the first time in Australia and one of the first times in the world.
- How free postage of Braille and embossed material was gained in 1902.
- The story of how a pension for blind Australians was successfully obtained in 1910.
- Achievements in transport concessions. The first concessions came in 1901.
- The story of Australia's first Braille and talking book library, established in Melbourne in 1894.
- The first residential care for blind Australians established at Brighton in Melbourne in 1909. Before this time many blind people were homeless and living in poverty.

- Personal stories of blind and vision impaired pioneers. A prime example is the story of Tilly Aston, Australia's first blind university student and teacher. Tilly also founded Vision Australia Foundation (the first organisation of its type in Australia established by a blind person) and Australia's first Braille library. She was instrumental in obtaining voting rights, pension and travel concessions for blind Australians and wrote six books of poetry and prose in addition to her memoirs.

Information on websites featuring the history of blind Australians and a copy of Vision Australia's history book "No Sight Great Vision" are enclosed. Also attached is a paper entitled "Hidden Voices - Why the omission of stories in cultural institutions is as important as the inclusion" from the Museums Australia 2002 conference detailing the need for greater representation of people with disabilities in Australian cultural institutions.

### Recommendations

The history of disability rights in Australia has received little representation in education programmes, museums and history books. Whilst plans to include Tilly Aston in the National Museum's Eternity Gallery in May 2003 are to be commended more is needed to redress the lack of representation of people with disabilities and fulfill functions set out in the National Museum of Australia Act. In order to achieve this it is recommended that the museum:

- Collect more heritage material related to the history of Australians with disabilities due to its high significance in Australia's history (6.1.a under Act)
- Develop and promote more exhibitions and public programmes specifically relating to the history of Australians with disabilities, both through internal projects and in partnership with organisations developing appropriate projects (6.1.b under Act)
- Explore how all exhibitions can be more inclusive of people with disabilities, for example including the story of blind cricket in an exhibition about cricket or the story of Australia's first blind teacher Tilly Aston in an exhibition on education (6.1.b under Act)
- Conduct, arrange or assist in research into matters pertaining to the history of people with disabilities. Whilst some resources are available more academic work is needed to fully document the history of disability rights in Australians (6.1.c under Act)
- Promote and disseminate information relating to the history of Australians with disabilities to the wider community (6.1.d under Act)

Further information on the history of Australians with disabilities is available through:

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