How do museums represent history?

Investigating two historical displays in the National Museum of Australia

Museums are important places for students of history. They help us to discover who we are, and how we have come to be who we are. But the displays in museums do not just happen — just like all representations of history, whether in books, songs, oral accounts, or even collections of photographs and documents, they have been created and constructed by someone for a purpose. The purpose may be to inform, to challenge, to persuade, to argue — or all of these. The maker of the display has made choices and exercised judgements — what goes in, what stays out, how things are to be arranged, what words are used to describe things.

In short, you are not seeing a neutral display, but one that has been designed to have certain impacts and effects on you. This does not necessarily mean that the display is biased or lacking balance and fairness — though it may be. How can you be critically aware of this and take it into account in your viewing and response?

In this unit you will be able to look at two ways in which the National Museum of Australia has created representations of aspects of our past, and critically analyse those representations. You will then be able to transfer these skills and approaches to any other museum display, and view it not just as a neutral presentation, but as a constructed one that is seeking to have an influence on you.

CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

At the end of this unit students will be better able to:

- explore ways Indigenous and non-Indigenous people have responded to contact in the past
- explore a case study involving the development of political power in an environmental context
- ‘read’ and comprehend museum displays
- critically analyse museum displays as representations of history
- identify different perspectives on and interpretations of history
- interpret history within the context of the actions, values, attitudes and motives of people of the past
- develop a set of criteria for evaluating a museum display as part of a site study
- create their own representation of the past.

The National Museum of Australia at Acton opened in March 2001 as part of the celebrations for the Centenary of Federation. The Museum employs a fresh and exciting approach to Australian history, culture and environment. Each National Museum unit of work in STUDIES asks students to consider the stories and concepts behind Museum themes, objects and images, and can be used with students in Society and Environment, History, Geography, English and Media Studies.

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What impression do you give about your great-great-grandfather? What impression does your distant cousin give of him? Both images (or representations) of your great-great-grandfather come from exactly the same evidence. Why can the two representations be so different? What do the two displays tell us about the people who made them — you and your cousin?

Imagine that there were two more documents associated with your great-great-grandfather: a police report that he had been charged with a minor assault against a drunk who had been harassing him, and a medal of valour and commendation for bravery for saving a family from a burning building, despite great danger to his own life. You only have room in the display for one of these documents. Which would you choose? Why?

Have you now presented a full and fair and accurate representation of your great-great-grandfather in this display? Discuss your conclusions.

These issues — of evidence, fairness, accuracy, facts, opinion, values and representativeness — are issues that are faced every day by museum curators who set up displays.

Let’s see how the National Museum of Australia deals with such issues in two of its displays.
Case study one

Representing an incident in frontier contact history

Examiner the Museum display
You have walked in to the National Museum of Australia. You are interested in what it has to tell you about frontier relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia in the early nineteenth century.

You go to the area dealing with this theme. You walk through a display on the attempts of the early governors to ‘conciliate the affections’ of the Indigenous people. You now see this introduction to the next section:

CONTESTED FRONTIERS

Battles for the land 1788–1988
It soon became apparent to Aboriginal people around Sydney Harbour that the British intended to stay. Aboriginal groups resisted. Guerilla wars were fought along a rolling frontier for a century and a half. Today the names of resistance leaders such as Windradyne and Jandamurra are virtually unknown outside their communities.

You are interested in finding out about the conflict around Bathurst in the mid-1820s. You believe that there was considerable unrest and many bloody clashes.

Testing the Museum display
You are in fact looking here at one of the most controversial displays in the Museum. It has resulted in heated debate, accusations of fabrication and inaccuracy by critics, and counter-accusations against those critics. Let’s look at the issues raised, see what the critics say and how their criticisms are answered. At the end, you will be able to make your own judgements about this important display.

Here is a comment on the display by a critic.

What is the criticism of this display?
If this claim is accurate, is it a serious criticism?

You move on to the display cabinet shown on page 13, or go to www.schools.nma.gov.au and go to What’s new or Curriculum resources for a virtual tour of the display.

This display is the one you want to look at today.

The key text boxes are also reproduced on the back cover.

Look at the image and the text boxes and answer the following questions.

From your viewing of all this information, what are your answers to these questions:

1. What happened between 1823 and 1825 in the Bathurst area?
2. What happened at Bells Falls Gorge?
3. Why did these events happen? (Give the Indigenous and non-Indigenous views.)
4. How do we know these events happened in this way?
5. What is the overall message that you get from this display?
6. What does this display tell you about Indigenous and non-Indigenous contact on the frontier in this period?
7. Why is it a significant event worth space in a museum?

What happened between 1823 and 1825 in the Bathurst area?
What happened at Bells Falls Gorge?
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How do we know these events happened in this way?
What is the overall message that you get from this display?
What does this display tell you about Indigenous and non-Indigenous contact on the frontier in this period?
Why is it a significant event worth space in a museum?

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To decide on the accuracy and validity of the criticism, you will need to look at more evidence about Bells Falls Gorge.

**Source A**

A description of materials describing what happened at Bells Falls Gorge

[T]his event [the ‘Bells Falls Gorge massacre’] is now discussed in two books by white authors, *Blood on the Wattle*, by the journalist Bruce Elder, and *Six Australian Battlefields*, by Al Grassby. Mary Coe’s school textbook *Windradyne: A Wiradjuri Koori[e]*, published by the Aboriginal Studies Press, claims the story as part of ancient Aboriginal tradition. The NSW Department of School Education has made a film* re-enacting the events. The story claims that Red Coat soldiers surprised a party of Wiradjuri, mainly women and children. The Aborigines retreated to the edge of the Bells Falls, where the women halted, clutching their children. The troops opened fire, forcing the Aborigines to jump to their deaths over the cliffs of the gorge.


Al Grassby and Marji Hill, *Six Australian Battlefields*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1988

Mary Coe, *Windradyne: A Wiradjuri Koori*, Blackbooks with assistance from the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council, Glebe, 1986

*Windradyne: Wiradjuri resistance, the beginning*, Aboriginal Education Unit, NSW Department of School Education, 1993

**10** According to the accounts described, what happened at Bells Falls Gorge?

**11** How would you decide whether these accounts are accurate?

**Source B**

Tracing the history of the Bells Falls Gorge massacre story

In 1962 Bathurst area local historian Percy Gresser recorded the local tradition that hundreds of Aborigines were killed at Bells Falls Gorge. He was prepared to believe that this was ‘a tradition with a solid basis in fact’, although he thought it likely that the estimate of numbers killed was an exaggeration.


In the 1980s the story was written about by Al Grassby and Marji Hill, and Bruce Elder. ‘In these, Gresser’s casual and cautious remark on a local tradition was ignored as detailed highly dramatised accounts of naked atrocity were produced, replete with descriptions of soldiers advancing in a pincer movement around an Aboriginal camp, of Aboriginal women grabbing their children and leaping over the cliffs, of broken bodies piling up on the rocks below and the water running red with the blood of murdered Wiradjuri. These highly sensational accounts, which have no provenance [origin] in historical sources, disguised or completely disregarded the fact that there is no contemporary historical evidence for a massacre at Bells Falls Gorge.’


In 1993 history student David Andrew Roberts, now a lecturer in history at the University of New England, investigated the story. He determined that it had been a story around for well over a century, and had been passed on by families whose members had been in the area since the 1850s, but: ‘One has to conclude … in the case of the Bells Falls massacre story, that it is hard to accept as sound historical evidence … [T]here is no record of the circumstances in which the story was conceived and whether it originated with a perpetrator, an onlooker or survivor; and from the evidence to hand we cannot trace the history of the story through the generations … [W]e cannot ascertain whether any pertinent details have been changed or lost over time, and we cannot test the suspicion that this tradition may have derived from another quite different event, or series of events … In short, there is no possibility of determining whether or not the story is based on an actual event.’


However, Roberts argued that because there were other recorded conflicts in the region around that time and because legends about the Bells Falls Gorge event could still be found among the local non-Indigenous community, this should be taken as evidence that something like a massacre did take place, at least somewhere in the district somewhere about that time.

In 2000 Wiradjuri Elder Bill Allen’s reflection on the events during the time was recorded by Museum curator Brad Manera and a quotation used in the display. (See text G in the display cabinet on the back cover.) Brad Manera: ‘I think what the display wants to present is an Indigenous voice. The stories that have been passed from one generation to the next about what happened on that site. I’ve spoken … in detail with some very highly respected law keepers … and they are quite convinced that something very tragic occurred on that place and that they are certain that members of their family, their language group, died in that place in the 1820s.’

(Transcript of interview on ABC PM 13 August 2001, www.abc.net.au/pm/stories/s34657.htm)
12 Where has the story of the massacre at Bells Falls Gorge come from?
13 The story is oral history — information handed down over time. What are the strengths and weaknesses of oral history as evidence of what happened in the past? Is it any more or less reliable than written history? Consider the strengths and weaknesses of written records in discussing this question.
14 The National Museum of Australia does not make any reference in the display to the secondary histories about Bells Fall Gorge. Is that a good decision? Why or why not?

Source C
An official report, and missing reports
Whatever reports were filed by the local authorities [about this event] seem not to have survived, and the colonial government appears to have whitewashed its account by claiming that ‘not one outrage was committed … neither was a life sacrificed or even blood spilt’.

15 According to the official report, how serious was the fighting around Bathurst during the period of martial law?
16 What are the strengths and weaknesses of official reports as evidence of what happened in the past?

Source D
Comparing the official report with some other records
This [the official report above] is at odds with the circumstantial evidence available. We have a large number of ambiguous hints and rumours, mostly penned by informants who were not directly involved, and numerous descriptions that emerged decades later in the form of family reminiscences and local traditions. They convey an almost unanimous opinion that the troops were engaged in fierce action, obliging us to imagine this was a time in which some extremely dark deeds were committed.

17 What sort of evidence is being referred to here?
18 What are its strengths and weaknesses as evidence of what happened in the past?
19 What do you now think happened at Bells Fall Gorge?
20 Compare this to your answer to question 10 above. If it has changed, suggest reasons why. If not, suggest reasons why not.
21 Regardless of your answer to question 10, what are the difficulties in knowing what happened or did not happen at Bells Falls Gorge? In your answer, refer to the nature of contemporary evidence, official records and oral history.
22 How certain can we be about our knowledge of what happened there?
23 Do you think the Museum display should acknowledge or refer to problems with evidence about what happened at Bells Falls Gorge? Discuss your ideas at this point, then read on to explore this question further.
Assessing the Museum display

You now know that the 1823–1825 Wiradjuri War display is a controversial one. Does it cover the aspects that you think should be covered for a viewer to understand what is being shown, and how they might interpret it?

There are many different types of museum displays, created for different purposes. Three of the main possible purposes are to present a:

- collection of objects that speak for themselves about what happened, and why
- selection of objects with explanatory text that raises questions, provokes questioning, and stimulates further investigation
- selection of objects with explanatory text that promotes a particular idea or interpretation, that takes a partisan approach to a controversial or contested issue.

Let’s explore further to see to which of these possible categories the display is closest. We can do this by looking at a number of elements of a museum display:

- Does the setting influence reactions?
- Does the surrounding displays set a tone that shapes the way displays are viewed? (For example, the presence in the next cabinet of a powerful modern piece of art of Aboriginal people being hanged, and the mournful sounds of a cello as the dominant sound in the display area.)
- Are some elements given special prominence, and therefore significance, so as to influence the viewer’s response to the display?
- Are they authentic to the story?
- Why have those ones and not some alternatives been chosen?
- Are they accurate?
- Do they explain clearly what is on display?
- Are they “slanted” in any way?
- Do the captions refer to any problems or controversies with the display? For example, critics say this display raises serious issues about oral history — is the viewer alerted to this in any way? It also raises issues about official evidence — its absence, the potential bias and self-interest of the government authors of it. Is the viewer alerted to take account of this in her or his response to the display?
- Does the exhibition inform accurately, or just create an impression?
- Are people not alerted to such issues because it is assumed that viewers will realise that they exist anyway? Or are they hidden and not meant to be seen, to be accepted as part of a narrative, a story that it wants viewers to come away with?
- Are they slanted to any idea or interpretation, that takes a partisan approach to a controversial or contested issue.

These are difficult but important issues. Here are some comments and evaluations by a variety of interested observers. While putting these comments forward for your consideration, we have also alerted you to some issues within these comments.

Source E

The centerpiece of the Contested Frontiers exhibit, a photograph of Bells Falls Gorge which implies that many Aborigines were killed at this site, is grossly misleading since there is no contemporary evidence that anyone was killed there. The ‘Bells Falls Gorge Massacre’ derives from mythology rather than history. All ‘evidence’ about this incident is based on oral tales told in the twentieth century.

(Keith Windschuttle, Submission to the review of the National Museum of Australia, 3 March 2003 www.sydneyline.com/National%20Museum%20submission.htm)

Source F

Nowhere in the display does the Museum actually affirm the popular story of women and children being forced over the edge of the falls, name the place ‘Bells Falls’ or use the word ‘massacre’. The general label covering the episode refers only in a general way to ‘an exterminating war’ being conducted in the Bathurst area in the early 1820s. The words that Windschuttle attributes to the Museum — ‘This is a place of great sadness. Our people still hear the echoes of the women and children who died there’ — are clearly attributed to a present-day Wiradjuri elder, Bill Allen.


Do you agree that the photograph implies a massacre occurred? Does the etching of the words ‘This is a place of great sadness’ in association with the photograph establish that connection between the place and the claim of a massacre? Do you agree that the size and placement of the photograph lead the viewer to exaggerate its significance?

Do you agree with this view that the Museum does not affirm the story — that is, promote it as true and accurate? Do you accept that because some things are not explicitly stated in the display, they are also not implied?
The National Museum has an exhibit on the massacre, including a large photographic reproduction of the waterfall and gorge. Its caption says it was white settlers rather than soldiers who did the deed, but otherwise agrees with the other accounts [presented by the authors on secondary accounts in Source A]. This is a place of great sadness, thee museum records. ‘Our people still hear the echoes of the women and children who died here.’


[The Bells Falls Gorge massacre] is a complete fabrication … The first reports of the event’s existence did not appear in print until 1962, that is, 140 years later, when an article in the Bathurst Times by a local amateur historian reported it as one of the oral legends of the district. All the references listed above originate, directly or indirectly, in this one article … it is appalling that the museum would still go ahead and produce such an elaborate display about such a spurious story.


Casual visitors are likely to leave with the impression that some sort of massacre of Aboriginal women and children took place in the Bathurst region. They will not have been seriously misled about the general truth — that life on the frontier in the 1820s was often violent and that Aborigines were killed by settlers — but they may have been misled into giving more credence to the Bells Falls story than the contemporary evidence supports.


There are numerous problems with the exhibit … One misrepresentation is the implication that the Bells Falls tradition is derived from Aboriginal sources. My research, at least, suggests it is not — although research conducted by Brad Manera for the Museum does support the existence of a separate Wiradjuri tradition concerning a massacre at Bells Falls … The intention [in the display] is to express an Aboriginal perspective. However, in light of the problematic nature of the evidence in this case, some clarification is required … [however] it is wrong to claim, as Windschuttle does, that it ‘can’t possibly be accurate’, or that ‘the slightest bit … of investigation’ proves it to be ‘false’.


Compare the underlined words here with those in the previous document. Is Davison’s criticism of Windschuttle’s position on these words a fair one? Is there a difference between ‘attributes’ and ‘records’?

Look back at Source B. Does Windschuttle accurately represent and describe the nature of the oral evidence about the Bells Falls Gorge story?

In response to the controversy over the display the Museum added this text box.

How do we know?

Information about specific conflicts comes from two main sources: written records and oral traditions — that is, stories carried forward from one generation to the next. The story told here has been passed down by the Wiradjuri people and by European settlers and their descendants. The oral traditions of the region are supported by written evidence of violence near Bathurst in the 1820s. Historians continue to argue about particular events, but most agree that, while their origins are impossible to verify, conflict on the frontier was extensive and often violent.

The intention [in the display] is to express an Aboriginal perspective. However, in light of the problematic nature of the evidence in this case, some clarification is required … [however] it is wrong to claim, as Windschuttle does, that it ‘can’t possibly be accurate’, or that ‘the slightest bit … of investigation’ proves it to be ‘false’.


Do you agree that while the specific incident is doubtful, the display creates an accurate impression of the nature of frontier conflict at that time?

Is the issue of whether the story of a massacre at Bells Falls Gorge is a European or Indigenous tradition important? Explain your reasons.

Make sure you understand the meaning of the words ‘myth’, ‘mythology’ and ‘legend’.

Do you agree with Keith Windschuttle that the Bells Falls Gorge story is ‘spurious’ (not authentic, not genuine) and a complete fabrication? Or with David Andrew Roberts, who argues that it is a plausible story, though probably exaggerated? Or with Graeme Davison, who believes that even if the details are not accurate, it provides an accurate impression of what happened in this time and place?
Assessing a museum display
The Wiradjuri War display at the Museum raises many issues about how museums construct or represent history. Many, probably most, museum displays are not this controversial. However, from your critical investigation of this display you should try to develop a set of questions that you can apply to any museum display. Here is a suggested set. You can test these by applying them to the Wiradjuri War display, and deciding if you would make any changes.

### KEY CRITERIA for judging a museum display

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects to consider</th>
<th>The museum display</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What does the display show?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the historical context explained clearly?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the significance of this display clearly explained?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are the objects displayed authentic for that event or period?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are these objects the best possible ones to be displayed?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are the text descriptions clear and informative?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do the surroundings influence my impression of the display?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How is the display arranged?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there a particular message being conveyed?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the nature of the event clearly identified (e.g. am I told if it is controversial or contested)?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If so, are various viewpoints clearly and fairly put?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do I know where the evidence has come from and what sort of evidence it is?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it giving me a particular message?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is its purpose to present objects (neutral), or to explain (impartial), or to argue a particular view (partisan)?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the end, do I feel that I really understand the situation?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Case study two

Representing an incident in environmental history

Let's look at another display in the National Museum of Australia. This one is on the flooding of a small lake in Tasmania in 1973, Lake Pedder.

You can apply the criteria on the previous page to this display, and see if they work well, or whether you need to make modifications to them.

You walk towards this display. It is in a section of the Museum looking at ‘Places of the Heart’ — personal attachment to land.

There is a text sign:

Lake Pedder
The divided lake

Lake Pedder has been two lakes though they have shared one name. The original Lake Pedder was small, formed as melting glaciers dammed the Serpentine River with rubble. It had a large beach of pink quartz sand marked by a pattern of ‘megaripples’, which were exposed in summer. The present Lake Pedder is larger, formed in 1972 when the Serpentine and Huon Rivers were dammed for the Gordon hydro-electric power scheme, after a well-publicised and emotional conservation battle. The original lake is now 15 metres under the waters of the much larger artificial lake.

There are two large photographs, with text written on them and with this explanatory sign.

Landscapes of the mind
We walk in landscapes made of words

The same piece of land may be seen in different ways by different people. The words we use for a place reveal these inner landscapes. Words reflect and shape the way we see the country. In the 1960s a passionate debate erupted over Lake Pedder. Some wanted to dam the lake for hydro-electricity, others wanted it preserved in its ‘natural state’.

The words here are lexical maps showing Lake Pedder through the eyes of developers, conservationists and bushwalkers and the Tasmanian Hydro-Electric Commission.

Look at the words on the images, and group them in this table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pro-flooding of Lake Pedder</th>
<th>Anti-flooding of Lake Pedder</th>
<th>Cannot tell</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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There is a small display case, with these objects and text:

**Pedder sand**
Lake Pedder was famous for its beautiful beach of pink quartz sand. Before it was flooded someone collected this little jar of sand as a memento.

(Pedder pennies 1970s, Dr Robert Brown collection, National Museum of Australia Photograph: George Serras)

**Pedder pennies**
Smooth, coin-sized, quartzite pebbles were common around old Lake Pedder. As the waters of the dam rose in the early 1970s, many people collected these ‘Pedder pennies’ as keepsakes, reminding them of the lost lake.

(Pedder pennies about 1972, Dr Robert Brown collection, National Museum of Australia Photograph: George Serras)

**‘Save Lake Pedder’**
It was Australia’s first major conservation battle. Many people joined the campaign to save the lake. Posters, newsletters, placards, books, poems, public meetings, scientific reports, stickers, vigils, depositions and petitions were all tried — without success.


Further along there are a number of photographs of the area by Olegas Truchanas, and artefacts and equipment associated with him.

From this display, answer these questions:
1. What was Lake Pedder?
2. What was the issue associated with it?
3. What happened to it?
4. Why did this happen? (Consider the points of view of the competing parties.)
5. How do we know these events happened in this way?
6. What was the area like after the flooding of Lake Pedder?
7. What is the overall message that you get from this display?
8. Why is it a significant event worth space in a museum?

Is this an accurate and adequate representation of the significance of Lake Pedder? Here are some questions about the situation. Decide if you can answer them from this display.

10. Why did the Tasmanian Hydro-Electric Commission want to destroy Lake Pedder? What benefits would it bring?
11. Why did the campaign to save Lake Pedder fail? Does this mean that most people in Tasmania supported the development?
12. Lake Pedder has disappeared. Why remember it in this way in a museum?
13. What were the consequences, good and bad, of the loss of Lake Pedder?
14. Look at the Key criteria for judging a museum display that you used for the previous case study. Apply them to the Lake Pedder display.
15. Do you think the display is a good representation of this historical event?

Here is some more information. Decide if it adds anything, and if you would change the display in any way.

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**Lake Pedder: the beginning of a movement**

By Natasha Simons

Twenty years ago the campaign to save Lake Pedder was lost, but its lessons were well learned by the new green movement. The fight to save Lake Pedder laid the foundations for the overwhelming success of the Franklin ‘no dams!’ campaign in the early 1980s, and it inspired many environmental activists — some of whom, such as Bob Brown, hold seats in Parliament today.

Lake Pedder, in Tasmania’s wild south-west, is considered by many to be one of the most beautiful regions in the world. By 1946 Pedder had become a base for expeditions into all parts of the south-west. In 1955, 24,000 hectares were set aside as the Lake Pedder National Park. Bushwalkers, tourists and nature lovers came from afar to experience the beauty of Lake Pedder.

In 1967 the Hydro-Electric Commission [HEC] proposed to build a power scheme in the Middle Gordon. This meant that Lake Pedder would be drowned by the damming of the Huon and Serpentine Rivers, which lay to the east and west of the lake.

In May 1967, the proposal was tabled in the state parliament. There was an immediate public outcry. Lake Pedder supporters began a petition to stop the proposal and collected 10,000 signatures, the largest number that had ever been collected in Tasmania … However, the … enabling legislation was passed. Then the campaign to save Lake Pedder really began …

In March 1971 Brenda Hean and Louis Shoobridge, two prominent campaigners for Lake Pedder, organised a public meeting which packed the Hobart Town Hall. Public opinion on the issue had polarised. The public meeting proposed to call a referendum on the issue, but the ’Shoobridge proposal’, as it became known, was defeated by a government wholeheartedly backing the HEC.

The grassroots activists refused to give up. They formed the Lake Pedder Action Group (LPAG) … Lake Pedder gained international attention, including support from organisations such as UNESCO.
On July 24, 1972, 17,500 signatures reached the new premier, and the LPAG mounted a national campaign …

The Pedder campaigners now put their hopes on the newly elected federal Labor government, which mounted a federal-state inquiry. The Tasmanian government refused to participate, but the committee … reported the area was too important to destroy … The weary LPAG activists could sense victory.

But the premier ignored the inquiry and gave the HEC the go-ahead. In March 1973 the vigil camp to save wildlife threatened by the rising waters was abandoned, and Lake Pedder was drowned. Tasmanian environmentalists had suffered their first great defeat.


Does this account add anything that you think should be in the display?

This account is from a particular ideological viewpoint — does that influence its value as evidence?

Lake Pedder

By Richard Flanagan (novelist and environmental historian)

The Snowy Mountains Scheme was perhaps the most potent symbol of Australian postwar development, a key indicator of its progress towards becoming an advanced industrial nation … The scheme was hailed as an engineering triumph, a technological realisation of the age-old dream of taming the awesome power of nature and turning it to the service of humanity …

For Tasmania, Australia’s smallest and least populous state, such enterprises were seen as critical to its economic future. The dream was to transform Tasmania from a sleepy rural economy, reliant on apples, hops and fish, into a modern industrial dynamo, pumping out cheap, clean, and supposedly inexhaustible power that would attract major industry to the state …

Before the 1950s, the south-west corner of Tasmania, an area covering some 3,500 square miles was known as ‘the empty quarter’. It was a pristine wilderness area, with Lake Pedder and its shining sands at its heart. Bushwalkers who knew and loved the region assumed that the lake was safe when the area was proclaimed a National Park in 1955 but what they did not know was that Tasmania’s Hydro-Electric Commission had the empty quarter squarely in its sights. Publicly, the Commissioner, Sir Alan Knight, maintained that the possibility of development in this area was remote, but what he did not reveal was that flow recorders were already being installed on the south-west rivers …

In 1963, only eight years after Pedder had been declared a National Park, the Hobart Mercury declared: ‘The imagination of thinking Tasmanians will be excited by the fact that the Commonwealth Government will bear the cost of constructing an access road … towards the remote and almost inaccessible south-west … With a high element of romance, the hydro-electric potential has a significance equal to the mammoth and costly Snowy Mountains scheme.’

‘In the 1930s, Labor came to power here with the belief and the propaganda that we would become the Ruhr Valley of Australia, and that the hydro-engineers would be the modern Moses, who would lead us out of the wilderness. And central to that was the idea of the natural world being entirely subservient to man and being transformed into these heavy industrial forms … the dams were as much as anything else … symbols, before they were of any economic use. They were symbols of what we might be if we’d only dream large.’

For more about the Snowy Mountains Scheme see STUDIES 2/2000

For most of the 20th century this paradigm of the positive value of technological progress reigned unchallenged in the public consciousness, and it was not until the late ‘60s and early ‘70s that environmental concerns began to chip away at the facade and gain wider attention in Australia.

Certainly, from the early 19th century there had been a consistent if low-level interest in conservation and the protection of wilderness areas, as evidenced by our excellent National Park network, but there were complex issues involved, and where wilderness and development met, public and media opinions were slow to change. Nature was seen primarily as a resource to be used for the benefit of humanity.

Dr Peter Hay observed that, at that time ‘an overwhelming majority of Tasmanians were right behind the Hydro-Electric Commission.’ But there was a small but committed group of conservationists who opposed the Scheme, and their fightback began in earnest with a petition of 10,000 signatures, the biggest in Tasmania’s history — the total population of Hobart was just over 100,000 at this time, so this was a very significant number.
As a result, the Upper House announced a Select Committee of Enquiry prior to its debate on the Gordon River Power Development Bill. Towards the end of its hearings, the Committee was shown an alternative scheme which would avoid the flooding of Pedder, but it would have cost $11 million — a huge sum in the Sixties. The Upper House passed the Bill. Within a short time the HEC began building Strathgordon, the construction town for its workers.

As the conservation movement organised Lithuanian-born photographer, explorer (and temporary HEC employee) Olegas Truchanas emerged as one of its leading figures. With a friend, hydro-engineer Ralph Hope-Johnstone, he assembled his photographs and films of the area, and they took the fight up to the Government and the people. To raise public awareness, they called public meetings in the Hobart Town Hall and in their now-famous audio-visual displays they showed capacity audiences what was about to disappear forever …

Despite solid bipartisan support for the scheme at the political level, the Save Lake Pedder campaign was by now having a significant impact and by 1971 opinion polls were showing that the majority of Tasmanians did not want the lake flooded. Conservationists took heart and formed the Lake Pedder Action Committee. Kevin Kiernan was still at school when he became its youngest founding member. He recalls that by this stage, ‘there was a very strong feeling that the hope for preventing the flooding of Lake Pedder lay in Canberra.’

As media interest increased, the rest of Australia started to become aware of the issue. Questions were asked in Federal Parliament and demonstrations were held in mainland capitals, but time was running out and the waters were rising fast. By December 1971, the flood was now only a few miles from Lake Pedder Beach.

Then, on 6 January 1972, the Save Lake Pedder movement was dealt a shocking blow — Olegas Truchanas drowned while kayaking down the Gordon River on a photographic expedition. It was a tragedy, but the campaign continued, and Olegas is today hailed as one of the founding fathers of the Australian conservation movement and a world leader in wilderness photography.

The anti-dam campaigns now decided to take on the pollies at their own game, and in March 1972, the United Tasmania Group — the first ‘green’ political party in the world — was formed at a meeting at the Hobart Town Hall in 1972, to campaign against the flooding of Lake Pedder. In the April state elections, it came close to winning a seat, but Eric Reece and Labor were returned to power. While the UTG did not achieve its short-term aim, it had far more important long-term outcomes, and this first political grouping laid the foundation for the Green Party.

Undaunted, the Pedder campaigners dug in, setting up Australia’s first ever shop-front for conservation, in Hobart’s main street …

By mid-1972, the rising waters had begun to flow into Lake Pedder. The last serious hope of stopping the scheme lay with the 1972 Federal election campaign, but here again the campaigners’ political inexperience led them astray. While Labor in Hobart wanted the dams, Labor in Canberra saw votes in the conservation issue … Unfortunately, the anti-dam faction’s attempt to solicit Canberra’s interest played right into Eric Reece’s hands, arming him with a vulnerable Aussie political weapon with which to counter-attack.

He reacted angrily to federal involvement, characterising it as an attempt to interfere with states’ rights and condemning it as a cynical response to politicians’ fears that demonstrations in their electorates would lose them votes.

The new Whitlam Government had recently signed the World Heritage Treaty at the United Nations, and they toyed with the idea of using this external power to stop the flooding of Pedder, but in the event this came to nothing, and the Reece government remained immovable in their commitment to the scheme. Comments from both sides illustrate the yawning gulf between the philosophies of the pro- and anti-dam factions:

‘I’m not entitled to be made a bloody goat on this and I don’t propose to be kicked all over the footpath. As far as Lake Pedder is concerned, the sooner they fill it up the better.’ [Eric Reece]

‘Going back 30,000 years, it was said to have been a lake over the whole area, but the water cut a channel out of it and the bulk of that flat area which is now the enlarged Lake Pedder, was in fact a lake years ago. What we’ve done is to restore what was there many years ago.’ [Sir Alan Knight]

‘… in large measure, it was the pride of old men that led to the final demise of Lake Pedder beneath the temporary dam that’s there at the moment.’ [Kevin Kiernan]

‘We were trodden under foot … because we were idealistic. And it’s very difficult to … make a case for the beauty of something when there are facts and figures standing against you, because economic rationalists and engineers have got scant regard for what artists or architects might call beauty. They simply say that beauty is in the balance sheet.’ [Max Angus]

By 1973 it was all over for Lake Pedder. The scheme went ahead as planned and in 1979 the largest arch dam in the southern hemisphere opened, marking the completion of the first stage of the Gordon Power Scheme. The battle to save Lake Pedder had been lost and this jewel of the Tasmanian wilderness now lies submerged under metres of water. But the campaign had certainly not been for nothing, and it had important and lasting outcomes, which became obvious when the HEC began planning the next phase of the scheme — damming the pristine Franklin River.

‘The Franklin River was saved because there was in place by the time of the Franklin campaign, a highly sophisticated, tactically skilled environment movement which hadn’t come out of a vacuum. It had come from the Lake Pedder campaign.’ [Peter Hay]

(www.geocities.com/milesago2001/lake-pedder.htm)
Words etched into the glass cover, in front of the large photograph of Bells Falls Gorge

This is a place of great sadness. Our people still hear echoes of the women and children who died here. They came to seek refuge but the armed white settlers found them and killed them.

Bill Allen, Wiradjuri Maying, 2000

Bathurst with its surrounding vicinity is engaged in an exterminating war.

Sydney Gazette, 14 October, 1824

Windradyne was a great Wiradjuri warrior. In 1823 and 1824 he led our people in a campaign of resistance against the settlers. He was driven to fight after his family were killed in a dispute over a few potatoes.

Bill Allen, Wiradjuri Maying, 2000

1823–1825 Wiradjuri War

As settlement spread west of the Blue Mountains, misunderstandings and conflicts with Aboriginal people escalated.

In Wiradjuri country, colonists attempted to drive off Aboriginal people by violating significant sites and contaminating waterholes. On occasions, they gave friendly Aboriginal people poisoned flour or bread. It is believed that the family of the warrior Windradyne was given potatoes by a farmer and that the family was shot when they returned to take more.

The British declared Martial Law on Wiradjuri land in 1824. This, from our point of view, was an excuse for the soldiers and armed settlers to go out and kill hundreds of Wiradjuri men, women and children.

Bill Allen, Wiradjuri Maying, 2000

The Aboriginal arsenal

At close quarters, Wiradjuri warriors stabbed or bludgeoned their enemies with clubs and parried blows with shields. Spear-throwers dramatically increased the range and penetration of a thrown spear.

British arms

A British soldier could fire a musket like this two or three times every minute. It was accurate to 90 metres, about the same as a spear. Military officers on the frontiers of settlement carried swords like these.

When martial law was declared, Windradyne and his people launched a guerrilla campaign. They frustrated the poorly organised British forces, who began to attack any Aboriginal people they could find. Windradyne and the Wiradjuri remained unvanquished.
TOWN HALL » 8.15 pm THURSDAY 23rd JULY

REPEAT SHOW
6th JULY

the famous

OLEGAS TRUCHANAS
audio-visual presentations

PEDDER and WINTER

presented by
Ralph Hope-Johnstone

also

GENESIS by STANISLAV OSTOJA-KOTKOWSKI

MT. WELLINGTON by PETER DOMBROVSKIS

NOTRE DAME by RALPH HOPE-JOHNSTONE

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Olegas Truchanas Publication Appeal
The British declared martial law in Windjana. This, from our point of view, was an excuse for the soldiers and armed settlers to go out and kill hundreds of Windjana men, women, and children.