

*Landmarks: People and Places across Australia, a gallery bringing together over 1500 objects, explores the history of Australia since European settlement.*

## OBJECT BIOGRAPHY

### John Smith Murdoch's drawing instruments

In 2009, the National Museum of Australia acquired a collection of drawing instruments including pens, compasses and rulers, housed in a leather-bound presentation case. On the front of the case is a silver plaque engraved with the following: 'Presented to John S Murdoch, Architect / by a few friends on the occasion / of his leaving Elgin for Inverness. 18 November 1881.'



**Boxed set of drawing instruments belonging to John Smith Murdoch, about 1881. Photo: Lannon Harley, National Museum of Australia.**

The case contains fifteen individual drawing instruments, which are stored in a moulded tray, lined with blue grosgrain and silk fabric, and a recessed storage compartment in the lid. The lid lining is stamped with 'W H Harling, Mathematical Instrument Manufacturer, 40 Hatton Garden, London' and the company's crest.

The recessed lid compartment contains a sector, protractor and parallel rule.

In the 1600s there was a developed stylus that could draw a line with a specific width called a ruling pen. The stylus had two curved metal pieces, which were joined by a screw. Ink was trickled between the blades, from which it flowed evenly across the paper. The basic model was maintained for a long time, with minor modifications, until the 1930s when the German technical drawing pens came to the market.

Many of the instruments were made by W H Harling, as indicated by the stamp. However, some of the instruments were made by J and W E Archbutt, Stanley and Elliot Brothers, suggesting that the case originally contained instruments from a variety of manufacturers or that Murdoch had replaced items over time.

Several instruments, including the protractor, are marked with Murdoch's name or initials. Murdoch carried this standard set of drawing instruments with him to Australia, where they were later retained by family contacts.

John Smith Murdoch was born in Scotland in 1863. Murdoch trained as an architect with Matthews and Mackenzie, a practice which had offices in Aberdeen and Inverness. The inscription on the lid of the drawing instruments case indicates that Murdoch worked for sometime at Inverness.

Murdoch migrated to Australia in 1885 and shortly after was employed by the Queensland Department of Mines and Public Works. In 1901 he was appointed Queensland District Architect and was responsible for designing many of the state's government and public buildings.

In 1904 Murdoch joined the newly-formed Commonwealth Department of Home Affairs, rising to the position of Chief Architect in the Department of Works and Railways in 1919, the first Commonwealth Government architect. During his career, Murdoch designed more than 120 buildings and public spaces in Australia, including the General Post Office and Forrest Place in Perth, the Spencer Street Post Office and the High Court of Australia (now the Federal Court) in Melbourne, and Anzac Square in Brisbane.

He was a member of the review panel for the National Capital design competition, won by Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin in 1912. Murdoch also supported an international competition for the design of a parliament house in Canberra, which was eventually abandoned due to ongoing disagreements.



**Museum of Australian Democracy (formerly Old Parliament House) was designed in 1923 by John Smith Murdoch as a temporary parliament house until a suitable design and sufficient funds could be found for a permanent building. Photo: Jason McCarthy, National Museum of Australia.**

In 1923, Murdoch was given the task of designing a temporary parliament house until a suitable design and sufficient funds could be found for a permanent building. As the architectural coordinator for all aspects of the building, Murdoch completed drawings for the exterior and interior fittings and furnishings.

Murdoch's stripped classical design for Provisional Parliament House reflected his training in Glasgow, earlier work in Australia, and visits to parliamentary buildings in London, Berlin, Paris, Vienna and Washington.

While both functional and economical, the symmetrical structure was symbolic of Australia's democratic bicameral parliament and was sympathetic to Canberra's natural and built environments.

Construction commenced in August 1923, and was completed in 1927 at a cost of £644,600 (three times the original estimate). The building spanned four acres (1.6 hectares), with a total of 184 rooms. It was designed to house the requirements of parliament at the time, though numerous changes were made as parliament expanded in the following decades.

Murdoch contributed to the establishment of Canberra by designing and constructing a number of significant buildings, including the Powerhouse at Kingston, the Hotel Canberra (now the Hyatt Hotel Canberra), Hotel Kurrajong, East and West Blocks, and Gorman House. Murdoch also adjudicated design competitions for the Australian War Memorial in Canberra and the Australian National War Memorial in Villers-Bretonneux, France.

Murdoch retired in 1929, still an active member of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects. He died a bachelor in Brighton, Melbourne in 1945.

The Provisional Parliament House building was in use until 1988 when a new permanent Parliament House was opened. The building, then known as Old Parliament House, was reopened in 1992 as a museum and exhibition spaces for the National Portrait Gallery and National Museum of Australia. In 2006 Old Parliament House was included in the National Heritage List, and in 2009 was re-established as the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House.

**Curator's notes:**

This beautiful collection of drawing instruments appears used, but well cared for. Several items are made with ivory, and have yellowed with age. The case has been opened and closed many times, and the hinges are now very fragile. The blue grosgrain and moiré silk fabric lining is torn and frayed. These signs of wear are fitting reminders of the large amount of work undertaken by Murdoch in the designing and building of the nation's capital.

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Object biography and curator's notes prepared by Jennifer Wilson, Curator, National Museum of Australia.

**Landmarks: People and Places across Australia** is the National Museum's newest and most ambitious gallery to date, bringing together over 1500 objects to create a history of Australia since European settlement.

For more information about the exhibition visit

**<http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/landmarks>**