

Nature, Nation and the Museum: the mid-twentieth century New Zealand experience

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Abstract

The mid-twentieth century is commonly identified as a transformative period for the display of the natural world, characterised by a shift from the didactic displays of natural history to interactive displays of science. But is this account sufficient? This question is explored through an examination of display practices of nature found within New Zealand's Dominion Museum. With a focus on the 1930s -1950s this analysis is developed with consideration of contemporaneous displays produced in Australia's National Museum of Victoria and the American Museum of Natural History.

This period is revealed as one of great intensity, fuelled by the convergence of nationalism, nature study, education and new display techniques of the diorama and habitat series. Accordingly, displays of nature shift to naturalise science and the citizen within the ecological specifics of the local. While the Australian museum mirrors this experience, the American museum presents a spectacular nature, a difference which can be partially explained by different temporalities of nationalism.

Key words: natural history, nation, diorama, New Zealand

Introduction

Colonial science and the museum served to position the unfamiliar nature of the Australasian colonies within the context of Imperial science. Commencing with the Sydney Colonial Museum, museums of natural history were quickly established, emerging in Victoria (1854), South Australia (1861) and Queensland (1862), followed by Auckland, Christchurch, Wellington and Dunedin (Sheets-Pyenson 1988: 18). The display practices and collections of the colonial museum reflected a *particular* coincidence between the imperatives of colonial settlement and new visual practices for ordering and displaying natural history, which were shaped by three major objectives: first, to collect and document indigenous flora, fauna and peoples before their predicted disappearance; secondly, to develop a science of economics leading to an emphasis on the geological and mineral resources of the new colonies; and thirdly, to develop public institutions of equal benefit to colonial science and the broader public (Bennett 1999: 345).

The nineteenth-century colonial museum and the display of natural history has generated extensive scholarly research including the work of Bennett 1995-2005, Bewell 2004, Finney 1993, Greenblatt 1991, Kohlstedt 1983 and Sheets-Pyenson 1988. Developments after 1930 have attracted far less attention. This absence owes much to the configuration of the Australasian museums. Unlike international examples such as the American Museum of Natural History, London's Natural History Museum and the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris, few Australian and New Zealand museums maintained a strict focus on natural history after World War One. Instead the museum diversified into multi-disciplinary cultural institutions reflective of modern scientific and display practices. Accordingly, understandings of mid-twentieth century developments in the display of the natural world are lost within increasingly complex institutional histories.

A limited understanding of this period however is not restricted to Australia and New

Zealand, instead also evident in a broader international context. Sharon Macdonald for example (1998: 13-15) comments that scholarly interest in the display of the natural world tends to focus on either nineteenth century 'museums-as library' or the post 1960s rise of the multi-sensory interactive science museum. Similarly, Alberti (2008: 77) observes 'histories of twentieth-century natural history museums in Europe are marked by their absence.' Rader and Cain (2008: 155) identify a decline in the American natural history museum after 1930 due to the combined effects of the Great Depression and World War Two; a commitment to public education (at the expense of scientific research) and the popularity of costly display techniques of the diorama. They do however argue that this transformative period from 'specimen-display to non-collection exhibit – from natural history to science' should not be considered a stagnant era of museum history but instead 'an important moment in a longer history' (Rader & Cain 2008: 165).

This paper responds to this challenge to reconsider this period through an examination of display practices of nature found within New Zealand's Dominion Museum. It asks did the Dominion Museum mirror the experience of the American museum as described by scholars such as Rader and Cain or were other influences evident? To fully understand this period however, it is first necessary to contextualise this period against the earlier display practices of New Zealand's Colonial Museum, the precursor to the Dominion Museum.

A Colonial Museum

Drawing inspiration from the Geological Survey of Great Britain, Wellington's Colonial Museum was established in 1865 in conjunction with the Geological Survey of New Zealand and the Colonial laboratory. The museum enjoyed early financial support, aided by a government keen to consolidate Wellington's position as New Zealand's capital through the development of major public institutions. The foundational director, Dr James Hector came to the museum after serving as the Director of the Otago Geological Survey. Trained as a medical doctor in Edinburgh, Hector was part of a wave of well-educated Scottish migrants to New Zealand influential in establishing the scientific foundations of the colony. Many considered Hector the only competent scientist and doctor employed by the government, and he remained in charge of the Colonial Museum until his retirement in 1903 (Dell 1965: 50).

A visit to the Colonial Museum in 1870 was a modest affair. Visitors first entered a small hall dominated by table cases housing collections of minerals, British fossils and shells. Standing cases displaying New Zealand birds, reptiles and fishes were relegated to the outer walls, as were smaller collections of gold and coins. The central hall was dedicated to New Zealand rocks, fossils and shells, the dominant content of the museum, as well as smaller collections of Australian specimens, all housed in table cases. Located at either end of the hall, were two larger animal displays of a moa and elephant, while a small collection of Maori 'curios' was displayed adjacent to moa bones. These specimens were displayed according to taxonomic classifications which ordered specimens according to the logic of the visible surface (Bennett 2004: 161). Collections were framed as books or encyclopaedias incorporating additional guidance for understanding the artefact through nomenclatures of labels, generally in Latin, and accompanying indexes.

This shared focus on the Geological Survey, Colonial laboratory and the Museum quickly resulted in significant space constraints. Although extended in 1875 with a south wing, gallery and offices, the timber Colonial Museum provided limited space, as well as having no heating or ventilation and being susceptible to fire and theft (Dell 1965: 7-8). In 1894 visiting British geologist F.A. Bather described the Museum as probably 'the worst managed institution of the kind in the whole of the southern hemisphere' (Proceedings of the Museums Association, Dublin 1894 cited Dell 1965: 88). He wrote,

At some distant period there seems to have been an attempt to keep the geological specimens in one room, the zoological in another, and the ethnological in a third; but now specimens are simply placed where room can be best made for them... Even in the cases the things are badly arranged, and the labels, if found at all, are often attached to the wrong specimens.

While Yanni (1999: 61) reminds us that these museums may appear to be 'a jumble to the modern viewer,' given the predilection of the nineteenth century for highly detailed and ornate visual arts, the Colonial Museum presented a chaotic mix of photos, paintings and art with fossils, minerals, Maori 'curios' and skeletons. Table cases were interspersed with larger specimens, creating little distinction between the major classifications of geology, zoology and ethnology, a situation exacerbated by the requirement of the nineteenth-century museum to exhibit the entire collection. This overcrowding not only reflected the spatial and financial constraints in housing an expanding museum collection but also the legacy of strong-willed long-serving foundation directors such as Hector who resisted institutional engagement with current scientific thought (Sheets-Pyenson, 1988: 35).

The appointment of Augustus Hamilton, one of New Zealand's first full-time ethnologists, as museum director following Hector's retirement led to major revisions in the museum's focus and display practices. Maori culture was now showcased, a shift reflective of escalating European admiration for Maori artefacts, the embracement of evolutionary science and the emergence of anthropology and Hamilton's interest in Maori culture, which included publishing several volumes on Maori Art and designing the Maori Pa at the 1906 Christchurch International Exhibition. This period also coincided with changes in the status of the independent colonies, following the Federation of the Australian colonies in 1901 and the subsequent declaration of New Zealand as a Dominion in 1907, (resulting in the renaming of the Colonial Museum to the Dominion Museum). Although McCarthy argues that Dominion status cannot be considered 'independent nationalism,' by the early twentieth century a stronger sense of cultural distinctiveness was apparent, with Maori culture an important feature for providing the young New Zealand nation with a sense of cultural depth (2007: 64).

The opening of a new Dominion Museum in 1936 provided opportunity to display a more comprehensive collection, shaped by modern display techniques. Incorporating the National Art Gallery, the Dominion Museum and the War Memorial Carillon, the new museum was championed as an institution 'run on the most modern lines and in accordance with the most advanced museum principles' (Evening Post 1936: 6). Accordingly scholarly interest in the Dominion Museum shifts from the focus on the display of the natural world within the Colonial Museum to an interest in an emerging sense of national identity, colonial independence and Maori culture. Understandings of the parallel developments in the display of the natural world are lost within this dispersed museum analysis. The remainder of this essay remains focused on the display of natural history. Through the review of museum archival documents including annual reports and policy, together with scholarly writing on nature study and education, it explores subsequent developments after 1930. This analysis is further developed through consideration of contemporaneous displays of nature produced at Australia's National Museum of Victoria and the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH).

Naturalising Nature (and the Citizen)

Internationally, the early twentieth century is considered a period which introduced a new educational agenda into the museum which particularly targeted children. The British Education Act of 1902 for example encouraged visits to museums as an integral part of the school curriculum, contributing to broader government agendas for projecting a homogenous and unified British identity (Coombes 2004: 231). Bennett (2004) highlights a similar movement in the United States, in particular the actions of the American Museum of Natural History, which promoted a common language of natural history to counter the squalor and marginalisation experienced by the immigrant child. This educational emphasis, with a focus on nature study is equally evident in New Zealand and Australia.

By 1904 nature study was an integral component of the school curriculum in Victoria, Tasmania, New South Wales and New Zealand (Kohlstedt 1997: 446). Nature study introduced children to physical nature, and stressed the experience of museums, zoos, reserves and parks as important education activities. Promotion of nature was ardently nationalistic, aimed at 'naturalising' the children of the new nations. An emphasis on local nature was an important strategy for moral improvement and good citizenry. Days celebrating nature such as Wattle Day and Arbour Day provided schools and communities with opportunities to celebrate and reflect on the nation.

New Zealand was especially anxious to distinguish itself from the dominance of Australia, as well as to counter the 'moral effects of the wildness and freedom' experienced by New Zealand children (Robin 2002: 7). The geographic isolation of the New Zealand child was the source of much concern. Lord Bledisloe in a 1934 official address stated that visits by school children to the new Dominion Museum were 'vitally important in a remote, ocean-girt country whose inhabitants suffer a constant risk in a fast moving world of the severe handicap of the geographical isolation being reflected in mental insularity and myopia' (1934: 8). Bledisloe highlighted the importance of considering how new generations would use the museum stating:

Educational exhibits should be systematised as such and be rendered increasingly attractive as stimulants to the imagination by constant change, special temporary displays finding justification in local circumstances and recent happenings, such as, in the case of New Zealand, an earthquake, an eclipse, an Antarctic expedition, the discovery of moa bones or an old Maori canoe, the white butterfly or grass grub pests, the new national coinage, or the revived interest in gold mining (1934: 9).

Unlike the static taxonomic collection of the Colonial Museum, the new Dominion was conceived as a vital place for children to expand their knowledge, including a focus on the New Zealand natural phenomena and a living nature. This shift towards a more localised understanding of nature is mirrored in New Zealand's education system. *The School Journal* for example which was first published in 1906 provides clear evidence of the transition from colonial British values to an emerging nationalism. For much of the early twentieth century *The School Journal* comprised extensive content taken directly from English publications, offering both 'a tonic and a subtle enforcer of colonial values' (O'Brien 2007: 13). A national education conference held in 1937 produced a new direction for *The School Journal* premised on stronger connection with the everyday life of school children through an increase in New Zealand content (O'Brien 2007: 18). Between 1940 and 1942 the publication evolves further to reflect a confident New Zealand culture showcasing New Zealand stories, artists, history and nature.

This evolution of *The School Journal* demonstrates that while New Zealand was officially declared a Dominion in 1907, it was not until the 1930s and 1940s that culture and identity becomes separated from its colonial origins. Education and nature were central to naturalising the citizen (especially the child) within an independent culture and nation. The significance of nationalism to this period offers an understanding of why interest in nature study in New Zealand and Australia extends well into the interwar period. This differs from America and Britain where interest is considered to have diminished around World War I. Nature study, comments Kohlstedt was sustained because it 'validated the particular, even unique aspects of Australia and New Zealand' (1997: 449).

An enduring interest in nature study coincided with the introduction of international expertise and funding opportunities for new display techniques and educational programs within New Zealand museums. H.C. McQueen's 1942 publication *Education in New Zealand Museums* outlines many of the innovative educative approaches. Cinema, museum clubs and games were proposed alongside travelling exhibitions that took natural history into the school. The 1933 Carnegie Corporation study of Commonwealth museums for instance proved a major catalyst for new directions. Grants from the Carnegie Corporation encouraged Australian and New Zealand museums to experiment with display methods and also provided international expertise. Frank Tose, Director of Exhibits at the California Academy of Science, visited New Zealand in 1938, teaching a six week course at the Dominion for museum preparators (Dell 1965: 180). Tose was responsible for the design of major habitat groups in the African Hall of Californian Academy of Science, considered the first museum to develop exhibition halls according to the illusionist principles of the habitat diorama (Wonders 1993: 140). A grant of \$50,000 for the 'furtherance of educational work of museum and art galleries' was used to fund educational officers, establish school services in four major museums, encourage the exchange of displays among museums and fund experimental displays at Auckland and Otago museums (McQueen 1942: 7).

This convergence of nationalism, nature study and education with international expertise and funding opportunities therefore produced an important moment of change within the Dominion Museum. As will be discussed in the following section, these influences combined in the development of new displays that emphasised a local ecology.

An Ecology of Place

International grants together with visiting international museum experts such as Frank Tose introduced more contextual approaches to the display of the natural world. The adoption of diorama and habitat cases presented a major shift from the evolutionary display techniques that had replaced the visual taxonomies of the late nineteenth century. Evolutionary practice turned attention from the presentation of a visual taxonomy of the entire collection to the temporal ordering of selected objects into a linear chronology of an evolutionary developmental series. Objects were no longer classified according to visual similarities and dissimilarities but instead curated according to their ability to best demonstrate the stages of evolution. Text provided narration of the space *between* objects to guide the visitor to see evidence of change.

The introduction of the diorama and habitat series instead featured ecological interrelationships between flora and fauna within specific geographies. Habitat cases and larger displays exchanged between the major New Zealand museums, funded by grants from the Carnegie Corporation, introduced ideas of ecology to children and the broader public. These exhibits included a series of habitat displays, designed as small travelling cases that McQueen (1942: 29) described in the following manner:

Each case contains a central exhibit, which is often a habitat group, with two panels of descriptive and illustrative matter on the inside of the doors. These doors are so arranged that, when they open, the panels and exhibit may be seen at the same time. Each exhibit is designed to convey ideas rather than a mere description of specimens, and the matter is presented as attractively as possible.

The Dominion Museum developed new displays, many of which focused on a local ecology. A storytelling approach presented knowledge as chapters of a whole, formulated for specific audiences such as children, rather than an all-encompassing general public (McQueen 1942: 39). These displays, which featured insects and disease, the Kauri tree, Maori and the whale, and the life of the honey bee, reflected Lord Bledisloe's intention that the new museum would find 'justification in local circumstances and recent happenings.'

Yet despite the recent opening of the new Dominion Museum, space availability and the layout of the exhibitionary spaces remained a barrier to developing more effective display approaches. In his 1944 policy then Director W.R.B Oliver expressed frustration at the difficulties in developing logical sequencing between exhibits, as well as the poor lighting conditions. Oliver was well aware of the advancements in American museum design citing the new gallery developments at the AMNH which introduced windowless galleries and artificial light (1944: 20). Notwithstanding space limitation, small habitat dioramas were introduced into the Dominion Museum in the early 1950s.

The first, completed in 1951, featured small habitat groups of kiwi and penguin, followed by a larger habitat diorama of the takahe (Notornis) within 'its last known sanctuary' (Dominion Museum 1951: 5). The takahe display was particularly emotive, given this gooselike flightless bird was considered extinct until 1948, having been only sighted twice since 1879 (Young 2004: 140). In 1948, Geoffrey Orbell sighted the bird in a remote area of the Fiordland, and within three years the bird featured in one of the museum's first ecological dioramas. Given the bird's rarity, the exhibition did not use real specimens but instead incorporated three 'built-up' models, shown in Figure 1. The addition of further habitat groups in 1952 included the tuatara and a display illustrating bird migration, while two years later the takahe exhibit evolved into a larger display featuring the reconstruction of bird life and plants of the valley where it was rediscovered, aptly renamed Takahe Valley (Dominion Museum 1951: 5-7).

The origins of the habitat diorama and its introduction into the natural history museum have been widely debated. According to Karen Wonders' much-cited study, *Habitat Dioramas:*



Figure 1. *Notornis* habitat diorama, bird gallery. [TPA B.014463]

Illusions of Wilderness in Museums of Natural History, Gustaff Kolthoff pioneered the first habitat diorama for the Stockholm Biological Museum in 1893. Eight Nordic landscape regions were presented as 'landscape pictures,' viewed by visitors from within a central glass enclosed observational tower (Wonders, 1993: 59-60). Alternatively historian Julia Voss and scientist Sahotra Sarkar (2003: 60-61) argue that the Stockholm Biological Museum had 'marginal influence for the subsequent history of the diorama,' instead nominating a diorama that opened in 1906 at the Grand Ducal Museum in Darmstadt, Germany, as the first 'scientific' diorama, as distinct from a 'landscape' diorama. Developed by the director of natural history Gottlieb von Koch, this scientific diorama featured the biogeographical zones of South America, Australia and Africa, and was considered a great success by the public and the scientific community. Voss and Sarkar (2003: 72) maintain that visual scientific thinking was critical to the diorama, incorporating three major scientific attributes: 'grouping of different taxa, explication of ecological relations, and representation of geographical locale.'

The small dioramas presented at the Dominion Museum clearly aimed to educate the New Zealand public about ecology and conservation. An emphasis on a local ecology was even more pronounced at the National Museum of Victoria, which opened the Victorian Fauna Series in 1939. Prepared by Charles Brazenor, the Series represent some of the first dioramas of an ecologically specific environment within an Australian museum. The Series is not, however, considered Australia's first 'diorama', an honour that is instead credited to a lion diorama, also prepared by Brazenor in 1928 (Pescott 1965: 134).

Significantly the Series were not conceived as 'landscape pictures' but instead presented a sequence of 'three-dimensional field guides to Victoria' of immense scientific and educational value (Rasmussen 2001: 220). As John Kean comments the Series present an 'important milestone in the evolving engagement of non-Aboriginal Australians with their local environment' (2001: 220-221). These dioramas owe much to the Carnegie Corporation-funded visit of Frank Tose, who, having acted in a similar role for the Dominion Museum, visited Melbourne to advise on 'modern methods of display' (Pescott 1953: 143). The first diorama depicted koalas near Worri Yallock, followed by displays featuring an eastern grey kangaroo group, wedge-tailed eagles and lyrebirds (Pescott 1954: 145). More displays were added throughout the 1950s.

Research for the Series involved expeditions to Halls Gap, the Loch Ard Gorge and

Woori Yallock where records, photographs and specimens of grasses, leaves, rocks and soil were taken. An award winning graduate of the National Gallery Art School, George J. Browning, accompanied the expeditions, painting a small version of the scene (Rasmussen 2001: 219-220). Everything within the diorama apart from the skins was recreated, including leaves, soil, plants, rocks, flowers and soil. It is this scientifically-accurate recording and attention to detail that distinguishes the ecological habitat diorama from the landscape diorama. Designers carefully reconstructed the detail of a particular place within the museum, presenting not only a specific geographic locale but a specific season and time.

Together the small habitat cases and diorama of the Dominion Museum and the Victorian Fauna Series of the National Museum of Victoria share the intent to present a local nature, to ground both science and citizen within environmental specifics. How then does this experience compare to contemporaneous displays produced within the AMNH? While this comparison is somewhat problematic given the AMNH's singular focus on natural history, it is worth pursuing given that scholars of the diorama pay little attention to Australia and New Zealand. Karen Wonders, for example, in her much cited study was unaware of the Victorian Fauna Series stating that Australia despite 'its abundance of exotic wildlife species and remarkably diverse wilderness regions, has no diorama tradition of which to speak' (1993: 10).

Nationalistic Nature: Wilderness versus Local?

Instead Wonders identifies America and Sweden as two countries dominant in the development of the diorama, which she attributes to their vast tracts of wilderness areas. This position is supported by Stephen Quinn (2006: 13) who states that both America and Sweden 'identified nationally' with a wilderness heritage in contrast to other parts of the Western world that lost their wild places centuries earlier. It was the potential loss of these wilderness areas, argue Wonders and Quinn, that inspired the introduction of the first dioramas within the American and Swedish museums. In the case of America, the closure of the western frontier in the 1880s together with the extensive loss of species such as deer, moose, bison, bears, antelopes and birds from unregulated hunting led to the first habitat groupings of the AMNH, the Hall of the American Birds which opened in 1902 (Quinn 2006: 17).

The golden age of the diorama within the AMNH however is considered to be the 1930s, commencing with the opening of the Arkeley Hall of African Mammals in 1936. This spectacular display comprised of a large central display of African elephants bordered by 28 windows displaying dioramas of the African continent. These displays featured the advancements noted by Dominion Director W.R.B. Oliver such as angled window panes to deflect reflections, as well as specialised lighting that simulated specific time of the day (Quinn 2006: 19).

The Hall of North American Mammals which opened in 1942 was even more impressive, considered to be the finest diorama displays in the world (Quinn 2006: 19). Unlike the familiar nature of the Victorian Fauna Series, the displays of the Hall of the North American Mammals presented the grandeur of the American continent. This was represented in two manners: an emphasis on superior 'record-breaking' game specimens and the depiction of iconic national landscapes prepared by renowned landscape artists. Many of the specimens were donated by sportsmen. These were often record breaking animals, including a bull moose and big horn sheep each with world record size antlers and horns respectively, and a huge Alaska brown bear sponsored by the Boone and Crockett club (Wonders 1993: 180). A reliance on these trophy specimens can be partly traced to the budget constraints of the inter war period. According to Radar and Cain (2008: 157) the dioramas and habitat halls provided opportunities for patrons to donate funds for collecting expeditions and exhibitions, as well as the ability to apply for Works Progress Administration funds.

These specimens were framed against elaborate painted landscapes which included the Sierra Nevadas, the Grand Canyon and the national parks of Yellowstone and Yosemite. These landscapes were the same places that had inspired the Hudson School artists and the writings of Whitman, Thoreau and Emerson in the late nineteenth century, who collectively promoted the spiritual and moral attributes of these wilderness areas. The subsequent protection of these landscapes within national parks became synonymous with the safeguarding of American national cultural values such as individuality, resourcefulness and spirituality.

Unlike the pleasure grounds and gardens of aristocratic Europe, these national parks were available to all (Euro-American) people providing an experience of 'what it meant to be American' (Cronon 1995: 76-77).

The dioramas therefore presented a dual purpose, simultaneously showcasing the ecology of the American continent and a hyper-realistic American national space. Nature was both spectacular and educational. This duality is clearly evident in the mountain lion diorama shown in Figure 2 which features the monumental wilderness of the Grand Canyon. While Wonders argues that the backdrop, which was painted by distinguished artist Charles Chapman, was intended to function 'as a geological illustration of stratigraphy and erosion' there is no question of the artist's manipulation of the image to maximise the spectacular panoramic view of the canyon (1993: 182). The landscape, not the mountain lions are the focus of the diorama, with the animals used as artistic devices within the landscape, akin to artists introducing people into picturesque landscape paintings.



Figure 2. Diorama Mountain Lion, Grand Canyon, American Museum of Natural History

In contrast the dioramas of the Victorian series presented a far simpler representation. The eastern grey kangaroo diorama produced in the early 1940s, shown in Figure 3, depicts kangaroos in scrubby grassland of grass trees and eucalypts, in an image not overtly picturesque or scenic. Constructed at eye level, the diorama replicates the sensation of the viewer coming across the kangaroos in the bush, a common experience for many Victorians. While the depiction of the male kangaroo on his hind legs offers a more threatening pose than the other kangaroos, his gaze is off to the distance and not directly challenging the viewer. A young joey, positioned closest to the viewer, creates a less threatening foreground, shunning the dramatic narratives evident in many of the AMNH dioramas.

An emphasis on a distant wilderness and a spectacular nature as portrayed by the AMNH drew extensive criticism from the museum's scientific community. Alfred Parr, incoming Director of the American Museum of Natural History, declared in 1943 these approaches were misdirected. Parr stated that rather than memorialise the wilderness, these dioramas should have educated the public about conservation, suggesting that the public would learn more about ecology by viewing familiar landscapes (Asma 2001: 43-44). No doubt Parr would have approved of the representation of the 'accessible and familiar' landscapes and animals in the Victorian Fauna Series. In 1945 Parr adopted a similar focus to that of the Series initiating the



Figure 3. Eastern Grey Kangaroo diorama circa 1940, McCoy Hall Scenery painted by George Browning, 1940, Museum Victoria

Hall of the Local Landscape which featured more regional landscapes as well as displays presenting biological processes such as decay and nutrition (Wonders 1993: 181).

On one level, the contrasting approaches evident in the spectacular diorama of the AMNH developed during the 1930s and 1940s and a more modest emphasis on a local ecology shared by the Dominion and National Museum of Victoria could be explained by factors of funding, space availability and skill, together with the absence of large mammals within Australia and New Zealand (which has none). But is this explanation sufficient? This paper's contextualisation of the AMNH against displays within the Dominion and National Museum of Victoria highlights a further influence: different temporal and spatial constructions of the nation.

Whereas the displays developed within the Australian and New Zealand museums reflect a first wave of nationalism which served to naturalise both science and the citizen within the local ecology, the American displays promote the protection of a monumental wilderness, a national treasure which had been defined a century earlier. Temporalities of nationalism are influential in this framing. The Anglo history of North America for example predates colonisation of Australia by two hundred years while the United States was declared a nation sixty years before New Zealand became a British Colony (Dunlap 1999: 13). Australia and New Zealand during the mid-twentieth century were in the process of untangling understandings and narratives of nature from a colonial lens, whilst national landscapes were still being defined. In the case of Australia, whose arid interior is comparable to America's west, the concept of an inspirational desert wilderness did not evolve until the mid to late twentieth century. The iconic national space of Uluru Kata Tjuta National Park (formerly known as Ayers Rock), for instance, was not declared until 1958, with road access only achieved a decade earlier.

The specific temporality of the settler society should therefore be considered a further influence in the conceptualisation of nature within the mid-twentieth century museum. Yet many comparative studies fail to recognise its significance. Throughout the 1990s, scholars from environmental history, post-colonial studies and natural history began to explore how the experience of the settler society influenced its engagement with the nature of the New World. While this comparative lens disrupts the 'nation-state' framing that has dominated earlier historiographies, many of these studies seek to uncover a *commonality* of the settler experience. This assumption of commonality for example underpins Wonders' statement regarding Australia's absence of diorama tradition, despite its 'remarkably diverse wilderness

regions.' Wonders presumes that Australia followed a parallel development pattern to America. Yet the later colonial settlement of Australia, combined with its vast geographical expanse meant that links between nationalism and wilderness occurred almost a century later than in America.

Similarly an emphasis on commonality is typified by Thomas Dunlap's much-cited *Nature and the English Diaspora: Environment and History in the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand*, published in 1999. In his introduction, Dunlap acknowledges the different sequence of settlement and geographic ambit of the four nations. However, he goes on to diminish these significant differences by arguing 'that national attitudes are a matter of statistics,' claiming that 'each Anglo society had the full range of ideas and attitude, but in different proportions' (1999: 13). He continues:

...it is abundantly clear that there are many discussions about nature in these countries that are variations on a common theme. Everywhere people spoke of parks, wilderness, wildlife, and the environment. Even without their references to events and ideas from elsewhere, it was clear that they were talking about the same things...(1999: 13).

Counter to Dunlap's statement, this paper's comparative analysis of the diorama has demonstrated that the settler nations were not always 'talking about the same thing.' Further it has highlighted the importance of documenting and interrogating the 'variations on a common theme,' rather than assuming differences within a tidy narrative of commonality. While terminologies, policy and techniques may appear at first glance to be shared within different settler contexts, it is essential to investigate more deeply in order to understand their application and translation against the distinctive temporalities of nation. This necessity extends beyond the display practices of the museum to other constructions of nature such as definitions of wilderness and national parks, which similar to the diorama, are shaped by a combination of scientific, cultural and political thinking.

Conclusion

Scholarly interest in the display of the natural world has emphasised two periods, the taxonomic classifications of the nineteenth century museum and the post 1960s rise of the multi-sensory interactive science museum. The mid-twentieth century, almost by default, is assumed to be a period of decline. Yet this analysis of New Zealand's Dominion Museum reveals the 1930s-1950s as a period of great significance for the display of the natural world. The convergence of nationalism, nature study, education and new display techniques of the diorama and habitat series combined to produce ecologically driven displays with a focus on the local. While these displays may be modest within an international context, they are nonetheless important, offering a first engagement with nature outside the lens of colonial science or evolution. The significance of these displays within the Dominion Museum has been overshadowed by the intense scholarly interest in the display of Maori culture and diminished within the increasingly complex institutional history.

The contemporaneous development of the Victorian Fauna Series within the National Museum of Victoria shares the Dominion Museum's intent to introduce a local ecology to visitors. Just as the colonial museum was shaped by a particular coincidence between the imperatives of colonial settlement and new visual practices of taxonomy, so the displays of mid-twentieth century Australasian museum reflect a particular and powerful coincidence of nationalism and ecology. In comparison the grand habitat dioramas of the AMNH produced during the 1930 and 1940s, shaped by new gallery design and lighting technology, renowned landscape artists and spectacular animal specimen, emphasis a monumental wilderness.

This difference in focus could be explained as a consequence of museum resources, space availability and skill. However this paper's comparative analysis suggests a further influence in the conceptualisation of nature within these displays, different temporal constructions of nation. A shift to ecologically driven displays within the youthful nations of Australia and New Zealand offered the first engagement with nature outside the lens of colonial science or evolution, serving to naturalise science and the citizen within the environmental specifics of

time and space. In contrast the displays of the AMNH, which simultaneously showcased the ecology of the American continent and a hyper-realistic American national space, reflect a country with a well established sense of nationalism. While new display techniques and scientific paradigms such as the diorama and ecology were shared across an international network of museums and scientists during the mid-twentieth century, the content and focus of displays was equally influenced by the specific temporality of the settler society.

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