

Museums, Nation and Political History in the Australian National Museum and the Canadian Museum of Civilization

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Abstract

The role museums play in shaping the public's understanding of the past has recently become a matter of considerable interest for historians and others. In Canada and Australia, portraits of their country's history created by national museums have ignited considerable controversy. The Canadian Museum of Civilization's Canada Hall was the subject of a review by four historians, chosen to examine the Hall's portrayal of political history, while the National Museum of Australia faced a highly politicised public review of all of its exhibits soon after the museum opened. By analysing and interpreting the findings of these reviews, the authors raise questions about the ability of museums to respond to historical controversy, shifting historiographies and changing understandings of what is important in the past.

Introduction

The role of national museums in defining and shaping a nation's identity has been a much-discussed topic of late. Introducing perhaps the most stimulating collection of essays on the subject, Darryl McIntyre and Kirsten Wehner draw attention to the difficulties contemporary national museums face in trying to 'negotiate and present competing interpretations of national histories and national identities' (McIntyre and Wehner, 2001: xiv). How national museums seek to represent competing histories, contested certainties and cultural difference through their structures, spatial arrangements, collection policies and exhibition strategies has been analysed by many scholars and practitioners, generating an extensive literature on the subject.¹ While some have suggested that museums might search for some sort of common ground, an agreed upon essence of national identity or 'the lowest common denominator' as Stefan Bohman has put it, others have concluded that in order successfully to 'be for all of us' national museums should abandon the task of 'telling us who we are' altogether (Bohman, 2000: 284). Such views have recently been put into sharp focus in the case of two national museums: the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC) and the National Museum of Australia (NMA). After much public controversy over their interpretation of the national past, both museums faced reviews of their exhibitions. In the case of the CMC, four historians were tasked to examine the museum's Canada Hall, its permanent history exhibition. A more broadly conceived review was launched in Australia, conducted by a panel of four, none of whom were practising historians. In exploring the genesis of the review processes and considering some of the findings, this paper offers some observations on the implications the reviews have for the way in which national museums can play a role in shaping the public's understanding of the national past.

The Genesis of Two Museums

The Canadian Museum of Civilization stands on the east bank of the Ottawa River just opposite the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa on a site made famous by the scene on the back of the now-extinct one dollar bill. The museum is an enormous eruption of Tydall stone, copper and

glass markedly contrasting with the neighbouring brick paper mill and cement office towers and with the soaring gothic spires across the river. The National Museum of Australia is strikingly located on the Acton Peninsula in Canberra which juts into Lake Burley Griffin. Close to the Australian National University, the museum is noted for its inventive shapes, angles and dramatic colours. Each museum was built on a site of cultural significance, both play a significant role in the cultural life of their nations' capital cities and both have ignited controversy over their interpretation of the national past.

The roots of the CMC lie with the Geological Survey of Canada and extend back to the mid-nineteenth century. In 1927 the National Museum of Canada was created with a mandate to cover anthropology and natural history. In 1951 the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, widely known as 'the Massey Commission', recommended the creation of a national history museum. However, the government opted instead to add history to the mandate of the National Museum.² Over the next two decades the History Division focused on the 'new' histories with material history at its core.³ When Pierre Trudeau's Liberal Government announced its intention to build a new museum, a large interdisciplinary team had an opportunity to revisit the interpretative approaches used in the permanent exhibitions installed in the National Museum's Victorian Memorial Museum Building in the 1970s. Although an option to deal with all of Canada's population, aboriginals and later migrants, together in a single exhibition was considered, it was decided to treat the depiction of aboriginals and non-aboriginals as separate projects. Thus, the First People's Hall, to be located on the first level of the new building, and the History Hall on the third, were planned by two different teams with separate budgets and schedules.

A key factor in developing a plan for the History Hall was the decision by the museum's new Director, George MacDonald, to have the exhibit feature a streetscape of replicated buildings similar to that found in the British Columbia Provincial Museum (now the Royal British Columbia Museum) and several American and European museums. Under a soaring dome, the individual exhibit modules would contain evocative settings representing specific times and places. A mezzanine covering part of the floor plan was set aside for supplementary exhibitions. MacDonald also introduced the geographical and chronological arrangement that determined the hall would begin in Newfoundland around 1000 AD and conclude in British Columbia and the North in the near present. Visitors were to be given the opportunity to set aside the present and enter another time and place; the Hall was to be a catalyst for cultural creation and not a work of history *per se*.⁴ The press of events and the unexpectedly high cost of completing the exhibit modules led the museum to set aside the last areas comprising almost half the length of the hall for completion in a second phase of development. The museum welcomed its first visitors with its History Hall stopping at Ontario in the Victorian era, and even then some portions of the exhibition were unfinished.

The opening of the new museum in 1989 was a major cultural event. General approval was accorded Douglas Cardinal's stunning architecture, but partially filled galleries drew criticism. Some observers bemoaned the emphasis on reconstructed environmental settings in the two principal spaces, the History Hall and the Grand Hall, and noted the low number of artifacts. Critics pointed to gaps in the storyline for the History Hall which excluded such major events as the conquest of New France in 1759-60, the rebellions of 1837, and Confederation in 1867. Much of the criticism occurred in the popular press.⁵ The History Hall was not reviewed in a scholarly journal, although scholarly opinion was sufficiently vocal to prompt the museum's management to change the name of the History Hall to the Canada Hall.⁶ In the years that followed the opening, the museum worked to complete the hall, a task which it accomplished in 2003, while in the background historians struggled to discover an overarching interpretation that would knit the whole presentation together. Criticism abated, and the Canada Hall became the single most popular feature of the museum.⁷

In comparison with the CMC, the NMA has a more recent history. Although the idea for a national museum for Australia had been 'around since Federation', it was not until 1975 that the idea took firm shape with the creation of a Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections.⁸ Its deliberations, known as the Piggott Report, proposed a National Museum focused on three themes or galleries depicting Aboriginal Australia, Social History and the Environment. In 1980 An Act to Establish a National Museum laid the foundation for

future development. Although successive governments committed themselves to building the museum, and the first steps were taken in accumulating a collection and offering temporary displays, real progress towards building a permanent home was made only after the election of John Howard's Liberal-National Party Coalition in 1996. The opening of a permanent museum was to be a major feature of national celebrations of the centenary of Australian Federation in 2001. Eventually an advisory committee settled on a site on Acton Peninsula, a place deemed to be 'of national significance', centrally located within the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), and one which would cost less to develop than other sites.⁹ Completed at a terrific pace, the new National Museum opened its doors on 11 March 2001. At the official opening Howard declared that it would 'change the way in which people view museums, because what this museum and what its concept seeks to do, is to interpret and relate history and the experience of our country in a somewhat different way' (Howard, 2001).

Certainly the museum was striking in both its architecture and its interior spaces, but these are features it shares with other museums, including the CMC. However, the NMA took a rather different approach to the question of displaying the history of aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples. Visitors encounter the events, experiences and effects of the contact period in the First Australians Gallery, and encounter them again in those galleries devoted to Australian history since the arrival of the British in 1788. Those visiting the CMC are informed about the contact period in a panel situated at the end of the recently opened First Nations Hall which invites them to find their way to the Canada Hall where the history of Canada after the first arrival of Europeans begins. The Canada Hall makes very little reference to aboriginal experience or to contacts between aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the First Australians Gallery is set apart from the three galleries devoted to Australia since 1788. Horizons: The Peopling of Australia since 1788 tells the story of the settling of Australia by migrants from the 18th century until the 20th century. Nation: Symbols of Australia, begins with an interactive map, 'Imagining the Country', and proceeds to tell the story of Australia since Federation through familiar symbols such as the national flag and the kangaroo. Eternity: Stories from the Emotional Heart of Australia offers multimedia presentations of the experiences of ordinary individuals grouped under a particular emotion. As well as covering certain topics across galleries, the NMA repeated the themes 'Land, Nation, People' throughout the museum, on signage and as a focus of exhibits.

The Review Process

As with the CMC, although visitors to the NMA seemed happy about what they saw the museum came under fire from the press for vilifying white Australians and presenting distorted views of modern Australian history.¹¹ One outspoken critic was Keith Windschuttle, an academic best known for his polemical *The Killing of History. How Literary Critics and Social Theorists Are Murdering Our Past* (Windschuttle, 1994). Windschuttle claimed that the museum had been hijacked by postmodern and postcolonial theorists and social historians and consequently the museum overemphasised past injustices and excluded the views of those 'who once occupied positions of authority, who had previously imagined they had contributed something to making the nation what it was.' The museum, he argued, portrayed European culture in Australia 'largely as a series of disasters, especially for the environment'. It was clearly 'a profound intellectual mistake as well as a great waste of public money' (Windschuttle, 2001).¹²

The public debate intensified when the *Sydney Morning Herald* broke the news in June 2001 that a few weeks before opening a member of the Museum Council, David Barnett, had criticised the labels accompanying the exhibits for being too 'politically correct'. Barnett, Howard's biographer and appointee, shared the Prime Minister's distaste for what he had once dismissed as the 'black arm band' view of Australian history, a view that saw modern Australian history as 'little more than a disgraceful story of imperialism, exploitation, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination'. Howard believed 'that the balance sheet of our history is one of heroic achievement and that we have achieved much more as a nation of which we can be proud than of which we should be ashamed' (Anderson, 2002: 181). Although the historian called in to examine the labels, Graeme Davison, found little fault therein, the affair

fuelled accusations of left-wing bias.¹³ Moreover, since Davison had been criticised by Windschuttle for having too great an influence on the museum in the first place, it was clear that debates over what the role of a history museum should be and how it should present historical events to the public would continue (Davison, 2001; Barnett, 2001).¹⁴

Although the museum had supporters and enjoyed positive visitor reaction, within a few months after its opening there was talk of launching a review of its exhibitions.¹⁵ Its terms of reference were announced on 3 January 2003. The Review of Exhibitions and Programs was to investigate whether the Museum had fulfilled its obligations under the 1980 statute and whether 'the Government's vision... has been realised'. It was also to make recommendations on future priorities (Review, 2003: 2-4, 80). Curiously, given the allegations of Barnett, Windschuttle and others, there was no historian on the review panel. Chaired by a sociologist, Dr John Carroll of La Trobe University, it consisted of two other academics, Dr Philip Jones, an anthropologist at the South Australian Museum and Professor Patricia Vickers-Rich, a palaeobiologist at Monash University. The fourth member was Richard Longes, a businessman who had been a member of several government advisory boards and headed the Indigenous Business Review.

The panel settled on nine key criteria by which to judge the exhibits and programmes. The last three insisted that the NMA had to establish an 'outstanding national collection', assume a nation-wide leadership role through travelling exhibitions and research, and provide national access through public and schools programmes. The first six criteria spoke to the concerns that had led to the launching of the review in the first place. The NMA had a responsibility to 'tell the Australian story' through 'compelling narratives' and 'enthraling, significant objects'; to present 'the primary themes and narratives' of modern Australian history; to present the history of indigenous peoples 'in a manner that enables deeper understanding'; convey the history of the 'unique Australian environment'; represent 'the mosaic of everyday life', emphasising the 'extraordinary in the ordinary' and diversity; and lastly to cover 'darker historical episodes' in a way that 'opens the possibility of collective self-accounting' (Review, 2003: 12-14).¹⁶ After six months of consultations and submissions, the Review Panel reported on 15 July. The Panel congratulated the Museum for its displays on the first Australians, but recommended changes were necessary in those galleries which represented Australian history after European contact. It also had a lot to say on the issue at the heart of the matter: how history should be presented in a national museum.

The CMC faced an analogous situation; although there were years rather than months between the opening days and the commissioning of an external review. While large audiences, high approval ratings from visitors, and slow but steady progress with the completion of the second half of the hall kept criticism in check, the Canada Hall continued to have detractors as the 1990s drew to a close. In particular, the *National Post* and the *Ottawa Citizen*, two newspapers owned by conservative press baron Conrad Black, highlighted inadequacies that they believed represented the museum's political correctness and lack of courage to tackle tough historical issues. For the most part, these articles were neither balanced nor well researched, but they tended to implant in the public's mind a perception that the museum was failing to present a comprehensive overview of Canada's history. In particular, politics and the contentious, divisive issues associated with it were being left out.

At the same time, academic historians were engaged in another round of debate about the study and teaching of history in Canada, especially the significance assigned to politics, the constitution and external affairs. A number of prominent historians had already denounced decades of emphasis on social history in its myriad forms and a few condemned the platforms from which this work was disseminated, including the Canadian Historical Association. One prominent dissident, J.L. Granatstein, penned a provocative critique of the state of historical studies, entitled *Who Killed Canadian History?* which became a focal point of a debate that still continues (Granatstein, 1998). This controversy was forcefully brought into focus within CMC by the nomination of Robert Bothwell, a University of Toronto political historian, to the museum's Board of Trustees and by the appointment of Granatstein as the Director of the Canadian War Museum and hence a member of CMC's corporate Executive Committee. The unexpected departure of George MacDonald at the completion of his current term as Executive Director, made the museum's future direction somewhat amorphous.

It soon became clear that political history would henceforth play a more prominent role in the presentation of history by the museum. A staff review of the Canada Hall was undertaken to assess the possibilities of enhancing the treatment of political history and the History Division's first Curator of Political History was appointed in 2002. New text panels were added to provide more information on various aspects of the exhibitions. The most public of these initiatives came in 1999 when four distinguished academic historians were retained to assess the Canada Hall. They were asked to define Canadian political history and show how it could be incorporated into the galleries. Each expert was expected to visit the museum, meet with the internal review team and to file his/her own report. Beyond their shared commitment to political history, the four brought individual perspectives to the task. Kenneth Munroe was from the West; Penny Bryden worked in the Maritimes; Jacques Monet was a specialist in French Canada, and John English, a former Member of Parliament, came from an Ontario university. They varied in subjects of specialization but none were museum specialists.

Thus two national museums, each assuming responsibility to represent the nation's history, found themselves the subject of external reviews. It is important to acknowledge that there were key differences between the two review processes. The Canada Hall reports were written by four historians who worked independently of each other and who were given a very specific task generated by the debate over the absence of political history in the hall's exhibits. They reported to a team internal to the museum. The NMA review was wide-ranging, covered all galleries, and was a public exercise which saw some 105 submissions sent into a panel that included no historians, which met together and which also conducted interviews with curators, staff and selected academics and museum professionals. Comparing the review and the reports is not a straightforward exercise. The review is extensive, sophisticated and elegantly written as befits a document that was intended for the widest possible audience. The reports are informal and idiosyncratic; they were not intended for public dissemination. The information contained in this analysis has to be teased out of each document and organized under themes that were addressed by most, but not all, the experts. On the other hand, many important parts of the Australian review cannot be discussed, as there is no comparable material in the reports. Nevertheless, comparing the review and the reports is instructive. It shows the similarity of expectations placed upon public history and public historians in two geographically distant, albeit related, societies and documents concerns shared by professional historians and lay critics alike. Issues involving the moral responsibilities of historians and the balancing of conflicting interpretations of the past are highlighted. In our comparison, we have chosen to examine four themes that were central to both the Canadian and Australian reviews: political history, narrative and chronology; the burden of national unity; the quality of exhibitions; and recommended solutions.

Political History and Narrating the Nation

One of the most remarkable features of the reviewers of the Canada Hall is that they were unable to agree on a definition of political history. The responses ranged widely in content and precision. Munroe said it was a history with interesting personalities, characterized by heroic acts and marked by 'unfortunate events' while Monet described it as tracing the institutions that guide, organize and unify civil society and dealing with the art or science of government, the state and public affairs. Bryden failed to define political history as such, while English noted that it is not a celebration but a recognition that politics was a part of Canadians' everyday lives. English's comment was connected to his explanation of the need to add politics to the Canada Hall. He accepted the desire of the museum to keep pace with the changing needs of society, and went on to state 'that pace has quickened, and for Canadians in the new millennium, keeping that pace requires guideposts, signs, and familiar names'.¹⁷ For English those familiar touchstones were the people and processes 'that are part of the democratic experience that becomes Canada's political history' (English, 1999: 20). The museum, thus, must serve as a beacon by which Canadians can orient themselves in a rapidly changing world. Where George MacDonald foresaw an institution adjusting to new social realities, English expected it to serve society's need for a sense of continuity.¹⁸ The other reports were less cogent about the justification for political history. Munroe and Monet seemed

merely to feel that no account of Canadian history could be complete without its political dimension, and Bryden saw political history as providing a narrative string to link events and explain the historical context of the artifacts, thereby giving them meaning.

The NMA panel also emphasised the importance of a coherent national narrative. They argued that the dividing point between the Horizons and Nation galleries – Federation in 1901 – should be strengthened and that a general tightening up of chronologies and narratives in all the galleries was needed.¹⁹ Weak narratives and a failure to distinguish important from less important events was a particular problem in the Nation gallery. However, the panel supported extensions to exhibitions on economic development, science and technology, sports, leisure and the arts; in contrast to the Canada Hall reports, the NMA panel steered clear of opportunities to recommend a stronger representation of more traditional forms of political history.²⁰ Indeed, it asked 'whether the Federation story belongs in the NMA', noting that a historian from La Trobe University, Dr John Hirst, had suggested to them that 'Federation may not be a dramatic enough story to suit a museum' (*Review*, 2003: 27). The NMA panel seems to have accepted a very broad definition of political history, one which includes 'history from below', multiple discourses and viewpoints. Thus while the heroic efforts of European discoverers and explorers are important, so too are the 'not-so-heroic' failures. They wrote: 'If Discovery is to be marked in the NMA by achievement, Exploration marked by poignant failure would serve as fruitful counter-balance' (*Review*, 2003: 24). The panel's recommendations for specific revisions and improvements can be described as attempts to achieve balance if necessary by presenting opposing views that would empower visitors to think for themselves.²¹

The Burden of National Unity

One of the concerns of each of the Canada Hall consultants was the old chestnut of national unity. Indeed, the wish to have CMC actively involved in the struggle for this perpetually elusive goal may be one of the prime motivating factors behind the drive to have the museum represent this line of history. Munroe stated that a national museum should 'first and foremost' present a representation of the institutions and values that Canadians share, rather than concentrate on what divides. Bryden suggested the work of Canadians is the work of nation-building. Monet wanted every section of the Canada Hall to make some reference to Canada's two 'historic founding peoples' and emphasize the things that unite Canadians. English omitted reference to national unity *per se*, thereby acknowledging that political history reveals disunity as well as unity. He cautioned that the museum should be balanced in its presentations, should avoid undue controversy but should address central themes of Canadian history. In this English reached conclusions similar to the Australian panel, although the Australian situation was somewhat less complicated than the Canadian. In Canada the potentially disruptive and divisive issue of English-French relations had to be treated as well as the interaction between indigenous peoples and Europeans. Nevertheless, in Australia there were major issues of disagreement and discontent with a number of specific exhibits that were brought to the panel's attention. While much of the concern focused on Aboriginal/European frontier relations, the way the NMA represented other episodes of Australia's past also drew the ire of critics.

In his assault on the museum, Windschuttle concluded that radical social historians had determined the narrative in the exhibit 'Snapshots of Australian History'. None were, he noted, 'in themselves, incorrect. But in the selection of the events to compose a narrative history, the story they tell is the old radical tradition writ large' (Windschuttle, 2001).²² Several of those submitting comments to the panel agreed. Peter Edgar of Garran, ACT, declared that the Museum was 'a blatantly political museum' which denigrated British immigrants 'who built the society we live in' (Edgar 2001) while Rob Foot of Theodore, ACT concluded 'What is presented is not the national story. It was a highly partisan perception of selected elements of it' (Foot, 2001). Among his specific criticisms, Barnett had singled out the decision to celebrate a trade union activist and recipient of the Lenin Peace Prize, and an anti-nuclear protestor. The Museum, he argued, 'should not be a contributor to the reworking of Australian history into political correctness'; rather its role was to 'present history, not to debate it' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 June 2001). However, the panel also received positive reactions to

contentious exhibits. Alasdair Wardle and Sue Grey Smith of Coolbellup, Western Australia, wrote that 'Passive, safe and conventional institutions will not make a difference to the cultural life of a country. We want the museum to present ideas and views of Australia that may not always be comfortable' (Wardle and Grey-Smith, 2001). Peter White of Redfern, New South Wales, was more explicit. 'Australian history', he wrote, 'is not entirely sweetness and light. There are moments of darkness and aspects of greatness... in any area I know something about, the Museum's exhibitions are unavoidably partial but do not present a distorted view of the past' (White, 2001)

The review panel was therefore required to confront the potential that a museum could become divisive, stimulate conflict and encourage disunity. It persisted with the view that the museum should 'cover darker historical episodes, and with a gravity that opens the possibility of collective self-accounting' (Review, 2003: 14). A few exhibits needed re-balancing. That on James Cook, for example, opened with a reference to Disaster Bay which Cook's ship *Endeavour* passed on its way to Botany Bay; this 'risks insinuation of the subtext that European arrival was a disaster for the continent'. Rather, the Panel argued, the exhibit should tell the 'dramatic and extraordinary' story of Cook, citing his much more favourable treatment at the hands of curators in the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, England. Similarly, the display devoted to the quarantine of immigrants implied that Australians devised such requirements to keep foreigners out, an imbalance which should be rectified.

The Quality of the Exhibitions

When it came to assessing the quality of the exhibitions, the four Canadian reviewers held widely divergent opinions.²³ Bryden, who implied that CMC had failed because criticism was directed towards it, found the Canada Hall marred by dark, confusing corridors that overall did not match the majesty of Canada or even the building housing the exhibition. Munroe was more generous, finding the presentations 'generally excellent' but lacking in linkages. Monet was impressed by the streetscapes but felt reality was undercut by their sanitized nature, lacking dirt or smells. He agreed the exhibits were not intellectually linked. English warmed to the way the imaginative vision behind the museum reflected brilliantly the ambitions of MacDonald and Cardinal, but felt it was not very Canadian because it lacked a Canadian context and failed to reflect the reality of modern urban life. It had too many things, but too few people; too many replicas and none of the historic figures of Canadian history.

There was more agreement upon the effects of the imposition of a progressive chronology combined with the east to west geographical arrangement. Monet found the individual exhibition modules provided no 'idea of interdependent development' or an explanation of how Canadians got from then to now. Munroe observed that the prologue and denouement of each module were not described. Bryden agreed that the Hall failed to capture the evolution of events, but attributed this shortcoming to the omission of political conflicts which were the agents of change. English acknowledged the enormous advantages of an east-west and chronological arrangement, but remarked the results could be ahistorical.

Many of these points were echoed by the Australian panel. They recommended that the Horizons gallery should focus on primary themes: discovery, exploration, European settlement, and civic foundations. The museum should highlight significant historical moments, ones familiar to many visitors, present 'key episodes' which would enjoy a strong 'chronological thread' (Review, 2003: 23). The need to introduce political figures, political events and political chronologies into the Canada Hall led the reviewers to suggest their own topics for new exhibitions while the Australian panel also received suggestions to which they alluded in their report.

Beyond the addition of themes in the existing exhibitions, the reviewers anticipated the creation of entirely new presentations. Some were clearly seen to be permanent in nature, although others could conceivably have been intended as temporary. The most ambitious proposal was made by Munroe. He wanted the creation of an entire new streetscape featuring the old French quarter of Edmonton, Alberta in which could be found a church, the general hospital, a mansion, hotel, college, girl's school, newspaper office and radio station. Other exhibits could be created on the new northern territory of Nunavut, the Canadian military, the

entry of Newfoundland into Confederation, and the Charlottetown Conference which was a precursor to Confederation. Bryden made a series of eight suggestions as topics for new exhibitions: the Conquest, Confederation, creation of new provinces, Canada's international role, development of alternative political voices, extension of the social welfare state, Quebec separatism, and evolution of the constitution. Monet refrained from calling for completely new exhibitions, preferring instead to inject elements of his recommended themes into existing displays. English wanted to adapt the Canada Hall to capture the sense of adventure, vision and devotion that motivated the early explorers and settlers. There should, in addition, be an exhibition to present the historical context for each module, a kind of timeline, perhaps. Somewhere there should be an explanation of the Britishness of Canada in the nineteenth century while twentieth century exhibitions needed to explain the nation's current discontents with Americanization, globalization and, in Quebec, with remaining in Canada. All of the reports recommended that the Canada Hall be populated with real personages, not fictional representations. Three of the reviewers looked to the museum's small group of actors to provide live dramatizations. Monet wanted this unit greatly enlarged. As well as part of the animation, biographical history had a place in the exhibits themselves. To illustrate the point, Munroe suggested 40 names (including two fictional characters), Monet listed 47 key historical figures, and English identified about 22.

The Australian panel would have sympathised with the spirit of these recommendations. Arguing that there was a need for more engaging narratives, a stronger representation of primary themes and a more forceful celebration of 'the achievements in Australian history of both indigenous and non-indigenous civilisation' (*Review*, 2003: 69), it offered some lists, such as those proposed by the historian Professor Geoffrey Blainey and by the Friends of the NMA. Significantly, they also proposed a revision to the museum's collection policy, although it was silent on what, precisely, they thought the collection lacked; certainly they thought the museum needed more artifacts that directly related to exhibits. One familiar figure whose story the panel thought worth telling was Ned Kelly. The 'Kelly legend is a sizeable, living part of the Australian story' which would introduce the missing theme of the important contribution the Irish made to Australian history and could serve to integrate the local with the national (*Review*, 2003: 25). Similarly the story of the explorers Burke and Wills should be told for it had 'mythic force in the national imagination' (*Review*, 2003: 25). However, in the main the panel recommended changes and additions to existing exhibits rather than entirely new ones. The important exhibit on Captain Cook, for example, could be improved by providing more context, with displays on Matthew Flinders, Dutch and French explorers. The panel would have agreed with the Canadian reviewers' emphasis on the need to 'people' the museum. Stories of individual migrants had to be presented in a thorough manner and in a way which would immediately involve the visitor.

Both the Canadian and Australian reviewers recommended that the exhibition spaces would be improved by making stronger linkages across galleries and displays. The Australian panel thought the experience of Burke and Wills could be used to show how Europeans struggled with the realities of the Australian environment. Their refusal to learn from indigenous peoples should be highlighted since it would encourage visitors to reflect on aboriginal relationship with the land. They thought the 'land-link' would serve to bring the fauna and flora displays [in the Tangled Destinies gallery] together with representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life [in First Australians] and with 'the development of national identity, including areas of national achievement such as agriculture and mining' [in Nation] (*Review*, 2003: 31). Thinking of linkages that would improve the Canada Hall, English proposed that the figures portraying the past be well-known to most Canadians. He foresaw the actors introducing some of the central figures of the twentieth century and through them the great issues of the day. Monet agreed and recommended the selection of individuals who were connected to the subject matter of several exhibition modules. He went on to advise the provision of audioguides, maps, and films to reinforce the links. Bryden turned to text panels to complete the stories represented in the modules, and foresaw the use of computer generated text and audio material as well. An important enhancement for her was the insertion of key themes of political history to examine the development of what she termed 'Canadian civilization' (Bryden, 1999: 6). Munroe likewise found the telling of the story of politics in Canada

an effective bridge to link the modules. Munroe, English and Monet wanted the mezzanine area to link modules by using it for sidebars to complement the exhibitions found in the main concourse or perhaps new permanent exhibitions or a cinema in which the story of Canada could be told. These are suggestions similar to those offered by the Australian review panel who argued that the museum had to make greater use of familiar characters, new technologies, more accessible narratives and more biographies.

Modifications to the Canada Hall were expected to achieve specific goals. The exhibition should tell a story structured around a grand political narrative. The reviewers collectively wanted the Canada Hall to instil pride in Canadians and provoke a sense of admiration and gratitude for the daring and imagination of their forebears. It should strengthen a sense of identity and combat the image of Canada as a harsh land in which the population only hewed wood and drew water. If the Australian panel's ideas of what a museum should offer the visitor was more generally framed, it carried similar sentiments. Visitors should leave learning something new about Australian history, excited and stimulated. They acknowledged, however, that debate could be encouraged through the presentation of alternative viewpoints.

The Australian review panel reported in July 2003. It is too early to tell what effect their report has had on the museum, and perhaps that is a story that really has to be told from the inside out. However, it may be significant that the limited term of the NMA's director, Dawn Casey, has not been renewed. Casey, a strong advocate of the museum's role in representing contentious issues, was unapologetic about the NMA's approach. In an analysis of what was 'new' about the new museum, presented to a conference a few months after the museum opened, she revealed some pride in the NMA's insistence on making connections between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples:

We do have a 1700 square metre permanent exhibition gallery dedicated specifically to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, but Indigenous issues and stories also appear in the exhibitions about migration and settlement or environmental history. Similarly, stories involving non-Indigenous people or natural history appear where appropriate inside the 'Gallery of First Australians'. After all, those stories are closely interconnected. That deliberate blurring of boundaries between traditional museum departments which were called Anthropology or Natural History or Social History is still something new. (Casey, 2001)

Casey was also insistent on the need to avoid a grand narrative. Instead, the museum was 'a forum, a place for dialogue and a social agent.... We intend the National Museum to speak with many voices and promote useful debate about questions of diversity and national identity. That plurality of viewpoints and engagement with contemporary issues may also be considered fairly "new"' (Casey, 2001). The review panel found themselves in general agreement with these views, although they certainly wished for more coherency, stronger narratives and chronologies, and greater representation of recognisable events and persons. The panel felt that while there was much to be said in favour of pluralism, this should not render invisible those cultural elements that suggested consensus and cohesion.²⁴

Consequences

It is impossible to know, looking at the process from the outside, the extent to which the four reviews of the Canada Hall made much of a difference in its future course of development. The team charged with completing the project were already aware of the pressure to add a political dimension to the selection of topics and were prepared to do so. The appointment of a new Executive Director who was alive to these realities and had a genuine interest in them, plus the appointment of English as Chair of the Board of Trustees, may well have been more significant factors in bringing about changes along the lines advocated by the reports.

In the years that ensued, portions of the hall that were still under construction were completed more or less according to existing plans. Emphasis continued to be placed upon the discovery and exploitation of primary resource industries, and various ethnic minorities within the Canadian population were profiled as anticipated. Certain spaces, however, were

identified in which politics could be treated, and plans to achieve that goal are now being prepared. Additional text, maps, and brief biographies of historical figures were added to the existing areas of the hall, but the methods by which this was done came from the Canada Hall team itself. The museum has also embarked upon a 'third' phase of the Canada Hall in which permanent exhibitions featuring significant and interesting personalities are to be featured. They will appear on the Canada Hall mezzanine, now re-baptized the 'Canadian Personalities Hall'. Initially, this concept was to highlight political decision-makers, but it has since been widened to include people who have had an impact upon various aspects of Canadian life. The criteria to be used for selecting persons for inclusion in this new set of exhibitions have been developed and the selection of subjects has begun. It is recognized that extensive collections development must be a part of the initiative and that exhibits will have to be renewed periodically to ensure wide topical coverage and ongoing appeal for regular visitors to the museum.

There can be no doubt that the drive to inject politics into the Canada Hall has irreversibly changed both the interpretation of Canadian history at CMC and the mandate of its historians.²⁵ There also seems little doubt that the critics who secured a review process so early in the NMA's history have not only scored a victory in the termination of its director's appointment, but that they will influence the museum's exhibitions on Australian history in the years to come. A study of the review process is revealing in this respect, for it offers a persuasive argument for the role of the museum in representing diversity on the one hand, and contentious issues on the other. The decision to integrate Indigenous and non-Indigenous histories, adopted in the NMA, rejected in the CMC, enables interconnected, comprehensive treatment of the mingling of peoples from a variety of scholarly perspectives. The NMA's insistence on repeating the motif of 'land, nation, peoples' throughout the galleries was thought by the panel to be potentially confusing to some visitors, but they concluded that this risk 'is outweighed by the potential for the generation of a creative frisson'. While the CMC might lack a grand political narrative, it achieves the same goal, for the themes of land, nation, people play out in all of its galleries and visitors are able to construct their own narratives because the curators of the Canada Hall adopted a social history approach centred on settlement, economic and social development. As a result, the Canada Hall has already put into practise some of the recommendations of the Australian panel.

The construction of ambitious exhibitions depicting a grand national history is an immense intellectual and practical challenge. Even in an ideal situation, the identification of an appropriate storyline and creation of an effective design would be extremely difficult tasks, but they are complicated by realities that constantly confront large public history undertakings. Some challenges have to do with contextual realities, such as leadership; budgets; time constraints; the number, ability, and interest of curators and other staff; the holdings of the institutional collections; the availability of loan material; community involvement, to name but a few. Any and all of these will impinge upon the shaping of the final product. Exhibitions themselves have their limitations. They are a medium of expression, and like any medium have strengths and weaknesses. Compared to some other media, exhibitions are blunt instruments, unable to convey certain highly nuanced ideas or complex concepts effectively. In getting their messages across, museums can add other media to exhibitions, such as video clips, computer stations, soundscapes, and portable electronic guides, to give the nuances some subjects might demand. Alas, although exhibits contain historical artifacts, the physical context that gives them meaning can only be simulated, not replicated, in uncompromising detail. Nor can exhibitions bear the burden of fact that can be packed into books. Catalogues and other publications continue to be the best vehicle for conveying densely-packed information. Finally, museum exhibitions, particularly permanent exhibitions of large national institutions, offer large stages, the space on which is highly contested.

The ongoing history wars in both Canada and Australia, as well as America and elsewhere, are occurring in the absence of generally-accepted national historical narratives. This terrain is a minefield for national museums attempting just such broad presentations. Protagonists in the wars suspect the methodologies and values of their opponents and resent any apparent acceptance of divergent views on a stage as prestigious or even 'official' as a national museum. The museums, for their part, have to mediate these conflicting perspectives,

all the while keeping their eyes on the sensitivities of their boards and political sponsors and catering to the taste of a public that is increasingly expected to foot the bill for the museum's operations. The desire to uplift and not to offend, to offer a vision of unity while respecting diversity and to entertain and educate simultaneously bears with it a host of management challenges any one of which can plunge the museum into hot water.

A study of the Australian and Canadian review processes reveals that there is no clear answer to the question Davison put to the Australian review panel, 'How should an institution charged with the responsibility of representing the nation's history to a national audience deal with divisions of scholarly and popular opinion?' (Davison, 2001). However, what is certain is that although permanent exhibitions are not forever, they are long-term commitments. This suggests that they should be crafted in such a way as to maintain a lengthy shelf life. That may deny them the luxury of reflecting fleeting controversies and current hot wisdoms; those should be captured by an active temporary exhibition programme. As long as museums must contend with the kinds of realities they face today, permanent exhibitions will likely always lag somewhat behind contemporary historical and political priorities, and they will evade the kind of moral and political certitudes that critics on all sides demand.

Notes

¹ There is an extensive literature on this subject. Besides the essays offered in McIntyre and Wehner (2001), see those edited by Fladmark (2000); Kaplan (1994); Karp and Levine (1991); Karp, Levine and Kraemer (1992); Macdonald and Fyfe (1996). Monographs include Kavanagh (1999), Simpson (1996), Walsh (1992), while Gore (2002) is an important doctoral thesis and Boswell and Evans (1999) offer a selection of important readings.

² The National Museum was reorganized in 1968 as part of a new Crown corporation made up of four component museums, of which one, the National Museum of Man, was the forerunner of the Canadian Museum of Civilization. The name was changed in 1987.

³ One of its achievements was the permanent exhibition, *A Few Acres of Snow*, which took its name from Voltaire's sardonic comment on the worth of Canada. The exhibition depicted Canada's past as a history of the exploitation of nature by humans and of some humans by other humans. For more information on the exhibition see Ruddel (1983).

⁴ For more on this and other aspects of interpretation in the Canada Hall, see Rider (1994).

⁵ See, for instance, Drainie (1989) and Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, George MacDonald's interview with Eric Malling, *The Fifth Estate*, 17 April 1990.

⁶ The whole CMC has recently been reviewed as part of a comprehensive look at the historical museums in Ottawa, see Goodall (2002).

⁷ Visitor surveys indicated the public at large approved of the contents of the hall. When asked specifically whether the addition of politics and political history was desirable, the response demonstrated little interest in the idea. Similar findings were forthcoming from a series of polls done over several years with visiting classes of undergraduate students from Trent University, Carleton University and the University of Ottawa.

⁸ The history of the NMA draws upon Gardiner-Garden (1996-7) and the recollections of Bolton (2001) and Davison (2001).

⁹ This decision was not without controversy. At least two members of the interim Museum Council, historian John Mulvaney (who had also served on the Pigott Inquiry) and sociologist Jerzy Zubrzycki, objected to the site's lack of space for research facilities, see Gardiner-Garden (1996-7) and Zubrzycki (2001).

¹⁰ The concluding words in the First People's Hall, which opened in 2003, are a quote from Georges Erasmus and begin, 'The history of our people needs to be told. We need to present accurately what happened in the past, so we can deal with it in the future....'. When asked about the separation of the First People's Hall and the Canada Hall, a museum official pointed out 'resonances' between the two halls, such as the use of watercraft in the wilderness. It could be argued that these only go so far in mitigating the likelihood that many visitors will leave the CMC thinking that Canadian history begins with the arrival of the Europeans. For more details on the First People's Hall see Inglis (2003).

¹¹ For examples of critical press reaction see Miranda Devine, 'A Nation Trivialised', *Daily Telegraph*, 12 March 2001, and 'Trivial Pursuit of Our History', *Advertiser*, 14 March 2001 who mused, in the latter, that 'It is a mystery quite how such a swifty was pulled on John Howard and his hand-picked museum council', cited by Anderson (2002: 182).

¹² Windschuttle was impressed by Devine's reporting of the museum – 'the most trenchant critic' – quoting with approval her accusation that the underlying message of the museum 'is one of sneering ridicule for white Australia. It is as if all non-Aboriginal culture is a joke'. More recently, Windschuttle has questioned evidence of massacres of aborigines by whites, see Windschuttle (2002, 2003).

¹³ Davison's report led to minor alterations in some six labels. The *Herald* had briefly noted Barnett's opposition to some displays as early as 3 March, 2001. Davison's offers a brief account of the labelling controversy in his submission to the panel (Davison, 2001) and the controversy is discussed by Macintyre and Clark (2003: 191-215).

¹⁴ Davison had argued that museums should challenge traditional narratives, adopt new strategies for display and embrace pluralism in a global community in a paper delivered at a conference held at the museum in July 1999, see McIntyre and Wehner (2001). Howard might have had the dispute in mind when he declared at the opening that 'Quite properly and inevitably there will be debate in the future' about ways of 'interpreting our history' and 'relating those events'.

¹⁵ See, for example, *The Daily Telegraph*, 16 May; *Courier Mail* for 31 March, 2001; and *The Weekend Australian*, 24 March 2001. Anderson claims that most media commentators supported Davison's insistence on curatorial independence (Anderson, 2002: 182) and the director, Dawn Casey, noted visitor numbers and reactions in her keynote address to the Museums Australia (Queensland) conference, Casey (2001).

¹⁶ All further references and quotations are taken from the *Review* (2003) unless otherwise noted.

¹⁷ All quotations are taken from the reports of their respective authors. The reports are available in the reference room of the museum library, see MUS AM101, H8, R46, 1999.

¹⁸ For MacDonald's vision see MacDonald and Alford (1989) and Gillam (2001: 135-54).

¹⁹ Not all members agreed. Dr Jones was allowed to present his case for keeping the boundaries fluid. He thought the 'meshing of themes' and the 'interpenetration of indigenous and European cultural and social histories from the pre-contact period until the present' was an approach that 'allows the Museum to move away from more traditional, chronologically ordered exhibits' (*Review*, 2003: 26).

²⁰ As recommended, for example, by an architect, Timothy Horton of Surry Hills, NSW (Horton, 2001).

²¹ They also noted that conferences associated with exhibits could be a powerful means to further discussions surrounding contested views of the past.

²² Gary Morgan, Executive Director of the Western Australian Museum, who disagreed with Windschuttle on so much, conceded that the selection was 'somewhat skewed towards profiling opposition or resistance to conservative authority' (Morgan, 2002).

²³ It is important to note that the reports were written before the completion of the second half of the hall which included exhibitions on the West and the North. Even so, it appears unlikely that subsequent additions would have substantially changed the opinions offered.

²⁴ Casey herself recognised that she was positioning herself very firmly on one side of 'the history wars' (Casey, 2001, 2003); see also Macintyre and Clark (2003) and press reactions to her leaving the museum, 'Casey's Badge of Honour', *Canberra Times*, 14 December 2003; 'Leader cries racism over Casey's exit', *Courier Mail*, 12 December, 2003; 'Going Down in History', *The Australian*, 9 December 2003.

²⁵ In 1973 the Chief of the History Division noted acerbically that 'the "national museum of Canadian history" recommended by the Massey Commission was, in effect, interpreted as an institution where the Canadian experience, from the earliest prehistoric traces of man until the present was to be studied and depicted.' 'In this museum of anthropology and history,' he concluded, 'the history division (as distinct from the Canadian War Museum) is the smallest of the six main units, and the historians ¼ are quite outnumbered by anthropologists', see Thorpe (1974: 2). Over 30 years later, this statement remains largely true. Since 2002 the museum's five historians have been part of an Archaeology and History Division.

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