



ICOM Australia International Museum Day 2017 Winner student essay competition¹

Saying the unspeakable: contested history in museums

Justin William Croft

Museums are spaces and places of memory in which material culture is preserved and displayed. In addition to playing a significant role in teaching history and providing meaning to visitors, these contemporary cultural institutions also have the social function, as 'raising awareness of issues and empowering people to educate themselves on important topics to determine their own position around these subjects and become socially active, museums can have a role in social transformation' (Cameron 2005, p. 225).

In this context, the theme of International Museum Day 2017 is 'museums and contested histories: saying the unspeakable in museums' (International Council of Museums [ICOM] 2016). Notably, 'this theme highlights how the acceptance of a contested history is the first step in envisioning a shared future under the banner of reconciliation' (ICOM 2016). This essay aims to examine displays of contested histories in museums through the medium of exhibitions. To do this, a case study of an exhibition entitled, '*Our Land: Parrawa Parrawa! Go Away!*', located at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, will be examined. This essay will argue that despite competing discourses and difficulties related to representing controversial histories, museums play a vital role and are invaluable in creating innovative spaces

¹ The views expressed in the essay are those of the author. Publication of the essay does not indicate an endorsement of those views by ICOM Australia.

and narratives that promote several different perspectives of the past to provoke thought, reflection and discussion among visitors.

Museums are a product of the Enlightenment, and at that time museums such as the British Museum were engaged in functions that organised knowledge and educated the population for civilising effects and to produce proud citizens who would identify with the nation-state. During the 19th century political operatives used museum structures and operations for identity building, strengthening and reinforcing nationalist discourses, in which visitors were connected by a memory of a shared past (Arnold-de Simine 2013, p. 7). British and European museums like the Musée du Louvre also collected artefacts to show the variety of human manifestations of culture, and constructed and manipulated the past to represent the worldview of the elite for state authorities and the prestige of nations (Kreamer 1992, p. 368). However, during the late 20th century, museological practices relating to hegemonic narratives were critiqued and deemed no longer appropriate by the 'new museology' movement. Consequently, under this new paradigm, museums abandoned monolithic and hegemonic versions of history that represented the views of the ruling class and began to collect and display material culture linked to the experiences and histories of ordinary people. It was in this manner that museums rethought their relationships with the individuals that they serve (Ross 2004, pp. 84–85). For example, according to McShane (2006, p. 07.1), the Museum of Victoria provides a point of reference to challenges posed by social history and post-colonisation. The visitor now encounters thematic structured exhibitions that weave together the multi-voiced human history of the state and the world, signalling a new, more inclusive curatorial practice.

Furthermore, some characteristics of the 'new museology' movement have clearly influenced the development of the National Museum of Australia (NMA). That cultural institution provides a sense of optimism for heritage professionals who advocate new purposes and practices in museums. The NMA describes its mission in terms that place less emphasis on 'a singular authority, preferring instead to accent representational breadth, social inclusion and a textual reflexivity' (Trinca and Wehner 2006, pp. 06.2-3). In 2001 Dawn Casey, then director, explained that the NMA is a 'forum, a place for dialogue and debate... we intend the museum to speak with many voices, listen and respond to all, and promote debate and discussion about questions of diversity and identity' (Casey 2001, p. 6). Moreover, by educating visitors through exhibitions aimed at stimulating thought and encouraging further inquiry, museums also became more accessible and the active initiators of social capital (Ross 2004, pp. 84–85). Additionally, with the integration of new curatorial practices, cultural institutions allowed space for contested histories and voices to be represented in exhibitions that challenged conventional historical narratives and collective memories. Hooper-Greenhill (2000, pp. 20–22) described this development as the period of the 'post-museum'. As Lawley (1992, p. 38) stated:

... museums must come to terms with a plurality of pasts, sometimes in conflict with each other. As one of the principal means by which people gain access to their history, museums must dismantle the cultural barriers that impeded widespread participation in their activities.

In other words, rather than concocting idealised stories, stories should be interpreted from multiple perspectives and represent diverse experiences to allow audiences to

become active participants in comprehending the complexity and richness of history (Gardner 2004, p. 17).

This essay will examine a case study of an exhibition that had the deliberate intention of making colonial contact history (a highly contested history) more visible to audiences. However, first, this essay will briefly consider why early colonial history is so contested in contemporary Australia. According to Peel & Twomey (2011, pp. 92-93), British expansion led to a frontier conflict that was violent. Skirmishes with Indigenous populations were frequent across the Australian colonies as settlers claimed their traditional lands, and these conflicts were the backbone of the British invasion, possession and dispossession. This historical truth exposes the myth that Australia's birth was one of peaceful colonisation. However, despite the abundant evidence available in archives, the fact that wars were fought on the Australian mainland remains hidden from most of the Australian population, as Australians were never taught about these wars (Connor 2002, p. IX). Consequently, when stories of frontier conflict leave academia and enter the public domain via publications and other media, there is often backlash and outbreaks of resentment. This issue came to a head in 'the history wars', when conservative commentators and parliamentarians attempted to reimagine Australia's past for party-political interests (Macintyre & Clark 2003, p. 1). It has been further confused by the link between the discussion of the past and the concept of an Australian national identity. As when revisionist history contradicts the 'romantic' settler narrative of Australia's past, it threatens certain perceptions of the nation's culture, identity and shared beliefs (Myers 2013, pp. 1-3). Thus, this aspect of Australian history raises many questions in relation to Australia's sense of self and continues to be contentious. Museums have an essential role to play in addressing these historical misunderstandings and revealing past atrocities to audiences if contemporary race relationships are to be healed.

An exhibition of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) in Hobart Australia is the subject of this essay's case study. The TMAG is partly located in a convict built Bond Store that dates back to 1824. It is also home to a permanent multi-voiced exhibition entitled: '*Our Land: Parrawa Parrawa! Go Away!*' (Harman 2013, p. 273). The TMAG (2017) describes this exhibition as 'an immersive journey through this dark period of history, with objects, contemporary historical accounts and specially commissioned films all helping to bring the story to life'. The exhibition enables visitors to gain a deeper understanding of the past, explore their own specific values, beliefs and attitudes, and assist visitors to acknowledge their personal ability to change 'society and their reality' (Taylor 2008, pp. 5-6). As Uzzell (1998, p. 16) notes, museums should be 'seen as places where people come to understand themselves'.

The exhibition is an interpretation of the enormous cultural impact of colonisation on the first Tasmanians after the British invasion of Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania). It focuses on the Black War, fought between pastoralists and Indigenous people in Tasmania from 1823 to 1831. Connor (2002, p. 85) notes that some of the nastiest fighting during the Australian War and the largest deployment of British infantry to a frontier occurred in Tasmania. The setting of the exhibition is fitting, as visitors are reminded that if they had been standing in the same place in the 19th century, they would have been standing among food, clothing and other equipment, as the Bond

Store was a supply depot during the frontier wars. A panel within the exhibition describes the store as 'the engine room of invasion'.

Through the exhibition's stories, visitors discover the variety of ways in which individuals in Tasmania reacted to colonisation, governmental policies and racial stereotyping. The exhibition offers detailed, first person descriptions of the cruel treatment that the first Tasmanians endured under settlers and colonial authorities. For example, one story of Tasmania's early contact history is brought to life through a historical spectator named Kikatapula (or 'Black Tom') whose experiences of several events are described. Visitors can trace Kikatapula's life story from his childhood (where he lived traditionally) through to his assimilation into colonial Tasmanian society and finally his death in 1832 (Harman, 2013, p. 273). Through this narrative, the exhibition shares accounts that provide visitors with an opportunity to discuss the problematic ethical and moral dilemmas described in Kikatapula's biography.

The exhibition begins with visitors hearing an audio recording of the voice of Jim Everett shouting, '*Parrawa Parrawa, go away you white buggers, what business have you here?*'. As Mundy (2013, p. 13) notes, this audio recording 'packs a powerful punch'. Visitors then proceed to a space that illustrates the first 20 years of British colonisation. A series of textual panels, audio-visual materials and a wide range of primary sources are used to give the exhibition a sense of authenticity. This area also contains a number of glass cabinets that display several artefacts such as convict-made shoes and newspapers. Notably, most visitors orientate to a large cast iron cannon that was used by the British against Indigenous people in 1804 at an incident that is now called the 'Risdon Cove massacre', where up to 50 people were killed (Harman 2013, p. 273–274).

Next, visitors enter a large spacious area where the Black War is addressed. The displays in this area complement each other and position the two opposing sides of the frontier more clearly. For example, the displays exhibit both a gun used by a colonist in the Black War and an assemblage of Indigenous spears used to kill settlers (Harman 2013, p. 273–274). These items of material culture attest to there being terror, violence and misunderstandings on both sides of the armed confrontation and highlight the discomfiting ways in which Indigenous people were dispossessed of their tribal territories.

From my observations, visitors spent most of their time watching a set of paired films being screened on opposite sides of the convict brick walls. One film shows a story of encounters from a colonist viewpoint and the other from an Indigenous viewpoint. These films include eyewitness accounts that were sourced from historical records such as newspapers, historic journals and court records (Mundy 2013, p. 13). The films also reference people and artefacts that the visitors would have encountered earlier in the exhibition. To encourage reflective engagement with the material, visitors can watch these films seated. This is particularly important, as it would be awkward to view both perspectives simultaneously. This purposeful learning presentation provides an opportunity for visitors to understand frontier violence, the cultural impact of colonisation and addresses the interplay between individual stories within a larger historical context. The exhibition closes with the death of Kikatapula. Visitors then have an opportunity to access touch screens that provide a more detailed history of Tasmania's colonial period and its legacy (Harman 2013, p. 274).

Overall, it is my view from attending this educational exhibition that it presents these contested histories well, as it does not shy away contentious events. Importantly, the exhibition should appeal to a wide range of audiences and ultimately enables visitors to learn about Australia's rich and hidden history. The exhibition also represents a new kind of historical awareness; it is more balanced and inclusive in its acknowledgements of Indigenous accounts of history that challenge existing norms and hegemonic assumptions. The exhibition creates an opportunity for transformational learning and does not 'mix the message to avoid controversy' (Woods 1995 p. 1115). As Woods stated: 'It is simply good public history to be inclusive'.

These types of exhibitions ask visitors to make connections between history, contemporary political and social frameworks that 'can foster critical self-reflection and lead to a deeper awareness of distorted assumptions and frees participants from the personal or cultural limitations of existing mental models' (Grenier 2010 p. 581). As Mezirow (2003 p. 74) similarly contended, such exhibitions enable visitors 'to compare their ways of interpreting common experience with the ways of others and to identify and critically assess their own taken-for-granted frame of reference'.

Reflecting further on the exhibition, it is clear that the museum chose to deliberately emphasise different experiences and viewpoints. This is a further sign that museums today have changed their practices and cultures within the 'new museology' movement (as discussed above) by representing the past in the present with multiple and opposing voices and without producing negative responses that may be counterproductive (Ballantyne 1995, p. 16).

The frontier wars are worthy of remembrance; however, it is debatable whether this exhibition alone will create a shift in the public consciousness of Australians. Regardless, the TMAG should be complemented for presenting an exhibition of this nature (i.e., of contentious historical memories) at a time when the nation is struggling over a mosaic of guilt due to the efficacious policies of successive administrations under which the first Australians have been subjugated since British settlement. Particularly, as other cultural institutions such as the Nation Museum of Australia have not been as courageous due to community and political protests during the 'history wars' (Attwood 2006, pp. 103–104). Further, by providing a reflective space for public discussion, the TMAG's mission is clear. It seeks to become an agent of social change in the community by reshaping the collective cross-cultural understanding of Australia's past in the spirit of reconciliation and thus to help extend what it means to be Australian (Ballantyne 1995, p. 13). The transformative learning contained within the exhibition may also affect present and future generations, as the TMAG contested history exhibition allows visitors to engage with varied perspectives about the risks of racial discrimination in the nation. To achieve 'deep change' people must question and subsequently revise their deeply held principles and opinions (Quinn 1996, p. 6).

This essay sought to investigate how museums exhibit contested histories and unspeakable elements of the past. It provided an example of the curatorial practices of cultural institutions that are progressively being called upon to provide community forums to deal with traumatic, socially and politically sensitive past events. This essay considered an exhibition entitled, '*Our Land: Parrawa Parrawa! Go Away!*' that

**Saying the unspeakable: contested history in museums**

by Justin William Croft

clearly achieved its objective of presenting contentious pasts. Its balanced interpretation provides experiences for learning, encourages new insights into opposing perspectives and increases understandings of the lived experience of other people by challenging visitors both sympathetically and cognitively. Its focus on personal storytelling provides visitors an intimate connection and identification with the individuals whose stories are being revealed under the banner of reconciliation. In conclusion, museums can provide places for reflection and debate about connections between the past and the present. Further, by creating peaceful and harmonious communities, museums can play a critical role in building a better future for all of us.

Bibliography

- Arnold-de Simine, S 2013, *Mediating memory in the museum: trauma, empathy, nostalgia*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, UK.
- Attwood, B 2006, 'Contesting frontiers: history, memory and narrative in a national museum', *Recollections: Journal of the National Museum of Australia*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 103–114.
- Ballantyne, R 1995 'Interpreters' conceptions of Australian aboriginal culture and heritage: implications for interpretive practice', *Journal of Environmental Education*, vol. 26, no. 4, pp. 11–17.
- Casey, D 2001, 'The National Museum of Australia: exploring the past, illuminating the present and imagining the future', in D McIntyre & K Wehner (eds), *Negotiating histories: national museums: conference proceedings*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, pp. 3-11.
- Connor, J 2002, *The Australian frontier wars: 1788–1838*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney.
- Gardner, JB 2004, 'Contested terrain: history, museums, and the public', *The Public Historian*, vol. 26, no. 4, pp. 11–21.
- Grenier, RS 2010, Moments of discomfort and conflict: Holocaust museums as agents of change, *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, vol. 12, no. 5, pp. 573–586.
- Harman, K 2013, 'Balanced portrayal of a difficult history', *Exhibition Reviews, History Australia*, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 273–275.
- Hooper-Greenhill, E 2000, *Museums and the interpretation of visual culture*, Routledge, London, UK.
- International Council of Museums (ICOM) 2016, *Launch of International Museum Day 2017, IMD 2017: museums as tools for creating peaceful communities*, ICOM, Paris, France, retrieved 1 April 2017, <<http://icom.museum/press-releases/press-release/article/launch-of-international-museum-day-2017-1/>>.
- Kreamer, CM 1992, 'Defining communities through exhibiting and collecting', in I Karp, CM Kreamer & S Levine (eds), *Museums and communities*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington DC, pp. 367–381.
- Lawley, I 1992, 'For whom we serve', *The New Statesman and Society*, vol. 5, no. 211, p. 38.
- Macintyre, S & Clark, A 2004, *The history wars*, Melbourne University Publishing, Melbourne.
- McShane, I 2006, 'Melbourne Museum', in C Healy & A Witcomb (eds), *South Pacific Museums Experiments in Culture*, Monash University E-Press, Melbourne, chapter 7, pp. 1-4.

- Mezirow, J 2003, 'Issues in transformative learning: adult development in post-industrial society and working life', *Stockholm lectures in Educology, Lecture Series*, no. 2, pp. 49–66.
- Myers, K 2013, 'Colonial landscapes: from historical trauma to mythical history 1850–2013', *Melbourne Historical Journal*, vol. 41, no. 1, pp. 1–20.
- Mundy, J 2013, 'Exhibition brings hidden tale to life', *Koori Mail*, no. 548, p. 13.
- Peel, M & Twomey, C 2011, *A history of Australia*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Quinn, RE 1996, *Deep change: discovering the leader within*, John Wiley & Sons, New York.
- Ross, M 2004, 'Interpreting the new museology', *Museum and Society*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 84–103.
- Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) 2017, *Permanent exhibitions: our land: Parrawa, Parrawa! Go away!*, TMAG, Hobart, retrieved 30 March, 2017, <[http://www.tmag.tas.gov.au/whats_on/exhibitions/permanent/our_land_parrawa,_parrawa!_go_away!](http://www.tmag.tas.gov.au/whats_on/exhibitions/permanent/our_land_parrawa,_parrawa!_go_away!>)>.
- Taylor, EW 2008, 'Transformative learning theory', in S Merriam (ed.), *The third update on adult learning theory: New directions for adult and continuing education*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, pp. 5–15.
- Trinca, M & Wehner, K 2006, 'Pluralism and exhibition practice at the National Museum of Australia', in C Healy & A Witcomb (eds), *South Pacific Museums Experiments in Culture*, Monash University E-Press, Melbourne, chapter 6, pp. 1-14.
- Uzzell, D 1998, 'Interpreting our heritage: a theoretical interpretation', in D Uzzell & R Ballantyne (eds), *Contemporary issues in heritage and environmental interpretation*, Stationary Office, London, pp. 11–25.
- Woods, TA 1995, 'Museums and the public: doing history together', *The Journal of American History*, vol. 82, no. 3, pp. 1111–1115.