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**Nation, History, Museum:**

**The politics of the past at the National Museum of Australia.**

**By Ben Wellings**


**Introduction**


The National Museum of Australia opened its doors to the public on 11 March 2001. Located in Canberra, the federal capital, the Museum was the centre-piece of celebrations marking the centenary of Australia's federation in 1901. As such, the Museum's director, Dawn Casey, described the $155 million, state-of-the-art institution as 'a gift to the nation'. But for some, this was not the sort of present that Australia wanted. In officially opening the Museum, the Prime Minister of Australia, John Howard, seemed somewhat under-whelmed, struggling to find anything positive to say about the new edifice. In his speech, the Prime Minister parsimoniously claimed that 'Whatever may be said and whatever has already been said about the Museum… [it] will change in a very profound way the enjoyment of life for people who live in the national capital' (Howard, 2001).

Not everyone was as dismayed as John Howard, however. For some commentators, the idea of a national museum offered the hope of redemption and renewal, rather than just a monument to a troubled past. Whilst the National Museum of Australia was criticised for presenting Australian history 'negatively', it was argued in other quarters that such an institution could help re-establish a coherent national narrative which would in turn help restore a sense of national cohesion. Accordingly, two years

after its opening, the Museum underwent a period of government review, in which a cohesive and positive national narrative was recommended in order to overcome the fragmentation of national consciousness that had been brought about by the so-called 'history wars' of the 1990s.

**Unsettling Histories**

In a land where it is commonplace to bemoan the 'lack of history', the past was fiercely contested in the years preceding the opening of the National Museum of Australia (NMA). Such 'history' or 'culture wars' need explaining by scholars of nationalism. John Hutchinson has argued that contestation over national history has been a crucial element in helping to define the forms of a dominant national narrative. He argues that 'rival symbolic repertoires, in appealing to multiple class and status groups, do not so much express sectional struggle as different visions of the nation' (Hutchinson, 2005, p. 87). On one level, this seemed true of Australia in 2001: radically different visions of the national past - and consequently the nation itself - crystalised around arguments about history in general and the National Museum in particular. But Hutchinson may go too far when making the case for 'the independent power of divergent, deep-seated historical memories' attached to an ethnic sub-stratum (Hutchinson, 2005, p. 85). The link between ethnicity and nationality in Australia is far from straight forward. Thus it would be a mistake to understand the 'history wars' as a robust debate carried out within the safe confines of a secure and dominant ethnic group. What caused the intensity of the debate in Australia's case was a questioning of the moral

legitimacy of the national community due to new understandings of the past, versus a reaction to this sense of contrition and an attempt to re-impose a cohesive and cohering national narrative. It will be worth spending some time outlining the history of this debate itself in order to explain its intensity.

The idea of establishing a national museum for Australia had been raised during the debates immediately before and after Federation in 1901. However, the National Museum of Australia only began collecting artefacts once it was established by an Act of Parliament in 1980. Thus the period of its existence coincided with a significant shift in understandings about Australia's past. Since the late 1960s, historians in Australia increasingly began to concern themselves with the effects of contact and colonisation on Australia's indigenous peoples. This newer approach entailed criticism of prevailing narratives of the past which were increasingly seen as involving conscious or unconscious acts of forgetting with regard to the more disturbing aspects of Australia's history.

Such national narratives were discernible by the middle of the 20th century. An indicative summary of these narratives may be taken from the opening pages of an illustrated survey of Australia and its principal colony, Papua New Guinea, entitled *Displaying Australia*. Produced for American service personnel at the end of the Second World War, the book was dedicated to:

the Pioneer Men and Women of Australia whose labour and sacrifice have laid the foundation of a Great White Nation. On their memories the sun shall never set, nor in the hearts of the Australian people shall they be forgotten. We shall continue to

remember that they died from hunger and thirst and exhaustion that future
generations of Australians should enjoy the heritage of our race, while the fruits of
their seeking materialise in the creation of a National soul (Australia Story Trust,
1945, p. 3).

In sum, the dominant national narrative was one which stressed the civilising effects
of hard-working, egalitarian white settlers, given added legitimacy in the 20th century by
successful participation in the global struggles against totalitarian imperialism. But
despite this, as Ann Curthoys points out, the dominant national narrative prior to the
1970s defined Australians not as victors, but as victims: convicts as victims of empire;
settlers as victims of the environment; and the Anzacs as victims of British incompetence
(Curthoys, 2003, p. 188). It was this deep-seated sense of victim-hood that made it
difficult for many Australians to identify their forebears as perpetrators of criminal,
inhuman and immoral acts towards Australia's indigenous peoples. However, in the latter
half of the twentieth century, it was exactly this that they were asked to do. By the early
1980s, many historians were writing a version of history that challenged longer
established national narratives of victim-hood and civilisation in Australia.

Worse was to come. In addition to the official celebrations in Sydney Harbour in
1988 to mark the Bicentenary of the settling of the Australian continent by the British,
there was a counter-demonstration by indigenous peoples and their non-indigenous
supporters. Far from celebrating the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788, the counter-
demonstration mourned the invasion of the Australian continent and the subsequent
dispossession and destruction of indigenous societies and cultures. Australia's past

became even more intimately connected with present politics during the 1990s through three related political and legal processes. These processes were 'Reconciliation' running from 1991 to 2001; the High Court of Australia's decision on native land title in the *Mabo* case of 1992; and the parliamentary enquiry into the so-called 'Stolen Generations' in 1997.

Through these political issues, debates about history began to permeate popular consciousness. The *Mabo* decision in particular, created a profound shift in understandings of the past within the Labour government of the day. Prime Minister Paul Keating strengthened this re-working of the popular narrative in his speech at Redfern Park, Sydney in December 1992. For Keating, *Mabo* established 'a fundamental truth and [laid] the basis for justice' (Keating, 1993 [1992], p. 5). Keating portrayed historical revision as a test of national self-knowledge that would begin with an act of recognition:

Recognition that it was *we* who did the dispossessing. *We* took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. *We* brought the diseases; the alcohol. *We* committed the murders. *We* took the children from their mothers (Keating, 1993 [1992], p. 4).

The issue that generated the most emotive politicisation of the past was that of the 'Stolen Generations' – offspring of mixed marriages between Aborigines and settlers who were forcibly removed from their parents by Australian governments. If the history of dispossession was disconcerting, then the issue of assimilation and possible genocide proved profoundly challenging. The 1997 *Bringing Them Home* report questioned the

assimilationist policies carried out by State and Commonwealth governments during the twentieth century (Wilson, 1997, p. 37). In particular it documented, through the use of oral testimonies, the forced removal of so-called 'half-caste' children from their indigenous families and their placement in government institutions or with white families. The authors stated that 'we can conclude with confidence that between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities in the period from approximately 1910 until 1970' (Wilson, 1997, p. 37). The Report, which shocked parliamentarians and public opinion alike and recommended an apology to the 'Stolen Generations', continued:

> Official policy and legislation for Indigenous families and children was contrary to accepted legal principle imported into Australia as British [sic] common law and, from late 1946, constituted a crime against humanity (Wilson, 1997, p. 275).

This notion that Australia could be ranked amongst regimes that had committed crimes against humanity jarred with the ideas of progress and enlightened attitudes that had previously permeated narratives of the Australian past. All three of these issues ─ Reconciliation, *Mabo's* abolishment of the legal fiction of *terra nullius* and the legacy of child removal policies ─ fed into popular and politicised understandings of the past.

But not everyone in the Australian community felt comfortable with the need to atone for past sins perpetrated by settlers against Australia's first human inhabitants. John Howard, Prime Minister of a Liberal-National Party coalition between 1996 and 2007, made it clear that he did not support the view of Australia's past that had emerged in the

preceding decades. Howard refused to apologise to the 'Stolen Generations' on behalf of the federal government of Australia and the Australian nation for something that he maintained the current generation of Australians had not done and could not therefore have been responsible for. In this stance, he was supported by, and drew strength from a group of historians, politicians and public figures who sought to counter what they saw as an overly-negative and damaging view of Australia's past.

**Unity and Legitimacy**

By the mid-1990s, the debate about history was causing concern in official circles. In 1994, the Centenary of Federation Advisory Committee noted that 'there is an increasing equation of Australian history with self-criticism, to the extent that it may be undermining an appropriate pride in Australian achievement' (Centenary of Federation Advisory Committee, 1994, p. 2). The previous year, Geoffrey Blainey, Professor of History at Melbourne University, gave a public lecture, entitled 'Drawing up a Balance Sheet of our History', subsequently published in the journal, *Quadrant*. In this lecture, Blainey addressed the issue of the historiographical shift in understandings of Australia's past:

> To some extent my generation was reared on the Three Cheers view of Australian history. This patriotic view of our past had a long run. It saw Australian history as largely a success. While the convict era was a source of shame or unease, nearly

everything that came after was believed to be pretty good. Now the very opposite is
widely preached (Blainey, 1993, p. 11).

Blainey went on to outline the case for the Australian achievement: economic
success; the triumph of the colonists over the harsh environment; Australia's long-
standing record of democratic government. But most importantly, Blainey coined a term
for revisionist attitudes to the past: 'black-armband history' (Blainey, 1993, p. 11).

The term 'black armband history' was broadly applied to any view of history that
certain conservatives in Australia deemed unduly negative. Some versions of black-
armband history were indeed quite simplistic, although no more so than some of the more
triumphal Australian narratives. Other proponents of this revisionist history were more
sophisticated, but were nevertheless placed in the black-armband camp, sometimes by
choice. Henry Reynolds, a leading figure in this debate, never denied the link between the
past and present in his own writing: 'I thought from the beginning of my career that
historical writing was inescapably political – the history of race relations especially so'
(Reynolds, 1999, p. 244). In this political contest over the past, Reynolds's conclusions
adopted an openly partisan position (in opposition to the covert one assumed by earlier
narratives). He stated that 'black-armband historians'

do not feel the need to be correct themselves as much as desiring to correct the
history distorted by several generations of nationalist and self-congratulatory
writing, which had banished the Aborigines from text to melancholy footnote and
thereby expurgated most of the violence and much of the injustice… Black-

armband history is often distressing, but it does enable us to know and understand

the incubus which burdens us all (Reynolds, 1999, p. 258).


It was in response to such a position that critics of 'black-armband' history attempted to re-assert a unitary, anti-pluralist vision of the Australian nation via the re-establishment of a singular and legitimating national narrative.

Some of the intellectual foundations of this response were laid in the mid-1980s. In 1984, conservative philosopher Roger Scruton visited Australia and publicly defended the legitimacy of the occupation of *Terra Australis*. His intervention was significant in that it prefigured the attempt to deny the legitimacy of the past as an area grievance, and then replace the narrative of dispossession with an older narrative concerning 'progress'. For Scruton 'progress' inevitably crushed people under its wheel. 'This is what happens. It would have happened anywhere, whatever the intentions of the original settlers. It couldn't but have happened because of the inevitable fate of one of a weak culture faced with a strong one' (Scruton, 1985, p. 77).

Geoffrey Blainey agreed. A decade after Scruton, Blainey argued that the different technical capacities of the British and the Aborigines were crucial in explaining the fact of British colonisation, even if the consequences of this conquest were unavoidably harsh:


Here were the inhabitants of the land which had just invented the steam engine

meeting people who, making no pottery and working no metals, did not know how to

boil water. Here was an utter contrast in peoples… even with goodwill on both sides

they were incompatible (Blainey, 1994, p. 22).


However, it was the change of government in 1996 which truly began the ossification

of public opinion about the past into a Manichean debate that pitted 'black armbands'

against 'white blindfolds'. John Howard, although economically a neo-liberal, was a

social conservative whose interest in the past was selective and ambivalent. Whilst

encouraging and re-popularising the Anzac legend, he was keen to disassociate himself

and the Australian people from other aspects of the Australian past. In government,

Howard adopted Blainey and Scruton's 'balance sheet' approach to Australian history,

whereby unfortunate episodes in the past could be relativised next to other collective

achievements. 'I do not believe it is fair or accurate to portray Australia's history since

1788 as little more than a disgraceful record of imperialism, exploitation and racism.

Such a portrayal is a gross distortion and deliberately neglects the overall story of great

Australian achievement that is there in our history to be told' (Howard, 2000, p. 90).

But John Howard was not the only politician to adopt Blainey's ideas. In 1997

Senator Pauline Hanson rejected the popular notion that Australia was acquired

peacefully. Hanson argued that 'we took this land by appropriation; we took it because, in

the words of Professor Blainey, the Aborigines could not defend it' (Hanson, 1997, p.

230). Hanson, a former chip shop owner, was the sole parliamentary representative of the

One Nation Party, created in 1996. Hanson's parliamentary career was short-lived, but

significant. Like Blainey, Hanson's underlying concern was for the cohesiveness of the

national community. Therefore her critiques of indigenous sovereignty became bound up

with critiques of multiculturalism and other perceived threats to national unity. She argued that, 'a truly multicultural country can never be strong or united. The world is full of failed and tragic examples, ranging from Ireland to Bosnia to Africa and closer to home, Papua New Guinea' (Hanson, 1997, p. 7). Crucial to Hanson's understanding of the cohesive national community was the denial of indigenous sovereignty in Australia; a sovereignty that, following the *Mabo* decision, was 'spreading like a cancer to attack family homes' (Hanson, 1997, p. 49). In her maiden speech in Parliament, Hanson stated:

> I am fed up with being told 'This is our land'. Well, where the hell do I go? I was born here and so were my parents and children. I will work beside anyone and they will be my equal but I draw the line when told I must pay and continue paying for something that happened over 200 years ago (Hanson, 1997, p. 4).

Outside of parliament, it was former media studies academic, Keith Windschuttle's interventions in the debate which were particularly significant and influential, supported as he was by *Quadrant* and Australia's only national newspaper, *The Australian*. Windshuttle was best known for his critique of the methodology of Aboriginal history, claiming that it was too reliant on oral history and many of the claims about massacres could not be documented. Windshuttle did indeed expose some research based on faulty evidence, but he went further, consequently arguing that 'the notion of sustained "frontier warfare" is fictional' (Windshuttle, 2002, p. 3). He also rejected the notion that genocide in Australia could have taken place.

To compare the intentions of Governor Philip or Lieutenant-Governor Arthur, or any of their successors, to those of Adolf Hitler, is not only conceptually odious but wildly anachronistic. There were no gas chambers in Australia or anything remotely equivalent. The colonial authorities wanted to civilise and modernise the Aborigines, not exterminate them (Windshuttle, 2002, p. 9).

The emotional intensity of Windschuttle's claims were such because he knew that the stakes in this debate were high. At the outset of *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* he argued that 'the debate about Aboriginal history goes far beyond its ostensible subject: it is about the character of the nation and the calibre of the civilisation Britain brought to these shores in 1788' (Windschuttle, 2002, p. 3).

Windschuttle's concerns were underpinned not only by a desire to counter the claims of indigenous sovereignty, but to restore the moral legitimacy of the nation and the wider civilisation from which it came. Although best known for his 'fabrication' thesis, Windschuttle was fundamentally motivated by a desire to prevent the 'break-up of Australia' (Windschuttle, 2000a). Central to Windschuttle's argument was the idea 'that the principle reason massacre stories have been invented and exaggerated over the past two hundred years was to justify the policy of separating Aboriginal people from the European population' (Windschuttle, 2000d, p. 6). Beyond this, Windschuttle claimed he was defending nothing less than 'the legitimacy of the British occupation of the Australian continent and of its commitment to the rule of law and civilised values' (Windschuttle, 2000b, p. 20).

Mark McKenna has demonstrated how such debates about history were not merely an academic exercise or political debate far-removed from Australians' lives (McKenna, 2002, pp. 202-15). McKenna documented the 'culture of forgetting' that pervaded local history and politics in the part of New South Wales in which he lived. He also showed the ways in which differing and un-reconciled versions of the past complicated social relations amongst Australians from the 1960s onwards, but particularly during the 1990s. By the turn of the new century remembering the past in Australia had become, in the words of one Bega Aboriginal woman who had her brother and sister removed to government homes, 'a very hurting thing' (quoted in McKenna, 2002, p. 212). So by the time the centenary of Australia's federation came around, the public debate about its past was characterised by guilt, pain, denial and defensive pride.

**Re-imagining the National Museum**

It was into the heat of this historical and political debate that the National Museum of Australia opened its doors in 2001. As we have seen, for some, indigenous sovereignty and newer understandings of the past threatened the legitimacy and the unity of the Australian nation. For conservatives, the National Museum of Australia held out the possibility of healing a divided nation by presenting the Australian past in a more cohesive and consensual way. But to perform this function it would first have to be removed from the intellectual grip of black-armband history. This debate about the Museum's function fits into John Hutchinson's understandings of the role of so-called

'culture wars' in creating a dynamic yet enduring sense of national identity.  Hutchinson argues that

> we can understand these divisions… as arising out of powerful collective experiences such as state-religious schisms; revolutions or civil wars and colonisations; and religio-national conflicts, whose consequences have been formative and memories of which have been carried by social institutions. Round such 'memories' rival repertoires develop as mobilisers of collective action (Hutchinson, 2005, pp. 87-8).

This much was true in turn-of-the-century Australia. But for some, the National Museum was the institution which should help transcend or even eradicate such 'rival repertoires', thereby strengthening the nation. The means of this transcendence was to shift the debate about history - and the Museum's displays - away from a vision of plurality and towards one where an imposed consensus was paramount (Hansen, 2005).

The Museum, housed in an unconventional building, was designed with three main galleries: Tangled Destinies, dealing with human interactions with the Australian environment; Nation, charting the development of Australian national identity; and First Australians, devoted to indigenous cultures of Australia. In designing the exhibits under these broad themes in the 1990s, the curators, bureaucrats and historical advisors charged with this task were conscious of the Museum's role as a nation-building institution and the need to accommodate new understandings of the Australian past in the design of the

galleries. Anticipating the opening of the Museum, the NMA's director Dawn Casey, argued that

> There can be no better time to reconsider our national narrative, to negotiate our way through the conflicting demands of many stakeholders and explore new possibilities in the interpretation of Australia's history (Casey, 2001b, pp. 6-7).

Casey also revealed something of the expectations that the museum profession had of new museums: 'Increasingly both the museum sector and the public view the role of the museum as a fulcrum for debate and interpretation of a whole range of social and political issues in which objects become just one part in the story of a people, a culture, an event or a symbol' (Casey, 2001a, p. iii). Sophia Milosevic Bijleveld has described the modern museum as a crucial national institution linking personal and collective memory (Bijleveld, 2006). It was this linking function that made the National Museum such a vividly-contested institution. Graeme Davison, advisor to the Museum during installation of the galleries, posed a solution to balancing the tensions between the role of a government-funded national museum presenting a singular narrative and an institution representing the nation's diversity. Davison suggested that 'Rather than suppressing difference by imposing an institutional consensus, might it not be better if national museums recognized that the imagined community that we call the nation is by its very nature plural and in flux?' (Davison, 2001, p. 26).

No, responded the critics, it would not be better at all. Keith Windschuttle quickly paid a visit to the newly opened Museum and had much to say. Unlike the Prime

Minister, Windschuttle did not need to be even slightly diplomatic about his impressions of the NMA. 'The building is full of cryptic symbols for the conference-going architectural *cognoscenti*, but it is a very uncomfortable enclosure for the typical visitor, the poor mug tax-payer who has funded it all' (Windschuttle, 2001, p. 16). More importantly, he was critical of the so-called 'social history' approach taken in presenting Australian history. Describing the NMA as 'a profound intellectual mistake' Windschuttle argued:

> Another problem for social history – and this is one from which the National Museum suffers the most – is lack of coherence.  By abandoning the traditional approach to history based on a narrative of major events and their causes, in favour of equal time for every identifiable sexual and ethnic group, history loses its explanatory power and degenerates into a tasteless blancmange of worthy sentiment (Windschuttle, 2001, p. 16).

Windschuttle's views were indicative of conservative commentators and some Museum Council Members close to the Liberal government, even if, as the NMA's Director Dawn Casey argued, most visitors claimed to have enjoyed their time at the Museum (Casey, 2003, p. 18). However, it was not the one-third of the Museum devoted to indigenous Australia that most irked Windschuttle (the Gallery of First Australians was, he claimed, his favourite part), but the seeming lack of a singular narrative.

It was this criticism which was picked up and developed by the government-sponsored review, delivered in July 2003. When the *Review of the National Museum of*

*Australia Its Exhibitions and Public Programs* (hereafter *Review*) was released, it again exhibited the growing concern about fragmentation and legitimacy on the right of Australia's political spectrum. In reflecting on the vision of the NMA, the authors of the *Review* understood the need to 'give some sense of the diversity of views, customs and beliefs that occupy the shared cultural space that is modern Australia', but noted that this risked 'presenting an assembly of ill-coordinated fragments, merely serving to confuse the visitor' (Carroll et al, 2003, p. 7). One of the main criticisms leveled by the *Review* was that the NMA failed to develop compelling narratives (Carroll et al, 2003, p. 32). This conclusion was taken up by organisations such as the *Australian* newspaper, which concluded that 'primary themes in the nation's history are absent from the National Museum of Australia, which has failed to adequately tell the story of the country' (*The Australian*, 16 July 2003).

On the issue of settler-indigenous conflict the *Review* steered a central path. The *Review* acknowledged the difficulty of presenting 'darker episodes of Australian history', but said that the Museum must do so to help create a mature citizenry. In this regard, the NMA was contrasted with another Canberra-based institution, the Australian War Memorial, although it admitted that the Memorial's task was somewhat easier: 'The Australian War memorial gains *gravitas* through recalling tragedy - its task is much easier here, in that tragedy is supportive of national mythology, not at odds with it' (Carroll et al, 2003, p. 10). Most significantly, the *Review* found that there was no 'systematic bias' towards black-armband history or a left-learning interpretation of the past, but that this existed only in 'pockets' that could be easily rectified (Carroll et al, 2003, pp. 36-5). In fact, like Windschuttle, the *Review* praised the Gallery of First

Australians as one of the better parts of the Museum (Carroll et al, 2003, p. 20). What this seemed to suggest was not that the issue of indigenous history itself that irritated the Museum's critics, but that it was the fragmentary and allegedly de-legitimising recounting of the national past that was cause for most concern.

Another of the main issues which concerned the Review Panel related to the perceived lack of gravity and solemnity accorded to the presentation of Australian history. This in part rested on a misunderstanding of Benedict Anderson's ideas as they were applied to the Nation Gallery of the Museum. Anderson's notion of 'the imagined political community' had indeed be influential when conceiving the layout of the Gallery, which progressed from imagining and mapping the continent of *Terra Australis*, to creating a political community, to quotidian ways of perceiving Australian-ness. However, the Review Panel confused Anderson's concept of 'imagined' with 'imaginary' in attempting to counter a perceived fragmentation of the national story:

> The Panel is inclined to read more consensus than plurality at the core of that
> national collective conscience. The concept of 'imagined communities', which is
> drawn from Benedict Anderson's book of that title, implies that that the national
> character is a sort of fictitious construct, fluid and subject to rapid change, and
> therefore ephemeral (Carroll et al, 2003, p. 9).

This passage in the *Review* continued:

This view underestimates the deeper continuities in culture ─ for instance the degree to which the portrait of the courageous warrior hero developed in Homer's *Iliad* three millennia ago has shaped later images and stories, including, in the twentieth century, both the Australian Anzac legend and American Western film genre (Carroll et al, 2003, p. 9).

This link between the Australian nation and classical European and Western civilisation was important. By explicitly linking Australian identity to narratives and concepts wider than the nation alone, 'European' or 'Western Civilisation' provided a greater depth to the legitimacy of settler Australia.

Such concerns guided the Chair of the Museum's Review Panel, sociologist John Carroll, in making recommendations about the NMA's presentation of history. The *Review* was overall very positive about the National Museum, given that it was only two years since it had opened. But the *Review* argued strongly that the Museum should work to present visitors with a (re)integrating story, in other words a 'compelling narrative' (Carroll et al, 2003, p. 7). This overall recommendation was interesting in light of Carroll's previous works on Australian nationalism, collective guilt and the role and decline of narrative in the Western world. The loss of a compelling story lies at the heart of Carroll's work dating back to the 1980s.

Writing in 1982, Carroll addressed the problem of authority in new nations. 'New nations, like new organisations, have great difficulty establishing rites that carry much authority, for such things depend in part on time – on tradition' (Carroll, 1982, p. 218). So for Carroll, any nation - let alone Australia - would never be enough to solve this

crisis of authority, although Western Civilisation could. Here he began to link symbols of

Australian identity with classical European civilisation: 'There is something of the grand

drama and ethos of *The Iliad* in Australian Rules Football at its best' (Carroll, 1982, p.

219). But coupled with this lack of tradition-derived authority was a growing pessimism

about the role of culture in general and Australian culture in particular. A crippling sense

of guilt was eroding the very foundations of Western Civilisation. 'At the close of the

second millennium the West is lost in a crisis of meaning. Like a rudderless ship it

pitches and rolls in the swell of existence' (Carroll, 1998, p. 1). The thrust of Carroll's

argument was that Western societies were fragmented, guilt-ridden and lost. Australia

was no exception; and given the collective guilt that many historians and politicians were

allegedly encouraging, this problem was particularly acute in Australia.

But although the diagnosis was bleak, the prognosis was sunny. The answer to

Australia's (and the West's) existential anxieties lay in the re-establishment of a cohesive

and cohering narrative: 'Without the deep structure of archetypal story, life has no

meaning' (Carroll, 2001, p. 9). In public lectures, books and the *Review*, Carroll stressed

the need for more grand narratives, to re-build a sense of unity and consensus that had

been lost. 'Of course, we have to recover the Dreaming. Of course, we have to recover

the Stories, connect our everyday lives into them, so their *pneuma* may overwhelm our

ordinary coffee time' (Carroll, 2001, p. 214). Guilt then, had redemptive qualities. In this

way, one battle in the overall defence of the Australian nation was fought out at the

National Museum of Australia.

Fittingly, for a debate about history that initially had so much to do with contested

land ownership, it was the land itself which became the symbol of unity and redemption.

Here, according to Carroll, was a subject which provided scope for real drama; of man and woman pitted against creation: 'Drought, bushfire, blasting heat, hurricane, and the sheer monumental vastness of nature, of oceans, cliffs, deserts, mountains, and the sky itself – much larger and brighter than in Europe – will always make a man feel a nobody on this continent' (Carroll, 1982, p. 224). The theme of land also provided an outlet and explanation for expressions of Australia distinctiveness and grandeur beyond the Vegemite jars, Hill's Hoist washing lines and Victa lawnmowers of the Nation Gallery's exploration of everyday Australian symbols:

> Of all the continents of the world, Australia's history is unique - its mobility and varied liaisons have shaped the development of its unusual fauna and flora, the productivity of its land, and the presence of its vast mineral resource base. These qualities have, in turn, influenced the national character, from the time the humans first set foot here (Carroll et al, 2003, p. 31).

Furthermore, the *Review* called for a greater development of this theme of human interaction with the Australian environment, a theme which it acknowledged was already well covered in the Museum. In particular, the *Review* argued that it was the concept of 'land' running through all the Galleries that should 'provide a macro-theme interlinking the permanent exhibitions' (Carroll et al, 2003, p. 32). The shared land of the Australian continent would link Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians and link the tradition-starved settler Australians with the continuing cultures of their Aboriginal predecessors and the deep time of the continent itself. By locating the essence of Australia's

distinctiveness in its land, the *Review* attempted to create the Museum as a place of reconciliation; reconciling Australian humans with their occupancy of the continent and soothing their existential doubts whilst providing a fun day out: 'The visitor, on exiting, feels awed and stunned, and reflective; more engaged than ever before by the Australian story; better understanding some of its main themes and traits, and the characteristics of the people; more respectful and curious about the past, and more thoughtful about the future. The visitor feels impelled to tell others: "You have to go there!"' (Carroll et al, 2003, p. 71).

**Conclusion**

The 'history wars' and the debate about the style and content of the National Museum of Australia illustrate the importance of history and the past to our understanding of nationalism. But although these debates could be understood as contests between the supporters of one culture versus another, it was the contest over the legitimacy of the nation which was paramount. In Australia, debates over indigenous-settler relations posed the greatest threat to the unity and legitimacy of the present-day Australian nation. It was this threat to unity that the Museum Review sought to overcome, in part by recommending a more cohesive narrative when telling the national story and in part by connecting symbols of the Australian nation with grander themes of European and Western Civilisation. The intended result was a national institution dedicated to displaying 'the Australian Story' and providing visitors with a cohesive narrative in which the land of Australia itself finally gave a sense of belonging for *all* the

humans sharing it. But in February 2008, even as the *Review's* recommendations were being interpreted and implemented, the National Museum was one of the locations around the nation that screened live the new Prime Minister's apology to the 'Stolen Generations'. Given the conservative adherence to the unity and legitimacy of Australia, Labour leader Kevin Rudd's apology arguably did more to heal the divisions of the past than the *Review* could have hoped for – or, more importantly, conceived of.

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