

1. An occasional newsletter of the History Program, RSSS

## Public profile — The National Museum of Australia Review

*Ann McGrath*

The Report of the Review of the National Museum of Australia, which opened in March 2001, was released on July 15<sup>th</sup> 2003. The review team was led by Dr John Carroll, a sociologist of Latrobe University.

Various historians have made active input into the Review, which had been called for by the Museum's Council and administered by the Commonwealth Government. Numerous historians lodged submissions. The Review Committee invited some leading historians to discuss their submissions face to face, including the History Program's Dr Tom Griffiths. Recent Visiting Scholar Professor Jill Roe and another recent visitor Professor David Carment, President of the Australian Historical Association were also called to address the Review Committee. Tom Griffiths and RSSS Adjunct Professor Graeme Davison are cited in the Review's report.

Shortly after the report was released, I was interviewed by ABC TV's *Stateline* and I then wrote an opinion piece on the topic in the *Sydney Morning Herald* 17/7/03 which was entitled 'Diversity

Lost in Boy's Own History', a version of which was published in *The Age* on 18/7/03. Points made included concern about the Committee's expertise and my fear that 'great white bloke history' was to dominate the Museum, especially given its call for 'grand narratives' and its suggestions of modules dealing with a 'Captain Cook and cricket caps' history. The Review argued for opening sequences highlighting the Captain Cook discovery narrative in Circa (the multimedia introduction to the Museum's galleries), and an installation about the 1961 Joe Solomon cricket cap incident in their proposed replacement for the Horizons gallery on the Peopling of Australia. Their report also argued for the representation of a more homogeneous story of nation, and, rather disturbingly, implied that Captain Cook and *terra nullius* did not belong together.

Although I received a lot of supportive emails, my intervention was taken as 'not quite cricket' by some people, leading to a lively newspaper debate, including

some letters to the *SMH* editor subtitled 'Validity Lost in Girl's Own Vitriol', illustrated by a cartoon which featured a family admiring a cricketer exhibit. The young girl asks her parents 'Where were the women in Australian History?'. Her mother replies: 'Ironing the cricket whites'. A set of letters to the editor in response were entitled 'A Credible Scholar', with contributions from Professor Carment and our regular seminar participant and past Visiting Scholar, Dr Linda Young. A museum expert of the University of Canberra, Linda's well-informed opinion piece on the Review had been published by *The Canberra Times*. On the 19<sup>th</sup> July, the *Sydney Morning Herald's* editorial referred to the debate, especially the coinage 'great white blokes' version of Australian history.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> August, the Friends of the National Museum of Australia hosted a discussion of the Review's Report. It was addressed by NMA Director Dawn Casey and invited speakers included Emeritus Professor John Mulvaney, Dr Linda Young and myself. It appears that the Council of the NMA may well see the Review's report as a blueprint for future exhibition planning and design. This would seriously jeopardize the intellectual quality and integrity of the NMA's role as a national museum, especially if it is to retain scholarly authority and prestige.



*Gordon Briscoe, Ani Fox and Ann McGrath during Ani's recent visit to the History Program*

This meeting was also attended by History program colleagues Professor Desley Deacon, Dr Gordon Briscoe and Ani Fox, a visiting American student investigating a potential Indigenous history project, currently a student of the University of Hawaii at Honolulu. (Dr Briscoe hosted him on a two day introduction to the key Canberra locales for indigenous historical research and a tour of the ANU).

More recently, Tom Griffiths wrote a pertinent letter to the editor of the *Canberra Times* on the 22/8/03 noting that the Council (which called for the above Review) lacked necessary expertise and that the Council itself should be reviewed. The Council is weak on representation by the historical profession and some members are perceived to be political appointments and antagonistic to the NMA. Just two weeks ago, the government announced two new appointments to the NMA Council, one of whom is an historian, Dr John Hirst from Latrobe University.

## New doctoral scholars

Maxine Pitts, Wendy Way and Joy McCann have joined the History Program this year as doctoral scholars. Maxine's book, *Crime, Corruption and Capacity in Papua New Guinea*, was published last year. Wendy recently edited a foreign policy document collection entitled *Australia and the Indonesian Incorporation of Portuguese East Timor 1974-76*. And Joy McCann has this year contributed to an exhibition and catalogue coordinated by Mandy Martin and entitled *The Lachlan: Blue Gold*, launched in June.

### Maxine Pitts writes:

'Hi All! I've been a PhD Candidate since February this year under the supervision of Tom Griffiths. After some



absorption of RSSS culture and many morning teas with some very fine scholars, and many hours in the National Archives and the Queensland State Archives, I'm out on fieldwork in Far North Queensland, based in the magical village of Yungaburra which also happens to be my home.

My research topic is: 'Historical Consciousness and Multiculturalism in Far North Queensland: An historical and sociological study of the experiences and impacts of difference in regional Australia'. It's a huge canvas - and I'm leaving it that way as there are so many trails I can follow within it. The geographical area of my study is urban and rural environments between Innisfail and Mossman along the coast and within an arc up through the Atherton Tablelands. The study period is early non-indigenous settlement to the present. My analysis focuses on the experiences of historical events by various cultural groups, as well as government legislation, policy and impacts relating to Aborigines and non-Anglo/Northern European immigrants and refugees, and the stories that interpretive historical displays tell and don't tell. My initial fieldwork has included observation of, and participation in, community events, the documentation of historical displays in museums, on monuments and at cultural heritage sites, and interviews with people of different ethnicity, gender and age. All up, the experiences have been very rewarding and my own perception of what history is, and how it can be portrayed more inclusively, is being broadened hugely. I look forward to sharing my initial findings with you at a History Seminar to be held on October 16, 2003.'

**Wendy Way** joined the program in February 2003. She finds the subject of her biography, F.L. McDougall, difficult to describe in a few words. He was at times, and often all at once, a trade lobbyist, 'economic adviser' at Australia House London, advocate of organised marketing for primary products, London liaison officer of the newly created CSIR[O], imperial activist, representative of Australia on many imperial and international bodies. McDougall is probably best remembered in the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, where he is honoured as a founding father. This study grew from

Wendy's work in the unit publishing historical documents in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Her first task there was to edit 'a big red book' comprising McDougall's letters to his Prime Minister, S.M. Bruce, in the 1920s, published as *Letters from 'a Secret Service Agent'*. She was responsible for several other volumes of the series *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy 1937-1949*, and two volumes of the new post-1949 series. Her last production was another 'big red book': *The Indonesian Incorporation of Portuguese East Timor 1974-1976* (mentioned above).

**Joy McCann** works at the Australian Heritage Commission and has transferred from the University of Canberra to complete her study of 'The unsettled country: landscape, history and change in the Australian wheatbelt'. The original impetus for this work, which focuses on the Lachlan Valley in NSW, was a SPIRT proposal by the University of Canberra and the Australian Heritage Commission to examine the implications of global economic changes and industry restructuring on the physical heritage of rural Australia. These themes are still embedded in Joy's work, although she is now also considering the cultural dimensions of ecological change and finds herself writing an account of the environmental transformation of a particular Australian region. Joy has a long-standing interest in rural cultural landscapes and has published on the subject, as well as writing a book (with Matthew Churchward) on *Victorian Steampower: An illustrated social history* (1994) and more recently on *A lot in store: celebrating our shopping heritage* (2002).

## Indigenous land management workshop

Several History Program members participated this month (2 September) in a day-long workshop on Indigenous Management in National Parks. The event followed the evening launch at the National Museum of Australia (attended by about 80 people) of the books, *South African National Parks: A Celebration* (co-edited by Jane Carruthers), and *Indigenous Kinship with the Natural World in NSW*, by Deborah Rose, Diana James and Christine Watson. Ingereth Macfarlane, Tom Griffiths, Darrell Lewis, Jane Carruthers and Brigid Hains attended the day-time meeting along with Aboriginal people from western NSW, Uluru and Cape York. The event was organised by Deborah Rose and Libby Robin at CRES, as part of a continuing program to bring Aboriginal teachers to the ANU campus. The workshop also included senior National Parks staff from NSW. The meeting assessed the progress and challenges of the joint management process, in particular the role of history, politics, community and government in the handback currently being negotiated at Mt Grenfell near Cobar, NSW.

## Ernest Scott History Prize

Rebe Taylor's book *Unearthed. The Aboriginal Tasmanians of Kangaroo Island* has been shortlisted for the Ernest Scott History prize. The winner will be announced at the AHA conference in Mildura on 28 September.

The next edition of *Footnotes* will feature a report from Rebe on her recent adventures at the Melbourne Writers' Festival.