

The “New” Cultural Wars: “Constructing” the National Museum of Australia

Dr Greg McCarthy

Politics Discipline, School of History and Politics, University of Adelaide,

Adelaide 5005

Refereed paper presented to the

Australasian Political Studies Association Conference

University of Adelaide

29 September – 1 October 2004

Introduction

The argument of this paper is that the controversy over the National Museum of Australia (NMA) is best considered in terms of a “new” cultural war. The paper contends that the cultural wars in Australia took on a new phase with the election of the Howard government in 1996. That is, while in Opposition, John Howard had asserted a narrow version of Australian identity, tied to a settler modernist version of history. Howard’s ideological construction remained within a plurality of views while he was in Opposition, however, once in power Howard set about constructing Australia to match his cultural predilections. Howard sought to displace pluralistic versions of Australian identity and history with his old-fashioned notion of the supremacy of Anglo-Saxon culture and Australia as a march of modernist progress. The case study in this paper on the NMA seeks to elucidate how the new cultural war, backed by political power, had profound consequences for those who asserted a pluralist interpretation of Australian history within the NMA. The government sought to construct the NMA in terms of Australia being an example of settler progress. The paper shows how it was not the government’s ideological victory but naked power that constructed the NMA in the government’s triumphalist historical vision.

Howard and the “new” Cultural War

This section leads the reader through Prime Howard’s particular belief system showing how it is unreflexive but dangerous when backed by power politics (Brett, 2003, p.4 see also Barnes, 2003, p.122). In her acute appraisal of John Howard, Judith Brett observes that his rhetoric against cultural elites is not just party-political manoeuvring rather it is based on a deep-seated personal belief (Brett, 2003, p. 4). According to Brett, Howard has not shown any deep interests in the academic debates over Australian history or culture but developed his beliefs through his family and political experience:

It is not that he wants to go back, but that he legitimates his beliefs, both to himself and to others, in terms of his own experience rather than in terms of more abstract systems of cultural and social knowledge (Brett, 2003, p. 7).

Howard supports his beliefs with power politics. As Pamela Williams notes, from the very point of his electoral victory in 1996, Howard has appointed “friends and mates” to important cultural boards and quangos (*Australian Financial Review*, 16 July 2004). Moreover, she comments, “In the field of ideas and Australian history, the government has been at particular pains to pursue appointments with a more conservative bent” (*Australian Financial Review*, 16 July 2004). She writes, “this is Howard’s empire, and the men and women appointed to positions of power and influence across the country form a conservative river as deep as it is wide” (*Australian Financial Review*, 16 July 2004). She contends that the magnitude of Howard’s political appointments is far greater than that of any other previous Australian government (*Australian Financial Review*, 16 July 2004).

James Curran makes a similar observation. Curran argues that Howard’s acts of retribution were against party-political foes (such as Hawke and Keating), and also against old-allies like Malcolm Fraser and the small -l- liberals within the Liberal Party but his over-all intentions were to construct the future not relive past battles (Curran, 2004,p. 251). Curran, among others, notes that Howard was central to the transformation of the Liberal Party of Australia from a semi-pluralist organisation to a single-voice social conservative party (Curran, 2004, p. 251; Barnes, 2003, p. 221). Howard was ruthless in asserting his authority over the party and in removing or silencing alternative points of view from that of his own. The acquiescence by small-l liberals was due in part to the thirteen years in opposition but in part it was due to

Howard and like-minded conservatives assiduously working to control the party's federal and state organisations (therein the pre-selection process).

Curran argues that Howard's conservatism had deep personal roots. At the epicentre of Howard's cultural beliefs is the primacy of the "digger" legend, forged at Gallipoli and on the Western Front - where both his grandfather and father fought (Curran, 2004, p. 244). Once in office, Howard had the power to conflate his family history with the official history of Australia. Furthermore, he sought to take this process of affirmation to the academy. In an address to the young Liberals he called on them to become "political warriors..to win back ideas and history", especially within the universities (Howard cited in Curran, 2004, p. 256).

Unlike the Liberal Party, the academy still remained an autonomous institution and was unreceptive to a single version of history. However, there were forces in society highly receptive to the call for a new cultural war. According to Barnes, the most influential institutions that responded to Howard's new cultural struggles were right-wing think tanks. For them it was the opportunity to move from the periphery to the centre of political debate. Barnes notes that the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA), the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) and the conservatives associated with the journal *Quadrant* were quick to offer support to Howard's new cultural agenda (Barnes, 2003, p. 122). Barnes observes that the recruits from these institutions were placed in prominent positions in Australia's cultural institutions. For example, Ron Brunton from the IPA was appointed to the ABC board (replacing

the 'political appointee' Michael Kroger) and Judith Sloan from the CIS was made deputy chair of the ABC.

In Margo Kingston's opinion, the IPA became a critical source of advice to the Howard government. She writes that the IPA has "close ties to Howard's government, acting as Howard's attack dog in his anti-ABC, anti-Stolen Generation and welfare privatisation agendas" (Kingston, 2004, p.283). Moreover, she argues the IPA and CIS became critical institutions covertly shaping the government's cultural and welfare agendas. For Kingston, their collective ideas have a distinctive American flavour, with a stress on the free market, individualism and an unquestioning preference for the private sector over public institutions. Moreover, this shift in policy direction has occurred in a period where the media was either compliant with the government or an active participant in the change of policy direction (Kingston, 2004, p. 283). In contrast, institutions (e.g. Australian Conservation Council, Australian Council of Social Service) that sought to challenge this new hegemony were threatened by the government with the withdrawal of public funding.

The "new" Cultural War

Kingston who had voted for Howard in 1996, was taken by surprise when he reneged on his promise to govern for all. She argues that Howard stealth-fully moved to stifle pluralism in society. For her, this authoritarian form of government had reminiscent of President Reagan's attack on "liberalism" and his social conservative agenda (Kingston, 2004, p. 286). According to Kingston, Howard was not so much positioning his cultural perspectives as one against others but silencing alternative views, just as he had within the Liberal Party.

In brief, Howard's tactics in government were distinctly different from the period in Opposition. For instance, when he became leader of the Opposition, Howard lampooned "political correctness" as a means of challenging the rights agenda, emanating from the social movements (McKenzie Wark, 1997, p. 258). The 1996 victory took this debate from lampooning to a new level, where there was the strident assertion of neo-conservatism as an unquestioning truth. Howard found he had solid allies in the media, all too ready to back the narrowing of political debate. The most often cited journalists who readily supported the new hegemony being Piers Ackerman, Andrew Bolt, Frank Devine and Angela Shanahan

While McKenzie Wark and Kingston, regard Howard's new cultural war as inspired by American politics, Curran considers Howard's views as typical of British conservatism under Margaret Thatcher (Curran, 2004, p. 241). Paradoxically, this form of conservatism was quite radical in its transformation of traditional institutions, such as the public service, and disdainful of academic critics (dubbed the "chattering classes"). It was, moreover, a conservatism that was hostile to any public criticism of the government.

When in Opposition, Howard had disguised his intentions by promoting an agenda of Australia being "relaxed and comfortable". When in government this rhetoric of comfortableness was soon articulated as the unquestioned support for Anglo-Saxon heritage and culture, (expressed in terms of "the things that bring us together") and dismissive of critics of the government's line. In this light, we can now reinterpret,

Howard's support of Geoffrey Blainey's attack on the "blackarm band" version of history as a first step in closing off debate (Curran, 2004, p. 250). For example, in Opposition, Howard used Blainey's historical perspective as a bulwark against that of Manning Clark but once in government, Howard asserted a much more strident view on Australian history as a celebratory march of progress.

Nevertheless, Howard's use of history to give gravity to his new cultural war did not go unchallenged. The most popular response coming from Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, in their book *History Wars*. While correct in seeing that the history wars began in the 1980s over the place of Aboriginal people in the Bicentenary, Macintyre and Clark tend to see the cultural wars as an evolving process rather than as shifting emphasis when there was a change in government. However, they do regard what began as a battle of abstract ideas becoming more concrete when it related to the NMA.

Before moving on to the NMA, a brief summary is in order. What has been argued so far is that while in Opposition, Howard had under-mined democracy within the Liberal Party and established a long-term plan to construct Australian culture around a conservative agenda, which displaced the previous Liberal belief in pluralism. When elected the Howard government set about asserting this authoritarian agenda by politicising the public service, asserting control over the boards of cultural institutions and then seeking to control dissident voices in civil society. In this light, the campaign against the NMA was but another example of an

assertion of government power to reshape Australian culture by authoritarian means.

“Constructing” the National Museum of Australia in the “New” Cultural Wars

Macintyre and Clark argue that the attack on the NMA was more vitriolic than the previous phase of the cultural war. The assault on the NMA was not merely criticising other versions of history, but the affirmation of only one point of view, against the professional advice of the curators. They write that:

Here the object was to impose control on a public institution, to override the professional judgement of its staff and to root out exhibitions that challenged the critic’s preferred version of history. This was no longer a campaign against political correctness, it was an imposition of affirmative orthodoxy (Macintyre and Clark, 2003, pp.197-198).

What this paper has argued, however, is that the assault on the NMA was typical of the Howard government. What was different was that it became public.

The opportunity for Howard to set his agenda for the museum was created by

Keating’s dismissive attitude to such an endeavour when he was Prime Minister.

Keating was adamant that he did not want “another bloody great mausoleum by the

lake” (Watson, 2002, p. 134). By the time Keating could be persuaded to build a

museum his administration was defeated at the polls. By contrast, Howard

perceived the Museum as a centrepiece for the celebration of Federation. Soon after

his election in 1996, Howard gave the go ahead for the museum, to be called the

National Museum of Australia to be built in Canberra on the site of an old hospital (Young, p. 2001).

Howard appointed to its board David Barnett, who had co-written (with Pru Goward) a hagiography of their friend John Howard. He also appointed Christopher Pearson, who had been his speechwriter, to the board. The board's chair was Tony Staley; a former Federal President of the Liberal Party who had played a prominent role in personally attacking Paul Keating both during and after his prime ministerial term in office. These three men had no direct experience in museums or in museum studies but were noted for their closeness to Howard's ideological views.

Nevertheless, the board was diverse enough to challenge their narrow perspective and supported the curators' decisions to ensure that the museum presented pluralistic interpretations of Australian history.

While Howard was keen to build a new museum as a key symbol of Federation, he chose the least expensive option, which, in turn had a profound effect on what exhibits could be collected and on the design of the building (Lundy, 5 December, 2003). The unforeseen consequences of the budget restraints were that the exhibitions tended too restrict what could be collected and consequently the points of views that could be displayed. Moreover, the opening of the Museum was to occur as close as was possible to commemorate Federation, which also affected the curatorial practices as everything was driven by the non-negotiable deadline.

As the exhibits began to be collected, the pluralistic interpretation of history became clearly apparent to the conservatives on the board. That is, those who had conducted scholarly research on Australian history, geography, anthropology and geology. who gave advice to the fledgling museum, and the curators hired to develop the exhibition, and the architects and designers employed to shape its environment, were opposed to the single-minded modernist version of history as asserted by Howard in his many speeches (Johnson, 2000).

It was Barnett who took up the fight against pluralism. He wrote a memo to Staley claiming that the NMA was developing a false image of the past, he said its presentation of Australian history was “claptrap” and influenced by “Marxist rubbish” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 June 2003). The crux of Barnett’s attack on the Museum was that the assembled exhibition displayed a left-leaning bias. For him it celebrated victims and not heroes. He wanted prominence given to the men who built Australia, citing the mining magnate Hugh Morgan and the union antagonist Chris Corrigan (Macintyre and Clark, 2003, p.192). Moreover, Barnett said in his letter to Staley that he strongly objected to the exhibit on the Stolen Generation as he regarded it as a “victim episode” shaped by a “black armband” view of history (Macintyre and Clark, 2003, p. 192).

Following the NMA’s grand opening, on 11 March 2001, the supporters of Howard’s cultural agenda launched a frontal attack on the exhibitions. They argued the curators and architects had duped Howard. For instance, Miranda Devine in the *Daily Telegraph* wrote that:

It's not nice to pour scorn on other people's hard work, especially when \$155 million of taxpayers' money went into it. But the underlying message of the National Museum of Australia, opened yesterday in Canberra by the Prime Minister, is one of sneering ridicule for white Australia...It is a mystery how such a swifty was pulled on John Howard and his hand-appointed Council (Devine, 12 March 2001)

Likewise Angela Shanahan wrote in the *Australian* that the NMA was founded on the "new orthodoxy of white middle-class guilt" (*Australian*, 12 March 2001).

Keith Windschuttle subsequently took up the attack on the NMA in the pages of *Quadrant* (Windschuttle, 2001, pp.11-29). The nub of Windschuttle's criticism was that the NMA did not celebrate white Australian settler memory. He particularly took umbrage at the charge of colonial genocide (Windschuttle, in Attwood and Foster, 2003 p. 99); a view developed at length in his book, 2002). Windschuttle criticises the Museum for its social history approach, which he called one of "political correctness" (Windschuttle, 2001, p.16). Adding that the NMA was a project in "people's history" that displaced the traditional museum system of scientific curiosity for one that is "in favour of equal time for every identifiable sexual and ethnic group" (Windschuttle, 2001,p.16). He concluded:

The National Museum is a profound intellectual mistake as well as a great waste of public money. Indeed, the museum is already a museum piece

itself an expensive relic to postmodern theory. It is a repository of nothing more than the intellectual poverty of the tertiary-educated middleclass of the post-Vietnam era (Windschuttle, 2001, p.19).

In a rejoinder to Windschuttle in *Quadrant*, Gary Morgan, Executive Director of the Western Australian Museum argued that while the old scientific system has its place it is by no means the only model for contemporary museums. He argues that in essence what Windschuttle was espousing for the NMA was basically “history written by the victor” (Morgan, 2002, p.7). He noted that Windschuttle was strong on opinion but lacking in “supporting evidence” (Morgan, 2002,p. 13). Adding that, Windschuttle assumes he knows what a proper museum is and it is one that he likes. Such prejudice, Morgan notes is not only “naïve” but is “frightening” (Morgan, 2002,p.16).

Emboldened by the conservative criticisms of the museum, Barnett leaked his internal complaints to the press. This action fuelled the public debate that in turn prompted Chairman Staley to seek a review of the museum. He asked Geoffrey Blainey whether he would conduct an overview of the exhibitions. Blainey was over-committed and recommended respected Monash historian Professor Graeme Davidson. As an aside, Blainey would have known that Davidson did not share Howard’s linear version of history yet was ready to promote him to the board based on Davidson’s expertise in museum studies.

In March 2002, Davidson presented to Staley his assessment of the complaints made by Barnett. Davidson's report contended that the museum was living up to its pluralist charter of presenting contemporary concerns in a lively manner, which did not avoid controversial issues but did ensure they were supported by scholarly research. Davidson then turned a political barb at Barnett's complaints, saying, "after careful reviewing them, I found that almost none of his [Barnett's] criticisms could be supported by reputable scholarship" (*Age*, 12 December 2002). Given the lack of evidence supporting Barnett's claim, Davidson asked the rhetorical question as to whether the board member was merely asserting that the NMA should be a conduit for the views of the [Howard] government of the day (Macintyre and Clark, 2003, 194).

For his part, Davidson regarded the criticisms of the NMA as basically politically motivated:

Even before the museum opened early last year, it had come under attack. Conservative critics of the museum such as *Quadrant's* Keith Windschuttle, members of its council such as David Barnett and Christopher Pearson and their allies in the press, such as Angela Shanahan and Piers Ackerman, have directed a continuous barrage of fire at the historical interpretations in the museum's galleries. Even in the narrowest and most obvious sense these debates are political debates ..their hostility to the museum's interpretation of contact history is inseparable from the government's stance on issues of Aboriginal reconciliation, native title, stolen children and the like. They in

turn portray the museum's curators and historical advisors as members of the 'new class', pushing their own radical 'post-modernist' political agenda against the will of the silent majority of Australians whose taxes they are spending (Davidson, 2002).

Carroll Inquiry

If those on the board and the curators who had promoted pluralism, thought that the issue had been resolved in their favour they were soon to be disappointed. The Davidson Report inflamed Howard's supporters on the board. Pearson and Barnett used their contacts within Prime Minister and Cabinet to press for further action (see Barnett, 12 December, 2003). In an effort to placate the critics, Staley appointed a review committee, comprising Richard Longes (Deputy Chair of the investment company Investec Australia); the controversial curator of the South Australian museum, Philip Jones, who was recommended by his close friend Christopher Pearson (Simons, 2003) and the Monash palaeobiologist Patricia Vickers. At its head was La Trobe University sociologist John Carroll. Carroll was an eclectic conservative, critical of neo-liberal economics but supportive of Howard's social-conservatism. The glaringly obvious omission from the Committee was a historian. On this lacuna, Macintyre and Clark contend that Geoffrey Blainey declined the offer and the prominent conservative historian John Hirst was vetoed because of his public support for a republic (Macintyre and Clark, 2003, 197). According to Macintyre and Clark, the Committee was hand picked by Arts Minister Rod Kemp,

to give a neo-conservative critique of the museum (Macintyre and Clark, 2003, p.196).

When it was released to the public on 18 July 2003, the Carroll Report pleased no one. Despite the Committee being strongly influenced by conservative members its report was not opposed to the contemporary approach taken by the museum or its exploration of contentious issues. It was, nevertheless, critical that the museum had not given adequate stress to the modernist themes of exploration, scientific endeavour and sporting heroes. Carroll, like Windschuttle, called for a grand Enlightenment narrative, which he saw should be at “the core of the national conscience”; elevating heroic deeds over everyday life (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 December 2003). Ironically, Phillip Jones, wrote a dissenting addendum saying the final Report had swung too far towards the conservative curatorial point of view. Jones commented that, “The Review is, in a way, incoherent..I felt the final shape was a little different to the substance of our discussions as a group. At the very moment it crystallised in a very conservative and unnecessary way” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 December 2003).

Aboriginal Gallery

Given Carroll’s conservatism, it was anticipated that the Report would fully support Barnett’s accusation that the Aboriginal galleries contained systemic bias (*Age*, 16 July 2003). Surprisingly, the Carroll Report begged to differ. It recorded that there was “overwhelming consensus about the positive achievements of First

Australians..This gallery serves as a model for much that should be aimed at in some other parts of the NMA" (Carroll Report 18 July 2003)." In regard to the Aboriginal gallery, the Report notes that a number of submissions charged the NMA

..with a systematic political bias - some were carefully argued. In a nutshell, they contend that the Museum glamorises Aboriginal life to the point of caricature, contrasting with a one-sided denigration of European culture.. The Panel carefully examined these charges and came to the conclusion that political or cultural bias is not a systemic problem at the NMA. Rather it exists in pockets, which may be fairly easily remedied (Carroll Report, 18 July 2004, Section 2, p.4).

The Report supported the historical premise that Australia could be celebrated in terms of a linear sense of progress, but tempered this position by noting that certain "darker historic episodes" should be covered so as to open up the "possibility of collective self-accounting" (Carroll, 2003, Section 2, p.2). It was critical of the museum for not presenting artefacts that make an "authentic connection" between what is exhibited and specific examples of these dark episodes. In a clear concession to Windschuttle, the Report recommended that all artefacts have to have an authentic link to the historic record of specific "frontier collisions" rather than Aboriginal "oral" accounts of such events or illustrative depictions (Carroll, 2003, Section 2, p.3). The Report asserts the need for certain principles in dealing with these "collisions" so that the exhibit is "not just of two monolithic 'peoples' (which

will feed notions of racism) but of two world views, two systems of culture, and of justice..."(Carroll, 2003,Section 2, p.3). Adding the rider that the Museum's approach "should be governed by scholarship and space should be given to different schools of credible thought" (Carroll, 2003, Section 2, p.3).

In brief, the Report uses the term frontier collision rather than frontier wars. Metaphorically speaking a collision implies a mere bump on the highway of civilisation. Implicit in this terminology is the view that the collision was not a systemic displacement of Aboriginal people from their land or in the case of the "stolen generation" from their families (i.e. not racism). It was a history of mere sporadic violence not a war over land and culture. Again this is a position close to that of Windschuttle, who asserts that the clashes were criminal and not racially based (Windschuttle, 2003). The Report's denial of the frontier wars, so detailed in academic histories, indicates a symbolic fear of illegitimacy by those adhering to the march of civilisation version of history.

Ann Curthoys makes a similar point when she wrote that:

The legacy of the colonial past is a continuing fear of illegitimacy, and therefore an inability to develop the kind of pluralist inclusive account of the past that might form the basis for a coherent national community.

Debates over the numbers killed on the frontiers (and these are important debates to have) are for all these reasons not simply debates about numbers, or about empiricist versus postmodernist or Marxist or any

other philosophy of history. They are, inevitably, no less than debates about the moral basis of British settlement in the past, and of Australian society in the present" (Curthoys in Attwood and Foster, 2003, p.199)

Similarly, in a conference organised at the NMA, Tom Griffiths contends that what is at issue is not historical concerns over empiricism but the political division over the idea of a frontier war. It is thus a line in the sand between Windschuttle and Henry Reynolds, who both adopt empirical historical methods, but fundamentally differ on the respective interpretations of frontier violence. For Reynolds, the frontier conflicts were aimed as protecting the settler acquisition of land versus Windschuttle's position that these collisions were mere "legitimate police actions" to defend "justice" and the (universal basis of the British colonial) rule of law (Griffith in Attwood and Foster, 2003, p.144).

In sum, the Report supports Windschuttle's criticisms of frontier violence as mere collisions. Equally, the Report goes some way in concurring with Windschuttle's decrying of the validity of Aboriginal oral history. Windschuttle asserts that, "My opinion is that Aboriginal oral history, when uncorroborated by original documents, is completely unreliable, just like the oral history of white people" (Windschuttle, in Attwood and Foster, 2003, p. 106). While equivocating on this debate, in the end, the Carroll Report comes down on the side of Windschuttle on (Aboriginal) oral history claiming that "oral history" is not the "basis for exhibits" where there is "an issue likely to attract such public debate and scrutiny, the NMA should be careful to ensure that it is backed by a wider range of sources" (Carroll, 2003, Section 2, p.3).

The point at issue is that the original sources were not Aboriginal but written by the settlers and State officials. Moreover, as Griffith's notes, many settlers burnt their records, perhaps to disguise the very history told through the Aboriginal oral tradition (Griffith in Attwood and Foster, 2003, p.142).

European galleries

The Carroll Report was less equivocal over how the NMA should represent European settlement. The Report asserted that the exhibitions should be refocused so as to position the Western civilising tradition as a primary focus. The Report stresses that the NMA needs to link the exhibits via a modernist theme. For instance, the "warrior hero" in Homer's *Iliad* could be linked to "the Anzac legend" (2003, 3, 3). In particular, the Report argues for a celebration of Australia's "greatest achievement", notably liberal democracy, saying that "the establishment of a notable stable, efficiently managed, prosperous democracy, with very low levels of institutional corruption, with relatively low social inequality and a largely inclusive ethos..." (Carroll, 2003, Section 1, p. 3). A view that echoes the arguments used by Prime Minister Howard in celebrating Australia's modernist cum settler history.

Again supporting Howard's mateship rhetoric, the Report calls for a celebration of the narrative of Australia's "fair-go" ethos (Carroll, 2003, Section 1, p. 3). However, the report was also aware that even this narrative was open to many interpretations. For instance, in regard to sport, the Report recognises that perhaps this ethos is something from a bygone era now replaced by "ruthless, and, at times, ignominious

competition” – not to mention commercialism and the commodification of athletes (Carroll, 2003, Section 1, p.10). The Report fails to consider that the fair-go ethos is as much a myth as it is fact of past and contemporary Australian life.

The Report inadvertently exposes problem of the modernist reading of Australian history. There is no dominant narrative or symbol that can hold together Australian colonial (and post-colonial) history. The Report notes that the replica of the Federation Arch fails to embody the spirit of a “grand monument, symbolising the birth of a nation” (Carroll, 2003, Section 1, p.8). This is a position supported in the submission of John Hirst, who wrote, “Federation may not be a dramatic enough story to suit a museum” (Carroll, 2003, Section 1, p.8).

As a means of asserting a modernist narrative to the pluralism of the exhibitions, the Report suggests that the arrival of Captain Cook be the fulcrum point for the museum’s narrative (Carroll Report, 2003 Section 1, p. 3). This recommendation, however, fails to consider how problematic such a turn to colonial history is in contemporary times. Ironically, such a move would simply compound the supposed problem of post-modernism and post-colonialism that the Report seeks to solve. That is, the scientific explorations of such men as James Cook were not innocent steps in spreading civilisation. For instance, as the Hawaiian academic Haunani Kay Trask, contends that Cook brought to the Pacific islands, “capitalism, Western political ideas (such as predatory individualism) and Christianity. Most destructive of all he brought disease that ravaged my people until we were but a remnant of what we had been on contact with his pestilent crew” (Trask, cited in Smith, 1999, p.

20). As Smith contends, there is a strong linkage between scientific exploration, imperialism and colonialism (Smith, 1999, p. 22).

Landscape Dreaming

Somewhat provocatively the Carroll Report was keen to transform fundamentally the NMA's courtyard, the "Garden of Australian dreams". The Report provocatively suggested that "large rocks that trace the geological history" be added to the garden, along with the planting of "ethno-botanically significant trees" to complement the stones. Also there should be the adding of more lawn for people to sit on (Carroll Report, 2003, 2, p. 43). Such an approach would work directly against the populist, post-colonial and postmodern intention of the design and its architectural intentions.

As Naomi Stead notes the 'garden' was meant to compliment the NMA's abandonment of an "authoritative version of history in favour of multiple stories, of ordinary as well as extraordinary people; the national embodied here is of the most diffident, self-effacing type" (Stead, 2002, 128). In contrast, to Stead, Linda Young is unimpressed by the Garden of Australian Dreams; she regards it as incongruous with the design and intention of the exhibitions. She writes that the garden is:

Excruciatingly built of concrete; this pastiche of postmodern conceit is brutal and bewildering. Jokey abstractions such as a unit of backyard fencing, a pair of palms and an allegedly domestic white cube are sited

bluntly on a ground-map of indigenous and English placenames. Yes, “Suburban Invaders” is the name of this game. It’s such a hackneyed image compared with the new directions of the exhibition galleries (Young, 2001, 11).

In her review of the NMA’s architecture, Stead counters this view with the argument that the Ashton-Raggatt-McDougall design

...draws elements from both low and high culture, enacts a complex game weaving together both vanguard and *avant garde* positions... The NMA undertakes a sophisticated discourse on the politics of popularity in architecture revealing some of the contradictions inherent in the very idea. It can be described as an architecture that has the look of popular without the intention of a simple or naïve populism (Stead, 2002, p.126).

The chief architect, Howard Raggatt, controversially drew upon the Holocaust Museum in Berlin for inspiration. When board member Christopher Pearson and columnist discovered this reference, he wrote that “There is no sensible comparison between post-contact Australian history and Hitler’s slaughter of 6 million Jews, who’s suffering it demeans...” (*Australian*, 26-27 July 2003, p. 20).

Raggatt cryptically replies

..everyone knows, we’ve never tried to hide, everyone knows, it’s that unspeakable word, everyone knows that it’s that terrible feast of zigzag.

Everyone knows that table so horrifying and gluttonous, everyone knows it's so manifest in infamy, everyone knows it's so unutterable in heartbreak. Everyone knows these are stolen crumbs we have gathered, like food for another wandering people.. (Raggatt as cited in Pearson, *Australian*, 26-27 July 2003, p.20).

In brief, Raggatt's defence is that idea of genocide is effective in the museum's design and brings forth suppressed memories of the past, that link modernism, colonialism and genocide (see Bauman, 1989, p. 87). Moreover, the genocide debate has offered a new perspective on Australian history that problematises the very character of Australia's modernisation (see Ann Curthoys and John Docker in the special issue of *Aboriginal History* 2002).

A Cook's tour

By the time the Carroll Report was dissected in the media, the paradox of Howard's cultural war was most apparent. The supporters of their narrow modernist view of history regarded it as vindicating their point of view. Nevertheless, the bulk of the media were more sceptical. Many commentators saw the Carroll Report as contradicting Barnett's claim of systematic bias. For these writers, the Report's call for a master narrative was treated somewhat derisively. For example, Ann McGrath derided the yearning for a grand narrative as being out-of-date, as a plaintive cry for a "somewhat school boyish national narrative" and of merely being an advocate for more "great white-bloke stories" (*Age*, 24 July 2004). Similarly, Janaki Krammer saw

as odd that while the Report was insisting on a Captain Cook narrative to appeal to a broad audience, the NMA was already a “phenomenal success”, attracting 1 million visitors. (*Christian Science Monitor*, 12 November 2003).

Having not had a decisive victory in the cultural debate, the government used its power to bring the museum more under its control. The highly respected Director Dawn Casey’s contract was renewed but for a shorter period of time (12 months instead of 3 years). The government then began a search for a replacement that would be in tune with their values. While the government sought a compliant director and a means of implementing Carroll’s recommendations, the museum was starved of funds (*Carney, Age*, 15 November 2003).

The Victim

The dispute over the NMA’s architecture and its exhibitions was basically between non-indigenous people. The main indigenous person involved in the controversy was the NMA’s Director, Dawn Casey. Behind the scenes the government was working to replace her and in public she was prevented from speaking out. For instance, at a Senate Estimates Committee, Minister Kemp blocked her attempts to answer questions (Lundy, 2003, p. 2). The government approached the director of the Australian War Memorial, Steve Gower, to become the new NMA director (*Australian*, 9 December 2003). In the end, Gower declined the position and on 11 December 2003, the chief general manager of the corporate and business division of the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Craddock Morton was appointed Acting Director. Later he was confirmed as

director. Concomitantly, the board members who had supported Casey, Marcus Besen, Sharon Brown and Ron Webb, were not re-appointed. In their place, conservative (if albeit maverick) historian John Hirst and the right-wing religious broadcaster John Fleming were appointed to the board. Another person with clear Liberal Party connections, Western Australian museum consultant Sally Anne Hasluck was appointed to the board to sit alongside the reappointed Pearson, Barnett and Staley. The government now had a compliant board to ensure the implementation of the Carroll modernist-colonial agenda.

Having previously been a paragon of propriety (see Casey 2001a and 2001b) once purged Casey felt free to express her point of view. She was highly critical of both Barnett and Pearson for being unprofessional in their leaking of board matters to the media (Faulkner, 2004, p. 7). Adding that the two councillors had continually sought to undermine her through their contacts with the Prime Minister, his staff and Liberal parliamentarians (*Australian*, 9 December 2003). She was also critical of Chairman Staley for being too party-political, saying that he was a “wonderful chairman, but the perception was that here he is, part of the Liberal Party” (*Australian*, 9 December 2003).

Casey defended the principle of historical pluralism and challenged the power relations that lay behind the Prime Minister’s colonial version of history. For example, to the claim that the NMA should give prominence to Captain Cook, she noted that Cook was “a great navigator”, but there were “many explorers before Cook” who were significant in Australian history (Casey, 2003). She added that, the NMA had to be cognisant that other cultural institutions had standing exhibitions of Cook’s exploits, including the Maritime

Museum. Casey countered the Carroll Report's claim of "pockets of bias", by contending that a similar accusation could be made about the Australian War Memorial and its version of history (Casey, 2003, p. 3).

Similarly, Casey notes that it is incongruous to compare the NMA with the British Museum because it would not be acceptable today to display the spoils of colonialism. She asks the rhetorical question "Can you imagine Australia showcasing Papua New Guinea's objects that they've collected or the Pacific? That is where Australia has colonised, if you go to that sort of level of comparison (Casey, 2003, p. 3). She notes that the Carroll Report stress for more British and Irish immigrations, had to be placed in perspective. For instance, this emphasis could be at the expense of Chinese and the Afghan immigrants. According to her, the Report, failed to recognise that in general , "the handling of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, is still poor, in comparison to the overall emphasis on the 200 years of European history" (Casey, 2003, p. 3).

In the end, Casey became a casualty of the "new" cultural war. But there is also something larger at stake in the cultural conflict and that is the basis of indigenous knowledge both within Australian history and the indigenous community itself. As the Maori educationalist Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes,

The struggle for the validity of indigenous knowledge may no longer be over the recognition that indigenous peoples have ways of viewing the world which are unique, but over proving the authenticity of, and control over, our own forms of knowledge... The notion of authenticity is critical

in this area because it is often crucial to the argument mounted by indigenous peoples in relation to knowledge and culture (Smith, 1999, p. 104).

James Clifford uses the idea of contact zones to describe the same point that museums bring different forms of knowledge, identity and culture into contact with each other. Museums, he contends, are no longer the same institutions of their aristocratic origins nor are they mere modernist disseminators of scientific progress. Rather museums in contemporary times are multiformed and ambiguous entities.

He writes

Museums, those symbols of elitism and staid immobility, are proliferating at a remarkable rate from new national capitals to Melanesian villages, from abandoned coal pits in Britain, to ethnic neighbourhoods in global cities. Local/global contact zones, sites of identity-making and transculturation, of containment and excess, these institutions epitomize the ambiguity of 'cultural' difference (Clifford, 1997, p. 219).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the case study of the NMA as a site for the cultural war reveals a number of significant elements. The power exercised by Prime Minister Howard, bolstered by a small but prominent group of individuals, was critical in the process of the war. Howard relied on a small band of warriors but he ensured that they

occupied prominent positions in the battle over the museum. At the heart of the war was the affirmation of a particular version of Australian history and culture. Howard had thought by controlling the NMA board and terms of reference that the museum would be an important victory in the “new” cultural war. But paradoxically, once the NMAs exhibitions and design were driven by scholarly research and debate, inflected by alternative modernist frameworks (e.g. social history) post-modern concepts of representation and postcolonial inflection, they did not reproduce Howard’s singular modernist narrative. He then used his capacity to bring the Museum under the government’s control, principally by board appointments and via the appointment of a more compliant director. Dawn Casey was the first victim of this battle. The second victims were those purged from the board who had supported Casey’s pluralist vision. The third victim was the cultural perspective that shaped the Museum’s first exhibitions, that of a cultural contact zone around a pluralist engagement (one that even touched on emotions) rather than the national myth of the victors. Howard victory over the NMA is a clear example of the new cultural war, where a modernist voice drowns out all others in the contact zone.

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