

‘What is Strange About Australia’

A look at unusual aspects of Australia’s history and environment and the role of Cultural Institutions in presenting these aspects to the public.

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First presented at the Museums Australia National Conference,
‘Food for Thought’ Melbourne, May 2004
with the assistance of the actor Tammy Clarkson.

Note: This ‘paper’ was presented as a performance piece however full stage directions and details of the props have been deleted from this version.

The performance piece is available for commission.

For further information, please contact:

Rosemary Simons at Rosemary Simons Design

166 Bastings St Northcote Victoria 3070

Telephone: (03) 9481 6915

Email: rsimons@rsimonsdesign.com.au

Website: www.rsimonsdesign.com.au

Introduction

The recently launched tourism advertisements promote attractions that are special to Australia, yet, from a conservation point of view, we are allowing some of our special things to disappear.

The aim of this paper is to encourage cultural institutions to promote an even broader understanding of aspects of our history and our environment than currently exists.

I begin, by offering up some word pictures of Australia composed of loosely linked fragments of information and viewpoints.

Because native plants are a passion of mine they are emphasised.

These pictures focus on the strangeness of the land mass and aspects of what follows in terms of plants, animals and the interaction with the land of two bodies of people, Indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

I use the word 'strange' to cover things that are 'odd, unusual, extraordinary or peculiar'

The exhibit is Australia. A place that sometimes seems to defy description: a place with an area identified by what it is not – an '**Out back**' a place with a '**Dreamtime**' and a '**Never Never Land**'

Word pictures: Picture 1

is of an Australia that is old, isolated, flat, dry and infertile.

A landscape much older than the 20,000 year old landscapes of Europe and North America. A place increasingly isolated since it's Gondwana connection 45 million years ago

"If we put the present into perspective and think in geological time, in aeons instead of generations, we realise we have a heritage so ancient that it disappears into the mists of creation."

White, Mary E. "The Greening of Gondwana – The 400 Million Year Story of Australian Plants" Published by Reed Australia. 1986

With an average elevation of 330 metres, Australia is the flattest continent on earth,

"A land of sweeping plains"

Mackellar, Dorothea. "My Country" First published in 1911. '

'The Closed Door and Other Verses', Australasian Authors. Curtis Brown, Australia

Some of it's rivers run inland and desert sand dunes are windblown into a North South orientation, only Antarctica is drier.

It's infertile earth has lacked the supplement of volcanic soil since the last eruption on mainland Australia 6,000 years ago.

"Soils are one of the key factors which limit human settlement in Australia. Few Australian soils are of good quality – most are naturally infertile."

Australian Government 'Geoscience Australia' website 2004

Word pictures: Picture 2

looks at the plants and animals of this old place.

From rainforest to heathland, gibber plains and beyond, strange and beautiful plants thrive, often in seemingly adverse conditions, shaped by the land on which they live, into a class of their own.

This 'class', consists of over 27,000 species of plants so special, that ninety percent grow no where else on earth.

"We have, in Australia one of the greatest store houses of biological diversity left on the planet. It has taken many millions of years to create such genetic variation,"

Cronin, Learnard. "Key Guide to Australian Wildflowers"

Published by Reed Books

Furthermore, some of these plants possess shape, colour or fragrance without peer.

In 1846, just up the hill from here, next to Spencer St Station, was:

"... a beautiful blue lake ... intensely blue, nearly oval and full of the clearest, salt water; ... Fringed gaily all round by mesembryanthemum pig face in full bloom, it seemed in the bright sunshine as though girdled about with a belt of magenta fire. The ground gradually sloping down towards the lake was also em purpled, but patchily, in the same manner, though perhaps not quite so brilliantly, while the whole air was heavy with the mingled odours of the golden myrnong flowers and purple fringed lilies or ratafias."

McRae, G. G. "Some Recollections of Melbourne in the 'Forties'"

Victorian Historical Magazine 1912

Word pictures: Picture 3

focuses on human marks on the land, pre European settlement.

Pathways criss cross the land, some marked, some not, and more ephemeral marks include smoke signals and campfires.

In the words of the poet and elder, Oodjeroo Noonucal:

“... a thousand thousand campfires in the forest
Are in my blood.”

*Noonucal, Oodjeroo. (Kath Walker) 1920 - 1993. "The Past"
Published in "My People" in 1970 by Jacaranda Press*

In patches along the Darling River:

“... the grass ha(s) been pulled, to a great extent, and piled in
hayricks, so that the aspect of the desert was softened into the
agreeable semblance of a hayfields. ...we found the ricks, or
hay cocks, extending for miles.”

*Grey, G. "Journals of Two Expeditions of Discovery in North West and Western
Australia during the years 1837,38 & 39". Published by T. W. Boone 1841*

and gardens like this one seen by the explorer Grey in the Hutt River
region in Western Australia

“...the plain resembled a great potato garden... the ground (was)
so perforated with holes dug by women foragers that for a
distance of three and a half miles, walking was difficult.”

Blainey, Geoffrey. "Triumph of the Nomads" published by Mc Millan 1975

Fleets of canoes are found on the rivers and lakes along with
giant birds nets:

“Major Mitchell, exploring the Murray near Lake Boga in the winter
of 1836, counted on one small lake a total of twenty four canoes
fleeing in surprise to the safety of a reedy island.”

“Nets 45 metres to 95 metres long and up to 18 metres deep were tied
to trees or to specially erected poles and strung across water courses.”
Blainey, Geoffrey. "Triumph of the Nomads" published by Mc Millan 1975

Middens take the form of

“fabulous shell monuments lining the inlets and estuaries of Port Jackson, Botany Bay and beyond... 12 metres high along the waters edge ... the height of Joern Utzon’s Sydney Opera House”
Myers, Peter. “The Third City. Sydney’s original monuments and a possible new metropolis” Published in Architecture Australia Jan/Feb 2000

along with dams such as this one:

“At the dry Bulloo river east of Tibooburra (NSW) (was) a dam about 360 feet long. (It would have required the moving of about 150 cubic yards of clay & stone)”
Blainey, Geoffrey. “Triumph of the Nomads” Published by Mc Millan 1975

These form some of the man made land forms.

Ceremonial sites also mark the ground. Some like this one:

“The initiation ground is in general situated on the summit of some round topped hill and the surrounding trees are minutely tattooed and carved to such a considerable altitude, that one cannot help feel astonished by the labour bestowed upon this work.”
Hogkinson, Clement 1845 “Australia from Port Macquarie to Moreton Bay”

Songs ‘mark’ the air:

“An Aboriginal song can go on for six months if it is done correctly. Say the migration tracks of the birds - they’re sung right the way from the desert to the Gulf of Carpentaria.”
CAAMA Broadcasters as recorded in “Being Aboriginal” by Ros Bowden and Bill Bunbury. Published by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in 1990

Word pictures: Picture 4

tracks the paths of European boats as they nibble away at the edges of the continent for 182 years.

It also looks at the subsequent settlement and the expeditions that trail exotic plants and animals in their wake.

Two seedling apples and some fruit kernels, are planted by Furneaux at Adventure Bay in Southern Tasmania in 1773. These are followed by the oak and the myrtle collected by Captain Phillip at Rio de Janeiro and the Cape of Good Hope bought to Australia in 1787.

More substantial introductions followed with the corn and wheat bought by the First Fleet.

Thus the vegetation began to transform:

“At Colbinabbin, (near Echuca), yams were so abundant and so easily procured that one might have collected in an hour, with a pointed stick, as many as would have served a family for the day. The wheels of our dray used to turn them up by the bushel as it went over the loose ground. Indeed, several thousand sheep, which I had at Colbinabbin, not only learnt to root up these vegetables with their noses but they for the most part lived on them for the first year, after which the root began gradually to become scarce.”

Curr, Edward. "Recollections of Squatting in Victoria 1841 - 1851" Published 1883

consolidating an exotic/native patchwork of vegetation.

Word pictures: Picture 5

sees settlements larger than the stone villages of the Gundidjmara at Lake Condor, and farming activities firmly established. Increasingly the hazardous, slow and expensive importation of plants and animals by settlers is undertaken with the objective of:

“...converting the wilderness into a fruitful garden.”

Suttor , George. “Memoirs of George Suttor 1774 - 1859”

Mitchell Library Sydney

Land is being cleared

“Howitt joined in the hard labour of clearing and road building with his soul sometimes rebelling against the destruction of the old forests by the Yarra. The trees were giants, some of ‘unconscionable girth’, six or eight yards around.”

Lemon, Andrew. “Northcote Side of the River” published by the City of Northcote in conjunction with Hargreen Publishing Company in 1983

In many places, however, native plants remained under foot, creating in the minds of D H Lawrence’s characters, a ‘corner of paradise’:

“... By the stream the mimosa was all gold, great gold bushes full of spring fire rising over your head, and the scent of the Australian spring... Harriet had armfuls of bloom, gold plumage of many branches of different wattles, and the white heather, the scarlet bells, with the deep-blue reed -blobs. ...the sulky with all the bloom looked like a corner of paradise... ‘if I had three lives, I’d wish to stay. It’s the loveliest thing I have ever known.’ They were both silent. The flowers there in the room were like angel-presences, something out of heaven. The bush! The wonderful Australia.”

Lawrence, D. H. From “Kangaroo” First Published 1923

Word pictures: Picture 6

is about Australia of today where effort, time, (preferably in Spring), knowledge and money may be needed if we are to access our native flora and fauna in anything approaching a pristine setting.

Domestic gardens have less than 1% native plants and the remaining two per cent of temperate native grassland in South East Australia exist only in small, isolated and highly vulnerable patches.

Plants and animal in National Parks are under threat from feral species. There remain, however, habitats of breathtaking beauty and plants that inspire writers like Murray Bail:

“Over time the River Red Gum has become barnacled with legends. This is only to be expected. By sheer numbers there’s always a bulky Red Gum here or somewhere else in the wide world, muscling into the eye, as it were; and by following the course of rivers in our particular continent they don’t merely imprint their fuzzy shape but actually worm their way greenly into the mind, giving some hope against the collective crow croaking dryness. And if that’s not enough the massive individual squatness of these trees, ancient, stained and warty, has a grandfatherly aspect: that is, a long life of incidents, seasons, stories.”
Bail, Murray. “Eucalypt” Published by Text

Conservation

Whether we stop the destruction of our indigenous environment in its tracks and begin reviving habitats that are currently on the brink of destruction, remains to be seen. If we do not do this, more people may feel as Jack Davis describes in his poem "Mother land"

"Mother why don't you enfold me
as you used to in the long, long ago
your morning breath
was sweetness to my soul
The daily scent of wood smoke
was a benediction in the air..."

My voice cries thinly in the dark of night
mother oh mother
why don't you enfold me
as you used to, in the long long ago."

*Davis, Jack. "My Mother the Land" from "Black Life Poems".
Published by University of Queensland Press in 1992*

Perceptions

That completes my series of word pictures. I wonder how familiar the general public is with some of the information in these pictures?

Have we a community that is knowledgeable about what is 'strange' about Australia?

Whatever the case, it seems that a fervour felt toward, especially the less obvious native plants, remains in the hearts of only a few. This reality may be the cause, or the result of an ignorance about the extent of our indigenous botanical splendours.

Preferences, however, can and do change as evidenced in this observation from the book, "Romulas, My Father" by Raimond Gaita

"I had absorbed my father's attitude to the countryside, especially to its scraggy trees, because he talked so often of the beautiful trees of Europe. But now, for me, the key to the beauty of the native trees lay in the light which so sharply delineated them against a dark blue sky. Possessed of that key, my perception of the landscape changed radically... The landscape seemed to have a special beauty, disguised until I was ready for it; not a low and primitive form for which I had to make allowances, but subtle and refined. It was as though God had taken me to the back of his workshop and shown me something really special."

Gaita, Raimond. "Romulas, My Father" Published by Text 1998

Ways of seeing also affect our responses to what we find in our environment, as noted in this description from the author Peter Carey, in his novel "Oscar and Lucinda":

"My grandfather drifted up the Bellinger river like a blindman up the central isle of Notre Dame. He saw nothing. The country was thick with sacred stories more ancient than the ones he carried in his sweat slippery leather bible. He did not even imagine their presence."

Carey, Peter. "Oscar and Lucinda" 1988

Obviously, there are many ways in which ignorance can be addressed and ways of seeing challenged, but who's job is it to do this?

Role of Cultural Institutions

In fact Museums around Australia have made a commitment to educating on issues relating to sustainability and the environment Mission and Vision statements include:

To:

- Achieve “Sustainable environments and cultures for future generations, through documenting and understanding the past and the present.”
- “..research, interpret, communicate and apply understanding of the environments and cultures of the Australian region to increase their long-term sustainability.”
- “... bring to life Australia's social and natural history...”
- “...explore(s) the land, nation and people of Australia.”
- Help Australians “...better understand their environments (natural, social and built)”

When planning how best to fulfil their mission as it relates to conservation of the environment, cultural institutions will make a risk assessment.

Conservation of species often comes down to choices over land use and land ownership. Unfortunately, struggles over land are not benign, in fact they can incite great passion.

Australia is no different to other countries in having spilt human blood on its own soil, through conflicts over land.

Even small conservation dilemmas such as the flying foxes in the Melbourne Botanic Gardens excite heated debate.

Rather than avoiding controversy, is it possible that biting into issues of current concern, (especially those with the urgency of conservation), may be a key to the sustainability of cultural institutions? Might it not further demonstrate the relevance and usefulness of the organisation involved.

In some odd way, the museum practice of collecting obsolete technology and preserved natural specimens, could be seen as a type of 'normalising' of loss. If this perception does exist, then it is at odds with a commitment to conserve habitats. If museums use collections and resources to broaden a 'bridge of knowledge' to the living environment, they would further help fulfil their missions.

Every design brief I have read over the past few years has contained a request for innovation. If the public seriously demand innovation from their museums, then maybe strengthening this 'knowledge bridge' in a committed and imaginative way, could be the recipe for an even larger audiences.

Whatever the involvement of museums in conserving our increasingly stressed natural environment, knowledge about it that embraces spiritual, aesthetic economic and scientific points of view is of value. Such knowledge can benefit planning for the Australia of tomorrow and at a global level.

The environmental transition from a uniquely Australian mix of flora and fauna, to one blending native with exotic, is a complex story. It may be that some aspects of the changes wrought on the Australian environment over the past two hundred years represents the future of the globe in miniature. A future where only the toughest plants and animals survive thereby reducing the level of distinctiveness between regions.

Conclusion

But change needn't mean decay.

We can choose not to be complicit in further diminishing the global stock of mysterious and strange places and beautiful things.

To do this well, Cultural Institutions play a vital role.

Mark O'Connor, in his essay "Goodbye to the Bush Republic" expressed the belief that:

"...rejection of our Aboriginal heritage may have been the mark of Cain upon our society in an almost literal sense, and at the root of our destructiveness. Like Cain we have been in a hurry."

O'Connor, Mark. Essay "Goodbye to the Bush Republic"

Published in "The People's Forest. A Living History of the Australia Bush"

Whether we agree with him or not, perhaps it is time to take stock and plot our next move, not just in regard to Indigenous heritage but with the environment as well. Imagine Australia as an artifact... and compare it's condition report from 200 years ago with a contemporary report, there may be cause for some reflection.

"Let no one say the past is dead.
The past is all about us and within.
Haunted by tribal memories, I know
This little now, this accidental present
Is not the all of me, whose long making
Is so much of the past."

Noonucal, Oodjeroo. (Kath Walker) 1920 - 1993.

"The Past" Published in "My People" in 1970 by Jacaranda Press

And,

"...we love a sunburnt country"

Mackellar, Dorothea. "My Country". First published in 1911.

'The Closed Door and Other Verses', Australasian Authors.

Curtis Brown, Australia

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