Imperial Legacy:
The Politics of Display in Australia

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Somewhere among the countless rows of objects currently on display in the British Museum’s Enlightenment exhibition there rests a flaking bark shield. This battered, utilitarian object stands somewhat apart from the splendidly exotic artefacts that surround it. Yet beneath its unprepossessing appearance there lies an extraordinary provenance. It was taken in 1770 from the Eastern Australian seaboard by Captain Cook’s landing party during its initial encounter with the first inhabitants of the land incorporating what is now known as Sydney.

The shield has been placed in a display of non-Western artefacts acquired during the period of Enlightenment discovery “through gift, trade or purchase”. In truth, however, none of these words could be used to describe its acquisition. It was hardly given, since it came into the party’s possession as a result of their shooting at a group of Eora people who left the cover of trees, apparently shouting at them to leave. Neither was it traded, unless one views a bullet fired in anger as a fair offer of exchange. Nor could it be called a purchase, unless one counts as a purchase price the blood shed by its original owner as he was hit trying to flee the invaders.

In short, this shield is a trophy of conquest that powerfully evokes the difficult legacy created by the collecting of non-Western material by colonial powers. Its presence in the exhibition is presumably intended to allude to this. Yet if so, the barely perceptible bat-squeak of critical self reflection that it introduces into the King’s Library has been effectively drowned out by the overwhelmingly celebratory tone that characterises the exhibition elsewhere. One room brochure even includes the shield in a sequence titled “carry on collecting”, while another claims that the systems of knowledge underpinning these collecting practices “laid the foundations for a more modern awareness of a shared humanity”. Maybe so, but one wonders whether the shield’s original owner would have shared these sentiments, had any of the landing party taken the trouble to explain them to him.

The British Museum’s reticence towards critically examining its founding fathers in this way is not so difficult to understand. The Benin Bronzes are in the basement, after all,
while the Parthenon Sculptures remain on the other side of the Great Court. There is also a sense in which the entire Enlightenment project functions as a kind of manifesto asserting the intellectual basis to the universal museum ideal that the British Museum has been rearticulating recently in order to justify its continued possession of these and other disputed objects.

On the far side of this horizon, however, Australian museums have not been able to insulate themselves as easily from nagging issues of these kinds. Instead, they have moved increasingly towards addressing the colonial basis to their collections in order to bring to the surface the troubled histories that these objects continue to carry. In this way they have been at the forefront of the development of cultural repatriation protocols and co-ownership agreements as well as in other forms of outreach and cultural partnership with Aboriginal communities and individuals.

A spectacular manifestation of this approach in a display format occurs in the newly reopened Melbourne Museum in Southern Australia. For many years this museum languished in cramped and run down quarters that were almost buried under the weight of extensive nineteenth to twentieth century encyclopaedic natural and social history collections. A resiting project nonetheless finally enabled this institution to radically rethink its mission. The results are most powerfully evident in an area given over to a permanent exhibition of Aboriginal identity that is maintained semi-autonomously by an indigenous department. The centrepiece is a cabinet focusing on the disputed legacy of the Anglo-Australian anthropologist, Walter Baldwin Spencer. Spencer was director of the Museum from 1899-1928 and he presided over the accession of a large part of its indigenous collections. These he obtained not via the naked brutality of Cook and his party one hundred years earlier, but rather, through purchases and exchanges carried out as part of his deep commitment to the study and documentation of indigenous culture. Spencer’s work was nonetheless informed by an underlying evolutionist perspective that viewed Aboriginals as an ultimately doomed race. Such attitudes helped justify the processes of displacement and dispossession that have played such a destructive role in white and indigenous relations in this country.

The Spencer display turns the tables on this history by recasting Spencer as a hapless specimen imprisoned within his own collection. In so doing, it ritually dethrones its founding father, installing him in a museological form of the stocks. There is a certain poetic justice to this role reversal since it locates Spencer’s memory in a denigrative form of display just as Aboriginal people were represented in dioramas until relatively recently. He is also lampooned as an outmoded and ridiculous figure with his whiskers and somewhat puzzled expression in the midst of it all. This impression is underscored by a nearby video display with an actor playing the role of an almost burlesquely ignorant Spencer who is brusquely inducted into some basic Aboriginal understandings by an impressively authoritative elder.

A high degree of artistic licence is clearly at work in this portrayal of Spencer as a hapless and hopeless, disembodied ghost, who is both less present and corporeal, ironically enough, than the objects he collected. A similarly evocative, artistic approach to the interpretation of colonial issues is found in the Museum of Sydney that was built in the early 1990s over the archaeological remains of the site of the first colonial governor’s residence in the city. This museum was originally conceived along relatively traditional lines as a reconstructed historic property. It accordingly incorporated plans
for a monumental statue of the first governor to be placed in the museum’s forecourt. Thankfully, however, this idea was dropped as the Museum concept broadened out to a more fundamental exploration of the early history of Sydney as viewed from a contemporary pluralist perspective. The decision was thus taken to bring this founding colonial father down from his pedestal and to replace him instead with a much less heroic and also more open-ended, contemporary artistic engagement with an indigenous perspective on the history of the area.

*The Edge of the Trees* grows out of a collaboration between a white Australian artist, Janet Laurence, and an Indigenous Australian artist, Fiona Foley. It brings to the threshold of the museum the same primal scene of the troubled foundation of the colonial enterprise as we previously saw evoked by the British Museum’s bark shield exhibit. *The Edge of the Trees* does not, however, use artefacts to make its point. Instead, it offers the visitor a multimedia installation that presents a poignant and evocative reflection on indigenous identity and the early history of white settlement. This sets the stage, in turn, for the non-object based narratives on colonial history that will come in the museum itself. Some of the themes raised in *Edge of the Trees* are thus amplified and spelt out in an exhibit inside the Museum entitled *Colony*. In this display a bricolage of archaeological fragments are arrayed around a central video screen in which actors offer contemporary perspectives on such issues as *terra nullius* (*terra nullius* being a concept used to define Australia as an ‘uninhabited land’, thus providing a fraudulently legal justification for Captain Cook’s proclamation of the possession of the continent for the British crown).

A similarly artistic attempt to confront the ghost of Captain Cook is once again evident in another recent commission from a newly instituted Australian museum. In 2001 the National Gallery of Victoria divided its collections in two and opened a new purpose-built annex for its Australian holdings closer to the centre of the city. Like the Melbourne Museum, this relocation also offered it the opportunity to rehang its collections along more contemporary lines. An emblematic example of this process came in its decision to critically reframe one of its iconic colonial pieces. A hundred years earlier the Gallery had itself commissioned a grand commemorative painting of the landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay as a means of celebrating the recent unification of the Australian colonies under the act of Federation. Now, a hundred years later, it was able to restage this commission in a post-colonial setting to coincide with the opening of its new building. It accordingly commissioned the Indigenous artist Julie Gough to create an installation that would respond to this painting as well as to one of her earlier works in the Gallery’s collections, *Imperial Leather*, a piece which also interrogates colonial practices of the collecting and stereotyping of Aboriginal identity. *Chase* accordingly evokes a tense and unresolved space between the historical moment and the contemporary situation. The ti trees that hang from the centre of the gallery represent once again the edge of the trees from which the Aboriginal people viewed Cook’s landing as well as “a place that has not been negotiated successfully and so remains our haunted house, our outdoors and indoors, our everywhere”, as the artist has recently described it.

The *Chase* installation is even more curatorially radical, in one sense, than the Melbourne Museum’s Baldwin Spencer display. This is particularly evident in the artist’s and the Gallery’s decision to remove the frame from the painting by Phillips Fox. This strategy has two effects. It helps to break down the divisions between the works and to
extend the historical painting out to the space of Gough’s contemporary installation. There is also a sense in which the decision to remove the frame from a major late Victorian commission constitutes a form of ritualised debunking that would have been unthinkable in its own day. The NGVA via the agency of its newly commissioned artist have thus ritually ‘deframed’ a painter whom they used historically to hold in the very highest regard. One could even argue that they have gone further in this than the Melbourne Museum. For all its overttness, the Spencer cabinet takes its revenge on what is in the end only an effigy of Spencer and his legacy. The NGVA, by contrast, has intervened in an actual, key historical artefact in its collection and has over-written it within the context of a contemporary art installation.

These three case studies all demonstrate a strong desire on the part of the institutions to bring to the surface the hidden histories that often lie beneath collections founded during colonial times. They also involve a corresponding recognition that a decision not to implement policies along these lines would, in effect, reproduce the unjust systems that they are elsewhere committed to opposing. At the same time, however, a museum’s willingness to address these topics does not automatically guarantee their resolution. These initiatives tend to raise yet further issues and to hold within themselves much that remains unresolved or even contradictory in relation to other dimensions of the museum. In the Melbourne Museum, for example, the critical approach found in the Baldwin Spencer display appears at odds with the much more positive – even hagiographical - representation of Spencer’s legacy that is found in the Museum’s own official history. Similarly, the Museum of Sydney’s emphasis on often highly conceptual, non-object based interpretations has also been scaled back more recently in order to return parts of the museum to traditional, object-based displays. But these ongoing difficulties do not invalidate these undertakings. Rather, a willingness to engage with difficult issues via artistic and evocative displays has enabled the museums in question to open up their spaces to an all-important dialogue of ideas. The resulting sense of institutional dynamism and increased interactivity has much to offer viewers and other institutions alike. Who knows but that perhaps even the great Enlightenment collectors, with their love of syncretic relationships and intriguing connections between objects and ideas, might even have approved.