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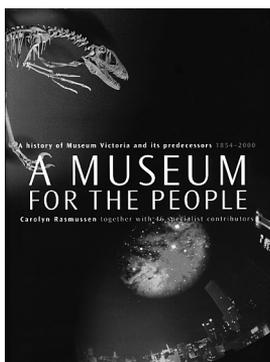


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Carolyn Rasmussen (together with 46 specialist contributors): *A Museum for the People: A History of Museum Victoria and Its Predecessor Institutions, 1854–2000*. Carlton North, Victoria: Scribe Publications in association with Museum Victoria, 2001. 423 pp., illus., ISBN: 0 908011 69 5 (HB), \$49.95.



The introduction to this book begins: ‘This is the story of two museums, the National Museum of Victoria, founded in 1854 [as the Museum of Natural and Economic Geology], and the Industrial and Technological Museum, opened in 1871 (later called the Museum of Applied Science 1944–1960, the Institute of Applied Science 1961–1971 and the Science Museum of Victoria). These two museums were amalgamated in 1983 to become the Museum of Victoria...’ Towards the end of this part of the book reference is made to the establishment of the applied science and technology collections as Scienceworks in 1992, the opening of the Immigration Museum, and Hellenic Antiquities Museum, in 1998; and lastly, of the Melbourne Museum in 2000. This brings the reader up to speed with what seems to have been almost a frenzy of Victorian name-changing in a little less than a century and a half. What lay behind this is a fascinating mix of personalities, politics, prosperity and oh yes, even science.

Rasmussen effectively tackles the long and complex history of what became Museum Victoria by breaking the subject chronologically into four main sections. In addition to this, there are significant contributions by various specialists. The detail offered by these contributors enriches the museum’s history, with such cameos as the story of Australia’s first computer (CSIRAC), or of Phar Lap, still Australia’s most popular racing horse. Indeed, one could read only these specialist contributions, and see them as an equally valid way of telling the story of the museum. By following the story at a collection or object level, the edifice of the Museum’s title, identity, and relationship with the government and tax-paying public can be side-stepped.

The first section spans the Museums’ nineteenth-century years. The chapters range from that of their establishment, through to their declining fortunes following the state’s economic woes in the 1890s. What comes across most powerfully is the rivalries that beset this small, vibrant community from the outset. Rasmussen describes ‘the two distinct “cultures” that characterise Melbourne’s museums until 1983... [and that this] reflects disciplinary boundaries between the biological and earth sciences, and the more mathematically based sciences of physics and chemistry’.

The Museum of Natural and Economic Geology, established in 1854, straddled both disciplines in a limited sense. Collections were established drawing on the flora and fauna of the state, as well as its mineral heritage. The remainder of the 1850s saw the University of Melbourne become the Museum’s home under the new title of the National Museum of Victoria, and Professor Frederick McCoy appointed its first director. However, the opening of an Industrial and Technological Museum in 1870 marked a shift towards the physical sciences and their applications. With its

clear mission to educate the public scientifically, and its origins in the Exhibition movement, such a museum was also a statement of colonial pride. Rasmussen notes though, that ‘In the little pond that was, and in many respects still is, Melbourne, they were both in the same boat’. Its birth marked the battlelines for McCoy, if not his museum. While he lived, his university Museum remained largely true to his concept of what a (natural history) museum should be, even if one increasingly deprived of resources. The Industrial and Technological Museum meanwhile, was relatively better funded, and more relevant to the average visitor. One was filled largely with static displays (albeit beautifully crafted dioramas at best), the other with dynamic artefacts.

The next Section (1900–1955), is set in a post-McCoy era dominated by another individual, Professor W. Baldwin Spencer. Not only had the National Museum been moved from the University, but its competitor of sorts, the Industrial and Technological Museum, was all but closed. A reorganisation of both institutions’ collections favoured the National Museum — and also re-drew the old distinctions between scientific disciplines. What drove this transformation from a university teaching collection into a major public museum was a profound philosophical difference between the directors: unlike McCoy, Spencer was a convinced evolutionary biologist. He personally set about rearranging the collections. Display categories now included zoological classification, family, genus, and species. Spencer’s passion for ethnology also introduced an Aboriginal presence into collections, something that was later seen as inappropriate to natural science displays, but which has been at the core of more recent Indigenous galleries.

For the Industrial and Technological Museum, 1899–1915 would later be described as ‘Years of Stagnation and

Discouragement’ by its historian, Warren Perry. War in 1914 acted as an unparalleled disruption to both museums, but what would much later become the Science Museum was revived even as ‘the faint stirring of a sense that Victoria might not have merely a past but a History’, dissipated. The Great Depression that soon followed did not help matters, though its collections continued to expand hopefully. Another world war also coincided with its next transformation into the Museum of Applied Science and a new focus on education. Once again the National Museum was left in the doldrums, with exhibitions that seemed only to depress those who made the effort to visit.

Section Three culminates in the radical move to finally merge these two Melbourne institutions. Growing public expectations about what museums were about forced a merger of the two separate Museum Councils, with consequent budgetary savings making a new social history division possible. Museums in general during this era had not only multiplied enormously in number, but came to embody specific values to a public less interested in the science which lay behind them. Hence, issues as diverse as the environment and dinosaurs were now major exhibitions, pulling in huge numbers of visitors. At the heart of this new interest in museums was a public increasingly blessed with leisure *and* disposable income. Scientists and curators were drawn to develop ‘blockbuster’ exhibitions, from which new funding streams arose, and greater status and profile for their collections and research.

Several small errors caught my eye, including the one where Ernest Shackleton’s British Antarctic Expedition ship *Nimrod* was confused with Robert Scott’s *Discovery* (p. 138). Perhaps more disturbing, another related to the inconsistency of the guide to the complex history of the two museums, just before the intro-

duction. It took this reviewer some time to fix in his head which organisation was which, when, and where. But I was so grateful for the guide that I was almost prepared to overlook the odd discrepancy between it and the text. Besides, seemingly faced with such a state of flux, whether the Industrial and Technological Museum actually opened in 1870 or 1871, probably mattered little.

The period between the later nineteenth century, and the early part of the last century, is also probably that part of Rasmussen's book which those who are particularly interested in the history of science will find the most rewarding. Given that this is a history of a science museum, how Melbourne grappled with a truly scientific approach to organising and exhibiting collections is of paramount importance. As notions of humanity's collective place in the world began to be revised following a series of Darwinian-induced near-extinctions in thinking (remarkably, creationism still does not seem to have been dealt a conclusive death-blow), a recognisably modern methodology of museum practice came into being.

In many respects trying to make sense of the recent past can be the most difficult of achievements, particularly when they are at times so divisive. The author demonstrates some honesty in the way she addresses this time of considerable change to what became Museum Victoria in 1983. This last section of the book documents the creation of several new museums in the 1990s, again representing an emphasis on

science and technology, and extending to even the social sciences. Scienceworks, the Immigration Museum, and the Hellenic Antiquities Museum were all successful offshoots of the troubled Museum Victoria during this time. There was still an enormous need for new facilities, while the museum staff were becoming increasingly overwhelmed by new directives that seemed to emphasise only the two very different structures that had been merged to make the one museum.

Indecision over potential new sites for expansion served to further frustrate staff. As part of the solution to these problems, a massive evacuation of many millions of artefacts and specimens was implemented. A daunting task, it was amusing to read of a minor 'discovery' made during this upheaval: a series of beautiful Aboriginal drawings. These were uncovered at the very back of an old piece of storage furniture that was to be demolished. It left me wondering how many more missing items might be found if more museums had to vacate their premises temporarily!

The temporary move became part of the eventual solution. The new museum would be a very different creature, to be known as Melbourne Museum. Its history has yet to be written, but one hopes that when it is (perhaps as part of a further name change?), it will be to the same high standard as that of this well illustrated *A Museum For The People*.

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