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# History from the Ground Up

**Dr Mathew Trinca, Director, National Museum of Australia**

I never had the good fortune to meet the late Dr Lesley Muir, but I was honoured to deliver the address in her name at the annual conference of the Royal Australian Historical Society in Port Macquarie this year. I cannot know, but I think from all I have heard that Dr Muir would have approved of the mid-north coast city's emphasis on documenting and preserving its history.

For me, the opportunity to visit Port Macquarie and deliver the address was greatly appealing, as I have had a keen interest in the city since the National Museum of Australia acquired an astronomical telescope once owned by a local luminary, William John MacDonnell. MacDonnell arrived in Port Macquarie in the 1880s to oversee the Bank of New South Wales, but his real mission was observing, studying and writing about the night sky. He built the first observatory in Port Macquarie in the bank's backyard in 1882 to house a Grubb Refractor Telescope, which he had imported from Ireland.

MacDonnell became well-known for his scientific work, and membership of the local Agricultural Association, Pony Club and Choral Society. He was a stalwart of the NSW branch of the British Astronomical Association and published the findings of his stargazing program in British and Australian scientific journals. His life was entwined with the transition in Australian astronomy from a pursuit of amateur dilettantes to a professional science. Wayne Orchiston, in a paper published in the *Journal of the British Astronomical Association* revered him as 'next to John Tebbut' the 'Grand Old Man' of Australian Astronomy.<sup>1</sup>

MacDonnell's telescope, his six-inch Grubb Refractor, is now a prized object in the *Landmarks* Gallery at the National Museum in Canberra. Who would have thought that Port Macquarie played such a key role in the establishment of astronomical science in this country? Initially a penal settlement, 'Port' became notable for its timber resources, fisheries and grazing land in the nineteenth century. And yet here it is, centre stage in the national story of Australian astronomy, and in the professionalising of scientific practice in this country.

I may be a little partisan of course, but I think the MacDonnell telescope is a fascinating historical object that speaks about the connection between history at a

local level, and its connection to a wider conception of the Australian past. For many years we have been consumed with endless, often circular arguments about our national identity and what it means to live in this country. But in searching for coherent narratives of our nation, it is all too easy to gloss over – or worse, do violence to – the actual circumstances of individual experiences and lives that do not necessarily correspond to general histories or theoretical certainty. Real life is frequently messier than that.

Since 2003, I have worked at the National Museum of Australia, which has found itself serially involved in frequently intemperate arguments about the nation's soul and meaning. Part of the problem, I think, is that we have been caught in the crossfire of generalisation and abstraction about Australia and its history, and failed somehow to adequately support the idea that a key characteristic of the nation's history and experience is its insistent diversity.

I believe very strongly that one of our country's greatest assets is its national story – it is not an easy story, but it is a story like no other, and it is *our* story, the story we contribute from this country to the global storytelling of the history of humanity. It is full of wonder and challenge, a history of diverse narrative strands that are not easily reconciled or resolved. It is a history that has inspired contest and debate, and over which we wrangle endlessly.

Mark McKenna's very fine book, *Looking for Blackfellas' Point*, is instructive about how we might approach the idea of the nation's history in ways that are essentially democratic and participatory. McKenna's book makes an argument for the close study of places and their layered pasts on this continent. In his introduction to *Blackfellas' Point*, McKenna wrote, 'The more I uncovered about the "local", the more I came to see that the best way of explaining the "national" was to focus on the "local".'<sup>2</sup>

I take that as an encouragement to build our national history from the ground up – literally, rather than from the top down. Instead of first conceptualising the nation and its key themes and finding case studies to satisfy our arguments, perhaps we might focus on local studies, on the story of museum artefacts, and on personal and familial accounts and draw these out to wider societal themes and ideas.

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The big themes of Australian nationhood are more than abstract notions that underwrite our 'imagined community'.<sup>3</sup> They are not simply intellectual exercises, but a part of our shared experience, felt and known by us all to a greater or lesser degree. Let me give you a few examples that move from the personal to a shared sense of ourselves as Australians. Some of you may know that the National Museum in recent times has established a program, *Defining Moments in Australian History*, which strives to promote discussion and debate about key events or forces that have shaped our collective experience.

A team of leading Australian historians helped the Museum compose an initial list of one hundred key defining moments – moments such as the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788, the Federation of Australia in 1901, or the landing at Gallipoli in 1915. Since the time the list was first published, the public has continued to propose other important moments in our past to be included in the list.

One of the defining moments listed was the foundation of the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association in 1925, an event that initiated the fight for political rights for Aboriginal Australians that gathered pace from the 1960s. Much of that story has been written by the noted historian Professor John Maynard, at the University of Newcastle. Less known is the fact that John's own family history is at the core of that 'defining moment'; his grandfather Fred Maynard, established the AAPA to fight for rights for Indigenous Australians. John's own family history is deeply embedded in this story of national resonance and reach.

Let us turn now to a very different time and place, to the Recherche Archipelago off the town of Esperance on the southern coast of Western Australia. More than 105 islands and countless rocky reefs and outcrops compose this labyrinth of land and sea in the Southern Ocean, where the wind blows for the greater part of the year and seafarers need to be stoic and doughty to survive. The Recherche is an area famed for its flora and fauna, particularly its bird life, and it attracts collectors, botanists, ornithologists, zoologists, fishermen and wreck divers from around Australia and the world. But the archipelago is also implicated in one of the great tales of Australian exploration and endeavour. In May 1803, Matthew Flinders, in command of the *Investigator*, dropped anchor off Middle Island and his crew spent days reprovisioning the ship. As they prepared to leave, Flinders let down two anchors, his stream and best bower anchors, to stop the ship being blown onto rocks.

When the wind changed suddenly, Flinders was forced

to cut the anchors loose rather than risk losing the ship. On such quick decisions and the hand of fate does history turn. The *Investigator* survived, as did Flinders and his crew to tell the tale. More than 150 years later, both anchors were recovered by underwater divers from South Australia and the stream anchor, which was later donated to the Australian Government, is now on permanent display at the National Museum of Australia.

The story of Flinders and his circumnavigation of Australia is a 'standard' of Australian history, learnt by school children across the country for generations. The trials and tribulations he and his crew endured are etched into our collective memory, not least his enforced detention at Mauritius while he waited for the end of the Napoleonic Wars.

Today we have the material evidence of this object, an anchor recovered from the waters off Esperance in 1973, to remind us how close Flinders came to irredeemable calamity in the course of his voyage. This is a case when the close study of an object found in a particular place, drawing both on material evidence and documentary accounts, can reveal an aspect of a national story that might otherwise remain in the margins.

As a museum director, I am entranced by the way that the biography of things like this, as much as biographies of individuals, can take us deep into aspects of Australia's past. And when I think about the very many objects that I have seen, both at my own museum and elsewhere, my mind invariably turns to one that I find genuinely spellbinding every time I see it. It is the Eureka flag that fleetingly flew above the Stockade during the miners' uprising of late 1854.

When I see this object, the hair literally stands up on the back of my neck as I try to associate this torn, damaged flag – on the face of it so banal and innocuous – with events at the core of our egalitarian imagination, with all of Eureka's echoes of the Chartist movement of the nineteenth century, and how it came to affect the political life of this country.

Objects like this draw communicative strength from two key factors. In the first instance, I think it is the power of the object's association with particular people, events or circumstances which lends it a capacity to affect and inform us. These object associations – it may be with a particular maker, or user of the object, or in this case a specific event – can be deeply moving. They also invest objects with personality, almost transforming them into actors in key events.

The other explanatory force of objects stems from their

association with particular places. Places have a capacity to affect us viscerally, as well as cognitively. I think this is why historic places are so bound up in our ideas about heritage values and significance. And when you see the object associated with the place from which it draws meaning, either *in situ* or through an interpretive evocation of its place association, then the capacity of that object to affect you, to communicate with you, is enhanced.

We all know where Circular Quay, or Sydney Cove, is – a place upon which our nation’s history turns, in many ways. In the collection of the National Museum there is an unlikely object that dates back to the early settler experience of Sydney Cove. It is a Wedgewood Medallion of 1789, made of clay sent back to England after the arrival of the First Fleet. It is a rare material trace of that ‘defining moment’.

Now, hold the image of the medallion in your mind as you consider some very different things – shell fishing hooks used by Eora Aboriginal people on the waters of what was to become known as Sydney Harbour. The shell hooks remind us that Sydney was a lived-in

human place, a place that was home to thirty distinct groups of Aboriginal people, long before the arrival of the First Fleet led by Captain Arthur Phillip in 1788.

It is objects like these that have encouraged the historian Grace Karskens to write in recent years that... ‘It is time to shake off the idea that Sydney was a “white” city, that Aboriginal people simply faded out of the picture and off “the stage of history”: it is simply untrue.’<sup>4</sup>

You do not need much more than these two small collections of things to conceive of something fundamental about Sydney, its sense of place and its history, which has clear ramifications for us all. The shell fishing hooks are evidence of First Australians for whom Sydney was home for countless generations, and the Wedgewood Medallion speaks of the British foundations at Sydney Town. Together, they are a poignant reminder of the clash of cultures, and the resultant challenges and contest, which flowed from the meeting of these two great, but very different, human societies in 1788.



*WJ Macdonnell standing outside the bank observatory with his refractor telescope, c1880s [Port Macquarie Historical Society]*

How do we understand why we write history, and what we are searching for in our study of the past? There is a sense, I think, of our historical practice being driven by an inherent contradiction, of the search for that which we know, and that which we do not. We move back and forth, incessantly, between the known and the unknown. The Australian historian Professor Tom Griffiths, in his wonderful book *The Art of Time Travel* puts it this way:

So here is our double historical quest: to be astonished as well as to understand. This tension goes to the heart of the historical enterprise – a tension between the past as familiar (and continuous with our own experience) and the past as strange (and therefore able to widen our understanding of what it means to be human).<sup>5</sup>

When we research and write about a place, person or a thing, we are working at a scale that is essentially human, something we can understand and digest, even when our ultimate intention may be to argue for a wider conceptual understanding of an historical theme or force. This, I think, is a clue to the immense value of working at a local or personal level when we study the past.

Such an approach cherishes the stories of us all as we seek to compose our narrative of the nation's history. It also affirms the deeply plural character of the national community, and acknowledges the diversity of human lives and experience. Perhaps a national story is not one in which one size fits all, but rather a mosaic of narratives and ideas that come together to create a rich and diverse amalgam of what we are as a people and a country. A deeply practical approach, for the story of a country known for its inherent pragmatism.

## About the author

Dr Mathew Trinca is the Director of the National Museum of Australia and Co-Chair of the Australia Singapore Arts Group. Under Dr Trinca's leadership, the National Museum has developed strongly engaged national and international programs that focus on bringing alive the stories of Australia for audiences around the country and overseas. The Museum has partnerships and programs with a range of cultural institutions abroad, including organisations in Singapore, China, Japan, Vietnam, France and the United Kingdom.

Mathew's interests span the twentieth century history of Australia, with a focus on the social and cultural relationships between Britain and Australia. He also has a professional interest in the historical and contemporary links between Australia and Asia. His publications include contributions to debates on

museum theory and practice, the history of Australian travel to the United Kingdom, on convictism in Western Australia, and on that State's constitutional history. He has also co-edited two books, *Country: Visions of Land and People in Western Australia* and *Under Suspicion: Citizenship and Internment in Australia during World War II*.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> W. Orchiston, 'William John MacDonnell and the development of astronomy in New South Wales', in *Journal of the British Astronomical Association*, vol.111, no.1, p.13.
- <sup>2</sup> M. McKenna, *Looking for Blackfellas' Point: An Australian History of Place*, UNSW Press, 2002, p.6
- <sup>3</sup> See for instance, B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, 1983.
- <sup>4</sup> G. Karskens, *The Colony: A History of Early Sydney*, Allen and Unwin, 2010, p.12.
- <sup>5</sup> T. Griffiths, *The Art of Time Travel: Historians and their Craft*, Black Inc., 2016, p.5.

## The Lesley Muir Address

In June 2012, the RAHS Council agreed that the keynote address to all RAHS Conferences would be named after Lesley Muir. This was an acknowledgement of the contribution that Lesley made to both the RAHS and local history in Australia. Lesley was an active member of the Affiliated Societies network from the early 1980s, serving on its Affiliated Societies Committee from 1985-2012. She also served as an RAHS Councillor from 2002-12.

Lesley had many research interests. From the 1980s she worked with Canterbury and District Historical Society to research, write and publish booklets on aspects of the district's history. Her largest community project involved researching and editing *Canterbury's Boys: World War I and Sydney's Suburban Fringe* (2002). In 1994 Lesley was awarded a Doctor of Philosophy in Historical Geography for her thesis *Shady Acres: Politicians, Developers and the Design of Sydney's Public Transport System 1873-1895*.

Lesley worked tirelessly to promote local history. Many RAHS and Affiliated Society members enjoyed her tours, workshops, talks and articles. Shortly before her death, she was made a Fellow of the RAHS, the Society's highest accolade. Those who knew her speak fondly of her energy, enthusiasm and modesty. The Lesley Muir Address continues her legacy by focusing on historical geography and the importance of place in history.