The Enlightenment, Imperialism, and the Evolution of Museums

> *We have a history of people putting Maori under a microscope in the same way a scientist looks at an insect. The ones doing the looking are giving themselves the power to define...*Merata Mita[1]

Introduction

The development of museums, zoos and universities in England coincided with the era of colonialism and imperialism, and consequently such institutions were culturally saturated with the notions of race and human classification that were popular at the time. As Prof. Linda Tuhiwai Smith points out,

> *…research became institutionalized in the colonies, not just through academic disciplines, but through learned and scientific societies and scholarly networks. The transplanting of research institutions, including universities, from the imperial centres of Europe enabled local scientific interests to be organized and embedded in the colonial system.* [2]

It is therefore necessary to interrogate the underlying ideologies and assumptions of western scientific thought to begin to properly understand the subtext of racism that informs the concept of museums and collections. In this essay I shall examine the early development of museums and their involvement in colonial process, as well as their role in the extensive accumulation of indigenous objects, artifacts and human remains. I will also look at how these collections and museum displays played an important role in both the colonists' justification of the dispossession of indigenous peoples, and the subsequent settler-society's creation of Hitlerian ' assimilation' policies, which were supported by anthropologists, and resulted in the 'Stolen Generations'.

The fact that some Australian museums might be making a belated effort to accommodate indigenous perceptions of history and culture does not absolve the institutions of past crimes, especially as some still will not acknowledge the historical racist and patriarchal notions that i nform their being. I will consequently conclude by examining how Australian museums are dealing with these post-modern challenges from the indigenous community, and see if the progress made really does make up for the way in which museums have

contributed to the racial gulf that divides Australia today.

The Enlightenment, Colonialism and Race

The very first museum was said to have been founded in third century Alexandria and destroyed 600 years later, and the next significant development was not until the Renaissance when, in fifteenth century Florence the word 'museum' was used to describe the Medici collection and gallery. [3] The great changes in European thinking over the next three hundred years led into what became known as the Enlightenment. In eighteenth century Europe the Enlightenment project had shaped notions of difference and 'race'. As Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze noted,

> *the Enlightenment's declaration of itself as 'the Age of Reason' was predicated upon precisely the assumption that reason could historically only come to maturity in modern Europe, while the inhabitants of areas outside Europe, who were considered to be of non-European racial and cultural origins, were consistently described and theorized as rationally inferior and savage.* [4]

Whilst ideas of 'difference' can be found long before the Enlightenment, in Greek philosophy and Medieval art and literature, Goldberg argues that these early beliefs and images 'furnished models that modern racism would assume and transform according to its own lights'.[5] From the Enlightenment project emerged a theory of knowledge called empiricism and the 'scientific paradigm of positivism', which involves ideas on how humans can examine and understand the natural world. Linda Tuhiwai Smith says that this 'understanding' was viewed as being akin to measuring,[6] thus institutionalizing an obsession with measurement, classification, and 'knowing'. As Smith points out, the theories and ideas of the West are,

> *…underpinned by a cultural system of classification and representation, by views about human nature, human morality and virtue, by conceptions of space and time, by conceptions of gender and race.* [7]

The eighteenth century saw the development of race consciousness as the colonizers became more familiar with the colonized, and Eze reminds us that,

'Enlightenment philosophy was instrumental in codifying and institutionalizing both the scientific and popular perceptions of the human race'.[8] Roberts says of the Enlightenment that its greatest political importance lay in its legacies to the future, and that the 18th century was thought to have, '… not merely to have invented earthly happiness as a feasible goal but also the thought that it could be measured and it could be promoted through the exercise of reason. Those ideas all had profound political implications.'[9]

Profound implications indeed, as these notions developed into ideas of collecting, classification and display of firstly things natural, and then human beings as Europe expanded into other peoples' worlds. The very expedition on which Captain Cook 'discovered' Australia was in fact a scientific expedition to Tahiti to observe the transit of Venus. The voyage was sponsored and equipped by the Royal Society in London which supervised the Greenwich Observatory, responsible for ultimately setting a world standard of time measurement.[10] The Royal Society, like most 'scientific' associations of the day, had began life, and still largely remained a group of amateurs and part-time enthusiasts. The society was dominated by, 'gentlemanly dabblers who could not by any stretch of the imagination have been called professional scientists but who lent to these bodies the indefinable but important weight of their standing and respectability'[11]

On board Cook's ship, *Endeavour*, was Botanist Joseph Banks who, reflecting the collecting, cataloguing and classification mania of the Royal Society, kept an extensive and intricate record of the voyage. His catalogue included not just a detailed daily diary, but also weather reports, tides, lists and illustrations of birds, plants and animals and peoples he encountered. Much of the flora collected by Banks was to find its way back to the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, which after being established in the 1770s, was to become an important repository and exhibiting site for plant specimens from around the world. The Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew came to symbolize the connection between education, science, technology and imperialism during the nineteenth century, and its displays were arranged geographically to create the effect of 'travelling around the world' for the visitor.

Throughout this era, collecting accompanied European acquisition of space, and as Paul Fox noted, each 'collection of objects constructed an image of a place previously unknown to Europeans'. When placed in museums these objects were 'transformed by their context into something that could be seen both as exotic and as typifying a place or people'.[12] As Smith notes, 'colonialism was not just about collection. It was also about re-arrangement, re-presentation and re-distribution'.[13]

In 1859 Charles Darwin published *Origin of the Species* which had an immediate impact, and when these theories developed to incorporate a general theory of human and social development, the notion was used by some to justify conceptions of superior and inferior peoples and nations. According to Smith,

> *'the concept of survival of the fittest used to explain the evolution of species in the natural world, was applied enthusiastically to the human world. It became a very powerful belief that indigenous peoples were inherently weak and therefore…would die out.'* [14]

This notion that the 'natives' of Australia, America and the Pacific were dying races fueled the mania for collecting artifacts and body parts of indigenous peoples. These events had coincided with the shift in mid-nineteenth century scientific outlook when the influence of racialism on scientific outlook strengthened and there occurred a drift in belief from 'monogenism' to 'polygenism'. Griffiths observed the result was, 'that by the 1850s, European and British scientists were moving towards a "scientific racism", a classification of the peoples of the world into fixed and distinct racial types'.[15]

As the booty plundered from other cultures of all parts of the British empire began to fill the storehouses of the British Museum, in 1861 land was purchased in South Kensington to build a new Museum of Natural History. When completed in 1881, this new museum initially constructed its displays to counter Darwinism, but under a new director, Henry Flower, in 1884 different ideas of scientific organization emerged and the museum became an advocate of evolution. Other new ideas about displaying objects in a manner to educate the public, with labels

and arranged around a specific context, and an implied hierarchy in display practices became very influential in the new colonial museums of Australia and America.

Australian Museums, the Colonial Mentality and Crimes Against Humanity

The colonies were close behind the 'Mother country' when it came to the proliferation of literary and learned societies which soon developed colonial models of British Botanical and Zoological Gardens and museums. As Fox noted, the 'colonial museum existed in a political space defined from the imperial centre. Consequently, the object in this museum existed physically in one place, while the knowledge about it resided elsewhere'.[16] In New Zealand in 1867, even before the establishment of a university, legislation was passed to create a public museum and the New Zealand Institute which published the first scholarly NZ journal for research on the Maori.[17]

In America the Museum of Archeology and Ethnology opened in 1866 in Harvard and in Australia one of the earliest public institutions was the Australian Museum, Sydney founded in 1827 when the Colonial Secretary in London provided an initial grant of £200. The idea had been around the colony since 1821 when the Philosophical Society of Australasia had been founded and was not opened to the public on its present site until 1857. The Colonial Museum was administered by the Colonial administration until 1836 when its name changed to the Australian Museum.[18] In more recent times Dylan Thomas said of this institution, 'This museum should be in a museum'.[19]

Melbourne was founded in 1835 and soon after gold was discovered at Ballarat and Bendigo and the population soared from 10,000 in 1841 to 100,000 in less than ten years.[20] In 1854 the colonial government set aside £2,000 'towards the establishment of a Museum of Natural History' and March 1st of that year is officially recognized as the commencing date of the museum. Three months later the museum's first Zoologist/Director, William Blandowski, was one of eight men

who established the Victorian Philosophical and Literary Society. In 1856 the museum was moved to the University of Melbourne where it was later to come under the influence of one Professor Baldwin Spencer, who had earlier been involved in the establishment of the Pitt-Rivers collection at Oxford. Spencer had been appointed as the first Chair of Biology at Melbourne University in 1887,[21] and remains a controversial figure in the eyes of some indigenous peoples. Thus the museum became connected to developing controversies in the academic disciplines of anthropology, biology and ethnography.

The nineteenth century had also seen the emergence of Anthropology as a 'science', and ethnography evolved as a form of culture collecting. Smith said of anthropology that, 'of all the disciplines (it) is the one most closely associated with the study of the Other and with the defining of primitivism.' She went on to suggest the, 'ethnographic "gaze" of anthropology has collected, classified and represented other cultures' to such an extent that Anthropologists are the academics most disliked by a wide range of indigenous peoples.[22] Perhaps this was in part because it was anthropologists more than any other academic discipline that worked closely with the colonial administrators of 'native affairs'.

As Cowlishaw has observed, in 1928 when Anthropology was established at Sydney University it was almost immediately was co-opted into involvement in the training of colonial 'patrol officers' for Papua New Guinea and the Northern Territory. Anthropologists became both the architects, builders and long-term maintainers of the policy of assimilation, and yet, as Cowlishaw states,

> *Neither the relationship between anthropological scholarship and the state nor the colonizing process was problematised. Applying the science of anthropology apparently did not require any intellectual scrutiny.* [23]

Social Darwinism had also become very popular in Australia, especially among the scientific community. Markus said that for scientists, administrators and politicians,

> *...racial categories provided the organizing concepts of the three groups; that racial assumptions dominated the work of academics and*

> *administrators; that while administrators took an interest in academic research, that nearly all politicians derived their racial categories from practical experience...*[24]

The Elder Professor of Anatomy at the University of Adelaide in 1926 theorized that Aborigines were, 'too low in the scale of humanity' to benefit from 'the civilizing influence of Anglo Saxon rule'.[25] In the 1920's and 30's Australia's Aborigines were of immense curiosity to scientists and academics who believed that they were the 'missing link' species that would advance the cause of Social Darwinism. Markus noted, 'one doesn't have to read extensively to discern that a central concern of anatomists was to establish whether Aborigines were closer to the animal than human'.[26] Indigenous peoples throughout the colonies were beleaguered by 'scientists' interested in such things as similarities between Aborigines and Chimpanzees, brain capacity and cranium size. One study in 1920 concluded that, 'the average brain capacity of Aborigines was between the normal medium intelligence of twelve or thirteen year old children'[27]

These ideas and attitudes were reflected in the journals, exhibitions and displays of indigenous culture and artifacts by Australian museums as Aborigines were cast as 'a dying race'. With the collusion of the anthropological establishment, a political plan evolved which developed into an Australian policy of "assimilation". The theory was that mixed-race people should be absorbed into the general white community over a period of time. At the same time the "full-bloods" would die off, thus maintaining the desired racial homogeneity of Australian society. This plan found expression when, on 21st April 1937, the first ever conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal authorities declared as its major resolution, under the general heading 'Destiny of the Race',

> *That this conference believes that the destiny of the natives of aboriginal origin, but not of the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth, and it therefore recommends that all efforts be directed to that end.*[28]

Writing a decade after this conference, the former Western Australian Protector of Aborigines, Mr. A. O. Neville, revealed himself as an advocate of miscegenation as a means of eradicating a potential future race problem. As an

influential former administrator in Aboriginal affairs he contended that to encourage so-called 'half-bloods' to intermarry with either white men or other 'mixed-bloods' ('octoroons', 'quadroons', etc.) would produce children with increasingly less 'Aboriginal blood' through several generations. Thus any future 'racial problem' could be avoided.[29]

These notions became embedded in Australian popular culture and have been central to most peoples understanding of 'Aborigines' for the past hundred years, resonating down through generations of Anglo-Australians. To this day one can still frequently encounter members of the academy and museum boards who cling to the old fallacies of the past, with no insight into the hegemonic stance they take. Even as some major Australian museums do face the challenges thrown up by indigenous demands for a voice and reassessment of the past, it still seems far too little far too late.

New Attitudes Develop in Some Australian Museums

The very latest in Australian museums will be the Museum Victoria in Melbourne, which cost $288 million and will feature an indigenous centre, *Bunjilaka*. In this indigenous space the museum says it will, through a series of exhibitions, explore the 'contemporary rights, recognition and perspectives of Australia's indigenous communities', and also 'serve as a gateway to Museum Victoria's magnificent collection of indigenous cultural material'.[30] This is clearly a new attitude and approach by museums, but it dates back only seven years to 1993, which was International Year of Indigenous People. It was a period of intense national and international scrutiny and soul-searching about indigenous-white relations in Australia, and ironically also coincided with increasing international interest in Aboriginal art and culture.

Local museums began to establish indigenous galleries and invite co-operation from indigenous curators and advisory committees. Since 1985 the South Australian Museum, which claims to have the 'world's largest and most

comprehensive collection of Australian Aboriginal material culture',[31] has taken the view that it is merely the custodian or trustee of its 3000 piece collection of indigenous artefacts rather than "owners". But even these measures are regarded as tokenistic by some indigenous curators and historians who argue strongly for less non-indigenous anthropologists on museum staff and more social historians.[32] Given the sorry history of people associated with the museum movement in Australia over the past 150 years, one might expect more in the way of reconciliatory gestures in the present.

Conclusion

Paul Fox asks the question, 'do Australians inhabit a postcolonial world or a landscape of colonial memories?' He points out that in the process of reconstruction by museums and anthropologists of Aboriginal culture through European recording, classification and representation, the indigenous voice was silenced.[33] Goldberg further argues that today's 'Western ways of viewing, talking about and interacting with the world at large are intricately embedded in racialized discourses'.[34]

At the turn of the millenium, the indigenous voice is again being heard despite continuing attempts to muzzle and mute; as Australian museums and, to a lesser extent, tertiary academic institutions begin reluctantly to face the truth of their own history. The belated acknowledgement by a few of Australia's major museums that their past practices have impinged on indigenous human and cultural rights should not be prematurely celebrated. It is not so much the progress that should be examined, but rather the broader failure of many areas of academia to do the same thing. After all, museums and universities developed at the same point in history, derive from the same European intellectual and 'scientific' origins, and mutually sustain each other through research and staffing.

Why is it then that museums seem able to acknowledge past errors and begin to make amends in meaningful ways, but their sister institutions universities and

their departments of anthropology, archaeology and social sciences stubbornly resist change. In that sense, Australian museums might be seen to be very progressive today, given their record of the past one hundred and fifty years, when compared to an institution such as the University of Melbourne. The university not only has done little to redress the role it has played, and continues to play, in the misrepresentation of indigenous culture and history, but continues to flaunt its association with disreputable figures from another era of racial ideas. The prominent "Spencer-Baldwin Building" is named after a former director of the Melbourne Museum, who in 1927 wrote,

> *Australia is the present home and refuge of creatures often crude and quaint that elsewhere have passed away and given place to higher forms. This applies equally to the Aboriginal as the platypus and kangaroo.* [35]

The irony today is that the new Museum of Melbourne would be embarrassed by such aspects of its history, whereas University of Melbourne glorifies the man and honors the sentiments by naming a university space (on indigenous land) after him. Thus demonstrating the miniscule progress made by those who might seek a more enlightened academy.

The Prosecution rests its case.

Gary Foley
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Notes

[1] Merata Mita, 'Merata Mita On…', in *The New Zealand Listener*, 14 October 1989, 30.

[2] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1999), 8.

[3] Gary Edson and David Dean, *The Handbook for Museums*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 3-4.

[4] Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, ed. *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 4.

[5] Daniel Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture, Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 23.

[6] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 1999, 42.

[7] Ibid., 44.

[8] Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment*, 1997, 5.

[9] J.M. Roberts, *The Penguin History of the World*, (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 667.

[10] Smith, 1999, 54.

[11] Ibid., 657.

[12] Paul Fox, 'Memory, the Museum and the Postcolonial World', *Meanjin*, Vol. 51, No 2, 1992, 308.

[13] Smith, 1999, 62.

[14] Ibid., 62.

[15] Tom Griffiths, 'Victorian Skullduggery' in *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia*, (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 39.

16] Fox, 1992, 308-309.

[17] Smith, 1999, 86.

[18] See, < http://www.austmus.gov.au/is/archives/fact01.htm>

[19] Dylan Thomas quoted in 'Brushing the Cobwebs', *The Times,* 5 July 1990, p.13.

[20] See, < http://www.geocities.com/TheTropics/Cove/5800/melbourne/t_hstry.htm>

[21] R.T.M. Pescott, *Collections of a Century: The History of the First Hundred Years of the National Museum of Victoria*, (Melbourne: National Museum of Victoria, 1954), 89-109.

[22] Smith, 1999, 66-67.

[23] Gillian Cowlishaw, 'Studying Aborigines', in Bain Attwood and John Arnold, eds, *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*, (Melbourne: La Trobe University Press, 1992), 22.

[24] Andrew Markus, "After the Outward Appearance: Scientists, administrators and politicians", *all that dirt: An Australian 1938 Monograph*, ed. Bill Gammage and Andrew Markus, (Canberra: History Project Incorporated, 1982), 87.

[25] Markus, 1982, 86.

[26] Ibid. p.86.

[27] Markus, 1982, 90.

[28] Commonwealth of Australia, Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities, *Aboriginal Welfare*, Canberra, April 1937.

[29] See, A. O. Neville, *Australia's Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community*, (Sydney: Currawong Publishing, 1947)

[30] From: *A Museum for the New Millenium: a companion booklet to the Museums Board of*

Victoria 1998-99 Annual Report, 10-11.

31] Christopher Anderson, 'Aboriginal People and Museums: Restricting Access to Increase It', *Artlink*, vol. 12 no.11, 12.

[32] Gaye Skulthorpe, 'Interpreting Aboriginal History in a Museum Context', *Museums Australia*, vols. 2-3, 1991-2, pp.49-56.

[33] Fox, 1992, 311.

[34] Ibid., 45.

[35] Baldwin Spencer and F.J. Gillen, *The Arunta: A Study of a Stone Age People*, (London: Macmillan, 1927), vol. 1, p. vii.

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