

Treasures

Author : Tim Sherratt

Tagged as : [archives](#), [collections](#), [history of science](#), [libraries](#), [museums](#), [narrative](#), [objects](#), [stories](#)

Date : June 29, 2005

Tim Sherratt, review of *Treasures of the Museum, Victoria, Australia and Land Nation People: Stories from the National Museum of Australia*, in *Historical Records of Australian Science*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2005, pp. 122-125.

Australia is blessed, it seems, with a frightening abundance of treasures. A quick survey of our cultural institutions reveals an escalating 'treasures race', as libraries, museums, and archives bombard the public with accounts of their rarest, most beautiful, and most interesting items. The State Library of Victoria, for example, has published a lavish description of its 'treasures', and features them prominently on its redesigned website. The National Library of Australia also has an online display of its most treasured holdings, hoping to bring in sponsorship for a permanent 'treasures gallery'. Meanwhile, the 'Treasures Gallery' at the National Archives of Australia is already up and running, while the South Australian Museum guides visitors around a 'treasures trail'. The Australian Museum recently presented their 'treasures' in a special exhibition, and even the University of Melbourne has catalogued the highlights of its collections in a glossy book of 'treasures'. Celebrating its 150th birthday, the Museum of Victoria has made an impressive entry into the fray, with a well-designed treasures website, a treasures trail for visitors, and a beautiful volume simply entitled *Treasures of the Museum*.

All this treasure hunting might be seen a sign of conservative pressure upon our cultural institutions. Instead of seeking to enlarge their roles as places of research, interpretation and debate, it seems safer to fall back on familiar stereotypes of vaults and storehouses, keeping safe the nation's heritage. Treasures are, by their nature, precious things — often protected by 'lock and key', 'hidden' from casual scrutiny. It is a label that promotes difference over familiarity, a feeling of reverence and awe over our ability to engage and connect. On the other hand, in an age of interactive exhibits and virtual museums, it is rather reassuring to realise that objects still provide such a potent source of meaning. Institutions trade on their treasures because we crave the experience of authenticity. We want the feeling of wonder, recognition and surprise that only comes from getting up close to the 'real thing'.

In any case, cultural 'treasures' can be identified in a nuanced and reflective way, as *Treasures of the Museum* well demonstrates. Some of the objects it describes are beautiful, some are perplexing, some are funny, some are horrifying. Seemingly commonplace items are revealed as amongst the most challenging and evocative, such as the red vinyl suitcase with which Cuc Lam fled Vietnam in 1978. That most treasured of treasures, Phar Lap, is included of course. However, 'the most famous quadruped in Australia' is introduced by a guest contributor, Phillip Adams, whose recollection of his own childhood fascination, of 'nose prints on the glass case', focuses attention not on the object but on our own experiences and memories. The majority of entries, illustrated by a magnificent series of photographs, are by museum staff, and vary in quality and tone. Some are merely descriptive, others offer intriguing fragments of larger stories. There is much pleasure and interest to be gained from repeated dipping and browsing.

Whilst no doubt wishing to claim its own share of treasures, the National Museum of Australia chooses to cast itself not as a repository, but as a 'storyteller'. Seeking to interpret the 'national story' is a brave undertaking, as evidenced by the criticism that has dogged the museum since its opening. *Land Nation People: Stories from the National Museum of Australia* is a determined restatement of the museum's commitment 'to telling the stories of Australia and Australians, and

debating the key issues, events and people that have shaped and influenced our nation'. The book provides a condensed version of the museum itself, presenting major themes and selected objects from each of its exhibition areas: 'First Australians', 'Horizons', 'Nation', and 'Tangled destinies'. With the exhibitions set to change in response to a review foisted on the museum by its critics, the book is an interesting historical document in itself. While the Museum of Victoria celebrates its long and illustrious past, the National Museum of Australia seeks to record the ambitions and achievements of its first few, turbulent years.

By unashamedly drawing attention to the process and practice of storytelling, the National Museum challenges curators, historians, and visitors to face up to the difficulties of narrative. With conservative commentators calling for the reinstatement of grand narratives of Australia's progress all the way from Cook to cricket, there needs to be greater acceptance that the crafting of engaging and insightful stories from the complexities and contradictions of the past is hard, skilled, and creative work. There are no easy answers.

That said, there is nothing particularly innovative about the storytelling in *Land Nation People*. The stories are colourful and interesting, though rarely surprising, the themes are important, and like the *Treasures of the Museum*, the book assembles an intriguing collection of objects and illustrations. Indeed, despite the possible tension between 'treasures' and 'stories', there is much in the two books that is similar. The organisation of *Treasures of the Museum* also reflects the institution's current structure, with the treasures divided into their respective collection areas of 'Australian Society and Technology', 'Indigenous Cultures', and 'Sciences'. This is uninspired and unfortunate: Weary Dunlop's medical instruments, for example, are uncomfortably tacked on to the end of 'Sciences', while the anthropological collections of Baldwin Spencer and Donald Thompson, featured in 'Indigenous cultures', are separated from their collectors who are locked up in the 'Sciences' section. If you are going to take a 'treasures' approach, why impose disciplinary boundaries at all? Interestingly, the companion website offers an alternative structure, grouping objects under such headings as 'Celebrity', 'Messages', 'Journeys', and 'Survivors'.

More importantly, of course, both books are concerned with the relationship between object and story. 'Museum objects', remarks the Museum of Victoria's CEO, 'are like comets travelling through time and space, trailing streams of meanings'. Both books seek ways of making these meanings visible, and in doing so they reveal connections, contrasts and queries. This process is more explicit in *Land Nation People*, but *Treasures of the Museum* traverses much the same thematic territory, relying on assemblage instead of argument to explore the broader significance of its objects. The experience of immigration and arrival feature prominently in both, as does the complexity of indigenous culture. Both also seek to document ways in which we have come to know and understand the continent.

The 'Tangled Destinies' section of *Land Nation People* is most obviously concerned with the interaction of people and environment, but examples of change and adaptation are spread across both volumes. One has the story of William Farrer and his 'Federation' wheat, the other counters with the stump-jump plough. The sophistication of indigenous technology, and the ability of indigenous people to adapt to environmental and cultural change are well demonstrated. Both books feature a display of 'Kimberley points'—spearheads crafted not just from traditional materials, but also from ceramics and glass.

Gesturing towards the supposed inventive streak within the Australian character, *Land Nation People* introduces two of the best known—and perhaps most overrated—Australian inventions under the banner of 'Nation'. Yes, where would we be without the Victa mower and the Hills hoist? *Treasures of the Museum* takes us into less familiar realms with the black box flight recorder and the Shephard micro-ruling engine, which, in the late nineteenth century, pushed the limits of precision measurement. Technologies of measurement and control appear in a variety of guises, reflecting the desire of European settlers to define the limits and boundaries of their new possession. Artefacts from the geodetic survey of Victoria can be contrasted with the Anton Breinl's

hot-air cabinet, used to study the effects of the tropical climate on white workers—both speak to questions of possession and legitimacy. The clock used to maintain standard time throughout Victoria seems to have little in common with the field trowel used by archaeologist John Mulvaney. But both sought to redefine our conception of time: one brought local timekeeping practices within a centralised system, the other helped locate the human occupation of Australia within the immense span of deep time.

The natural sciences, of course, dominate the scientific collections of the Museum of Victoria, reflecting both the nature of the disciplines and the history of the institution. However, featured prominently amongst its ‘treasures’ are not just collections of birds, insects, minerals, and fossils, but the people who assembled them—the collectors themselves. John Gould, Alfred Russel Wallace, William Blandowski, and even Charles Darwin, make an appearance. This is an important inclusion, because it emphasises the *process* of collecting, the way in which scientific knowledge itself is constructed. Although most of the national science collections went elsewhere, the National Museum effectively uses the stories of Harry Burrell and Colin Mackenzie to similar ends. The lives and works of such individuals offers insight not just into the development of biology, but into the passion for collecting, understanding, and knowing, that motivates science in general.

While it is perhaps the historical and aesthetic dimensions of the scientific collections that make them most appealing, their continuing role in research is vitally important. *Treasures of the Museum* notes the scientific significance of the many type specimens within its collections, as well as the ongoing work of its staff to develop a cryogenic collection of tissue samples from rare and threatened species. Such a reminder that the collections themselves are living, growing things offers further complexity to the idea of ‘treasures’. Strangely, while the National Museum describes work to conserve and develop the National Historical Collection, there is little mention of its own research activities, particularly in environmental and indigenous history. Surely this too is a story worth telling.

This omission adds to the rather static feeling of *Land Nation and People*. As a snapshot of the museum, complete with obligatory corporate guff about its cutting edge multimedia technology and innovative architecture, the book seems to be more of a record of a visit—a reminder or a souvenir—rather than something to be explored and enjoyed for its own sake. *Treasures of the Museum*, on the other hand, offers the twin pleasures of familiarity and surprise. Museum-tragics like myself, who spent happy days wandering amongst the old Swanston Street exhibitions, will discover many favourites amidst the ‘treasures’. One of the goldfield models is included, as well as the wax fruits and the working models case. At the same time, you have the sense that you are peeking behind the scenes, gaining access to wonders rarely seen in public.

The National Museum is committed to telling a diverse range of stories, but this worthy aim does not seem well-served by *Land Nation People*. The attempt to downsize the exhibitions for book consumption has taken away any feeling of exploration or uncertainty—it all seems a little too controlled. It is precisely this feeling of exploration that makes *Treasures of the Museum* so much fun to dip into. There’s more space here to imagine, wonder, and connect. There is much left unsaid, many questions unanswered, and the entries are frustratingly brief. But you are left with the feeling that there is much more to know, many more stories to tell, many more treasures to be revealed.

Share this:

discontents

working for the triumph of content over form, ideas over control, people over systems
<http://discontents.com.au>

- [Click to email this to a friend \(Opens in new window\)](#)
- [Click to print \(Opens in new window\)](#)
- [Click to share on Twitter \(Opens in new window\)](#)
- [Share on Facebook \(Opens in new window\)](#)
- [Click to share on Google+ \(Opens in new window\)](#)
-

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).