

4

ECHOES FROM THE PAST
ORAL HISTORY IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA
/
ΑΝΤΙΛΑΛΟΙ ΑΠΟ ΤΟ ΠΑΡΕΛΘΟΝ
ΠΡΟΦΟΡΙΚΗ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑ ΣΤΟ ΕΘΝΙΚΟ ΜΟΥΣΕΙΟ ΤΗΣ ΑΥΣΤΡΑΛΙΑΣ

Louise Zarmati*

ABSTRACT

When the National Museum of Australia opened in 2001 it was severely criticised by right-wing politicians, historians and journalists for being too negative and ‘too politically correct’, especially in its depiction of Aboriginal history. The target was the *Contested Frontiers* display in the *First Australians* gallery which presented the view that particular frontier conflicts had resulted in massacres of Aboriginal people. Conservative historian Keith Windschuttle claimed that Aboriginal oral history accounts of the massacres were unreliable, fabricated ‘mythology’, and was appalled that the Museum would exhibit such a spurious story. Defence came from the progressive left, and was led by academic historians Stuart Macintyre, Graeme Davison and Bain Attwood, who endorsed the Museum’s postmodernist methodology, and its multivocal

Dr. Louise Zarmati is Lecturer in Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Tasmania, Australia.
Louise.Zarmati@utas.edu.au

MuseumEdu 2 / November 2015, pp. 53-62.

Copyright © 2015 by Museum Education and Research Laboratory, University of Thessaly.
All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.

interpretations that tackled differing perspectives of the treatment of Aboriginal people. In this paper I will show how the National Museum of Australia responded to criticisms of its use of oral history, and how it used this negativity in a positive way to educate the public, particularly school students, not only about Australia's frontier conflict, but about the problems of using oral history as a source of evidence in museums.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Όταν άνοιξε το National Museum of Australia (NMA), Εθνικό Μουσείο της Αυστραλίας, το 2001, δέχθηκε οξεία κριτική από δεξιούς πολιτικούς, ιστορικούς και δημοσιογράφους για το ότι ήταν υπερβολικά αρνητικό και «πολιτικά ορθό», ειδικά όσον αφορά την απεικόνιση της ιστορίας των ιθαγενών. Στόχος της κριτικής ήταν η έκθεση *Αμφισβητούμενα Σύνορα* στην πτέρυγα του Μουσείου *Οι Πρώτοι Αυστραλοί*, η οποία παρουσίαζε την άποψη ότι οι διαμάχες γύρω από συγκεκριμένα σύνορα οδήγησε σε δολοφονίες ιθαγενών πληθυσμών. Ο συντηρητικός ιστορικός Keith Windschuttle υποστήριξε ότι οι προφορικές αφηγήσεις των Αβοριγίνων για τις δολοφονίες ήταν αναξιόπιστες, κατασκευασμένη «μυθολογία» και δήλωσε συγκλονισμένος από το γεγονός ότι το Μουσείο παρουσίασε μία τόσο ψεύτικη ιστορία. Η υπεράσπιση του NMA ήρθε από την προοδευτική Αριστερά με προεξάρχοντες τους ακαδημαϊκούς ιστορικούς Stuart Macintyne, Graeme Davison και Bain Attwood, οι οποίοι προσυπέγραψαν τη μεταμοντέρνα μεθοδολογία του Μουσείου και την πολυφωνία των ερμηνευτικών προσεγγίσεών του, οι οποίες αναδείκνυαν διστάμενες απόψεις σχετικά με τον χειρισμό των Αβοριγίνων. Στο κείμενο αυτό θα δείξω πώς το Εθνικό Μουσείο της Αυστραλίας απάντησε στις κριτικές για τη χρήση της προφορικής ιστορίας και πώς αξιοποίησε αυτό το αρνητικό κλίμα με θετικό τρόπο, για να εκπαιδεύσει το κοινό, και ειδικά τους μαθητές, όχι μόνο ως προς τη διαμάχη σχετικά με τη μεθόριο της Αυστραλίας, αλλά και για τα προβλήματα που ενέχει η χρήση της προφορικής ιστορίας ως πηγής τεκμηρίωσης στα μουσεία.

Η Δρ. Luise Zarmati είναι Λέκτορας Ανθρωπιστικών και Κοινωνικών Επιστημών στο University of Tasmania στην Αυστραλία. Louise.Zarmati@utas.edu.au

Background

The National Museum of Australia (NMA) is a social history museum located in Canberra, Australia's national capital. Its mission is to explore the land, nation and people of Australia by focusing on Indigenous histories and cultures, the histories of European settlement and the Australian people's interaction with the environment.

When the NMA opened in 2001, old debates about the nature of Australian history that characterised the so-called 'history wars' were quickly reignited and the battleground shifted to Australia's new museum. A barrage of criticism was launched from the conservative right, the most outspoken being then-Prime Minister John Howard and polemical history writer Keith Windschuttle. They chided the museum for being too negative and 'too politically correct', especially in its depiction of Aboriginal history. One journalist claimed the Museum's underlying message was "one of sneering ridicule for white Australia...as if all non-Aboriginal culture is a joke" (Devine 2001).

Windschuttle's criticisms targeted the *Contested Frontiers* display in the *First Australians* gallery which presented the view that particular frontier conflicts had resulted in massacres of Aboriginal people. He argued that Aboriginal oral history accounts of the massacres were unreliable, fabricated 'mythology', and it was appalling that the Museum would exhibit "such an elaborate display about such a spurious story" (Windschuttle 2001: 12).

Defence came from the progressive left, and was led by academic historians Stuart Macintyre, Graeme Davison and Bain Attwood. They endorsed the Museum's methodology, and its multivocal interpretations that tackled differing perspectives of the treatment of Aboriginal people. Attwood supported the title "Contested Frontiers" because it deliberately drew attention to the fact that the history of frontier contact has been, and still is contentious (Attwood 2006).

This is a brief background to the heated debate, but my purpose is not to revisit the details. Rather I will show how the NMA responded to criticisms of its use of oral history, and how it used this negativity in a positive way to educate the public, particularly school students, not only about Australia's frontier conflict, but about the problems of using oral history as a source of evidence in museums.

Contested history in the *Contested Frontiers* gallery

The NMA's 2001 *Contested Frontiers* display consisted of three cases, with the most controversial interpretation, the Bells Falls Gorge¹ narrative, located in the final case.

Curator Brad Manera stated that his intention was to present an indigenous voice because

the stories have been passed from one generation to the next about what happened on that site [...] they are quite convinced that something very tragic occurred [...] and they are certain that members of their family, their language group, died in that place in the 1820s (Mark 2001, oral interview).

Manera used interviews with local Aboriginal people to reveal the longstanding oral tradition among the Wiradjuri² people of a massacre in their local area. The exhibit showed a photograph of Bells Falls Gorge³, the place where some Aboriginal people believe a massacre took place in the 1820s. Etched into the glass in front were the words of Wiradjuri Elder Bill Allen,

This is a place of great sadness. Our people still hear echoes of the women and children who died here. They came to seek refuge but the armed white settlers found them and killed them.

Bill Allen was again quoted on a panel to the left of the photograph,

The British declared martial law on Wiradjuri land in 1824. This, from our point of view, was an excuse for the soldiers and armed settlers to go out and kill hundreds of Wiradjuri men, women and children.

The staunchest critic was conservative writer Keith Windschuttle who objected to the interpretation because he believed that the “Bells Falls Gorge Massacre”⁴ derived “from mythology rather than history. All the ‘evidence’ about this incident is based on oral tales told in the twentieth century” (Windschuttle 2003a).

Windschuttle argued that Aboriginal oral history is completely unreliable when uncorroborated by original documents (Windschuttle 2003b: 106). “Old legends and oral history, unless they are corroborated by original documents, are worthless as historical evidence, whether told by blacks or whites” (Windschuttle 2003b: 110).

In contrast, indigenous historian Frances Peters-Little argues that the responsibility of the historian should be to seek knowledge of an indigenous perspective and lived experience, not to undermine it by squabbling about whether it is ‘accurate’. Aboriginal viewpoints should be at the very least included, considered and understood with compassion (Peters-Little 2010: 4).

Public criticism of the NMA was vitriolic and so politically powerful that a review was undertaken only two years after its opening. The Review Panel recommended that a series of principles should guide exhibitions covering controversial issues: scholarship and research should govern the museum’s approach; space should be given to presenting different schools of credible thought; debate and analysis should be

encouraged through conferences, publications and the website, and the NMA should use technology to provide extended access to the debate.

The Review Panel approved the NMA's use of oral history as a basis for exhibits with the proviso that, where an issue is likely to attract public debate and scrutiny, the museum should be careful to ensure that oral testimonies are backed by a wider range of sources (Carroll 2003: 35).

To its credit, the NMA responded positively to the recommendations of the 2003 review and devised a two-pronged approach to revision that placated those who argued for the complete removal of the exhibit, and those who argued that it should be retained because it tackled the unpalatable truth that killings of this nature *did* occur on the Australian frontier (Attwood 2006). *Contested Frontiers* would be replaced with a new exhibition about frontier conflict, and an interactive historical investigation focusing on the debate about the previous interpretation would be made available on the Museum's website for study by school students.

Voices of the past, echoes in the present

The new exhibition called *Resistance* was launched in 2008. It presents four stories of resistance by Aboriginal people to British colonisation from the 1830s to the 1930s: Yagan, a young Noongar⁵ man who fought injustice against his people during the 1830s; Fanny Balbuk a prominent Noongar woman, who protested against the occupation of her traditional land in the late 1800s; Bilin Bilin, a prominent leader of the Yugambeh⁶ people who fought to maintain his culture and identity in the face of the British occupation; and the Coniston Massacre, a series of events which led to the violent reprisal murder of over 60 Aboriginal people in central Australia in 1928. Each story is based on substantiated, official historical records and accompanied by relevant, authentic artefacts.

Unlike *Contested Frontiers* which relied on written versions of oral history interviews, *Resistance* uses video presentations of interviews with Aboriginal people who are either related to the key historical personalities, or played an active part in the commemoration of their memory. The acts of resistance in the past play a significant role in the personal identities of Aboriginal people in the present.

Ken Colbung, an Aboriginal elder from the Noongar community in Perth, West Australia, talks about the personal impact of his campaign to return Yagan's remains (see above) to Australia:

Having been over in England and discovered where Yagan was, and also getting permission from the authorities in England, I believe that I became

closely attached to him and he became attached to me, in the Aboriginal way of spiritual connection.

Seventeen-year-old Axel Best explains the deep connection he feels to his ancestor Bilin Bilin when he visits their traditional land:

The eagle was very important to Bilin Bilin and he was quite upset when the white people were shooting them down. I like to think that Bilin Bilin was the eagle for his people. I hope I can make a difference like he did. *Ngulli yahnbai gulli bahn*. We are still here.

As a child, Walpiri⁷ woman Theresa Napurrurla Ross, was told the story of the Coniston Massacre by her father who had witnessed the event when he was 15 years-old. She said to herself, “when I grow up I will write this down and put it in a book so that a lot of people can know about it.” Most significantly, the Aboriginal oral tradition of the massacre differs to the official accounts by the authorities. Theresa Napurrurla Ross reported:

The Board of Enquiry said 31 were killed. But when I interviewed the old men at Willowra they told me there were many others, and women and children as well. The old men said no, they killed hundreds and hundreds.

These narratives are supported by downloadable learning materials for secondary students which investigate Aboriginal resistance to colonisation.⁸

The new *Resistance* exhibit demonstrates the centrality of oral history to Aboriginal culture today and to the personal identity of the people associated with the events. Oral history connects past actions and people with present and future generations. It is the means by which Aboriginal people connect to their ancestors and their past and construct their identity in the present. The exhibit makes a strong statement that the stories of the ancestors are echoed in the voices of their descendants today.

Bells Falls Gorge: An interactive investigation

In response to the Review Panel’s requirement that the museum should use technology to provide extended access to issues of debate, an interactive online investigation was made available in the Education section of the NMA’s website.⁹

The target audience is secondary history students between the ages of 16 and 18 years. I have used these learning materials with senior students studying New South Wales’s History Extension historiography course¹⁰ and found them to be an excellent way to stimulate discussion and research on controversial topics about the reliability of oral sources and the interpretations of history in museums.

Students begin by viewing the online virtual tour of the *Contested Frontiers* exhibition accompanied by the deep, sombre tones of a cello. They are directed to the *Bells Falls Gorge* case, and can zoom in to look more closely at the artefacts and text. A button asks, ‘Why is the display controversial?’, and a quote by Windschuttle questions the credibility of the sources on which the conclusions are based. Another button asks, ‘How do we analyse a museum display?’, and students view six criteria with additional critical questions that can be used to analyse the different elements of a museum display.¹¹ Comments from Windschuttle and Davison present conflicting judgements on the reliability of the sources, and the impact of the display on the visitor. The final step in the inquiry asks students to decide which interpretation is the most valid and whether or not the Museum’s original display was misleading or biased. This pedagogical approach is powerful because the students rather, than the museum’s curators, become the critics and interpreters of history.

Conclusion

The example of the controversy surrounding the *Contested Frontiers* exhibit is an exemplary case study in how museums can turn the negativity of harsh criticism into a positive learning outcome. It demonstrates that museums have a social responsibility to become places for dialogue about history, and to ensure that multiple voices and perspectives are presented. The new *Resistance* exhibit achieves this by using contemporary oral history to echo the voices and experiences of Aboriginal people whose lives were profoundly changed by British colonisation.

References

- Attwood, B. (2006). “Contesting frontiers: History, memory and narrative in a national museum”, *reCollections: Journal of the National Museum of Australia*, 1(2), (September). Retrieved 12.9.2013, from:
http://recollections.nma.gov.au/issues/vol_1_no_2/papers/contesting_frontiers
- Attwood, B. & Foster S.G. (Eds.) (2003). *Frontier Conflict: The Australian experience*. Canberra, ACT: National Museum of Australia.
- Carroll, J. (2003). *Review of the National Museum of Australia: Its exhibitions and public programs. A report to the Council of the National Museum of Australia*. Retrieved 10.9.2013 from:
http://www.nma.gov.au/about_us/ips/review-of-exhibitions-and-public-programs

- Davison, G. (2013). Conflict in the museum. In B. Attwood, & S.G. Foster (Eds.), *Frontier conflict: The Australian experience* (pp. 201-214). Canberra, ACT: National Museum of Australia,.
- Devine, M. (2001). "A nation trivialised", *Daily Telegraph*, 12 March. Retrieved 10.9.2013 from:
<http://www.mkc.nsw.edu.au:3390/PDFs/HISTORY%20EXTENSION%20PDFs/NMA%20Controversy.pdf>
- Macintyre, S., & Clark, A. (2003). *The History Wars*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Mark, D. (2001). "Did the Bells Falls Gorge Massacre happen?" Interview with Brad Manera, Curator, National Museum of Australia, on *PM ABC Radio*, 13 August. Retrieved 23.10.2013, from: <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/stories/s345657.htm>
- National Museum of Australia. (n.d.). *Resistance Exhibition*. Retrieved 22.10.2013, from: http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/first_australians/resistance
- National Museum of Australia. (n.d.). *Bells Forge Gorge virtual tour. Assessing a museum display: interactive activities*. Retrieved 25.10.2013, from: http://www.nma.gov.au/education-kids/classroom_learning/multimedia/interactives/bells_falls_gorge
- National Museum of Australia & Rybuck Media (2004). *How do museums represent history?* Retrieved 28.9.2013 from: <http://www.hyperhistory.org/images/assets/pdf/museum.pdf>
- Peters-Little, F., Curthoys, A. & Docker, J. (Eds.) (2010). *Passionate Histories: Myth, memory and Indigenous Australia*. Canberra: ANU e-Press and Aboriginal History Inc.
- Windschuttle, K. (2003a). *Submission to review of National Museum of Australia*. Retrieved 10.9.2013 from: http://www.nma.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/2486/Mr_Keith_Windshuttle.pdf.
- Windschuttle, K. (2003b). Doctored evidence and invented incidents in Aboriginal historiography. In B. Attwood & S.G. Foster (Eds.), *Frontier conflict: The Australian experience* (pp.99-112). Canberra: National Museum of Australia.
- Windschuttle, K. (2001). "How not to run a museum: People's history at the postmodern museum", *Quadrant*, (September 2001), 11-19.

Endnotes

¹ The virtual tour of the Bells Falls Gorge section of the *Contested Frontiers* exhibit is available at:

http://www.nma.gov.au/education-kids/classroom_learning/multimedia/interactives/bells_falls_gorge

² Wiradjuri is a group of indigenous Australian people who live in central New South Wales.

³ Bells Falls Gorge is located about 245 kilometres north-west of Sydney, New South Wales.

⁴ The exhibit was never called “The Bells Falls Gorge Massacre” as stated by Windschuttle. Its title was “1823-1825 Wiradjuri War”.

⁵ Noongar is a group of indigenous Australian people who live in the south-west corner of Western Australia.

⁶ Yugambah is a group of indigenous Australian people who live in south-east Queensland.

⁷ Walpiri is a group of Indigenous Australians, who live north and west of Alice Springs in the Northern Territory.

⁸ See:

www.nma.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/18997/Aboriginal_resist_colonisation_colour_Oct2012.pdf

⁹See:

www.nma.gov.au/education-kids/classroom_learning/multimedia/interactives/bells_falls_gorge

¹⁰ The New South Wales Board of Studies offers the intellectually challenging *History Extension* course to high-achieving senior history students in their final year of schooling. This historiographical course requires students to critically analyse and evaluate sources and the contextual constructs of history. A popular topic is the so-called ‘History Wars’, and the question of how the NMA presented the Bells Falls Gorge display is central to this inquiry. For the *History Extension* syllabus document, see:

http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/syllabus_hsc/pdf_doc/history-extension-st6-syl-from2010.pdf

¹¹ Students can download a 21-page workbook that guides them through a critical examination of the exhibit.

