

# Preface

The overland explorers of the nineteenth century did not complete the exploration of Australia. They merely began a slow task which is still far from ended. It was not only the land and the coasts which had to be traversed and mapped. The intricate natural world also had to be discovered, described, named, classified and assessed and interpreted. Birds, fishes, mammals and insects in their thousands had to be captured and labelled. The climates and the skies had to be explored. A profusion of new plants, and the soils and minerals and fossil beds, all awaited discoverers.

At first many of the new birds and shells found in Australia were seen simply as gorgeous curiosities, and were packed like works of arts and shipped away and sold to wealthy private collectors in Europe. Many other specimens were shipped to Europe as clues and puzzles for scientists who were beginning to piece together a new Book of Genesis, a new story of the Creation. Here and there, too, grew unfamiliar plants which might be of high utilitarian value to Great Britain. Captain Cook had found such plants; and indeed one reason for the British decision in the 1780s to send the First Fleet to New South Wales was the strategic value of the Norfolk Island Pine and the flax plant *Phormium tenax*, which promised naval masts and sailcloth of rare strength. For long the naturalists and explorers imagined that a continent so vast would at the very least provide plants as spectacular as the tobacco, maize and potatoes provided by the newfound Americas. In London in 1827, Captain P. P. King's two new volumes on his survey of the remote coasts of Australia proclaimed: "no country has ever produced a more extraordinary assemblage of indigenous productions; — no country has proved richer than Australia in every branch of natural history".

The new Australian Museum was promoted in the late 1820s, just when the real exploration of the interior was beginning. It was envisaged as a scientific depot, a storehouse of the rare and exotic, an outstation for European museums and collectors, a grand encyclopedia of knowledge on Australia and the southwest Pacific, and a sedate entertainment parlour wherein might be seen "the many rare and curious specimens of natural history". It was unable to fulfil so many functions effectively in its first years, and some critics said it fulfilled none of them with success. How could it when, like so many Sydney institutions, it had to recruit professional staff from men who had been transported to New South Wales? In the 1830s its main employees were an Irishman who had been sentenced for bayonetting a rioter and a Londoner who, convicted of stealing clothes, was now the museum's field collector and taxidermist.

And yet the museum, in its own slow way, did vital work. It became a convenient source of specimens demanded eagerly by museums in Europe. It enabled local scientists, collectors and pastoralists to increase their knowledge of Australia. It became a meeting place in a land which possessed no university, no scientific academy and no valuable public library of scientific works. Many of the colonists who promoted science and the harnessing of natural resources were in touch with the museum and were aided by the facilities it offered. Thus Reverend W. B. Clarke, who sat on the governing body of the Museum from 1840 to 1874, was energetic in what was probably the most influential discovery in the natural sciences in Australia in his lifetime; the finding of payable gold in 1851.

The Museum, for much of its history, carried signs warning the visitors, 'Please do not touch'. Do not touch was also the unwritten motto of some of the trustees and staff. As this book vividly recounts, the trustees quarrelled amongst themselves: they fought with the chief officer; the chief officer fought with his subordinates; and almost every generation gave the ferris wheel of suspicion and rivalry a swift turn, rearranging the combatants. The best of the early officers of the Museum was torn apart on this wheel. Gerard Krefft, a young German zoologist, had risen quickly to become curator of the Museum in 1864, and for ten years he imported distinction to the Museum and exported knowledge of new Australian species to the centres of the learned world and to such distinguished scientists as Darwin, Owen and Agassiz. His pioneering book, *The Snakes of Australia*, he virtually published at his own expense. His interest in biological theories and frameworks — he was an early supporter of Darwinian theory — was matched by a ravenous appetite for evidence which might fit into or thwart theories. Eventually he fell out — partly through his own fault — with the trustees and with prominent politicians, and he barricaded himself in the Museum. He was finally evicted.

An inability to attract or retain outstanding scientific staff was a hallmark of the Museum during long periods of its history. Another weakness was the Museum's inability to retain valuable collections within Australia. Though the international flow of collections even then was from poor to rich countries, vigilant trustees could have ensured that the Museum's own collections were not sacrificed unduly in the interests of Europe. Later the traffic was reversed. In the 1880's, for example, a fine collection of Indian fishes gathered by the Inspector-General of Fisheries in India was snatched from the expectant hands of the British Museum and brought to Sydney. At the same time the Museum began to collect more Aboriginal objects, though it lost many of them in the Garden Palace fire of 1882. In retrospect, few of the Museum's activities were more important than the preservation of relics of those Aboriginal tribes whose culture was rapidly vanishing.

The Australian Museum, in a century and a half, has carried out many functions: indeed few institutions are expected to fill so many needs as a large national museum. It has collected and preserved hundreds of thousands of objects which deserve preservation for scientific, historical or aesthetic reasons. It has conducted or facilitated research in almost every field of natural history. It has educated, excited, pleased — and sometimes inevitably bored — people of every age. It has advised governments on a wide range of issues of national or local importance. It has sharpened curiosity and satisfied curiosity. Above all it has shown remarkable resilience in its ups and downs. Since the 1950s it has greatly enlarged its collections, the range of its research, and its services to the public. In the last ten years the research grants received from public and private donors have soared. More than 700,000 people now visit the Museum and its circulating suburban exhibitions annually; more than 20,000 questions and enquiries are directed to the Museum's staff in the course of a year; and tens of thousands of people now visit the Australian Museum Train which in March 1978 commenced a two-year tour of rural New South Wales.

The history of a museum indirectly illuminates our changing attitudes to Nature, Man and Technology. Reading this book I felt suddenly aware of the long leap in attitudes to Nature and to Technology. In the 1830s, Nature in a new land had been seen as the great inventor, the ingenious provider. The distinctive plants, animals

and minerals of a new land were expected to yield new medicines, drugs, fibres, adhesives, metals, timbers, foods, ornaments, dyes and chemicals. Nature was viewed as an effortless laboratory for research and development. To discover a large land was thus to tap a laboratory as productive as the life-achievements of all the living inventors of Europe. That Australia in the nineteenth century was to yield only eucalyptus oil, wattlebark, the macadamia nut and a few other distinctive products does not alter the fact that the founders of the Australian Museum thought that here they were about to harvest a new America.

Then followed a long period in which our civilisation saw Technology more than Nature as the great inventor. Few new products now came readymade from Nature. Nuclear energy, artificial fibres, medical drugs, dyestuffs and so many of the revolutionary commodities of modern times came directly from laboratories. Nature had been subtly dethroned. The technologists now sat on their ersatz throne. In the last quarter century, however, the same technologists have been challenged and assaulted, especially by that all-embracing word, Pollution. Nature has returned to favour, and is seen popularly as that delicate and kindly and harmonious system of organization which Man is imperilling. So the museums of natural history, once popularly viewed as a cemetery of stuffed birds and mounted butterflies, lives again in the popular imagination. Few institutions can have undergone such a dramatic somersault of opinion.

Here is one of the finest histories so far written of a scientific institution in this country. The book spans scattered fields, is gentle but not evasive in judging people and events, and it is not frightened to tell of failure as well as success. It also conveys that sense of wonder which marks the great museum.

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