Richard Owen, Thomas Mitchell and Australian Science
A Commemorative Symposium

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On Saturday, 24th October, 1992 the well-known expatriate art critic and author, Robert Hughes, was addressing a distinguished audience at Australia’s Parliament House on the topic "What's a museum for?"

At the same time a smaller, but possibly no less distinguished group, of scientists and historians, was meeting at Wombeyan Caves Reserve, a delightful, but somewhat isolated mountain retreat, several hours drive north from Canberra, to discuss the work of several long-dead scientists and their associates.

Although at first glance these events seem quite removed from each other in the level of significance (both politically and socially), in relevance, and presumably in elegance, there were some surprising relationships.

Although he was considering mainly art galleries Hughes used the comprehensive term "museums" in much of his discussion, lamenting the "age of museum triumphalism" and the "advent of mass cultural tourism". Hughes criticised the "blandness of current curatorial policies" He believed that the future "belonged to small, intimate storehouses [of culture]...not plagued with great tides of inattentive visitors... such places are not cathedrals but chapels. It belongs to what is local, and used once to be derided as 'provincial'. In them the pure function of the museum can flourish again". (Sydney Morning Herald, 26 October, 1992).

Hughes's lecture came at a time when the future of the National Museum of Australia is once again being reviewed, after a stop-start history of many years. It comes when University museums are being threatened with closure, and when directors of many of our major storehouse of precious archives of every type (including libraries) are desperate for staff and funding to preserve and display priceless material.

Yet, ironically, it comes also at a time when there is a renewed interest in things Australian by the community at large, but who seem to be unaware of the problems involved in the operation of these chapels of art, science and technology.

Perhaps the saddest aspect of the present situation is that many Australian museums seem to be blindly following international trends and reducing, or completely removing the research sections of their organisations to the detriment of the displays, which become in time mere items for entertainment with little instruction.

What did the Owen-Mitchell Symposium have to do with such matters?

In a sense the story starts in the Cathedral Cave at Wellington in 1830 and ends with the Great Cathedral of Science, the British Museum of Natural History in London, completed in the 1880s.

The meeting considered a number of aspects of the lives of Sir Richard Owen (1804-1892), Sir Thomas Mitchell (1792-1855) and related nineteenth century figures in a series of papers interspersed with lively discussion. Although the happy coincidence of the centenary of Owen's death and the bicentenary of Mitchell's birth was the initial reason for the symposium, the major link was the involvement by Mitchell in the exploration of the Wellington Caves in the 1830s, the bones of extinct giant organisms which were discovered there and some of which were subsequently taken to England by Mitchell and studied by Owen.
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Two papers by David Branagan and Julian Holland outlined aspects of the careers of Owen and Mitchell. The former paper concentrates on the antipodean aspects of Owen's work, which has been generally neglected by earlier workers, while the latter, which is an abstract based on a forthcoming large-scale appraisal of Mitchell's work, considered some formative influences on Mitchell.

A paper by Ann Player discusses a facet of the work of J.E. Tenison Woods, an early student of Australian Caves, who was involved in the discovery of the large emu-like bird, named by Owen Dromornis, and who did much to popularise science in the Australian press.

Three papers were given at the Symposium on the fossil material itself. Armstrong Osborne considered the sediments which encase the vertebrate fragments in Wellington and Wombean Caves. Jeannette Hope discussed the fossil fauna she had examined from the Wombean Caves area, and the influence on her work of earlier vertebrate palaeontologists Robert Broom in the 19th century and Norman Wakefield who had encouraged her work prior to his relatively early death. [This paper is not reproduced here, as Dr. Hope is overseas]. The paper by Paul Willis, Susie Davies and Armstrong Osborne documents the exciting find of previously undescribed material from Wellington, Wombean and Clairvaux, near Glen Innes, the result of what the authors called the "pursuit of three presently unpopular activities - looking backwards, curiosity-driven research and the study of collections", and brings the Russian scientist Maklouho-Maclay, Edgeworth David, Robert Broom and more recent researchers into the story. These papers were followed up by visits to important sites both on the surface and underground.

Michael Shortland's paper broadens the story by examining the influence of the study of caves on geological thought from the 18th through much of the 19th century, an influence which Dr. Shortland suggests extends indeed much further, and which has been little researched to date.

The Symposium ended with Nicolaas Rupke's paper on Owen and the Victorian Museum movement, showing his importance in the development of museums, both as sites of popular culture and as research organisations.

Taken in all, this symposium shows the value of looking backwards occasionally, to appreciate both the achievements and failures of the past, and to apply the lessons for the future. What will our museums of the twenty-first century be like? In fact will there be any?

The anonymous author in the "Illustrated Sydney News" wrote (1892): "the odd thing about the fossil bones is this - they reveal to us something of the history of Australia, something of the history of our own land as it is written on tables of stone by historians without prejudice, by fingers void of passion. The geological records of a country are true, and the fossil remainders are the dates of the history". However as perhaps the paper above indicates those humans who have attempted to interpret the story are not without prejudice or passion, which is probably not a bad thing. There would be little of interest in a bloodless history of science!

This symposium was organised by the Earth Sciences History Group of the Geological Society of Australia Inc. The Group is grateful to the Royal Society of New South Wales for assistance in publishing the proceedings. Thanks are due to the Wombean Caves Reserve Trust for making facilities available for the meeting.

(Manuscript received 3-11-1992)

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