

THE HISTORY TRUST OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA: AN IDEA BEFORE ITS TIME?

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My career in South Australian history has extended over 35 years in both paid and voluntary capacities. I was involved in founding the Historical Society of South Australia in 1974, was Honorary Historian to the Port Adelaide Historical Society for 20 years, spent 14 years with the History Trust and have been in my present position with the Heritage Branch of the Department for Environment and Heritage for almost 11 years. Given the nature of my topic, I must stress that my talk today expresses my own opinions and should not be taken to represent the views of my current employer, the South Australian government.

The study of the past has many functions. One is to help us to understand how the present came to be and gain insights into how best to move into the future, and that is the focus of my talk today. I want to reflect on our community's engagement with its history by exploring two propositions: that the History Trust was formed too late; and that it was, and may still be, an idea before its time.

The History Trust of South Australia Act gave the Trust a very broad brief to research, display, collect and promote in the field of South Australian history. By any measure, much had happened before the Trust was established in 1981, five years short of the State's sesquicentenary. At a government level, the South Australian Institute had been created in 1856, establishing a government-funded library and museum that have evolved into today's State Library and SA Museum. The Copyright Act of 1878 subsequently required a copy of all books first published in the colony to be lodged with the Institute. The National Gallery (now Art Gallery) of SA had followed in 1881 and a Technological Museum was established 8 years later by the SA School of Mines and Industries in the eastern annexe of the Jubilee Exhibition Building, the site of the University of Adelaide's underground car park.

Moving into the 20th century, the Library had been supplemented in 1919 by the Archives Department of the Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery, the successor to the SA Institute. The Archives opened to the public in 1920 in what is now the Radford Auditorium of the Art Gallery and was the first public archives in Australia. Then around 1951 the Library created a 'Z' Collection, later renamed the South Australian Collection and more recently known as the Mortlock Library of South Australiana after it absorbed the non-government records of the Public Record Office of SA (known as State Records since 1990) in 1985. Finally, the Libraries Board of SA took two notable initiatives in 1962, commencing the journal *South Australiana* and establishing a program of publishing facsimiles of rare Australian and South Australian books of historical interest.

Voluntary organisations had been equally busy. The Gawler Institute had opened the Colony's first local museum around 1859 and the Mt Gambier and Port Adelaide Institutes had opened theirs in the 1860s and 1872 respectively. A SA Branch of the Geographical Society of Australasia had been formed in 1885 and taken a significant interest in the Colony's history. In 1927 it had formed an Historical Memorials Committee and twenty years later an Historical Division. Meanwhile the Pioneers Association of SA had been founded in 1935, the SA Methodist (now Uniting Church) Historical Society in 1950, a SA Division of the Australian Railway Historical Society

in 1952 and the National Trust of SA in 1955. The Trust's first Branch was formed at Renmark the following year and opened a museum - the first of many to be established by Trust Branches - in 1959. An Australian Electric Transport Museum had been founded two years earlier and the first trams were shifted to St Kilda in 1958, but the museum did not open to the public until many years later (1973). By 1960 there were about 20 museums and historical societies in the State.

Now many, perhaps most of us here, know what happened next. The 1960s saw the beginning of an explosion of interest in SA history such that by 1980, the year before the History Trust was created, there were about 150 museums and historical organisations in the State. These included major museums begun by voluntary organisations or private individuals, such as the Mile End Railway Museum (1963), the Birdwood Mill Museum (1965) and Pioneer Village (1972); State-level societies like the SA Genealogy & Heraldry Society (1973), the Historical Society of SA (1974) and the SA Branch of the Oral History Association of Australia (1979); and ambitious undertakings like the Pichi Richi Railway Preservation Society (1973).

The 1970s had also seen some acquisitions of notable buildings by the State Government: the ANZ Bank (originally the Bank of SA) in King William Street, Adelaide in 1971 (soon renamed Edmund Wright House) when it was under threat of demolition and in 1976 Cummins, the Morphett family home at Novar Gardens, built in the 1840s.

However, when one looks more closely at this crowded scene there are some sobering aspects. For a long period of its history the SA Archives was very thinly staffed. The South Australian Historical Society formed in 1926 had petered out in 1931. An Agricultural Museum at the Wayville Showgrounds, which evolved from a display organised for the 1936 Royal Show by the Early Agricultural Implements Committee of the Department of Agriculture, had been dispersed, as was the case with the Technology Museum of the SA Institute of Technology (now part of the University of South Australia) in 1963. The SA Museum was very much focussed on natural and indigenous history and the Art Gallery's 'Historical Collections' were always a small part of its responsibilities, although both organisations had given some overdue attention to the State's European history with the opening of an Historical Museum by the Art Gallery in 1972 and the appointment of a Museums Extension Officer at the SA Museum in 1976 and a Curator of Historical Collections at the Art Gallery in the same year.

While collecting the paper-based records of the State's history was receiving a reasonable level of attention by Government institutions, the collecting of artefacts and mounting of museum displays clearly was not.

In the 1970s two of the major private museums mentioned earlier – the Birdwood Mill Museum and Pioneer Village at Hackham – had run into difficulties and were purchased by the State Government in 1976 and 1978 respectively. As well as acquiring those museums to prevent their collections being dispersed and purchasing two notable buildings, the Dunstan Labor Government also took two significant museum-related initiatives with long-term consequences. In 1978 it established a Constitutional Museum Trust to develop a museum of political history in the Old Legislative Council Building and on 27 February 1979 announced an inquiry by Dr Robert Edwards to address long-standing problems with the SA Museum's accommodation and resourcing. In March 1980 the terms of reference for the inquiry

were expanded to include the needs of the State Library and the Art Gallery to the year 2000.

The Labor Government was defeated at the 1979 election and it was the Tonkin Liberal Government which received the final report. The Edwards Report *Museum Policy and Development in South Australia Final Report* was not released until August 1981, but the recommendations were known to Government and Minister of Arts Murray Hill's concerns about the management of the Birdwood Mill led to some recommendations being acted upon before the Report was released.

Edwards had judged that the SA Museum could not take on new responsibilities for the State's post-settlement history while undergoing redevelopment and had recommended that a separate body be created to do so. The History Trust's first annual report records that in December 1980 the Minister informed the Constitutional Museum Trust that it would be expanded and take on a broader role, becoming the History Trust of SA. That occurred with the proclamation of the History Trust of South Australia Act on 26 March 1981. On 1 July 1981 the Trust also gained responsibility for managing the Birdwood Mill Museum and in December the Museums Extension Officer and Curator of Historical Collections positions were transferred to the Trust from their respective institutions.

I hope that I have shown that the Trust was entering an already crowded field, even though there was still much to do. It is interesting to consider what it might have achieved if formed 20 years earlier. Could the Technology and Agricultural Museums have been saved? Could the railway and tramway collections have been co-located? Could a large shared storage facility have been provided for local museums? Asking 'what if' questions is a useful exercise. What if Baudin had got here first? Would we now be more confident about our own culture?

Now, returning to what did happen rather than what might have, instead of attempting to chronicle the History Trust's achievements in detail, I want to discuss just some of them - along with some other history-related initiatives - in the context of explaining how they happened, which will serve to offer us some lessons for the future.

Some lessons from this review

- Without the threat of demolition Edmund Wright House would not have been purchased by the State Government.
- Without the threat of closure or sale the State Government is unlikely to have purchased the Birdwood Mill and Pioneer Village museums or Cummins.
- If there hadn't been decades of neglect of the SA Museum's buildings and collections there would have been no Edwards Report and hence no recommendation to establish a History Trust of SA and an 'Ethnic Museum', which opened in 1986 as the Migration and Settlement Museum – a title shortened in 1988 to Migration Museum.
- If there had been no History Trust there is unlikely to have been a SA Maritime Museum, a Museums Accreditation and Grants Program, a South Australian (originally Community) History Fund, a relocated Mile End Railway Museum at

Port Adelaide (now trading as the National Railway Museum) or regular State History Conferences.

- To be more specific about some of these initiatives, without the Commonwealth's contribution to the Jubilee 150 funding the SA Maritime Museum is highly unlikely to have proceeded and without Australian Bicentennial Authority funding it is equally unlikely that the Mile End Railway Museum would have been relocated and provided with significantly better accommodation at Port Adelaide.
- Without an astute reallocation of funds by Minister of Arts Murray Hill from elsewhere in his portfolio – he was also Minister for Local Government – the Museums Accreditation and Grants Program wouldn't have begun in 1982.
- And to leap ahead to the recent past, without Minister Assisting the Premier in the Arts John Hill's promotion of the concepts, SA History Week would not have commenced in 2004 and nor would have SA Open Heritage in 2006.

So what does this review suggest about the formulation of history policy in SA?

- crises are an important means of gaining attention
- reading the political wind – for example, advocating an 'ethnic museum' at a time when multiculturalism was in favour – can be helpful in gaining support
- significant anniversaries provide funding opportunities that in 'normal' times rarely seem to exist
- the right person in the right place can initiate important new programs
- it is difficult to maintain a planning strategy with impacts across several agencies. The vision of the Edwards Report, which I have not discussed today but is well worth revisiting, was progressively diluted for a whole variety of practical and political reasons.

Where to now?

I'll discuss this question under two headings: 'some opportunities' and 'some issues to ponder'.

Some opportunities

Anniversaries - We're already seeing significant sesquicentenaries being celebrated with style, including the Goolwa – Port Elliot railway in 2004 and the Port Adelaide – Adelaide line a few weeks ago. Coming soon are the Gawler Line (2007) and its extension to Kapunda (2010). Sadly the sesquicentenary of the opening of the first government telegraph line in the Colony from Adelaide to the Port (1856), intimately associated with the Port Railway, appears to have passed without notice.

- The SA Museum is this year celebrating the foundation of its

collections under the auspices of the SA Institute in 1856 and the Botanic Garden has started celebrating in the context of its establishment in 1855 and the 150th anniversary of its opening to the public in 1857.

- The sesquicentenary of responsible government will occur in 2006-2007 and of the *Advertiser* newspaper in 2008, although I believe that planning for the former began rather late and for the latter has yet to begin. Given that a comprehensive history of the State's newspapers has yet to be written, is it too much to hope that Advertiser Newspapers Pty Ltd could at least partially address that gap?
- In that context planning for the 175th anniversary of formal European settlement in 2011 needs to begin soon. (The Jubilee 150 Board was established 6 years prior to the event.)

Volunteers - Volunteers contribute an enormous amount to the recording and preservation of the State's history and heritage. Is there a case for 'rewarding' them with more government support? To take just one example, should the National Railway Museum at Port Adelaide have more than two paid staff, which is all it can fund from the commercial operations of the Museum. Its 65 volunteers currently contribute 40 000 hours per annum.

Collaboration - Collaboration and partnership have been buzz words in recent years, and much can be gained from local museums and historical societies developing close ties with their local councils, the local history collections in public libraries and where possible local schools, as some already have. However, we need to reach out beyond the obvious. Holding joint meetings with other groups is one simple way of building bridges and dispelling misconceptions.

A History Plan - Despite the fate of the Edwards Report, which as I have said makes very interesting reading 25 years on, would it be desirable for the history community, perhaps through the History Council of SA, to draft a five year plan to lead into the 175th celebrations?

Recording our own histories - It's common for historical groups to be so busy recording the history of others that they neglect their own. Who knows the stories that bring your museum's objects to life? What have been the major achievements of your society?

Some issues to ponder

- Since its relocation from Wayville the Investigator Science & Technology Centre appears to be languishing at Regency Park. Given the current focus on defence and 'high tech' industries, why is this so?

- Neither history nor heritage currently have a place in the SA Strategic Plan. What does this indicate about the mind-set of some of the decision-makers in this State and can it be remedied?
- Managing intellectual property is often said to be an important consideration for modern management. If that is true, what has been the impact of disbanding government department libraries and encouraging many long-serving public servants to take early retirement through voluntary separation packages?
- There was a Sydney History Group and there are a Brisbane History Group (founded 1981), a Centre for Western Australian History (founded 1985) and a Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies. Are any South Australian tertiary institutions able to fill the gap here?
- Given the economic importance of tourism and the environmental challenges facing the State, why haven't a general history of European impact on the environment and a history of tourism been commissioned to inform current policy making? Indeed, given the economic challenges facing the State, wouldn't an economic history be an equally wise investment?

If the past is any guide, there is a fair chance that the history/heritage movement will continue to rely enormously on volunteers, be clever about securing grants and exploit significant anniversaries as they arise. The challenges lie in getting action on some of the bigger issues that require some longer-term thinking and strategies. Issues such as the following:

- Does the State need a well-located museum / interpretive centre / restaurant at the end of the universe – call it what you will – that provides an overview of and introduction to the State's history for both visitors and locals alike.
- Is there a need for a large Government-owned storage facility to avoid significant items leaving the State or being destroyed and to provide for the possibility of future museum displays that are currently beyond the capacity of the State to mount?
- Is there a way of taking funding levels up a notch, for example, by emulating the NSW Government's initiative of using the proceeds of the sale of airspace on a CBD site to establish a Heritage Fund of which only the interest was used for grants.

It is in this context that the History Trust can be seen as an idea before its time. Having created it, and having commissioned the Edwards Report which laid out a broad sweep of roles for it, it is as if Governments of both political persuasions haven't quite known what to do with it.

Sources

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