

## PRAGMATICS & 'PROGRESS': THE EVOLUTION OF THE PERTH MUSEUM AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

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The second half of the nineteenth century saw an explosion in the development and expansion of natural history museums around the world. Collectors became obsessed with classifying and arranging scientific specimens taxonomically into progressively subdivided orders and genera, in an endeavour to understand the kingdom of nature. At the same time the moral improvement of the museum visitor through education became the dominant purpose of the museum. This followed a shift away from the aristocratic and princely collections, originating in the Renaissance, which emphasised the exotic and unusual and served to reinforce the position of power and knowledge, in Foucault's terms, of the ancient hierarchies of the world.<sup>1</sup> In the nineteenth century museums were governed by the principles of scientific taxonomy, which stressed the observable differences between things placed in a series rather than unique items: everything in its place, perfect order. At the same time this shift heralded a new democracy in museums, away from the 'elite temples of the arts [to a] utilitarian instrument for democratic education'.<sup>2</sup> Whereas the aristocratic collections of the Renaissance excluded the working classes, nineteenth-century museums served to invite them in and control them.

Architecturally and educationally, museums became symbols of power and status of paramount importance in the young colonies striving to emulate the Old Country. By the second half of the nineteenth century, government-supported museums had opened in all Australian colonies except Western Australia. There, until the 1890s, economic constraints prevented the visible demonstration of 'the degree of civilisation attained'.

Although celebratory histories of the development of most of the State museums have been written, there has been little analysis of museum building in the context of the international 'museum movement' and colonial-imperial relations in the second half of the nineteenth century. As yet there is no published history of the Perth Museum. This paper traces the evolution of the Perth Museum at the turn of the century and examines its history in the context of State development and the wider 'museum movement'.

The Perth Museum grew out of a number of collections of geological and mineralogical specimens made by the colony's early explorers and successive government geologists. This was a typical pattern of museum development across

Australia in the nineteenth century, reflecting the pressure of economic need. Exploration and geological survey work brought with it specimens and ultimately the pressure for permanent museums.<sup>3</sup> Geological and mineralogical survey work in Australia had been of interest to scientists in Britain and Europe since the late eighteenth century, as they sought to extend their knowledge of the physical structure of the earth.<sup>4</sup> The discovery of gold in Australia in the mid nineteenth century attracted a growing number of trained geologists 'handpicked from the British Geological Survey to man colonial posts'.<sup>5</sup> But in a young country endeavouring to generate wealth, colonial interest in survey work was pragmatic. It was not until later in the century that geological survey work began to focus on the 'systematic development of related geological, petrographic and palaeontological research'.<sup>6</sup> Funds which governments provided for geological exploration and specimens also provided opportunities to gather natural science and ethnographic specimens, for there was considerable interest in the natural wonders of Australia by scientists in the Old World.

Responding to the growth of museums throughout Britain, Europe and America, leading colonists were keen to develop their own cultural institutions. Not surprisingly, in environments where 'outposts of transplanted European societies' had been created, natural history museums enjoyed particular success.<sup>7</sup> But prosperity was an essential prerequisite for that success, and progress in museum development reflected not only the commitment to geological survey work following the discovery of mineral wealth, but also the wealth generated by the growth of the agricultural economy. By the middle of the nineteenth century a general commitment to museums had been made across Australia.

In Western Australia prosperity and expansion of the agricultural economy proved elusive for many decades. It was not until the 1890s that the Government could make a firm commitment to developing a museum in Perth. The first museum was started much earlier though, when in 1860 the Swan River Mechanics' Institute raised enough money through private subscription to add a museum to its building.<sup>8</sup> Apart from a small government grant to assist in building the museum, it was a private concern made possible by the patronage and leadership of the colony's influential Surveyor-General, John Septimus Roe.<sup>9</sup> Roe contributed his own valuable collections of botanical, zoological and mineral specimens, accumulated during his years as Surveyor-General.<sup>10</sup> Specimens collected by the explorers Augustus and Charles Gregory were also added to the infant museum.<sup>11</sup>

Mechanics' Institutes, first established in Britain in the early nineteenth century, provided a means of wider adult education in science and the industrial arts and were part of a universal demand for adult popular education. The Swan River Mechanics' Institute was founded in 1851, less than a year after transportation

began. It was a means by which the free artisan and builders of Perth could distance themselves from convict labourers, and in this they were supported by all the powerful institutions in the Swan River Colony—government, church, the law, and willing citizens.<sup>12</sup>

The museum remained a part of the Mechanics' Institute until 1892 when the collections were purchased for £400 for the new Perth Museum.<sup>13</sup> The absorption of the Mechanics' Institute collections into the State museum, and the development of the public library in the 1890s, witnessed the displacement of the role of the Mechanics' Institute as an outlet for the quest for scientific knowledge and as a centre of social improvement and progress. Indeed, across Australia the growth of museums and libraries spelled the demise of Mechanics' Institutes.

Government commitment to the Perth Museum originated in 1881 when the Reverend C. G. Nicolay was engaged on a part-time basis as the Government Registrar of Minerals. Nicolay, Chaplain of the Fremantle Prison, obtained the use of the old guard room at the prison 'for the collection and preservation of specimens illustrative of the Geology of this Colony, in anticipation of a Museum of Geology to be hereafter established in Perth'.<sup>14</sup> While the scientific and cultural value of the collection was recognised, pragmatic concerns were uppermost in the minds of supporters, as Nicolay made clear in his plea to government for a permanent museum:

*In all civilised countries, the Governments are making every effort to obtain Geological collections, not merely for the advancement of science generally ... but for the illustration and development of their natural wealth by the promotion of knowledge of it.*<sup>15</sup>

The basis of the first collections of geological specimens at Fremantle came through expeditions made by explorers, surveyors and government geologists including H. Y. L. Brown, E. T. Hardman, C. D. Price, John Forrest, W. H. Knight and Nicolay himself.<sup>16</sup> To expand the combined collections Nicolay sought the assistance of resident magistrates and settlers throughout the State in collecting and submitting documented specimens.<sup>17</sup> As there was no government analyst, he undertook the task of analysing the specimens himself, and classified and displayed them as best he could in his cramped quarters.<sup>18</sup>

As the collections grew, lack of display and laboratory space became an ever-increasing problem. In 1883 Nicolay took over the study and closet in the Chaplain's quarters, adjacent to the guard room, for use as a laboratory, but this provided only temporary relief.<sup>19</sup> In the ensuing years he urged the government to establish the museum on a more permanent basis, and in larger premises, so that the collections would be more accessible for the study of geology.<sup>20</sup> Following the first discoveries of gold in the Kimberley district in 1885, Nicolay spent an increasing amount of time analysing mineral samples for hopeful prospectors, still with no

assistance other than help from his own family.<sup>21</sup> In 1888 he complained that work on the collections 'occupied all my time not engaged in my duties as Chaplain of the Prison'.<sup>22</sup>

By the end of the decade the inadequacy of the Fremantle facilities was finally recognised. In 1889 the collections were moved from Fremantle and incorporated with the collections of the Government Geologist, Harry Page Woodward, in the former chapel of the old gaol in Perth.<sup>23</sup> Harry Page employed his cousin, Bernard H. Woodward, for £50 from his own salary 'to arrange the collection which had just been transferred to me from the Rev. Mr Nicolay'.<sup>24</sup> It appears that Bernard continued to be paid by his cousin until 1891 when Harry Page convinced the Commissioner of Crown Lands, William Marmion, of the necessity of employing Bernard full-time as curator. The collections had grown, in size and value, and public demand required a regular curator and the museum to be open. On 9 September 1891 the museum was officially opened as the Geological Museum, as part of the Government Geologist's Department under the administration of the Commissioner of Crown Lands.<sup>25</sup> Bernard Woodward was to be a principal force in its future development.

Later, in 1891, Bernard was given additional appointments including Government Analyst (under the Colonial Secretary with use of the Government Geologist's laboratories), Inspector of Mineral Oils (under the Treasury) and Government Assayer ('on his own hook').<sup>26</sup> In 1894 the position of Government Geologist and responsibility for the museum, which still came under Harry Page's control, were transferred from the administration of Crown Lands to the Department of Mines.<sup>27</sup> By 1894 Harry Page was trying to rid himself of responsibility for the museum, seeing it as more of a liability than an asset:

*I think that you will agree that he [Bernard Woodward] had better be made into a department by himself ... I want you to understand that I wish to resign all charge of the Museum & Govt laboratories as they bring in no pay or credit to me but only a considerable amount of trouble.<sup>28</sup>*

The growth of the museum over the previous decade had been closely aligned to the search for mineral wealth and the discovery of gold. Indeed, the various early mineral collections originated through a desire to expand European settlement by exploring and conquering the wilderness and, following the discovery of gold in the eastern colonies in the 1850s, to search for mineral wealth in the economically struggling Swan River Colony. In an effort to attract investors to the Swan River Colony the government sent agricultural and mineral specimens, borrowed from the Mechanics' Institute and Nicolay's collection, to be exhibited at five inter-colonial and international expositions in the late nineteenth century: Paris 1878, Sydney 1879, Melbourne 1881, the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in London in

1886, and the International Exhibition of Mining and Metallurgy, again in London, in 1890.<sup>29</sup> Following the success of the Crystal Palace Exhibition in London in 1851, museums across Australia contributed specimens for colonial displays interstate and abroad. The exhibitions were an important means of advertising to the world the advancements made in the colonies and the potential for investors.

Reports in the local press of the opening of the new Geological Museum in Perth emphasised its pragmatic value in the search for mineral wealth:

*[A] modest but very useful effort is being made to supply the colony with an educational adjunct, which should prove of special value in relation to its Mineral resources.<sup>30</sup>*

The inappropriateness of housing such an important cultural institution within the walls of a former convict establishment was expressed at the official opening.<sup>31</sup> But the colony had not yet benefited from the riches of the Golden Mile and museum promoters, including Governor William Robinson and Premier John Forrest, had to accept the ignominy of the Museum's temporary location in a dis-used government gaol:

*until such a time as the colony is in a position to build a habitation of which it can feel proud. But when that time comes our whole strength should be put into the work. There is a deep truth in the teaching of RUSKIN that architecture is the revealing medium or lamp through which flames a people's passions, and which is the embodiment of their polity, life, faith or no-faith.<sup>32</sup>*

Leading officials in colonial society also recognised the need for a broader based museum encompassing botanical, ethnological, zoological and art collections in a building 'in which it can feel proud'.<sup>33</sup> Bernard Woodward summed up the feeling of his contemporaries some years later when he introduced the first of a series of free public lectures:

*The degree of civilisation to which any nation, city or province has attained is best shown by the character of its public museums and the liberality with which they are maintained.<sup>34</sup>*

In 1892 the collections of the Mechanics' Institute were purchased for £400.<sup>35</sup> The material was eclectic in origin and nature, ranging from geological and mineralogical specimens to zoological, ethnographic and some historical specimens. In the same year the Commissioner of Police, Colonel Phillips, transferred Aboriginal artefacts, which had been 'collected' by the police over the years, to the museum.<sup>36</sup> As scope of the collections broadened, 'Geological' was dropped from the title and 'Perth Museum' was adopted as the official name of the expanding cultural institution until 1898. In that year the name was again changed, accommodating further expansion, to the 'Western Australian Museum and Art Gallery'.

Elsewhere in Australia, major museums were already well integrated into the international movement of museum building and their promoters were skilled in the art of gaining local support. Their hiatus followed the discovery of gold in the 1850s and, in the ensuing decades, collections were expanded and grand edifices erected to house them, witnessing the 'degree of civilisation' attained by their respective states. As the colonies prospered through exploitation of natural resources, colonial governments began to support public museums as the 'museum movement' spread around the globe during the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>37</sup> Paradoxically, by the 1890s when Western Australia was beginning to prosper from the effects of the gold boom, museums elsewhere in the country were frustrated by the effects of economic depression. Expenditure on new material virtually stopped after 1893, and in some cases there were not even sufficient funds to publish annual reports. Budgets in once-flourishing State museums were slashed by up to 80 per cent, staff were reduced drastically and salaries cut by one-quarter.<sup>38</sup> There was a threat to remove the annual grant completely in Tasmania, where some argued that museums were a luxury which could not be carried in times of financial crisis.<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile, in Western Australia, the Perth Museum opened its first new building in 1895.<sup>40</sup> Costing £2000, it was not the grand new entrance building envisaged by museum promoters, for the colony was not yet sufficiently prosperous to flaunt money. Instead, a wing, which would ultimately form an extension off the imposing front elevation, was erected. Judging by extant alternative plans, the designs for this building stirred debate in local society.<sup>41</sup> The question of retaining or demolishing the old gaol had to be considered. For most, no doubt, it was a reminder of a convict past which was best wiped from memory. But economics outweighed the desire to rid this taint of history and the gaol was retained with the intention of demolishing it in the future.

The overall design comprised a symmetrical edifice, with the museum and art gallery on either side of a grand, domed entrance, and an elaborate piazza extending across the front and sides of the building.<sup>42</sup> In the style of the British Museum in Bloomsbury, the dome was to cover the large public library. On either side of the library would be a series of parallel galleries for museum and art gallery collections. The 1895 gallery was to be incorporated into this plan as one of the museum galleries and the old gaol demolished to make way for other parts of the complex. In about 1900, however, there was a departure from this plan. Instead of one solid building it was decided to have a series of five parallel galleries, spaced 14 feet apart, extending behind the front facade.<sup>43</sup> One would be the 1895 gallery, the second a wing of the public library (built in 1903), and a third the future art gallery (completed in 1908). The proposed fourth and fifth parallel galleries were

never built and the old gaol was never demolished because the continuing lack of space demanded its retention. In the 1970s, the 1895 gallery would be demolished to make way for a 'modern' building erected with some of the wealth generated from the 1960s' mineral boom. By that time the convict past was considered an important aspect of State history and the old gaol was retained and renovated.

Stylistically the symmetrical front elevation echoed many features of the new British Museum in South Kensington, London. The Romanesque style of this Natural History Museum—with its symmetrical facade, commanding entrance and multi-storeyed central hall surrounded by colonnades and a grand staircase—epitomised architectural convention, albeit on a grand scale.<sup>44</sup> It was just one of many major European museums to move into an opulent, new building in the late nineteenth century. The architecture of these new museums was designed to instil national prestige, pride and regard for learning.<sup>45</sup> Standard architectural elements, such as towers, arches and domes, were used to connote 'feelings of admiration, respect and confidence'.<sup>46</sup> While colonial museums did not achieve the scale of their European counterparts, they adopted the architectural elements which conveyed these messages. In 1896 the *West Australian* described the proposed new museum, art gallery and library complex as Romanesque in style, 'which lends itself to a fine blending of picturesque and utilitarian'.<sup>47</sup> The skylines were to be broken with gables and domes and 'the central entrance arcade ... is to be surmounted by a dome, the ball of which is to be 100 feet above ground level'. The approach was from James and Beaufort Streets, 'by gracefully curved carriage drives, which lead up to an imposing flight of steps, and so to the main entrance through a wide spanning arch'.<sup>48</sup>

Grand plans indeed. But the first allocation in 1897 of £20,000 allowed only half of the proposed front elevation to be built.<sup>49</sup> With the excitement of Federation and the political upheaval of 1901 in Western Australia there was a decline in government interest in the museum and building was slowed. Protracted and often bitter campaigns were waged by museum promoters and the local press for completion of the art gallery and library extensions.<sup>50</sup> Even though the foundation stone had been laid in grand style by the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York in 1901, the art gallery wing on Beaufort Street was not built until 1908.<sup>51</sup> The completed front elevation of the public library, however, was out of alignment with the museum facade, breaking the original symmetry. The elaborate domed entrance connecting the museum and the library was never built. Nevertheless the Romanesque building style was maintained, even if the most imposing elements of its design were rejected. When the art gallery extension on Beaufort Street was completed adjacent to the James Street building, the gaol was effectively enclosed, removing from sight this reminder of a best forgotten past.

While the bricks and mortar of museum expansion was protracted and often compromised, the building of collections progressed rapidly. Bernard H. Woodward, with the support of Premier John Forrest and a committee of management which had been appointed in 1895, was a successful architect in collection-making. With limited staff, but an extensive range of contacts within Australia and internationally, Woodward expanded the range and quantity of collections at a rate unsurpassed until the 1960s. Aged in his early 40s, Woodward had migrated to Western Australia 'on account of a lung weakness'.<sup>52</sup> He had an eclectic education, the basis of which was a solid scientific training under a coterie of eminent scientists.<sup>53</sup> Woodward's knowledge of the major modern languages enabled him to keep abreast of scientific literature and his family was well known in scientific circles.<sup>54</sup> Dr Henry Woodward, his uncle, was Keeper of Geology at the British Museum (Natural History) from 1880 to 1901, and his brother, Horace B. Woodward, was Assistant Director of the Geological Survey of Great Britain.<sup>55</sup> In Western Australia Bernard's cousin, Harry Page Woodward (Dr Henry Woodward's son), was Government Geologist from 1888 to 1896.<sup>56</sup> Bernard Woodward managed Nicolay's collection when it was amalgamated with the collection of the Government Geologist in Perth in 1889. It was not until two years later, however, that he was officially appointed Curator of the Geological Museum.<sup>57</sup> Only in 1897, when his resignation as Government Analyst was finally accepted, two years after its submission, was he able to concentrate his energies on the museum collections.<sup>58</sup>

Even though the range of collections had been expanded in 1892, with the addition of the Mechanics' Institute material and Aboriginal weapons from the Police Department, the focus remained with the geological and mineralogical collections. Until the effects of gold discoveries benefited museum funding, pragmatics outweighed any broader museological ambitions. The first change occurred in 1895 as the colony began to prosper from gold mining. The government grant to the museum was increased from £200 to £4000.<sup>59</sup> Control of the museum was removed from the Minister of Mines to a committee of management chaired by Sir James Lee Steere and an impressive line-up of influential colonists, including Sir George Shenton, J. W. Hackett, Charles Harper, M. F. A. Canning, Justice E. A. Stone, J. C. H. James and Dr H. F. Harvey.<sup>60</sup> The focus on geological and mineralogical collections shifted as the new committee sought to broaden the natural science collections, by acquiring Western Australian flora and fauna, Aboriginal artefacts and, 'to make the collections of real educational value', specimens from outside the State.<sup>61</sup> Woodward was instructed 'to obtain examples of every species indigenous to the Colony'.<sup>62</sup> A collector, J. T. Tunney, was appointed in December 1895 to find the specimens, and a taxidermist, Otto Lipfert, employed to mount them for display.<sup>63</sup> By 1899 Woodward could report that 43 of the 53 known mam-



mals indigenous to Western Australia and 264 of the 344 known birds were already in the collection.<sup>64</sup>

The focus, however, was not just on local material. Like museum builders elsewhere in Australia, Woodward and the committee wanted to establish a general collection of natural history specimens representing the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms of the world. In addition to the perceived status of a worldwide collection, these specimens were valued as comparative material, helping to fill in the picture of nature according to classification. The obsession with collecting, classifying and arranging specimens taxonomically was typical in late nineteenth-century history museums. It was a 'legacy of the eighteenth-century enthusiasm for classification and encyclopedic knowledge'.<sup>65</sup> To achieve a general collection Woodward was also instructed in 1895 to have 'all the principal orders of mammalia represented'.<sup>66</sup> Following a vigorous acquisition program, he was able to report within two years that 'almost every important group of mammals is now represented'.<sup>67</sup> With only a limited purchasing budget this level of acquisition was largely achieved by exchanging specimens through an international network of collectors and dealers, including the major Australian, British and European museums; large clearing houses such as H. A. Ward in the US, Sowerby and Fulton, and Edward Gerrard and Sons in London; and the British aristocrat and collector Walter Rothschild. In return for intercolonial and overseas specimens the Perth Museum sent indigenous material, including bird and animal specimens, Aboriginal weapons, and photographs of Western Australian Aborigines, scenery and wildlife.<sup>68</sup>

The system of intercolonial and international exchanges began in the mid nineteenth century and was well established by the late nineteenth century, as natural history museums around the world boomed. It formed part of a system of reciprocity between imperial and colonial museums. For colonial museums, collections were enhanced and curators kept in touch with the international scientific community whose expert knowledge they relied on. The chief reference point for all colonial museums, including the Perth Museum, was the British Museum (Natural History) in London. For the London naturalists, the colonial museums were viewed as sources for the supply of raw data in the advancement of knowledge: the colonists supplied the raw material and the 'experts' at 'home' analysed and published in learned journals and placed specimens in research collections.<sup>69</sup>

Woodward kept a duplicate collection of specimens ready for exchange.<sup>70</sup> It was not always duplicates that left the State, however. Like many other Australian museums, the Perth Museum lost valuable 'type' specimens to overseas museums and, indeed, to other museums within Australia. At the turn of the century specimens were sent for identification to experts at the British Museum (Natural History), the National Museum of Victoria and the Australian Museum in Sydney. While a

duplicate of each specimen was usually retained in Western Australia, the important 'type' specimen, the reference specimen on which future identifications would be based, remained with the identifying museum.<sup>71</sup>

Early displays at the Perth Museum followed the methods of the major British and European museums, in particular the British Museum (Natural History). Display galleries were little more than filing systems of scientific specimens, progressively subdivided into orders and genera. In the introduction to his first museum guide, published in 1900, Woodward quoted well-known British scientist, Thomas Huxley, who described a museum as 'a consultative library of objects, where people can see for themselves the things of which they can read in books'.<sup>72</sup> This philosophy satisfied the needs of students but not the 'ordinary' person who could hardly notice the subtle differences between specimens in a series. While the main purpose of the museum was considered to be educational, the educating was aimed at two levels. On one hand the museum was seen as an advanced school of self-instruction for students and specialists. On the other it was seen as a way of improving the general knowledge of working-class people with limited formal education, and providing a worthy sense of values by exposure to the ordered world of the museum. The beneficial effects of education and order in museums were espoused by John Ruskin and often quoted by Woodward:

*The first function of a museum is to give an example of perfect order and perfect elegance to the disorderly and rude populace. Everything in its own place, everything looking its best because it is there, nothing crowded, nothing unnecessary, nothing puzzling.*<sup>73</sup> [My emphasis]

For the working classes, the ordered space of the museum was to act as an 'antidote to forms of behaviour associated with places of popular assembly [such as] the inn, the tavern, the circus and the fair'.<sup>74</sup> In this sense, museums were said to have a softening effect on the 'disorderly and rude populace'. In addition museums were places where the public manners of the disorderly working classes could be improved by imitation of middle-class museum visitors.<sup>75</sup> The 'democratisation' of the museum made it one of the first public spaces (apart from mechanics' institutes and trade fairs) to encourage the intermingling of different classes.

Endeavours to 'popularise' museums resulted in new display techniques introduced in the US in the late nineteenth century. Emphasis was placed on displaying natural history specimens in the form of habitat groups, in life-like postures and simulated natural surroundings. The idea of presenting habitat groups did not gain favour in Britain and Europe until later, whereas it was widely accepted in the US, 'where communication with the public was more eagerly sought than in the Old World'.<sup>76</sup> Woodward's interest in popularising the Perth Museum led to his first attempts at presenting habitat groups in 1900. Birds were mounted with their

nests and young in natural surroundings and sea birds were 'mounted on a mass of weather-worn limestone rock of some three tons weight'.<sup>77</sup> But the dominating, coffin-like display cases which held these exhibits did nothing to enhance the sense of a natural environment. In 1903, however, Woodward mounted a splendid diorama simulating bird life in Perth's wetlands. With a backdrop painted by well-known local artist, J. W. R. Linton, and birds, nests and young placed among preserved swamp vegetation, the diorama spanned the entire width of the bird gallery. The swamp diorama remains in the museum as an important historical display although, ironically, it has been relocated, with a copy of its original backdrop, to celebrate the museum's centenary in 1991.

Bernard Woodward's filial contact in the British Museum (Natural History) was richly rewarding for the Perth Museum's palaeontological and geological collections. Dr Henry Woodward provided extensive advice and assisted the fledgling museum in Western Australia in the acquisition of specimens. The museum's major coup was the historical collection of 3400 fossil specimens made by one of Britain's most eminent scientists, Professor Tennant.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, the British Museum (Natural History) itself had considered buying the collection for the significance of its many 'type' specimens.<sup>79</sup> Woodward maintained strong sentimental and cultural attachments to his British heritage. His colleague in charge of the art collection from 1906, George Pitt Morison, described Woodward as 'very English... anything was inferior that did not come from England, even his clothes were imported from England'.<sup>80</sup> His pro-British sentiments influenced the way he shaped the collections at the museum, particularly the natural science collections, where 'he would allow no departure from the methods of the British Museum'.<sup>81</sup>

Since the time the British first settled at Swan River in 1829, colonists had sought to identify with their natural surroundings by moulding the landscape for agriculture and introducing familiar plants and animals. As late as the 1890s little bits of England were still being introduced, as when Woodward wrote to the English aristocrat and collector, Walter Rothschild, seeking examples of 'the best known of the English mammals and birds to please the old settlers and their descendants'.<sup>82</sup> In return Rothschild received Western Australian birds for his immense zoological collections.<sup>83</sup> However much Woodward maintained sentimental links and depended on patronage from 'home', his loyalties were to his adopted country and museum. He was imbued with a sense of purpose. Not only was the museum a place for research and specialists, it was also a place to acquaint 'the poorly educated inhabitants with the Australian evidence of God's universe of design'.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, it was a place where the populace could be exposed to the 'works of man', in particular decorative art and industrial design, to improve 'public taste' and, more pragmatically, the standards of design for local industry:

*Science could not be properly studied without access to the material upon which knowledge was based. Modern progress was based upon science, and their duty was to observe the materials upon which the history of mankind and knowledge and science were founded ... In a museum ... they should find these objects that best illustrate the phenomena of Nature and the works of man, and the utilisation of these for the increase of knowledge and for the culture and enlightenment of the people.*<sup>85</sup>

Pressure to commence an art collection at the museum had been mounting in the 1890s. In 1895 a letter to the editor of the *West Australian* deplored the absence of a public art collection, arguing:

*There are few more perfect means of refreshments for the eye and brain and mind as there are fewer higher instruments of education than pictures, fine pottery, fabrics, statuary and the like. It is a singular and even deplorable circumstance that not only is there nothing of the kind open to the public inspection in Perth, but there is almost nothing of this description to be found in our private homes. Those who have never left these shores must grow up in ignorance of the world of wonders save for what they can glean about it from photographs and engravings, excellent in their way but only substitutes at their best.*<sup>86</sup>

Along with his scientific training Bernard Woodward had studied painting and drawing in England and was influenced by the ideology of art as a moral agent. In 1889, the year he arrived in the colony, he set up the Wilgie Sketching Club, and in 1896 was instrumental in establishing the Western Australian Society of Arts which was formed, in part, 'to disseminate that elevating influence among the people that must result from a study of the true and beautiful'.<sup>87</sup>

In 1895 the museum established an art collection.<sup>88</sup> Through Woodward's commitment, and the support of the committee and government, a vigorous policy of acquisition was initiated which was maintained until 1911 when the museum and art gallery were amalgamated with the public library.<sup>89</sup> In 1895 when the Government grant was increased from £200 to £4000, one-quarter of this was set aside for the purchase of art.<sup>90</sup> Advice on how to proceed with establishing an art collection was sought from the Director of the National Gallery of Victoria, L. Bernard Hall. The conservative, pro-British taste which dominated the early acquisitions is reflected in Hall's advice, which encouraged the purchase of Old Masters and landscape painters:

*If works of art are bought to captivate the casual visitor—the man in the street—at first sight, your public taste will remain non-progressive, your funds will be wasted, and your gallery encumbered today with what it will disclaim tomorrow.*<sup>91</sup>

The committee and curator secured the advice of some of Britain's most respected artists and connoisseurs to act as official buyers for the museum. By the turn of the century it boasted sufficient paintings to illustrate the English, Flemish, French, Dutch and German Schools.<sup>92</sup> In addition to paintings, the art collection included sculpture and architecture. Sculpture was one of Woodward's chief passions and he was responsible for the purchase of many plaster casts of Egyptian, Greek and Roman statuary, and architectural fragments.<sup>93</sup> In 1900 the arts and crafts collection was established. Woodward was influenced by the arts and crafts movement in England at the time and, more specifically, by the establishment in late 1899 of an art department at the Perth Technical School. It was not uncommon in the late nineteenth century for museums and industrial art schools to be closely linked. Many museums had art schools attached to them, the museums providing the study material for students of art and design.<sup>94</sup> An attempt was made to transfer the Art Department of the Perth Technical School to the museum in the early years of the new century.<sup>95</sup> Despite its failure the two institutions worked closely together. Woodward was a close friend of J. W. R. Linton who took over the Technical School's Art Department in 1902. Linton influenced and assisted in the acquisition of many of the arts and crafts specimens for the use of his students. The museum's London buyer for many of these objects was Linton's father, Sir James Drumgold Linton, who was influential in the art world and the arts and crafts movement in England.<sup>96</sup>

Influenced by the sentiments of the time, which found growing interest in the unification of art and craft by uniting beauty and taste with practicality and durability, supporters of arts and crafts at the Perth Museum wanted to improve 'public taste' and to this end set about obtaining:

*representative examples of arts and crafts of the world, in order that the public may see the great advance that has been made in domestic art, namely the improvement in the design of home fittings, furniture and utensils.*<sup>97</sup>

The economic and industrial development of the State was never far from the minds of museum supporters and Woodward was careful to promote the value of collections in these terms. He argued that 'in a new and rapidly growing country like Western Australia it is necessary to keep practical ends in view ... even while we educate the public'.<sup>98</sup> For example, he hoped that the acquisition of the Royal Doulton ceramics in their various stages of manufacture would influence the quality of work produced in the new local potteries at Guildford and Bunbury.<sup>99</sup>

Initial interest in Aboriginal ethnology in Australian and overseas museums focused on the curiosity value of the material culture of this 'primitive' race. During the nineteenth century the focus shifted to an interest in the evolution from primi-

tive life to civilisation, exemplified in General Pitt Rivers' ethnological museum in England which opened in 1874.<sup>100</sup> By the late nineteenth century in Australia, most people believed that a race unable to compete with white civilisation would inevitably become extinct. This Social Darwinism resulted in a 'preoccupation to acquire the 'last' of a species',<sup>101</sup> demonstrated in Woodward's description of Aboriginal artefacts in the Perth Museum:

*The very large and valuable collection of weapons, ornaments and utensils, etc etc as well as photographs of Western Australian natives is of great interest, for the aborigines are not only diminishing rapidly in numbers, but those that are left are making use of European materials for all purposes; e.g., glass and telegraph insulators for spear-heads, pieces of metal for making tools, and so the ancient stone implements are becoming scarce.*<sup>102</sup>

Woodward disputed the prevailing opinion which considered Aborigines as the 'lowest of the human race'.<sup>103</sup> Rather, he argued, they had developed in a particular direction, exemplified by their superior skills as hunters and trackers, because they had only to contend with their natural environment:

*But which attainment, unfortunately for them, is of very little use now that their land is being occupied with a stronger race; by men who have proved themselves the fittest to survive in the struggle with their fellows in the larger continents during the period when the Australians, isolated from the rest of the world, were happy in hunting and fishing, but became unfitted for any other pursuits.*<sup>104</sup>

Although his attitude to Aborigines was more broad-minded than most colonists, Woodward showed little respect for their culture. The most secret/sacred artefacts were emphasised in museum exhibitions and catalogues, and he praised the cunning of white geologists and police in acquiring examples of specimens which had been carefully hidden by 'headmen of the tribe' in caves and 'a hollow tree plugged with clay and covered with stones'.<sup>105</sup> Woodward even tested the assertion that, according to Aboriginal custom, bullroarers should not be seen by women and uninitiated men: 'I once whirled one in Barrack Street as I approached a group of natives when the women, on hearing the sound, instantly hid their faces in the sand'.<sup>106</sup>

It is at least some relief to know that Woodward and the committee had moved beyond the early nineteenth-century museum interest in Aborigines for their curiosity value and declined the macabre offer by a Mr Taylor 'to mummify an Australian native'.<sup>107</sup> The worldwide interest in the material culture of 'primitive' races made Aboriginal artefacts and photographs particularly valuable exchange items for the Perth Museum, so valuable, that large numbers of artefacts lent to international exhibitions were never returned.

There was, however, little interest in collecting historical material at the Perth Museum until the 1960s. The lack of interest in history objects was not unique to Western Australia. As late as 1933 a report into museums and art galleries in Australia, commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, remarked on the absence of historical collections in Australia, despite the representation of a wide cross-section of disciplines.<sup>108</sup> Questioning the absence of historical collections in Australia, Tony Bennett argues that while the 'raw material' of history obviously existed, the historical events of post-settlement history did not fit with 'the rhetorics governing the forms in which national pasts could fittingly be represented'.<sup>109</sup> Australian perceptions of 'fitting' historical events were modelled on British representations of the past, exemplified in 'the military exploits of Empire'. Within this model, Australia was part of British history but could lay no claim to its own national history. Even the 'great men' of colonial settlements, the early maritime explorers and the colony's statesmen, were too closely associated with the continuing history of Britain rather than a national history of Australia.<sup>110</sup> Other historical events were best forgotten. When offered a pair of convict leg irons Woodward replied: 'The Committee do not wish to have anything which will revive the memory of the convict days'.<sup>111</sup>

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2 *ibid.*, p. 63.

3 In New South Wales and Victoria the animal kingdom was pre-eminent in the formation of museums. See Anderson, M. & Reeves, A., 'Contested Identities: Museums and the Nation in Australia', in Kaplan, F. (ed.), *Museums and the Nation*, New York University, New York, in press; also Strahan, R., *Rare and Curious Specimens*, Australian Museum, Sydney, 1979, pp. 1-14.

4 Moyal, A., *'A Bright and Savage Land': Scientists in Colonial Australia*, Collins, Sydney, 1986, p. 119.

5 *ibid.*, p. 126.

6 *ibid.*, p. 127.

7 Kohlstedt, S. G., 'Australian Museums of Natural History: Public Priorities and Scientific Initiatives in the 19th Century', *Historical Records of Australian Science*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1983, p. 4.

8 'Swan River Mechanics' Institute/Museum Book'.

9 *ibid.*

10 Uren, M., 'John Septimus Roe' in Pike, D. (ed.), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1967, p. 391; also Woodward, B. H., *Guide to the Contents of the Western Australian Museum and Art Gallery*, Perth, 1900, p. 1.

- 11 *Inquirer*, 25 January 1860, quoted in Kohlstedt, op. cit., p. 5.
- 12 Stannage, C. T., *The People of Perth*, Perth, 1979, p. 137.
- 13 Woodward, op. cit., p. 1.
- 14 Nicolay, C. G., *Reports of Progress of the Collection Making at Fremantle Towards the Foundation of a Geological Museum for Western Australia*, Perth, 1884, p. 3.
- 15 *ibid.*, p. 3.
- 16 *ibid.*, p. 4. H. Y. L. Brown was Government Geologist from 1870-72; W. H. Knight worked in the Colonial Secretary's Department in the 1860s and 1870s and had an interest in stations in the North-West; E. T. Hardman was a surveyor and Government Geologist from 1882-83 and organised the Western Australian exhibit at the Colonial Exhibition in London in 1886; C. D. Price was a surveyor; and John Forrest was a surveyor and explorer and the first Premier of Western Australia in the 1890s.
- 17 Nicolay, op. cit., p. 3.
- 18 *ibid.*
- 19 *ibid.*
- 20 *ibid.*, 1884-88.
- 21 *ibid.*, 1885.
- 22 *ibid.*, 1885, p. 2.
- 23 Woodward, B. H., *Guide to the Western Australian Museum and Art Gallery with Notes on the Natural History of the State: Part IV. The Mineral Collections*, Perth, 1912, p. 3.
- 24 Memo from Harry Page Woodward to Secretary of Mines, Henry Prinsep, 9 May 1894. Battye Library AN 350/1, Acc. 964, File 99, 1894. My thanks to Ken Spillman for alerting me to these references.
- 25 Letter from Harry Page Woodward to William Marmion, Commissioner of Crown Lands, 6 March 1891. Battye Library AN 350/1, Acc. 964, File 1808, 1894; *West Australian*, 10 September 1891.
- 26 Memo from Harry Page Woodward to Henry Prinsep, Secretary of Mines, 9 May 1894. See footnote 23.
- 27 *ibid.*, 25 January 1894.
- 28 *ibid.*, 9 May 1894.
- 29 Woodward, *Guide to the WA Museum and Art Gallery...*, op. cit., p. 2; *West Australian*, 2 August 1890.
- 30 *West Australian*, 10 September 1891.
- 31 *ibid.*, also *Daily News*, 11 September 1891.
- 32 *West Australian*, 10 September 1891.
- 33 *ibid.*
- 34 Quoted in Erickson, D., *A History of the Metal Collection of the Art Gallery of Western Australia and a Catalogue of Objects 1896-1916*, MA Preliminary Dissertation, Centre for Fine Arts, University of Western Australia, 1987, p. 1. Woodward was quoting a famous address by G. B. Goode, Director of the National Museum at the Smithsonian



Institute in Washington, presented to the British Museums Association Meeting, Newcastle in 1895. See Sheets-Pyenson, S., *Cathedrals of Science: The Development of Colonial History Museums During the Late Nineteenth Century*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Kingston & Montreal, 1988, p. 93.

35 Woodward, *Guide to the WA Museum and Art Gallery...*, op. cit., p. 1.

36 *ibid.*, p. 2.

37 Sheets-Pyenson, op. cit., p. 18.

38 Kohlstedt, op. cit., pp. 16-17.

39 *ibid.*

40 Perth Museum, *Annual Report*, 1895.

41 See alternative designs for the proposed new museum. One design incorporates the gaol as an integral part of the new complex. Public Works Department (PWD) Plan Nos. 2036 & 4011 (Battye Library).

42 PWD Plan No. 418 (Battye Library).

43 PWD 1911 Plan; Woodward, B. H., 'The Western Australian Museum and Art Gallery, Perth', *Museums Journal*, London, December 1903, p. 181; Perth Museum Minute Book of the Committee of Management, 5 March 1900 (Battye Library).

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45 *ibid.*, pp. 45-6.

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48 *ibid.*

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52 *Twentieth Century Impressions of Western Australia*, Perth, 1901, p. 97.

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54 *ibid.*

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