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The great diversity of Australian life is lost in the boy's own view of history

By Ann McGrath
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Captain Cook and cricket caps. The review of the National Museum of Australia, with its heartfelt yearning for the return of great-white-bloke stories, makes for rather vexing reading.

Predictably, the review team's maiden voyage of museum discovery washes them up onto the familiar shore of great male discovery narratives. This lost white Australian dreaming doesn't get messed up by facts about the usurpation of Indigenous land and human rights and doesn't foreground women. In their proposed upstairs/downstairs narrative of Australia, terra nullius stays downstairs where it belongs. Captain Cook and other ocean-going discoverers get reified upstairs. Non-British immigrants go altogether, unless they can make good cappuccinos.

The panel's plan starts with Circa, the multimedia introduction to contemporary Australia that's extremely popular with all age groups. Circa is criticised on various grounds but mainly for presenting a diverse range of opinion. The three majority panelists recommend replacing the two major galleries Nation and Horizons with two chronological "white history" exhibitions - "European discovery to Federation" and "Federation to contemporary Australia".

The first would begin with Burke and Wills; the second with a 1961 world record Test crowd at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. The previous track record of such themes at inspiring Australians is weak. Remember the Centenary of Federation? Maybe not. While making Federation a central framing device for two main gallery treatments, even the review panel suggests that Federation is a bit too boring.

The review's findings are influenced by an undisguised yearning for a grand, if somewhat schoolboyish, national narrative. Commending the "courageous warrior hero" stories of Homer's Iliad or the American Wild West, they mistakenly believe coloniser cowboy epics are deeply unifying narratives. Although few references are cited, the report's intellectual underpinnings conform with Keith Windschuttle's Quadrant article of September 2001, which lamented the absence of grand historical narratives in the National Museum. The review panel has obligingly filled in the dots with the outlines and textures of a highly exclusionary and tired formula.

In its vision of nation, the panel does not reject differing versions of history, but it certainly rejects multiple identities, contested identities, interrelated identities of nation. Migrant cultures might be temporary exhibitions, that is, unless they blend into a homogenised cafe streetscape or influence a core culture. "Footballers hugging in public" are apparently part of this and OK. Aborigines are fine, though preferably they should stay "classical", antique and "anthropological" and should not comment on the more recent history of British colonialism.

Remember that advertisement - what sort of a nation doesn't know the name of its first Prime Minister? Sure, facts are important, as are the grand sweeps of history, as are planned redevelopments of so-called permanent museum exhibitions.

But what sort of nation, we might well ask, is afraid to put a leading historian in charge of a review of our first national history museum? Possibly one that doesn't recognise the value of top-quality history or that doesn't want to hear what real experts might say. A future vision that takes us back to narratives of great white navigators and explorers is the museological equivalent of Prince Charles's architectural plans to rebuild England into the good old days of manor houses in the countryside.
While the review endorses many existing museum policies and programs, it is an often incoherent document containing confusing and contradictory recommendations.

The review formally recommends that the museum adopts a targeted collection policy - unaware that the museum's council already passed such a policy last November. The report contradicts itself on whether the ANZAC story and bushrangers should be in or out and seems to contend that *terra nullius* is a 20th-century concept. While it heartily approves the gallery structure, it seeks to reformulate, reorganise, and whitenwash its exhibitions. It argues for high professional standards but does little to suggest it understands the specialised nature of museum expertise.

If the National Museum of Australia is to continue to aspire to being a world-class institution of "authority and distinction", it should ensure that future reviews do not deteriorate into the chaos of an amateurs' day out. If good-quality historical interpretation is to inform and enrich future exhibits, senior historians should not be absent and museum experts should not be outvoted. The discipline of history should be represented on the museum's council and on any future review panels.

To escape the cricket caps and great-white-bloke mentality, the widest possible range of innovative historians must be invited onto any future museum panels. In close collaboration with professional museum curators, leading historians are best equipped to come up with inspiring and innovative narratives. These might present Australia in a global context, or a future Australia that has come to terms with its contested pasts and changing identities. A nation needs a vision of the future to create narratives of the past.

Exhibitions might include narratives of a relaxed, comfortable and hopeful nation - one that celebrates Australian achievements in 19th-century women's rights as well as 21st-century human rights. Indeed, Australia could be a nation that has an exceptional story of coming to know, accept and debate - in a truly cross-cultural, collaborative fashion - both its comfortable and uncomfortable pasts. After all, an ambitious and innovative narrative - but one that allows for inclusion and cultural diversity - might be every bit as satisfying an epic as Homer's *Iliad*, a Wild West movie or even a 1961 cricket match.

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