
Macleay Museum News

Number 6, September 1995

Upstairs Downstairs

The Macleay Museum has opened a new exhibition in the downstairs foyer of the Macleay Building. [*Upstairs Downstairs - the Changing Shape of the Macleay Building*](#) is both an interpretation of the history of the Macleay Building and an introduction to the Macleay Museum Gallery. The exhibition was opened on 6 September by Professor David Patterson, Head of the School of Biological Sciences. A new departure for the Museum has been the employment of designers Lucy Bannyan and Marianne Hawke in preparing this exhibition.



Upstairs Downstairs examines three aspects of the Macleay Building's history - its construction, people who have worked in it, and some of the range of specimens and artifacts used or preserved in it.

The Macleay Building was designed by George Allen Mansfield, well known as a designer of schools and other institutional buildings. In providing a home for the Macleay family natural history and ethnography collections, Mansfield was influenced by the destruction of the Garden Palace building by fire in 1882. This housed the rooms and library of the Linnean Society of NSW of which William John Macleay was a leading member and benefactor.

Although the Macleay Building, built in 1887, was constructed relatively cheaply, it represented a considerable advance in museum architecture in Australia. It's high roof and well lit interior provided a stable environment for the collection. To minimise the risk of fire, very little wood was used in the building's construction. The two staircases were made from cast iron. Cavity walls, an Australian invention of the 1880s, were also used to protect the collection from damp.

The Macleay Building existed in its original form for less than thirty years. Pressure for use of its spacious interior was such that at various times the Museum building played host to the departments of Botany, Geology, Engineering and Pathology as well as the University Volunteer Rifle Corps! By 1918, the central court was lost permanently when two floors were inserted covering the entire length of the building to provide better teaching space for Botany and Geology. The transfer of the Macleay Collections to a new and uninsulated attic, and the 1925 addition of the mock Gothic Botany extension to the east front of the Macleay Building, all but removed the Museum from public awareness for the next three decades.

Upstairs Downstairs also looks at some of the occupants of the Macleay Building: those who have worked in the Museum, either professionally or as volunteers, and those who have contributed to the life of the School of Sciences, with whom the Macleay Museum now shares the Macleay Building.

The Botany Scrapbook 1912-1963 is a highlight, lent to the Museum by the School of Biological Sciences. It contains newspaper cuttings and photographs, formal and informal, of many events in the department's history, some of which have been reproduced and mounted separately from the book. There is also a seed model used in the department as a teaching aid in the 1940s and a soil temperature thermometer.

The exhibition focusses further on a selection of objects from the Macleay Collection, as both a reminder of the initial purpose of the building, and as an appetiser for a visit to the museum gallery on the top floor. The collection has a dual significance, as an active research collection and as an illustration of the history of science. The objects displayed range from a drawer of cockroaches, some over 150 years old, to a printing press for microscope labels. The collection is notable for its diversity.

A major feature of *Upstairs Downstairs* is a timeline mounted up Mansfield's magnificent staircase (*right*) drawing the visitor to the gallery. The timeline contains images and graphics contextualising events in the history of the Macleay Building with those of the University and wider community. The timeline begins in 1850 with the University's Act of Incorporation, and illustrates such events as the major building projects in the University, the anti-Vietnam War



demonstrations on the University's front lawn and the creation of the Granny Smith apple!

Other Exhibitions

Dodo

The Museum's ornithology collection contains an extensive series of bird study skins, nests and eggs, as well as mounted specimens. There are also some bones of extinct species. Among these are three leg bones of a dodo, which with other leg bones and a pelvis borrowed from the Australian Museum, have been incorporated into a small [display](#). A large flightless pigeon which lived on the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean, the dodo was driven to extinction after European discovery of the island in the 16th century. The dodo probably became extinct in the 1660s.

The popular impression of the dodo as a plump and slow creature was based on 17th century paintings of captive birds. This impression was perpetuated by Tenniel's engaging illustrations for Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Dr Andrew Kitchener, Curator of Birds and Mammals at the Royal Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, has recently shown that the dodo was in fact a slimmer and more agile bird. This research has been drawn on for a painting which forms a backdrop to the display.

New Displays in the Gallery

A new selection of artifacts from the Museum's collection Aboriginal material culture has recently been put on display. These include engraved Aboriginal pearl shell ornaments from the 1920s and 1930s; bags and baskets from the 1870s and 1880s, and bark paintings - including one from Port Essington, Northern Territory, collected about 1878.

More recent material on show includes a significant Aboriginal crayon drawing from Yeundumu in the Northern Territory, collected in 1953, and artwork from Ernabella, Central Australia, also collected in the 1950s. Ernabella Arts Inc., formerly a mission, has kindly lent to the Museum some current textiles and small paintings on canvas boards for exhibition. These provide an interesting comparison with the Museum's collection of Ernabella greetings cards. The textiles and paintings will be on display until the end of the year.

The Museum also holds an extensive collection of Melanesian artifacts; many of which date from the late C19th. These include some significant masks from Melanesia. A selection of these and some ancestral boards from Papua New Guinea, collected during the 1870s and 1880s, is on display.

Women and Taxidermy

The Museum is planning a major exhibition on women taxidermists in the 19th century. The exhibition will focus on Jane Tost and her daughter, Ada, who opened Tost and Coates Taxidermy Studio (later Tost and Rohu) in William St., Sydney, in 1872.

Jane Tost had worked as a taxidermist for the British Museum in the 1840s before emigrating to Tasmania where she worked for the Hobart Town Museum (1856-60). She then worked as a taxidermist for the Australian Museum, Sydney (1864-69) where she received equal pay to her mail counterparts. Tost and Coates prepared skins of animals, birds and reptiles for museum and private collectors, sold fur and feather apparel, and later sold Australian and Pacific Islander implements and curiosities. They also exhibit their work at several international exhibitions including London (1862), Sydney (1879), Colonial and Indian (1886), and Chicago (1893), receiving at least 20 exhibition awards for their taxidermy work.

The exhibition will open in February and run until the end of 1996.

Acquisitions

As Australia's oldest university, it is not surprising that there are many relics from the past hidden away in cupboards and storerooms around the University of Sydney. Among these are numerous scientific instruments. Since the early 1970s the Macleay Museum has provided a home for antique instruments which departments no longer wish to retain. This has formed the basis of the Scientific Instrument collection, selected items from which are included in long term displays in the Museum gallery.

An important collection of surveying instruments has recently been transferred to the Museum from the Department of Civil Engineering. Some of these instruments have been in the University since early this century, and many of them are a good deal older. A very large pillar mounted sextant made about 1820 is among the more spectacular items transferred. It was possibly used for hydrographic surveying. The surveying instruments are presently being accessioned and catalogued. Some of them will be incorporated into a new display, *By Land and Sea - Instruments of Place*, to be mounted in the Museum next year.

Another instrument recently acquired is a circular brass protractor retailed in Sydney in the 19th century by Angelo Tornaghi. It is contained in its original wooden case bearing Tornaghi's trade label and was generously donated by a private individual.

The sextant and the protractor, together with other surveying and drawing instruments, are presently on display pending the development and installation of *By Land and Sea*.

On Loan

The Museum is often called upon to lend items for inclusion in displays in other institutions. The Museum has lent ten of its historic microscopes for inclusion in the exhibition *Zoom-In* at the Australian Museum. This opened on 5 August and will run until 28 January 1996. Microscopes from the Museum are also presently on loan to Elizabeth Bay House, Mary Mackillop Place and the Justice and Police Museum. 15 natural history specimens from the Museum are currently on display at the Museum of Sydney. The Unusual barkcloth featured in the last issue of the *Macleay Museum News* is on display at the Australian National Museum, Sydney, in the exhibition *Australian South Sea Islanders* (12 August to 6 November).

Macleay Miklouho-Maclay Fellowship

The fourth [Macleay Miklouho-Maclay Fellowship](#) has recently been awarded to Mr. Shane Ahyong, a Research Officer with the Australian Museum. Shane will take up his four-month fellowship in mid October on a part-time basis to work on the decapod crustacean collection (crabs, prawns and lobsters).

The Macleay Museum holds crustacea from many parts of the world. These specimens date mainly from the 1870s although some collected by W.S. Macleay date from earlier in the century. Detailed taxonomic work has not been undertaken on this collection since the 19th century. The project will involve the identification of specimens to species level and the preparation of a catalogue. As emphasis in major Australian museums has been on specimens from our region, Shane's work is expected to provide a stimulus to research interest in the Macleay's crustacea from the scientific community. Shane hopes that his project will also lead to a fuller estimation of the contributions of both W.J. Macleay and W.A. Haswell to Australian carcinology (the study of crustacea). Shane has already worked with Stuart Norrington on the stomatopod crustacean collection (mantis shrimps) which includes various Caribbean species not represented in other Australian collections.

UMREC Report

The University Museums Review Committee is due to report to the Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee in October. The report of the Review Committee, which was funded by a grant from DEET, will provide the first comprehensive documentation on the many museums and collections located in Australian universities.

We hope that the recommendations of the Review Committee will lead to an increased recognition within universities of the role of their museums and collections in research, in teaching and promoting them to the wider community. As the University of Sydney maintains a large number of collections, in addition to the Macleay and Nicholson museums and the University Art Collection, the findings and recommendations of the Review Committee may have significant implications for their long term organisation and management.

Briefs

Air Conditioning

For many years the Museum has sought to have its gallery air conditioned. Visitors to the Museum on hot summer days will recall how uncomfortable the gallery was for people. The wide fluctuations in temperature and humidity were also very unsatisfactory for museum specimens. Finally last year the University agreed to meet a substantial portion of the cost of air conditioning the gallery and design work

commenced. The ducting is presently being installed in the roof cavity. All being well, the air conditioning will be fully operational before the worst of the summer heat is upon us.

New Logo

The thylacine on the banner of this newsletter is the Museum's new logo. It was developed in conjunction with *Upstairs Downstairs* by graphic designer Marianne Hawke. It appears on colourful banners mounted in Gosper Lane designed to encourage passers-by to visit the Museum. It will shortly appear on our stationery too.



Staff Notes

The Museum is very pleased to welcome a new member of staff, Andrea Warren. Andrea has been appointed as Indigenous Heritage Officer to research the collections and liaise with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities about culturally significant and skeletal material held by the University. Much of this material was collected in the 19th century. Andrea, who comes to us from the Australian Heritage Commission, is working in conjunction with physical anthropologist Dr. Denise Donlan from the Shellshear Museum in the Department of Anatomy and Histology.

Angus Patterson is also working with the Museum. He became involved with the Museum last year as a Museum Studies student. Since finishing the course he has worked with the Historic Photograph Collection and on other museum duties on a part-time basis. Angus researched and curated *Upstairs Downstairs*.

E-Mail

Museum staff can now be contacted by electronic mail.

Vanessa Mack, Director: vanessa@macleay.usyd.edu.au

Lindy Davidson, Administrative Assistant: lindy@macleay.usyd.edu.au [defunct]

Susie Davies, Curator of Ethnography: susie@macleay.usyd.edu.au

Julian Holland, Curator of Scientific Instruments: julian@macleay.usyd.edu.au

Stuart Norrington, Vertebrate Collection Manager: stuart@macleay.usyd.edu.au

Angus Patterson, Curator of Historic Photographs: angus@macleay.usyd.edu.au [defunct]

Andrea Warren, Indigenous heritage Officer: andrea@macleay.usyd.edu.au [defunct]

Bargain Books

The Museum has reduced the price of several of its [publications](#). The Museum's history, *Mr Macleay's Celebrated Cabinet*, was \$26.95, now \$6.00. The letters of Fanny Macleay to her brother, *Fanny to William*, was \$34.95, now \$20.00. Among other bargains is *Blue*

Mountains - Grand Adventure For All, reduced from \$17.00 to \$5.00. For more details visit the Museum bookshop or write, phone or fax.

Footprints in Time

How do we know about life in the ancient past? Fossil remains provide a great deal of evidence. From the examination of a fragment of bone from New Zealand in 1839, the comparative anatomist, Richard Owen predicted that a large flightless bird like an ostrich would be found there. In 1843 a box of bones confirmed Owen's prediction. From these bones Owen made the first reconstruction of the Moa.

But what if there are no remains of the animal, only footprints? Fossil footprints began to be noticed in quarries in the early years of the 19th century. William Buckland, the Oxford geologist, made tortoises and other reptiles walk across piecrust to gauge the similarity of their tracks to those found in the quarries.



In the 1830s remarkable tracks were discovered which seemed more like mammal than reptile imprints. The print was hand-like with four fingers and a thumb curling to the side. In 1835 J.J. Kaup in Germany named the mysterious long-dead beast, *Chirotherium*, from Greek words meaning "hand animal". As modern stratigraphic concepts were developed in the 1830s and 1840s, the rocks in which the footprints occurred were assigned to the triassic beds, dating back some 200 million years. Fossil bones were not found in association with the tracks. The evidence - or lack of it - tested the imagination of 19th century palaeontologists.

It was suggested that large apes or bears may have made the prints. Small jaws found in the Stonesfield slate quarry near Oxford were identified about the same time as belonging to marsupials. Perhaps the mysterious tracks were made by an ancient marsupial. After all, the tracks suggested an animal with large hind feet and small fore feet, such as the kangaroo.

As the years passed, increasing numbers of *Chirotherium* tracks were being found. Storeton Quarry in Cheshire was especially rich in tracks. A particular problem in interpreting the "hand-animal" was that the thumb pointed out from the line of walk, not inwards. This led to the idea of an animal that crossed its legs as it walked. The marsupial theory was rejected and Owen suggested instead that the animal was a Labyrinthodont, a type of amphibian. The English geologist, Charles Lyell, illustrated the cross legged amphibian in his *Manual of Geology*

(1851). This amphibian *Chirotherium* has been preserved in effigy in the plaster model shown here. This is part of a collection of models of prehistoric animals supplied to the University from Germany in the 19th century.

A closer examination of the footprints showed they had been made by a reptile not an amphibian. The first convincing explanation of the animal which made the prints did not come until 1925 when the German palaeontologist Wolfgang Soergel drew a connection between the European footprints and the South African fossil remains of dinosaur ancestors called Pseudosuchians ("false crocodiles"). These had outward turned little toes like the ones that had led to the initial confusion.

The story is far from finished. Evidence of the exact animals which made the tracks is yet to be found. But the cast of footprints and the model *Chirotherium* in the Museum are vivid reminders of the roles of imagination and patience in science.



The cast of Chirotherium footprints is mounted over the stairs leading to the Museum gallery. The plaster model of the reconstructed Chirotherium is displayed with other plaster models near the front of the gallery. Moa leg bones can be seen in a nearby display case.

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