

An Interview of Professor Tony Bennett

*In late September Professor Tony Bennett from the University of Western Sydney came to Turku and held a keynote lecture for a symposium in the University of Turku. Tony Bennett is, among other things, the author of *The Birth of a Museum*. The lecture's title was *Collecting, Ordering, Governing*, and these themes were related in the lecture to case-studies concerning the Australian aboriginal peoples and how they were portrayed in museums in the early 20th century. Kuriositeettikabinetti had the pleasure to conduct a short interview with Professor Bennett after the lecture.*

First I would like to ask about museums in Australia in general. Could you tell us a little about what museums are like in Australia? What might be the most well-known museums in Australia?

Tony Bennett: Australian museums are quite varied in type, though this used not to be the case. In the nineteenth century most museums focused on natural history, geology and anthropology - reflecting a practical interest in exploiting Australia's natural resources and in colonizing its indigenous peoples. Art museums were developed relatively early too, and in recent decades these have multiplied. Museums focused on Australian history date mainly from the 20th century, and these are now very varied in type with a significant focus on Australia's multicultural history complementing early concerns with colonial history. Military history is important too, particularly at the Australian War Memorial. This was, indeed, Australia's first national museum established in the early years of World War II. Australia's National Gallery of Art was not established until the 1980s, and its National Museum of Australia later still - around 2001 I think.

Do Australians themselves feel, that museums are places worth visiting or are they mainly considered to for tourists?

TB: Yes, they do. But of course different Australians like different kinds of museums, as is the case in most countries. Museums of science and technology, and museums like the National Maritime Museum in Sydney are among the most popular, partly because of their strong appeal to children of various ages. Art museums are less popular and tend to recruit most of their visitors from the professional and middle classes; this is especially true of museums of contemporary art. Yet, and this is something of an anomaly in my view, entrance to art museums is free in Australia whereas most other type of museum charge entry fees.

You have researched subjects relating to museums. Most of this journal's readers probably find museums interesting in many ways, but can You give us Your opinion why museums are an interesting or important subject to study and research?

TB: In brief because they are have been one of the most important and enduring 'civic engines of modernity'. They have been consistently important as places which have sought to shape the civic

values of the citizens of democracies. Not always for the good. To the contrary, the respects in which their early histories were tangled up with racist, classed and gendered forms of power is all too clear. Their more recent history, of course, is one in which more inclusive, diverse and tolerant conceptions of citizenship have been the civic goals that most Western museum practices have sought to produce.

In Your lecture You talked about how indigenous Australians were presented in an Australian museum exhibition in the early 20th century. Are there nowadays many museums related to the indigenous Australian people? Can You briefly describe how presentations of the indigenous Australians in museums have changed from the early 20th century, for example are the peoples themselves in collaboration with museums?

TB: Nearly all major museums in Australia now have significant Indigenous collections and exhibitions, and these usually involve a significant degree of input from Indigenous communities and, in larger museums, from Indigenous curators. Key concerns now, in contrast to earlier evolutionary and colonial portrayals of Aborigines as backward, are to show that Indigenous Australians have had a long, continuous and inventive history and culture through which, beyond just surviving in the face of colonial onslaught, they have been innovative and adaptive in ways that have also enriched that broader Australian culture.

There was an interesting point in Your lecture concerning the indigenous Australians. You said that in the past the colonial Australian culture didn't have any connection with or basis in the indigenous Australians cultures, but nowadays the Australian culture is in some ways anchored to the indigenous cultures. How is this "anchoring" visible in Australia nowadays? Most Finnish people don't probably now much more about the indigenous Australians than the boomerang and the didgeridoo.

TB: It was a common view, until well into the 20th century, that the history of Australia only began with the establishment of a penal colony in what is now Sydney in 1788. Before that, it was believed that Aboriginal culture and society had been static for millennia - an entirely flat time. However, in more recent times, as Australia has sought to free its fledgling national culture from its tutelage to European and especially British culture, the pre-1788 history of Indigenous Australia has increasingly been looked to and refashioned as a deep and developmental time in which post-1788 history can be anchored to produce a sense of a longer, continuing national story.

One theme in the lecture was the process and agencies in how material from the indigenous Australians was collected and ordered in and for the museums in the early 20th century. What is collected and how it is displayed, affects people's view on things. How much power and therefore responsibility do You think museums have had in the past or have now?

TB: Museums have been very powerful institutions as a significant locus for authoritative knowledge. They were probably more important in this respect in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries than they are now, mainly because their authority was often greater than that of universities and because their public reach was unrivalled. The former is now less true and the development of public broadcasting has provided an influential alternative to the forms of publicness that museums can lay a claim to. But they are still important.

The final question is something completely different: As an Australian, do You follow the Rugby World Cup currently in progress in England? If You do, who would You tip as the champion?

TB: This is a complicated question! I am a dual citizen of both Australia and the UK. But I am even more divided in my loyalties as I am also part Welsh, and Wales is the team I support most in Rugby Union. I wouldn't put my money on Wales winning though!

[Editor's note: After the pool stage England was knocked out by Wales and Australia, who both continue to the play-offs. The Editor-in Chief of Kuriositeettikabinetti is a devout supporter of the New Zealand All Blacks!]

Interviewed by Mikko Myllyntausta, the editor-in-chief of Kuriositeettikabinetti.