THE IDEA OF A MUSEUM

In its original Greek meaning, *mousion* (Μουσικός) was a sanctuary devoted to the muses of mythology, but by 300BC the same word was used to designate the library of the Egyptian palace of Alexandria. Although pagan temples, like Christian cathedrals, tended to accumulate possessions—including works of art and curiosities—there is little but an etymological link between the classical *mousion* and the modern museum, which began to take shape during the Italian Renaissance. The house of an Italian nobleman of the sixteenth century often contained a large room, the *musaeo*, in which was displayed his collection of ancient carvings, bronzes, pottery, and other artifacts. It was distinct from the *galleria*, a long room in which more contemporary paintings and sculpture were displayed. Today the International Council of Museums defines a museum as 'a non-profit making, permanent institution, in the services of society and of its development, and open to the public which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of man and his environment'.

One hundred and fifty years ago a museum was established in the growing township of Sydney. What were the reasons for it? The answer must be sought prior to the foundation of Sydney; earlier than the discovery of the east coast of Australia.

During the eighteenth century many British gentry and successful merchants became fascinated with collecting ancient objects and specimens of natural history. Such an enthusiast was a prosperous medical practitioner, Sir Hans Sloane, whose collection was one of the sights of London. Despite his busy medical practice he was happy to show it to the public, being 'particularly civil to persons who have some scientific knowledge.

Under the terms of his will, Sloane's collection—consisting of at least 79,575 objects (excluding the plants in his herbarium) and containing some 10,000 mineral and fossil specimens, more than 32,000 coins and medals, shells and insects—became the property of the British nation in 1753. Montague House in Bloomsbury was purchased to provide 'one general repository for the better Reception and more convenient use of the said Collections, and of the Cottonian Library, and of the Additions thereto'. These collections formed the basis of what is now the British Museum. The present library of the British Museum which was opened in the 1830s, stands on the same site, but the natural history collection was transferred to a branch of the museum at South Kensington in 1880.

The collections of the British Museum remained rather chaotic and poorly classified until early in the nineteenth century despite the example set by a few European centres, particularly Vienna. There were, indeed, no generally accepted systems of classification of natural history specimens although these were coming into existence thanks to the researches of such men as Linnaeus in botany, John Hunter in medicine, Abraham Werner in mineralogy, Buffon and Cuvier in palaeontology.

The existence of the British Museum did not preclude the development of others devoted to natural history. The Hunterian Museum in London was another body of high scientific reputation and a museum of the same name in Edinburgh was also an important research centre, as were the collections of the older universities—Oxford, Cambridge, and Edinburgh. Each of these institutions played some part in the establishment or development of the Australian Museum.

One of the important links between the British Museum and Australian science was Sir Joseph Banks, for a long time a trustee of the museum to which he bequeathed his library and his ethnographical and botanical collections. It was largely due to Banks and his assistant Solander that the British Museum obtained its numerous valuable accessions from the voyages of the great explorers of the late eighteenth century.

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Above: The museum of Ole Worm, a Danish naturalist of the seventeenth century, is typical of the collections of curiosities that characterised museums of the time—and even some of the present day.

Above right: A decorative display of foetal skeletons and injected viscera in Frederick Ruysch's museum in Amsterdam, about 1690.

Right: The Hunterian Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons, London, in 1830. There is a strong resemblance between this hall and the oldest gallery of the Australian Museum.
Alexander Macleay, New South Wales colonial secretary (1826-36), was probably responsible for the establishment of the Australian Museum. From 1836 to 1848 he was chairman of the first Committee of Superintendence.

The Hunterian Museum in London maintained important links with Australia for many years. In 1825 Samuel Stutchbury, assistant to the curator William Clift, resigned and was replaced by Robert Owen, who became curator in 1853. Stutchbury made a collecting voyage to the south seas, visiting Sydney, New Zealand and Tahiti. Although his collections were mainly sold by auction and became widely dispersed to institutions and private collectors, some specimens went to the Hunterian Museum. As curator, Owen was happy to accept many important fossils of extinct marsupials, a practice he continued when he moved to the British Museum in 1856. He was regarded by many (including himself) as the chief authority on Australian fossil vertebrates and he was in contact with many of the officials of the Australian colonies.

For the first thirty years of European settlement in Australia it was natural that materials should be collected by those interested and forwarded to Europe for examination and classification by the various experts. In 1798 Governor Hunter thought he had discovered a new animal and sent it in spirits to the newly established Literary and Philosophical Society at Newcastle-upon-Tyne of which he was a member. He also sent various packages to Sir Joseph Banks. Banks received innumerable specimens from colonial governors and officials, but these were insufficient to satisfy his curiosity and for ten years he paid his assistant, George Caley, to make collections in Australia. The variety of material sent back is indicated in this extract from Caley's correspondence of 28 April 1803: '1 box of plant specimens; 1 box of living plants; 238 papers of seeds; 65 waratah pods; 149 duplicates; 77 skins of birds; 164 pages of descriptions; 2 maps; specimens of clay and wood some gathered on a trip up the Hawkesbury to the Blue Mountains with Colonel Paterson'.

There was a demand for Australian curiosities in Europe and money could be made from trading in suitable specimens. Adolarius Humphrey, who was appointed His Majesty's mineralogist to the colony in 1803, was allowed as one of the conditions of his appointment, free transport to London of any private collections he made. No doubt his patron Charles Greville benefited from the arrangement, but it caused some argument between Humphrey and Governor Macquarie, who felt that the young man should be getting on with the search for iron, coal and other mineral substances.

A consequence of European patronage during these years, and indeed until much later, was that many precious type specimens of unique Australian creatures, minerals and plants were deposited in European museums or private collections. Although many were well looked after, others vanished and cannot be located today in the institutions that received them.

In 1826, Alexander Macleay arrived in Sydney with a very fine collection of insects considered by many to have been the best private collection in Europe. This material was later the basis of the Macleay Museum collections and its removal from Europe must have been quite as frustrating to European scholars of that time as the loss of Australian material has been to naturalists resident in this country.

On 4 July 1821, five years before Macleay's arrival, some gentlemen of Sydney gathered to form the colony's first scientific society, the Philosophical Society of Australasia. Among its numerous aims was the establishment of a museum, with each of seven original members paying £5 to set up the collection and purchase books of reference. Major Goulburn offered the society the use of a room in the Colonial Secretary's office and the society expended £9 to fit this out as a museum. Steps were taken to establish contact with societies overseas, the society offering to exchange duplicate materials from its museum as 'it would be desirable to compare these specimens with others resulting from the same natural kingdoms in different parts of the world'.
Early approaches to Australian anthropology were strongly tinged by European preconceptions. This illustration from Collins’ *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales* (1804) was entitled, ‘A Night Scene in the Vicinity of Sydney.’
During the first year of the society's existence material for the museum was obtained from various sources, most of the specimens being geological in character. A collection of 'Minerals, fossils and petrifications' came from Rev Mr Youl of Port Dalrymple (Launceston, Tasmania); 'specimens of the different stratifications of coal' from Major Morisset, commandant at Port Hunter (Newcastle); and mineral specimens were brought from Port Macquarie by Mr Oxley. In the interests of agricultural development, members were requested 'to transmit to the Museum, specimens of the different soils in their respective districts of the country, noting the depth at which each specimen was taken, and such other particulars as they may deem proper'. Perhaps of most interest is a specimen the society did not obtain. At the meeting on 19 December 1821 'Mr Wollstonecraft informed the Society that Mr [Hamilton] Hume reported the existence in Lake Bathurst, of an animal supposed from his description to be the manatee or hippopotamus'. Consequently it was 'Resolved, that Mr Wollstonecraft be authorized to reimburse Mr Hume any expense he may incur, on the part of himself or any black natives, in food or labour, for the purpose of procuring a specimen of the head, skin or bones of this animal; and that the Treasurer do make good the same'.

The society continued only until the end of 1822 but it seems likely that its collection of curiosities—Australia's first museum—remained tucked away in the Colonial Secretary's offices which came under the charge of Alexander Macleay early in 1826.

During the late 1820s and early 1830s another need felt by the growing colony (Sydney's population in 1829 was 12,000) was that of a public library. Earlier libraries had existed but they all restricted admission in some way or other. Of these the most important was the Australian Subscription Library, formed in 1826 and opened the following year in Pitt Street. Alexander Macleay was its first elected president.

Several attempts were made to combine the Subscription Library with the Australian Museum. On 15 October 1831, Governor Darling wrote to London suggesting a site (possibly in the Hyde Park region) for the '... Australian Subscription Library and Museum. As this is a Public Institution of great importance to the Colony, and, as a site for the necessary Buildings is of consequence, it appears to me, though the Grant was only lately ordered, that the section should take precedence of all private claimants'.

The proposal was approved by the Colonial Office but, foreseeing difficulties in locating the government museum in the premises of a private society, Darling's successor Bourke suggested that the arrangement be reversed. In 1835 he wrote to the Secretary of State for the Colonies seeking permission to propose to the Council of the Colony the appropriation of money for the erection of a Building to serve as a Library and Museum and to be placed in connexion with the Sydney Botanical Garden... I have the great advantage of addressing a Minister who being himself a Member of several learned Societies is fully able to appreciate the value of Institutions formed for the promotion of literature and Science. I may therefore I trust anticipate a favourable reply to the proposal I have now the honor to submit to your Lordship.

There has been for some time established in Sydney a Subscription Library... maintained entirely by private funds. On the retirement of my Predecessor from this Government, he directed that it should receive two small allotments of ground in the Suburb of Sydney and a Building allotment within the Town, the former to be sold to procure some portion of the funds required to erect a Building on the latter with the condition that the Building should contain rooms for the Colonial Museum for which Collections on a small scale have been making for a few years past. This arrangement was subsequently approved by the Secretary of State.

It has been carried into effect so far as to give possession to the Society of the two suburb allotments, but I would beg leave to submit a different arrangement for the Building. I apprehend some difficulty in procuring suitable rooms for the Museum in the rooms, which the funds of the Society will enable them to erect, and it would be a novel and perhaps an imprudent measure to place the public property in a House over which the Government would have no other control than as a kind of Lessee of a part of it. I consider therefore it would be more advisable to build a House for Library and Museum, and, cancelling the promise of Building allotment to the Society, to allow them to place their Books in the Library and have the use and occupation of the Rooms composing it, with a condition that they shall, if required by a year's notice, vacate the Rooms, in which case they should receive a Building allotment in Sydney, or the value of one at this day which may be estimated at £330.

By the proposed arrangement, I might hope to establish at once a convenient Institution for the Study of Natural History and to lay the Foundation of a public library. The cost of a suitable Building will not exceed four thousand pounds, the appropriation of which sum I beg permission to propose to the Council for this object.'
Amalgamation seemed to be a distinct possibility. In May 1836 the Subscription Library and Museum were given accommodation together in Bridge Street in a house previously occupied by the Chief Justice, Sir Francis Forbes. Four years later they were moved to a house at the southern end of Macquarie Street, but in late 1841 the two institutions went their separate ways. Nevertheless, the idea of recombination was not completely discarded. As late as 1874, the idea of a combined museum, library, sculpture gallery, and public lecture theatre in a single massive building was seriously discussed.

That any support for the arts and sciences should be forthcoming from New South Wales in the 1820s is remarkable. Still a convict settlement and racked with dissension between free immigrants and emancipists, businessmen and farmers, army and government, colony and Colonial Office, it did not provide an environment conducive to any activities other than those directed to individual survival and aggrandisement. Prior to 1827, the government had funded only two scientific enterprises, both of apparent practical application.

The Botanical Gardens were established in 1816 under Charles Frazer, the first Colonial Botanist. His main functions were to assess the suitability of introduced crop plants for local conditions; to develop acclimatised varieties of these; and to investigate the potential value of native crop plants and fruit trees. The third aim was singularly unfulfilled for, unlike most other places where the British flag had been planted, Australia had no indigenous agriculture nor any promising fruit trees. On the other hand, the pure scientific interest of the unique flora of Australia was such that successors had no lack of interesting problems to keep them occupied.

The Parramatta Observatory, founded in 1822 under the enthusiastic patronage of Governor Brisbane, contributed to astronomy and thus, at least potentially, to navigation. Its meteorological records and those of its subsidiary outstations were of fundamental importance to agriculture and land development. The Parramatta

Catalogue of Stars, compiled in the 1820s, was greatly praised by the Royal Astronomical Society in London, but the subsequent neglect of the observatory and its closure in 1848 reflect the apathetic attitude of the local administration to researches in pure science.

Rather surprisingly, the systematic study of geology and mineralogy was long delayed. It might have been expected that the isolated colony would have been greatly—even desperately—concerned to search for coal, iron, copper, and perhaps gold. Yet, subsequent to Adolarius Humphrey's term of service as Government Mineralogist (1803-12), no appointment was made until 1823 when John Busby became Mineral Surveyor and Civil Engineer. Preoccupied with the colony's water supply, he devoted little attention to mineralogy before his retirement in 1837. No similar post was filled until 1850, when Samuel Stutchbury was made Geological Surveyor.

The pursuit of pure, and even applied, science was a matter for educated gentlemen of sufficient means to provide for their own expenses and to pay assistants. Since the population of the colony did not reach 12,000 until the end of the 1820s (and some 5,000 of these were largely unlettered convicts), there were not many in this category—to few, indeed, to maintain the activities of the premature Philosophical Society. In view of their paucity, it is not surprising that much the same individuals, in varying permutations, were the activators of almost every scientific venture: governors Macquarie, Brisbane, Darling, Bourke and Denison; colonial secretaries Macleay and Deas Thomson; parsons Clarke and Turner; doctors Bennett, Jamison and Vaughan Thompson; explorers King, Sturt, Mitchell and Leichhardt. With the exception of Macquarie and Brisbane, all of these men were directly associated in some way with the early development of the Australian Museum but it is to the enthusiasm and influence of one of them—Alexander Macleay—that one must look for its formation.