DISTANT LIVES & DIGITAL SURROGATES: HISTORICAL RESEARCH, ELECTRONIC PUBLISHING & COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS IN AN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY MUSEUM

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Abstract

Innovation, outreach and collaboration in university museums can take many forms. In recent years, virtual access through web sites and electronic publishing has helped to transform university museums into dynamic spaces for teaching, research and community outreach. The Lachlan Macquarie Room, located inside Macquarie University Library in Sydney, is a unique heritage museum containing the original timber panelling and fittings from the Scotland home of the University's namesake, Lachlan Macquarie. Since 1995, public use and awareness of The Lachlan Macquarie Room, and its related display items, has been expanded through the development of dedicated web sites, public exhibitions and seminars examining the life and times of Lachlan Macquarie in Britain, North America, Asia, the Middle East and Australia. This paper examines how curatorial staff at Macquarie University are exploiting web-based technologies to provide 24-hour access to the museum and describes the initiatives under development to establish national and international research partnerships to promote the history of this unique historical collection.

Introduction

At the entrance to Sydney Harbour stands the Macquarie Lighthouse. Originally built between 1816-1818 to guide ships to anchorage at Sydney Cove, the lighthouse was an important physical and emotional beacon for sailors and their passengers reaching Australia. It marked the safe conclusion of the long voyage and the beginning of a new world of experiences in a strange and exciting new continent.[1] Approximately one hundred and fifty years later, this lighthouse became the symbol for the official arms of the newly-established Macquarie University. The consequences of this decision have been significant; it has provided a unique context for engagement within Macquarie University and in the wider community beyond the perimeter of the university campus.

Macquarie University, Sydney, was founded in 1964 and opened for teaching in 1967.[2] Thirty-five years later, the institution has become a key participant in both the Australian tertiary sector and the international research network, with a tripartite strategic mission (and statutory obligation) to foster teaching, promote learning and establish community links. As such, the University is uniquely endowed with commemorative links to its Scottish namesake, Lachlan Macquarie, who governed the convict colony of New South Wales from 1 January 1810 until 30 November 1821.[3] His governorship was a period of autocratic penal rule tempered by benevolent paternalism. Macquarie initiated an ambitious program of public works, the establishment of educational and social welfare initiatives, and the foundation of organized commerce, banking and trade. The challenges of a rapidly expanding convict population and the pressure for democratic and judicial reforms from resident free settlers was counterpoised by major advances in the geographical discovery and exploration of the eastern coast of Australia. Macquarie helped to transform a distant penal settlement, and an outpost of British imperial ambition, into a thriving commercial entrepot—with trading links to China, India, South Africa, Britain and the Americas.

In 1967, Macquarie University received a unique gift from Scotland—the complete timber interior (walls, doors, windows, shutters and fireplace) of Macquarie's original parlour room from inside his house on the Isle of Mull. This parlour is a room approximately 20ft x 11ft (6m x 3.5m) in size, with a ceiling height of 8ft 6in (2.5m). The room was reassembled eventually and installed within the University Library in 1978-1979 as a commemorative heritage space now known as "The Lachlan Macquarie Room."

Heritage Place

Historic House Museums are found extensively throughout the world. They come in many shapes and sizes and often act as significant cultural agencies in the preservation of national, regional and local heritage.[4]

At their worst, these buildings may appear to be "three-dimensional autobiographies" commemorating the lives of rich or famous "dead white males." At their best, house museums can convert dusty, aging dwelling places into sites of relevance and meaning for a diverse range of people and interests. The social history of a historic house, with its furnishings and surrounding grounds, can often lead to wider stories of gender, class and race. In particular, such houses can become windows of opportunity for scholarly research and community outreach.

After only 200 years, historic houses in Australia have brief architectural traditions when compared

with heritage buildings in Britain, Europe and North America. The spread of white settlement across this continent was constrained by geographic isolation, economic opportunism, regional rivalries and climatic extremes—and the surviving heritage buildings tend to commemorate the activities of colonial governments rather than those of private individuals. By contrast, indigenous Australians have lived on the island for at least 40,000 years, but have not left any durable erected monuments. Their legacy and culture is encoded and preserved in their remarkable rock art, creation myths and oral traditions.

Consequently, The Lachlan Macquarie Room at Macquarie University is a strange amalgam of displaced architectural traditions and historical interpretations. From the outset, it has been an "inner space" seeking a wider heritage context.

Yet, although public access is limited by location and staffing restrictions, the Room is rich in personal connection. One of the historical ironies of this Room is that its shape and appearance commemorate the achievements of Macquarie's wife, Elizabeth,[5] not the man himself. She refurbished the room in the months of May and June 1824 as a "homecoming surprise" for her husband, who was absent on business in London. However, Macquarie died there without ever seeing her efforts or the extra rooms that she had added to their house. She brought his coffin back to the Isle of Mull, Scotland, and held his memorial service in one of the recently-constructed ground floor rooms. Elizabeth Macquarie buried his remains in the family burial ground approximately 300 yards (274m) from the house, and eleven years later she would join her husband.[6]

Not only does the Lachlan Macquarie Room recreate the original dimensions and ambience of the original parlour room, but it also contains several unique items that belonged to the Macquaries: a dining chair, dinner platter, book of poems, a seventeenth century map of Mull, a replica of the regimental colours of the 73rd Regiment of Foot and a nineteenth-century engraving of the Macquarie lighthouse at South Head, Sydney. All these items form part of the permanent public display adjoining the Lachlan Macquarie Room inside the University Library building.

Virtual Space

As early as 1995, Macquarie University Library was embracing the use of the World Wide Web as a means of promoting the existence and history of Lachlan Macquarie's original parlour room located on campus. Remote access via the Internet to heritage spaces and unique museum objects was seen as an ideal way of describing the history of this "space" and establishing broader links with the community.

The success and popularity of the Lachlan Macquarie Room web site[7] led to the establishment of a joint initiative with the State Library of NSW in 1997. Its purpose was to prepare an online collection of full-text transcripts of the original journal entries of the Macquaries in Australia in the period 1809-1822 (with associated historical notes/links).[8] This public web site, known as *Journeys in Time 1809-1822*, provided the first electronic access to the original writings of the Macquaries.[9] It also provided a mechanism for scholarly discussion and critical comment.

The recognition of the value of cyberspace and its ability to facilitate the publication and distribution of scholarly findings has led to the creation of two other web sites at Macquarie University Library. These document other aspects of Macquarie's life in India and Sri Lanka.

In 1999, the Library made available *Seringapatam 1799*, which provides full-text transcripts of Macquarie's account of the British military campaign in southern India in 1799.[10] Then, in 2003, this was supplemented by the web site entitled *Under A Tropical Sun*, which transcribes Macquarie's letters and journals describing his experiences in Ceylon in 1796.[11]

These electronic initiatives are seen as an integral part in the development and promotion of the Lachlan Macquarie Room as a scholarly resource and teaching space at the University. In addition, they allow for the establishment of an outreach program that opens the University to wider community interaction and participation.[12]

Scholarly Context

Biographical research and textual analysis of personal diaries and correspondence is a complex and demanding area of scholarly activity. In July 2001, The National Library of Australia enunciated a broad statement of intent in relation to the preservation of the cultural and historical materials recording the history of the nation. Similarly, the State Library of NSW has initiated a broad program of cultural and scholarly activities in the decade leading up to 2009 and the celebrations commemorating the establishment of the Mitchell Library.[13]

Macquarie University Library has been systematically developing its collection to enhance scholarly access to research materials that describe, analyse and illuminate the period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—particularly the clash of empires and polities in Europe, North America and Asia that form the backdrop to Lachlan Macquarie's life. Library funding has been committed to the purchase of manuscript and newspaper sources on microfilm, as well as a wide cross-section of print and out-of-print materials.

Collaboration

Technological innovation continues to provide new directions for librarians, archivists, curators and custodians of cultural heritage objects. A recent example of this type of international cooperation in a digital context is the TANAP Project involving museums, archival repositories, libraries and universities documenting the history and impact of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in Asia, Africa and Europe between 1602-1796.[14] These records are the most complete and extensive source on early modern world history anywhere. Such initiatives provide important templates for future cooperation between cultural institutions.

The substantive parts of Macquarie's personal writings are held by the Mitchell Library (State Library of NSW, Sydney) and State Records (NSW). For this reason, Macquarie University and these two institutions established a joint partnership in 2003 to create "The Lachlan & Elizabeth Macquarie Archive" (LEMA). The goal is to provide enhanced scholarly access to relevant transcripts, digital reproductions, indexes and historical notes relating to the Macquaries. This will provide a window of opportunity for Macquarie University to become a major initiator in the preparation and provision of electronic text transcriptions of original Macquarie source materials held in Australia, the United Kingdom and elsewhere.[15]

The long-term objective is to ensure that by the year 2010 there will be an acknowledged digital resource for researchers to consult and utilize. This year will mark the commencement of a unique series of bicentennial celebrations relating to Lachlan Macquarie's governorship in Australia. Already a wide range of public bodies and historical societies, as well as various government agencies, cultural institutions, companies and corporate organizations, have indicated an interest in developing a public program of events and commemorative activities.

Conclusion

If there is cultural resonance in the twenty-first century mind for the lives of a Scottish soldier and his wife, it raises the possibility of going beyond what at first glance appears to be a small and limited museum space such as The Lachlan Macquarie Room at Macquarie University Library. In traditional terms, this is a heritage area and a collection of objects that hardly merits attention—and yet in the digital era, it can be transformed from an "inner space" into a dynamic "teaching place."

The Lachlan Macquarie Room is more than simply a remembrance and memento of individuals from the early nineteenth century; it is an opportunity to create a unique historic record within a digital framework.

Preservation can take many forms, and the distributed scholarly environment offered by electronic publishing may be a new frontier for museum curators and researchers to explore. It can become a place where they bring their own special talents and skills to the forefront of teaching and research.

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Notes

[1] Construction of the Macquarie lighthouse at South Head commenced in 1816 based upon the design prepared by noted convict architect, Francis Greenway. The lantern became operational in 1818. For a detailed history, see Bridges. For the social significance of the lighthouse, see Faro.

[2] For a discussion of the history of the establishment and naming of Macquarie University, see Mansfield and Hutchinson and Macmillan.

[3] For biographical and historical details regarding Lachlan Macquarie, consult Ritchie, Broadbent and Hughes, Ellis and Currie.

[4] See Donnelly.

[5] The only biographical study of Elizabeth Macquarie that has been published to date is Cohen's *Elizabeth Macquarie, her life and times*. Brief entries about her also can be found in Pike's *Australian Dictionary of Biography, Vol 2* and Kerr's *The Dictionary of Australian Artists; Painters, Sketchers, Photographers and Engravers to 1870*.

[6] The Macquarie Mausoleum on the Isle of Mull was gifted to the people of New South Wales on 6 October 1948 by Mrs Pamela Pelham (6th Countess of Yarborough), the owner of the "Jarvisfield" estate (1948-49), through an Australian Trust consisting of the Union Trustee Co. of Australia and the Royal Australian Historical Society (and later transferred to the National Trust of Australia [NSW]). The mausoleum currently is maintained on its behalf by the National Trust for Scotland.

[7] See *The Lachlan Macquarie Room*.

[8] The collection is accessible through the *Journeys in Time 1809-1822: the journals of Lachlan & Elizabeth Macquarie* web site.

[9] See Walsh. *Journeys In Time 1809-1822* also extended the coverage originally provided in the 1956 book *Lachlan Macquarie, Governor of New South Wales: Journals of his Tours in New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land 1810-1822* by including additional transcripts for the Macquaries' voyages to and from Australia in 1809 and 1822.

[10] Lachlan Macquarie recorded his experiences fighting against Tipu Sultan, the ruler of Mysore, and, in particular, the assault upon Tipu's fortress at Seringapatam. The campaign transcripts may be accessed through the *Seringapatam 1799* web site.

[11] *Under A Tropical Sun 1796-1821* details Lachlan Macquarie experiences in Sri Lanka in 1796, as well as later historical links between colonial NSW and Ceylon 1814-1821.

[12] Other outstanding examples of web site projects established to promote historical research and electronic publishing include *Valley of the Shadow: Two Communities in the American Civil War, The William Blake Archive, American Memory, Electronic Beowulf* and *The Tiger and the Thistle: Tipu Sultan and the Scots in India*.

[13] The State Library of NSW has already developed a number of important digital archiving projects, including *The Papers of Sir Joseph Banks* and *The Matthew Flinders Collection*.

[14] See *TANAP: Towards A New Age of Partnership. A Dutch - Asian - South African Heritage Programme*.

[15] There are additional, and important, holdings to be found within Australia at the National Library of Australia and the Tasmanian Art Gallery & Museum. Overseas, there are documents held in the National Library of Scotland, the Scottish National Archives, the National War Museum of Scotland (Edinburgh Castle), the India Office Library, the Public Record Office (in London), as well as related holdings in India, Sri Lanka, South Africa and possibly in Canada and the United States.

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