

‘The Museum is the Medium’ Remembering Dr. George F MacDonald (1938–2020)

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Museums around the globe in the current pandemic crisis take for granted ‘the digital pivot’. Earlier this year, the world of museums lost the anthropologist who first opened up these possibilities. This was Dr George F MacDonald, Founding Director of The Canadian Museum of Civilisation (opened 1989), now (since 2013) renamed the Canadian Museum of History (CMH), directly facing Parliament Hill in Ottawa.

The world-shifting CMC museum led by George MacDonald was conceived as a sister museum of the anticipated National Museum of Australia (as envisaged through the Pigott Report in the 1970s). The CMC opened as planned in 1989, with the Canadian Trudeau Government having decided to forego the cost of a frigate from the defence budget in order to fund a major new cultural institution for the nation. In Australia we lobbied similarly, famously epitomised in the cartoon of Canberra’s Geoff Pryor, to save the cost of a submarine to fund our National Museum. But it finally eventuated only decades later, prompted by the Howard Government’s decision to make the NMA a showpiece marking the centenary of Federation in 2001.

Marshall McLuhan was famous for his epithet and best-selling publication, *The Medium is the Message*. George MacDonald adroitly



ABOVE
Dr George MacDonald, Joanne MacDonald, and Dr Amareswar Galla, photographed during a museum gathering in Canada, 14 June 2010.

adapted this to ‘The Museum is the Medium’. He introduced and forever embedded digital media in the world of museums – in a novel set-up that was then called Satellite Uplink and Downlink.

MacDonald facilitated the Inuit Festival at the CMH, directly interconnecting the young people on site in Ottawa and their elders back home in Nunavut. Everyone worked in unison drawing together a fluid range of media: dance, song, and ceremony; bone and stone carving; storytelling and multiple narratives – all interwoven in the middle of the Arctic Winter, a prime ceremonial time.

Earlier, Dr MacDonald facilitated the coming together of the Haida from the Northwest Coast of Canada and their impressive cultural treasures in the CMH, through what became the first-ever digital repatriation, or return of sacred treasures to rightful knowledge holders via a video disc. The Haida received this recuperative return with full ceremonial performance, as if the originals themselves had rejoined them. And the physical return of their ancestral treasures was similarly welcomed ‘home’ to their ongoing protection and care soon after.

Similar outcomes were achieved for the Potlatch Collection of the Kwakwaka’wakw that was repatriated respectively to the Umista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay and the Nuyumbalees Cultural Centre in Cape Mudge – both on Victoria Island, British Columbia. What was so significant at the time was that George as the Director stood back and empowered a new policy and museological environment for First Nations curators, Dr Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin, to work directly with the elders and knowledge bearers from the respective bands.

MacDonald's inclusive cultural leadership, as both collaborative museology and museography, is etched within the larger scope of museums as they continue to evolve and break new boundaries of museum practice.

Dr MacDonald was attentive to Australian museum developments in these years, and visited as often as possible. On the day the bushfires surrounded Canberra, in January 2003, he rang from Ottawa, recalling how Aboriginal Elders had warned Canberra planners of this inevitable calamity one day – they had called it the Ring of Fire that would one day come around Whiteman's Planning.

Around the turn of the millennium, George MacDonald's longstanding interest in Australia was celebrated when he became the founding CEO of the transformative new Melbourne Museum landscape – a project that he nurtured and oversaw until the opening of the new Museum, on the lands of the Woi Wurrung (Wurundjeri) and Boonwurrung peoples of the eastern Kulin Nations, in 2000. He brought with him the leadership skills and First Nations cultural knowledge to ensure steerage of a museum culture of honouring Indigenous Agency, Voice and Performance in all that would unfold at the new Museum sited opposite the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Royal Exhibition Building (1879–80) in the Fitzroy Gardens.

Dr Gaye Sculthorpe (Head of Indigenous Studies), Elder Jim Berg (Founder of the Koori Heritage Trust), Norman Graham (Curator guiding the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre) and many others of all backgrounds made the new Melbourne Museum an inspirational civic space for primary learning, reconciliation, and cross-cultural engagement in Australia.

MacDonald's inclusive cultural leadership, as both collaborative museology and museography, is etched within the larger scope of museums as they continue to evolve and break new boundaries of museum practice. The interview with Dr MacDonald conducted by the present author on 2 November 2000, soon after the opening of the Melbourne Museum, can be accessed in full at <<https://bit.ly/iim-news-2>>. Meanwhile the lessons learnt from his leadership continue to resonate in contemporary museum practice in Australia, Canada, and the rest of the world. ■

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