

Launch of Island Story

Rufus: I'd also like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land, their elders, past present and future, and all indigenous people here today. I also acknowledge Alderman Ron Christie, Mayor, and Director of this fine institution, Janet Carding.

Now, it is a privilege to launch this wonderful book by Ralph Crane and Danielle Wood in this special place. There are so many ways into this book, as there are ways into this institution because they both bring together categories that are so often separated in a very western kind of way we have with our forms of knowledge and institutions we create. We like to separate and divide things into categories and build institutions around them. We like to separate the sciences and the arts, and then separate the sciences into a great taxonomy of categories. And the arts are much the same. We do it institutionally, we do it academically. In lots of ways it has been the genius of the way we have come to know things in the western world.

So, if you pick up this book with that kind of mindset, you might be mistaken in thinking it's a catalogue. There are a set of objects across all of these categories with texts neatly placed beside them. But, if you thought what you'd picked up was a catalogue you would be sorely wrong, and in danger of missing the genius of this project, for this book is not just a book, but a different way of knowing. It offers us a form of holism, a non-linear knowledge, better known in indigenous cultures and some eastern ways of knowing.

I think it is a form of knowing we need to recover, and for me I think that is what is particularly worthy of celebrating about this book.

And so, in launching it, I want to celebrate its non-linear nature and its holism. And, its non-linear nature is important. It's a powerful reminder that knowledge needs to be acquired from multiple perspectives. Not necessarily because there are multiple truths, though that is true in some cases, but because reality is far too rich to be understood from just one vantage point. As the German philosopher, Rudolph Arnheim, observed – "Knowledge in lots of ways is like when a group of people stand around a tree. Of course, all see the tree truly, but we don't know the tree properly until they can all describe how it looks from their vantage point".

There is in this book a great sense of the power of that form of non-linear observation. And, you will see at the start of the book this wonderful picture of the works assembled on Ralph's floor as he and Danielle lay it out, and it put me very much in mind of Arnheim because it was a great circle as they sought to order the circle of observations that they had assembled. And, there is no linear narrative that forces a structure on itself. And I think the genius here is that if we are going to know Tasmania, ultimately the subject of this work, we cannot construct our knowledge of Tasmania in some linear way. We need exactly this kind of approach of looking at it from a similar and diverse set of vantage points magnified by all of these objects.

But then there is the holism of the book. And what is special about this island story of Tasmania in object and text, indeed, which is also special about TMAG, is not the nouns. We often focus on the nouns. Text and objects. The genius here is in the

conjunction. It is in the 'and'. It starts with the joining of things, not the separating of them. And the result as the book's title makes clear is the objects and text that the 'and' creates our ability to tell a story about a very particular place.

And like TMAG itself, where these objects have their cherished home, this book is first and foremost for me therefore about place, memory and identity. The relationship that they have to one another. The essence of the book is a conversation, and the result is a story that looks both forward and backwards. And I think place, memory and identity all integrate in categories, create a grounding that matters in the world today. For we live in a world that is transactional, prone to the separate and the universal.

Grounding is important because it takes us to our sense of rootedness to a particular community that we are a part of, an environment that we belong to, and a world where we are better connected to the people around us, to the environment we live in. We become much more conscious of all the things that separate us. The inequalities that separate us from people who live on our streets or even next door. From the environment we become separated from by the pulling apart of things. And for a world that starts to look all too much the same wherever we go that undermines that sense that we are grounded in a particular place.

And so, here in this work, we find an extraordinary exploration of place. The objects are incredibly contextual. The natural objects of butterflies and shells, and of skeletons of lost creatures or endangered ones. They are not universal creatures but very particular ones that come from this place and often from a particular time, sometimes a time passed. And human objects have undergone, many of them natural objects, we have transformed and similarly grounded in their particular point in a time, in a history, in a community and in a place.

So, this book explores place and invites us to see how we experience this place of Tasmania, which in so many ways is a place of places. It invites us to engage with the seas, the mountains and the wild places, the unique creatures and the distinctive history. And, what I think the juxt of positions do so well is to turn this perception around. We don't look at the objects as we so often do in a museum. We look at the world through them. They are part of how we make sense of the world. They are not what we are looking at to make sense of. They have been liberated from the display cases where we look in on them, and rather they have become windows that we look through out onto the world.

And the texts precisely because they are not a catalogue, invite us to engage with the meaning of the world through the objects that come not of a particular time and location and space. They invite us to engage, if you like, in a form not just for standing around a tree in a moment of time but a journey through time where we can see and experience what makes up this complex place we call Tasmania through the windows of these remarkable objects.

And it is not simply a kind of heliographic celebration of place. It also deals with a sense of unease that people have felt here where convicts, or in a beautiful piece by Peter Conrad, a reminder that while many of us may love this place for all those things, it can also be experienced as remote and alien. And in those experiences, we

start to have call to our minds the importance of this book about which is also I think not just about place but about memory.

In their introduction, Ralph and Danielle say “The objects represented here offer a way into the story of an Island with a long history. The objects carry our collective memories and they remind us of things that formed us, and that is why in any society they are so important because when we were not there, these objects were, and they were a part of stories that formed us. It’s like when as an adult we see photographs of ourselves that reach back before our memories do, and yet it was us there. And when we see these photographs, but before our memories begin, and yet they are about us. Those photographs tell us something about who we are, of experiences that have actually shaped us, of relationships that we have been in. In lots of ways this is a family photo album of Tasmania, reminding us of experiences that shaped us before we were there. It is rich and challenging in its invitation to think about those experiences that made us who we are”.

But Ralph and Danielle are inviting us to do something more than look back. In the introduction they write – “Rather than reading the messages, the text that objects carry, we invite the reader to discover new stories through pairing of words and images.

They are inviting us to make new meaning of our memories. It is an inherently whole making project to do so. Because if we can’t make new meaning of our memories, we will be trapped by our interpretation of them.

Now, of course, real things happened in the past, so we can’t just invent it, it has a brute facticity about it in some ways. But we can see it in new and expanding ways. And those new and expanding ways are really important for writing the next chapters of our story on this island. Because this book invites us into conversations about very difficult questions in the memory of this island. It deals with a history looking for a language to describe the grievous breaches of humanity that occurred here. The loss of species and whole parts of ecosystems, of crippling inequalities and the fight for inclusion. It also reminds us these are not new conversations. But troublingly and hopefully without waging a war on the aboriginal people, the treatment of convicts and the destruction of the environment, we are reminded that there were people who knew these things were wrong at the time.

We join conversations that stretch well back as we seek to make sense of these things. But for all of these grand things, the volume also invites us to engage in a way that celebrates the profound beauty of the ephemeral of this island and in a wonderful way.

Just one illustration is the wattle bird display, a wonderful case with two wattle birds. A moment frozen in time. What unfreezes it are two delightful poems by Anthony Lawrence and James McAuley that reminds us to listen to the wattle bird and to take delight in it. And we need those moments of profound delight and joy if we are to tackle the hard and difficult questions that are in front of us. If we don’t remember the joys and moments of profound beauty in the passing seconds, that this book does a wonderful job of helping us to do, we may not have the strength to create that rather different future.

So, in this fusion of place and memory, the book is an invitation to a conversation about our identity. And as it noted at the beginning, it is a conversation that we need to have now because our world is in a troubled state and it is looking for new ways forward. No places perhaps have an advantage that they can make new things up. When you travel far from the centre and the dominance of the system, you can think of new ways of doing things less encumbered by the consequences or the assumptions.

And Tasmania has, in some ways always had that opportunity, sometimes used well, sometimes not. It is an opportunity today and perhaps even an obligation to engage in a new kind of thinking about the sort of world that we want to have.

What this book reminds us is that we have to do this well. It's a conversation that which needs to begin beyond the definitions provided by economists and political theorists, important though they are, it's a conversation for poets and writers, historians, artists, musicians and scientists, and many others that make up the civic society that lies behind this book.

That's why we need such strong institutions of the type TMAG is that is home for those, and creative people with a voice and a vision to ensure those conversations are rich. And people with the skills and dedication to bring those conversations to a wider audience as Ralph and Danielle are here.

So, this is a book that I think is profound and important to Tasmania, its conversations about where it has come from and where it is going to. I hope it enjoys a very long life on the shelf and that its authors are widely recognised for a remarkable achievement done through a remarkable collaboration.

I formally launch this wonderful book.

Thank you.