

Reviews (History in Other Media)

Never a Dull Moment! Hamilton Stories. Waikato Museum Te Whare Taonga o Waikato, 1 Grantham St, Hamilton. Reviewed on 24 January and 10 February 2010. [http://www.waikatomuseum.co.nz/news/pageid/2145845750/Never_a_Dull_Moment]

IN RESPONSE TO VISITOR REQUESTS for a display showcasing Hamilton's settler past, Waikato Museum has presented a new, ongoing exhibition, 'Never a Dull Moment! Hamilton Stories'. It opened in August 2009 and offers visitors an accessible, engaging series of displays that communicate a familiar, reassuring settler narrative. Such a display is sure to please the Hamilton museum-going public alongside the sprinkling of tourists who find their way through the museum's doors. The extent to which this familiar, reassuring settler narrative is desirable for an exhibition of this kind is, though, unclear.

'Never a Dull Moment!' extends across four connected exhibition spaces. The themes and features of each of the four spaces are signalled in a 'Gallery Wayfinder', which can be picked up upon entry. The Wayfinder is designed both to aid the navigation of 'history's twists and turns', and to provide a floor plan of the layout of the exhibition. As this is not primarily a linear display, the Wayfinder is a necessary aid, and is an engagingly designed piece of ephemera.

The exhibition begins with a section devoted to the arrival of the 4th Waikato militia at Kirikiriroa. This is followed by a smaller section largely designed to portray the unification of the east and west of Hamilton. The third section focuses on Hamilton as a lively, leisured 'Boomtown', while the final section is devoted to the more weighty symbols of urban maturity; the impact of the Great Depression, World War II and planning developments in the central city's Garden Place. The end point is Hamilton's birth as a city in 1945, when the population reached 22,000.

Although Māori feature in a supporting role in many aspects of 'Never a Dull Moment!', this is essentially an exhibition about a white settler presence in a particular geographic region, from military settlement (showcased in the opening display), through to urban prime (depicted in the final section). In turn, there is a sense in which the narrative in the exhibition is one of progress. There is little here to challenge or unsettle, little which breaks away from standard progressive myths about colonial scuffles, followed by the beneficent boons of Pakeha technologies, and the maturity associated with fighting outside of your own nation's boundaries. The thematic approach taken within the exhibition softens this narrative of settler progress but it does not overthrow it. Within each section of the exhibition, objects are juxtaposed in ways that create a 'feel' for the time and place more than a concrete narrative. However, a linear narrative is created by linking these separate pods of posterity through a larger historical coherence embedded in the explicit periodization of each section, as well as through the layout of the exhibition as a whole.

This is not to say that 'Never a Dull Moment!' has merely reproduced an older style of museum narrative. The exhibition also takes the museum object out of its box figuratively, and in some cases, literally. It makes the past accessible through the provision of interactive elements, allowing for tactile engagement in each of the four sections. Children (and adults) can stand behind mannequins dressed in period costume and see their Victorian reflections in a large mirror. LCD screens show actors in period costume discussing themes pertinent to the exhibition and suggesting points of interest to make note of within each section. Dr McDonald's 'Hamil-tron Machine' provides visitors with the opportunity to take a seat and navigate their way through a digitized selection of the museum's collection by touch-screen. Although space is at a premium in the exhibition, making it hard to fully appreciate or utilize all the interactive elements on busy days, individually these features of the exhibition are well designed. They are attractive and informative, enhancing the exhibition

experience overall. Moreover, boards on which visitors can leave comments overflow with positive responses. Some comments indicate that the exhibition has succeeded in creating a sense of communal ownership for the region's past. Yet the question remains: are the implicit white settler narratives of 'Never a Dull Moment!' diverse enough, or inclusive enough, to create the desired depth of communal re-imaginings?

'Never a Dull Moment!' bursts with stories and paraphernalia taken from Hamilton's past, but displays associated with communal identity are often a 'paint by numbers' affair, and unfortunately much of this exhibition falls under this category. It is possible to see in this exhibition not 'Hamilton Stories' so much as national tropes fractured through a regional lens. A more innovative exhibition may have resulted from avoiding the use of national mythologies as the backbone from which the exhibition was hung. As it stands, 'Never a Dull Moment!' provides an accessible, quirky and visually enticing experience, but it also offers an exhibition depicting white settler progress reflective of national mythologies that might have been more fruitfully undermined for the sake of diversity, inclusiveness and innovation. While it will surely satisfy requests for settler history, it would be nice to see an exhibition more inclined to unsettle public expectations about communal identity.

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Tales from Te Papa. <http://www.tepapa.govt.nz/ResearchAtTePapa/Pages/TalesfromTePapa.aspx> and <http://tvnz.co.nz/tales-from-te-papa/ta-ent-tales-te-papa-index-group-2922277>. Created and maintained by The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and TVNZ6. Sites accessed 20 January 2010–3 February 2010.

THE COLLECTIONS OF BIG MUSEUMS and galleries are like icebergs: only the tip of them is on display. Self-described 'cultural curmudgeon' Hamish Keith recently applauded what he saw as a return to core business in such places — showing their collections rather than touring blockbuster exhibitions.¹ Te Papa has come in for its fair share of flak about this over the years, as one critic after another has demanded to have one collection or another put on display. Whether or not it was designed to counter such criticism, *Tales from Te Papa* certainly exhibits more of its collection to the public.

Tales is a set of 50 mini-documentaries, each three or four minutes in length, that focus on some of the two million pieces in Te Papa's collection. They were made in conjunction with TVNZ6 and screen daily on that channel (Freeview 06 and Sky 16). For viewers without these television options, Te Papa's own website will take you to their 'channel' on YouTube where the episodes can be downloaded.² They are also available 'on demand' at TVNZ6's site.³

The mini-documentaries are a superb way of using material culture and objects to tell good stories, especially stories that expand outwards from the object to touch on broader or contemporary issues. An assortment of horrid objects associated with dental nursing becomes the vehicle for talking about women's employment in the 1920s and 1930s (episode 25); we are told about the process of identifying Mht, the Egyptian mummy, but also why she is no longer on show and how attitudes to displaying human remains have changed (episode 14); Guide Sophia's hei tiki is not only a chance to discuss the Tarawera eruption, but also the stories crafted into and carried through hei tiki (episode 2).

The pattern of each episode is straightforward. One of the two upbeat presenters (Simon Morton from Radio New Zealand's *This Way Up* and *Why We Buy?* and Riria Hotere from *Korero Mai*) lead off, taking us into the bowels of Te Papa or providing a context to the episode as they wander the corridors and stacks of the museum. This is the hook — connecting the object to something going on now (showing a digital camera as a way

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