

The marvellous Macleays

Author and journalist **Ashley Hay** talks about her collaboration with artist Robyn Stacey on *Museum*, a tribute to the Macleays and their collections

Robyn and I began working together in 2002 when she asked me to write an essay for *Herbarium*, a book built around her images from collections held by the National Herbarium of NSW at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney. I was thrilled to jump into another collection with Robyn when she proposed the Macleay Museum as a follow-up.

I've always loved the richness and the imagination in Robyn's work – even before we worked on *Herbarium*, she'd photographed a specimen in the National Herbarium for the cover of my book, *Gum*, and it was a privilege to work with her more closely. This time we were working simultaneously – although Robyn has been shooting items in the collection for more than three years, whereas I was really only planning the essay during 2006. The still lives she devised to open the four image sections in *Museum* – “Entomology”, “Expedition”, “Exotics” and “Education” – are exquisite. One is already in the collection of the National Gallery in Canberra.

Robyn is a very generous artist; she's a gift for a writer to work with because she's got quite a textual way of talking and thinking about her own work, and she's interested in the ideas and the stories that underpin the objects she's trying to capture. She's looking for the pieces that stand out in some way, the aesthetically arresting or unusual; and I'm interested in writing about the arresting or unusual stories that underpin any collection.

We're both interested in the processes of collection: the passions, the obsessions, the fascinations of the people who have

their lives taken over by the act of accumulating certain things; as well as the development of science through Australia's colonial history; recovering stories and objects that might not always – or ever – be in the public's view or imagination.

Alexander Macleay was secretary of the Linnean Society in London until 1825, when he sailed to Australia to become Colonial Secretary for NSW. He possessed what was later described as the finest entomological collection of any gentleman in Europe. (Assembled partly through his own excursions but mainly by spending up at the auctions of other gentlemen's collections.) The Linnean Society offered him space in their attic to store the collection. Nobody expected he would take it with him, but he did. So from 1826, Europe's finest collection of entomological specimens was in Sydney.

William Sharp Macleay is the next character in the story. Alexander's eldest son, he followed his father in a fascination with natural history, collecting widely (he was posted to Cuba), but also – unlike Alexander – working at what we might call a more scientific level. He did a lot of work on taxonomy. He was interested in theory too and came up with “the Quinary System”, which was a precursor to Darwin's thinking in terms of explaining the how and why of the natural world.

After Cuba, William followed his family to Sydney (stopping briefly in London, where he met Darwin) and spent the rest of his life here. A young cousin, another William (John) Macleay, sailed with him and it was this Macleay whose passion (or obsession) took the family's

collections – which William John inherited on William Sharp's death in 1865 – to a new level. From 1873 on, he resolved to donate them – massively augmented from their mainly entomological core to include good representations across all areas of natural history – as a teaching collection to the University of Sydney. He spent the last 18 years of his life buying specimens, engaging collectors who would collect for him and trading Australian specimens for exotic specimens.

W. J. Macleay also made bequests to the University and to the Linnean Society, published many scientific papers (mainly identifying and naming new species of insects and fish), and materially supported young workers and curators to make their own contributions to science.

The University built the museum for his collections during the 1880s. The transfer (there were more than one million entomological specimens alone) began in 1888 and took several years. Many people don't know about the Museum and the story of the family, nor how important its Australian historical collections are. We hope this book tells some of that story while showcasing Robyn's interpretation of the collections in her own unique way.

Museum: the Macleays, their collections and the search for order, by Robyn Stacey and Ashley Hay (Cambridge University Press), will be launched by the Chancellor on 7 November. University museums open Mon-Fri 10am-4.30pm, Sun 12 noon-4pm. Admission free; entry fees for some lectures and events; ph: 02 9351 2274, www.usyd.edu.au/museums. ■



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