

Sesqui-centenary to Bicentenary: Reflections on a Museologist

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ABSTRACT. F.D. McCarthy's long career began in the Australian Museum at a time when museum anthropology in Australia was at a low ebb. Despite the lack of staff and funds, McCarthy developed interests in the popularisation of museum collections, struggled for better museum conditions, engaged in a wide range of archaeological pursuits both within NSW and other States in Australia, as well as in south-east Asia, and undertook pioneering ethnographic research in Arnhem Land and Cape York. As the first Principal of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, he provided leadership and encouragement across a broad range of fields in Aboriginal studies. His contribution to scholarship was acknowledged in 1980 by the award of an honorary Doctor of Science degree by the Australian National University.

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Two museologists toured Australia in 1933 to report upon the state of museums for the Carnegie Corporation. They found overcrowded and unsuitable buildings, deteriorating collections, meagre staff salaries and minuscule research funding (Markham & Richards, 1933). In 1975, the Pigott Inquiry on Museums and National Collections (Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections, 1975) reported conditions in many of these institutions which had not greatly improved.

Fred McCarthy's museum career spanned those lacklustre decades of Depression, War and succeeding cultural mindlessness. The significance of his extensive and many faceted research output and public advocacy is magnified when set within the context of those sterile years.

Museology

F.D. McCarthy joined the Australian Museum staff at a time when distance, low budgets and inherited bureaucratic colonial rules preserved state institutions as cultural isolates. Markham & Richards (1933:7) observed that, until well after 1900, 'there was not only no co-operation among museums, but rather a state of complete and utter indifference between them'. As late as 1958, when urging the need for positive field collecting, McCarthy (1958a:265) deplored the 'too State-minded and parochial' policies of museum administrations. In the same year, Aldo Massola, the National Museum of Victoria's curator of anthropology, had to take leave under the regulations in order to cross into South Australia to participate in my Fromm's Landing