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A FUTURE FOR MARITIME MUSEUMS

Neil Cossons*

In his seminal book, *Facing the Ocean*,[i] Professor Sir Barry Cunliffe contends that the peoples of Iceland, Scotland, Ireland, Brittany, Spain, Portugal and Gibraltar all share an identity shaped by thousands of years of living along the Atlantic shore. He shows that Celts, Bretons and Galicians had a closer kinship with seafaring neighbours than with their English, French and Spanish countrymen. Indeed, that the very act of living on the edge of the world created a collective consciousness that was, and is still today, specifically 'Atlantic'. This identity has produced cultures of great inventiveness, from Mesolithic hunter-gatherers who first exploited fish and fruits to fifteenth-century explorers who found lands beyond the horizon. As Cunliffe states, 'Those who face the ocean will always be in awe of the uncontrollable power of the waves and the swells, and the inexorable, reassuring, strength of the sea's rhythm. However informed we may be of the nature of the sea in terms of modern science, it is difficult not to recall in some half-remembered way, deeply rooted ancestral beliefs in the personality of the ocean'.

Those comments will no doubt strike a chord in the minds of most people in this room. It is a compelling notion. It sounds like a narrative ready-made for a major documentary television series. And, it doesn't take too much imagination to see it as the basis not just for one museum but for a whole string of them stretched out along the Atlantic littoral. What is of course captivating about this idea is that it is a big story and it satisfies our thirst for themes that embrace mankind's relationship with the ocean. We see it as having some meaning in terms of our own lives or those of our forebears. There are of course hundreds of such major narratives because as we all

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* Neil Cossons has enjoyed a long career in museums and heritage, retiring in July 2007 as Chairman of English Heritage, the United Kingdom Government's principle adviser on the historic environment of England. He was Director of the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich from 1983-86 and a trustee of the Maritime Trust, the Mary Rose Trust, the Royal Naval Museum, Portsmouth and the HMS Warrior Trust.

know it has been the ocean that has been central to many of the great events of human history over the last 500 years.

Ocean voyages afforded Europeans their first visions of new but only dreamt of worlds, gave them the means to conquer and colonise their new finds and forge trading links and open up markets that were crucial to the growth of industrialisation. Ocean crossings brought people across the Pacific to be the first human inhabitants of places far distant from their original homelands, wherever these might have been. At about the time William of Normandy was invading England, by sea, the first human beings were setting foot on what is today New Zealand. And what is extraordinary about New Zealand is that until only some 75 years ago every inhabitant of the country had arrived, or their ancestors had arrived, by sea after an immense ocean crossing not from some neighbouring country – there are none - but from different and distant places on the other side of the world.

Two years ago in Britain we celebrated as a great national event the bicentenary of a naval victory – the Battle of Trafalgar – which set the scene for our view of the ocean and who had command of it for more than a century. This year we mark, with more mixed emotions, another event in which the ocean had played a vital role, the passing on 25 March 1807 of an Act of Parliament to abolish the slave trade. And, of course, it was the power and authority won in 1805 that was to give Britain the naval capability and thus the authority to do something about the implementation of that Act.

In whatever way we look at the history of many of the world's peoples and nations it is to the seas and oceans we return again and again to understand the big picture; the exercise of power, the context for migration, the mechanisms of trade and commerce. So, why aren't most museums maritime museums? Why have we separated out a slice of history, termed it maritime, and by so doing diminished its importance and relevance and simultaneously marginalised the great stories of human history in which oceans played such a crucial role? The answer of course is that in the main maritime museums were set up to deal with ships and their technology, seafaring and seafarers. This is what their audiences expect of them. This is what the word

'maritime' defines in their minds. The complicity in this contract between museums and their audiences is that this is what maritime museums expect of themselves too.

We are here in Malta to talk about reaching new audiences. It is a topic of peculiar significance to maritime museums. That is partly because what might be termed thematic museums – which is what maritime museums have been and largely still are – represent the big growth area in museums in the last half-century or so and as a result they are now having to reappraise their functions. And the reason for this is that these museums were set up in response to particular circumstances and as these have changed so too have their audiences. This leaves 'single theme' museums faced with a dilemma; to move with the times and seek the narratives that will interest their public, to tell the old stories with their collections but tell them much better, or face an increasingly marginalised future serving a more and more specialised rump of a an essentially self-defining group of people. Or, they might turn themselves into something else altogether, reflecting what they perceive to be new areas of public interest or new areas to which their collections might be relevant. And of course part of the success of change and of building new audiences will be, how do these museums attract new people without irritating or turning away those they already have.

So if, as I believe, museums are about objects and for people, their role and capacity to transmit messages is defined by their collections – certainly through their permanent displays if not in their temporary exhibitions. It is what they *do* with their collections that gives them the power – to change people's view of the world or to create new audiences around new perceptions. For, while the objects themselves may be immutable, the meanings and metaphors tied up in them are lying dormant, there to be released by scholarship and imagination.

When in 1996 I last addressed an ICMM gathering – in Greenwich – I pointed out two paradoxes in the context of the national museums structure in Britain.[ii] First, there is no museum concerned principally with the story of the British as a people or as a nation, despite – and perhaps because of - the existence of that great institution called the British Museum. That means that the strands of British history are nowhere spun together in a single place to form a continuous thread. The nearest one can get to big

picture narratives on the nation's history is in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich but there are of course chapters of immense importance elsewhere - in the Science Museum, London (the National Museum of Science & Industry), principally concerned with the birth of industrialisation (the world's first industrial nation), or in the Imperial War Museum. Outside London, places like the historic dockyards at Portsmouth and Chatham, with their collections of outstandingly important ships, are as close as one might get to major collection-based expositions on the history of the nation, its peoples and its place in the world.

The second point that I made then, and would amplify now, is that it has been the growth of thematic museums that in recent years has characterised museum development throughout the world. Thus, on the one hand there are great multi-facetted museums of longstanding that increasingly see themselves as 'universal museums' embracing what they define as world cultures, whose collections transcend national and indeed continental boundaries and have become platforms for great exhibitions of 'universal' value that can travel the world (be they of terra cotta soldiers or the relics of Tutankhamen). The British Museum, the Louvre, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, are perhaps the most obvious. And, to further underscore my first point, national museums of national history and of nationhood are no more common around the world than they are in Britain. Wherever you go you need to delve through a range of museums and historic places to piece together the history and culture of a nation. I think we should assume this is not only a fact of life but also that it is a good thing. It is I believe peculiarly relevant to maritime museums.

Maritime museums then stand as thematic museums within this complex pantheon of museums to purvey specific and specialised messages through their often-rich collections. The National Maritime Museum in Greenwich – according to its website – is about 'sea, ships, time and the stars', 'covering every aspect of seafaring, in peace and war'. In Liverpool the Merseyside Maritime Museum 'focuses on the Port of Liverpool', in Southampton the museum is concerned with the 'maritime history of Southampton', Lancaster 'uses sounds, smells and reconstructions to tell the story of the port of Lancaster', while Aberdeen Maritime Museum 'tells the story of the city's long relationship with the sea' and 'is the only place in the UK where you can see displays on the North Sea oil industry'. Maryport Maritime Museum, on the

Cumbrian coast of north west England, 'contains an interesting look into Maryport's proud maritime heritage'; 'there are displays about Fletcher Christian, of the mutiny of the *Bounty* fame, and Thomas Ismay, owner of the *Titanic*'.

We might reasonably assume that specialised thematic museums will continue to open but that there will be few if any new 'universal museums' although those that already exist will thrive, largely by reinforcing the cultural milieu that they have made their own. We might also surmise that the great proliferation of thematic museums, which in Britain peaked in the 1970s and '80s when a 'new museum opened every two weeks'[iii], may well continue as new themes emerge, but I suspect at a rather lower rate. Elsewhere, museums will find new subjects for major exhibitions. So, in Liverpool earlier this year National Museums Liverpool opened the Museum of International Slavery, adjacent to but significantly not a part of the Merseyside Maritime Museum. In Greenwich on the other hand, the National Maritime Museum opens on 30 November 2007 its Atlantic Worlds Gallery 'to explore the relationships, connections and exchanges created between Britain, Africa and the Americas between 1600 and 1850 and look at the impact and legacy of Empire on three continents'. There is a big picture for you – the sort of thing a national museum should be addressing. Nor would it be seen as the province of any other national museum, nor indeed any other maritime museum. In Bristol the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum – an independent museum – opened its exhibition on the slave trade, in which of course Bristol played a significant role, in part because the city's own museum, run by the Bristol City Council, regarded the theme as politically too hot to handle.

In Liverpool again the Museum of Liverpool is under construction on the Pier Head, a few yards from the maritime museum in nearby Albert Dock, thus further fragmenting and compartmentalising the theme; there will be three separate museums run by the same organisation (National Museums Liverpool, with the same Board of Trustees) and all within sight of each other, and all three dealing with matters maritime, the international slave trade and the history and development of Liverpool, one of the world's great seaport cities - and as such designated a World Heritage Site in 2004.

Now the purpose of this – rather laboured – resumé is to try and demonstrate that maritime museums are self-defining, that at the time of their establishment they reflected an enthusiasm for maritime affairs on the part of people with sufficient passion and fire in their bellies to create something that they felt necessary, and at a time when they could readily persuade others of the value and worth of their case. They were museums of their time and that time has passed. My bet is that in the future few new maritime museums will be established, certainly as major national museums, as the moment for such things is gone. There will be museums that deal with themes maritime – the new Museum of Liverpool is an example, as is this year's winner of the European Museum of the Year Award, the Emigration Museum in Bremerhaven. But will they in the future call themselves 'maritime museums'?

You will I hope by now be recognising that the currency in which I am dealing today is one of generalisations. Museums come into being when the time is right for them. Let me give you a couple of illustrations. Open air museums of buildings, beginning in Scandinavia in the 1890s and extending in a great sweep across northern Europe to the Black Sea, were set up as a direct response to the rural depopulation taking place – in part the result of industrialisation, in part political instability and the ethnic cleansing and pogroms that went with it. Today, there are some 300 of them. Artur Hazelius (1833-1901) in his creation of Skansen started a trend and defined a mechanism for capturing something of the material culture of a fast-disappearing rural society. Paradoxically, it was the folk culture – of tradition, language, music, dance that he sought to perpetuate in the buildings he brought together. In that respect open air museums have been only marginally successful and many now fail not just because their time has passed, but because they are no longer relevant to the societies whose histories they sought to reflect, and, most significantly, they have failed to re-invent themselves. Many are very sad affairs indeed. Folk museums, farming museums, industrial museums – and of course, maritime museums - have all emerged in response to the circumstances of the day, perceived threat of change, cultural extinction or the loss of material evidence. All these museums have had their moments. The question is, can they sustain themselves across generations or do they transmogrify into something else, or do they go out of existence?

Today's infatuations are with museums of contemporary art and with interactive science centres, neither driven by traditional beliefs in collections, the scholarship deriving from them, their conservation and presentation to the public.[iv] Tomorrow I suggest that city museums – that is, museums that are concerned with the history of cities - will emerge as a must-have for any self-respecting urban community with a history and a need to emphasis its place in the world. Again, it will be opportunities for promoting place and reinforcing economic and cultural identity that will be the driver. In short, they will be message-driven. But, crucially, most of these museums will use collections, collections built up for one purpose to be re-used in support of another. In Bristol, for example, the industrial museum has closed so that its buildings, adapted and expanded, can be converted into the Museum of Bristol. Here the theme of the city, including its long and distinguished history as a great Atlantic seaport, will be presented through collections originally built up by subject-specialist curators within the framework of traditional disciplinary boundaries. Today, others with different interests and motives are using those same collections to tell new stories. In other words the collections become a resource to be mined for any number of public narratives. At best this will derive from first class scholarship in which the collections and the wisdom they contain and can reflect will form the core of the museum's message; the objects are the message. At worst, municipal councillors, city marketing and promotion executives, or curators whose social consciences exceed their scholarship, will dictate political or propaganda-driven themes for which the collections become on the one hand bait and on the other, window-dressing. In short, the objects will merely *illustrate* the message. The difference is critical.

The museum as propaganda-machine is of course widely recognised. A few years ago some 45 cities around the world sought to have a Guggenheim, not because they had outstanding collections of contemporary art that needed a home – on the contrary – but because they wanted to see the Bilbao magic transform there economic fortunes. And of course it is not the collection that is central to the Bilbao effect, it is the building.[v] The building is the exhibit. The content of these new art museums is in many cases entirely evanescent. The contemporary art museum is primarily a place and a space for people to commune and within which art, in the tangible form that most of us might recognise it, may - but increasingly may not - be present. They are

essentially social places, of that genre of art museum to which Roy Strong famously referred, where people 'sip Martinis amongst the Bellinis'.[vi]

And the idea of science centres, which have their roots in the interwar years, received an astonishing shot in the arm in the United States as a direct result of the events of fifty years ago last week – the seismic shock of the launch of Sputnik by the Soviet Union which brought science, and in particular science education, to the forefront of the nation's political agenda. As a result many hundreds are now spread across the nation.[vii] These science centres – they are not usually called museums – also rarely if ever hold collections; they offer interactivity by engaging - usually young people - with the phenomena of science.

So, to pursue my theme of museums in their time, might we reasonably assume that most of the maritime museums that are ever going to exist already do? They were set up when maritime issues were perceived to matter. They are associated in the minds of their publics with events in the past, partly because their collections in the main are of the past and the events and circumstances that led to their establishment were in the past – great naval exploits, four-masted barques rounding Cape Horn, traditional wooden sailing craft – and the experiences they recreate through sounds and smells, or boatbuilding classes or children walking the plank are designed to bring some sense of the past into the present.

Can they escape the incubus of the past? More importantly, should they? It is that question that perhaps lies behind the lecture title that you gave me when you invited me here? That is the key issue for the future of maritime museums and for their audiences.

Before I move on let me emphasise that there is nothing inherent in the idea of a museum that determines it should be concerned with yesterday although in the minds of most people that is what the word 'museum' means. And, of course, in maritime affairs the oceans have never been more significant than they are today. More tonnage of freight travels around the world by sea than ever before – in several million containers.[viii] Globalisation as we know it is predicated on this fact. The reliability and ever-decreasing real cost of transport by sea has accelerated the decline of the

traditional manufacturing nations – in Europe and North America – just as it enabled their growth in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And, of course, we are all implicated in this, if not as producers then certainly as consumers. The low inflation enjoyed in the last decade and a half by most people in the western world is directly attributable to our being able to enjoy the fruits of low production costs on the other side of the world – all made possible by the advent of the 'box'. And, more people enjoy the sea as leisure sailors than ever before. And, more people travel as passengers by sea than ever before, albeit as cruise passengers rather than as migrants, refugees or settlers of new lands, usually on one way tickets.

So, in many respects the seas and oceans have never been more important than they are today. But, like so much of the essential infrastructure of modern life, the business of the oceans is mundane and to a great extent invisible. It is difficult to find in it romance or derring-do. The very fact that it is everyday and in the case of freight transport is carried on without our even knowing it is happening, invisible to most of us, that makes it unappealing.

So, back to my main theme. Most maritime museums are about the past or, put another way, the traditional. They are interested in their futures, otherwise we wouldn't be debating it here. That suggests to me either a lack of confidence that there is a future, a belief that their audiences are drifting away never to return, or a refreshingly enquiring state of mind, open to new ideas and innovation and prepared to face what needs to be done to effect change. I shall assume the latter, in the main because I am hugely optimistic about a future for maritime museums.

But without doubt most of their audiences have lost touch – culturally and spiritually – with the seas and oceans, which have disappeared from the radar screens of most people. The language, drama and magic of the sea and all it represented in our lives – as recently as half a century ago – has largely evaporated from our consciousness. No longer is it our national obsession. And with it has evaporated much of our inherent understanding of the material culture of the sea. That can be seen as threat or opportunity. I believe it is the latter, not least because it sets maritime museums free to determine their own agendas unencumbered by the weight of assumptions that have straight-jacketed them in the past. Let me set out some not too prescriptive options.

Let me say first that it is not the history that is the problem. Nor, in the main is it the collections. But, it is to do with being apologetic about history, not having the insight to spot good stories when they are there, nor the narrative skills to tell them in an engaging and lucid manner. We have I believe every opportunity to make history work for us. We have material that reflects historical events and circumstances of substance and import, often in rich abundance. What we seem to be lacking – and this is true of historical museums in general - is the ability to extract the stories from the collections we hold. We seem to have lost confidence in our collections, our major stock in trade. They represent the single most important quality that distinguishes museums from every other place of learning, scholarship, education or entertainment.

There are a number of reasons for this. First, many museums have come to believe that they must set out their narratives in simple terms for all to understand. Objects get in the way. That is why, when compared with the past, there are so few objects in museums today. But museums are about objects and for people. That is what they are for. Second, people need to know how to look at objects. Looking at and understanding things – museum collections, ships, historic buildings – is a sophisticated experience that needs to be learnt. Museums have a primary role in preparing people to look at and understand *things*. Learning to look is difficult but can be hugely rewarding. Like opera or ballet the experience improves with the benefit of learning and the frequency of repetition. We are I believe losing the ability to see and understand things. Museums are in part responsible for this; so too perhaps is the extent and intensity of our exposure to images of things which have become so powerful and all-pervasive that the real object, when we do encounter it, can look a little disappointing.

So, by putting less on public display museums have contributed to this loss; by marginalising – if subliminally - the relevance of collections to museum audiences (the tyranny of curators), by surrounding them by the message and the window dressing (the tyranny of designers), presenting them in an increasingly gloomy environment (the tyranny of conservators) and by demanding more of the message than collections themselves may be capable of delivering (the tyranny of the marketeers). Curators want to purvey meaningful messages and like to do this in

words and increasingly other visual media, because – I suggest - they have lost confidence in the ability of the object to speak for itself. They see the object as getting in the way of the message. Conservators believe it is their duty to prevent deterioration; display accelerates this. But conservation is not an absolute; it is a relativistic process about the management of decay. Someone somewhere in every museum has to decide on the rate of decay that is acceptable. It should not be the conservator. The conservator is there to advise not to determine.

I have given up going to museums where I can't see the objects. What a contrast to the retail world which we are led to believe is the metaphor for all that our lives are about. Here the object is to sell the object. And how is that done? By putting the object centre-stage; making the object the centre of worship. Making objects not just visible but seductively desirable to the point of irresistibility. Museums need to do the same.

The relationship between message and object is a subtle one. It is largely misunderstood. Great galleries with great collections more often than not get it right because they know that it is for the object that their audiences turn up, time and again, to savour its qualities, and because they can make up their own messages. These places create elites, in encouraging visitors to become familiar with their collections, by encouraging them to form a view, helping them to look and offering them a quality of experience that is sophisticated and distinctive. I see nothing wrong in this. On the contrary, a maritime museum that can build an audience of regulars builds a group of *aficionados*, people whose familiarity with what the museum holds is the key to their enjoyment and inspiration.

Philippe de Montebello, longstanding and outstanding Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, makes a spirited defence of the special values and qualities of a museum:

'Too many museums today are trying to become like theme parks or upscale shopping malls … There is complicity in the notion that you have to compete with Disney and this is *tragic*. If you start to compete on the level of the theme parks, you are going to lose, because they can do it so much better.'[ix]

Few would argue with that, but he goes on to describe the museum's audience, as he perceives it:

'….. I hate to call it a mass audience. The numbers are not high enough, frankly, at five million visitors. ….. there are a great many repeat visitors – I don't mean people who come once or twice but people who come six or seven times, or twenty times, a year. I would be surprised if our audience is as high as one million different human beings'.

The Met's audience, in de Montebello's view, does not need to be sold on the art, because the audience is, *a priori*, a cultural elite.

So, let me summarise with some one-liners. The first of these are common to museums in general:

- Celebrate the object;
- Understand that collections are the museum's stock-in-trade;
- Objects have less meaning unless the museum knows a lot about them;
- Most people believe museums know more about their own collections than does anyone else; make sure they are right;
- Recognise that looking at objects is a rare and cerebral experience that can be learnt but needs to be nurtured;
- Encourage visitors to look at objects;
- History is something to be made more of;
- People want more of it;

- People are interested in people; objects can say more about people than can any other thing;

- So, finding the stories and making more of them is where success lies – in-house knowledge and scholarship, supported by guest curators, celebrated historians;

- Big messages need fewer words, but better, to reveal the meaning of their collections;

- In an increasingly visual world the quality of presentation matters more and more;

It is significant isn't it that most of what I think is crucial to success for maritime museums in the future is common to museums in general. But, if I turn now to the more specific issues of maritime museums as such there are some extra dimensions and opportunities:

- The magic of the maritime is something to celebrate in its own right;

- The nature of the ship as an organism – its form and function - has messages for everybody;

- Material recovered from below the sea conveys messages beyond the ordinary – in terms of archaeology, science, history and drama;

- Our view of the past is invariably abbreviated by uncertainty - the value and authority of evidence from below the sea derives from the purity of its provenance;

- It brings with it the shock of the real; its power is all the greater because it can pierce the anonymity of people from the past;

- Their collections and the history attaching to them is relevant to many more people in any more countries than might at first be apparent;

These are a few not entirely random thoughts. In a world in which family history is a huge growth area, where record offices and archives are overwhelmed by demand from people for access to something about their ancestors and where for a vast population of the world those ancestors have migrated from another part of it – by sea – it is difficult to imagine that the maritime museum of the future can't be a vibrant place which, like all good museums, hooks its visitors on one pretext and releases them changed by the things they weren't expecting to see.

Notes and References

[i] Barry Cunliffe, 2001. *Facing the Ocean*, Oxford.

[ii] Neil Cossons, 1996 'Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Maritime Museums in the new century', in *Proceedings* IXth International Congress of Maritime Museums, 22-28.

[iii] Most of these new museums in Britain were not just single theme museums, they in the main lay outside the then existing framework of publicly funded museums. They came to be called 'independent museums' and most were registered as not-for-profit organisations (charitable trusts) seeking their funding in grants and by charging their visitors. Many maritime museums and ship preservation projects are in this category. Today number well over 500 independent museums. They have their own organisation to represent their interests and act as a support network – the Association of Independent Museums (AIM). Sir Arthur Drew (1912-1993), then Chairman of the Museums & Galleries Commission, was a great supporter, seeing these museums as bringing new life and vitality to a rather moribund sector and forming the basis for growth and development. He called them 'the primordial slime of the museum world', a term greeted with glee by the new independents but misunderstood to be a term of abuse by the old guard.

[iv] See Neil Cossons, 2000 'Museums in the new Millennium' in *Museums of Modern Science* (ed Svante Lindqvist) [papers from the Nobel Symposium, 112, Stockholm, 1999] 3-15.

[v] Klaus Capplinger, 1997 'Architecture and the marketing of museums' in *Museums International* (October/December 1997) 6-9. See too Nicholas Powell, 1998 'Power building in Paris', *The Spectator* (22 August 1998) 37-38, for an analysis of the

complex political conventions that have regulated the world's most celebrated tradition of power building.

[vi] Sir Roy Strong was Director of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

[vii] See Cossons, 2000, 8-13

[viii] See Brian J Cudahy, 2006 *Box Boats: how container ships changed the world*, New York, and Marc Levinson, 2006 *The Box: how the shipping container made the world smaller and the world economy bigger*, Princeton. Both were published to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of one of the most important events in twentieth century history (and which passed virtually unnoticed), the first ship to carry containers – the *Ideal X*, from Port Newark, New Jersey to Houston, Texas on 26 April 1956.

[ix] Quoted by Calvin Tompkins, 1997 'The importance of being elitist' *The New Yorker*, 24 November 1997, 58-69.