

SA Museum
Remembering Dr Robert Edwards AO (1930-2023)

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The South Australian Museum marks the passing of one of its own – the extraordinarily gifted and productive curator of anthropology, Dr Robert (Bob) Edwards AO.

At his family's farm near the Sturt Creek at Edwardstown, Bob developed an early interest in Aboriginal stone tools. From his teenage years Edwards became a keen bibliophile with a special interest in Australian history; he was soon drawn to the South Australian Museum and its small band of experts on Aboriginal culture. He gained field experience working with Adelaide-based anthropologist Draper Campbell and stone tool expert Harold Cooper; this interest took him to archaeological sites in southern South Australia and to Central Australia, particularly the Warlpiri settlement of Yuendumu.

With the pending retirement of Norman B. Tindale, Robert Edwards began his anthropological career in 1965 at the South Australian Museum as curator of Australian Ethnology. Field experience in Aboriginal communities accustomed him to evaluate Aboriginal cultural material in terms of its value and importance to Aboriginal people themselves, as well as to those European institutions charged with its preservation. For Edwards this was a natural and logical conjunction, and it could be said that his key achievement in this field was to position Aboriginal cultural heritage as a vital and integral part of the national cultural patrimony, while empowering Aboriginal people to play an active role in managing and interpreting this heritage.

There was nothing tokenistic about his approach. His direct support of Darby Ross Jampijinpa as the first Curator of the Yuendumu Men's Museum in 1971 is a case in point. So also was his deeply consultative approach as inaugural Chair of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council. Edwards went to lengths to ensure that the Board's membership was composed of senior, authoritative Aboriginal figures from across Australia, and that the Board's meetings took place away from Canberra at sites of significance, with meaningful, action-oriented agendas.

Edwards is rightly regarded as an Australian pioneer of systematic rock art research and archaeology. With guidance from Charles Mountford and Draper Campbell he became a meticulous recorder of Aboriginal sites, focusing particularly on four main categories of Aboriginal heritage, and accumulating precisely documented photographic archives in the process. During the 1960s Edwards began a comprehensive survey, accompanying Mountford on several expeditions resulting in a series of important, illustrated publications.

Edwards adopted a similar quantitative approach to his broader survey of rock paintings and engravings through Central Australia, the Kimberley, Arnhem Land, and other sites in Tasmania, Queensland, Victoria and South Australia. His pioneering work at Koonalda Cave, deep beneath the Nullarbor Plain in South Australia, opened up the field of rock art and artistic expression to prehistorians in Australia, as did his collaborative work on dating rock art in Arnhem Land at Ingalladdi rock-shelter.

These rock art surveys brought him into contact with a select group of key Aboriginal elders whose attitude towards the preservation and protection of their 'field monuments'

underpinned all Edwards's work in this area. His professional-quality photographs of the artworks at these sites, often taken under adverse conditions of heat and light, stand now as a crucial reference for contemporary rock art conservation initiatives. His foray into filmmaking on field expeditions to Warlpiri Country in Central Australia also documented material culture processes; others document ceremonial performances at important sites, such as the Ruguri Emu Ritual (1966), and had not been recorded previously.

The fourth body of work in Robert Edwards's 'South Australian period' was undertaken closer to Adelaide; a comprehensive survey of the scarred canoe trees of the Murray Valley. Many of these trees have now disappeared altogether, and once again, Edwards's carefully assembled survey collection constitutes a vital, enduring record of this aspect of Australia's heritage.

Bob possessed an easy, respectful manner, and this stood him in good stead with Aboriginal people, both in remote and urban areas. At the South Australian Museum during the late 1960s and early 1970s, he used his tenure to impress upon people of influence the urgency and importance of upgrading the storage and exhibitions to do justice to the country's most outstanding and comprehensive ethnographic collection. His abilities in analysing the particular challenges facing the Museum, and in devising their most effective and advantageous solutions, were soon recognised by the South Australian Government. He was commissioned to provide a detailed report in 1977 on the future of the museum precinct on North Terrace.

The 'Edwards Report's first phase was implemented, with the construction of a Science Centre, a Conservation Centre, and significant organisational changes, before economic circumstances affected further progress. After this report was accepted by Cabinet, his brief was extended to include the Art Gallery of South Australia and State Library of South Australia, and make recommendations for government policy on regional and specialised museums. On the recommendation of Bob's final report, the History Trust of South Australia was established by legislation.

Within South Australia, Edwards had few equals in terms of producing a lasting and coherent record of Aboriginal culture within and beyond the state during his time at the South Australian Museum. He grasped the opportunities to work closely with Aboriginal people to ensure that their view of culture would take primacy wherever possible, and this is the attitude which accompanied his tremendous success in forming cultural attitudes towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage during his mid and later career, as his South Australian projects led seamlessly into his 1970s and 1980s work with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (Deputy Director), the Aboriginal Arts Board (Founding Chair), the National Museum of Victoria (Director) and Art Exhibitions Australia (Director). He also served on the boards of the South Australian Museum and University of Adelaide.

Aside from Bob's predecessor, Norman B. Tindale, it is difficult to conceive of a fuller, more productive life. The South Australian Museum and the wider South Australian and Australian community have greatly benefited from his remarkable, lifelong contribution to our cultural life.

Our thoughts are with Bob's family and loved ones.

Tribute written by: Philip Jones, Senior Curator, Anthropology, South Australian Museum