

A most extraordinary man

Today the National Museum will celebrate the life of a cultural revolutionary, **Peter Stanley** writes

'Bob Edwards' is an ordinary name; about as ordinary as you can get. But the Bob Edwards the museum world admires is, without question, one of the most important figures in Australia's cultural history over the past 30-odd years.

Our Edwards has been a leading curator of anthropology, a key figure in the study of indigenous art and culture, a museum director and the progenitor of a revolution in Australia's entrée to world culture. And we – the National Museum – think it's time to celebrate that fact.

Today our director, Andrew Sayers, will welcome participants to a free public event celebrating Edwards' journey from South Australian orchardist and amateur naturalist to influential international cultural impresario. The gathering – a "Tribute to Bob Edwards" – will enable friends, protégés, admirers and former colleagues to evaluate and celebrate Edwards, his life and the times through which he has lived, and to assess the effects of one on the other.

The idea for the tribute came from the museum's former director, Craddock Morton, conscious of Edwards' influence in the life of the nation, and especially its museum sector, over five decades. The tribute will be neither a stuffy academic *Festschrift* nor a sentimental *This is Your Life*. It will combine warm tribute with sharp evaluation and reflection on what has happened in Australian museums and galleries since the mid-1960s. Edwards has been a vital part of their growth, as curator, director, consultant and cultural entrepreneur.

Hosting the event has been an education for me and my colleagues in the National Museum's Centre for Historical Research. For one thing we've been astonished and delighted by the expressions of affection and regard that we hear whenever Edwards' name is mentioned. Here is a man who has done great things in his life, and he has managed to do them without making enemies.

We have enjoyed contacting people from diverse backgrounds – all now themselves figures of substance in the cultural sector. They include former curators, scholars of history, anthropology, archaeology and indigenous and world art, indigenous artists, museum and gallery administrators and cultural commentators. They will include Edwards' friend and admirer, Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum, who is travelling from London to speak about his role in fostering international travelling exhibitions. Did I mention that Edwards practically invented the "blockbuster" art exhibition?

The tribute will be structured around the major phases of Edwards' career. South Australian Museum curator Dr Philip Jones (winner of the Prime Minister's Prize for his book *Ochre and Rust*) has largely programmed the gathering. He knows Edwards'

work as a pioneering curator of South Australia's indigenous past, having inherited collections Edwards created or added to in the 1960s.

It will begin by looking at Edwards' achievements as a museum curator in 1960s and '70s, when a group of questing archaeologists pushed the frontiers of knowledge about the continent's pre-history back to 60,000 years ago. Speakers will include Canberra's John Mulvaney (who worked with Edwards on Aboriginal prehistoric sites), National Museum archaeologist Mike Smith, and renowned expert on outback life Dick Kimber from Alice Springs. The participants will not give formal papers, but will offer memories and reflections.

In the 1970s Edwards became the founding director of the Australia Council's Aboriginal Arts Board. Its patronage and support created a climate conducive to the development of an indigenous artistic movement, which has done so much to express indigenous beliefs and responses and to inform non-indigenous Australians about that world view. Key figures such as Jenny Isaacs and Kate Khan, and indigenous artists such as Peter Brokensha and John Moriarty, will discuss this phase of Edwards' career and the impact of his work.

After a time as the Director of the Museum of Victoria, 1984-90, Edwards became chief executive of Art Exhibitions Australia and embarked upon a further influential mission. AEA brought to Australia many significant exhibitions, including the *Entombed Warriors* from China (1982), *Claude Monet* (1985), *Van Gogh* (1993) and *Rembrandt* (1997). Australians are prepared to queue in the rain to see great works of art from overseas largely because of the climate of interest and expectation Edwards and AEA have created.

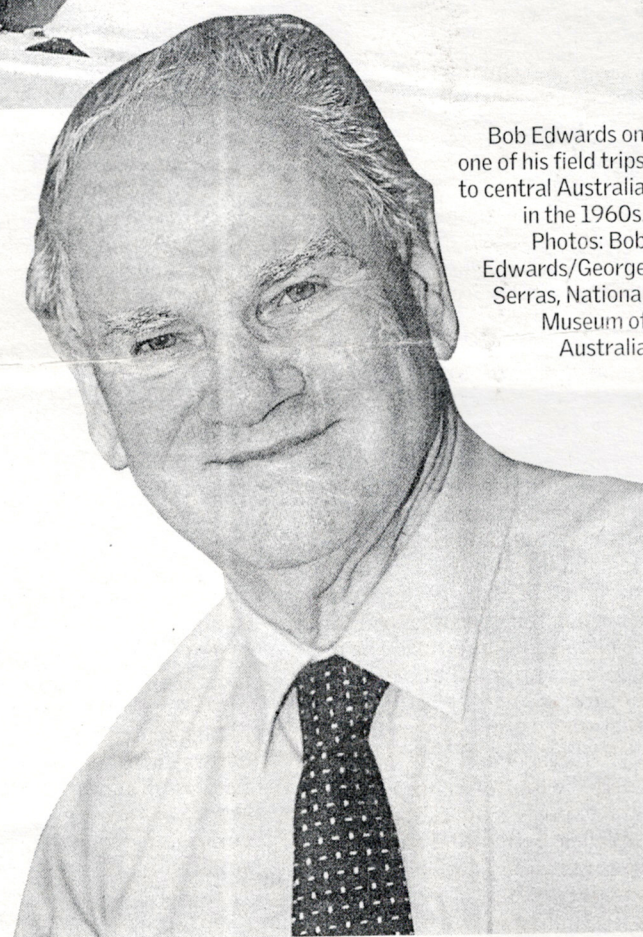
What a way we've come in the course of Edwards' life. In one (admittedly busy) working lifetime Australia has moved from apathy towards its indigenous past and ignorance of the world's culture to understanding and embracing both. That we now take them for granted as part of our life is largely due to people like Edwards.

Now in "active retirement", Bob Edwards remains involved in Australia's cultural life. With the National Museum's curators he is cataloguing the thousands of photographs he took on field trips all over Australia. He is also transferring his huge collection of papers and books to the National Museum – a treasure trove not just for the study of indigenous Australia but of Australian museum history.

Thanks, Bob...

■ A tribute to Bob Edwards today, 9am-5pm in the Visions Theatre at the National Museum of Australia. Free. Bookings on 6208 5021 or email bookings@nma.gov.au

■ Dr Peter Stanley heads the National Museum's Centre for Historical Research.



Bob Edwards on one of his field trips to central Australia in the 1960s. Photos: Bob Edwards/George Serras, National Museum of Australia

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