

Seddon Bennington: A life in museums

Conal McCarthy pays tribute to Te Papa's second Chief Executive.



Dr. Seddon Bennington ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: MUSEUM OF NEW ZEALAND TE PAPA TONGAREWA

Seddon Bennington was a man with unusually broad interests whose varied life experiences across a range of fields moulded his long and successful career in the museum sector. His love of museums was sparked at a young age. While waiting to go to the dentist as a thirteen year old, he wandered into the Canterbury Museum. The visit made a tremendous impression on him, but little did he know that this first experience of a museum was to shape the rest of his working life.

He grew up in Hanmer Springs in North Canterbury. After leaving school in 1966, he lived in Samoa for a year on VSA. This first hand experience of Polynesia sparked an interest in Maori culture, which led him to study Maori history and culture at Auckland University. During summer jobs in the forestry industry at Tokoroa, he made friends with a Maori co-worker who invited him home to meet his family in the Bay of Plenty, giving him an insight into another way of life.

A MAN OF ART AND SCIENCE

Seddon's academic expertise ranged across both the arts and sciences. He completed a PhD in Zoology at Canterbury University, but even while doing advanced research in science, he appreciated visual arts. During a stay in California, he visited the Berkeley Art Museum, opening his eyes to contemporary art. As a result, he did a degree in art history at the same time as he was completing his doctorate.

In fact, his first job after graduating was in the arts rather than the sciences. In 1977, he took up the post of director of the Otago Early Settlers Museum, and then in 1980 became the founding director of the Wellington City Gallery. He developed a passion for managing museums, especially balancing the demands and needs of both collections and communities - something he regarded as a common theme throughout his professional life.

AN INTERNATIONAL CAREER

Keen to further his career and take on new challenges, Seddon left New Zealand to take up the post of deputy director of the Western Australian Museum in Perth in 1982. Responsible for public programmes, he found himself again grappling with the different internal perspectives on the museum visitor experience, from

conservators, publications staff, curators etc. In 1988, he took on the challenging job of setting up the new Scitech Discovery Centre also in Perth, which followed through a project from the initial idea to a successful opening.

Reflecting on the different approaches in art galleries, museums and science centres, Seddon felt that his experience at Scitech with its hands-on engagement with young people and the business-like management of commercial operations anticipated the direction the whole industry was moving in and prepared him well for future challenges.

In 1994 he became the Director of the Carnegie Science Centre, which had been established in Pittsburgh in 1991. Here, in a large and complex organisation, he developed his management skills and learned a great deal about building audiences, not just among typical museum-goers – white professionals from the outer suburbs – but also urban blacks living in the inner city.

RETURN TO NEW ZEALAND

After twenty years overseas, Seddon returned to take up the position of CEO at Te Papa in June 2003. He found a very different country from the one he left. New Zealand now seemed to him much more of a Pacific nation, trying to come to terms with its British past and its postcolonial present. In an interview I conducted with him earlier this year he explained that the appeal of coming home to take the helm of the national museum was its unique bicultural vision showing a 'demonstrated commitment... based on the sharing of responsibility with Maori.' However, as he was the first to admit, there was much to learn about the reality of working within a bicultural structure alongside the Kaihautū and in partnership with iwi around the country.

There were tremendous challenges in other areas as well, with balancing the external and internal functions of the museum, responding to a new government and an ever-changing economic environment. But there were rewards too. As he recently remarked: 'What I have enjoyed most is developing the relevance of what happens inside the museum for the public.' This commitment to what he called a 'broad and diverse audience' was palpable, from his daily presence on the floor to regular attendance at conferences, meetings and openings as well as his support for education, from schools to university classes in museum studies.

SEDDON BENNINGTON (1947 – 2009)

E te Rangatira Seddon – He Poroporoaki

He reo noa ka kore e rongohia e tangi ana i roto i Te Papa Tongarewa. Kua rere noa atu tō wairua, ki tō tātau kaihanga kia noho noa koe ki tōnā ringa ōmātau. E noho ai mātau ki konei tangi mōnenehu ai mōu. Kua mahue mai o takoha hei whāngai i te marea e uru mai ana ki te tiroiro i ngā taonga o neherā.

Kua rere noa atu tō wairua, ki te whakatuwhera i tō huarahi ki te Atua. Haere, haere atu rā e te hoa.

Dr Seddon Bennington, CEO of the Museums of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa from 2003 to 2009, died in the Tararua Ranges in July 2009. He started his museum career as Director of the Otago Settlers Museum in Dunedin, before taking up the Directorship of the City Gallery in Wellington. He then moved to Perth, Australia, where he first served as Head of Professional Services with the West Australia Museum, before his appointment as Chief Executive of Scitech Discovery Centre. He later moved to the USA, leading the Carnegie Science centre in Pittsburgh before returning to his native New Zealand in 2003 as CEO of Te Papa. He served on the Board of Museums Aotearoa from 2005 to 2009 and was a constant champion for museums, heritage, art, and science. Museums Aotearoa honours his many achievements and his strong support and advocacy for the museum sector.

MEMORIES OF FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES

In the six years Seddon was at Te Papa, he was involved in an ever widening network. This included serving on the Board of Museums Aotearoa, forging close relationships with the National Library and Archives New Zealand, making a strong commitment to digital heritage through the National Digital Forum and various professional bodies across the Tasman and overseas. His respect in the local and international museum sectors was reflected in the many tributes and condolences on his untimely death.

Te Papa's blog is a testament to Seddon's life, affirming that friends and colleagues, in New Zealand and around the world, remember him for 'his intellectual and physical energy, his outgoing personality, and his love for his family.' Despite tremendous pressures, a busy schedule and constant demands, Seddon was always unfailingly polite, courteous and approachable. He was well known among staff as a sociable colleague who liked to cook well, dress up and join in the party, despite an undistinguished singing voice!

In a 2007 *Dominion Post* interview he talked about his love of the outdoors. In what now seems bittersweet, he said he often longed to get away from work to go tramping. 'Now, with the Tararuas visible from the office window, I frequently think of the satisfaction of being away from city lights and comforts, of traversing ridges, of the sleep that comes of a day's hard exertion, and of the respect for nature and weather that goes with the terrain.'

Many different directors have led the national museum since its establishment in 1865, each leaving their own indelible mark on the institution. Seddon will be remembered for his quiet and gracious leadership style, his grasp of the broad range of integrated collections and his support for art and the natural environment. His respect for things Māori was warmly acknowledged in whaikōrero on Te Papa's marae as his body lay in state. His sudden death meant that he was not able to see through the recently completed restructuring of the museum that marked its transition from the ten years of operation since 1998 into a new phase of development, but colleagues have remarked on his energetic plans for the future. They, along with all those who Seddon came into contact with, can only imagine what might have been.



Dr Seddon Bennington at the opening of The Scots in New Zealand exhibition, 2007, with the Honorable Mr George Fergusson, British High Commissioner to New Zealand. ACKNOWLEDGMENT: MUSEUM OF NEW ZEALAND TE PAPA TONGAREWA

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