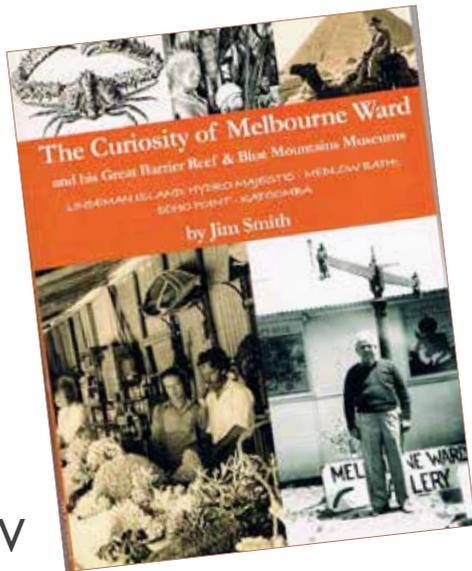


# THE ART OF COLLECTING



## REVIEW

Museums are the places you seek out if you're visiting somewhere—those old, unusual, sometimes historic or even dilapidated buildings bursting with curiosities collected over lifetimes, often by eccentric characters. Such collections of oddities are everywhere. In Australia think of Wing Hing Long & Co. in Tingha, New South Wales, a shop built in 1880 in Chinese ownership until New South Wales Heritage purchased it in 1998. It is a living museum. There's The Man From Snowy River Museum in Corryong, Victoria, and the orchard shed built in 1947 now the Apple and Heritage Museum in the Huon Valley in Tasmania—the early settlers in this area exported around 300,000 cases of apples per year from only fifty acres of apple trees.

In the past the collectors themselves might have been on hand to regale you with hair-raising stories of convicts and bushrangers, or of primitive peoples and faraway places, extraordinary creatures and evil-looking artefacts. One such collector was Charles Melbourne Ward, described by Jim Smith as a 19th century gentleman-naturalist stranded in the mid-20th century.

Jim Smith has researched, written and published *The Curiosity of Melbourne Ward and his Great Barrier Reef and Blue Mountains Museums*, part of a series covering the social history of the Hydro Majestic Hotel and the life of Mark Foy. An American-built fibro shed in the grounds of the Hydro Majestic Hotel at Medlow Bath would become the home of the most substantial of Mel Ward's museums. Later there would also be the Pyala Museum at Echo Point in Katoomba. Their forerunner had been a small museum on Lindeman Island on the Barrier Reef where Mel and his wife Halley lived an idyllic lifestyle collecting shells and corals.

Today Melbourne Ward's collections have been scattered far and wide: some items are in storage at the Australian

Museum and parts may be seen at the Mt. Victoria Historical Society Museum located in the Refreshment Rooms of the old Mt. Victoria railway station. Melbourne Ward's collections at this museum inspired the recent *Birdland* exhibition there curated by Miriam Williamson.

Mel was the son of an American couple who migrated to Australia in 1900. He had a theatrical bent which made his lectures, walks and guided tours of the museums always entertaining and exciting. As a young man he bought a one-man band combination of wind, brass and string instruments which he used to entertain while simultaneously playing the saxophone and doing 'wriggly dances'!

Jim Smith has unearthed so much fascinating information about this unusual man that on every page a new facet of his extraordinary life is revealed. He began life as a professional performer but by his mid-twenties he had become a crab hunter, discovering a new species of crab in 1926 (which was named after him) and going on to become an expert on their taxonomy. Soon we find him being made an honorary zoologist by the Australian Museum after participating in a Cambridge University expedition to discover the ecology of the reef. Next he is mounting expeditions in the Whitsundays, and with his wife Halley has opened The Hayman Island Biological Station with rough huts, tents, a dining hall and dancing, lectures and research. During the Second World War we find Mel educating troops on survival techniques and bush foods and at around this time he has also managed to enthrall Mark Foy Jnr. with the idea of opening a museum in the grounds of the Hydro Majestic.

A delightful chapter in the book is the 'virtual tour' of the Medlow Bath Museum using black and white photographs of Mel Ward with the exhibits. No longer the slim young diver from Barrier Reef days but a lumpy dressed white-haired eccentric regaling visitors with stories of head-hunters' skulls, Samurai warriors and convicts with balls and chain, of colonial guns. Smith too is conscious of Mel's appearance now, writing: 'a rather poignant detail is the old coat worn by Ward, with its frayed sleeve and pocket. Perhaps the inheritance he had relied on for most of his life had become depleted by this time.' My feeling is that Mel was completely unaware of his appearance—simply irrelevant when you are surrounded by so much living, exciting history.

Here is the material for a remarkable biographical film just waiting to be made.

**Carolynne Skinner**

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Photos of Melbourne Ward from *The Curiosity of Melbourne Ward* by Jim Smith, 2019