

a and New South Wales thanks members to vote according to ur from over. In typical fashion, , with its see-sawing hopes and of those campaigning for and l the issue will not be re-visited. on will be re-introduced sooner

quality and dignity. But it will : battles have always been. The nes does – or it may ignore us, the Tasmanian mud regardless, igs forth.

n Gay and Lesbian Rights Group.
id a former editor of *Island*
ustralia in 2003 for his gay rights

MEMOIR

Reasons to be cheerful

Humility and hubris from Glenorchy

David Walsh

NATASHA Cica sent me an email the other day reminding me I had agreed to do a two thousand-word article for her (this). She wanted to know why MONA is in Tasmania, and she thinks that you might want to also. I needed reminding; I made the commitment over a lunch that included the right amount (too much) wine. The email also thanked me, as a synecdoche for MONA staff, for showing John Ralston Saul around MONA on Tuesday, when it is otherwise closed.

So, of course, I typed 'John Ralston Saul' into the Google search bar on my iPad and now I'm an expert on the guy. He certainly has an impressive résumé. Within the Wikipedia article one sentence caught my eye: 'He argues that Canada's complex national identity is made up of the "triangular reality" of three nations that compose it: First Peoples, Francophones, and Anglophones. He emphasises the willingness of these Canadian nations to compromise with one another, as opposed to resorting to open confrontations.' There is an improbable implication that Canada, and other locales, would not have a complex national identity without this tolerance triangle.

Mostly monolingual and accidentally genocidal, Tasmania has its own fractured and remade identity, and that characteristic Tasmania managed to preserve my interest, even against the considerable attractions of much larger and more worldly centres of culture that might have been unwilling, but beneficial venues for MONA.

THE HOBART OF my youth was mostly working class Glenorchy, the satellite city of Hobart that is neither a city nor a satellite, at least in the sense of willing subordinate. The denizens of Glenorchy believed it to be a place where a life could be lived completely, mostly without ambition, but also without its attendant desperation. In Glenorchy and, I later found out, in Tasmania, we believed in shades of grey. People weren't black, or alcoholic, or rich (actually I think nobody was rich except Claudio Alcorso, my predecessor at Moorilla, where MONA now resides). Everybody was just somebody. Most people weren't even bothered by weird, demented, internal me.

We believed in shades of grey because our forebears were convicts, and we were in no position to judge. And we believed in shades of grey because we were the stunted cousins of the larger, flashier cities that the descendants of those felons transported to the mainland produced.

How could a culture prepared to call the other states of Australia, collectively, 'the mainland' see the world in terms of absolutes? We were, by some misapplication of complementarity, necessarily a minor land. We had western privilege without western ego. The cultural cringe that overwhelmed the Tasmanian sense of identity was a tremendous benison to me. We Taswegians knew that we weren't special but, paradoxically, thought we had something to prove.

So it seems obvious that I returned to Glenorchy because so much of the attitude embedded in the community is mirrored in MONA. Obvious, but inaccurate. MONA ended up in Glenorchy by chance, through a chain of events that I was complicit in but not the author of. History (is the genesis of MONA history?) takes on the sheen of certainty in retrospect. Motives are a repulsive force, like dark energy they become more compelling as they recede. To paraphrase a song you'll never hear, 'they are brighter when they're further away'.

HERE'S HOW MONA happened, and how it happened just up the road from the place where my childhood played out.

Leaving Glenorchy was important. I went to a school that had a computer. I already knew I liked computers even though I had never seen

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one. I was a nerd, on the cusp of nerd-dom being fashionable, a decade or two before nerds got sexy. So I met some guys who knew a guy who liked gambling. My dad trained greyhounds; I liked gambling too. But the guy that the other guys introduced me to, he wanted to win. Later the fortunate proximity of the university to Australia's first legal casino gave us the opportunity to learn stuff that we needed to know.

So a few years later I bought a fancy house at Otago Bay, on the bank of the Derwent River opposite (geographically and socio-politically) the present location of MONA. And I started buying things rich people buy, like art. That was also an accident.

Our team made money in South Africa playing blackjack; we were beneficiaries of the chaos that followed the collapse of apartheid. We couldn't take out more money than we took in. But, remarkably and incomprehensibly, art could be exported. We had about \$20,000 too much. I had seen and admired a hundred-year-old Nigerian palace door in a gallery near Johannesburg. I asked its price – \$20,000 – and became an art collector.

My fancy house had a peculiarity. It was three storeys tall, but very narrow, so those who dwelt within suffered through summer and winter every day. Most people would never have bought such a house, but I was labouring under a romantic notion. Years before, when I was ten or eleven, I had read a Robert Heinlein novel called *The Door into Summer* (Doubleday, 1957). The protagonist had a cat that wouldn't believe it was winter outside his house until it had tried all eleven doors. The cat was seeking the door into summer. I decided then that one day I would get a house with eleven doors. My Otago Bay house, three storeys on a slope, had eleven doors.

But it wasn't just the occupants who suffered through four seasons each day. So did the art, and clearly that was not a good thing. But across the river there was a lovely peninsula, with houses designed by an expert, Roy Grounds, and they had tolerable internal climates. The owner of those houses and the winery that surrounded them, Claudio Alcorso, was going broke.

SO I BOUGHT the whole peninsula from the bank and built a little gallery. That wasn't my intention initially; I just wanted a more appropriate building

to use as a warehouse. But I needed to do some renovations, and it soon became clear that turning Claudio's old house into a gallery wouldn't be that much more expensive. Thus was born the Moorilla Museum of Antiquities.

And it was beautiful, it really was. Clean lines, minimalist cabinetry, white walls – it looked like every other art gallery in the world. I didn't want it to. I had no investment in museological notions such as presenting art in a neutral matrix. I just wanted to put my art on the walls.

And I bought more art, antiquities and modernist art and contemporary art and all the while I wondered why my gallery looked like everybody else's. Gradually (or suddenly, I don't remember) the reason revealed itself. It was the wall labels. Black text on white cards means white walls means every museum looks the same. As you may know, MONA got the labels off the walls by having them follow you around in a handheld device that knows where you are in the museum. Depending on your perspective, a trivial thing, or a revolution.

I decided to build a bigger museum. I did think about other places, even around Hobart, but not seriously. I had a site, and by then I also had daughters and shared custody. And anyway where would I go? Real estate in London and New York isn't cheap and I had a few opinions, I wanted to build a megaphone. But who would hear me shouting in a place like New York, or even Sydney, with all that cultural background noise blaring? I also had another rationale: people who travel to see something pay it serious attention. It's just a matter of getting them to travel. But in London everybody is already there.

And the nature of the journey to MONA had some resonance. People could come up the Derwent River on a ferry.

People don't die on boats on the Derwent very often, but two thousand years ago on the Mediterranean the risks were substantial. A journey survived was a cause for celebration, and for offering thanks. The islands had temples and they were on the top of cliffs (at least in James Bond movies they are). MONA is an oracular cave, but in the Delphic tradition the advice given is difficult to interpret. My fantasy is that MONA's message, in common with that of Apollo, affirms life by undermining the reasons you have to lie to yourself. But that isn't why I built it. That motive came after MONA

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opened, but its potency seduced me, and I've often found myself claiming it in MONA's pre-history.

I built a museum by accident.

I didn't build MONA by accident, given that I was going to build a second art museum it had become inevitable that it would be MONA. But the events that led me to building a museum in the first place, and gave me the capacity to build a museum, were exquisitely unlikely. Of course, other events would have resulted in other outcomes, and I would have interpreted those as unlikely.

So MONA is a museum of science, and a yacht, and a factory, and a piece of cardboard under which I sleep, and a tumour sapping my will on the way to claiming my life. It is the statistical noise that enables me to do the analysis by which I determine how fortunate I am.

But, somehow, MONA is imbued with the hubris of a man who was inadvertently taught by his community not to respect boundaries, and the humility of a little boy who often walked past the peninsula on which it now resides, but who never ventured in, because he didn't understand that it was okay to have a look.

David Walsh built a museum despite (or because of) a low-level of chopstick proficiency. His high school reference conceded, 'Any employer who can get David to work will be very lucky.' He was once gainfully employed by the tax office, and has been paying for it ever since. It is rumoured that he is to be cast in the lead role of the next Wonder Woman franchise, if he doesn't cut down on tofu.

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