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Sydney Morning Herald

# Boyish hobby that became an \$18 million collection of Australian history

By [Julie Power](#)

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Like most boys born in 1942, former journalist, media executive and businessman Trevor Kennedy collected stamps, matchbox lids and other things.

That boyish hobby became a passion for Australian history and resulted in a collection of 5000 treasures dating back to the First Fleet, valued at between \$15 to \$18 million, that will today find a permanent home at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra.

[Trevor Kennedy with some of the 5000 items of historical significance that will find a home at the National Museum of Australia. *CREDIT:ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN*]

In an unusual arrangement that follows a decade of negotiations, the museum will pay more than \$8 million for a large part of Kennedy's collection with payments in six instalments ending in 2023.

And in a donation, on an unprecedented scale, Mr Kennedy has given the museum other items of historical significance – valued at between \$7 and \$10 million – to retain the collection's integrity and character.

Kennedy said he hoped the collection would give Australians the opportunity to "explore and better understand our nation's remarkable history".

Together, his collection told a history of a colony where "everything was a battle, by settlers pushing further and further" into the bush and the Indigenous population being treated "very badly" with tragic consequences.

[The Kennedy collection has been acquired by the National Museum of Australia. *CREDIT:ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN*]

The museum's director Dr Mathew Trinca said the acquisition was one of the most significant in the institution's history. "Honestly, it's awesome," he said.

Its breadth and scope was so extraordinary, far outstripping the museum's previous largest single acquisition of \$1 million, that the museum decided to fund it from future annual allocations for acquisitions.

[Much of the collection is Australiana, acquired over the years. *CREDIT:ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN*]

As well as engraved eggs, clocks, ceramics, taxidermy, artwork and historic furniture of historical significance, it includes:

- Thomas Watling's miniature portrait of John White, principal surgeon on the First Fleet
- a silver collar made for a dog, Tiger, who killed 20 rats in 2 minutes and two seconds in 1834
- jewellery decorated with Australian flora and fauna during the gold rush
- invitations and press passes to the opening of the first parliament of the Commonwealth in 1901
- a plane-shaped diamond and platinum brooch given by Charles Kingsford Smith to his wife to commemorate his flight across the Pacific.

[Cooee, an item from the jewellery collection within the Kennedy treasures that will find a home at the National Museum of Australia.]

Kennedy said his interest in collecting turned into a fixation on antiques when he was posted to London for the *Australian Financial Review* in the late 1960s. With "a junk shop on every corner," he started hunting Portobello Road for treasures.

It was as editor of *The Bulletin* that he later became interested in Australia's own rich history. "That was when the Australiana thing really kicked in," he said. After being "absolutely broke like the rest of young journos", he also had some money for the first time.

It was the pursuit that excited him. "It is the thrill of the hunt, which is one of the most satisfying things of all," he said. "It is like [chasing] a good story," said Kennedy.

[Much of the jewellery was decorated during the gold rush. *CREDIT:ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN*]

Kennedy started as a cadet reporter in Albany, WA, and had a meteoric rise in journalism including as editor of [The National Times](#) newspaper. Often described as the late Kerry Packer's right hand man, he was editor-in-chief of Packer's Consolidated Press and later managing director until 1991.

In 1993, he was investigated – along with late stockbroker Rene Rivkin and Labor powerbroker Graham Richardson – over the Offset Alpine printing plant and a mysterious parcel of shares that skyrocketed in value.

Kennedy and Richardson both denied being the owner and the corporate watchdog gave up on the investigation in 2010.

[Trevor Kennedy sitting in the same chair occupied by the Duchess of York when she presided over the federation of Australia at the inaugural sitting of Federal Parliament in 1901. *CREDIT:KATE GERAGHTY*]

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Mr Kennedy told the *Herald* that everything left was up for sale. This includes a very valuable chair that was literally the seat of Federation, which is still the subject of negotiations with the museum. The Duchess of York sat in the chair when she presided over the first sitting of Federal Parliament in 1901 that took place in the Melbourne Exhibition building.

"All of it is on the block. The fact is I am now 78 summers ... My family likes [the collection] but nobody has the passion for it. And to leave them with it, would have been a burden, frankly," he said.

The museum's curator Dr Sophie Jensen said the 5000 objects made up a collection of collections, ranging from rare and valuable clocks, ceramic ware, eggs, furniture, to \$10 kitschy Australiana ashtrays with surfers riding a ceramic wave.

John Hawkins, an antique dealer, described Kennedy's collection as the finest in Australia history in private hands. It was a "public disgrace" that the government had taken so long to buy the collection, he said. The government blocked the collection's sale to a wealthy Singaporean about six years ago.

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JSanders

Thank you Trevor Kennedy - outstanding generosity from one of Australia's great collectors and longstanding donors to our museums. Trevor is a Life Fellow and former trustee of the Powerhouse Museum and he helped raise millions to acquire objects for the Powerhouse's collection before its 1988 opening and also gave major decorative arts objects to the Museum. Sadly, the continuing uncertainty over the Powerhouse's Museum's future (with its Ultimo home now spoken of as a creative cultural industries playground) has meant many donors are giving their prized collections to interstate and national institutions. This is one of the destructive consequences of Baird's thought bubble which no member of government has had the wit or cultural acumen to fix and, to instead rebuild the Powerhouse Museum to its world renowned status. The Powerhouse Museum has not been saved - it won't be a museum if this scheme goes ahead - our Museum and its collection will be lost to the people of NSW and beyond.

The Nightingale

Why is an unresolved financial investigation from 1993 even mentioned in this article? More relevant are Trevor Kennedy's gifts to the Powerhouse Museum and the staggering ineptitude of the NSW Government in not securing his collection for NSW. Instead they have spent five years trying to move the Powerhouse Museum, on which board Trevor Kennedy made a distinguished contribution. In the process the government has wasted more than \$40m on consultants, which is more than double the value of the whole Kennedy collection. And there is nothing to show for it. If it was the NRL moving its grand final to another city the government would be a lather about that, hurling money at stadiums and turning public assets into elite gyms for footballers. But when it comes to sensible museum policy and priceless NSW history they dial up another consultant so they get their hands on the museum's assets.