

'I hope you're not going to dig too deeply. Just remember – he was our god.'

(Quote by an elderly admirer of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith in Ian Mackersey, *Smithy: The Life of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith*, Warner Books, London, 1999 page xv)



Finding 'Smithy'

Exploring the legend and reality of

Sir Charles Kingsford Smith

The National Museum of Australia has an exhibit in the Eternity gallery under the theme of 'passion'. It shows part of a memorial created by Austin Byrne, an enthusiastic admirer of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith, over a period of 25 years. His passion was to have the young people of Australia recognise the achievements of Kingsford Smith (commonly known as 'Smithy') and his aeroplane *Southern Cross*. The components of this memorial were:

- a large-scale model of the *Southern Cross* made from hand-turned brass, with the interior seating covered in kangaroo hide and the cabin illuminated by real but minute electric lights
- three globes of the world, two of them about 30 centimetres across, and the third at about waist height and measuring about 90 centimetres across, with each globe showing the countries of the world in raised metal and every route flown by Smithy marked in Australian opals
- a photograph of Smithy set into a frame of Australian marble
- a kangaroo-skin bound book containing the record of Smithy's every flight.

Some of the elements of the exhibit are reproduced on the next page. Look at them, and answer the questions that follow.

Curriculum Guide: Student Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit students will be better able to achieve these learning outcomes that are common to most states' and territories' Society and Environment Key Learning Area:

- | | |
|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Time, continuity and change (History) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know about key events in Australian history • Critically evaluate evidence • Analyse representations of history in a museum context • Analyse reasons for changes to images of a hero over time |
| Culture and identity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe some cultural influences on Australian identity • Explain how cultural representations may change over time |

The National Museum of Australia at Acton opened in March 2001 as part of the celebrations for the Centenary of Federation. The Museum employs a fresh and exciting approach to Australian history, culture and environment.

Each National Museum unit of work in *STUDIES* asks students to consider the stories and concepts behind Museum themes, objects and images, and can be used with students in Society and environment, History, Geography and English.



Click on images to view in large format

'Finding Smithy'

The legend



Source



Elements of the Austin Byrne memorial to Sir Charles Kingsford Smith in the Eternity Gallery of the National Museum of Australia

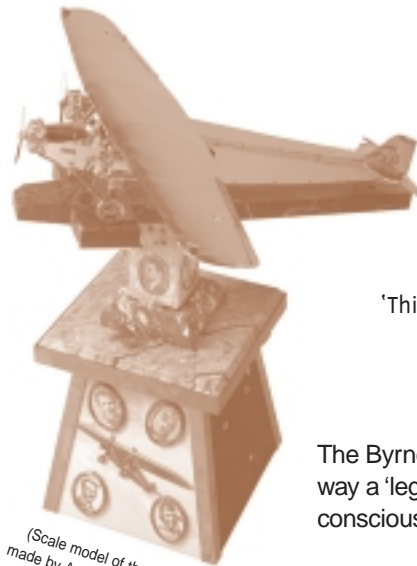
'As from today, I dedicate this my life's work, the *Southern Cross* Memorial and bequeath it to the youth of my country, for them to hold in trust for future generations, with the hope that it may inspire many to the glory of our great country.'

'This work was inspired by the noble and magnificent efforts of my fellow countrymen, Air Commodore Sir Charles Kingsford Smith, Flight Lieutenant C.T.P. Ulm, and the many other members of the gallant and courageous crews of the *Southern Cross* in their endeavour to help the onward march of civilisation by their pioneering explorations and flights in the early days of aviation.'

'I walked the streets of this city for 40 years trying to get recognition, not for me, I don't count. I am only the instrument that has given my country this priceless historical record.'

'Have a look at the map today — there's thousands of lines, mighty hops over oceans and continents — all brought about by two great Australians, Kingsford Smith and Charles Ulm.'

'I myself today maintain that the crossing of the Pacific by Smith and Ulm was the greatest feat ever, [greater] even than landing a man on the moon. It took 25,000 human beings to put a man on the moon. To fly the Pacific it took two men with terrific interest, terrific inspiration and the backing of some of his great country men.'



'This work belongs to the children of Australia — it's theirs.'

'I designed a globe that would show all the pioneering flights of that plane... I vowed, "It will have to be great, for these great men." '

(Scale model of the *Southern Cross* made by Austin Byrne. Completed 1938. National Museum of Australia)

The Byrne memorial is an illustration of the way a 'legend' may be represented in a nation's consciousness and history.

'The greatest aircraft the world has ever known. When the Pacific was crossed I went to Smithy and asked would it be possible for him to get me the blue prints of the *Southern Cross*. I wanted to make a model.'

- 1 What is meant by a 'legend'?
- 2 What are the elements of the Kingsford Smith legend that are presented here?
- 3 How is 'legend' different from 'history'?

Austin Byrne was not the only admirer of Smith. Look at the evidence in sources 2–5.

Source



Some popular images of Kingsford Smith



'Sir Charles Kingsford-Smith Aviator' (Museum of Victoria)



'The Southern Cross: England-Australia. Trans Tasman. Trans Pacific. Trans Atlantic' (Museum of Victoria)



(Australia Post)



(In Edward P. Wixted, *The Life and Times of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith*, Brisbane, 1996, page 286)

Source

3

From a letter by a female admirer to Charles Kingsford Smith

'Dearest Captain Kingsford Smith, I am dreaming wonderful dreams with you always as my hero. If only they could come true, one would feel in paradise with Prince Charming. I would just explode with wonderful feelings.'

(Ian Mackersey, *Smithy. The life of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith*, Warner Books, London, 1999 page 171)

Source

4

Crowds at Christchurch (NZ) greet the *Southern Cross* in 1928



(Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)

Source

5

A treasured memento

Thousands of people paid for joy-ride flights with Smithy during his barnstorming tours around Australia. For many, it was one of their most-treasured memories in later life.



(In Edward P. Wixted, *The Life and Times of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith*, Brisbane, 1996)

- 4 If you only had this information available about Kingsford Smith, what would your image of him be?
- 5 Why do you think Kingsford Smith is a national Australian legend?
- 6 How do these sources contribute to the popular image or legend of Kingsford Smith?

The National Museum of Australia exhibit about Austin Byrne and his obsession raises an important question: **how do we properly remember and commemorate a significant person and event in a museum?** Do we emphasise the legend or the historical reality? Do we emphasise the feat? Or the qualities and characteristics of the person who achieved it? Or do we emphasise the whole person, and therefore include any faults or dark elements that might be there?

You can explore this idea in this unit through the person of Kingsford Smith and his achievements. We will provide you with a variety of information, and ask you to create your own museum exhibit at the end – 'Finding Smithy'. It will be fascinating to compare what different people decide to include!

Work through the information that follows about Kingsford Smith, then create your museum exhibit. As you work through the material, keep in mind the following considerations about creating a museum exhibit:

Creating a museum exhibit

An exhibit should combine historical information with effective display techniques to produce an informative, entertaining and accurate presentation.

- What stories do you want to tell? What messages do you want to convey? What ideas and impressions do you want the public to take away from the exhibit? How do you decide what information to include and what to exclude? For example, do you stress factual details, or give a broad outline? Do you stick to facts only, or include opinions and judgements? Do you raise ideas and issues explicitly, or let people ask their own questions about the exhibit? Do you stress the feats and the achievements involved, or do you include failures and weaknesses?
- Who is your audience? What approach or emphasis might be most appropriate for them?
- What look and feel do you want your museum exhibit to have? How does this reflect the content?
- How would you like your audience to interact with your exhibit? Consider building in an interactive element.

In addition you should ensure that:

- Labels are relevant and 'add' to the story the symbol or object tells. Consider the length of your labels. How much text will your audience read?
- There is continuity of language and style throughout the exhibit. What is the reading level of your audience?
- Your exhibit is supported by research.
- Different media, where appropriate, are utilised in your display (e.g. audio, visual, tactile).
- All objects, images, audio etc are sourced and credited. For example:
 - 'Scale model of the *Southern Cross* made by Austin Byrne. Completed 1938.'
- There is a balance between text and objects.
- Your exhibit complements the materials/information it presents.

'Finding Smithy'

His early life



(National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington 1919)

Source

b

Some events in Kingsford Smith's early life

- Born Brisbane 1897
- Family moved to Sydney 1899
- Family moved to Canada 1903
- Visiting Sydney 1907 when he nearly drowned at Bondi – he was rescued by the newly-formed lifesaving service, and resuscitated by a nurse who happened to be on the beach
- Family returned to Sydney permanently 1909
- Enlisted in the AIF on his 18th birthday 10 February 1915
- Served at Gallipoli
- Transferred to Royal Flying Corps 1917
- Awarded Military Cross for bravery 1917
- Wounded – two toes shot off in an aerial combat 1917
- Demobilised 1919
- Travelled to USA and flew stunts in films 1919

7 Discuss which of this information might be most relevant in your understanding of Smithy, and how you might present some or all of this information in the display you are creating about him.



(London Daily Mail 1919)

'Finding Smithy'

His pioneer aviation achievements



Smithy returned to Australia in 1920. He started flying for a Western Australian aerial company. In 1928 he and his crew were the first people to fly from Australia to the United States. The feat was acclaimed throughout the world. He created several other flight records, and was the first to fly several routes. He was knighted in 1932.

8 Use the information about the flights and the routes marked to create a colour code to identify each of Smithy's famous flights on the following map.

19–29 June 1927 Record-breaking flight around Australia in (Bristol Tourer G-AUDJ)
30–31 March 1929 Lost, forced to land in Kimberley area of WA attempting Australia-England flight, Sydney–'Coffee Royal' site (in <i>Southern Cross</i>)
31 May – 9 June 1928 First trans-Pacific crossing Oakland–Brisbane (in <i>Southern Cross</i>)
10–11 September 1928 First flight across Tasman Sydney–Christchurch (in <i>Southern Cross</i>)
8–9 October 1928 First westbound Tasman crossing Christchurch–Sydney (in <i>Southern Cross</i>)
23–24 June 1930 First westbound North Atlantic crossing Dublin–Harbour Grace (in <i>Southern Cross</i>)
31 May – 9 June 1928 First trans-Pacific crossing Oakland–Brisbane (in <i>Southern Cross</i>)
9–19 October 1930 Record-breaking solo England-Australia flight London–Sydney via Rome and Karachi (in <i>Southern Cross Junior</i>)
20 October – 3 November 1934 First eastbound Pacific crossing Brisbane–San Francisco (in <i>Lady Southern Cross</i>)
15 May 1935 Dramatic failed crossing of Tasman when propeller smashed mid-flight and Gordon Taylor had to stand on the wing and put oil in an engine (in <i>Southern Cross</i>)
6–8 November 1935 Final flight, attempting to break England-Australia record via Baghdad and Allahabad (in <i>Lady Southern Cross</i>)



(*Australian Geographic*, Number 54, April-June 1999 page 114)

Pioneer flying was difficult and dangerous. Biographer Ian Mackersey, sitting in the tiny cockpit of the Southern Cross aeroplane while writing Smithy's biography, imagined it this way:

'Here, wrestling the great spoked bicycle-wheel control columns, he and his co-pilots had sat, unable to move about or stand up properly, for up to fifty hours at a stretch. Through the open sides of the flight deck they had been blasted by freezing air and drenched by rain. Their hearing had been bombarded to insensibility by the roar of three unsilenced engines, their conversation reduced to scribbled notes. How, trapped in this confined space without access to the cabin for a day and a half, did they empty their bladders and bowels? How, with no intercom, did they confer with their navigator and wireless-operator sitting out of sight behind the giant fuel-tank they carried?'



(Ian Mackersey, *Smithy, The life of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith*, Little, Brown and Company, London, 1998 page viii)

How did they manage to find small islands in mid-Pacific? To survive, unstrapped in their wicker seats, in bone-shattering turbulence amid great explosions of lightning, on crude blind-flying instruments with no radar to warn them of the atomic forces that threatened to annihilate them inside every storm they so innocently tried to penetrate? The stress and fatigue must have taken them to the limits of their resistance.'

(Ian Mackersey, *Smithy, The life of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith*, Warner Books, London, 1999 page viii)

Smithy wrote of aspects of the experience of pioneer flying at various times:

- 'We seemed to be leaving the world for a new one of our own. Before us swept an immensity of silent ocean.'
- '[The noise] seemed to get right into the bones at the sides of the forehead.'
- 'Encrusted with ice. Our radio failed. Alone in the middle of the deserted Tasman Sea. We could see nothing, hear nothing. We didn't know where we were. I think that night I touched the extreme of human fear. Panic was very near and I almost lost my head. I felt a desire to pull her around, dive – climb – do anything to escape. We were like rats in a trap – terrified, dazed with fear.'

(Ian Mackersey, *Smithy, The life of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith*, Warner Books, London, 1999 pages 136, 182)

9 What was special about the achievements of pioneer aviation?

10 If Kingsford Smith had not flown those routes or set the records, somebody else would have. Why give so much attention to the first person to do something?

Finding Smithy



His qualities and character

Kingsford Smith was a national and international hero for his flying achievements. Think of today's most famous celebrities and heroes – and that was Smithy in his own day.

But what sort of a person was he? What were the characteristics and qualities that helped make him an Australian hero?

11 Look at the following information about him and identify the qualities and characteristics you can see in him.

Source 10 Experiences of aerial warfare

'My gun jammed early in the fight and I put my nose towards home to get it fixed, when three spare Huns [Germans] sat on my tail and kept there all the way down to the Hun lines. ... The Huns were firing all the way down. I landed with holes all over the machine and one burst of a dozen alongside my ear. I was rather badly scared.'

'My mind was completely occupied with one unearthly desire. ... too many of them to move quickly. I pressed the trigger. Tracer bullets zipped along the road and I saw men falling, and hundreds of them scrambling to get out of the way. I was filled with an unearthly joy. I kept my finger pressed hard on the trigger. Then I turned and roared back with my machine-gun spitting death. I saw dozens of men bowled over and I remember screaming at the top of my voice. ... I roared up to the other end of the road, turned quickly and back again ... until my gun was empty, then streaked for home. All the way back I had nothing but these thoughts of quite unholy joy. I had killed – undoubtedly killed – lots of men.'

'After the noise of the engine and the gun everything, all of a sudden, was quiet. I could hear birds whistling and men talking and laughing. Contact with these realities suddenly made me realise the horror of the thing I'd done. I leaned against the fuselage and vomited. I was twenty years old, I had just killed many men and I hadn't the faintest idea why. For those few minutes I had gone completely insane. Now I felt utterly miserable and hated my weakness for doing what I did.'

(Extracts from letters in Ian Mackersey, *Smithy, The life of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith*, Warner Books, London, 1999 pages 28, 30)

Source 11 A commanding officer's letter

'As you have probably heard by now, your son was wounded in an aerial combat yesterday. It was rather a nasty wound in the foot and necessitated the removal of two of his toes. But it should not permanently affect him in any way. I went to the hospital to see him and found him

very cheerful. He goes to England tomorrow. We are most awfully sorry to lose him. I am especially sorry as he was one of the very best fighters I have had, full of grit and a splendid war pilot. He hadn't been here with us very long, but had done a lot in that short time and was universally popular. He hopes to be flying again in a few months' time. There is no one I should welcome back more warmly to the squadron. Believe me, there was only one opinion of him out here, and that was 'one of the best'.'

(Extracts from letters in Ian Mackersey, *Smithy, The life of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith*, Warner Books, London, 1999 page 34)

Source 12 Smithy on Smithy

'My mind was filled with flying to the exclusion of everything else.'

(Ian Mackersey, *Smithy, The life of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith*, Warner Books, London, 1999 page 47)

Source 13 An evaluation by a biographer

'He also became a legend for constant small acts of kindness: taking poor schoolchildren and unemployed men for free rides, lending people money, giving up his evenings to make the speeches he hated ...

He was a man untouched by fame who ... remained the quintessential Australian good bloke – disarmingly approachable, devoid of a shred of pomp. Old mates, asked to describe him, spoke of his basic decency, his kindness, generosity and tolerance, his reluctance to speak unkindly of anybody. They remembered his ... informality, his preference for the oily, raunchy camaraderie of the hangar over lavish banquets held in his honour. They talked of his infectious enthusiasm, his contempt for officialdom, of the boyish immaturity he never outgrew. Of his endless pranks, inveterate beer-drinking, risqué jokes, larrikin ways and the dashing spirit of adventure he always brought to flying. He was, they said, stimulating company, radiating a spellbinding charm that was almost electric. His deeply appealing mixture of the heroic and the human inspired loyalty and devotion; they would all have followed him to the ends of the earth.'

(Ian Mackersey, *Smithy, The life of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith*, Warner Books, London, 1999 pages 289, 379)

12 What personal characteristics or qualities did Kingsford Smith have?

13 Do you think the popular image or legend of Kingsford Smith is justified?

'Finding Smithy'

Other assessments



A **national myth** puts a person on a pedestal. They can only have good qualities. Any normal human weakness or failing can usually not be tolerated in the myth. Did Kingsford Smith have human weaknesses? Look at the following evidence and decide.

Source

14

Some other information about Smithy's character and behaviour

- The myth of Smithy tells of him being banned from entering the Britain-Australia race in 1919 because of political interference. The reality was that he had been involved in a series of landings in fields not authorised for that purpose (thereby endangering his passengers' safety) and insuring planes for more than their value – and crashing them. The company who owned the plane that Smithy was to fly therefore wanted him replaced.
- Smithy happily accepted a nephew deliberately destroying his speed boat so that Smithy could get the insurance money at a time when he needed cash.
- During his days of flying an aerial service in WA and his barnstorming days of giving paid joy rides, he crashed many times, endangered passengers and spectators on the ground, and often flew while drunk. During his barnstorming days he often took women for rides for free in return for sexual favours – known at the time as 'a ride for a ride'.
- 'He was an impatient, frustrated, very gifted man who wanted to show the world what aviation could do. His mind was permanently in the sky. On the ground he was a restless roamer, never creating a stable home and spending as fast as he earned.' 'He ... gave [his first wife] a very rough time – was a bad drinker, never paid his debts, and was a womaniser. "Not a very honourable man."' (A family member of Smith's first wife)
- In 1929 he flew with a crew of three on a trip to England. He became lost near the north-western coast of Western Australia. They had to land the plane, and were forced to stay there until rescued. They did not have equipment to repair the radio, or food to keep them going. Search parties were sent out, and one of them also got lost and the two rescuers died in the desert. Some people accused Smithy of deliberately getting stranded for the publicity (though an inquiry later cleared him of this charge). He and his crew were described by one newspaper as 'private adventurers taking foolhardy risks.' (*Sydney Bulletin*), and the *London Times* commented: 'The question remains whether to venture on such a voyage at a bad season, without tools and without provisions, was altogether unjustifiable. It seems imprudent to set out without equipment to repair the wireless.'

- 'He just came and went as the spirit moved him, never seeming to worry about anything. But because he was so universally worshipped and the most famous man in the country, everyone just accepted it.' (A young apprentice engineer working for Smithy in 1931)
- Smithy was a member of the New Guard, a secret military organisation that was ready to take over the New South Wales government by force in an act of civil war during the Depression.
- His most recent biographer quotes psychiatrist Ken Craig's opinion that Smithy was an alcoholic: 'There are other things, too, about him that are very common to alcoholics: his promiscuity, the constant need for fresh conquests, seeking reassurance about his potency; his chronic restlessness; his earlier flighty



irresponsibility as a pilot [in WA]; his inability to handle money; the great generosity – ready to give away his last penny, always broke. And the evidence from the photographs that show how rapidly he aged – another consequence of alcoholism.'

Smithy in 1933 after a solo flight from England (*Brisbane Courier Mail*)

- 'To the aircraft manufacturers the record-breakers were absolute anathema, people who flew aircraft dangerously overloaded for their personal glory. Their frequent disappearances and crashes served only to give air transport a bad name.' (Nephew, Rollo Kingsford Smith)

(Ian Mackersey, *Smithy. The life of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith*, Warner Books, London, 1999 pages 42ff, 269, 288, 85, 215, 264, 269, 276, 306)

- 14 What are the characteristics or qualities that are revealed here?
- 15 Why are such characteristics not stressed in the popular image or legend of Smithy?
- 16 Does this information change your views about Smithy as a person, or his achievements, or his role as an Australian myth?
- 17 Do you think such information ought to be included in your museum display? Or should you only stress the man's achievements, and his good qualities?

'Finding Smithy'



Reflecting on images and reality of heroes

Sir Charles Kingsford Smith died in 1935 during an attempt with Tommy Petherbridge on the England-Australia flying record. The *Lady Southern Cross* disappeared off the coast of Burma. All that was ever found was a wheel from the plane.

18 Smithy was skilled as a pilot, yet he was also frequently reckless. Does his war experience help explain and justify this recklessness?

19 Consider the strengths and weaknesses of character that you have discovered about Sir Charles Kingsford Smith. Which do you think are relevant to the way young people today should regard and remember him?

20 Why did Smithy become an Australian hero? Discuss to what extent it might have been:

- his feats and achievements
- his character
- the Depression period (1929–1930s) in which many of his flights were carried out
- the need for Australians at the time to have Australian heroes?

21 Who would be the most similar hero to Smithy today? How is that person represented in the media? How do you think Smithy might have been represented if he were achieving his feats today? Do you think the media treats popular heroes fairly today?

22 The quote at the start of this article said: 'I hope you're not going to dig too deeply. Just remember – he was our god.' How would you reply to this statement?

'Finding Smithy'



Your museum exhibit

Now it's time for you to design your museum exhibit.

23 What decision have you made about the issue raised at the start – to emphasise the feat, or the legend, or the whole person?

24 Compare your museum representation with others in your class. Identify the similarities and differences. What does a comparison of different people's exhibit of the same person tell you about how people are represented in museums and history texts?



(Robert Lewis)



(Robert Lewis)