Two centuries ago, give or take some years, revolutions and wars in Europe and the Americas changed these parts of the world in such a fundamental way that they conventionally provide a main periodical divide opening the pages of contemporary history. Out of this political turmoil emerged a series of new states, with time nation states. Hence, the long string of bicentenaries on both sides of the Atlantic in recent years (and more coming up).¹ My country, Norway, is one of them. This country, Argentina, is another. Key events from that period came to deliver the stuff from which national myths of origin were elaborated. Some of the houses “were it happened” have survived and often hold a privileged place in the imagery of those myths; they have become national icons, imprinted in the minds of the citizens.

Nowadays, museums usually take care of those houses. So, what do we do with them? They have been all about the nation; increasingly also about democracy, rule of law, human rights… About independence as well as political freedom. How do we deal with this heavy load upon our shoulders? What narratives do we produce? One thing is sure: We are not left alone with our own stories to tell. Every one, it seems, has a stake in our houses and our stories, from the prime minister to the retired schoolteacher across the street. People use and abuse us; they interfere, and they have every right to do so, as this heritage is essentially the property of the people. It is a healthy thing for a museum to be the object of public concern – it is indeed what we want! Nevertheless, it is not always easy to cope with external expectations and still be able to uphold our autonomy and latitude of action.

_Eidsvoll 1814_ is a historic house museum in Norway dedicated to the constituent assembly of 1814, and more widely, to the development of constitutional rule, democracy and human rights, addressing historical and contemporary issues.² The events that took place here are at the core of most historical narratives of the Norwegian nation, and the so-called “Eidsvoll house” rapidly turned into a national icon already in the 19th Century, all the more so as the Eidsvoll Constitution was regarded the guardian of Norwegian autonomy within the imposed union with Sweden (1814-1905).³ It has been widely used for historiographical, educational and political purposes of different kinds, producing different narratives, with different notions of the key concepts of “nation” and “democracy”. “Eidsvoll” is a constant reference every 17 May – Constitution Day, our national day, widely celebrated across the country both on an official and on a popular level. In the same way as Mayo in Argentina (we even share the month!), the very mention of _Eidsvoll_ evokes a rich and often emotion-charged semantic field of connotations in a Norwegian mind.⁴

The bicentenary of the Norwegian constitution in 2014 meant a culmination of this kind of attention. Both the government and other authorities, civil society in all its ramifications, historians, politicians and the public showed great interest in the bicentenary and contributed in shaping it. Interacting with all of this, the museum itself worked out its own agenda and defined its role – and the stories to tell. The single most important – and most expensive – project of the entire bicentenary was the complete restoration of the historical house, brought as close to the situation around 1814 as the available sources permitted.⁵ The result was viewed as spectacular, causing surprisingly few controversies, and provided a perfect backdrop for a long series of events throughout the year. In three of them, in particular, wall-to-wall coverage by the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) contributed much to bring the Eidsvoll House at the centre of the national stage. They include the official opening...
on the historical date of 16 February; a non-stop “slow TV”-programme (a concept particularly popular in Norway) called “1814 in 24 hours” that consisted of live lectures from the Constitution Hall by leading academics, night and day; and, obviously, the 17 May celebrations, with “everyone” present in the park, including the three Scandinavian monarchs.6 All of this naturally produced a huge corpus of texts, official and non-official. Of course, they vary a great deal in content, but even so, we may attempt a tabloid summary of some main characteristics:

The Norwegian Minister of Culture (Labour) had asked, specifically addressing our museum, that the bicentenary become one great history lesson for the nation. As it turned out, the bicentenary was indeed imbued with history content, following the calendar of the 1814 events. A broad national research programme had been established, and there was an intense output of publications in all genres and channels, scholarly and popular, from doctoral theses to TV documentaries and children books.7 All of this was mostly consensus orientated. There were few historiographical debates with much temperature. Earlier in Norwegian history, historiographical and political partisanship were often linked together; and history, including conflicting views on 1814, had provided an armoury for contemporary political struggles. Not so much anymore.8 Contemporary perspectives of democracy and the nation during the bicentenary also tended to meet unifying, edifying and constructive ends, rather than dwelling on the really tough and critical questions, though the latter were not totally absent. Constitution and democracy were enhanced, rather than debated, as the political basis for a plural and inclusive nation, often from an integration perspective: “the new ’we’”.9 Summing up: The left impression of the Norwegian bicentenary experience was that of varied and well-intentioned, feel-good infotainment.

To me, this kind of celebration is quite legitimate. We, as a museum, played along with all of this, and we are not ashamed of it. Still, we tried to do more. In particular, we endeavoured to work with democratic challenges in our time, sharp edges included, and to engage with our visitors and the public in so doing. A physical basis for that line of activities was our visitor centre, where we established the “Democracy centre”, specifically targeting young people under the voting age limit of 18 and hence working with a broad concept of democratic practices, beyond the formal channels of parties and elections.10 In particular, in the wake of the bicentenary, we have embarked on several pilot projects in the field of education for democratic citizenship, inside and outside the museum. One of the latest and to some colleagues perhaps the most nerve-wracking expression of this was a “Youth take over”, when students from a local high school took charge of the entire museum during the week leading up to parliamentary elections in Norway. This was serious fun, but we must leave it for another talk – another time…11

From the curious outsider’s angle – several in the audience will have much deeper inside knowledge – I will round up with a sideway glance to the Argentine bicentenary of 2016, and to the role two of our “sister museums” played in it, both of them iconic national monuments comparable to the Eidsvoll House. Strictly speaking, they symbolize two different events with two corresponding bicentenaries: 2010 and 2016. The Cabildo of Buenos Aires (Museo Nacional del Cabildo y la Revolución de Mayo) was at the centre of the autonomist and anti-absolutist revolution of 1810, while the “Tucumán House” (Museo Casa Histórica de la Independencia) hosted the Congress of Tucumán that declared (full) independence in 1816. The twin national days of 25 May and 9 July honour the two respective events.12 However, the formal juxtaposition of the two might be somewhat misleading, as the latter date has always tended to stand somewhat in the shadow of the former. Nothing surpasses
Mayo in the history of the tales of the Argentine nation! The bicentenaries were also very different, and for other reasons as well. First, there was much more of it in 2010, not least in the form of spectacular public events; the governments of Néstor and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner allegedly spent perhaps ten times more celebrating the May revolution than Macri did in honour of independence. \(^{13}\) Now, the political and economic situation of the country was quite different in 2016 as compared to 2010. Still, there is reason to believe that this was not only about budget priorities. There is a very distinct difference in the role history played in the political rhetoric of these presidencies. As for the former, there is no room here to elaborate on the way a certain version of Argentine history formed an integral part of a specific political narrative on the national past, present and future. Six years later, however, the new government made much less use of references to the national past in their relato. To me, this was the most striking feature for instance in the president’s traditional speech to the nation broadcast on national TV from the historical house of Tucumán on 9 July: the scant and perfunctory opening reference to the historical core events, weakly connected to the main arguments in the contemporary political message.\(^{14}\)

Provincial Tucumán, on the other hand, put all its heart in the celebrations and savoured every moment in the national spotlight just as Eidsvoll had done in 2014. A tremendous effort was also made by museum director Patricia Fernández Murga and her staff at the historical house, who installed brand new exhibitions amidst the requirements of the government and other authorities and the pressures from an expectant public that obliged a prescheduled opening. They did this even though new displays had been provided by Cristina’s government the previous year. In general, Argentine governments of different colours have tended to intervene rather extensively with the administration and policies of public museums. Exhibitions from the 2010 bicentenary (and in the wake of it) were no exception. Now, the museum staff themselves wanted another approach to history, with more question marks and less exclamation marks, with less dichotomies, less heroes and villains, more respect for the “otherness”, complexity, openness and even bewilderment of past situations and the way people lived them. The most competent historian Noemí Goldman wrote the script, and as far as I could observe, the massive flow of visitors appreciated the reopened house as a fresh renewal. May we suggest, then, that more elbowroom for the museum in certain cases might be the fortunate by-product of a lesser interest in history on part of the government (effects of budget cuts left aside here)?

In Buenos Aires, bicentenary projects apparently did not abound in 2016 (as compared to 2010). The Cabildo, however, represented a noteworthy exception. For the last few years, under the leadership of director Gabriel di Meglio, activities at the old colonial town hall have taken a new and refreshing direction that impressed me much. A particularly interesting contribution last year was the temporary exhibition “1816. A country under construction” (1816. Un país en construcción), which focused the territory in all its fragmented diversity. The playful and physical way in which the visitor was invited to explore the topic, among others rambling across a gigantic floor map, generated curiosity and made people discover a would-be country very different from the “Argentina” everybody is familiar with. Connections between state, nation and territory were relativized in what to me seemed a bold choice in a country very much imbued with territorial nationalism. And people evidently liked what they saw. Just as Norwegians, Argentinians in my experience love to grapple with questions of the national past, without this being an expression of chauvinism. We have more trouble grasping that others might find it irrelevant.

That is a good point of departure for museums who, like these, actually want to invite people to take an active part in the exploration of the rich human treasures of history, to help tell the many stories of the nation.

2 Web site: [www.eidsvoll1814.no](http://www.eidsvoll1814.no).


5 The restoration project, carried out by the governmental company Statsbygg, won the EU Prize for Cultural Heritage/Europa Nostra Award 2015 Category Conservation: [http://www.europeanheritageawards.eu/winners/manorhouse-eidsvoll/](http://www.europeanheritageawards.eu/winners/manorhouse-eidsvoll/)


7 The most comprehensive historical research project was summed up in the following anthology: Odd Arvid Storsveen, Amund Pedersen and Bård Frydenlund, eds. *Smak av frihet. 1814-gunnloven. Historisk virkning og sosial forankring*. Oslo: Scandinavian Academic Press/Spartacus Forlag, 2015. The children’s hip hop video from the Constitution Hall, “Til Dovey faller”, is said to have had more viewers than any other music video produced by NRK: [https://tv.nrk.no/serie/musikkvideoer-nrk-super/MSUB04000114/sesong-1/episode-25](https://tv.nrk.no/serie/musikkvideoer-nrk-super/MSUB04000114/sesong-1/episode-25).


9 Cf. the phrase coined a few years earlier by the Norwegian Labour politician Jonas Gahr Støre and elaborated in a much celebrated 17 May speech at Eidsvoll 2009: [http://virksommeord.no/tale/5943/](http://virksommeord.no/tale/5943/).

10 A video presentation of the Democracy Centre by the young students who helped create it: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7FnA3QNIq4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7FnA3QNIq4).

11 “Youth take over” as explained by the students: [https://eidsvoll1814.no/lva-er-ta-over](https://eidsvoll1814.no/lva-er-ta-over).

