Telling Absence:
Aboriginal Social History
and the
National Museum of Australia

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December 2009

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of
The Australian National University
6. Travel and travail

Emily

Although only the slimmest of details can be known about Deanna’s Ngarigo ancestors at the time of first contact, and those more by inference, context and rumour than by archival evidence, the next generation, spanning the era from the 1850s to the first decade of the 20th century, comes into clearer focus in the records. The first example is a photograph of a group of well dressed young ladies who sit demurely on the banks of the Avon River in Gippsland, Victoria. One of these girls, we guess the third from the left, is Emily Peters, Deanna’s great grandmother.

Figure 18. Girls on the Avon River, Charles Walter 1865
Accession number H96.160/1603, Victorian Copyright Collection, State Library of Victoria.

Emily first enters the written record as she travels from Albany in Western Australia to the Moravian run ‘Ramahyuck’ mission station in Gippsland in 1867, managed at the time by the Reverend F A Hagenauer. She is perhaps not quite 15 years old and on the greatest adventure of
her young life so far, a ship’s journey to the east where her married future awaits. Her companion, the older and steadier Bessie Flower, writes home to their friend and school teacher Missie during a brief stopover en route in 1867:

… A baker drove past us in a cart and dropped a double loaf in the mud. We could not help laughing. [The clergyman] called out to him but he did not hear. Emily went to pick it up and she told me to tell you it was so hot and smelt so nice. She was going to pick a piece out of it (we have such fun with her).172

Emily, it is clear, is full of beans, if not bread.

Sent in a party of five young women from Albany, Emily along with three of the other girls were to be given as brides on their arrival, an arrangement made between friends and fellow Moravian missionaries, the Rev. John Ramsden Wollaston in Western Australia and Hagenauer in Victoria. The plan had originally been hatched between the Reverends for two other girls but both fell sick on the journey and died in the Melbourne Hospital before they had a chance to meet their fiancés. Not dissuaded, the two Moravians tried again, this time with five girls, although two of them, including Emily, were still too young to marry. Another Western Australian girl had already married the Wotjoballuk man Nathaniel Pepper at Ebenzer Mission, the location of Hagenauer’s previous posting, and the missionaries had been very pleased with the marriage.

The girls were all well educated young women, having been through the Annesfield School in Albany, established by Henry and Anne Camfield in 1852. Founded specifically to educate local Aboriginal children, the school was the Camfield’s contribution to the ‘civilising and Christianising [of] the Nyungar’.173 Anne Camfield, a trained teacher and, it seems, a talented educator, took responsibility for both developing and teaching the curriculum. Historian Bain Attwood believes the school’s primary aim was to provide children “trained in those habits of order, obedience and industry considered appropriate for a labouring class…” for positions in service.174 Certainly this was their stated aim. But the experience of Bessie Flower, Emily’s school mate, travelling companion and soon to be Ramahyuck teacher, shows that Mrs Camfield

172 Pepper and De Araugo (1985):136-7
173 Attwood (1989):32
174 Ibid:34
was dedicated to education, not just for vocational purposes but for more general intellectual
development. On her recommendation the academically gifted Bessie had been sent to Sydney
under the auspices of the Anglican Archbishop of Perth, where she attended one of the Anglican
model schools. There she was taught not only the basic subjects of English grammar and
literature, arithmetic, history and geography, she also had access to drawing, music, dancing and
calisthenics classes and developed skills in piano and singing as well, on one occasion playing
the organ at a Sunday afternoon service in St Philip’s Church, leading ‘a full congregation’ in
singing the hymns.175

By the time that Emily and Bessie would have began school, presumably sometime in the late
1850s, many of the Nyungar had already moved into European settlements more or less
permanently and no doubt their parents were part of this demographic shift. Unlike the
experience of the Ngarigo, the education of their children was not coupled with a threat of
separation and as their parents’ relationship with the church and the local missionaries
strengthened, the children began to attend the newly established school freely, with many of the
children able to live at home while attending classes. The success in attendance contrasts starkly
with the model proposed in NSW, where the children were to be removed from their parents for
long periods of time.

Despite Bessie’s superior educational experience, the Camfields’ goal for their students was that
they would find “respectable situations as domestic servants or be settled in marriage upon
Aboriginal reserves.”176 Since no such reserves existed in Western Australia by the time these
girls were ready to graduate, the idea of sending them to Victoria offered a solution to both
mission managers. Hagenauer knew that the Camfields were looking for Christian husbands for
female students of the school, just as he was looking for Christian girls for the Ramahyuck men.
As was often the case in the newly established missions of the mid 19th century some of the
young men on the east coast had made enthusiastic conversions to Christianity but none of the
women had followed suit. The mission managers recognized that if the still-forming
communities were to flourish, suitable Christian wives for the men would need to be found.

175 Ibid
176 Ibid
Likenesses had been exchanged and it seems that all parties were pleased with the arrangement, including the girls’ parents - the idea of finding husbands from appropriately distant communities may have been compatible with extant traditional marriage rules - and so five young women, including Emily Peters, left Albany in June 1867.\footnote{Pepper and De Araugo (1985):132-143}

**Ramahyuck**

Emily arrived at the orderly but rudimentary Ramahyuck mission station as an educated young lady, versed in the gospel, domestic arts and nursery duties as well as reading, writing and arithmetic. While waiting to come of age, it was intended that she should spend a year or two working with Mrs Hagenauer in the mission house as a general domestic assistant. Ramahyuck was a classical Moravian mission, a disciplined complex of cottages and public buildings set out with precision around a central square and surrounded by neatly fenced farm yards. This was a moral architecture which sought to reshape and control those who resided within, a material and spatial expression of the principals of the Church. Originating in central Europe in the fifteenth century, the Moravian Church, also known as the Church of the United Brethren, was essentially a missionary fellowship and had arrived in New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria in October 1849 at the invitation of the colonial authorities for exactly that purpose; to establish missions.\footnote{Edwards (1999); Kenny (2007)}

The Reverend Hagenauer who founded two missions in Victoria was clearly well equipped for the job. By 1874 a visitor remarked of Ramahyuck that what had once been a ‘dense and dreary woodland, void of improvements of any kind’ was transformed ‘into what now is… a comfortable, neat and clean hamlet.’\footnote{Gippsland Times 13 January 1874, cited by Attwood (1989):13} Life for the residents was likewise: on a visit in 1871, the ethnographer A W Howitt described one of the cabins as being “very neat and just as whites might occupy, a few books, some [needle]work and some knickknacks were lying about.”\footnote{Van Toorn (2006):189} Founded by Hagenauer on the Avon River near Sale in 1863, the first buildings were a makeshift

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177 Pepper and De Araugo (1985):132-143  
178 Edwards (1999); Kenny (2007)  
180 Van Toorn (2006):189
church and a bark schoolhouse, soon replaced with a dormitory for the school children to live in and a neat white church. By 1871 Hagenauer had implemented his Victorian ideal of a gender-segregated playground for the children which could be viewed from all main buildings and a separate ‘orphan house’ where they could be separated from their parents for the purposes of education, a factor he considered vital to the process of civilisation. Children were taught the three ‘R’s’ as well as vocational skills including wood-work for boys and sewing for girls. Victoria’s Board for the Protection of Aborigines hoped that such skills would eventually make the reserves self-sufficient.

Figure 19. Ramahyuck Mission Station, Gippsland, Victoria  
Notes in catalogue: “Two adults and five children standing in front of house. This is the home of Reverend Hagenauer.” State Library of Victoria, Accession No: H31867, Image No: a13413

Life on the mission was not what the Nyungar girls were used to, unaccustomed as they were to the kind of rigid conformity that Hagenauer demanded. The strict Moravian believed that “in

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181 Hagenauer 1885; Attwood (2000):47
182 Attwood (1989)
order to carry on the work successfully, [the station] needs a regular plan … [into which can fall] every individual Black from the old man down to the child, so that each one knows his place and work.”

The Western Australian girls fell well short of his expectations. Almost instantly he wrote to Western Australia complaining that “very much wanted in them, which one would not see at first”, and as a remedy he increased his demands, insisting that a heavy work load was the antidote to their inadequate training which “lacked a practical turn.” Indeed these highly literate young women may well have been disappointingly uninterested in the laundry, Emily’s first assignment in the mission house. Bessie was worried by Emily’s dissatisfaction and high spirits and wrote to Missie asking for her intervention:

July 24th 1867
I forgot to tell you lots of things; first I have had my plaid frock washed; only the skirt for I wore it all the way from Melbourne and I am trying to sew it on… Emily washes our clothes on Tuesdays… When the steamer was coming up the river this morning, we were thinking if you and Martie were in it what would we do. Emily said she would jump in and swim to it. I said I would give the girls a good thumping… Oh if you did come, Mr and Mrs Hagenauer say they would be delighted… I must not forget to tell you, I am making a gruel for Mrs Hagenauer every night. She says it is very nice. Emily is so wild here. Will you dear Missie, write and tell her she must not be so… God bless you.

With fulltime school for the children, heavy agricultural work for the men and household and lighter farm duties for the women, church on Sundays supplemented by twice-daily services for hymn singing, choir practice during the week and bible studies classes encouraged, the routine at Ramahyuck was both busy and disciplined. Soon after arriving, Bessie began to teach in the school, conducting her classes with what she called ‘great earnest’.

The girls had seemingly settled into the demanding schedule yet in the new year of 1868, just six months after their arrival, the mission descended into chaos when most of the Aboriginal residents staged a walk-off over demands for better working conditions. Hagenauer was furious. Believing the two older

183 Attwood (1989):8
184 Ibid:37
185 Pepper and De Araugo (1985):140
186 Harris (1994):202; Flower (1867)
Nyungar women had fomented the rebellion he wrote to Camfield “Instead of making the others settle down, these two girls persuaded nearly all 60 blacks on the station to leave... they [are] worse than any of the common bad lubras in the district.”187 This was one incident too many for the missionary and he resolved to restore order by any available means, including arranging for the immediate marriage of the two remaining Nyungar girls, Emily and Bessie’s younger sister Amy, although they were still too young.

Emily was married off to local man John Ellis and within little more than a year after her arrival, had had her first child. Letters from the east coast back to Albany, reports from Hagenauer to the Central Board and the Ramahyuck School records trace her growing family over the next few years: on 20th May 1875, Jessie, the oldest is registered in the school records as being 7 years old, indicating he was born in 1868, one year after Emily arrived on the mission.188 She would have been about 16 years old. In 1871 Harry Flower wrote that Emily had had another girl (presumably she already has at least one) and in 1873 Bessie wrote that Emily had had another boy with another child following in 1875.

Married to John Ellis and with a full complement of babies and young children to care for, her life would have taken on the rhythm of the mission as she settled into the routine of raising her young family. Attwood draws an evocative picture of life on Ramahyuck in the 1870s, depicting the milieu in which Emily would have operated:

[The Aborigines] worked hard for themselves and their families and became quite well off during the 1870s. They lived in comparatively comfortable cottages, in which both men and women took enormous pride, and while the men’s wages were not high [they] were supplemented by government stores, a plentiful supply of milk and butter, a wide range of vegetables and fruit from the mission garden and orchard, and meat from animals fattened and slaughtered there... A refinement in ‘taste’ and manners was evident in the acquisition of sets of crockery, while the most prized objects were rocking chairs, gramophones and sewing machines. With the latter, the women made themselves

187 Hagenauer (1865-72)
188 Ramahyuck School (1871-1884)
elaborate dresses in the latest styles, while the men boasted nicely tailored coats; they donned these on Sundays and on important occasions.\textsuperscript{189}

For all the seeming comfort however, an undercurrent of discontent was brewing. In 1877, ten years after Emily’s arrival, Reverend Hagenauer refers to Emily and one of the other Nyungar girls in a report, stating that they “had large families but were careless and did not attend to their housework, and neglected their children.”\textsuperscript{190} He makes no mention of the fact that Emily was by this time a young widow with many small children to care for. The school records show that the Ellis children were talented students, all of them at the top of their class so clearly the neglect was not of their education. Perhaps Hagenauer’s criticism held hidden meanings, for in the same year as his complaint Emily, still only in her mid twenties, met and married a man not of Hagenauer’s choosing but of her own.

\textbf{James}

James Brindle arrived at the Ramahyuck mission station probably around 1876. Hagenauer writes in December of that year that “a great many blacks have come down from the ranges to the station so that there will soon be nearly 120.”\textsuperscript{191} Hagenauer’s fellow mission manager from nearby Lake Tyers, the Church of England missionary Reverend John Bulmer gives a much more detailed account of the migration:

The past year has been a remarkable one. Quite unexpectedly the last remnants of the wandering tribes of Aborigines from beyond the mountains made their appearance. We have often heard in days gone by from our blacks of those ‘warical’ tribes far away who would some day come down upon them and do them much harm. So great was the fear, that mothers frightened their children by telling them of those wild people… the expressed fear was needless, for the ‘waricals’ did not appear, and we naturally concluded that they had passed away like many other tribes in different localities of the colony. At last we learnt that there were some left, and they did come, in a most

\textsuperscript{189} Attwood (1989):41-42
\textsuperscript{190} Cited by Court and The Traralgon and District Historical Society (1973)
\textsuperscript{191} Hagenauer (1876)
deplorable condition, but in a friendly way… There was no need to be frightened of the handful of sick people who came in friendship, saying they wanted to make the station their home. They had been in contact with the Chinese on the goldfields and most of them had eaten and smoked opium.  

Whether James was one of the opium-sickened men is not known but given the speed at which he attracted the educated and vivacious Emily and organised himself permanent accommodation in a purpose built cottage it seems highly unlikely. Although no records confirm his previous residence, he was probably a resident of Lake Tyers prior to moving to Ramahyuck. The Lake Tyers Mission Station was established in 1861 by Bulmer, who continued to manage the station until 1907. Two years after its inception, an area of 2,000 acres was gazetted by the Victorian Colonial Government in 1863 as the Lake Tyers Reserve. As Bulmer’s record notes, Lake Tyers was a popular point of arrival for people travelling from the Monaro, making it most likely the first port of call for James in Victoria. He may well have made the move from Lake Tyers to Ramahyuck expressly because of Emily; the traffic between the two missions was constant and the timing of their union suggests an existing familiarity.

Whatever James’s background, it is clear that the pressures on the Ngarigo caused by the gold rush and the Robinson land acts on the Monaro affected mission populations in Gippsland. The spatial logic of this southern migration is clear; the country that James came from and to which he and Emily would return was not yet run through with a state border, but rather centred on routes of movement that lead from high country to low and from inland to the coast, following along rivers and ridges. Gippsland and the Monaro were linked by ancient trails and tracks and it may well be that James had travelled these ways before.

Emily and James lost no time becoming a couple; within a year they had moved into a new cottage and had had a daughter, Lilly Brindle, who was born in 1878. Once they paired up, old resentments between Emily and Hagenauer flared and rebellion was again on the agenda. At this point James enters the written record for the first time as a fully formed, politically savvy adult.

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192 Bulmer (1876)
193 Kleinert (2006)
194 See for example Grinbergs and Australian Heritage Commission. (1993)
The entry is a rare treasure for a 19th century Aboriginal man - his own authentic voice, albeit a collective one. James and Emily were two of thirteen residents of the mission station who on July 11th 1878 signed a letter of complaint to the Central Board for the Protection of Aborigines listing a number of issues with which they were dissatisfied. The document records not just his and Emily’s dissatisfaction with the administration of the mission but their astute political acuity. The letter begins:

Dear Sir,

We would humbly ask of you if it is lawful that the blankets are distributed to the favoured ones rather than to the poor sick blacks, when we asked for the blankets, the answer was that they were kept for the dead;

It then ranges across concerns about keeping livestock, attending sporting events, the provision of tomahawks and axes and disparity in wages, before landing on the crux of the matter:

We have heard that Mr Hagenauer said that government was not over him & we would know whether its true… Another thing that the blacks wish to say before you; that they cannot agree with Mr Hagenauer. May we ask the use of Mr Hagenauer’s coming here to preach the Gospel to the poor blacks & then for him to send them away… This is the first complaint we make to you & no more to say. We remain yours truly… Please send an answer.

A list of scratchy signatures follow, including that of Brindle JJW & wife.

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195 PROV: Item Number 172. NAA, CRS B313 Central Board for the Protection of the Aborigines, Correspondence Files Hagenauer (1869-1957)
The Central Board acted immediately, sending a demand for an explanation with the next post. Hagenauer was ready. On July 20, 1878 he replied:

Sir, … In explanation I need not draw your attention to my [earlier] letter regarding the defection of those men from Coranderrk and the secret success they after all seem to have had with some few here. I may add that already one of those here went to Lake Tyers, no doubt on a similar errant, so that if not prompt steps are taken to put down such rebellious spirits it will spread further. One or two of the ringleaders, James Brindle, who is not here long, and whom I build a fine cottage, is the worst and thinks he must get everything and
do nothing… These few ought to make feel that there is such a thing as law and order. The others are only dummies.196

It was clear that bible studies had made way for politics as the favoured topic for night time discussions in the mission cottages and strategy and information was shared across the network that extended between Coranderrk, Ramahyuck and Lake Tyers. Certainly Hagenauer singled the Brindles out for the harshest punishment. Moving swiftly to crush the rebels, within a month he had drafted a minute outlining his recommendations, including:

That James Brindle, being a native of New South Wales, be dismissed from the Station, his wife to be allowed to follow him with her infant child (these are young healthy half cast people).

Despite its unhappy conclusion, this incident reveals much about James, both through the pitch of the letter of complaint and Hagenauer’s response. Without flinching, the rebels addressed Hagenauer’s central structuring principal, his unquestionable authority, and addressed it directly at its source, the Central Board. This was a sophisticated tactic, displaying a nuanced understanding of exactly how the power flowed in colonial administration. They could have been under no illusion about what they were doing. Questioning Hagenauer’s authority by exposing his overblown claims to being ‘above the government’ was sure to set off an explosion of retribution, with dismissal from the mission a possibility from the outset.

Through this incident, we can form at least a vague picture of Emily and James as a partnership. Emily is an educated woman, her level of literacy perhaps beyond that of many of her white contemporaries. James is not afraid of authority, managing to inveigle a house out of Hagenauer before complaining about him to his superiors, a strategy which points to some experience with white administration prior to his arriving at Ramahyuck. Together they are a powerful force, as Hagenauer admits when he singles them out as the ring leaders behind the letter, all the more reason for them to be split off from the rest of the community as soon as possible.

196 Ibid
The aftermath

James and Emily left the mission with their new baby and headed to the place that was increasingly becoming a refuge for people leaving the Moravian run Ramahyuck station, Lake Tyers. They weren’t there long before Hagenauer warned Reverend Bulmer of their potential to cause disruption. The liberal Bulmer was more sympathetic than Hagenauer but he too was having problems with threatened rebellion, ostensibly stirred up by men from Coranderrk. A couple of months later the Brindles were on the road again and there they leave the record for the next eight years. Three of Emily’s children by her first marriage – Laura who was 6, Jessie the oldest who was 8 and the baby John Ellis who was 5 – were according to Hagenauer’s instructions, to be kept in the orphanage unless instructed otherwise by the Board.\(^{197}\) His wishes prevailed as all three remained in the ‘orphan house’ at Ramahyuck to complete their schooling. With Bessie now in charge of the school’s boarding arrangements, Emily may well have felt more comfortable leaving the older children in her care rather than taking them on the road into an uncertain future. Certainly Hagenauer was keen to keep the children under his influence and away from their mother.

\(^{197}\) Pepper and De Araugo (1985):181
By the time the Brindle family enters the records again in 1886, James and three young Brindle children are back on the Monaro receiving blankets from the Cooma Police at Ingegoodbie, a remote locality in the heart of the southern Snowy Mountains. These children, born to the couple in the intervening years, would be Jimmy, by this time about 7, his little brother Jack, around 4, and their sister Lily who by then would have been about 8. Why Emily is not mentioned in the entry is not known. Perhaps she had returned to visit her other children in Gippsland or perhaps she was just not present at the blanket distribution. That the family were at Ingegoodbie is in itself a mystery. No other people are mentioned in the blanket distribution records as being present; not surprising given that the date recorded is June 22nd, the middle of winter in the middle of the mountains. This was no fleeting trip as they are mentioned again in the Police blanket records the following year although no specific location is given. The imperative would
have been for James to find work to support his young family and with his employment options in Gippsland severely attenuated, a return to home country would have at least reunited him with his family, not an option open to his Western Australian wife Emily.  

Mountain Home

Deep in the southern Snowy Mountains, the Ingegoodbie track was, according to archaeologist Alistair Grinbergs, one of the most important traditional human movement routes in the region. Archaeological evidence and historical records, including oral histories, point to this pathway being the traditional access route for Aboriginal people moving between the Gelantipy district and the headwaters of the Snowy River, as well as into the Thredbo River valley and associated ranges. The track had been used by graziers from the 1830s as the major cattle route between the Monaro and East Gippsland and remained so until the 1950s, becoming a major factor in the colonisation and economic development of East Gippsland. Indeed, the presence of cattle runs in the Snowy River valley was a direct result of the access provided by the track and, before the Gippsland road and rail connection with Port Phillip and Western Port had been built, was the chief link between East Gippsland and the Monaro. The development of Port Albert in central Gippsland led to an escalation in the numbers of cattle being moved down the Ingegoodbie track (some coming from as far away as Queensland) for sale at the Bairnsdale yards and by the end of the 19th century East Gippsland had become a major centre for Australia’s expanding beef-cattle industry, with its pre-federation economy more closely linked to that of south eastern NSW than Melbourne. Cooma in those days was considered the big smoke.

For a man looking for work, this was the place to be at certain times of the year. But Ingegoodbie is an untamed track that weaves between rocky slopes and wild water even today, although some of it has been incorporated into the Barry Way and Snowy Mountains Road.

198 I have deduced the ages of the children from the Ramahyuck school records which records name, age and year of Inspector’s visit, as well as mentions of the children at various ages including in Hagenauer (1876); Pepper and De Araugo (1985); Attwood (1989). See Young and NSW Dept. of Environment and Conservation (2005):190 for blanket distribution records.


200 Ibid: 2
settlement, no housing, just an open semi flat paddock at the summit of the southern range to rest stock in before a steep descent to the Snowy River. The record shows only the Brindles receiving blankets there, with no references to any sort of commonly used camp in the area. This would have been well known territory for James, with his background in the district at the head of the Genoa River, to the west of Ingegoodbie. Raised by his Ngarigo mother and probably surrounded by her male relatives, at least for some of his childhood, who’s to say what he knew about the old ways. There are tantalising references in the records to a character named Jamby, formerly of Lake Tyers, who worked for the O’Rourke family whose property lay at the southern end of the Ingegoodbie track. O’Rourke senior made two annual trips with 12 pack horses to Cooma with this stockman and as an old man O’Rourke reported to the Monaro Post in 1894 that Jamby knew the old routes well, was their main ‘man’ for many years. Jamby is a nickname of sorts, an honorific that is said to refer to the uncle or senior man who takes a young boy through initiation, but has a more modern meaning as brother-in-law or close male relative, still used as a term of affection. Historian Mike Young of the Kosciusko National Park believes that this Jamby is probably James Brindle, most likely the same Jimmy or Jim Brindle from the Delegate Reserve who worked occasionally as a black tracker for the NSW police at the turn of the 20th century. Working the Ingegoodbie track as a stockman would make sense for a man with family connections at both ends, particularly as circumstances surrounding the children begin to change. The year after their second mention in the blanket records the Brindles have another child, Alex, born in Jindabyne and destined to become Deanna’s grandfather.

Half-caste cast-off

The birth of Emily and James’ son Alex at Cobbin station near Jindabyne in 1888 places Emily in the mountains, but two years later she is back in Gippsland with four sick children, the two boys and her daughter Emma from her first marriage and most probably Lilly Brindle, her oldest child with James. By the end of the year both boys and Emma had died, almost certainly from consumption. It is not known if Lilly survived but she is not found in the records at any point

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201 Pers. comm. with Mike Young at NPWS Jindabyne, October 2005

202 See Pepper and De Araugo (1985):210-12 for a full account of the fate of Emily’s children from both marriages.
later. After this tragedy Emily and Bessie, along with Bessie’s daughters Maggie and Louise, spent much of their time in Bairnsdale, working when they could and petitioning the Board for the Protection of Aborigines for help to feed and clothe themselves and their remaining children, who, like their mothers, were often in poor health.\footnote{Attwood (1989):55}

![Blacks Camp at Lake Tyers 1886 by N. Caire.](image)

State Library of Victoria Accession Number: H96.160/1837

By this time the Aborigines Protection Act passed by the Victorian Parliament in 1886 and often referred to as the ‘half-caste’ Act, had been in operation for eight years. The intention of the legislation was to move as many people out of government supported missions and reserves as possible. The line of exclusion was decided by racial ‘purity’, with policies regarding residents eligible to live on missions tightened to exclude so called ‘half castes’. Under the Act the
Victorian government had the power to remove any Aboriginal person from a reserve who was under the age of 34 and was categorised as less than ‘full blood’. The legislation was posted at police stations throughout Victoria, and police were regularly requested to remove people from reserves. Aboriginal people affected by the Act found that they could no longer receive any assistance from the reserves, and any Aboriginal person who continued to live on a reserve who was found to be supporting expelled community members with food were ‘threatened with having their own rations stopped’. Emily and James were perfectly positioned to be the victims of such assimilationist policies. Too black for white society and now too white for black welfare, they were forced to move to the nearby fringe camp of Toorloo Arm, along with many other families in similar positions. One last mention of the family in the Victorian records has them receiving contraband rations from the Reverend Bulmer at Lake Tyers who “was reported again to the Board late in 1894 for giving food to half-castes’’, this time to the Brindle family who were camping near the lake.”

Emily, James and Alex, who by this time was six years old, are not seen in the records as a family unit from this point on, yet we can guess from his entry of the records at the age of 18 as being from Delegate, that Alex was raised on the Delegate Reserve across the NSW border for the rest of his childhood, no doubt in the company of his grandmother’s Ngarigo relatives. Although the Delegate Reserve was officially gazetted at around the time of Alex’s birth, it was already a favourite camping place, on the track between Gippsland and the Monaro. It seems from the blanket records that James and Alex may have remained on the Monaro while Emily returned to Gippsland to be with her sick older children from her first marriage.

This crossing and re-crossing of the state border was happening within the context of the legislative changes that had taken place with the 1886 ‘Half-caste Act’ in Victoria, with families refusing to be separated along ‘full-blood/half-caste’ lines. Yet they were not only operating within a colonial imperative. As the Brindles moved along traditional routes, camping in traditional places such as the Delegate Reserve and along the Ingegoodbie track, the story

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205 Kleinert (2006)
206 Pepper and De Araugo (1985):212
weaves through different spatial and temporal realities. They are using knowledge that is old, in a politic that is new. And although the boundaries of their lives are clearly delineated by the colonial masters, they also inhabit a world in which whitefellas played a less internalised role than they might have thought. For all their experience with European life, the Brindles were Aboriginal people and colonial boundaries, cultural, spatial and temporal, were not of their construction. The record draws the space in which their story took place as a familiar landscape with a state border running neatly through the middle and regions either side named ‘Gippsland’ and the ‘Monaro’. But these geographic divisions are an overlay on an already existing world, a sphere of operation run through with much older routes of cultural and economic engagement. The certainty of colonial boundaries hid Aboriginal people from view, for while the Maneroo Crown Lands Commissioner was lamenting the disappearance of the natives, mission manager Rev. Hagenauer was recording their arrival. The mountains and the river lands of the south were connected through associations that were known in one world but unseen by another, one inside history, one outside.
7. Something old, something new

Prehistoric people of the present

Historian Graeme Davison calls on data produced in a wide ranging survey looking at Australians’ relationship to the past to tell us that:

When people in … Australia are asked to rank the sources of information about the past that they most trust, museums come close to the top of the poll, well ahead of history teachers and far ahead of politicians who come last. Museums, it seems, are still compelling houses of learning, perhaps more than ever. Full of fascinating evidence that reveals narratives of places, people and events, they offer a direct experience of the past through the display of objects that can be found nowhere else.

What Davison fails to mention however is that in the same survey, Aboriginal people nominated the family as the most reliable source of information about the past while museums fell far down the list. This is hardly surprising when we consider that as late as the turn of the 20th century the director of the National Museum of Victoria, Baldwin Spencer, was writing in his Guide to the Australian Ethnographic Collection in the National Museum of Victoria:

The Australian aborigine may be regarded as a relic of the early childhood of mankind left stranded in a part of the world where he has, without the impetus derived from competition, remained in a low condition of savagery; there is not the slightest evidence either in his customs, social organisation, weapons, or implements to show that he has retrograded from a higher state of civilisation.

Historians writing of the same era show that by the time Spencer wrote his guide, a well informed and vocal Aboriginal population were patently leading non-savage lives within full

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207 Davison (2006):91
view of the Museum audience.210 Spencer’s classificatory displays however dominated the formation of popular perceptions of Aboriginal people, amplified by remaining on exhibition in the National Museum of Victoria well beyond his tenure.

It took until 2001 and Australia’s celebration of its first century as a federated nation, for a national museum to be built in the nation’s capital. The distinctive bright red and olive green building now sits on the water’s edge of Lake Burley Griffin in Canberra, a major tourist drawcard and a place of significant cultural influence.211 In his speech to open the Museum, the then Prime Minister John Howard proposed that the NMA “represents an attempt to put forward a museum which tells a story of a country in a way that is peculiar to our own nation and our own nation’s experience.”212 Although the last in a line of governments from both sides of politics to offer support to the idea of a national museum, the allocation of finances exclusively from the Centenary of Federation Fund revealed his government’s, if not the broader community’s, ‘clear commitment to the production of a centrally co-ordinated national past.’213 The inaugural NMA director, Dr Dawn Casey, confirmed this in her address to the Museums Australia Conference just one month after the opening of the museum, admitting that “Australia’s national museum, like others of its era, is a consciously nation-building exercise.”214 But it was never going to be an uncontested project. Indeed, the whole enterprise of building an institution with such a deliberately articulated role in the construction of a ‘national identity’ immediately invoked, as Graeme Davison observed, the “tangled lineage of ideas that has governed thinking about national selfhood … [and] the close connection between the development of museums and the 19th century discourses of race and colonialism.” 215

210 See Barwick (1963); Attwood (1989); Broome (2005); Kenny (2007); Pascoe (2007) for example.
211 It was, for example, the ignition site of the ‘history wars’. See Windschuttle (2002); Manne (2003); Macintyre and Clark (2004)
212 Prime Minister of Australia, March 11, 2001, speech 810
213 Bennett (1995):143
214 Casey (2001):14
Inside the big house

The tripartite concept of the Museum’s exhibitions inter-link three themes: 1) Australia’s history since European arrival in 1788; 2) the interaction of people with the environment; and 3) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture. Indigenous history was always central to the development of a national museum, right from its first mooting in the second half of the 19th century, even before the nation existed. In 1887 the premier of NSW, Sir Henry Parkes, called for a “Memorial State House’ as part of the celebrations to mark the centenary of colonial settlement, intended for the ‘education of the soul of citizenship.”216 There was to be:

A Museum … where shall be deposited, as they can be collected, all books, documents, maps, printed or written matter, and reliques as may be illustrative of the historical, material, and industrial stages of the Colony’s progress, and of the various aboriginal races of Australia, their customs, languages, and ethnological characteristics.217

However, Parkes not only did not get his proposal through but was ridiculed for making the suggestion. Never-the-less, the idea of an institution to house the national story had been launched.

From the end of the 19th century, Australians, although secure in their membership of the British ‘race’, increasingly searched for ways to express their feelings of an emerging national distinctiveness.

These colonials did not want to secede from the Empire, but they did seek separate nationhood. If the desire for political autonomy was often seen to follow from a sense of distinctiveness, it in turn called distinctiveness into being. National character or something like it had to be made explicit and visible.218

It was not until the end of WWI and the establishment of the War Memorial however, that the idea that “Australia had a material history that was worth preserving and through which it could distinguish itself as a separate nation” would gain purchase.219 This search for national distinctiveness from Britain collided with (and contributed to) the emergence of the new sister

217 Gore (2002):370
218 Thomas (1999):95
219 Gore (2002):169
disciplines of ethnography and anthropology, fields growing in stature in both museums and universities at the turn of the 20th century. It was no coincidence that the confluence of these elements resulted in the idea of a museum with a national focus being revisited. The idea for a new museum with an ethnographic focus found momentum from the growing “expectation of Aboriginal extinction,” fuelling the “urgency of preserving the records of a dying race.”  

Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown, the Chair of the newly minted Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney, made a heartfelt plea to the Minister for Home Affairs and Territories in 1927:

If such an ethnological museum is ever to be established at all, some steps must be taken immediately. Every year it becomes increasingly difficult to obtain specimens illustrating the life and cultures of the Australasian peoples. The native people themselves are dying out or are ceasing to make or use the things they formerly had. 

On the strength of this petition, Prime Minister Bruce appointed a committee of inquiry whose 1928 report recommended that a Commonwealth Museum be established and that an Institute of Anatomy be constituted as the first unit in the Commonwealth Museum “self-contained and with its own Keeper or Curator, but destined in course of time to take its place in the group constituting the whole Museum.” Although Radcliffe-Brown’s sought-for Institute of Anatomy opened in Canberra in 1931, the larger project of a national museum, of which this were to be a part, was once again consigned to the backburner.

A depression and another world war drained any funds that may have been found for a national museum for another thirty or so years and by the time the idea was revisited in the second half of the century, a new sensibility was beginning to emerge. In 1965, two years before the 1967 constitutional referendum that allowed for Aboriginal people to be counted in the Census and three years before his famous Boyer Lecture ‘The Great Australian Silence’, anthropologist W E H Stanner re-launched the debate with a letter to the Canberra Times. Calling for a ‘Gallery of Southern Man’ to be established in Canberra, he argued that

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220 Griffiths (1996):26
221 AA CRS, A1/15 1932/524, National Museum of Australia
222 Ibid
223 See Robin (2007) for a full discussion of the origins of the National Ethnographic Collection
Everyone loves a good story, and one of the world’s best stories could be told about Australia. Told properly, and continually filled out by new discoveries, it could appeal to every generation afresh. It has nothing to do with Cook or Parkes; with Sturt or Leichhardt; with the Colonies or Federation; with rum, wool or gold; with Eureka or Anzac. Its subject is older, grander and more full of meaning than any of them. It is the story of the discovery, mastery and enrichment of the continent by the aborigines, and it makes one of the most splendid tales of its kind that any country in the world can offer.

This exhortation to establish a museum with a different attitude to Aboriginal history had to wait until the advent of a new political era, almost ten years later, to be heard.

New wave, new way

In 1974 the Whitlam Government established the Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections, under the chairmanship of Peter Pigott, to look at museums and collections across the whole of Australia and to make recommendations to government for a national program. The report that the review committee returned made clear that the centrepiece of any new museum would be its Aboriginal content. Piggott maintained that:

The argument for a major display of Aboriginal history is overwhelming. The chronology of the human occupation of Australia is dominated by Aboriginals. If the human history of Australia were to be marked on a 12-hour clock-face, the era of the white man would run for only the last three or four minutes…

This report put forward a conceptual approach for the National Museum of Australia in which not just Aboriginal content but Aboriginal history was at the centre. Having found that in natural history museums the technological triumphs of Aboriginals are either ignored or even out of perspective. Likewise the values of their civilisation are, by implication, dismissed as totally irrelevant or totally inferior to the values of our civilisations the report sought to open a new era in the representation of Aboriginal people.

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224 Stanner (1965)
226 Pigott (1975)
Six years later, on 2\textsuperscript{nd} April 1980, with the Fraser Government now in office, the legislation to provide for the ‘establishment of a national museum of Australian history’ was passed with bipartisan support. The Minister for Home Affairs and the Capital Territory, R J Ellicott, in a triumphant speech given to the House, hoped that:

\begin{quote}
[i]ts establishment will fill a gap in the array of institutions charged with the preservation of our cultural heritage and will demonstrate to the world the pride that we have in our country. As a nation we have been somewhat diffident in expressing an interest in our history and our culture… This museum will provide that opportunity and will, I hope, prove to be a national focus for all Australians.\textsuperscript{227}
\end{quote}

That diffidence was not to be overcome with any haste. Although a bureaucratic framework was put in place and the institution called the National Museum of Australia was initiated with a skeleton staff, it took another three Prime Ministers and twenty-one years before the opening of a new museum was celebrated. In that hiatus, new museologies had begun to emerge: In the early 1990s, out of an era of cultural policy activity and a growing awareness of the museum sector’s past insensitivity towards Indigenous Australia, the Council of Australian Museum Associations began the development of a policy document on which interaction between museums and Aboriginal people could be based. In 1993, the International Year for the World’s Indigenous People, it released \textit{Previous Possessions New Obligations: Policies for Museums in Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples}. The document provided guidelines for consulting with Indigenous people in dealing with human remains, secret/sacred material, the general collections of Indigenous cultural material; including Indigenous people in research and public programs; and issues of governance.\textsuperscript{228} So significantly did museum practices shift that the Indigenous inaugural Director of the NMA, Dawn Casey, was able to declare:

\begin{quote}

\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{227} Minister for Home Affairs and the Capital Territory, RJ Ellicott, Museum of Australia Bill, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Reading, \textit{Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives} (Hansard) 2\textsuperscript{nd} April 1980
\textsuperscript{228} Sullivan, Kelly et al. (2003)
the days when museums could collect and display ethnographic material from the viewpoint of a dominant culture depicting an exotic minority culture are well and truly over.\textsuperscript{229}

The ‘native people’ who were ‘dying out’ according to Radcliffe-Brown, now found themselves not only alive and well but actively asserting their rights to self-determination in respect to cultural heritage matters. Despite having inherited the old Institute of Anatomy’s National Ethnographic Collection of more than 20,000 items (which still makes up almost 80\% of all objects currently held in the National Historical Collection), the project of decolonising the museum had begun.

**Social history on show**

Given that over 5 million people have visited the museum since 2001, the vast majority of them Australians, most of whom find museums to be a source of information about the past that they trust, it is not surprising that the Museum is now seen as a major player in the creation not only of ‘national identity’ but of national political discourses. The debate that the opening of the Museum sparked, now famously known as ‘the history wars’, was one of the most passionate public discussions on national identity and ownership of historical narrative that the country has ever had.\textsuperscript{230} In the light of this debate, it might be easy to see the Gallery of First Australians within the NMA as an innovation rising out of the Museum’s self-conscious understanding of its role in contemporary politics, but given the history of its development it is clear that an Aboriginal presence has always been central to the project of a national museum, despite shifting authority over modes of representation. Much has changed since Parkes’ first suggestion for a national museum in 1887, not least being the degree to which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people themselves interact with the collection and exhibitions. As is the case for contemporary museums in former colonies around the world, this interaction has lead to a profound change in approaches to collections, exhibitions and education, inspiring a new paradigm: the social history museum as national museum of representation.

\textsuperscript{229} Casey (2001):14
\textsuperscript{230} For a discussion of the Museum’s role in the ‘history wars’ see Windschuttle (2002); Manne (2003); Macintyre and Clark (2004)
In her analysis of the NMA at its opening, Christine Dauber observes that the museological methodology that most influenced curatorial strategies within the Museum was ‘new museology’. Although described as ‘new’, New Museology, the fundamental concepts of which are based on social history, is a phenomenon of the 1970s and 80s. Taking momentum from the revised definition of museums issued by the International Council of Museums in 1974, and within a broader context of advances in the granting of civil rights to oppressed populations, three unrelated experiments in three separate social contexts emerged simultaneously: neighbourhood museums in the United States, integral museums in Latin America, particularly in Mexico, and eco-museums in France and Quebec, all of which came to exemplify the ideas around which the term ‘new museology’ developed. These three experiments re-focused attention away from the traditional spheres of collection, preservation and classification of objects to the development of narratives that addressed social concerns of local populations. With an emphasis on identity building, attention was given to labour history, Indigenous peoples and their customs and local ecologies and environmental concerns. This radical move reflected social reforms of the 1970s more widely, where a growing appreciation of alternative traditions and histories was gathering impetus.

The experiments flourished. Observers began to notice the positive effects these newly conceived museums were having on the societies in which they had been established and in response formed the International Movement for New Museology (MINOM) in the early 1980s. Interested in ideas of the museum as a democratic, educational institution in the service of social development (particularly at the local and regional level), this influential group of museum professionals declared that:

this new active or community museology resolutely challenges the museum as an institution, the omnipotence and omniscience of the curators… the absolute precedence

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231 Dauber (2006):3
232 ICOM Statutes, adopted by the Eleventh General Assembly of ICOM, Copenhagen, 1974, states that “The museum is a permanent non-profit institution, open to the public, in the service of society and its development, which does research on the material evidence of man and his environment, acquires such evidence, preserves it, communicates it and, in particular, displays it for the purpose of study, education and enjoyment.”; See Hauenschild (1988) for discussion of the success of these museum experiments.
of objects over life and the abiding nature of the history and values of an elite that turns to its profit the resources of the planet, the creativity of its inhabitants and taxes of its fellow citizens.”

The alternative they proposed was defined by its socially relevant objectives. Within this new paradigm both material and non-material elements that constituted local and regional identity became important. No longer interested in merely recording an inventory of artefacts, the ‘new museum’ instead became theme-centred rather than object-oriented. These themes were found among the ‘collective memory’ of the population and focused on the advancing of the contemporary needs of the community. The 1984 working document of the Ecomusée de la Haute-Beauce for example proposed that in such a model

Contemplation and intellectual pleasure are supplanted by the participation and involvement of the visitor, who in this way becomes an integral part of the new museum in place of being merely a guest. Through his knowledge and his living forces he is called upon either to participate in the museum adventure itself or to involve himself in the sociocultural and even economic development of his territory. He is no longer a visitor; he becomes a decision-maker, an actor, a museographer and an agent of multiplication.

In the ‘new museum’, the stress of collection and conservation activities was placed on non-material cultural heritage and in this regard, “all knowledge, all historical and social perceptions, all testimony become subjects.” In this way the ‘new museum’ came to be seen as existing without architectural barriers, without disciplinary barriers and without barriers to public access, therefore an open museum in the most extreme sense. The methods used to develop exhibitions within this paradigm called on humanistic approaches which no longer exhibit objects for their own sake but as part of a story or as elements in a narrative, “forming part of a thread of discourse which is itself one element in a more complex web of meanings.”

\[\text{\tiny 234 ibid} \]
\[\text{\tiny 235 ibid:3.1} \]
\[\text{\tiny 236 Vergo (1989):3} \]
accommodating what people feel, and how they respond to the events of history, objects were used to illustrate abstract qualities of people’s emotions, requiring as a result the deployment of fewer objects in an entirely different manner making what were very extensive colonial collections almost redundant.\(^{237}\)

As American commentator Amanda Cobb noted, ‘new museology’ was of particular assistance to First Nations peoples in developing representational techniques which allow self-actualisation. This she suggested arises in part from the fact that the ‘new museology’ generally “throws the authority of museums into question thus subtracting some of their power.”\(^{238}\)

This museological revolution hit Australia at the moment at which the academy was undergoing a similar disruption in its apprehension of Aboriginal history. Historians such as Henry Reynolds and Lyndal Ryan and others, were publishing revisionist histories that challenged dominant narratives about Australian ‘settler’ society.\(^ {239}\) The atmosphere amongst commentators and legislators was ripe for a recognition of Indigenous histories and the imperative for Indigenous people to “control their own representations in a culturally appropriate manner, within the institutional space” drove the development of the gallery within the National Museum of Australia that was being planned.\(^ {240}\) The ‘new museology’ principles which sought to open engagement with marginalised groups were applied here in part as a redress of the racial and evolutionary categories and hierarchies which previously governed the collection of Aboriginal material culture, in particular the objects that the NMA had inherited with the National Ethnographic Collection.\(^ {241}\) The narratives these objects were once used to construct were now dismantled, even if the objects themselves remained in the NMA stores. The re-assembling of alternative narratives would demand not just consideration of intangible heritage and community and personal memory but, above all, relevance and representational authority. These new narrative demands drove a need for new engagements with history and Aboriginal communities, not to mention new ideas about what constitutes ‘Indigenous material culture’. One of the ways

\(^{237}\) Dauber (2006):4-5
\(^{238}\) Cobb (2005):488
\(^{239}\) For example Reynolds (1981); Ryan (1981). McIntyre, Wehner et al. (2001) discuss this cultural paradigm shift in Negotiating Histories: National Museums
\(^{240}\) McIntyre, Wehner et al. (2001):xv
\(^{241}\) Davison (2001):18
to facilitate such engagement might be to “innovate new perspectives by locating objects treasured by Indigenous people within local and national histories of colonialism, survival, collection and museology”\textsuperscript{242} through a research project such as this. But within the vast enterprise of the museum, even within its post-colonial iteration as a ‘new museum’, such an undertaking assumes a cultural symmetry that, on examination may be seen as an epistemological blind spot. If that is the case, what can a museum, in this instance the National Museum of Australia, do?

\textsuperscript{242} Appendix 1
8. Performing Aboriginal history

Being a participant in this story is not comfortable. The history of this country is not comfortable and we, the inheritors of a colonial past, both colonisers and colonised, are not comfortable with each other. For the first two years of field work I was too naive to understand how deeply these currents of discomfort flowed. Slowly, as the anger and mistrust washed up against me, I began to see how integral they are to our history making.\(^{243}\)

One of my first encounters with this truth was at the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) Kosciusko Education Centre at Saw Pit, just inside the Jindabyne entrance to the National Park. NPWS in this region have an excellent relationship with the traditional owners group and consult them both formally and informally through a number of channels including a Joint Management steering committee. This weekend was one of the formal meetings, where the NPWS staff and the Ngarigo families gather to discuss a range of issues to do with caring for country.

Iris, Deanna’s daughter and a senior spokeswoman within the group, invited me to attend the meeting to explain to everyone what I was doing. I was very happy to be invited – at last the rumours circulating about my work might be seeping through. This would be a chance to speak to the traditional owners as a group, to tell them about the project and if not get their assistance or even approval, at least allow for some transparency in the process.

\(^{243}\) My use of the term ‘comfortable’ here makes reference to the former Prime Minister John Howard, who during an interview in the lead up to the 1996 Federal election said: “Let me respond to your question by saying this, ... by the Year 2000 I would like to see an Australian nation that feels comfortable and relaxed about three things: I would like to see them comfortable and relaxed about their history; I would like to see them comfortable and relaxed about the present and I'd also like to see them comfortable and relaxed about the future. Jackson (1996)
I picked Deanna up on my way out of Canberra and we drove the 150 km or so to Jindabyne, arriving at the NPWS offices in the town before going up to Saw Pit where the meetings would take place. All the park rangers knew Deanna and they jumped up from their desks to kiss her fondly. She was clearly among old friends. As more of the traditional owners arrived from Sydney, Wreck Bay and north-east Gippsland there were waves of greetings with much laughter and hugging. I hung on the outside of this circle, a stranger in country, invited but not yet known.

The agenda for the next two days was full. Parks had a long list of issues that needed addressing and the traditional owners had business of their own to discuss outside of the formally convened sessions. We all headed out to Saw Pit to begin.

The education centre is a relatively new building made of local stone and timber, an attractive and sensitive addition to the landscape. Inside, the roomy foyer ringed with display cases and panels sets out the story of the Kosciusko National Park, moving from geology to flora and fauna to Indigenous and settler histories. Classroom and meeting spaces open up from this exhibition area, furnished to accommodate groups of school children or conference delegates.

Figure 23. Deanna and Christine in front of displays at Saw Pit, 2006
Part of the display features tools and weapons found in the area flanked by a large reproduction of a 19th century photograph by Henry King entitled *Australian Aborigine, Monaro District*. Moving on from the Monaro Man, the next exhibition bay holds a bark slab hut and some horse tackle but the Aborigines are nowhere to be seen. The ‘pioneers’ have arrived, the high plains cattlemen have begun operations and that’s the end of the Aboriginal story. I am familiar with the King photograph and was surprised to see it in this context, but with the meeting about to begin there was no time for reflection.

![Image](image.jpg)

Figure 24.  
*Australian Aborigine, Monaro District, Henry King, date unknown*  
State Library of Victoria, Image number H20918/59
The families took their places in a ring around the room and the formal proceedings began. After the welcomes and opening addresses, including an introduction to the archaeologist who later in the day would be demonstrating stone flaking on the terrace outside, Iris handed me the floor. I began by explaining that I was a researcher working with Deanna doing interviews and gathering together some of the history of... I looked at the faces surrounding me. Suddenly pronouns and possessives became tangled. Me, you, her, us, we, I’m doing, we’re doing their, your history. Out loud the complexities which sat together without too much friction in my mind were exposed as being full of tension. I stumbled and tried to backtrack. I explained that I was interested in Aboriginal social history which, in this particular area was largely missing, as the exhibition in the display area so ably demonstrated. Monaro Man, I explained to the room, exists in his pristine and primitive world but is extinguished as soon as the settlers arrive, which, as the gathering here today was testimony to, was not the case. There was no history available after Monaro Man and it was this gap that I was interested in filling.

I did not expand on the super-sized photograph any further than that but I could have gone on to say that it had been used by Josephine Flood on the front cover of *Moth Hunters*, the seminal (and for a long time the only) book that examines archaeological evidence in the Monaro region. The photograph was produced by Henry King sometime during the late 19th century, most probably for his entry in the World Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893 to which he submitted a display of Aboriginal portraits. By the time it was taken the Monaro had been occupied by Europeans for about 60 years. A gold rush had come and gone, the Robertson Land Acts had been passed and what became known as the Half-caste Acts had come into force. If strapping men in kangaroo skin loin cloths were thin on the ground in the Monaro at the time, audiences in Chicago would not have been any the wiser.

The injustice of the extinguishment had hit me immediately on entering the Education Centre that morning. This bloke whose photograph stood in for pre-history was an historical character smothered by a fiction. He may well have been party to the staging of the photograph – certainly he looks comfortable with his pose – but in becoming short hand for a pre-contact world he was

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244 King (1983)
wiped out of the historical narrative, an extinguishment perpetuated firstly by his placement on the cover of an archaeology book in the 1980s without any critique and then again in the NPWS display.

Figure 25. Moth Hunters of the Australian Capital Territory  
Flood and Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. (1980): front cover

Instantly everyone in the meeting hated me. I had insulted the National Parks staff who had obviously put both thought and resources into the exhibition and whose goodwill was evident on so many fronts, and I had insulted the traditional owners who were more aware than anyone of their missing history, both humiliated by the gaps and conscious of the agonizing events which filled them. Silence stretched out into the room until one of the traditional owners, a woman who had travelled up from the south coast to attend the meeting with her elderly mother, turned and eye-balled me. “We know that this history is missing and we know why. But what you might not understand is that the reasons behind that are very PAINFUL.” It was the only sentence she spoke to me for the entire weekend. I was chastened. I slunk out to the morning tea room and
waited for Deanna to take pity and offer me a Monte Carlo. It was not that I was wrong. I just did not yet understand my own role in the research. One thing I learnt very quickly that morning was that it was not neutral.

The meeting at Saw Pit was an exemplar of the situation: clearly everyone in the room had had cause to think about the kinds of unexamined assumptions within contemporary culture in regard to Aboriginal history, and they all sat in various relationships to the problem, both professional and personal. They all get it, but they don’t know what to do about it. The National Parks managers are geologists, archaeologists, botanists, education and natural resource management professionals and apart from anything else, are busy managing the complex 673,524 hectare Kosciuszko National Park. There are of course Indigenous rangers who work with the local community and park visitors but their focus is on management issues and visitor education. Although they hold extant knowledge from within their own families, they are not researchers. The only written history that exists are local or specialist histories focusing on the cattle industry, the ski resorts or the mountain huts, or Keith Hancock’s Discovering Monaro. NPWS have tried to redress this situation with the publication of Aboriginal People of the Monaro, an annotated anthology of primary and secondary sources (to which this work owes a huge debt), but a collection of documents in itself does not immediately redress the missing narratives.

It was clear that I had insulted the traditional owners but it was only later, when I heard one of the senior rangers proposing to an Elder, slightly desperately, that perhaps they could have a pin board in the display centre with snapshots of contemporary families on it that I realised how deeply I had hurt the NPWS staff. They were really trying to do the right thing; to consult, to listen, to represent, to fund. My insensitive comments had only pointed out how inadequate their efforts were. It took me some time to understand that it was not that I was wrong, it was that the relationship between me and the participants that day was not at a stage where public critique was appropriate. It was not enough that I had the imprimatur of the University or the Museum, that I was an ARC research scholar or that the project had its own validity away from the specifics of this particular community. I not only needed to reassess my topic, I needed to reassess my own position within the research. I had fallen into a participant observation methodology, despite the research being historical not anthropological, without a conscious
strategy for representing my own engagement. Once I realised that, it was clear that there was no ethically viable passive voice available to me. My presence was affecting the very nature of the enquiry and I was implicated in not just the process but the resultant history. I had unavoidably taken sides and the only option was to be transparent. It was after this meeting that I began to write in the first person, to incorporate my field notes in my own voice and to give up the fiction that I was nowhere to be seen in the frame.

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The disciplinary pathways that lead me to the practice of history writing are of no help to me here. I grope at the literature of the anthropologists, who at least know how to handle themselves in a tricky situation, but their methodology leads to an anthropological outcome. I am not asking their questions or looking for their results. I ask myself what effect does the methodology have on the outcome? What does working with living people in the field, not just as informants or carriers of oral history but as contestants of the legitimacy of my position within the project, do to both the outcome and more importantly the question itself?

These complexities have been tackled in various ways by researchers working in the field, articulated by James Clifford for example, as part of a developing post-modern anthropological discourse. Clifford questions assumptions about fieldwork as travel, going out in search of difference, where the field remains somewhere else, albeit within one’s own linguistic or national context. Drawing on the writing of Kamela Viswewaran, Clifford proposes an alternative model for conducting primary research by repositioning fieldwork as ‘homework’. ‘Homework’, he proposes, is not defined as the opposite of exoticist fieldwork, rather it is “a person’s location in determining discourses and institutions – cutting across locations of race, gender, class, sexuality, culture.” Such a critical confrontation is aimed at bringing the researcher to an examination of the “often invisible processes of learning that shape us as subjects. [It is] a discipline of unlearning as much as of learning.” In that ‘unlearning’, a space is cleared for “unorthodox routings and rootings of ethnographic work.” 245 In this instance my work with the Ngarigo community, although not positioned within an anthropological framework, was in every

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245 Clifford (1997):85
sense, including the literal, homework and the invisible processes of both learning and unlearning were rapidly becoming apparent.

The imperative to address the researcher’s position in cross-cultural production has been likewise confronted in Australia by practitioners working across the spectrum of anthropology, ethnography, history and archaeology. Nicholas Thomas for example addressed his disquiet at the unavoidable problem of voice in his work on Indigenous art and colonial culture:

[I am] a white Australian. I attempt to discuss both colonial and indigenous traditions in a broadly balanced way... but it must be conceded that I do not write from an insider point of view—the fact [is] that I happen to live in a particular part of the world. I am not so much concerned to ‘come to terms’ with this in a personal sense as to illustrate why the region’s history makes ‘coming to terms’ always an incomplete business: one that is necessary, awkward, rewarding and also improbable.246

Thomas sees his position as a commentator and cultural producer as part of the post-colonial and perhaps generational obligation to both address and dismantle what Clifford calls ‘learning’. He is implicated because of where he lives and although he makes a case for his lack of need to ‘come to terms’ with his national inheritance, he nevertheless acknowledges that his position within the cross-cultural dynamic, i.e. that of a white Australian and an ‘outsider’, informs his enquiry. Stephen Muecke enters the discussion from both a different discipline and a different perspective when she reports the following:

In order to tell yourself the story of an event from an unfamiliar standpoint, you have to position yourself there as yourself. Speaking as myself, and as an Australian, there is something of a dilemma in visiting others within my own country. Aboriginal people have been playing host to a lot of visitors over the years, going backwards and forwards with changing stories about what they experience in Aboriginal country. The paradox of ‘visiting Aboriginal Australia’ concerns the unresolved political question of ‘them’ and ‘us’. At what level are we the same people within a nation?247

246 Thomas (1999):19
247 Muecke (1999):53
The anxiety of the ‘visitor’ who hovers at the border of ‘us’ and ‘them’ is overwhelmingly familiar. The political contest in which those pronouns slide to accommodate the context – an intervention for them, a celebration for us – is played out here not in distinct geographical locations as Muecke experiences in his work in remote Western Australia, but amongst the densely populated heartland where the ‘nation’, whatever that may be, is enacted. Here the history slips imperceptibly between ‘ours’ and ‘theirs’, not entirely shared but deeply entangled. Archaeologist Denis Byrne addresses this issue when he admits that his concern as an archaeologist working in the field of ‘Aboriginal heritage management’ is to trace the lineage of my own practice and thus, optimistically, break free to some extent from its colonial complicity. As this implies, I believe that archaeology in Australia can only be post-colonial to the extent that its practitioners deconstruct its colonial underpinnings. Archaeology in Australia must decolonize itself before it can claim to be post-colonial.

Byrne’s admission that the critical struggle is located within the examination of his own disciplinary practice suggests that his interests extend beyond decolonizing the field in general, to decolonizing himself as a current practitioner. The methodology he employs then is truly ‘homework’, where the epistemological boundaries of fieldwork are re-examined in the light of his own location in institutions and discourses. In encouraging such critical reflexivity, both Clifford and Byrne recognize the challenges in developing an appropriate methodology when working in a cross-cultural situation and prompt me to assume a similar attitude to my own research work.

There is a certain anxiety that is inevitable when working in this domain as Thomas, Muecke and Byrne articulate. The critical confrontation in this project demands not just a dismantling of the cultural underpinnings of the initial research question but a re-examination of the ways in which the relationship between me and my research participants define our interactions: my status as a gubba defines the ways in which they are prepared to reveal their possessions and their stories; I am not just an observer but a necessary part of the narrative as the following example demonstrates.

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248 Journalist Nicholas Rothwell discusses this discomfort in detail in Another Country. (Rothwell (2007))
249 Byrne (1996):82
Drinking from the gubba cup

Nowra, a seemingly endless string of car dealerships and shopping malls on the NSW coast, an hour or so south of Wollongong, is flat and hot. The veneer of urban sprawl which covers over the original swamp is a thin layer that shimmers in the heat haze, evaporating into the steamy still air. I am cushioned from it by the air-conditioning in Tabatha’s four wheel drive for the moment, although stopping to drop our gear off in the local caravan park, the late February furnace hits us. Tabatha’s 86 year old grandmother doesn’t seem to mind. When we arrive at her new ‘elder care’ unit, a purpose-built development of retirement village style accommodation for Aboriginal elders out near the naval base, she is keen to take us on a tour of its features. I admire the large light switches, the phone with oversized numbers and the button in the bathroom to call for help. My real interest however lies with the amazing array of black, red and yellow decorations that adorn the tiny unit, from the ornately crocheted dress on the cupie doll in the china cabinet to the painted cork coasters on the table and patchwork knee rug across the back of the couch. I try to admire them but Aunty Barb is more interested in showing off the kitchen; the cupboards are just the right height and there is room for a microwave on the bench. It is a perfect place to segue into stories of other houses she’s lived in, from the zinc shacks at Lapa where she raised her children to the river front cottage at Orient Point of her own early childhood. Tabatha prods her in that direction but she won’t start the stories until we’re settled with tea and bikkies in the lounge room.

I set up my camera and tape recorder while the kettle boils. I’m here to film Tabatha and her grandmother, Aunty Barb, speaking together for an oral history project and as usual I’m relegated to the technological fringe; focusing lenses, testing microphone levels, framing shots. I put my headphones on and settle into the shadows as the conversation heads back towards the mission at La Perouse and the fun of diving for mutton fish and boiling the billy on the beach. We’re well into the shady country of memory, with a pack of bare footed kids running wild while their mother, with her long black wavy hair, dives deep into the rock pools of Botany Bay, when Tabatha jars us back into the present with an exclamation. “For Christ sakes Nan, why’d you giver her that cup?” I freeze, the cup mid way to my mouth. I’m suddenly aware of the delicate piece of china in my hand, cream with a yellow rose pattern and gilded filigree edge. It is a lovely cup. I took it with some pleasure when Aunty Barb handed it to me, noticing that she
served herself and Tabatha in regular thick navy blue mugs. I don’t understand what the problem is, I don’t understand the question. It is polite to give the visitor the good cup. Does Tabatha think I don’t warrant it? Aunty Barb ignores the question and we all return to the interview. As we are leaving I reach into my bag and pull out a slab wrapped in alfoil and offer it to the old lady. She takes it and pulls back the wrapping to reveal a corner of the sticky, dark, brandy-soaked fruitcake that Mum had given me for Christmas. No further words are exchanged as she shoves it deep into the back of a kitchen cupboard and shepherds us towards the door.

Back at the caravan Tabatha, perhaps sensing my confusion, feels the need to explain. The bone china cup is what her Nan calls the ‘gubba cup’, given to gubbas who need to have impressed on them her good manners and her ability to maintain a properly functioning household. The tradition of the gubba cup stems from the mission days, when the manager, or perhaps his wife, would do a weekly house inspection. Blankets were lifted to examine the condition of the sheets, a gloved finger run across surfaces to check for dust and cupboards opened to check for food. That the same bag of flour was seen in the pantry of a row of neighbouring houses, run between them by a string of kids, seems not to have been noticed. During the weekly examination a cup of tea would be offered to the inspector in the gubba cup. This polite ritual of tea and chat was in reality a game of high stakes: if the mission manager felt you were not up to scratch, an unfavourable report could be made to the ‘welfare’ and a review of whether your children might need to be taken into care could ensue. This is how Tabatha explains it anyway, as she tries to knock out a seagull with chips the size of doorstops. I have no reason not to believe her.

Suddenly, irreversibly, I am in the frame. I have walked into shot and found myself cast as a central character: I am the gubba. I constitute the other half of the story. I am the antagonist around which the action is generated; the mission manager’s wife, the school headmistress, the babies’ home matron, the missionary, the gubba historian.

On our return the next day, Aunty Barb tells me that she had a slice of fruit cake with her milo before bed. It was very nice. I confess that my Mum made it. She nods and seems to be a little warmer. As I am setting up the gear while the tea is being made, I look at the tiny unit through new eyes; gubba eyes. The tender objects of family and identity crowd the cabinet, coffee table
and walls: posed studio photos of the children and grandchildren, the handmade decorations in team colours, gold rimmed sherry glasses holding posies of dried flowers. As she hands me a cup of tea I notice I have been upgraded to a navy blue mug, by virtue of Tabatha’s intervention and Mum’s Christmas cake. But it is too late. I know what it feels like to be the gubba. Someone has to be and it is not like we can pretend they don’t exist – the truth of that constellation is all around us: the huge family photo that takes up almost the entire wall above the couch tells the story. Christina (Tabatha’s mother) smiling out from the far left, was taken into care as was Tabatha in her turn. Vic the oldest boy, leaning on his mother’s shoulder and eyeballing the lens, famously made a record (entitled “Stranger in My Country, Stranger in My Land”) in Long Bay jail, the first ever inmate to do so. Each of the seven of them have their story; husbands, wives, children, siblings and parents all came up against the gubba in one way or another. That’s just the way it is. With tea made and bikkies eaten, we get back to the stories of clever men transforming themselves into cattle (!!), fishing at Pussy Cat and recipes for Johnny cakes. Her conversation is dotted with references to ‘them gubbas’ after which she looks over at me and adds ‘not you but’. When it’s time to go she kisses me on the cheek and invites me back anytime, but I’ve already been warned off by her daughter Ruth and Ruth is scary. It seems other gubbas from other universities had been there before me and had misbehaved, writing her mother’s stories into unsanctioned works. The fact that I am merely the techno support of her niece mattered little, I was not to be trusted. When we arrive back in Sydney I immediately hand the master tapes to Tabatha.

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It is as I am sitting with the Ngarigo ladies in their lounge rooms and kitchens that the incident of the gubba cup comes to mind. In truth I suspect that they all have their version of the gubba cup but they are not objects that are volunteered for viewing. It is not their way to insult me for a start. And in truth I am not the gubba of old. Aunty Barb’s retraction of that status on the second day of recording acknowledged that we don’t have to stay in clichéd relationships with each other. New stories and new relationships are available if we listen for them. But neither can the truth of that past be denied. While the story of the gubba cup remains linked to the object, the cup acts as a potent symbol of the relationship embedded in it. It was not only the history of the tea cup we played out together but its still potent symbolism. Being given a cheap navy blue mug
would have had no meaning without going through the process of being given the china cup first. The poignancy of the switch was moving and gratefully accepted, but only after I was given the story by Tabatha during the night. The whole procedure, including the exchange of cake, the tea cup, the coffee cup, was an enactment of the old lady’s history of relationships with gubbas, a tea ceremony of a kind, where the re-enactment of the symbolic significance brought the meaning to life.

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Aboriginal objects that hold important historical narratives such as the gubba cup, face a number of difficulties in coming to light; not only are they not widely seen as Aboriginal by outsiders, but they may also not be seen as important by their custodians/owners. While museums have been obsessed with the ethnographic, Aboriginal people have continued to circulate objects within an entirely different economy of exchange; resources are re-imaged into different uses, useful things are distributed amongst friends and family constantly. And there is nothing to say that that particular gubba cup is of any heritage value. It may have been bought in the local op shop, or at last year’s Myers sale. There may also be shame associated with poor circumstances in the past as well as memories that people would rather not have dredged up. This is a continuing sensitivity for the Museum curators whose task is to acquire objects for the National Historical Collection. Opening painful wounds is part of their remit in looking for artefacts that tell difficult histories, yet they are very aware of the trauma inherent in the painful remembering that such an exchange generates.

This particular story is my story, and the telling of it is a legitimate (if not entirely comfortable) place from which to speak. That I was needed to enact a history of relationship reminds me that I am not just writing history, I am making it. I will be in future stories as the mission manager is now in my tea drinking story. The on-going-ness of the narrative and both its fragmentary and relational parts are held together in the object of the cup. That the narrative should travel back to an object is appropriate in a story that leads to the museum. It also reminds me that so many of the stories unfolding here could be told from a similar position. All of them are entangled with people and objects in ways that can never be undone, and all of them have voices on both sides of the cultural divide yet to be explored.
9. Farms and fences

The old people, old Tongiai used to sing in the river for the rain. Used to whack the water with wattle, get a bit of wattle and whack the water with it and make a rainbow come out of the water and sing a song.

Yes they’d sing that song. We still know a bit of that song.

That was the song of the rainmaker. Mount Delegate, he was the rain maker.250

Grandfather camp

The NSW town of Delegate lies two and a half hours drive south of Canberra. Just 10 kms from the Victorian border, with views west to the Snowy Mountains and east to the coastal range, this charming town with a population of just 700 provides a “service centre for people living in the far North East Gippsland area and boasts a fascinating historical retreat into the bygone era of early settlers and pastoralists.”251 Although full of suggestions for good local pub meals and maps to well known fishing spots, the Tourism NSW brochure which can be picked up in pubs, newsagents and real estate agents throughout the district makes no mention of the old Delegate Aboriginal Reserve, the historical black counterpoint to the sheep stations of “early settlers and pastoralists.” Why would it? There are no monuments to see, no cultural centres running tours to local sites and no interpretive walking tracks. Yet this 10 acres in the Parish of Currawong, County of Wellesley, is a place of deep meaning for the descendants of the old reserve dwellers; a site for the location of their identity as Monaro-Ngarigo people, and the focus of their aims to be acknowledged as such.252

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250 Mason and Dixon (2009)
251 Tourism NSW brochure, 2006
252 Chittick and Fox (1997):p 36-39; Margaret Somerville and Patsy Cohen discusses the nexus of identity and ongoing relationship to place in similar circumstances, locating their study at Ingelba in the New England region of NSW. Goodall and Cadzow (2009) similarly cites the Georges River in southern Sydney as a case study.
Although the old cabins are long gone, visitors to the reserve site today can imagine the attraction for the old time residents: the gently undulating grazing land flows down to a bend in the trout-stocked Delegate River, with unobstructed views south to the peak of Mt Delegate which rises as a perfect cone to 400 metres above the surrounding plain. Along fault lines, the Bendock River and Haydens Bog Creek course off the mountain as clear streams.

The Gazettal notice of 1892 which declared these 10 acres an Aboriginal reserve show that the land was already classed a temporary common on crown land, a classification which would have been determined in the wake of the 1861 Robertson Land Acts. Heritage archaeologists reason that this classification indicates Aboriginal people were already camping on the river site at the time of the Acts being passed. The Delegate River had always been an important resource for the Ngarigo and given that a view of Mt Delegate, a place known to be highly significant, is accessible from every location on the reserve, a camping spot located at least in the vicinity makes sense.

So the thing is this was the camping ground and this was where they’d meet and one would go that way and another would go that way and that other one would go that way but this is where they met, at Delegate here. That mountain, Mt Delegate, is the grandfather camp. It is a cone, just straight up like that. There is another cone up near Cooma there, on the Murrumbidgee. You can see it. It is the only cone up there near Cooma. And there is three others called the brothers.

Occupation of this country started early in the colony’s history. Delegate Station was founded illegally in 1827 by squatter Robert Campbell as an outstation of Duntroon on the limestone plains in present day Canberra, but licences were granted to both him and George Simpson in 1841. The flood of permits that followed included those issued to the O’Hares at Corrowang, the Nicholson’s at Little Plain, Ross on the Delegate River and Lawson at Craigie.
All of these permits allowed for huge tracts of land to be ‘taken up’: 53,000 acres, 24 square miles, 11,520 acres, 34,000 acres. While boundaries showing these ‘runs’ began to appear on maps, the Ngarigo continued their practices of seasonal travel. The escalation in the pastoralists’ takeover of their traditional lands from the 1830s to the 1880s offered the Ngarigo little choice but to interact with the new economy if they wanted to survive and remain in their own country. The 1889 NSW Aborigines Protection Board report, the first year that the Cooma District was mentioned specifically, tells us that the “aborigines in the district… are generally employed on stations as labourers and stockmen. None are in need of aid from the Government.”257 By 1890 the camp site at Delegate appeared as a named location, along with plans both for acquisition of the common as a gazetted reserve and the building of shelters. Fifteen adults and six children were counted as residents in that year’s census, although the shifting nature of the population was acknowledged, as was their reliance both on employment in the pastoral industry and other sources of food. That the men travelled between the shared social space of the reserve and the stations where they worked was established as an observable pattern by 1891, with the ABP Report for that year noting

Some of the reserves, and more particularly those in the pastoral districts, are simply used as camping grounds, the men being generally employed in various kinds of labour on sheep-stations, or in rabbiting, marsupial hunting, & c.258

This way of life – working on stations, moving camps, supplementing European rations by hunting birds, fish, rabbit, possum and kangaroo – continued well into the mid 20th century.259

So [the old people would] come here for the long grass birds in spring and summer. The long grass birds are pigeon, three different types, quail and bush turkey, the Australian Bustard. So when they got here they’d light a big fire on top of the hill, Mt Delegate. They’d light a big fire up there and you could see it all the way to Cooma. You can see

257 Aborigines Protection Board New South Wales (1889)
258 Aborigines Protection Board New South Wales (1891)
259 See Rae Stewart’s account of growing up in the area in Young and NSW Dept. of Environment and Conservation (2005):409-411
Mt Delegate in Cooma. Everyone around the whole of this place would know that they was camping at Mt Delegate.260

Most of the Ngarigo working on stations throughout the 19th century followed a schedule of travel between the high country and Gippsland. The Delegate campsite was always part of the itinerary as Emma ‘Dollie’ Williams recalls:

The blacks were fairly numerous at that time [ca. 1880s] but they was all tame. A number of them used to work about the stations but they were restless and could not stay at the one place long. Often in the mornings when the people arose they were gone. Delegate first stop as a rule and later Gippsland. They would stay away about twelve months and they would start to make back again.261

Similarly the ‘restless’ Ngarigo made accurate census reporting a challenge. The APB found “great difficulty in taking a correct census, owing to the wandering habits of the race, more especially in the remote districts; by the border tribes crossing in to the other Colonies.”262

The reporting of these movements give no insight into the type of business being conducted on the round trip between the Monaro and Gippsland. Presumably there would have been visits to relatives, perhaps to the Lake Tyers or Ramahyuck mission stations and almost certainly various cultural exchanges, including the reporting of political developments. The Board, it seems, were equally uninterested in following the progress of the Ngarigo across the colonial (and what would become state) border, yet it was the drawing of this ill-conceived political boundary which designated them a ‘border tribe’. Proclaimed by Governor Gipps in 1843, the boundary in this area runs in an arbitrary and perfectly regular line between the headwaters of the Murray River in the west and Cape Howe in the east. Serving merely to join the most eastern point of the Murray with the coast, the line was ruled on a map without any reference to the geography of the region let alone Ngarigo knowledge or boundary sensitivities. The cultural landscape it cut through was a complex topography of meanings and interconnections, with mountain ranges, rivers, tracks

260 Rodney Mason speaking at the gates to the old Delegate Reserve on the Delegate-Orbost Rd, 10th March 2009
261 Handwritten reminiscence by Mrs Emma Sophia (Dollie) Williams (born 1872) transcribed by Mike Young of NPWS. See Young and NSW Dept. of Environment and Conservation (2005):250
262 Aborigines Protection Board New South Wales (1894)
and trails defining zones of exclusion, zones of contact and transition, boundary areas of agreement or contestation and paths along which people and stories had travelled for millennia. Although, according to Mr J O’Rourke, “the NSW blacks claimed all that territory to the Buchan River and down as far as the rapid water continued [but not as far] as the low-lying country”, the new and unnuanced political boundary bisected it for the purposes of administering the colonies. This border not only did not allow for an interconnected geography of subtle and negotiated meanings and shifting boundaries, it caused both administrations to lose sight of the Ngarigo whenever they crossed it, a sometimes manipulated invisibility. Although important cultural and economic resources straddled the newly drawn line (for example the Snowy and Ingegoodbie Rivers, the Ingegoodbie track, Mt Delegate and its associated streams and the grass-bird hunting precincts), the Board was only able to collect data from the NSW side making the census figures for the Delegate Reserve, especially in the 19th century, approximate at the very best.

Working in country

Further to the north and higher into the mountains, Harry Bradshaw, also known as Black Harry, was starting a family with his wife Lizzie during the early 1880s. A stockman and labourer at Cobbin station near present day Jindabyne, Harry was well known in the district for his athletic skills and held the ‘belt’ in the Jindabyne-Cooma area for both running and jumping. He was a favourite with the gamblers in the district, with a lucrative book run on the strength of his athletic abilities. Although part of the wider Ngarigo milieu, for reasons we can no longer know Black Harry was reluctant to travel with his kin folk, preferring to stay in the high country of the mountains with the cattle and horses. Dollie recalls that

Black Harry spent the greater part of his life on Cobbin Station. His gin was Lizzie. He was a very smart man. He was also a great horseman. His name was Harry Bradshaw. 264

263 The Bairnsdale Advertiser and Tambo and Omeo Chronicle, 17th March Bairnsdale Advertiser and Tambo and Omeo Chronicle (1910); For other views on tribal boundaries of the area see Matthews, 1904, cited by Young and NSW Dept. of Environment and Conservation (2005):309 fn 207
264 Young and NSW Dept. of Environment and Conservation (2005):251
In an era when the use of the pejorative ‘gin’ was common place, Dollie volunteers that Black Harry was ‘very smart’. In the context of the mountains’ pastoral industry his distinguishing intelligence would have included knowledge of country, of stock animals and horses, of weather, and of men. Her further elaboration, that he was a ‘great horseman’, opens a window deep into his world and through that aperture we can see some of the particulars of his life.

That Harry worked on Cobbin station reveals a number of details about his circumstances. In the 1880s Cobbin was one of the large high country stations running beef cattle. A farm such as this ran in seasonal cycles; during winter the cattle grazed on the lower valley pastures of the station. In summer they were driven into the high country to feed on the nourishing grasses and alpine herbs that grow above the tree line. Much of Harry’s work life would have revolved around these migrations. In the summer he would have lived in the alpine pastures in one of the cattlemen’s huts, from where he would have roamed with the animals as they followed the feed and the weather. To follow cattle in this country is dangerous and takes great skill. The rocky alpine ridges are exposed and prone to blizzards, even in mid summer. The gradients are steep. The understorey in the stringy bark and snow gum sub-alpine forest is often impenetrable. The moss bogs are treacherous, particularly for cattle, and in the 1870s the whole place would have been run through with dingoes. The lower country is wet and cold for much of the year and by the 1890s, almost the instant it was invented, the Dryzabone coat had become essential equipment. In these conditions Harry would have been expected to catch his own food, tend to his own medical needs and provide his own company.

Towards the end of summer, when the animals were in peak condition, they were rounded up and driven back to the station before setting off on a long drive to market – which in this era meant a journey along the precipitous Ingegoodbie track into Gippsland and finally to the sale yards in Bairnsdale from where they would set sail for Melbourne.

This cycle, in fact the whole enterprise of the cattle industry in the mountains, depended on good stockmen. Stock work is by its nature seasonal with most stock workers taken on for the summer drive and laid off in autumn. If Black Harry spent his life on Cobbin, then he was not a seasonal worker, he was permanent staff and as permanent staff he was probably the head stockman, even
more likely since he was remembered as very smart man and a great horseman. Unlike the crew
taken on only to drive the animals to market, although they too have their skills, the head
stockman plays a crucial role in the running of the station. In the winter months he makes his
own stock whips, most often from kangaroo skin, an innovation introduced by Aboriginal
stockmen, not insignificant considering the Ngarigo were possum skin cloak people and well
adept at leatherwork. He also repairs his saddles, saddle bags and other kit and makes his own
harnesses both for riding and for draft work. Draft harness making is a very specific skill for
which you need a deep understanding of the anatomy of horses and the way in which a team
works together. Making a riding harness involves not just an understanding of horse anatomy but
an understanding of the individual animal it is being made for. This was an essential element in
what would have been Harry’s most important winter work, training horses.265

The compliment a born and bred mountain woman such as Dollie Williams pays in calling
someone a great horseman, has specific meanings. Part of that is, as Banjo Patterson so
exhilaratingly portrayed in his poem The Man from Snowy River, the ability to ride down steep
gradients over rocky ground at high speed and stay in the saddle but it also refers to a horseman’s
ability to train and work with his horses, to communicate with them without using force, to
develop an intimacy with them that knows their capacity for hard work and hard riding, their
dietary requirements, the history of their injuries, their harness. He would also have had a flare
for breeding, adjusting the task specific mix of Arab, thoroughbred and quarter horse in each
generation.

If Harry was able to do all of these tasks in an exemplary fashion then presumably he was a
highly valued worker whose contribution to the station’s profitability would have been
significant. Yet there was another element in Harry’s life that would have contributed to the
perception of him as very smart, which was his Ngarigo cultural knowledge. This would have
ranged across a number of fields, from familiarity with landscape and travel routes, to knowledge
of edible flora including medicinal use of plants, to a comprehension of weather patterns and
seasonal behaviour of fauna, all of which could be translated directly into his work as a stockman

265 See McCall (2000)
with considerable consequence. Despite the limitations of working in the pastoral industry in NSW during the mid to late 19th century, it was a time when, as historian Heather Goodall tells us, Aboriginal people could still

travel frequently over their country, maintain traditional ceremonial and social traditions, eat healthy native food as well as European rations, speak their own languages and teach their children about land, traditions and recent history. These are remembered as times when Aboriginal traditional knowledge was acknowledged by whites for its value to pastoral work, and when Aboriginal expertise at stock work, horse riding and property management were widely respected.266

Sadly Black Harry died young, leaving Lizzie, still only 23 years old, a widow with two small children.

**Billy Rutherford Snr.**

Like Black Harry, Ngarigo stockman William ‘Billy’ Rutherford snr. was a talented high country cattlemen and was held with much affection in the district, so much so that the Crisp brothers, the owners of the large and prosperous Jimenbuen Station for whom Billy worked, paid for his burial and for a stone memorial to be erected in his honour.267 Although Black Harry is not remembered widely, Billy Rutherford snr. survived into the 20th century and is still in living oral tradition. His origins are somewhat mysterious, with this story surviving amongst the local white community of Delegate.

Old Billy Rutherford was said to have had a club foot. The Doctor in those days, William Rutherford, found Billy when he was a little baby on the ground near Hayden’s Bog. He’d just been left out there. Dr Rutherford took him home and reared him but he died

266 Goodall (1996):66; See chapter 5: *Dual Occupation* in same for an in-depth discussion of Aboriginal pastoral workers in NSW during this period. This is a subject which attracted much scholarly interest during the late 20th century. Other studies of this topic include McGrath (1987); Read (1988); Curthoys and Moore (1995); Castle and Hagan (1998); Russell (2006)

267 Young and NSW Dept. of Environment and Conservation (2005):252 citing Dollie Williams
not all that long after and when the Dr died, Billy’s people came and took him back again. That’s how it was in those days I suppose.\textsuperscript{268}

As Ngarigo compatriots, stockmen on two of the larger Monaro stations and habitués of the Delegate Reserve, it is impossible that Billy and Harry would not have known each other. At the very least the two men would have had many friends and work interests in common. After Harry Bradshaw died Billy married his young widow Lizzie and took on the responsibility of raising her two young daughters, Christina who was seven at the time and Daisy who was two. Given the swiftness with which Billy stepped into the breach after Harry’s premature death, it is possible that the two men may even have been in some traditional kinship relationship of obligation such as brothers, cousins or related through skin group or totem. For whatever reason, Billy snr. married the young widow Lizzie Bradshaw and together they had two sons, William (Billy jnr.) in 1892 and Frederick in 1897. Frederick did not survive childhood but Daisy, the last of Harry’s children, and Billy jnr., the first of Billy Rutherford’s, grew up as close siblings and Daisy was identified as a Rutherford throughout the district.

This network of relationships plays out further within the family tree of the contemporary Davison family. During the time Black Harry worked at Cobbin, James and Emily Brindle are known to have passed through the station, if not resided there at least for a short period. Given that James was in the blanket records as receiving blankets on the Ingegoodbie track some years before and had probably worked for the O’Rourkes as a stockman, he was likely to have been taken on at Cobbin as one of the stock workers for the summer drive. Emily Brindle is recorded as giving birth to her son Alex at Jindabyne in 1888 and the story in the family is that he was born on Cobbin Station. The Brindles’ constrained circumstances after their problems at Ramahyuck Mission meant that the family would have been travelling for work opportunities, moving between stations in the high country and Gippsland where their other children were still in the mission school. Lizzie Bradshaw would have been at Cobbin with her one year old daughter Daisy at the time and presumably would have helped Emily with the birth. That the two babies, Lizzie’s daughter Daisy and Emily’s son Alex, would grow up to marry may well have

\textsuperscript{268} Ingram (2009)
been discussed, after all Emily’s own marriage had been arranged by her parents and the local missionaries and being on the lookout for suitable marriage partners in right kin relations for their children would once have been a prevailing occupation. If nothing else, the children’s marriage confirms that James Brindle from the Genoa area and Harry from the Jindabyne area came from different totemic groups (Emily was from Western Australia and Lizzie was from the Glenroy area in the western Blue Mountains, probably of Gundungurra descent, a group in proper marriage relationship to the Ngarigo), but presumably both men were Ngarigo speaking.269

Nobody’s business but their own

Although Emily Brindle chose to give birth at Cobbin, Lizzie, both as Mrs Bradshaw and Mrs Rutherford, chose to travel to Delegate to have her four children, as her daughters would do in their turn and as other Aboriginal women of her generation did. Why? What did Delegate offer as a place of refuge for a woman in labour? Lizzie’s journey to Delegate as an 18 year old girl to have the first of her children in 1880, despite the official gazetting of the reserve still being 12 years away, indicates that there was a community she was choosing to rely on which must have consisted of women with midwifery skills, camped on the river. A warm circle of aunties and female relatives may have held more attraction for the young mother-to-be than giving birth on the station where her husband worked. That she travelled back to Delegate over the next 12 years as she gave birth to three more children indicates that this was a place of return for her that held special meanings, a place to bring her children into the world.

Contemporary knowledge of the site makes reference to a women’s place on a creek a short distance from the camp270 and in the late 19th century the world of the Ngarigo would likely have still have been strictly gendered. But the men also travelled between the shared social space of the reserve and the stations where they worked, returning to the camp for family and community

269 Elizabeth Bradshaw noted on birth certificate of Frederick Rutherford (NSW Reg no. 1897/029659) as born at Glenroy NSW, 1862
270 Mason and Dixon (2009)
business, a pattern which was observable by 1891 and noted in the Protection Board report for that year.

The Delegate camp found official status when it was gazetted on 11th June 1893, with the Department of Lands declaring that

His Excellency the Governor, with the advice of the Executive Council, directs it to be notified that, in pursuance of the provisions of the 101st section of the Crown Lands Act of 1884, the land specified in the Schedule appended hereto shall be reserved from sale for the use of aborigines and is hereby reserved accordingly.271

Compared to the vast acreages that had been licensed to the squatters 50 years before, the modest 10 acres behind the old hospital counted for little. Nevertheless, it had been secured for exclusive Aboriginal use, a tiny holding that gave the Ngarigo a place from which they supposedly couldn’t be removed. Most importantly it was a place of their own choosing, one that had been in use well before the strangers arrived. With the gazetting of the reserve, cabins were erected, a market garden planted, irrigated by a complicated water race and a cemetery established. What was once a seasonal camp became a much loved home where community and family life could be enacted away from the prying gaze of the Protection Board or any other authority. Once the Reserve was officially reserved the Aborigines Protection Board began a programme of erecting accommodation huts. The Board also observed that the community had become self sustaining in regard to health care, noting that “they are seldom ill, but when they are. .. [at] Delegate they attend to one another.”272

Of the four locations on the Monaro regularly surveyed, from the time that the Aborigines Protection Board began to collect census figures in 1889 until its final survey in 1915, Delegate consistently returned a count of almost 30 residents, with the other locations numbering 4 or 5 at the most, usually just 1 or 2. Given the persistent complaints about the difficulty of obtaining accurate figures due to the movement of people across the colonial state border, there is no guarantee that the same 30 or so people were being recorded. The total number of the reserve

271 Dept. of Lands (1893)
272 Aborigines Protection Board New South Wales (1891)
cohort may even have been closer to 40 or 50 at its peak. Oral traditions within Aboriginal families tells us that people were crammed into the huts

There was 30 people in them old huts. Hmmm. They had big families.

Were they all the same family?

I guess so. I don’t know. I just know there was about 30 people.\textsuperscript{273}

During this period, when Aboriginal men were finding more secure work in the pastoral industry, two distinct spheres of operation developed. While the Ngarigo were occupying a role that gave value to their knowledge of country on pastoral stations, their social lives were being conducted on the Delegate Reserve. Aboriginal people from across the Monaro such as Lizzie and Harry Bradshaw as well as Billy Rutherford snr. were treating Delegate as their place of return, the home camp where they could meet and socialise with friends and relatives, give birth to their children, leave older children to be cared for by extended kin networks when employment demands called them further afield, make marriage arrangements and be cared for when they were sick.

Being self-managed, the residents of the Reserve generated no bureaucratic attention except for an occasional brief mention in the Aborigines Protection Board annual reports. Despite this autonomy they were forced to apply to the local police for permission to travel beyond their immediate place of abode. An entry in the Delegate Police diary for 22 November 1900 notes that “Three Aborigines Billy Rutherford, Tommy Arnott and Jimmy Tongai are desirous of visiting Sydney during Commonwealth Celebrations and ask for passes.”\textsuperscript{274} This request may have been refused given that the Protection Board considered it was not desirable for Aboriginal people from rural areas to be visiting Sydney at all, but the application shows that despite their distance from the centres of government, the residents of the Delegate Reserve had an interest in affairs of the day and that news of governance and politics was closely followed, with the impending Federation of enough interest to warrant a journey to Sydney. No doubt socialising

\textsuperscript{273} Dixon (2009)
\textsuperscript{274} Young and NSW Dept. of Environment and Conservation (2005):296
and news gathering from friends and family in Sydney would have been part of such a trip, but an engagement with administrative developments was clearly of importance.\textsuperscript{275}

\textbf{Too black, too white}

That Billy Rutherford snr. was one of the men applying for a rail pass to Sydney for the Federation celebrations is no surprise. Although still working as a stockman for the Crisp brothers during this era, he was often in the middle of Reserve affairs and was clearly playing an important role in the community. When he enters the record four years later it is as an advocate for the children of the Reserve, looking to secure them an education with a place in the local school. It appears that he had developed friendly relations with the local Senior Constable, George Stutchbury, who evidently held Rutherford snr. in high regard; it was through Stutchbury’s intercession that the teacher at the Delegate Public School agreed to allow the Reserve children to be enrolled in class. This event and its consequences became something of a minor scandal in the town, with a Sydney newspaper using events in Delegate as a pretext for an editorial polemic on Aboriginal inferiority.\textsuperscript{276} When the incident hit the press Stutchbury was ordered to report to his command in Goulburn regarding events. He details the episode as follows:

\textit{23\textsuperscript{rd} September 1904}

\textit{The Senior Constable spoke to the public school teacher here, in reference to the Aborigine children attending school. He [the teacher] had no objection to them doing so. On the following day the Senior Constable accompanied William Rutherford aged 12 years, full-blood, Alexander Booth aged 13 years, half-caste, and Edward Christopher aged 7 years, half-caste, and Maggie Tonqui aged 11 years, half-caste, to school. They were all clean and well dressed, and no reasonable objection could be made to them. On the following day one or two residents who have children attending the school, and}

\textsuperscript{275} The local school teacher refers to Billy Rutherford snr as an \textit{“intelligent and partly-educated blackfellow”} which presumably is a reference to his level of literacy (1904 Response to memorandum from Teacher at Delegate School (unnamed) to Dept of Education. Correspondence file, Box 5/15677, SANSW). Given that the opportunity for education amongst the Ngarigo of his generation was limited, newspapers may well have provided the means of gaining reading skills as well as information about political developments.

\textsuperscript{276} See Colour in Schools Evening News, 5 October 1904
whose habits and mode of living are not quite as clean as the Aborigines raised objections to these children attending the school. The local paper here published a paragraph which of course incited the people; the teacher then requested the Aborigine children not to attend. There is not slightest truth in these children being filthy and likely to spread disease.277

Stutchbury clearly holds the teacher accountable for requesting the children’s dismissal. A report to the Department from the teacher however has Rutherford Snr. initiating a withdrawal.

11 October 1904

Sir, In reply to your memorandum with regard to the above I beg to report as follows:

On Tuesday 13th Sept. four children from the Aboriginal Mission Station, 2 ½ miles distant, were brought to the school by William Rutherford (father of one of them) and Senior Constable Stutchbury. One child is a pure-blooded aboriginal, two are half-castes, and the fourth has only a trace of aboriginal blood, having blue eyes and fair skin. They were neatly dressed and apparently clean. I admitted them and they attended school the remainder of the week.

Finding however that there was a number of residents who objected to their presence in the school I visited the Mission Station on Sat. 17th Sept, and interviewed William Rutherford, above mentioned, who is an intelligent and partly-educated blackfellow, and who seems to act as guardian of the children. On my telling him that some objection was being taken to the children’s attendance he said: “I suppose I better not send them”, and they have not attended since.

On Monday following I received a telegram from Mr Inspector Smith requesting me to exclude them. I telegraphed in reply as follows: “Aboriginal children not now attending. Voluntary withdrawn. Report following.” A report was sent to Mr Smith the same day.278

277 Stutchbury (1904)
278 1904 Response to memorandum from Teacher at Delegate School (unamed) to Dept of Education. Correspondence file, Box 5/15677, NSWSA
The Aboriginal Protection Board referred to the matter in their annual report for the year:

[Aboriginal children] are in some instances absolutely prohibited from attending the public schools, owing, it is understood, to objections that have been raised by a few parents of European children, although, as has previously been pointed out, there is nothing to which exception can be taken either in their habits or behaviour, and the Board are ever ready to see that they are decently clad.\(^{279}\)

That one of the children refused entry to the school was Billy and Lizzie’s son, Billy Rutherford jnr., adds further to the question of the children’s education. Rutherford jnr. was considered in his adult life not just literate but well read and was known to have had a ‘beautiful hand’ in reference to his copperplate script. Given he was refused entry to the school when he was already 12 years of age, he was left little opportunity to join the state education system, even if the decision to omit the Reserve children had been rescinded quickly. The teacher’s report mentions that Rutherford snr. was a “partly educated black fellow” presumably meaning that he had a level of literacy. Reading and writing were clearly of interest to the Rutherford family and there must have been some hurt and disappointment experienced by both children and adults at their being turned away. If the teacher is to be believed, Billy Rutherford snr. wanted no excuse for trouble between the local white community and the Reserve, hence the ‘voluntary’ withdrawal.

This colour bar did not last. By the close of the 1920s the Reserve children had been enrolled at the school for some years and the last of the Ngarigo people to have lived at Delegate, Uncle Arthur McLeod, had fond memories of his time as a student there. Neither did it promote general ill will between the Reserve residents and the other local people more generally. Billy and Lizzie it seems were almost universally well regarded. Many examples of their interactions with local people, particularly children, survive in oral tradition including this one:

When a friend of mine’s father was a little boy he lived at Riverview, one of the large properties in the area which was about 8 kilometres out of town. To get home he had to pass the Aboriginal Reserve which was about three quarters of the way home and old Mr

\(^{279}\) Aborigines Protection Board New South Wales (1904)
and Mrs Rutherford used to always take him inside for a cup of tea. That’s something he remembered.  

While the simple gesture of offering a cup of tea to a young boy might have endeared the Rutherfords to the community’s children, their qualities were also recommended to anthropologist RH Mathews by their mutual friend Senior Sergeant George Stutchbury. Writing from Bombala Police Station on 8th December 1906 Stutchbury notes that

What Aborigines there are in Monaro are at Delegate – they appear to like that place and you could not shift them from it… [however] the Aborigines are dying out fast on Monaro, I buried a good many while stationed at Delegate, I think it is consumption that takes them off in this District. You will find a few good old sorts among them at Delegate still, viz Rutherford and family [with a margin annotation ‘Lizzie his wife – RHM’]  

Stutchbury’s championing of the Rutherfords may well have had other long term effects. In 1909, five years after the incident at the Delegate school, Billy Rutherford jnr., by then 18 years old, is entered in the Police Salary Register under the heading Trackers – Southern District. He is stationed at Delegate where he would have worked within the Bombala Command, then headed by Stutchbury. His contemporary and brother-in-law, Alex Brindle, had already been working as a tracker under Stutchbury for a year and the same year was transferred to Cooma, where he remained in the employ of the NSW Police for the next 30 years.  

But the Reserve residents’ relationship with the police was fickle and dependent on the good will of individuals. By the early 1920s the Aborigines Protection Board had begun a drive to move all Aboriginal people off self managed reserves and onto mission stations where they would be under the control of managers. The Ngarigo community was extremely fond of the Delegate Reserve, a place of their own choosing with not only traditional associations but legislative status since its declaration as a common in 1861 and its gazettal as an Aboriginal Reserve in 1893. The

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280 Ingram (2009)
282 See following chapter for a full discussion of Trackers Brindle and Rutherford.
administrative betrayal which saw them expelled is still remembered by those whose parents were effected.

*And they were all forced off the reserve.*

*Forced off?*

*Yes. Well it was let known by the police for them to leave if you know what I mean. They [the Aborigines Protection Board] told them [the police] to remove them [families living at the Reserve] and so they all had to leave. Aunty Cecilia was working as a domestic in Sydney and they waited for her to come back home. That’s what they was still doing here at the time. Because they wouldn’t leave without her. So she came back home then they all went to the coast to live.*

The community had no choice but to move. With existing connections at La Perouse, Wreck Bay, Wallaga Lake and Lake Tyers, the coast was the obvious place to go and so by 1927, all the old Delegate families had left. Uncle Arthur McLeod remembered that “things were getting difficult at Delegate, the tribe went to look at other areas… The older people went in a horse and sulky, the children walked.”

They would have taken the old routes down the mountain via Cathcart, then followed the Towamba River, coming out just south of Eden, setting up camp along the Bega River or moving onto Wallaga Lake Mission, some going as far as Nowra and Jervis Bay/Wreck Bay or south to Lake Tyers. They picked beans, cut timber and hauled tuna. Their kids married locals, had more kids, became part of the coast community. People would say of the old mountain mob that there were none left, hasn’t been for almost fifty years, and that would be that. But that would be very wrong.

This forced abandonment of the Reserve contributed to the belief that no Ngarigo people remained on the Monaro by the end of the 1920s. Given that no missionaries had been generating records of the reserve residents, which in other places in NSW and Victoria was the means by which the wider community held the history of local Aboriginal people, few archival traces of the Delegate Reserve remained.

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283 Dixon, McLeod et al. (2009)
284 Egloff, Peterson et al. (2005):45
285 See Lydon (2005); Nugent (2005); Goodall (2006)
removed, perhaps for materials to be reused, and stock was allowed to graze on the property. But
the truth is that at least two of the old Ngarigo families remained. Both of them are in Deanna’s
lineage, and both of them are remembered in oral history of the region.
10. Soft landing on hard history

Jostling for position

Within the project of acquisition, which is still the central function of museums around the world, curators and other professionals have, since the 1980s, been asking themselves “what makes certain objects, rather than others, ‘worth’ preserving for posterity?”

David Lowenthal provocatively extended this question to contest the entire project of museum collecting, declaring that...

With so much transmuted into heritage, it takes special effort to resist keeping it all. Packrats by nature, we preserve too well. Not only do we not need all we have, we need desperately to be rid of it… Yet heritage is such a sacred cow that none dare call for its culling.

For all its alleged allegiances to the person focus (as opposed to object focus) of ‘new museology’, the National Museum of Australia, in its heart and in its storerooms, is addicted to objects. Perhaps it is the way objects are perceived as carriers of inalienable truth that make them irresistible. Perhaps it is the Museum audience’s need for their experience of history to be anchored in the material that drives the addiction. Or perhaps inherited collections have their own momentum, always hungry for renewal. Whatever the reason, as a national museum, the NMA has the task of ‘narrating the nation’; it is to objects that it turns.

Aboriginal people have always been a central element of this narrative undertaking, whether as specimens or as agents of history, right from the Museum’s conceptual beginnings in the 19th century. But the post-colonial discourse which underpins this current iteration of the Museum casts a deep shadow on its material inheritance that is not easy to resolve. As Nicholas Thomas observes:

286 Vergo (1989):2
287 Lowenthal (2005):396
288 as already discussed in chapters 2, 4 and 5
In settler museums, the jostling of ‘modern’ and ‘primitive’ objects does not so much display affinities of form [as] point unavoidably to rival attachments to country, and competing imaginings of the nation...

This is a rivalry that the NMA ethnographic collections are particularly vulnerable to articulating. Nevertheless, the NMA must jump over these opposing attachments to country, or rather illustrate competing attachments to country, through the display of objects and so must answer the question: what makes one object worth preserving over another? If the post-colonial concerns of the NMA have left what were once “very extensive colonial collections almost redundant”, how are new narratives constructed and out of what?

Identity as history

Walking through the various galleries of the NMA, the distinct fields of material culture that the curators have called on are clearly observable. Hills Hoist clothes lines and Victa lawn mowers, EH Holdens and plywood caravans tell of 20th century Australian life; hand-stitched boots, broken crockery, corseted dresses and wrought iron wrist cuffs convey stories from a deeper colonial past; rabbit traps, bullock catchers, flame throwers and chicken wire fencing reveal human interactions with the environment; Gertrud Bodenwieser’s ballet costume, Nancy Bird’s aviation goggles, Annette Kellerman’s swimmers, even the dashboard of the family car used as evidence in the Lindy Chamberlain trial, all meet in the imagined social world out of which we were created as a nation to commemorate our achievements and scandals. Included throughout the exhibitions are objects that have belonged to Aboriginal people: Cathy Freeman’s Olympic sprint suit; coolamons used for winnowing seeds; stone tools from Lake Eyre; all thread through the various themes, carving out a place for Indigenous people in the previously impervious white narratives that dominated Australian museums until the mid 20th century.

Entering the Gallery of First Australians however, the experience shifts to a culturally distinct domain, with the bushel of pukamani poles at the entrance setting the scene. Here the emphasis turns to an Indigenous view, where history and culture are articulated not through objects

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289 Thomas (1999):14
290 Dauber (2006):4-5
sequestered from daily life (the majority of objects in the rest of the Museum) but through objects made specifically for the purpose of carrying consciously determined meanings. Newly constructed possum skin cloaks, shell necklaces, grass fish traps and ceremonial headdresses form the backbone of the upper gallery, interspersed with multimedia presentations that play statements of identity and celebrations of survival, including commentary on the making of the objects. The deep history of the knowledge traditions called on in the construction of the objects is the emphasis here, along with their context within social networks. Older ethnographic objects are sprinkled through the exhibitions marking chronological as well as cultural connections, but the text avoids the history of their museum journey including the circumstances of their collection, focusing instead on their meaning for contemporary communities.

The decision to separate the Gallery of First Australians from the rest of the Museum was one of the recommendations of the 1975 Piggott Report, the *Museums in Australia Report* to the Australian Parliament known for the name of its chairman.\(^{291}\) It was considered to be an exciting and innovative advance at the time, reflecting in part the radical make-up of the committee tasked with reporting on the ‘Gallery of Aboriginal Australia’ as it was originally known; a ground-breaking combination of heritage professionals and Aboriginal people. The committee took on the historically offensive representation of Aboriginal people in museums, directly quoting Baldwin Spencer’s 1901 references to their “low condition of savagery” and countering it with a range of recommendations that placed Indigenous autonomy at the centre of the decision making process.\(^{292}\) Fundamental to this proposal was a separate gallery of representation that was “designed to give voice to those once voiceless.”\(^ {293}\) The emphasis was to be on history and culture, a direct contestation of previous representations, which in the Committee’s view were “Europocentric preconceptions conceal[ing] the essential spirituality, the network of social bonding and obligations and intimate man-territory relationship which typify Aboriginal society.”\(^ {294}\) By positioning history, not ethnography, as the central concern of the

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291 Piggott (1975)  
292 Dauber (2006):20  
293 Ibid  
Gallery, the Committee set in train a revision not just of historical content in relation to Aboriginal people, but the way in which Aboriginal history is conceived.  

In the more than 30 years that have lapsed since the Pigott Report was submitted to Parliament, an entirely new field of Indigenous historiography has opened up. Drawing on alternative methodologies, much of this work is based on oral histories and memories held within families. The acceptance of these methodologies by academic historians has not been universal however. As Attwood and Foster observe:

> These representations have been particularly disruptive … because they often challenge traditional ways of doing history (which have been inherently European). … this largely results from the fact that Aboriginal histories are based on memory. One of the crucial intellectual debates in the area of Aboriginal history has been about the similarities and differences between memory and history, and across the political spectrum there are historians, … who are apprehensive about the ways in which memory, in the context of ‘identity politics’, threatens to displace the authority of history.

This nexus of memory and identity is immediately apparent in the GFA exhibitions, particularly in the display of contemporary works which reference ‘classical’ forms. Fish traps, possum skin cloaks, kelp water carriers and fibre baskets are all clearly identifiable as Aboriginal, which in this representational context is their reason for being. In their form and in their associations with people and places, they comment on what has come before while marking a cultural distinction between Indigenous cultural practices and mainstream Australian society as depicted in the rest of the Museum. This connection to a pre-contact past is an important element in marking out a distinctive history. Indigenous curator Hettie Perkins has no hesitation making this authenticating connection explicit when she says “The same communities that made rock art are making the art

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295 This report was written in the wake of W.E.H Stanner’s 1968 Boyer lectures *After the dreaming*. It was in these lectures that he identified a ‘cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale’, for which he coined the phrase ‘the great Australian silence’, as a major force in Australian cultural production. (Stanner (1969))

296 Attwood and Foster (2002):20-21. Tim Rowse (2006) is also concerned with Indigenous historiographic process and their legitimacy within the academy. Apprehension around the displacement of authorial authority that Attwood & Foster identify was central to the ‘history wars’ debate where documentary proof was pitted against memory and orality in a public dispute over historical legitimacy.
we see today.”297 This representational strategy, as well as making explicit the politics of identity, sits well with audiences. Feedback from visitors overwhelmingly refer positively to their GFA experience. The merchandising opportunities that the Museum Shop offers follows through the ‘traditional’ Indigenous aesthetic with the opportunity to purchase similarly crafted items with provenance labels identifying the artist and community they came from.

Calling on distinct and ancient traditions and cultural lineages to construct statements of identity is clearly an approach that has worked well for the Indigenous curators who assembled the exhibitions in the upper galleries of the GFA. Yet this strategy is limited when it comes to social history narratives. By containing representation within the ethnographic, for all the intentions within the Gallery to dismantle outmoded discourses, the people represented are “no longer [able to] invent local futures. What is different about them remains tied to traditional pasts, inherited structures that either resist or yield to the new but cannot produce it.”298

As the exhibitions move into post-contact histories on the Gallery’s lower levels, this strategy is less available. Here the narratives are about dispossession, trauma, resistance and survival, as well as celebrations of success and community/family life. These stories are not easily constructed from the repertoire of ‘Indigenous artefacts’ available in the upper gallery. The National Historical Collection held by the Museum holds very little in the way of objects that tell Aboriginal social history not primarily concerned with pre-contact traditions. Similarly, the use of memory and oral history confines the narratives to a limited zone within the not so distant past while, unlike the other galleries within the Museum, social histories that tell of the deeper past are missing. For the people who are represented, the reassertion of their contemporary presence directly addresses the extinction narratives out of which museum exhibitions were built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and within which many of them are still popularly conceived.299 For the Museum’s directive to tell ‘Aboriginal history’ in it is role as institution of community education, this limitation is less satisfying.

297 Hettie Perkins, curator of Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Art at AGNSW, cited by Lowenthal (2005)
298 Clifford (1988):5
299 This is particularly pertinent for the Tasmanians. See Griffiths (2000):25
Whitewashed objects

As the once firm ground of representation, ownership, custody and preservation shifts under the weight of a reasserted Indigenous presence, “real people with modern lives now stand in for the objects which once stood in for them…”, although not as uniformly as Griffiths’ comment would suggest.\textsuperscript{300} It may be true in the domains of exhibition and interpretation. Within the protocols of the collections however, archaic notions of Indigenous material culture are preserved by practices which memorialise the collector through whose agency they came into the collection. While Indigenous people whose material is displayed are consulted by the Museum, allowing objects to be united with stories held in the oral traditions of source communities, the history of how such objects came to be in collections is not expunged in this process. Although some collecting was conducted with both permission and sensitivity, much was not. Nor were the objects collected valued or cared for greatly beyond the moment of their collection. Griffiths relates the story of a group of stone artefacts belonging to the Museum of Victoria, for example, although it is one which is repeated many times over:

During the Second World War, truckloads of stone artefacts were removed to an outside store to clear museum space. That is where they mostly still are today, stranded in a warehouse in boxes layered with dust… Although there is vagueness about the dispersed places of origin of [these] individual artefacts, there is precision about the person who gathered them together. In their sheer volume and disarray, these boxes of stone artefacts represent an orgy of collection.\textsuperscript{301}

The legacy of this collecting is, as Griffiths illustrates, mountains of artefacts disconnected from their origins. The way in which contextual information was ignored in these early collecting drives is discussed extensively in the literature yet the narrative needs of the social history museum drives the historicizing of these collections.\textsuperscript{302} Naturally the strongest storyline to emerge is the one which archival sources best support, and invariably that is the one in which the collector features. Further, the mechanism through which collectors became the primary agent in the construction of discourses within the museum are extant in the administrative processes in

\textsuperscript{300} Griffiths (1996):27
\textsuperscript{301} Ibid:67
\textsuperscript{302} Pearce (1994); Thomas (1999); Gosden and Knowles (2001)
use today. The NMA for example still names objects, for the purposes of cataloguing, with the name of the collector.\textsuperscript{303} This emphasis casts the collector as the originator of the history of the object at the moment it begins its museum life, often the only documented aspect of its journey. Indeed the roll call of famous collectors memorialised within museums throughout the country narrates the early history of ethnography and anthropology in Australia through the titles of its collections.

Academic interest in both the collectors and their collections over the last decade has resulted in several important studies on the subject, most recently The Makers and the Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections. The front cover of this latest edition to the field shows a group of clearly identifiable ‘Indigenous’ objects on contemporary display. With no people in the frame, their ethnographic presence is left to articulate their meaning only in the context of the museum. Both the title and the cover of the book infer an Indigenous presence, yet the series of essays deals exclusively with the histories of white collectors. This classificatory sleight of hand exemplifies the undertow that the history of collecting exerts on ethnographic objects, even when they are regarded within contemporary museological sensitivities.\textsuperscript{304}

Similarly, the masses of objects held in these collections generate their own activity. A rich collection of artefacts, photographs, audio visual recordings and archival material assembled by Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land and the Great Sandy and Tanami deserts held by Museum Victoria for example is hailed in their publicity as “one of the most comprehensive and significant collections of Aboriginal cultural heritage material in the world.” The claim is supported by a photograph of a string basket, taken in the style of an art gallery catalogue, placing the object firmly in the discourse of aesthetics as well as ethnography. This collection is rightly considered a jewel of ethnographic collections, exquisitely assembled and extensively provenanced as it is. It is no surprise that scholars have been consistently drawn to the material during the 25 years it has been held by Museum Victoria; it has inspired scholarly publications,

\textsuperscript{303} As do most museums. See the Donald Thomson Collection in Museum Victoria below as an example.

\textsuperscript{304} Philip Jones (2008) works against this current in his book Ochre and Rust, where he reads a series of objects as historical texts. Even here collectors are still often cast in the lead role, as in the case of Daisy Bates, the central figure of chapter 7.
coffee table books, articles, conferences and even a popular feature film.\textsuperscript{305} The so called ‘digital repatriation’ of parts of the collection has also become a celebrated example of contemporary museology.\textsuperscript{306}

The interest which a collection such as this inevitably generates in turn engenders further interest, creating a positive feedback loop which continues to enhance the collection’s value as contemporary meanings and new engagements are added to its history. Harder to see however is

\textsuperscript{305} See for example Thomson and Peterson (1983); Carment (1990); \textit{The Big Picture: Thomson of Arnhem Land}, ABC TV, 29 June 2000 (ABC Archives, Sydney); \textit{The Ten Canoes} (2006) directed by Rolf de Heer

\textsuperscript{306} See Toner (2003) for a discussion on the definition of ‘digital repatriation’, with emphasis on its meaning for Indigenous communities; For example the major ARC Linkage project conducted between 2003-2006, known as \textit{Anthropological and Aboriginal perspectives on the Donald Thomson Collection: material culture, collecting and identity}, which investigated among other things “digital modes of repatriation” of images from amongst the more than 2,000 photographs and 4,500 objects held by Museum Victoria. Papers on this work have been given at international conferences including the World Archaeological Congress (Dublin) 2008 and The Makers and Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections (Melbourne) 2006.
how the boundaries of such a collection trace the historical limits of academic interest in the lives of Aboriginal people.

Born in Melbourne and educated at a private boy’s school and at Melbourne and Sydney Universities, Thomson was mentored into the field of anthropology by the great academics of his era, Sir Baldwin Spencer, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and later during his doctoral studies at Cambridge, the evolutionary theorist A. C. Haddon, before himself becoming Professor of Anthropology at the University of Melbourne for four years in the mid 1960s. This compelling academic biography is the least of his achievements; his reputation for solo and intrepid field work as well as his championing of many unfashionable causes of his era such as Aboriginal land rights, led to him being dubbed ‘Australia’s Lawrence of Arabia’. That Thomson consistently travelled over 4,000 kilometres to conduct his field work offers an insight into attitudes of the intellectually privileged towards Aboriginal people in proximity to the southern capital cities in the early to mid 20th century. While he was (unsuccessfully) proposing land rights policy to the government on behalf of the Yolngu in the Northern Territory however, only a few kilometres from his Eltham farm north of Melbourne the local Wurundjeri people were being removed from their land at Coranderrk to make way for soldier settlement schemes in 1947. Despite the vast amount of material in his archive, there is no record of his opinion on this matter. That the Wurundjeri were not ethnographically interesting to the local scholars and would not become so for another 30 or 40 years is no criticism of Thomson, merely an observation of the historical context in which his collection was assembled. One of his biographers notes that

[Thomson’s] collection of more than 7000 artefacts, comprehensive in its scope and scrupulously described, together with 11,000 photographs documenting every aspect of

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307 Morphy (2002)
308 Soldier settlement schemes and their effect on the Coranderrk campaign is discussed in Barwick, Barwick et al. (1998):311; This is in no way a criticism of Thomson’s fierce 1947 campaign against the establishment of a rocket range at Woomera, South Australia, merely a comment of the geography of his interests. Attwood (2003) documents Thomson’s passionate involvement in social justice issues in regards to Aboriginal people. See Rowley (1983) for a discussion of what became known as the ‘land rights’ movement in this era.
Aboriginal daily and ritual life, enables the viewer to recapture the Aboriginal world of Cape York and Arnhem Land in the 1930s and 1940s. The Aboriginal world of south-eastern Australia in the same era however is almost entirely missing from the material and archival record. Not only is the record missing but the richness and depth of the Arnhem Land record as assembled by Thomson now generates contemporary interest because of its exemplary qualities and thus perpetuates the boundaries of intellectual concentration.

This brief example of just one of Australia’s great ethnographic collectors, one who was deeply ethical and unerringly humane, was repeated over and over, not always with such compassionate attention. It is exactly this march of late 19th and early 20th century collectors from the south to the centre and north in search of ethnographic booty, gaining momentum as the once richly covered Victorian landscape was cleared of Aboriginal material, that The Makers and the Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections documents. John Tunney, Norman Tindale, Charles Mountford, Spencer and Gillen, Herbert Basedow, the Berndts, TGH Strehlow: the list of collection makers referred to by the authors records the great names of Australian anthropological achievement. The essays are in themselves a collection, one which chronicles the contemporary scholarly interest in these historical figures. The editors are not unreflective about the essays’ demonstration of white intellectual interests and the nature of the disciplinary discourses the collectors worked within, yet their positioning of the essays as part of a wider discussion about Indigenous material culture demonstrates the strength of the pull exerted by this current of intellectual inheritance.

Meanwhile, Museum Victoria is looking to its Donald Thomson archive to generate social history narratives as they investigate new relationships with contemporary communities. Like their counterparts, including the NMA, they strike the problem of representing Aboriginal social history – what objects do we use to tell these stories? One solution is to use an ethnographic collection as inspiration for contemporary responses and certainly the Thomson Collection is perfectly suited to such a strategy. But this approach places the relationship between Thomson

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309 Morphy (2002)
and his informants at the centre of the public narrative which unfolds, standing in for an Aboriginal social history.\textsuperscript{310} Thomson himself was such a compelling figure and his collection so magnificent that to not investigate all the possibilities it offers would be negligent. But hidden in this history is an unexamined politic which silently infers that the power relations between Thomson and his informants, both in his time and now, are even. To recap from Chapter 1, “Images of exotic and ancient cultural richness are extremely useful in the workings of nation-states; unresolved political contests are not”, yet as senior Indigenous curator Margo Neale points out, political contests are at the heart of all modern Aboriginal histories and are just as central to desert and top end people as they are to south-east Kooris, a point which is glossed over in the rush to celebrate cultural richness and successful cross-cultural relationships.\textsuperscript{311}

**What is an Aboriginal object?**

It is not the job of this thesis to deal with the silences the disciplinary interests of early anthropologists and ethnographic collectors generated, however in returning to the NMA and the task of this research, those silences are clearly defined. Not only were the Ngarigo people of the Monaro of no interest to early anthropologists, not having had any material culture collected they are not the subject of contemporary repatriation projects. This silence within the collection is perpetuated in direct and opposite symmetry to collections such as the Thomson Collection and flows out into history where the literature has declared the Ngarigo extinct for almost a century. Even before they were declared extinct the heroic histories of the Snowy River and the great story of sheep and cattle on the early frontier pushed them into the narrative margins, their role in the economic development of the region deleted and their objects of everyday use spurned as uninteresting.

**Degenerate modern**

In my first month of working on this project, I was told by a senior research advisor at the NMA that my work was problematic due to its location. The people of south-eastern Australia, he told

\textsuperscript{310} This is the case in the public articulation of the project. Presumably for the families involved the emphasis is reversed.

\textsuperscript{311} Hinkson (2002):63
me, had no distinctive material culture and I had made an unfortunate choice in focusing on the far south coast of NSW. Decimated by the colonising process, their possessions would reflect merely their similarity to poor white rural people. Sadly, he noted, this was true for all Aboriginal people ‘this side of the frontier’. The frontier, he said, could be drawn on a map as a line that stretched approximately from Townsville to Perth. As I was about to discover, he said, Aboriginal people’s possessions this side of the frontier would be the same as those of non-Aboriginal people from the same class and era. If I were to find that there was an extant ‘economy of knowledge’, there may be some hope for an interesting research project, but he could tell me that I would not find any ‘Aboriginal objects’.

This research advisor was not alone in his opinion of what constituted an ‘Aboriginal object’. As Rodney Harrison notes, the notion of Aboriginal history being prehistory is still shockingly pervasive, with Aboriginal people’s presence before the arrival of white invaders “commemorated through a heritage discourse which memorialise[s] fossilised representations of the deep Aboriginal past … while emphasising that authentic forms of Aboriginality [exist] only outside of settled Australia.” 312 The lack of equity in this position is articulated by Byrne when he notes that while Aborigines were engaged in transactional relationships with white settlers and were establishing a new cultural geography, “settler society was spatially marginalizing them and denying the authenticity of their emergent (south-east) Aboriginal culture… [settler society] was also beginning to regard the archaeological remains of pre-contact Aboriginal culture as a benchmark of authentic Aboriginality.” 313 Byrne sees the adaptation of Aboriginal equipment at the moment of contact as the moment at which the criteria for classifying Indigenous material culture by Europeans were laid down. He proposes that as Aboriginal people adapted their lifestyles and material culture under European influence, Europeans lost interest in them.

The Aborigines were seen to have lost or to be fast losing that quality which … was the only excuse for being a native, the quality of being authentically primitive… [I]t is important to understand that [the Europeans] saw themselves as the exclusive agents of change. Lacking such agency, the natives could only ever be the passive recipients of

312 Harrison, Williamson et al. (2002):5
313 Byrne (1996):82
European ways and products. And it was for this reason that with few exceptions the early observers failed to attend to the process by which Aborigines were recontextualising or Aboriginalising elements of European culture.\textsuperscript{314} That such ‘Aboriginalised’ objects were of so little interest to Europeans pointed to the way in which Aboriginal cultures were conceptualised as existing outside of systems of transaction and exchange, particularly in regard to technological innovation. As Byrne points out, the passivity with which Europeans saw their technology being adopted was a function not of the Aborigines’ interaction with new objects, but the thinking which separated Europeans from ‘primitives’ and thus from history.

Although Byrne’s focus here is on the archaeological record, the distinction he makes between these conflicting positions is paralleled by the division that developed between anthropology and history, a division that was central to the building of museum collections, as the distinction between the historic and the ‘timeless’ found form in object classificatory systems. In this vein, while the equipment of pre-contact Aboriginal life was sought by museums as representative of authentic Aboriginal experience, objects holding contact narratives were overlooked. From the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, for example, Aboriginal people created artefacts that documented their experiences of interaction with European settlers, producing boomerangs, shields, spear throwers, clubs, walking sticks and stock whip handles decorated with engraved or painted depictions of animals, people and plants. These decorations often worked as narratives, depicting changing circumstances brought about by European settlement as well as links to land and traditional cultural practices. That objects such as these are both important and largely missing from public collections was addressed by the Australian Museum (Sydney) when it initiated a study of transitional objects followed by a collecting drive which ran between 1998-2003 noting: some of the objects we examined from early museum collections had ‘degenerate modern’ written on them by past curators because they were adorned with skilfully produced and faithfully rendered figurative imagery.\textsuperscript{315} Although this drive increased the Australian Museum’s holdings marginally, a significant dearth of artefacts that represent this genre of Indigenous production remains including in the

\begin{footnotesize}
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  \item[\textsuperscript{314}] Byrne (1996):83
  \item[\textsuperscript{315}] Tacon, South et al. (2003):100
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collections of the NMA. This gap directly reflects the limited interests of anthropologists in cultural processes in heavily colonised parts of Australia for most of the 20th century.

This lack of interest was demonstrated succinctly during a 1934 field trip by an anthropologist from the University of Sydney who spent four months undertaking research on Barambah Mission in south-east Queensland, later known as Cherbourg. Her task was “to form some idea of the ritual and social life which obtained before the breakdown of the local cultures.” In keeping with the anthropological practice of the time, the researcher was not interested in examining contemporary dynamics of social interaction on the settlement; rather, she was concerned with Aboriginal culture in its pristine form, or “the uncontaminated native.” AP Elkin who oversaw the project, noted that they were able to observe only a “disintegrated society”, where the residents led a “kind of cultural non-existence.”

Figure 26. Detail of boomerang from Cherbourg Mission, QLD

318 The NMA has recently purchased a large and important group of artefacts made at Cherbourg during this period which clearly demonstrate the narrative interests of the makers and their adaptive responses to changing circumstances. The boomerangs pictured in figures 26 & 27 are included in this collection.
This thinking, at the foundation of cross-cultural discourses for the best part of the 20th century, played a role in foundational museological practices throughout Australia. Tom Griffiths argues that this binary discourse of the historic and the timeless emerged also at the moment in which anthropology was coming into existence, in fact was an agent in its formation. Anthropology he argues “was the study of ‘primitive’ peoples, of people without history. Europeans had a history and were continually making it, while ‘primitive’ peoples were the timeless subjects of a different form of analysis, anthropology.”

Museums articulated this conflict as a matter of course in both the scholarly and public arenas. They were after all the repositories of the objects collected by the founding fathers of anthropology (as well as occasionally the commissioners of such collections) and at the same time, the storehouse of the nation’s historic treasures, although the two collecting domains were kept strictly in different cupboards.

While the masses of objects inherited from the now defunct Institute of Anatomy, the beneficiary of so much anthropological booty, were handed over to the NMA at its inception, artefacts which offer a place to Aboriginal people within an historical narrative held in the National Historical

319 Griffiths (1996):25
Collection are, not surprisingly, few and far between. This is changing as the contribution Indigenous curators are making to the collection begins to find form. Nevertheless, the vast ethnographic collections found in museums in Australia and overseas have had a heavy hand in defining what Aboriginality is and how it is conceived in the popular imagination, with the trope of the ‘primitive’, the ‘traditional’, the ‘authentic’, or whatever the language of the day prescribes, well outliving the museological paradigm within which it was formed. Although it is now decades since the last of the dioramas showing tableaux of ‘primitive man’ at work and play were dismantled, the conception that ‘real Aborigines’ are not part of modernity is, as Harrison points out, still shockingly pervasive.

Straining relationships

Knowing the central role that Aboriginal material culture plays within the telling of distinctive Australian stories within museums, the Ngarigo research participants involved in this project understood that the real question being asked was not “what objects do you treasure, preserve, display in your homes and community places that connect you to the past?” but “what objects do you have that tell the history of Aboriginal people of the south coast?” The reluctance to offer objects from within their possessions as a demonstration of their interest in the past was not an unwillingness to associate themselves personally with history – history they are happy to narrate at length in conversation – but an admission that their objects do not tell those stories. Most of the stories told during recording were of tough times; picking beans, living on the mission, manning timber barges, moving around looking for work, running from the ‘welfare’, fighting governments and raising families in exceptionally poor conditions. These were people who were trying to move beyond their material circumstances. Nostalgic associations with objects from daily life were therefore low on the list of priorities. Equally, conceptualising such objects as historic artefacts at the time in which they were in common use was not their main concern. Furthermore, these objects did not delineate the type of cultural distinctiveness that was an important element in constructing identity for many Aboriginal people of the early and mid 20th century. As Byrne argues, after all, “Aborigines, for their own reasons, also trade in the currency

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320 Lynette Russell offers an in-depth analysis of the mechanisms which drive the persistence of this outmoded discourse from an Indigenous perspective in Russell (2001).
of essentialism... hardly surprising, considering the extraordinary valorisation of the timeless-traditional conception of Aboriginal culture by settler discourses.”

The trajectory of an object within a family on the other hand, has no need to account for itself in terms of distinctiveness. Objects that were once in common use may be kept by immediate descendants as keepsakes of a beloved individual or a memento of a time and place, no matter what their ethnic allegiances are, but as they travel further from their origins they are kept as historic artefacts, linking generations to each other. Such personal memorabilia may hold different meanings for different generations and different individuals within the one family, seen either as historic artefacts or still in transition from the equipmental. Depending on the context, such objects may intersect with museum interests because of their antiquity or the stories they narrate. It is this intersection of the public and the private and their associated social and family narratives which is at the heart of this research project. By examining this intersection, a conflation between collecting domains inherent in the aims of the project is exposed: any whitefella asking about Aboriginal people’s private possessions is necessarily asking about the site at which their possessions intersect with the wider narrative of 20th century Aboriginal history and the survival of cultural identity.

Stories which contest essentialist depictions of ‘authentic’ Aboriginal culture and peoples are emerging as the following example given by Tony Birch, curator of the Bundjilaka Gallery of the Melbourne Museum, illustrates. Here Birch offers an alternative to the ethnographic paradigm and challenges museums to look again at the links between Indigenous history, narrative and material culture:

In my father’s family ... we had an old brass tea strainer at home that was battered and beaten and no one would throw the tea strainer out. My father is not an articulate man, but I asked him what it was like to live in the Fitzroy house. He lived there with his grandmother, mother, two aunties and sisters. When he saw the house knocked down he couldn’t believe it. When he walked onto the block and started to look around in the rubble he found the tea strainer which reminded him of sitting around the table drinking

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321 Byrne (1996):101
tea and his grandmother telling him stories. So the only way he was told the stories of his ancestry was around the table. So the tea strainer became the repository of stories.

This anecdote of the tea strainer illustrates the circumstance of one of the most contested moments of contemporary Koori history in Melbourne: the knocking down of the Fitzroy Terraces. Inhabited by a large community of Aboriginal families for many years, their destruction to make way for Housing Commission flats was the cause of much ill will, still being played out in Gertrude St today. Having inscribed the battered tea strainer with the meaning of its context, it becomes the mnemonic device for recalling the specifics of time, place and action – invoking the rubble left after the destruction of the terraces, the old man picking through the ruins, the discovery of a tiny but meaningful remnant of a life once lived in a community of relatives. For Birch’s father, the strainer contained stories about his ancestry. For us, it becomes available to illustrate the larger narrative of political contestation.

The tea strainer in this story cannot be immediately read as an Indigenous object without the corresponding narrative, lacking as it does the ethnographic markers which render it immediately recognisable as culturally distinctive. Not pre-historic or part of a pre-contact history, the tea strainer had to transform from a cheap and readily available domestic object by being used then buried in very specific circumstances, then retrieved. Birch’s story starts with him asking his father why he kept the old tea strainer, a question which came out of the shared use of his father’s possessions. Lives are littered with these sorts of objects but what is it that turns them into something that has been collected or that carries collective meaning? Is it possible to know that while still engaged with the object or is it only through the intervention of a third party that their nature can be seen? Tony Birch has been a museum curator and is now a poet lecturer in creative writing. He brings to his interactions with objects an unusual degree of narrative awareness. But is it only this type of consciousness that transforms ‘stuff’ into a collection? This question points to a certain anxiety that is inevitable when working in this field. Any non-Aboriginal person looking at and photographing objects belonging to Aboriginal people is part of a history of collecting that needs to be consciously acknowledged, particularly when working on

322 From transcript of recorded interview with Tony Birch, 4th April, 2005
a project that has substantial links to a museum. That is not to say that those links are all bad: being seen and heard by an outsider, especially one with institutional connections, can sometimes be an affirming moment for those who have struggled to preserve a marginalised history. But based on delicate relationships, as this research attests, there is no room for naivety.

Aboriginal objects such as the tea strainer have a further difficulty in coming to light; not only are they not widely seen as Aboriginal by outsiders, but they may also not be seen as important by their custodians/owners. While museums have been obsessed with the ethnographic, Aboriginal people have internalized the discourses that continue to be re-iterated within institutions of representation. Why would anyone be interested in their old junk? There may also be shame associated with poor circumstances in the past as well as associations with memories that people would rather not have dredged up.

Aboriginal people, as evidenced by the choices made by Indigenous curators of the NMA and the willingness of communities to participate in exhibitions, have a continuing interest in finding materially distinct means of expressing their identity in institutions of representation. Although these representations do not call on the flattening narratives of ethnography with which such material was once associated, in their allusions to a classical past, they evoke notions of the ‘authentic’ that for many Aboriginal people are unavailable precisely because of the circumstances of their colonisation. Anthropologist Fred Myers proposes that we reconsider our approach:

A fundamental question … that engages with the present is how to think about cultural continuities without reifying culture? If we are not only antiquarian, concerned to unearth the truth of an original Aboriginal alterity (however alluring that is), attention to what is happening directs us to Aboriginal cultural production, to the production of Aboriginal cultures. 323

This shift in emphasis is well accommodated in social history methodologies, where the tracing of historical characters and cultures positions the choices made by Aboriginal people within a

323 Myers (2005):5
larger historical context. But looking to Aboriginal social history for new approaches to representation brings its own problems, as discussed in detail in chapter 12.