



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

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1. Introduction – an ordinary tale

Where Aboriginal people are concerned, the twin strands of dysfunction and idealization weave a highly-coloured thread through the fabric of Australian culture. The strand that remains all but invisible is that of ordinary Aboriginal lives, the preoccupations and pleasures that amidst all the furore and sentiment remain robust and sustaining.⁴

Kim Mahood 2008

Ordinary lives of ordinary people are the theme of this thesis and they lie at the heart of the stories it contains. For myself and for my fellow story-tellers who animate these pages, the ‘ordinary’ is full of robust and sustaining pleasures, as Kim Mahood proposes. Not least of these is a good yarn. This particular thesis yarn begins in Melbourne where I grew up in the 1960s and 70s. It was an exciting city, full of foreign languages, the smell of newly imported foods and cliques of artists living bearded and bejewelled lives in run down inner city mansions. This mix of flavours, sounds and sights cohered into a spicy backdrop against which my uneventful suburban childhood played out. In the aromatic, multi-coloured texture of my surrounds, it never occurred to me then that Aboriginal people were missing from the mix. As everyone in those days knew, the Aborigines were long gone; their ancient lineages vanished into the blank past from which we (Australians) had sprung freshly minted into the new world.

Like many children of my generation, I was taken to the Museum of Victoria by my parents to view the evidence of science out of which came our understanding of nature and humankind. The marvellous planetarium taught me about the night sky, the Egyptian mummy was an excuse to learn to spell sarcophagus and the stuffed body of Phar Lap educated me in the wonders of large scale taxidermy. What I made of the dioramas of plaster Aborigines sitting around camp fires I can’t remember, nor can I recall what impression, if any, the grand displays of ‘native tools and

⁴ Mahood (2008):168

weapons' made on my young mind. Aborigines were no concern of mine; my fantasies lay with children in boarding schools who enjoyed flasks of hot cocoa at midnight feasts.

My best friend for the entirety of my kindergarten and primary school years lived with her parents in their milk bar a couple of blocks from my house and the two of us spent much of our time pilfering lollies and returnable Tarax bottles from the storeroom behind the shop. On one of my many outings with her family, both of us tucked unbelted into the rear-window compartment of her parent's VW Beetle, we drove to a gymnasium in another suburb for what my friend's dad assured us was a special treat. The place we arrived at was a disappointingly dingy, smelly room full of grown-ups in various sporting outfits; nothing us girls were interested in. My friend's dad knew everyone and we had to wait forever while he chatted and smoked his way through the assembly. On the way home he told us to remember what we'd seen for we'd just met the bantam weight boxer Lionel Rose, the great sporting hero of the moment and the most famous Aboriginal man of his generation. I was maybe six years old and couldn't have cared less.

It was after working on this thesis for a year that I recalled our visit to the gymnasium four decades before. The realisation dawned on me, as I began to understand the implications of the episode, that I had on that day been given access to something that had hitherto remained a secret. The next time I spoke to my own father I mentioned the incident to him and asked "do you think (my friend) could possibly have been Aboriginal?" "Oh yes, I knew that all along" he replied without hesitation. "They came from somewhere in Gippsland."

It took forty odd years for me to work out that I had spent a significant part of my early childhood deeply embedded in an Aboriginal family and I *hadn't known*. The ordinary lives of an ordinary family in an ordinary suburb did not connect with any learning about Aboriginal culture or history I had been exposed to at school. There was no discussion of Indigenous issues in my own family, despite the 1967 referendum being held around the time of our visit to Rose's gymnasium. As I began a scholarly enquiry into the Aboriginal past as an adult I saw the many ways in which the stories that might then have informed an understanding of not just of an Aboriginal past but an Aboriginal present, had been silenced and withheld. I could also see that for precisely the reasons that the silences on my side of the racial divide had formed, listening for

those missing stories was not a straight-forward proposition. If there was a trail leading between the ‘Aborigines’ in the museum’s dioramas and my little friend in her patent leather shoes and lace-trimmed socks, it was not one that was going to be easy to follow.

The great silence surrounding Aboriginal history has well and truly been broken since the 1960s with the biographies and auto-biographies of Aboriginal people and histories of Aboriginal communities being published in all states and territories of Australia. Many of them have been collaborative works between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal historians and many of them have found great acclaim.⁵ Similarly, the unmediated voices of Aboriginal people have been present in film, television, radio, theatre, fiction writing and museum exhibitions for more than two decades, where they have often taken on the challenge of directly contesting mainstream historical narratives.⁶ Nevertheless, heritage archaeologist Rodney Harrison believes that the notion of Aboriginal history being *prehistory* is still shockingly pervasive within the wider community. Aboriginal people’s presence before the arrival of white invaders, he tells us, is “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.”⁷ It is the role of museums in both perpetuating and dismantling these ‘fossilised representations’ on which this research project focuses.

That museums in Australia play a major role in public understandings of the past was borne out in the survey *Australians and the Past*, in which respondents were asked to rank which sources of information about history they most trusted: museums were consistently ranked at the top of the list.⁸ This role in the dissemination of history is something that the National Museum of Australia (NMA) takes very seriously. Despite its position as the most recent addition to the list

⁵ For example Read (1984); McKellar and MacCallum (2000); Somerville and Cohen (1990); Pepper (1980); Kenny (2007); Landon and Tonkin (2000)

⁶ For example the television series *First Australians* directed by Rachel Perkins, the films of Ivan Sen, Richard Frankland and Warwick Thornton, Alex Wright’s novel *Carpentaria*, Tony Birch as curator of Melbourne Museum’s *Koori Voices*.

⁷ Harrison, Williamson et al. (2002):5

⁸ Ashton (2003)

Australia's of national cultural institutions, the NMA holds a large inherited collection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artefacts, as do many other museums around the world, stemming from the period when the collecting of artefacts from 'primitive peoples' was a central element of ethnographic practice.⁹ Many of these collections have undergone radical re-interpretation from within a post-colonial context. Being a national institution however, the NMA has had to redefine its relationship to Indigenous material culture in the light of shifting political realities in a way many other institutions, such as smaller regional museums, have not.

Aware of the burden it carries to be both accurate and to find stories that are interesting and relevant, the NMA agreed to a collaborative project proposed by colleagues within the Australian Centre for Indigenous History at the Australian National University. The project aimed to "investigate the material objects that Indigenous people collect, display and hold dear within their homes and communities, and to consider the personal, family and collective significance of these items" including "how Indigenous people have used material objects to express identities and maintain connections with the past."¹⁰ This agenda, put forward by the Chief Investigators Professors Ann McGrath and Tom Griffiths, coincided with the Museum's interest in expanding its knowledge of the role material culture plays in the historiographic practices of contemporary Indigenous people outside of an institutional setting. Concerned to find stories that moved beyond the inherited and outmoded discourses contained within its store of ethnographic artefacts, the Museum's Senior Indigenous Curator at the time, Margo Neale, agreed to the collaboration and the *Australian Indigenous Collectors and Collections* project was launched.

It was my good fortune to be the successful candidate for the position of research scholar on the project and so it fell to me to conduct this research on behalf of the Linkage team; this thesis is the result.

⁹ The National Museum of Australia opened to the public on 11 March, 2001. Originally held at the Institute of Anatomy, the 80,000 artefacts known as the National Ethnographic Collection were transferred to the custodianship of the NMA on its inception in 1980 with the passing of *National Museum of Australia Act*.

¹⁰ See Appendix I

Friends on the south coast of NSW introduced me to a Ngarigo family whose traditional lands encompass the Snowy Mountains and Monaro plains region of south-east NSW. Ngarigo country and the history of the Ngarigo community offered an opportunity “to consider the particular issues or problems faced by Indigenous collectors in heavily colonised parts of Australia, whose beloved possessions may be popularly defined as less authentic or valuable”, one of the aims of the research I was particularly interested in pursuing (chapter 2). It would be fitting that, if they were willing, I would work with this community to develop a case study for this research project. The fragments of Aboriginal history remaining in the Monaro and Snowy Mountains region are few and indistinct. In contrast, Anglo history is unavoidable, paraded through the heritage interpretation signs, public art and tourist brochures found in every petrol station, sandwich bar and picnic stop from Cooma to the Victorian border. Yet there is significant interest in the Aboriginal history of the region within the local non-Aboriginal community and Aboriginal people from the early 20th century are still fondly held within living memory (chapter 11). With no traditional owners as visible permanent residents however, nostalgia for the ‘lost’ past casts a misty haze over what exactly the Aboriginal history of the area might be. Furthermore, the focus on archaeological evidence of pre-contact Aboriginal occupation, a topic well researched within the region, conditions local people and visitors to look only to pre-history for information about the material culture of the Aboriginal past. All of these circumstances combined to provide the ideal location for an examination of remembrance and identity amongst the Ngarigo and in particular, how material culture articulates with their understandings of, and connection to, the past.

The structure of this thesis is shaped around the different textures and requirements of three distinct voices which are interleaved sequentially. The first of these voices is my own where I give an account that describes how my understanding has changed through the process of engagement with the research, the museum, the Aboriginal community and historians. I also reflect on the meaning of the research process as it unfolds. It became clear during the writing process that a linear structure could not do justice to the kinds of associative connections I was encountering, nor would it resonate with the people I was writing for and about. Stories rather than objects were central to the interests of the community participants and it was a story, or

rather a series of stories, that I felt would best serve the thorny conjunction of politics, history and representation that was the core of the project. Historian Tom Griffiths tells us that story is “a privileged carrier of truth, a way of allowing for multiplicity and complexity at the same time as guaranteeing memorability. Story creates an atmosphere in which truth becomes discernible as a pattern.”¹¹ Including my own story provided the opportunity for a reflective internal narrative which allowed not just truth about the topic to become discernible but about the process of discovery and understanding as well. It also allowed me to expose the workings of my primary research methodology: community engagement.

Story is also the central method in the second voice of this work: that of the historical narrative. Here the plot centres not so much on reflection as on reconstruction of a family’s history. The shards of archival evidence for this have been placed end-to-end in roughly chronological order (chapters 3, 6, 9 and 12) to form the spine of the thesis. As reported in chapter 5, the participants I was working with had little interest in either an analysis of the relationship between material culture and historiography or my own reflections on the project. An opportunity to work on their family history however held immediate appeal for them. By developing this historical voice as a narrative that can be presented separately, it remained in a form available for return to the family at the conclusion of the project, an outcome that was not only important to all of us involved in the research but a mandatory requirement of the ethics clearance process. Although it was this imperative that drove me to experiment with a three-voiced structure, the resonances between the voices set up powerful tensions within the text, adding their own momentum. At the exact moment a museum curator of the early 20th century, for example, was studying the “Australian aborigine ... as a relic of the early childhood of mankind ... [who] remained in a low condition of savagery” (see chapter 7), one of the historical Aboriginal figures in the family saga was applying for his first job, turning up for duty at the local police station (see chapter 12) where he was employed for the next 30 years. This juxtaposition between the reality of lived lives and the constructions of Aboriginality emanating from the both academy and from within popular representations powerfully articulate important differences in the location of ‘truths’ without need of further elaboration.

¹¹ Griffiths (2003):15, citing Lopez, B. fn 5

As the project shifted beyond the boundaries of the original proposal (chapters 2, 5), I saw the importance of re-examining the epistemologies driving understandings of objects as carriers of meaning. This meta-narrative forms the third voice of the thesis and offers an analytical examination of the ideas underpinning the original research questions. In dismantling the conceptual and historical elements out of which a museum is constructed my intention is to examine how the processes which have constituted the museum might be re-configured to accommodate the particularities of Aboriginal social history. This third voice arrives at a series of recommendations to the NMA (separate from this project) suggesting ways in which the process of creating Aboriginal social history narratives, both for exhibition and within the National Historical Collection, might be approached. All three of these voices sit in both juxtaposition and conversation with each other, until they come together as one in the conclusion (chapter 14).

Forty years on from my childhood brush with Lionel Rose's fame, I am now able to view his silk shorts on display at the National Museum of Australia and remember how real the fiction of my Aboriginal-less childhood felt. The dismantling of that fiction allows all of us access to a much richer engagement with the past and a more critical engagement with the present than I could have hoped for then. The ordinary history of ordinary Aboriginal people is indeed full of robust and sustaining preoccupations and pleasures. These ordinary stories are a necessary part of Australian history making and are the means by which we can navigate away from the partial stories which prohibit us from reflecting on and understanding our shared experience.

2. All roads lead to home

It is Easter 2006 and the queue from the bakery stretches out through the sliding doors onto the footpath, swollen by the cold and hungry Four Winds Festival crowd. Bermagui is used to hosting the three day classical music event and the coffee shops and restaurants are doing their expected roaring trade. A cold turn and a sprinkling of rain however has sent a surprising surge into the bakery looking for hot pies and sausage rolls. I notice two Koori lads a couple of spots ahead of me in the queue, impatient with the blow-ins prevaricating over the steak and onion or cheese and bacon. When their turn comes they load up with sliced bread and push their way back out to the street. A moment later I see them heading out of town in the direction of Wallaga Lake. I had heard on the grapevine that a bloke from the mission had died in hospital a few days ago under difficult circumstances. My guess is the funeral is today.

Back at the Festival site the program is beginning. A welcome to country is offered by the Gulaga Dancers, who I suspect are young relatives of the lads in the bakery. They perform the ‘brolga’ dance from their repertoire, smeared with pipeclay and dressed in red loin cloths. The audience cheers and claps. The dancers exit and another Aboriginal man enters. He takes a seat centre stage and sounds a deep resonant note on the didgeridu or yirdaki. It is the first moment of composer Peter Sculthorpe’s ‘Quamby’. The MC speaks over the music from off stage, telling us that ‘Quamby’ was written by Sculthorpe in 2003 as a response to a tragic 19th century story from Tasmania, told to him by his father as a child. Local legend has it that Quamby Bluff, a mountain close to the young Sculthorpe’s family home, was the scene of a massacre when white settlers forced an entire local tribe over a cliff, plummeting to their deaths. One of the tribe members is supposed to have shouted “Quamby!” (save me!) before jumping. As the Four Winds Quartet takes up the opening bars, the clouds clear and the sun sparkles on the golden Bermagui sands. The audience applauds enthusiastically at the end of the piece and immediately breaks into chattering groups, moving up the hill towards the festival ‘market place’ where local wines and kangaroo sausages are available for lunch.

I try to enjoy the performance but the Koori lads in the bakery haunt me. The sepia tones of the Quamby story jar with my experience of the community just over the ridge. Perhaps for many of the audience it is their first encounter with stories of frontier massacres. For me, today, it provides a discordant accompaniment to the funeral of the young man I am aware of being held up the road, so close that if the audience fell silent they could hear the chatter of the women as they turn the loaves of bread into curried egg sandwiches for the morning tea that will follow the service. Perhaps that would serve as a more suitable welcome to country than the ‘brolga’ dance.

This particular Easter marks my second year of field work here and I now know that that’s the kind of place the far south coast of NSW is; full of oppositions and contradictions, tensions and competitions. And it is for exactly those reasons that I chose it as the location for this study: its combination of circumstances – the history of settlement, the still fairly sizeable Aboriginal population, and the proximity to major cities – offers a focus for examining issues around Indigenous material culture with particular concern for the problems faced by Aboriginal people in heavily colonised parts of Australia.

Living within driving distance of two major east coast cities, the traditional country of the Aboriginal people here encompasses large areas of national park and extends across some of the most scenic and popular tourist destinations in south-eastern Australia. Not surprisingly, it is the needs of holiday-makers that invade the towns and villages of the south coast for weekends and school holidays that dominate the local culture. Luxury gift shops, cafes and wine bars line the shopping precincts of Batemans Bay, Eden, Merimbula and Bermagui, while art galleries and Devonshire tea houses dot the highways and back-roads. Within this seaside playground, although hidden in bushland, sit the old Aboriginal mission sites of Wallaga Lake just west of Bermagui, Lake Tyers, over the Victorian border to the south and Wreck Bay on the most northern fringe. All are now fully owned Aboriginal Land Co-operatives. The more than 1400 Aboriginal people spread across the Bega Valley and Eurobodalla shires can mostly trace their history to these old mission sites.¹²

¹² Bega Valley Shire Council (2001)

Not that their history began with missions. The Aboriginal people of the south coast have as deep and complicated a pre-colonial history as any other Indigenous people in Australia. Their proximity to the colony of Port Jackson left them vulnerable to early invasion and by 1829 the first of the British squatters had come looking for pastures, returning with their cattle and sheep in 1832. Within a year the three Scottish Imlay brothers, George, Peter and Alexander, had laid claim to a massive 65,000 acres, founding the first permanent white settlement of the Biggah (Bega) region. By 1855 Eden and Merimbula both boasted ports and over the next ten years the town of Bega flourished as the main service centre for the coast: hotels were built, churches erected, post offices established, court houses founded and even a newspaper, the *Southern Standard*, had set up operation.¹³

As early as the 1840s many Aboriginal people from south-east NSW were looking for work with the new settlers, primarily as sheep washers or agricultural labourers. The whaling industry based in Eden in particular depended heavily on the local Aboriginal community for its seasonal workforce. As new laws allowing for the break-up of large squatting runs in favour of smaller holdings of free selectors were passed, sheep farms gave way to dairying, requiring extensive land clearing and allowing for a larger population.¹⁴ With their resources severely contracted, Aboriginal people were forced onto the fringes of towns or onto the reserves at Wallaga Lake and Lake Tyers. By the 1860s the pre-colonial economy of Aboriginal people on the far south coast had been effectively dismantled.

The NSW Aborigines Protection Board, established in 1883, took control of the 152 hectare reserve at Wallaga Lake in 1891, staffing it with white managers and imposing a strict regime. Visitors were not encouraged, food was rationed and permission to leave the site could only be granted by the mission manager. Although these conditions were not uncommon for many Aboriginal people across the south east of the country during this era, Wallaga Lake was the most extreme within this region. Wesson notes however that Aboriginal experience during these years in Eden-Monaro was not uniform.

¹³ Gaha and Hearn (1994) cited by McKenna (2002):163-167

¹⁴ Ibid

In Gippsland, for example, missions and informal camps were the usual places of abode, whereas on the far south coast there was only one mission and both formal camps were important. On the Monaro there were no staffed mission stations: at Delegate a reserve was gazetted in 1892, but with little assistance from government, most of the twenty or thirty Aboriginal people who lived there had moved to Wallaga Lake by the 1920s.¹⁵



Figure 4. *Aborigines at Wallaga Lake Station* circa 1898 by William Corkhill
nla.pic-an2504920

Despite the imposed limitations to their lifestyle and associations, Aboriginal people adapted to this state intimidation with resourcefulness, developing a parallel and mutually exclusive sphere of operation. While the government was herding people onto missions, away from the prying eyes of the managers, those same missions were becoming new repositories of culture and

¹⁵ Cited by McKenna (2002):164

community.¹⁶ When they did venture beyond the tight-knit cohort of family and friends, the Yuin people of the coast were derided by the white public for displays of their culture, criticised variously for being too native or for not being native enough. The anthropologist Alfred Howitt, for example, had to abandon his plans in 1883 to “witness a ‘grand corroboree’ when a group of ‘larrikins’ from Bega harassed the ‘Aborigines’ and mocked their rituals”, despite people having walked from up and down the coast to attend.¹⁷ Seventeen years later, describing a corroboree that took place at Wallaga Lake in 1900, one journalist complained “that the ‘Aborigines’ had not paid enough attention to ‘dressing’, unlike the corroborees of ‘the old tribal days.’”¹⁸

This history resonates deeply and directly with the current experience of south coast people as they struggle to find representation of their own culture within the wider society, despite the fact that the area still has a cohesive population of families who consider themselves to be living in ancestral country. Issues of authenticity and public conceptions of identity are deeply rooted in the history of occupation for this community. Here visibility plays out in the shadow of long-held notions of cultural purity which echo through contemporary discourse with surprising potency, turning up as complicating mechanisms in a range of locations. The most visible of these currently is the fine art market where ‘authenticity’, or in the parlance of the 19th century, ‘nativeness’, and ‘value’ are inextricably linked. The new French ethnographic museum, the Musee du Quai Branly, opened in June 2006, offered an example of this when it commissioned works from several Aboriginal artists from the central desert and the northern tropical regions of Australia to be incorporated into the museum building. At the time of the commission, the Museum’s managing director Stephane Martin noted that the Aboriginal art chosen for such honour was both “ageless and contemporary.” He was supported by the leading Parisian Aboriginal art dealer Stephane Jacob, who confirmed that Aboriginal art is in a “vibrant phase.” “Arnhem Land communities are still very remote” he is reported as saying. “They still have ceremonies, do walkabout, have initiations, speak language. I think it is a strong culture.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Read (1988)

¹⁷ McKenna (2002):115

¹⁸ McKenna (2002):164

¹⁹ Button (2005):19

These comments illustrate the way in which complex cultural discourses are reduced and reiterated in the wider community to become the prevailing orthodoxy. In this formulation Indigenous communities which still have ceremonies, do walkabout, have initiations and speak language have a strong culture. Conversely, where those signifiers are not present there is not a strong culture, or so the logic would have it. Here ‘remote’ stands in for ‘authentic’, terms often used interchangeably, both of which fix authorised forms of Aboriginality within an imagined pre-colonial moment. The forms that diverge from it, and the living Aboriginal people associated with those forms, are but “diminished and impoverished versions.”²⁰

This commentary is constantly repeated through a range of social discourses, where such binary thinking serves a political end. According to anthropologist Melinda Hinkson, living Aboriginal people and the challenges they pose to settler colonial society have been cut loose from the “dominant representations of Aboriginality that are prevalent because images of exotic and ancient cultural richness are extremely useful in the workings of nation-states; unresolved political contests are not.”²¹ Political contests however, according to senior Indigenous curator Margo Neale, 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.²² While recognition and inclusion of Australian Aboriginal art in a major French collection is to be celebrated, it cannot stand in for resolution of political complexity; neither can it represent the diverse cultural practices of Aboriginal people more widely, where identity and meaning are constructed outside this binary ‘authentic/inauthentic’ framework.

Unconcerned by the political nuances of representation, the Kari Yalla Aboriginal Artists’ Co-operative in Eden is determined to ride the wave of popularity enjoyed by the Aboriginal art movement. Formed by renowned local Koori artist Cheryl Davison in 2004 the group exhibits at regional festivals and in town halls and community centres in the area. Despite Cheryl’s encouragement to draw on their own culture for inspiration, a few of the painters, finely tuned to the expectations of the tourist market, specialise in desert style dot painting techniques,

²⁰ Hinkson (2002):63; Morphy and Perkins (2006), Myers (2005) similarly discuss this issue.

²¹ Hinkson (2002):63

²² Personal communication during NMA staff meeting, April 12, 2005

producing works entitled ‘Waterhole’, ‘Meeting Place’ and the like. Invariably they sell like hot cakes. The holiday-makers at the coast know what they are looking for in their Aboriginal art and the popularity of these works confirms to the Kari Yalla mob that they have not misread the market. That these artists are Aboriginal gives them an authority to produce the type of art they do within the local tourist economy, but the reason for their success in this environment is also the reason that they are excluded from representation in the lucrative fine art scene, where markers of authenticity are much more complex. For the tourist market, the gesture that renders a work recognizable as Aboriginal can be reduced to a homogenized shorthand. Dots and waterholes, x-rayed animals and bark are the current signifiers of Aboriginality that have taken up where decorated boomerangs as tourist art left off (although there is usually a rack of those as well).

Further along the spectrum however the criteria of authenticity is, according to Arjun Appadurai, complicated as a “way to preserve the function of these commodities in the prestige economics of the modern West.”²³ He proposes that “[t]he very complicated competition and collaboration between ‘experts’ from the art world, dealers, producers, scholars and consumers is part of the political economy of taste.”²⁴ Here the complicating criteria are much more sophisticated, with notions of ‘country’ and lineage that the south coast mob have no claim to precisely because of the historical circumstances of their colonisation, being used to create kudos and therefore value. Along the same lines, Bourdieu’s understanding of consumption stresses the hierarchical character of modern society and the centrality of consumption practices upon which the hierarchy is based. He sees material possessions as representing the individual’s possession of symbolic and cultural capital and the way in which taste can be displayed.²⁵ Clearly the market’s continuing infatuation with Aboriginal art plays into extremely sophisticated displays of taste and wealth, with its inference of ‘ancient’ spirituality and esoteric understandings of place.

Meanwhile, the struggle that Aboriginal people from this area have to find representation of their presence let alone their culture outside of their own community is constantly articulated through

²³ Appadurai (1986):44-45

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

absence of inclusion. Commemorative murals made in 1997 in Eden for example, show Aborigines with spears and headbands occupying a pre-contact world with pilot whales. They migrate into the early whaling industry but once the timber milling arrives the Aborigines disappear.



Figure 5. Eden mosaics, February 2006



Figure 6. Eden mosaics, February 2006, panel detail

Further up the road, but still in the same land council district, Mark McKenna notes that the 1999 commemorative publication, *Cooma 150 years on*, dealt similarly with the issue, where “Aboriginal people are given two pages under the heading *Early Days of Cooma and Monaro*, then they disappear from the story”, presumed dead.²⁶ As I was soon to discover, this community was lots of things, but dead was not one of them.

²⁶ McKenna (2002):257, fn5

At Home Party

I took my hands out of the perfumed blue foam to inspect my nails, following the woman's instructions. Yes my hands were miraculously soft and smooth, ready for an application of moisturizing hand and nail balm. If I turned to page 52 of the catalogue I could find these products listed and if I flipped over, I could see the range of lipsticks she was about to demonstrate.

This Body Shop 'At Home Party' was my introduction to some of the women I was hoping would help me in my research. I had been taken to the house in Pambula by Cheryl Davison as a way of meeting several of her workmates/ relatives/ neighbours (the convoluted kin networks were now so dense I had given up trying to work out the distinctions). We'd been going to pop in for just a moment, but two hours later I was still sitting in Joy's lounge room surrounded by her mum, sisters, daughters, daughters' friends, sons' girlfriends, workmates and neighbours, soaking my hands in the complimentary softening liquid. As the only gubba, I was something of a curiosity. Not one that anybody had to make any serious attempt to talk to, but a curiosity nevertheless.

The house was full of dogs, kids, piles of clothes, men sitting on the bed watching telly (hiding from the women), teenage boys in baseball caps, car parts, BMX bikes, framed photos, mugs of tea at various temperatures and of course the women. And so began the kin talk, the endless kin talk that seemed to precede any occasion I had been at where people from out of town were present.²⁷

Joy's mum had caught the bus down from Nowra for the party which meant that Cheryl, not having met Joy's mum before, was required to launch the protocol. *So Aunt, where you from?* Within a few sentences, a relationship through the marriage of an uncle on Cheryl's side to a cousin on Joy's mum's side as well as historical connections to Wallaga Lake had been established. That done, but not before everyone in the room (except me) had added their bit, the finger soaking could begin.

²⁷ I have borrowed the evocative term 'kin talk' from Somerville and Cohen (1990):xiv

I had been regularly visiting Cheryl and her family in Eden for a year or so, doing the rounds of exhibitions and town hall art fairs to photograph the Kari Yalla paintings and generally make myself known. Having positioned my research to “consider problems faced by Indigenous collectors in heavily colonised parts of Australia, whose beloved possessions may be popularly defined as less authentic or valuable” this community offered the perfect location. Furthermore, given that these artists are producing the next generation of artefacts, they were potentially a group of people who would be interested in objects, museums, stories and history. With all this in mind I set out to get to know them and I began by following Cheryl around, ‘developing relationships’. By the time they had tasted my cooking, seen my photos, borrowed 50 bucks, fed me, spooked me with dooligah stories, given me a bed for the night (more than once) and speculated about my private life amongst themselves I was ready to start asking them about their objects. I was of course aware that questions about personal objects could be considered extremely nose-y and that people would need time to get to know me before fully engaging with the project: my presence at the At Home Party was part of this strategy. I was sure that stuff from the old days would soon be pulled out of the cupboard; the memorabilia from grandparents, political struggles, mission life, sporting events, whatever, would be revealed and I would photograph them and their collectors and my research would have begun in earnest.

Three months, four months, five months passed. No objects, no collections, no interest. I had met maybe six or seven different families by now and had been on numerous abalone diving picnics, lomandra grass picking expeditions and to multiple exhibition openings, as well as the odd social event such as the Body Shop party, community festival day and children’s birthdays. But nothing was gelling. Finally I realised I was working with the wrong generation. The people my age were too busy raising their children and making a living to care about history, objects, culture, identity, or whatever it was I thought I was researching, right at this moment. But I was assured that the old people were avid history keepers and that they would be more than willing to help me with my enquiries. The next step was clear: I needed to meet Cheryl’s mum, Deanna.

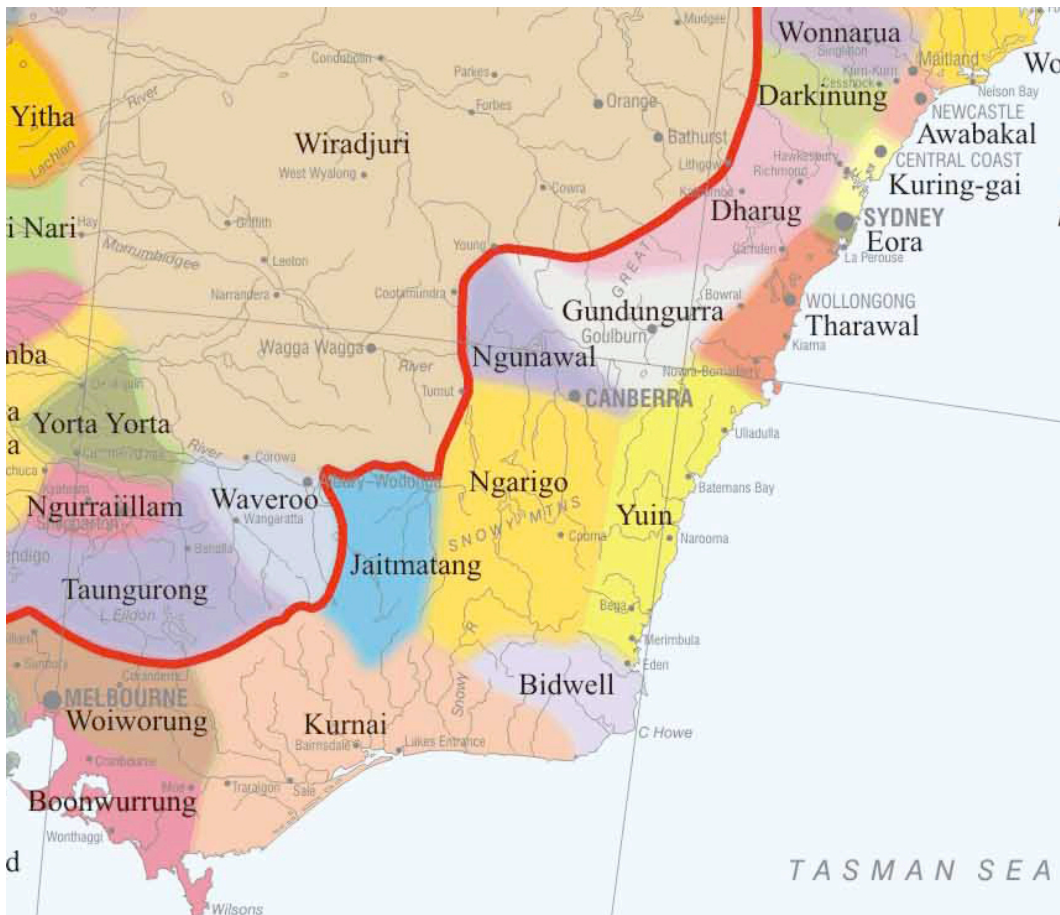


Figure 7. Aboriginal language groups of south-east New South Wales²⁸

Connecting with Deanna demanded a change in location. As one of the Elders in the Ngarigo traditional owners group, she was a member of the joint management committee for Kosciusko National Park and as such was often in the Snowy Mountains on official business. An opening of a Kari Yalla exhibition at the Perisher Blue ski resort near Jindabyne, for which she was to give the welcome to country, provided an occasion for us to meet.

The golden sands of Bermagui and Merimbula gave way to the Monaro plains as I began the drive across the stretch of undulating terrain that flattens the high country between Canberra and Adaminaby. Lying in a rain shadow caused by the Snowy Mountains to the west and the Coastal Range to the east, the dry open grasslands rippled with stands of *bigeniculata* driven flat by the

²⁸ Horton (2000)

chill winter wind. Basalt flows from the more than 65 ancient volcanic eruption sites across the region filled the bedrock contours five billion years ago. It is mostly eroded now. Only the harder core rock remains, outcrops left perching on the surface of the sheep-chewed paddocks – lichen covered balls that wait out geological eras as they wait out the passing cars; freezing, baking, cracking, shedding. Little brown hawks wheeling above the road kill sat in the currents as I drove by. Cheryl had told me during one of my visits that they are her totem and I was reminded that I was in her country, her mother's country, as I watched them hover and dive onto the wallaby gizzards smeared across the tarmac, retreating into the distance in my rear view mirror.

I stopped for petrol at Cooma, stung by the sleety wind as I stood at the bowser. The horizon had turned from open plains to snowy peaks and the threat of snowfall was building in the green storm clouds. I had just driven the northern leg of the Monaro Highway, the central artery of Monaro or Monaroo country, named for its gentle curves with a word in local language meaning a woman's breasts. At least that is what Currie, Ovens and Wild were told by their Aboriginal guides during a night of fire-lit boys' talk in 1823. The road swings between the treeless bends in graceful asphalt arcs, following pathways that archaeologists claim were walked by the first human inhabitants of the area sometime before the last ice age.²⁹ Maintained by fire and sung into memory maps, these tracks carried warriors, diplomatic missions, climate refugees, young initiates and wedding parties to the high country festival grounds. They came from the coast on the east, from modern day Albury to the south-west and from as far north as the Southern Highlands. By the time Europeans arrived looking for grass for their stock, the paths that thread in, out and around this country had been trodden by well over 800 generations of Aboriginal people.

The first thing I asked Deanna, after we'd found seats by the fire in the Jindabyne resort lounge, was to explain her complex connection to both the mountains and the coast. I knew from Cheryl that she has deep history with Wallaga Lake, Nowra, Wreck Bay, La Perouse, but I also knew she identifies as a Ngarigo woman, a traditional owner of the Snowy Mountains and surrounding

²⁹ Kabaila (2005):127

country including the Monaro plains. Settled into our arm chairs with a view out into the blizzard where we could see her granddaughters throwing snowballs, she began...

Deanna's father's people are Yuin, coast people, with a known lineage that stretches back to named individuals in the earliest written records of the colonial era and an unrecorded one (at least in writing) that goes untold generations before that. It is a venerable ancestry and it is through that side of the family that she is now on the Register of Traditional Owners of Gulaga and Mumbulla National Parks and a member of the management committee for both. She and her husband Jimmy raised their family on Wallaga Lake Mission, in the days when there was still a manager, before moving to Nowra to improve the educational opportunities for their kids.

It is from her mother's side that she draws her Ngarigo identity and she is careful to begin that part of the story by reciting her lineage through her maternal grandfather. He lived at the Delegate Reserve and worked for the Cooma police, name of Alex Brindle. He was a high plains blacktracker in rocky, snow country, and highly regarded in the local community. His wife died young leaving him with two little daughters. He was willing and able to raise them but the welfare came and took them to Cootamundra Girls Home anyway. Trained as domestic servants and sent to other places, the girls never found their way back home. One of the girls was Deanna's mother.

As she gives this brief synopsis, I wonder why none of the Ngarigo mob live in the mountains today. Geographer and historian Sue Wesson claims that "as early as the 1870s Aboriginal people on the Monaro and the south coast thought of themselves as one people. Their way of describing their relationship with one another left little doubt – 'we are all one'."³⁰ But Deanna disputes this. It is true that the Delegate Reserve south-west of Bombala where they had been living had closed down by the late 1920s and it is true that most of that mountain mob moved to the south coast. Nowadays those people who identify as Ngarigo are primarily found scattered from Jervis Bay to Lake Tyers, including almost all of Deanna's nine kids and their families. But Deanna insists that they are not 'all one' and that not all the Delegate families shared the exact

³⁰ Wesson (2002):254-6

same history. Her grandfather for example did not move to the coast when the reserve closed but rather stayed in the mountains continuing his work as a blacktracker for the NSW Police Force, along with his colleague, friend and brother-in-law Billy Rutherford, up until the 1940s. His first wife was a woman from the Delegate Reserve (Billy's sister, Daisy), his second a woman from Cooma. After he left the police force he moved to Liverpool in Sydney, not to the coast, and it was from there that he travelled into Redfern on the train to visit his daughter Iris and his granddaughter, the young Deanna. Sadly the last of the people to live at the Delegate Reserve, Uncle Arthur McLeod, died a couple of years ago and with him went the living memories of those times. His children, now middle-aged adults, are still alive, and although they're interested in their inheritance, their direct experience of it is limited to day trips and weekend visits for meetings, as it is for all of the descendants of the Ngarigo mob.

I listen to this story and try to understand how it will tie into my research. Whether there are material traces 'treasured and preserved' that link this past to the present I don't know. What I can see is that these stories, these people, are central to Deanna's expression of her Ngarigo identity yet they are not mentioned in local histories or known beyond the family. The hazy conflated past overwritten with a heroic history of horses and cattle and rustic mountain huts pays little attention to the Ngarigo men and women who lived alongside the high country pioneers. "More often than not," historian Keith Hancock noted, "the white man did not trouble to give his black guide a name, or, at any rate, to record it; thus we read of 'the native who was with us', or 'my blackfellow', or 'my tamed black'." ³¹ Overwhelmingly the documents, including 20th century local histories, fuse the complex seasonal activities of the Ngarigo, both sacred and secular, into either roaming or hunting and reduce their presence to a collective noun, 'the Aborigines', or more commonly 'the blacks'. It is as if the dense mist that rolls in across the Perisher valley as the day lengthens outside the windows of the resort is as heavy as the mist that shrouds the Aboriginal past of the Snowy Mountains; the black ahistorical mist into which the Ngarigo were so thoroughly absorbed.

³¹ Hancock (1972):69-70

Despite its density, this black mist is not entirely impenetrable. A name, a place, a date cuts through it and an historical character emerges into the light. Over the years I had heard Deanna speculate about the origins of the name 'Brindle' and I had heard rumour that an old lady in the Genoa River district had some information.³² Then, unexpectedly, Iris, Deanna's eldest daughter, rang me on my mobile late one afternoon. She had something important she needed to discuss, some information that she'd just been able to authenticate about her family history. I pulled my car over to the side of the road scribbled down notes as she told me the story.

Nungatta station was owned by a man named Alexander Weatherhead. He had sons, not sure how many but more than one. It was reported to him that his sons were having relations with the local Aboriginal women. He told them that he did not care what they did with the women but if there was a child it would not take their family name but that he would name it. In time there was a child and he named it Brindle. This was a reference to the cattle that he bred – the first of the cross breeds being known as a brindle.

Iris was with the Water Catchment Authority people doing a tour of Nungatta station. She met the owner of the station and said to him "my family has some history on this place." When she told him the story he was amazed. He went off and came back with an old map of the holdings. It was a big station, still is. He pointed to the map – Brindle's paddock.

When they were out on the property later that day he stopped and said to the group that Iris had told him a story about her family and asked her if he might share it, then told the story and finished by saying "We're now standing in Brindle's paddock." ³³

This tiny scrap of information is hardly an in-depth biography, yet it is enough to pierce the membrane around the excluded historical narratives. As this knowledge reverberates through our research, it begins a process of remembering, and brings into focus the first historical character

³² Egloff, Peterson et al. (2005):45

³³ Verbatim from notes, August 19, 2008

with whom we can begin the tale: a woman, a Ngarigo woman, standing in the soon-to-be Brindle's paddock, nurses a young boy on her hip as she holds the stare of the child's paternal Grandfather, the cattle breeder whose name her baby son will not share.

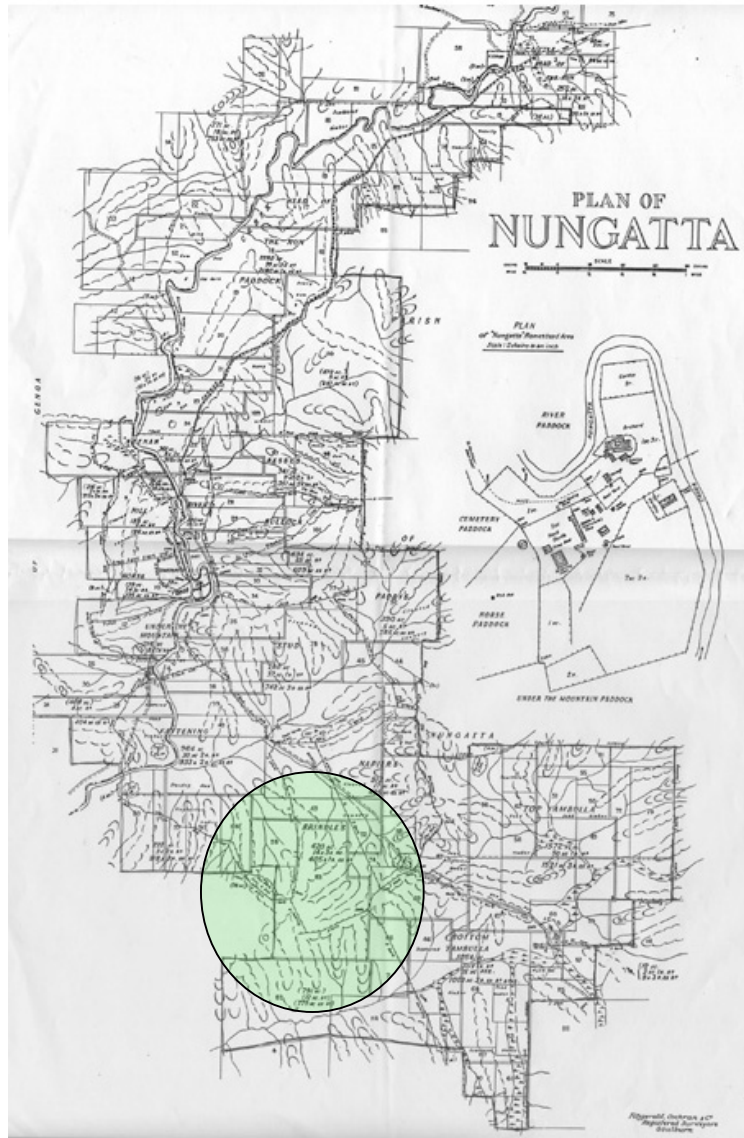


Figure 8. Nungatta station map showing Brindle's paddock
Map courtesy of Jim Osborne

3. Grandmother Dreaming

Contact

Family history and lineage are important to the contemporary Davison family, but what is held in oral history does not extend past living memory, that is both the direct memories Deanna has of her own life, including of her mother and grandfather, as well as the memories of her mother's early years as told to her. There is no way of knowing for example what the exact first moment of contact was between Deanna's ancestors and the colonial invaders: no records were made by either participant and no oral history remains extant. There is however no advantage in assuming that moment as a beginning, a 'zero point' with its inference of a before and after, with which to start the story. Such a point infers that the moment was of such radical and immediate transformation that the Ngarigo were somehow no longer themselves afterwards. Certainly their circumstances began to change at that moment, but those changes were played out in complex interactions that lead to adaptation as much as revolution. For the Ngarigo, the invasion of their lands was a problem they had to deal with, not a moment that constituted the beginning of a newly forged identity.

Within that broad circumstance of transition, we know that a Ngarigo girl grew up to have a child to a white man, a child who would be known as James Brindle and from whom the contemporary Davison and Brindle families descend. This girl was most likely born sometime in the late 1830s, around the time that Captain Mark John Currie, Brigade Major John Ovens, Joseph Wild and their Aboriginal guide rode south of present day Canberra to record their reconnaissance of the Ngarigo homelands. Captain Currie, in common with many other European travellers, claims to have been the "first white man the natives had seen", although historians argue that this is most unlikely.³⁴ It was, by 1823, thirty-five years since the arrival of the first fleet, an entire generation, and the Ngarigo interacted with tribal groups to the north as far as Braidwood and Queanbeyan, and east to the coast from Shoalhaven to Twofold Bay and

³⁴ Young and NSW Dept. of Environment and Conservation (2005):89

probably beyond. The coastal people had at the very least encountered whalers and sealers, often in violent clashes, events that would have been reported to their mountain cousins in detail, if not witnessed first hand. Travelling to the coast was after all an annual culinary expedition for the Ngarigo, the flowering of a particular wattle indicating that the season had arrived for a salt-water trip to harvest beached whale around Twofold Bay and other calving bays.³⁵

Nevertheless, Currie was keen to declare himself the first and keen to make a lasting impression. Naming the country through which he travelled was one way of memorializing the adventure. On 4 June he noted:

Passed through a chain of clear downs to some very extensive ones where we met a tribe of natives... From these natives we learned that the clear country before us was called Monaroo, which they described as very extensive...³⁶

Once introduced into the English lexicon the word ‘Monaro’ remained, although its meaning, much like its spelling, has been in dispute almost ever since. Known variously across the next century and a half as Monaroo, Monera, Maneiro, Meneiro, Meneru, Miniera, Monera, the name survived Currie’s suggested but lack lustre and obsequious alternative of ‘Brisbane Downs’, “after (and subsequently by permission of) his Excellency the Governor.”³⁷ Hancock doubts that “the white men correctly understood the aborigines who told them, so they thought, that Monaroo signified a woman’s breasts, gently rounded, like the undulating downs that so delighted Currie.”³⁸ Linguists agree. Aboriginal systems of nomenclature in this region do not as a rule use proper nouns to describe large areas. Names are associated with specific sites, a fact which often infuriated early surveyors whose Aboriginal informants insisted on naming every bend in every creek in minute detail. As one early linguist wrote “Not a point or inlet, knoll or dell, glade or thicket, rock or rivulet, but was designated in the language, and faithfully delineated in the memory of the ancient inhabitants.”³⁹ According to linguist Harold Koch, body parts are known to play a large role in Aboriginal place naming strategies and remnant wordlists

³⁵ Wesson (1994):15

³⁶ Field (1825)

³⁷ *Discourse on the Origin of the name Monaro*, Cooma-Monaro Express, 23 December Cooma-Monaro Express (1968); Field (1825)

³⁸ Hancock (1972):6

³⁹ McKenzie *Specimens of native Australian languages*, 1874 cited by Wesson (1994):15

suggest this is so for the Ngarigo. From this point of view Currie's reporting of his informants' naming association with a woman's breasts is more likely than Hancock gives him credit for. The word for 'breast' (or 'milk') however, recorded in wordlists from the Ngunnawal, Dharrawal and Dhurriga languages, all bordering on and related to Ngarigo, is *ngaminyang* a long way from Currie's *monaroo*.⁴⁰ The Goulburn grazier and close observer of Aboriginal life, E M Curr, offers an explanation for Currie's expedient conclusion:

In connection with this name, Manera Plains, one suspects it at once, because though the tribes have names for every remarkable spot in their territories, they have seldom collective names for large areas. What seems probable is, that the Englishman who first saw the plains had a Sydney Black in his party, who on being asked their name replied *manyer*, or *I don't know*.⁴¹

Whatever the truth about the name of the area, as a pre-invaded world it would have been a place of certainty for the young girl and her parents. As part of a tight network that occupied an ancestral territory, they would have moved around both the higher and lower mountain country on a seasonal basis, with occasional travel to today's Bega, Bateman's Bay and Canberra regions for ceremonial and social occasions. Archaeologists have offered various theories on the patterns of occupation that they would have followed: one school proposes that they exploited resources seasonally, with the people retracting to lower, comparatively frost-free valleys during winter and moving back into higher altitudes during the Bogong moth migration in summer.⁴² Other theories suggest that higher occupation sites, providing permanent water and a variety of readily accessible food and industrial raw materials without any inherent seasonal stress, would be occupied year round.⁴³ No matter what the patterns of occupation and the activities of daily life were in 1823, Ngarigo routines were about to change.

The naming and reporting of the region by Currie on his return to town, although both unknown and irrelevant to Ngarigo at this time, began the cascade of events that would lead to massive

⁴⁰ Personal communication with Dr Harold Koch, School of Language Studies, ANU, 18 July 2006. See also Koch and Hercus (2009)

⁴¹ Curr (1886):xvii

⁴² See for example Flood (1980)

⁴³ See for example Chapman (1977)

changes on the Monaro. As news of the potential grazing lands circulated in the colony, those on the look-out for opportunities turned southward and just three years after Currie's mission, the first wave of occupiers gathered their stock and followed his map. The earliest of them was Captain Richard Brooks in 1827 who, with his son, herded a mob of cattle south and reached what was afterwards known as Cootralantra Lake, "where consequent upon the blacks proving hostile, he lost his cattle which he later found on 'Gejizrick Flat'".⁴⁴ The rich pastures the cattle had found for themselves decided Brooks to settle where he landed and the first of the great Monaro stations was founded.

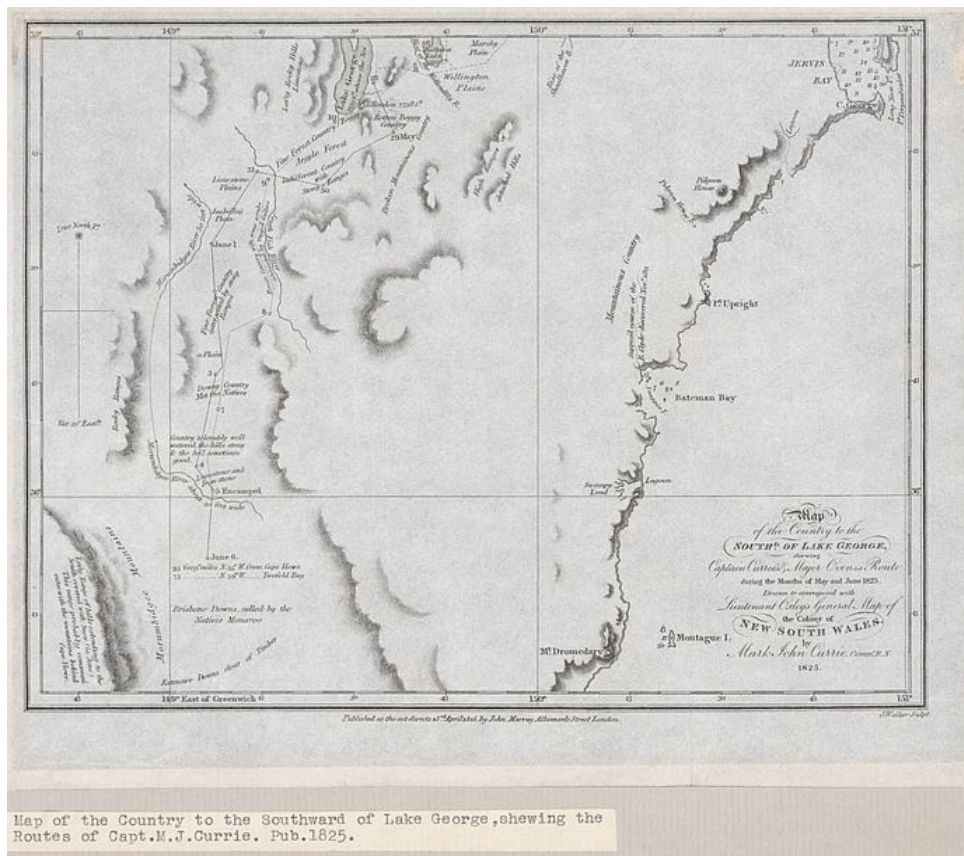


Figure 9. Map shewing the Routes of Cpt. Currie
Nla.map-nk 3274-v

⁴⁴ Mitchell (1926)

We don't know if the family of the young girl interacted directly with these trespassers but rumours of them and their grass-eating creatures would have circulated through their world.⁴⁵ Adults would have discussed the invaders and devised strategies for dealing with them; perhaps they saw the truth of the emerging future and tried to imagine a world where the usurpers came to dominate or perhaps they were still intent only on how to get rid of them. The Ngarigo's resistance to Brooks' incursion, for example, was strong. Although he erected a homestead of timber slabs with a thatched roof in the bush "the blacks, proving still unfriendly, caused him a few years later to erect in the open another house."⁴⁶ Eventually some sort of truce was reached when Brooks persuaded one of the Ngarigo men to stop the others from spearing his cattle, in return for an annual 'gift' of a bullock. "This they roasted whole and had a great feast near the homestead."⁴⁷

If Brooks was the harbinger of a new world order in the north of the Ngarigo lands, the enterprising Imlay brothers were his counterpart to the west, holding one million acres only a decade after their arrival on the Monaro in 1832, and Robert Campbell in the south taking up Delegate Station, around which the town of Delegate eventually grew.⁴⁸ This station began as an outstation to the property 'Duntroon', established three years before on the Limestone Plains north of the Monaro. In the seven years from its establishment in 1827 to John Lhotsky's reporting of it in 1834, Delegate Station had grown to a run of an astounding 22,000 sheep.⁴⁹ If the Ngarigo still had any thoughts of evicting the trespassers, the proliferation of foreign animals soon demonstrated the scale of what they were up against.⁵⁰ It was not just the number that was changing the landscape, overwhelming as it was; the way in which these animals consumed the pasture had an instant and almost irreversible effect. As Hancock explained,

marsupials, having no hooves, tread delicately; but sheep tread firmly and cattle stamp hard: marsupials graze lightly; but drought afflicted sheep will eat the grass to its roots

⁴⁵ It is this scenario of encounter which Robert Kenny approaches in detail in *The Lamb Enters the Dreaming*: see Kenny (2007)

⁴⁶ Mitchell (1926)

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ McKenna (2002):50

⁴⁹ Lhotsky and Andrews (1979):70, 105

⁵⁰ Andrews (1998):103

and then pull up the roots and lick up the seed... In the Monaro as elsewhere, [the squatters] made one blade of grass grow where two had grown before.⁵¹

With 22,000 sheep on just one station, and one hundred and thirty-one stations named in the list of squatting runs on the Monaro in the 1830s, all of them running sheep or cattle or both, life on the Ngarigo homelands was profoundly altered.

By the end of the 1830s the region was already being described as crowded.⁵² The ruin of the pasture was fast. With little knowledge of the environment they now occupied, the squatters overstocked the land and within just a couple of decades had fouled the waterways, destroyed the thin top soil and decimated vast areas of native animal habitat. As early as 1848 Henry Haygarth was writing with nostalgia for an era that had already passed:

... to the lover of the picturesque perhaps this is the most beautiful scene that Australia can afford... Plains and 'open forest', untrodden by the foot of the white man, and, as far as the eye can reach, covered with grass so luxuriant that it brushes the horseman in his saddle; flocks of kangaroos quietly grazing,... emu crossing and recrossing his route; the quail rising at every step; lagoons literally swarming with wild fowl – these scenes are reserved for the eye of the enterprising settler...

Then mark the change that follows hard upon discovery. Intelligence of the new country reaches the settled districts, and countless flocks and herds are poured into the land of promise. It is divided into stations, and 'improvements' are everywhere erected on it... the wild blacks, indignant at the cool occupation of their territory, spear the cattle, and the settlers retaliate. The governor establishes a 'protector of aborigines', who perhaps has most need of protection himself.⁵³

Haygarth's work has been cited as the first environmental history of the Monaro and is often used by environmental lobby groups (or nature conservationists as Hancock calls them) to map the beginning of the fall. But Haygarth's eulogy tells more than the story of a lost paradise on the Monaro; it charts the deep collision of cultures that underwrote the occupation. The replacement

⁵¹ Hancock (1972):64-5

⁵² McKenna (2002):50

⁵³ Haygarth (1850) cited by Hancock (1972):60

of Ngarigo open-range farming of native fauna with ‘stations’ or ‘runs’ stocked with hooved herds was the outcome of what he termed the ‘cool occupation’. The temperature of this theft, in Haygarth’s view, marks its true nature: no hot headed impulse but a cold calculation, underpinned by an imposition of governance, as he goes on to tell us, which moved the Ngarigo from self-governance to subjection without consultation.

This shrewd appraisal of the forces at work on the Monaro was directed at the most senior colonial administrator of the district, Crown Lands Commissioner, Magistrate, property owner and Protector of Aborigines, John Lambie. Lambie made no secret of the fact that his sympathies lay both professionally and personally with the European population. His annual reports to the Colonial Secretary document his increasing frustration with the ‘natives’ whose conduct displayed what he saw as an incomprehensible (and ungrateful) lack of enthusiasm for the new regime, for example:

[they] continue to roam from one station to another... and are generally supplied with food for the time by the Settlers near whose Establishments they encamp, and by whom they are occasionally employed in odd jobs but which are performed in the usual listless and indolent way.⁵⁴

Lambie’s admission to the Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines in 1845 that the Ngarigo people’s “ordinary means of subsistence had diminished, inasmuch as the kangaroos retire as soon as the land is stocked” displays his talent for obfuscation. Hancock insists that Lambie was both perceptive and compassionate in dealing with the Europeans as the local Magistrate, but given his power as the most senior (in fact only) government representative in the district and his role as Protector of Aborigines, his overall lack of affection for and disinterest in the Ngarigo contributed significantly to their fortunes during this early period.

It was left to the astute and sympathetic Czechoslovakian medical doctor, John Lhotsky, to offer a glimpse into the Ngarigo domestic world as he paused at the northern edge of the Monaro in 1834:

⁵⁴ Lambie (1850)

their camp... presented in the delightful evening a tolerably good appearance. The men and women (some of the latter were out hunting) were sitting under their Gunyas, either without any particular occupation, or preparing Opossum skins for cloaks, making nets of currigong etc. Upon a fine round Plain the male youths were playing with a ball made of wool, which they threw to a great height, catching it with much dexterity. It was very interesting to see these fine, naked, athletic bodies in such a gymnastic exercise; they were almost all muscular and smart people...⁵⁵

This description of a relaxed evening in a Ngarigo home gives a rare insight into their private lives: the scene that Lhotsky paints of boys playing footy while adults do a few odd jobs around the house, offers a depiction of life on a scale that was not commonly reported. The interior world of the Ngarigo was of little interest to the early invaders, and by the time ethnographic curiosity dawned towards the end of the 19th century, they were considered too culturally contaminated to be paid much attention beyond salvaging what little knowledge remained from among the 'dying race'. The 'social enjoyments' that Lhotsky observed, although not unchanging, were retreating from view, presumed by those witnessing the retreat as being extinguished.

Marriage and family life

If the story of a young woman and her mixed heritage child allows a window into the larger story of invasion, it equally opens a view of the story of the entanglements that resulted. The baby James Brindle was after all an expression of the new world that was developing, evidence of a union between the participants in frontier life.

Although we cannot know if James Brindle was the first child of his mother or how old she was at the time of his birth, we can deduce that the young woman was alive and coming to maturity during the first two decades of occupation by the squatters. This brief 20 years was a time of enormous change for the Ngarigo, marked at the start by Richard Brooks' pioneering invasion in 1826 and capped by Commissioner Lambie's testimony before the Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines in 1845, in which he acknowledged, somewhat belligerently, the

⁵⁵ Lhotsky and Andrews (1979):41

threat occupation had caused to their survival. If foreign grazing animals had mutilated the hunting grounds, the influx of foreign pastoral workers equally altered the tightly woven Ngarigo social structures that controlled kin networks; the making of a marriage relationship would once have been a matter closely controlled by this girl's parents and adult relatives.⁵⁶ Whatever other children this woman had, and it is likely that she had others, James was the first generation of Ngarigo to be conceived within the new society.

The Monaro was never going to be a place for Europeans to make an easy living, despite its promise of endless grazing. The early cattlemen soon found that once the lower pastures were depleted, the country needed for seasonal rotation was rocky, dry, steep and in winter covered in snow. There was no close settlement, no supply of consumer goods, no churches or doctors. It was a hard country to work and not just because of its physical characteristics: when in 1829 Governor Darling proclaimed the boundaries of nineteen counties in which land could be taken up, a proclamation that did not include the Monaro, he defined the limits of the governed world beyond which there could be no formal title. The Surveyor-General's Department, swamped with demand for land that could be selected, could not keep pace with the spread of settlement and while land remained unsurveyed it remained unavailable for alienation by any legal process. Hence, the Monaro lay beyond the boundaries of formal survey until 1839, and so beyond the limits of the law, quite literally lawless.⁵⁷

Despite the lack of formal governance, assigned convicts poured into the district as the squatters, at least those with access to capital, took up huge acreages and stocked their holdings with herds, creating a pressing need for labour. Convicts were the only choice. By 1828 the colony of NSW had a European population of not quite 37,000 of which nearly half were male convicts. Although transportation would be over by the time James was born in 1856, in 1834 there were still 10,800 assigned convict workers on privately owned properties in NSW, almost 9 out of 10 of the convict population. The colony, staffed almost wholly by convicts as it was for the first 50

⁵⁶ See Howitt (1996):197-8: "Their form of marriage is, a father or mother can give a daughter away to; whom they think proper (whether the damsel be willing or not) to a man who has a previous wife, or to one who has none. A brother can give a sister away in like manner. Also see Helms (1895), under 'Marriage'.

⁵⁷ Poiner and Jack (2007)

years, was totally dependent on this source of labour and the Monaro in its early development was no exception. The huts of convict stock-keepers soon dotted the valleys and slopes. With no police, no magistrate, no law-enforcement of any kind many of the worst elements of the new colony washed up on the Monaro. Lhotsky reported his astonishment at the conditions he discovered during his 1834 expedition;

As I was now beyond the limits of the colony, I found myself quite in a new situation, even so far as social life is concerned. I had lived before under absolute monarchies and under commonwealths; here I found myself surrounded by absolute anarchy and lawlessness... fighting and disorder of all kinds is going on, for which there is no redress – no stoppage. ... I must here likewise observe, that after leaving Mikelego Plains, we saw no more white females, although we travelled upwards of a hundred miles on stations.⁵⁸

With no European women available, it was inevitable that the men would turn to the Ngarigo women sooner or later. Not infrequently Aboriginal women were taken by force, often detained in the huts of their captors by being chained to the furniture. Governor Gipps was so alarmed by reports of this behaviour that in 1837 he was forced to explicitly outlaw it, making clear the link between the mistreatment of Aboriginal women and the escalating violence between the black and white communities. In almost certainly a direct reference to the Monaro, he began the decree with:

... beyond the limits of location, Overseers and other Persons in charge of Cattle and Sheep in those remote Districts, are not unfrequently guilty of detaining by force, in their Huts, and as their companions abroad, black women of the Native Tribes resorting to their neighbourhood, an offence not only in itself of a most heinous and revolting character, but in its consequences leading to bloodshed and murder.⁵⁹

Some white Monaro residents felt they had been unfairly singled out for official disapproval and vehemently denied such practices were going on. One anonymous correspondent from 'Maneroo' wrote to the *Sydney Herald* claiming:

⁵⁸ Lhotsky and Andrews (1979):79

⁵⁹ Gipps (1837):625

... Your strictures on the government Notice disallowing stockmen, hut keepers, and other from DETAINING Aboriginal women in their huts, appear to me to be just – it is a custom in these, and I mistake if it is not so likewise in all other districts, to allow the blacks of both sexes free ingress as well as egress of all huts; but if the Order is meant to convey the meaning that these people are to have every door closed against them, why not express it? I have no hesitation in saying as far as the inhabitants of this district at least, are concerned, that the informants of Government have cast upon them a gross libel, in asserting that some of them have been known to detain Aboriginal females in their huts BY FORCE...⁶⁰

Neither the Notice or its trenchant denial had much effect. Women continued to be kidnapped and raped and their men continued to retaliate against the captors. Six months after issuing the first edict, following yet another violent incident, Gipps wrote to the Colonial Secretary in exasperation:

[Recently] I detailed to your Lordship the measures which I thought it right to adopt, in consequence of a collision between a party of the Mounted Police and a Tribe of the Native Blacks... Your Lordship is, I am sure, well aware of the extreme difficulty of devising any measure that shall effectually check the outrages, which I regret to state, are now of frequent occurrence beyond the boundaries of Location... I have also deemed it necessary to republish a Notice, which appeared in the Government Gazette on the 16th Sept., 1837, on the subject of forcible retention by white men of women belonging to the Aboriginal Tribes, which there is reason to fear is often the immediate cause of these outrages.⁶¹

It is clear that the children born to these unions were considered the responsibility of their Aboriginal mothers. Although it was not entirely unknown for European men to form stable relationships with Aboriginal women and care for the children of the union, this was the exception and, according to Lambie, not something that occurred on the Monaro. He informed the Select Committee of 1845 that

⁶⁰ *Maneroo*, 24 June, *Sydney Herald* Sydney Herald (1839):3

⁶¹ Watson (1914):vol XIX:659

There are about twelve half-cast children, all living with, and after the manner of aborigines... There is no disposition on the part of the white labouring population to amalgamate with the aborigines, so as to form families⁶²

The exact circumstances of James Brindle's birth and the role his father played in his upbringing are not known but rumour of his genealogy leads to Nungatta Station on the upper Genoa River, owned at the time by squatter Alexander Weatherhead. Weatherhead had arrived from England in 1834 to work on the station 'Bergalia' in the Bodalla region but left soon after to take on his own run. When word reached him of the large but failing station higher up the mountains, he packed up his wife and two children and set out for the Monaro to take up the job of Nungatta's manager. Within two years he owned the property and had turned part of it over to dairying.⁶³

On the inland side of the coastal range on the upper reaches of the Genoa River, Nungatta forms the western corner of a triangle of major pastoral stations, with Delegate to the east and Bibbenluke to the north. Between them these three properties and their out-stations ran almost all of the stock in the south-eastern corner of the Monaro during the mid to late 19th century. By the time the Weatherheads took up residency at Nungatta in 1840, the Ngarigo had begun clustering at these stations seeking food and employment, their presence increasing over the following decade as the viability of their resources diminished. Station records show that Aboriginal people moved between the large runs, looking to supplement their food supplies with station rations and take advantage of seasonal work opportunities.⁶⁴ Travelling between locations within their country for cyclic exploitation of resources had always been part of Ngarigo life, one of the characteristics that so frustrated Commissioner Lambie. As Crown Land Commissioner he was required to submit a census of Aboriginal people in his district, a task in which he was constantly thwarted by the "Natives shifting so frequently", but his comments give an insight into the kinds of economic adaptations the Ngarigo were undergoing in this period, where although they "occasionally assist in sheep Washing, Hoeing and Reaping, they are frequently found to be

⁶² Lambie and Parliament (1845)

⁶³ Weatherhead (1984)

⁶⁴ Dawson (1996)

absent on some hunting or shooting excursion.”⁶⁵ As their dependence on station rations grew so did their contact with the European squatters and labourers.

Rumours circulate for a long time on the Monaro. Unlike the neighbouring coastal regions, the area has not seen much of a demographic change over the last few decades and many of the current residents are descendants of the old farming families. Tales of wrong-doing stay in spoken lineages, passed from one generation to the next, surviving for more than a century in the same location. Alexander Weatherhead features in more than one of these stories. During his 1999 research in the region Mark McKenna was told this story by long time Bega resident Jack Burgess:

Alexander Weatherhead, one of the first men to own Nungatta Station in the 1840s, had killed many Aboriginal people. Part of the milk-making process was to put the milk pans out to let the cream settle on top. Attracted by the offering, Aboriginal men and women would skim the cream off. Weatherhead was apparently so annoyed that he laced the milk with strychnine and later, when the poison had done its work, disposed of the bodies. Burgess claimed he had heard this story from the manager of Nungatta Station in the 1960s. More than 120 years after Weatherhead had allegedly poisoned a large number of Aboriginal people, the story lived on, passed down from one manager of the station to the next.⁶⁶

The persistence of the rumours in the area is in spite of any police or military investigation of the events which might have made details public.

The rumour of how James Brindle came by his name has similarly stayed in the memory of at least one old time Monaro resident, to be retold to Iris White, James’ great great granddaughter. Mrs Weatherhead had given birth to four children by the time the family moved to Nungatta, although two of the children had died in infancy. She had more children after taking up the station, including at least two daughters, but it is not known how many. By the early to mid 1850s the oldest children, believed to be sons, would have been adolescents.⁶⁷ The story relates

⁶⁵ Watson (1914):vol XXII:649-50

⁶⁶ McKenna (2002):42

⁶⁷ Weatherhead (1984)

how these boys were known by their father to be having sexual relations with the Ngarigo women who were camped on the land. The old man told them that he did not care what they did with the Aboriginal women but if there were any children they were not to take the family name. Instead they were to bring them to him and he would name them. Some time passed and in due course there was a child. As per their father's instructions, the boy brought the child to him and the old man named it Brindle, in the way of the mixed colours on the hide of a cow are known as brindle, seemingly a reference to the child's mixed race heritage and a sly nod to his role as a dairy farmer.

This story can only ever be rumour, but as a rumour that has survived within the white community for almost 150 years, it has some compelling evidence to substantiate it. For example, knowing approximately how old the Brindle child is when he enters the records as an adult some decades later, we can deduce that Weatherhead did have children of the right age to be sexually active at the time of James' conception. Those same records refer to him as a 'half caste' and, as noted by Lambie, the only mixed race children on the Monaro at the time had Aboriginal mothers and white fathers.⁶⁸ And finally, the name Brindle is further linked to the Weatherhead family through the old station records that refer to 'Brindle's paddock' on the Nungatta property, an area still clearly marked and named on the station maps.

Naming People and Places

However their white relations saw them, the children of these first cross-cultural unions were born into and became the expression of the new order emerging on the Monaro, a world not of the Ngarigo's choosing but increasingly part of their reality. Changes to traditional seasonal movements and resource use were the first demands of the new regime but other adjustments occurred, which began to filter into the known record.

A language of engagement was needed as the Ngarigo came into contact with white officials and pastoralists more frequently. It soon became apparent that the *lingua franca* would be English based, but exchange flowed both ways with many Indigenous words used, especially for place

⁶⁸ Lambie and Parliament (1845)

names. Despite the new forms that were developing, misunderstandings, linguistic and otherwise, gave rise to false popular conceptions of Ngarigo traditions as the British frequently failed to see their often extremely complex protocols. Although the endemic cultural blindness on the part of the British was at the root of the misinformation, the Ngarigo inclination to keep much of their world secret no doubt also contributed. In 1846 the convict Joseph Lingard, who had been assigned to a station on the Monaro, wrote an account of his life during his seven year term of labour, in which he tells his audience that:

the Blacks... go about in Tribes, and in summer time they all go naked; men, women and children. They have no names among them, only, the black man calls his wife Jen, and she calls him Black fellow; the children they call Pickaninnies. When a child is born near any one of the stations, whatever name any white man gives it, in future it is known by that name. ⁶⁹

The clear purpose of Lingard's account is to demonstrate the depth of the savagery of the natives, both nakedness and namelessness being evidence of their primitive state. His account unwittingly demonstrates more accurately the level of access that was afforded to an outsider. Ngarigo naming practices were complex and opaque, linked to stages of life and initiatory rites, not information that Lingard would have been privy to. An infant child did not, as Lingard correctly observed, receive a name immediately. Rather it was referred to as "child" (the anthropologist AW Howitt records the term as *lit*⁷⁰) until it began to walk when it received a pet name, a nick-name of affection that related to its moment of birth, an animal that the mother saw or some other sign. The child's 'real' name was given by one or other of the grandparents when it was around 8 or 9, the first public acknowledgement of his or her impending maturity. This was a name of great significance and might be related to totem, the spirit world or a revered ancestor. After this name was given at initiation it immediately became secret, not to be mentioned by friends and never to be revealed to strangers. Considered as much a part of a person as hair or fingernails, a name could be made use of by someone who wished to 'catch' him or her by evil magic. Thus Howitt tells us that:

⁶⁹ Lingard (1846)

⁷⁰ Howitt (1996):737-38

one of [them], of whom I inquired as to his child's name, told me in a whisper, when no one else was present. When I asked him the name of [someone else], he said, "I cannot tell you, he might be very angry with me; our fathers have told us that we must never speak of our secret names."⁷¹

We cannot know that the Brindle child was not given a name through one or all of these traditional processes but the written record has preserved him only as James, son of a Ngarigo woman and a fully fledged child of the Georgian era, by title if nothing else. Common sense however would dictate that traditional naming practices continued, unseen and unmentioned to outsiders, at least during the time in which initiations were still being held, perhaps until the early 20th century. Remnants of naming practices are still extant: 'bub' is a common generic name for a younger person for example, while aunt and uncle are universally used as honorifics for older people. Giving nicknames is also still widely practised in the Koori community, a distinctive characteristic of contemporary Aboriginal life. That the nicknames are often given along traditional lines, such as commemorating what happened at the moment of birth has deep resonances with past naming protocols. Deanna for example is known widely as daughter, or Aunty Daught for the moment of her birth when her father, thrilled at having a girl, called out 'a daughter, a daughter!'

Given the prohibition on speaking personal names, the real meaning of Ngarigo names that were collected in census records are a mystery. Contemporaneous with Lingard, Chief Protector of Aborigines for the Port Phillip District from 1837 to 1849, George Augusts Robinson, kept a diary of the epic two thousand mile journey he made across south east Australia in 1844. This expedition included a transect of the Monaro, beginning on the coast at Twofold Bay, passing through Cooma, and ending in Yass, with a brief stop at Gedgezerick en route:

Sunday 7 July 1844 (at Gedgezerick)

Frosty last night. Seven men, women and girl visited this afternoon, (?) alias Old Tom (chief) among them; the rest were firm young men; gave each handkerchief and some

⁷¹ Ibid

medals; took their names and names of all the natives of the tribe. The language is the same as the Omeo Blacks.⁷²

The census he took at Gegezzerick details the presence of 23 Aboriginal people. Names such as *Joon.doo.mung.*, *Bug.ge.goke.*, *Joo.lo.cud.jang.*, *Moo.ro.rare.rere.* are listed against anglicized nicknames: Jemmy, Cherry Tree, Neddy, Blue Skin, Kitty, Polly, Bidy. No other notes about the encounter were made.⁷³

This naming and numbering of the Aborigines, a task Robinson's diaries attest he was dedicated to throughout his journey, opened the way for them to be brought into the written record. Once named, further information about them could be tabulated and preserved; blankets received, stations visited, spouses and offspring. Without any further context for their social, family or economic structures, this recording transitioned them into the white social and historical record which allowed them to be 'discussed' and 'dealt with' by the authorities, positioning them, according to historian Paul Carter, "in the same historical space as the Europeans – a space constituted culturally, according to social, economic and above all, intellectual criteria... names, in short, made them white history."⁷⁴

Education

Weatherhead might not have been keen to give his name to his grandson, but white officials were interested in educating him and his generation. The colonial imperative to civilize the natives, or if not civilize them at least educate them to a degree that was useful as a labour force, drove a series of experiments. These began with the Parramatta Native Institution founded in 1815 by Governor Macquarie. His ambition to turn out an alumni of trained black farmers and domestic workers was thwarted when every last one of the students returned to their parents to continue their Aboriginal education. Despite this perceived failing, the Native Institution was a successful *school*, proving to the administration that Aboriginal people were well able to develop literacy and English language skills. Indeed one of the students, Maria Locke, won the anniversary

⁷² Robinson (1980):7 July 1844

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ Carter (1988):332

examination in 1819 over 100 European students at the central public school.⁷⁵ The Governor was unimpressed with these academic achievements while the students continued to spurn white society and called for Aboriginal children to be separated from their parents in order to develop the necessary attachments to European ways. Not surprisingly the school foundered. Parents were unwilling to commit their children to the Institution while the Institution could not accommodate both the educational and cultural needs of the families.

In December 1821 under Governor Brisbane's guidance they tried again, this time moving the school to the Blacktown Native Institution and shifting the emphasis to purely vocational training in the hope of attracting more students. By 1823 only 12 Aboriginal children were enrolled, well short of the planned 60 and by 1825 this school had also closed. The newly arrived Governor Darling was perplexed by the "Aborigines [who] learned to read and write yet returned to their tribes and remained with them as soon as their education was finished."⁷⁶ Other colonists put the matter more bluntly:

They have been brought up by us from infancy in our nurseries, and yet the woods have seduced them at maturity, and at once elicited the savage instincts of finding their food in the trees, and their path through the forest – propensities which civil education has only smothered.⁷⁷

Not everyone, and especially not the Colonial Office in London, shared this pessimistic opinion. Governor Gipps, following the lead of his predecessors, sent word to the Monaro that he was interested in Lambie procuring some of the local children for training in his newly founded school at Parramatta. Lambie dutifully sought out potential students but in 1841 reported that:

having had an opportunity of communicating with various Tribes on the subject, ... none of the Parents or Friends will consent to part with any of the children.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Parry (2005); Kohen and Brook (1991); Kohen (1993);

⁷⁶ Fletcher (1989):23

⁷⁷ Fletcher (1989):24

⁷⁸ Lambie (1841)

A year later they returned to the issue when it seems that the Governor's enquiries shifted emphasis to the teaching of reading and writing more generally. Lambie offered a way to proceed which he considered would make the scheme more palatable to the parents:

the tribes ... of the District, appear to wish that their children were taught to read and write, but at the same time they have an insuperable dislike to parting with them, if they are to be excluded from occasionally seeing them. If Schools were established in the District in the first instance, I have no doubt the Children would be permitted to attend them, provided the Parents and Friends were some times allowed to visit them – and the dislike of parting with the offspring on the part of the Parents most probably would gradually wear off when the children might be sent to some general establishment and finally separated from the Tribes.⁷⁹

In any event no schools for the exclusive use of Aboriginal children were established by Governor Gipps in Sydney or in the Monaro District until the Wallaga Lake Mission School was founded in the 1880s, well after James might have made use of it. Yet as discussed in chapter 6, the adult James was able to write his name and, if not fully literate, was well attuned to the power of the written word and its potential for use as a potent political instrument.

The emerging economy

Whatever the circumstances of James Brindle's schooling, where once he would have been born into a tight-knit community and educated in the ways of language and culture from childhood, the world of flux that he inherited by the mid 19th century offered an entirely different future to that of his forebears. His grandparents, if not his mother, would have spent their lives making a living hunting small and large animals such as possum, kangaroo, emu, snake and lizard, as well as birds and birds' eggs, fish, insects, seeds and tubers. Within the mixture of open grasslands and dense forest to which they had access, a diverse range of flora for medicine, carbohydrate and industrial fibre would have been available. They would have made weapons and tools from stone, wood, resin, reed and bark as well as fishtraps, nets, bags and water-carrying vessels. When they weren't working, they would have been carrying out ceremonial duties, arranging

⁷⁹ Lambie (1842)

marriages, initiating young people, fighting skirmishes and attending funerals, with an occasional trip to the coast for whale feasts, trade and to visit relatives.⁸⁰

Making a living from this land had been the job of Ngarigo men and women for many hundreds of generations. There is evidence of human occupation dating to between 6 – 7,000 years ago and some occupation sites as old as 21,000 years ago at Birrigai Rock shelter.⁸¹ Once the squatters arrived with their new animals, the pre-contact routines of the Ngarigo were damaged beyond sustainability almost instantly. The vast fields of yams that grew by the rivers were trampled by hooves, the permanent water ways fouled and the hunting grounds over-grazed. The trauma of that change must have ricocheted through the community during those first decades as the realization dawned that what were once dependable resources, to be returned to seasonally, had vanished. The necessity created by these changes drove the Ngarigo to experiment with the emerging colonial economy and they quickly had to learn how to exploit new possibilities as the old ones were extinguished.

The whalers on the coast were the first to trial Aboriginal labour in a serious way. George Imlay for example, reported that

[the] natives continue to behave well and make themselves useful in various ways, when their services are required. I have this year, by way of experiment, formed a whaling party consisting of four boats manned entirely by blacks...⁸²

Commissioner Lambie, although not an overly insightful or perceptive observer of the Ngarigo, managed to convey something of the hybrid life that was developing:

... a good many ... of the natives are employed in sheep washing, hoeing maize and reaping and last year three boat crews, in number eighteen, were employed by the Imlay [brothers] in the whale Fishery at Twofold Bay on the same pay or terms as the whites. The Blacks were stationed on the opposite side of the Bay to the other Fishermen and adopted the same habits as the Whites. They lived in Huts, slept in Beds, used utensils in

⁸⁰ Byrne (1984); Wesson (2000); Hancock (1972)

⁸¹ Flood, David et al. (1987)

⁸² Letter from George Imlay to the Colonial Secretary attached to the record of a blanket issue, cited by Young and NSW Dept. of Environment and Conservation (2005):151

cooking and made the flour into bread; but as soon as the fishing season was over they all returned to their tribes in the Bush.⁸³

This observation demonstrates that engagement with European culture - sleeping in beds, using cooking utensils, making bread – was not at the expense of maintaining relationships with country, here characterized as ‘returning to the tribes in the bush’. Quite clearly interacting with the new economy and the culture that it brought did not extinguish Indigenous identity but was consistent with other responsibilities that no doubt extended to cultural business not discussed with either whaling bosses or the Commissioner of Crown Lands. It seems that for a moment in this founding era, a possibility for some compromise existed, where Aboriginal people could earn a living commensurate with that of their white contemporaries as well as maintain the practices which were essential to their cultural survival. It was not a possibility that the Presbyterian Scot, John Lambie, was interested in pursuing. A true son of the Ayrshire Kirk into which he was born, Lambie was repulsed by what he saw as an unwillingness to work on the part of the Aborigines. Year after year his reports are littered with judgements about the indolence and unreliability of the Ngarigo, beginning with his submission to the Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines in 1845 to which he reported that “the [Aborigines] are so unsettled they cannot be depended on, and consequently their services are not much in request. The remuneration is usually made in articles of food and clothing... They can scarcely be said to have any settled habits bearing upon an aptitude for employment”⁸⁴ He continued this theme in his annual reports:

1850 [They] are generally supplied with food... by the Settlers near whose Establishments they encamp, and by whom they are occasionally employed in odd jobs but which are performed in the usual listless and indolent way.⁸⁵

And again the following year:

1851 Many of them make themselves useful at several of the Stations at the periods of sheep washing and harvest and are always well treated, and well paid by those who

⁸³ Lambie (1842)

⁸⁴ Lambie and Parliament (1845):item 9

⁸⁵ Lambie (1850)

employ them. But they still exhibit their old aversion to constant and settled employment.⁸⁶

Lambie saw the work practices of the Ngarigo in terms of cultural ideology. His perception of them as ‘indolent’ and ‘unsettled’, views upheld by his squatter associates, marks them, in his view, as removed from civilisation. Despite admitting that ‘the kangaroos retire’ after the land is stocked, a fact which he understood threatened the Ngarigo’s very survival, Lambie is unwilling to admit the colonial agenda was wanting in compassion. The culturally inscribed attitude he displays to ‘a hard day’s work’ has deep roots in his own cultural history and critical self reflection is not articulated in any of his writing.⁸⁷ That the Aborigines are paid nothing more than some food and clothing for their labour, labour on land they knew had previously provided for hundreds of generations of their forebears, did not seem to form part of the equation. Despite the fact that he witnessed the Imlay brothers successfully man their craft with all-Aboriginal crews, Lambie was adamant that Ngarigo attitudes to work were nothing more than belligerency.

Yet ten years later they still hadn’t been ‘civilised’

“... I would state that there appears to be no method of diverting them from their inherent love of their wandering lives and erratic habits – even those employed at the stations every few months join their tribe to ‘walking all about’ as they term it. They live most miserably making but a bare subsistence in the bush...”⁸⁸

That these destructive initial decades in the Monaro were benignly observed by the most senior government administrator of the time goes some way to explaining the speed at which the

⁸⁶ Lambie (1851)

⁸⁷ The literature which explores British attitudes to work in this era includes Fitzpatrick, Richards et al. (1992) who note the way in which Colonial society was riven with ethnic snobberies and religious sectarianism, often played out in attitudes towards physical discipline in the service of advancing prosperity. Hancock (1930) made an earlier contribution to understanding the cultural as well as economic forces at work at this time in his exploration of the origins of Australian culture. Curthoys, Markus et al. (1978) explore the work experiences of Aboriginal and Pacific Island labour, as well as the patterns of racial exclusion from the paid workforce, while Grimshaw, McConville et al. (1985) describe the early colonial economies of family life.

⁸⁸ Bransby (1859)

destructive changes to the Ngarigo lifestyle took place. Once the role of Crown Lands Commissioner was taken over by AW Manning in 1853, a new attitude emerged from within the Colonial administration, although one already experimented with by businessmen such as the entrepreneurial Imlay brothers. In his first report of the year Manning notes:

From constant and intimate connection with Europeans their habits are gradually becoming assimilated. Quiet and orderly in their deportment, when not ill used, they are willing to labour for wages so small that their Services are in general demand.⁸⁹

Not long after Manning's appointment a labour shortage driven by the first of the gold rushes in the region, struck the pastoral industry, causing a shift in attitude in the broader population. The first discovery of gold in the region was in 1839 by Count Paul Edmund de Strzelecki, but graziers were also making some significant finds. Once news of the discoveries spread, many thousands of people began to leave the cities and towns to search for their fortunes in the high country. This population movement was supported by the colonial government of Victoria in the early 1850s when Alfred Howitt was commissioned to cut approximately 350 kilometres of tracks linking the various goldfields. In 1859, the discovery of gold at Kiandra in the northeast of the Snowy Mountains stimulated a rush and by the winter of 1860 many thousands of miners had arrived.⁹⁰ As a result many of the local farm hands left their employment to seek their fortunes alongside them. During its peak, the Kiandra goldfields supported approximately 10,000 people. By 1861 it was all over but during the peak of the rush the local pastoral industry was left with an acute labour shortage.⁹¹ This shortage drove a shift in the attitudes towards Aboriginal workers and by as early as 1855 Commissioner Manning reported:

During the recent excessive scarcity of labour many settlers were mainly dependent on the natives for the means of carrying on their operations. I know of several instances in which the blackfellow's assistance has saved the Europeans from severe loss. Thousands of sheep have been tended, and large herds of cattle entirely watched by the natives, who some few years ago even in these parts were regarded as unteachable and useless, and

⁸⁹ Manning (1853)

⁹⁰ Blainey (1993)

⁹¹ Goodall (1996):chapter 5

whose presence even created alarm and was too often the signal for treachery and ill-usage.⁹²

Not all the prospectors were successful and after the rush began to subside many thousands of men sought employment in the district. The supply of available labour generated by the population surge soon overwhelmed the new attitude to Aboriginal workers. This situation was exacerbated by a change to the rules of land settlement. In 1861, the Premier of New South Wales, John Robertson, resolved to break up the monopoly of the squatter-pastoralists in the colony to give poorer purchasers access to land to encourage the development of agriculture. To this end he forced two Acts through Parliament; the *Crown Lands Alienation Act 1861 (NSW)* dealt with the sale of land and the *Crown Lands Occupation Act 1861 (NSW)* dealt with leasing. Together these Acts allowed for the free selection of up to 320 acres of Crown land by any person, on the condition that they pay a deposit of one-quarter of the purchase price after survey, and that they live on the land for three years.⁹³

Prior to this legislation being passed, powerful squatters had acquired vast amounts of prime land through illicit occupation. These new Acts opened up all leasehold land, including squatter held lands, for selection by anyone in the colony. Predictably, clashes between the squatters, whose wealth and power were directly threatened, and the selectors ensued. By enabling close settlement of pastoral lands which until that point had still been available for use by Aboriginal people, the Acts further limited their lands and what had survived of their economy. The influx of small landholders created by the Acts, unlike the earlier large landholders, would not have learned about their land directly from the local Aborigines.

These land Acts coincided with the gold rush and as prospectors lost hope of gaining their fortune in minerals, they sought their fortune through grazing. Hancock notes that the majority of these selectors never came within sight of Robertson's objective – that they should be able to maintain their families by their own labour on their own land. Most of them had to earn their income by working for their more prosperous neighbours. As he notes “the hard times of these

⁹² Manning (1855)

⁹³ Hancock (1972):chapter 3

men and their families are recorded, not on parish maps, but by the rubble and lumber of their ruined homes.”⁹⁴

We cannot know what specific experiences James was exposed to as a young man within the rapid changes taking place. During his early years maps were made of his country and place names were assigned; white men flooded into his homelands looking for their fortunes; the new pastoral economy brought devastating changes to the region yet Ngarigo would still have been spoken fluently. Mention of Brindle’s paddock in the Nungatta station records indicate that there was some long term association between James’ family and the Weatherheads. Perhaps the Brindles raised a few head of cattle there or were part of station life as stockmen and domestic workers. Perhaps the family had merely camped there for some time while James was a child. Whatever the circumstances emerging in his own country, when James enters the record as an adult it is across the state border on the Gippsland mission station of Ramahyuck where Aboriginal labour was the focus of the operation, as discussed in chapter 6.

⁹⁴ Hancock (1972)

4. The nature of ‘things’

Objects and innovation

The immediacy of the historical narrative which the community engagement component of this project exposes is compelling, but the document which sets out the main research task, as submitted to the Australian Research Council, was devised in part to advance the National Museum of Australia’s collecting interests and clearly positions material culture, not archive-derived narrative, as its central concern.⁹⁵ This emphasis provides an unambiguous articulation of the principal enterprise that drives the Museum and in doing so opens a possibility for an active critical engagement between this thesis and the thinking within the institution. Rather than simply conduct the research as set out in the project description, a method in which the original instructions would dissolve into the work and remain unseen, I intend to have a conversation with the discourses encoded in that agenda. The conversation will follow not only the proposed project schedule but the patterns of thinking out of which the Museum is constructed and which provide the premise for this research, as well as a broader engagement between the Museum and Aboriginal social history more generally.

Fundamental to this study as authored by the Chief Investigators is the link between material culture, cultural heritage and historiography. Quite rightly the authors note that “within academia, Indigenous material objects have long been considered the domain of anthropologists and archaeologists”.⁹⁶ Unlike anthropological discourses which direct questions surrounding material culture towards an understanding of meaning, this study explicitly nominates the relationship between the material world and understandings of the past as its focus.⁹⁷ Similarly,

⁹⁵ See Appendix 1 for excerpts from original Linkage Project application written by Australian National University academics Ann McGrath and Tom Griffiths in collaboration with Margo Neale from the National Museum of Australia

⁹⁶ Ibid

⁹⁷ That is ‘meaning’ as distinct from the things themselves (Ingold (2000)). Or, as subscribed to by modernist anthropologists, as an elucidation of social and cultural ‘contexts’(Pinney and Thomas (2001)). For a full discussion of

unlike archaeological interpretations of the material record which might share a similar emphasis, the focus will be directed to developing historical narratives where the agency remains with the historical actors. The intention of the project is to broaden disciplinary interests in Indigenous material culture and to investigate “new perspectives by locating objects treasured by Indigenous people within local and national histories of colonialism, survival, collection and museology.”⁹⁸

This explicit linking of objects and histories might be innovative in regard to the analysis of Indigenous material culture, but it is the core strategy around which museums, particularly contemporary social history museums such as the National Museum of Australia, revolve. The conjunction of the material past and historical narratives within this important ‘nation-building’ institution reflects history-making practices that flow through our society more widely.⁹⁹ The notion of the keepsake, the heirloom or the collection, nestles deep within the personal, professional and public lives of mainstream society, as evidenced by the value assigned to aged objects and the way in which provenance, i.e. associated narrative, escalates value, both monetary and otherwise.¹⁰⁰ This conjunction of objects and stories sits in the middle of our public and personal history-making practices and is deeply embedded in our collective cultural processes. But why do old things matter? What is it about the material past that inspires our private and collective fascination?

The stuff of times past

The museum, in its project of telling history, calls on the peculiar character of old things to describe the past. These objects carry the marks of handling by persons who are now dead and it is through the scratches and patina, form and decoration and in their archival journey as fondly preserved or discarded and retrieved that we can track the path from the deceased back to the living. Archaeologist Julian Thomas tells us that it is exactly this quality which makes old things

various anthropological discourses in material culture studies see Henare, Holbraad et al. (2007) and Strathern (1990)

⁹⁸ Appendix 1

⁹⁹ Casey (2001):14

¹⁰⁰ The concept of a ‘collection’ is examined in detail below.

compelling for in this way “things can stand as evidence for past lives, identities and relationships.”¹⁰¹

The experience of materiality within our own lives, our embodied engagement with the material world, opens us to a non-discursive experience of the past through objects. Our sensory apprehension of things which form or alter our understanding of time, place and people allow them to serve as witness to history and substantiate particular narratives. It is this apprehension coupled with our impulse toward story which allows for fragments to be integrated in the telling, so that “if we are called upon to give an account of a thing’s identity, it may well take the form of a narrative which knits together the events of where it has been and who it has been involved with, to what purpose.”¹⁰² In seeing or touching these objects, their mnemonic character allows us to directly perceive the result of their life journey.¹⁰³ It is this quality that museums call on to create a lens through which their audience is invited to view a moment or a story from the past.

The relationship between historical narrative, objects and meaning that a museum configures is a complicated conjunction of contemporary discourses, disciplinary polemic and material culture, resulting in “museum exhibition[s which are] a deeply unrealistic, highly artificial assemblage of objects, installations, people and arguments”.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, the combination of elements in this environment is a powerful cultural force, created in part through invoking the emotional response we have to objects as audiences. In developing exhibitions, curators draw on Julian Thomas’ proposition that in bringing forward traces of the past, things are in some way able to transcend death. It is this very quality that ‘enlivens’ museum exhibition narratives. But this strategy implies the meaning we perceive in an object exists independent of context and that both object and meaning have somehow travelled immutably through time. Early 21st century modernist anthropologists seem to have some sympathy with this thinking when they argue that:

¹⁰¹ Thomas (1996):81

¹⁰² Ibid

¹⁰³ The term ‘life journey’ as used here is borrowed from James Clifford. See Clifford (1997):212

¹⁰⁴ The discussion of museums as sites of contest as well as interpretation dominated the theoretical end of museum studies literature throughout the 1990s. See Macdonald and Fyfe (1996); Bennett (1995); Karp, Lavine et al. (1991); Griffiths (1996); Macdonald and Basu (2007). Quote: Weibel and Latour (2007):94

rather than accepting that meanings are fundamentally separate from their material manifestations, [we posit the notion] *that things might be treated as sui generis meanings...* [where] meanings are not ‘carried’ by things but just *are identical* to them.¹⁰⁵

This ‘hard’ materialist position which is both complex and valid, is a response to Appadurai’s 1986 work *The Social Life of Things* where he asserts that the exact opposite is true.¹⁰⁶ The ‘stuff of material culture’ as he calls it, alters fundamentally as it flows through contemporary social and political imperatives. He tells us that:

the way in which we read the meaning of an object shifts as the object changes use and context, circulating in different regimes of value in space and time ... in specific cultural and historical milieus.¹⁰⁷

Reflecting on Appadurai’s essay, Nicholas Thomas develops this idea further, arguing that essentialist notions of the identity of material things being fixed in their structure and form is necessarily deconstructed as the object passes through social transformations. “What we are confronted with is thus never more or less than the succession of uses and recontextualisations.”¹⁰⁸ For the purposes of this thesis, I follow Appadurai and Nicholas Thomas’ thinking, rather than the ‘harder’ anthropological material culturalists, to examine the shifting complex of function and meaning in uses and contexts as an object travels through space and time. As part of a discussion that will intersect with discourses of race and identity, this ‘softer’ theoretical approach, i.e. that which is more interested in an object’s migration through the social world than its materiality, offers scope to follow the shifting politics inherent in projects of representation such as the National Museum of Australia.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Henare, Holbraad et al. (2007):3-4

¹⁰⁶ Appadurai (1986):4

¹⁰⁷ Ibid

¹⁰⁸ N Thomas (1991):28-29

¹⁰⁹ Material culture studies is a fast evolving domain of scholarly interest with many theoretical approaches. This thesis is not concerned with the diversity of positions within the field generally but touches only on that which is relevant to the case study. For a full discussion of the various schools of material culture studies see Woodward (2007)

Carrying water, carrying meaning

While ‘materialist’ anthropologists are concerned with illuminating understandings of a people through examination of their ‘stuff’, this study is concerned with the use of objects in self-representation, as preserved and treasured, not as texts of the everyday. This distinction is important as the separation of objects from the everyday by their users is the moment of agency which transfers them from one regime to another, at least for that moment in time. In asking the question what objects “Indigenous people collect, display and hold dear within their homes and communities”, the research proposal which this thesis addresses is asking ‘what objects have a particular group of people transferred from one regime of operation to another and why.’¹¹⁰ In this regard the museum is the exemplary regime-shifter, enacting a public display of the moment and meaning of such a transfer.

Also fundamental to this research is the notion of objects as carriers of historical narrative. Philip Jones offers a potent example of the way in which ‘things’ carry stories in his examination of objects from early Australian frontier encounters.¹¹¹ Yet the moment of telling the story also fixes apprehension of an object within the context of its telling. While Jones demonstrates the way in which objects offer evidence of a particular narrative, the examples he has chosen, despite their contemporary incarnation as museum objects, are not discussed in relation to their full life journey, including that of symbol. This emphasis obfuscates the processes by which the museum (or, rather, the curators) becomes the agent or author of history as an object (that can be read as text) is moved from ‘useful’ to ‘symbol’ through their intervention. Although this research seeks to observe objects which have undergone this transformation in the context of families and communities (as I discuss below and in chapter 5), it is within the museum (and other institutions of representation such as art galleries) that this phenomenon can most clearly be observed.

¹¹⁰ Appendix 1

¹¹¹ Jones (2008)

To demonstrate the way an object moves through a such successions of uses and recontextualisations (as proposed by N Thomas above) I nominate an artefact currently on display in the Gallery of First Australian in the NMA. I am not proposing that the object be examined as a static presence (it is a series of reconstructions and representations, not the very same object) but as a lineage which narrates the concerns of each context it passes through. In particular, its current manifestation as a museum object offers an occasion to discuss the role of museums in relation to material culture more broadly.

In this example the shifting meanings inherent in the object are not only accommodated by the NMA but, in the way of contemporary social history museums, are drawn on for a further iteration of the object's narrative, this time a self-conscious articulation of the various discourses through which it has been apprehended.¹¹²



Figure 10. *Sauvages du Cap de Diemen preparant leur repas*
nla.pic-an20973389¹¹³

¹¹² The New Museology which underpins curatorial strategies employed by social history museums is discussed in detail by Hauenschild (1988); Vergo (1989); Cobb (2005). See Chapter 7 for detailed discussion.

¹¹³ Labillardiere (1817):plate 5

Figure 10 is an engraving made in Paris in 1817, based on a sketch by the artist Piron entitled *Sauvages du Cap de Diemen preparant leur repas* (*the savages of van Diemen's Land prepare their repast*, executed during the d'Entracasteaux expedition to Tasmania in *La Recherche* in 1792. The picture depicts the occasion of a meeting between the Tasmanians and the French during the ship's anchorage.



Figure 11. *Sauvages du Cap de Diemen preparant leur repas* detail¹¹⁴

Figure 11 is a detail from the drawing showing a close up of two small baskets. The one on the right is a receptacle made from the bull kelp which is a feature of the Tasmanian coast and when worked, dries into a leathery consistency, easy to mold and good for carrying liquids. This object, in this time and location, is a bucket. The artist Piron found this article interesting enough to record it as part of the scene. No doubt to the Tasmanians, the French had many objects which were equally curious - a floppy cravat for example or skin tight hose, boots, hats. This sketch captures a quality that the object has when it is in use: as part of daily activity in the world it goes unnoticed, but when it is removed from its place in action, it becomes a curiosity, able to be seen in a conceptual framework rather than a merely equipmental one. Its life as a bucket tells us directly of the relationship between the object and its makers. By knowing of its use, we can apprehend its meaning, as Thomas tells us:

our relationship with material things is better understood through making use of them in some task than by any analytic looking. Those material things which we are most closely

¹¹⁴ Ibid, detail

connected with will therefore be those which serve as equipment: [as Heidegger termed it] *things-for* (*zeug*)... where we make use of something as a piece of equipment, we may find that we are concerned less... with the thing as an object and more... with the task in hand.¹¹⁵

This iteration of the object is aligned to the ‘hard’ material culturalists’ interests, where its nature (material) and meaning converge. Here the kelp water carrier in its original context, still in use by its maker, is equipmental. In the rendering of it in a lithograph based on a drawing made during a 1792 frontier encounter, it begins a transition through the agency of the curious gaze. Now an object of wonder, the bucket in the picture narrates the story of encounter with the new world in a language that can be read at the site of the story’s making, that is in the studios, galleries and bookshops of 1817 Paris.



Figure 12. *armes et ornemens* by Nicolas Petit
nla.pic-an7568671¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Thomas (1996):67-68

¹¹⁶ Dien (1824)

The next depiction of the water carrier, of the same construction although certainly not of the same provenance, is made 10 years later by Nicolas Petit, artist on the *Baudin* expedition of 1802. This time the water carrier is illustrated as part of a collection of *armes et ornemens*, a study of objects sketched during the expedition's unsuccessful search and rescue mission to find LaPerouse. Here the water carrier is disengaged from its surroundings, floating in space, in relationship only to other objects. Place, people and use are now deleted from the story and although the viewer can still guess at its function, its role here is to depict the implements of the *sauvages* as part of nature, closer in its arrangement to botanical illustrations of the time. The gaze is now displaying its classificatory impulses, and in doing so its contemporary allegiance to the advancing 19th century discourses of science. In arranging the implements as a display of 'type', the picture anticipates the concerns of the soon to arrive discipline of ethnography and foreshadows in its aesthetic the great displays of ethnographic objects with which museums of the late 19th and early 20th century became synonymous.



Figure 13. Water carrier held by the British Museum
British Museum , Department of Africa, Oceania & the Americas, Registration No. Oc1851,1122.2

Next the water carrier is moved to London via a tour through empire, courtesy of Dr Joseph Milligan, the collector of the object, who lived and worked in Tasmania between 1830 and 1860. In his role as surgeon, he interacted with local Aboriginal people in various capacities, including

as Medical Officer of Aborigines.¹¹⁷ This water carrier is one of 5 objects shipped to London by Milligan for display in the The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations, held in the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park in 1851. Here it was installed in the exhibition of Tasmanian artefacts where it told the story of distant lands and curious native peoples. The still extant object is now in the British Museum collection although has not been on show since 1851.

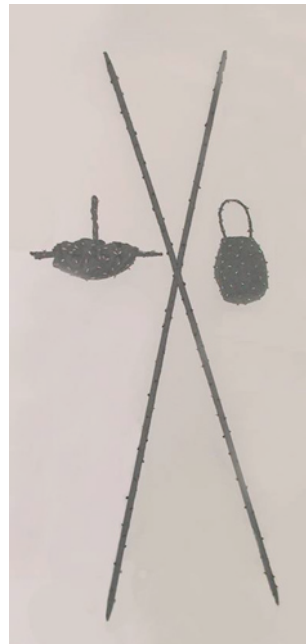


Figure 14. Julie Gough *Blanket return 4*
National Museum of Australia

One hundred and fifty years later, Tasmanian Aboriginal artist Julie Gough returns to the Petit sketch to comment on its depiction of her cultural heritage. She reconstructs the sketch as a three dimensional work, substituting the materials used to make the original objects with grey woollen felt, of the type distributed to Aboriginal people as blankets by government agencies throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. The artist makes an observation on the intervening years between Petit's sketch and her response to it in the statement accompanying the piece:

This work is a commentary on the repatriation of cultural material held in institutions including museums across the globe. A blanket return or repatriation is a reflection on the

¹¹⁷ Hoddinott (1967)

call made by many Indigenous peoples for illicitly taken cultural items to be returned to their respective communities. Since the French arrived on Tasmanian shores Tasmanian Aboriginal Cultural material has been studied and collected. [These objects] of culture.. have survived, buffeted from time, and ironically by careful handling by their captors in museums, but this survival has come at the expense of the objects participating in their intended, usual cultural lives.¹¹⁸

Here the artist's clear intention is to use the object, or image of the object, as a bridge between past and present, making clear the divergent discourses separating the two depictions. She articulates her sadness at the shift the object has undergone from *zeug* or thing-for, to artwork, and the politics of dispossession such a shift implies. In doing so she draws out both meanings contained in the Petit sketch - his observation of the original article in-situ and his subsequent recording of it as an object of curiosity.



Figure 15. kelp water carrier in case
National Museum of Australia, 2009

In the final iteration we see the water carrier in the Gallery of First Australians at the National Museum of Australia, displayed in a glass case. An exemplar of what is considered New Museology, it is now exhibited as an object in relationship to ethnographic objects and images on

¹¹⁸ Artist's statement 2004, on file, National Museum of Australia

display around it, in a context which celebrates the revival of Tasmanian Indigenous culture. In the intervening centuries between Petit's lithograph and this museum object, the disciplines of ethnography and anthropology and their effects on Aboriginal people have played out, as has the history of colonisation, including the extinguishing fiction of Truganini as the 'last Tasmanian'. The interpretive text tells us that it is a water carrier of contemporary construction, but the framed print of Petit's sketch on an easel next to it places it in an historic context with a provenance that can be traced to the early 19th century.



Figure 16. kelp water carrier on exhibition, National Museum of Australia 2009

As an object of contemporary construction it did not pass through an equipmental phase as *zeug* in which it was used merely for the carrying of liquids, unnoticed in any conceptual way by its users. That it was made in 2002, long after modernity had replaced a physical need for seaweed water carriers, indicates that its function, even at the moment of its construction, is entirely conceptual. Rather, its task is to reach across the narratives generated about Aboriginal people from Tasmania during the 200 years which separate it from its prototype depicted in Petit's lithograph. Here the maker is using the water carrier to reclaim a distinctive cultural voice through the revival of a craft practice and in doing so is asserting herself as a participant in continuing traditions. Her construction of the object articulates her *right* to construct the object through familial descent, a lineage which the bucket stands as proof was not extinguished. Both the bucket and the act of its construction therefore directly contest the extinction narrative with

which her and her family are popularly associated. The museum takes this articulation further by positioning the bucket in the context of the story of Truganini, the so-called ‘last Tasmanian’ as well as contemporary poetry and art work by Tasmanian Aboriginal people. The public display of this object in this context is the moment of conjunction where the meanings encoded in it by the maker draw together and can be read as intended. Here the audience’s gaze is recruited as part of the complex coalescence of meaning and counter-meaning, no longer complicit in the construction of new world narratives but in a revision of them. Although similar to Gough’s woollen version in intent, this iteration of the water carrier draws directly on the original craft practice to make its point, using its material connection to the past to jump over the intervening dispossession and forge new ties with a pre-contact history.

Across these representations, the kelp water carrier moves from an article of a domestic nature, a Heideggerian *thing-for*, to a conceptual object around which political meanings and cultural revival have been built. It is the display of this artefact in the Gallery of First Australians, both as 19th century image and contemporary construction, which allows for its meaning as an object of identity to be articulated. In other circumstances, the Great Exhibition of 1851 for example, the water carrier on display might tell a story of technology or craft techniques, or represent the practices of a foreign and curious people. All of these meanings are implicit in the water carrier on display but its juxtaposition with other objects and images allows it to function as a political statement. It is the museum curators who are the authors of this current narrative, as it was the artists who were the authors of its previous iterations. The context the museum displays the object within allows its political meaning to be revealed and the intention of the artist to be realised.

The use in the above example of an object with clear ethnographic allegiances is somewhat disingenuous: in exploiting popular perceptions of what makes an object ‘Aboriginal’, I am positioning a wider discussion of the shifting nature of objects within a clearly recognisable Indigenous domain, invoking a history of museum representation regardless of the contesting commentary offered by contemporary Aboriginal artists. Although this mechanism remains

unexamined for the moment, the question ‘what is an Aboriginal object?’ will be dealt with in subsequent chapters.

The primary aim of my research is not to investigate institutional modes of representation derived from currently held collections of ethnographic material but reflexive displays of identity which express contemporary realities, an aim in line with social history museums. In this regard, by participating in this collaborative project the NMA is seeking to fulfil its obligation to engage with diverse histories, communities and modes of representation and, in relation to the representation of Aboriginal people, to move beyond the ethnographic, through this research.

Collecting, collector, collected

In her study of the nature of collecting in the European tradition, Susan Pearce defines collecting as the gathering together and [or] setting aside of selected objects.¹¹⁹ Although display is the public iteration of a museum artefact, it is this setting aside or separating of an object from common use that is the most significant museum intervention in its life journey. The act of accessioning an object into a museum collection immediately renders the artefact conceptual, no longer able to function in the way it was originally intended: no cup and saucer that is in a museum will ever again be used for serving tea, no piece of clothing will be worn, no weapon used again in battle, except perhaps in performance and even then rarely. Although such objects may have a life beyond the museum in the future, that will be for other generations to determine. For the moment their destiny is fixed.

This separating of an object from its *thing-for* nature by sequestering it from daily activity (even if it remains in nominal use such as a precious garment worn on special occasions) renders it valuable beyond its mere material presence, its significance now determined by its role as a carrier of story. The task of this research project, “to consider Indigenous people’s agency as collectors, curators and presenters of possessions which they hold dear”, seeks to observe and record objects that have made this transition, having been removed from daily use through the act of collecting, curating, preserving; that is, they have moved through the moment of conscious

¹¹⁹ Pearce (1995):3

intervention when the owner/user/custodian decides they should be sequestered because of their conceptual value.¹²⁰ Baudrillard explains the mechanism of this shift in function when he observes:

Possession cannot apply to an implement, since the object I utilise always directs me back to the world. Rather it applies to that object once it is *divested of its function and made relative to a subject*. In this sense, all objects that are possessed submit to the same *abstractive operation* and participate in a mutual relationship in so far as they each refer back to the subject. They thereby constitute themselves as a *system*, on the basis of which the subject seeks to piece together his world, his personal microcosm.¹²¹

The system he refers to can be taken not only to mean a *collection* in the private realm but also to include projects on the scale of a national museum. It is the shift of function that Baudrillard assigns to the noun *possession* that positions objects as conceptual, not the specifics of their context.

Clearly the authors of this research task regarded the private or semi-private act of removing objects from daily use (collecting) and the objects chosen to be sequestered (collections), in this instance by Indigenous people of Australia, of interest to the museum. Keeping, treasuring, preserving and displaying are all verbs used in the proposal document to identify the quality of objects the research will be considering. By inference these will not be objects in kitchen cupboards and drawers, unseen except as articles of daily use. They will be special objects, treasured because of their *associations with the past*, as the proposal makes clear:

This research, focusing on the theme of Indigenous people as collectors and keepers of precious objects:.. [will] break new ground in its consideration of this aspect of Indigenous history-making.¹²²

and

¹²⁰ Anthropology on the other hand is often interested in objects which remain in daily use (and therefore not seen) as a way of examining a particular social group or society. See Daniel Miller's analysis of Jamaican living rooms as an example (Miller (1990)) and more widely Miller (1987); Conroy (1998); Attfield (2000); Vannini (2009)

¹²¹ Baudrillard (1994):7

¹²² Appendix 1

By considering Indigenous people as collectors, curators and presenters of beloved objects, this project will offer major new perspectives on Australian Indigenous history...”¹²³

The connection between history-making, sequestered objects and displays of representation which the authors assume in these statements is a complex web of cultural tradition, identity performance and a “political economy of taste.”¹²⁴ The terms collector, collection and collecting have deep cultural implications and histories in themselves, although as a museum’s principal activities, they are constructs closer in nature to *zeug* or *thing-for* than their intangible nature would presume. Abstract in essence, their enactment is so reflexive within the museum world that they remain largely unexamined, the daily task of enacting them making them invisible.¹²⁵ In this project, where such concepts are likely to encounter contesting world views in which notions of objects and value might not run in direct parallel, it is perhaps worth pausing to reflect on their origins and their accreted meanings.

Hoarding

Ancient, historic and contemporary material remains show that the acquiring and hoarding of valuable objects has always been a custom of the wealthy and powerful in Europe, although varying in expression and meaning through various epochs. Foucault positions the shifts in hoarding practices within the notion of ‘epistemes’ or periods of history organised around, and explicable in terms of, specific world-views and discourses; such periods are characterised by institutions, disciplines, knowledges, rules and activities consistent with those world-views.¹²⁶

Pearce intersects with Foucault’s notion of the episteme implicitly when she contends that the geographical and cultural factors underlying the European tradition

have helped to define and create the peculiarly intense relationship which [they/we] have towards the production and accumulation of goods.¹²⁷

¹²³ Ibid

¹²⁴ Appadurai (1986):44-45

¹²⁵ This is my experience as a curator in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Program at the National Museum of Australia.

¹²⁶ Foucault (1973)

¹²⁷ Pearce (1995):39

It is this peculiarly intense relationship that has led to the culture out of which contemporary interests in collecting grew. Tracing a historical line through the prehistoric European world, she cites hoards, caches and grave goods as the earliest evidence of the accumulation practices of chiefdom societies. Aligned to laws of inheritance, kinship and land ownership, complex engagements with precious objects were fundamental to the workings of governance and authority structures.

The epistemological concerns of the classical world similarly found form in the hoarding and possessing of objects. Leading figures such as Hadrian, Lausus and various members of the Byzantine court had large collections of art and *objet d'art*, as did Cicero, Mummius and Verres during the late Roman Republic. So developed was the concern for acquiring that Cicero commented of his friend Verres:

The passion for building an art collection had reached a maniacal and violent degree..

His passion was soon transformed into illness and even insanity.¹²⁸

Alongside these formal collections Roman families also accumulated personal collections of both gold and silver plate, many of them enormous. Family prestige in this epoch came to depend to some large extent on collections of silverware as a way that money could buy visible gentility. Pearce asserts that it was here for the first time the way in which heirlooms which pass from one generation to another and are a source of pride and identity, and in another sense household goods which also carry an investment value, can be observed.¹²⁹

It was during the Renaissance that the practices popularly associated with modern collecting interests fully emerged. The Renaissance collectors gathered all that had gone before them in the European tradition of possessions (after Baudrillard's use of the term), arriving at the moment in which Florentine power and influence flourished. Cosimo de Medici was not the first and not the only collector in this period but he was the most visible and certainly the most prolific (not to mention the richest). Newly wealthy and aesthetically ambitious, he amassed a collection of possessions large enough to warrant its own building and so founded what is now considered the

¹²⁸ Pearce (1995):93 citing Chevallier 1991

¹²⁹ Ibid:95

first museum in Europe, the Palazzo Medici Riccardi in Florence, in 1444.¹³⁰ The palazzo housed an extensive assortment of ‘effigies and images’, precious stones, engravings, sculptures, paintings and mosaics as well as articles from the ancient world. This private showroom of both taste and knowledge set the course for the proliferation of collections that were housed in rooms, buildings and cabinets across Europe, although such collecting practices were limited to a particular aesthetic and remained exclusively the domain of the moneyed and leisured. Coming at the conjunction of a re-emergence of interest in the classical past amongst the bourgeois class, as well as a new fashion for the flashy demonstration of wealth, princes, merchants and scholars all began to establish collections after Cosimo’s model.

Classical coins, medals, intaglios, inscriptions, fragments of buildings and sculptures were actively sought and collected for their legible importance along with codices, texts and illustrated volumes from classical times. Statues were dug out of the ground and new building sites were eagerly scanned for the pieces that might emerge... Emissaries were dispatched to search for the old neglected classical manuscripts that lay rotting in the cellars of the monasteries and cathedrals.¹³¹

By the end of the 16th century, collections had become commonplace in Europe, all of which “had the function of bringing together a number of material things and arranging them in such a way as to represent or recall either an entire or partial world picture.”¹³² These ‘Cabinets of Curiosities’, which housed objects from natural history, geology, ethnography, archaeology, religious or historical relics and works of art, flourished over the next four hundred years. Often they would contain a mix of fact and fiction, including specimens from the new world that were collected during voyages of discovery and trade.

Ordering

The Cabinet of Curiosity was the prototype of the encyclopedic museum as an institution of learning, an institution which Foucault positions as central to the ordering of knowledge. Cabinets and collections, he asserts, describe the momentum of the episteme which allowed for

¹³⁰ Hooper-Greehill (1992):23-24

¹³¹ Ibid:33

¹³² Ibid:78

the accumulating of everything, of establishing a general archive that enclosed in one place all the times, epochs, forms and tastes, but which itself sat outside time and its ravages, creating a perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place.¹³³ These cabinets sought to bring together objects which, through their simultaneity, could act to represent all the different parts of existence while at the same time ordering the material into a demonstration of knowing. The divisions and categories used to divide such collections began to take on the hue of scientific classification as taxonomic divisions were developed. One distinguished Dutch cabinet of the early 1600s for example was designed to hold objects that represented the “animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms; the four contents; every period of historical time; tools for every variety of work and pleasure; and the traditional allegories of the four seasons, the five senses, the virtues, time and place.”¹³⁴

As the Renaissance dissolved into the age of reason at the beginning of the 17th century the classificatory systems which allowed for the acceleration of scientific enquiry became the central schema for the ordering of collections. This moment of transformation saw the establishment of records and filing systems, catalogues, indexes and inventories, systems which stripped away much of the contextualising material that had accrued to things and ideas during the Renaissance.¹³⁵ The ‘age of the catalogue’ as Foucault calls it, was an acceleration away from the circular relationships of resemblance, infinitely variable, often personal towards the tabulated, documented, limited canon of order.¹³⁶ Hooper-Greehill suggests the Repository of the Royal Society in England as the apotheosis of this type of collection, set up as a self-conscious “instrument to create a new ‘truth’, a cutting tool appropriate for a new episteme.”¹³⁷

In this project a new rational language was to be created that would enable the new rational ordering of things. A universal language, able to be used by merchants, divines, and scientists, would be used to classify objectively ideas and data about natural

¹³³ Foucault (1973)

¹³⁴ Kaufmann (1978)

¹³⁵ Hooper-Greehill (1992):138

¹³⁶ Foucault (1973):131

¹³⁷ Hooper-Greehill (1992):145

phenomena in what might ‘prove the shortest and plainest way for the attainment of real knowledge, that hath been yet offered to the World’.¹³⁸

As well as a moment in which a new language of order was envisioned, the Repository of the Royal Society was also a moment in which collecting practices shifted from private to public. Founded in 1660 as an experimental science club, the group reformed as a public institution, establishing a laboratory and a ‘keeper’ or ‘curator’ to set up experiments and look after instruments.¹³⁹ Setting an agenda to compile a complete taxonomy of the knowable world, one of the founders, Thomas Sprat, wrote in 1667

that the Society was working towards a General Collection of all the Effects of Arts, and the Common, or Monstrous Works of Nature’, and that the Fellows had already drawn together into one Room, the greatest part of all the several kinds of things, that are scatter’d throughout the Universe.’¹⁴⁰

The emphasis in the collection was on the malformed and monstrous natural history specimens, including a chicken with four legs, a one-eyed colt, and even a gigantic cucumber.¹⁴¹

The attempt to catalogue the whole of nature failed, yet as Hooper-Greenhill notes, that failure led to the creation of a museum that,

although it did not act as a scientific databank for information, did act as a compilation and repository of the values of rarity, pleasure, and curiosity. As such it related to other contemporary elements that included personal cabinets, ostentatious display, and social gain through the possession of unusual things.¹⁴²

The segue between the prototype encyclopaedic collection and the public museum as an institutional holder of knowledge came through the person of Sir Hans Sloane, one time secretary and later President of the Royal Society. One of the greatest collectors of his era, Sloane spent the considerable income he earned as a popular London physician on books,

¹³⁸ Ibid

¹³⁹ Ornstein (1938):67

¹⁴⁰ Hunter (1989)

¹⁴¹ Arnold (2006)

¹⁴² Hooper-Greehill (1992):159

manuscripts, art, coins, and natural history specimens of every kind, often buying whole collections from contemporary botanists and zoologists. His collection, housed in several rooms at his mansion in Bloomsbury, was open to the public by appointment. Sloane's contact with other Royal Society Fellows and the Repository influenced not only his collecting activities, but his strong commitment to compiling systematic and accurate catalogues. Sloane left a will specifying on his death in 1753 that his collections be offered for sale, first to the King and then to the Royal Society, with the hope that they would be kept as one collection. The Parliament voted to take over the material at which time it became the foundation of the British Museum, the zenith of the encyclopaedic museum and the model on which museums were based for the next 200 years.¹⁴³

This development as it played out in England was echoed in Europe where the French revolution similarly transformed the emerging field of museology. In the place of private collections housed in the palaces of princes and the homes of scholars, collecting rooms were transformed into public spaces open to the whole community.¹⁴⁴ Then,

once 'museums' had been set up in a regular geographic network in France, they were established in other parts of Europe ... to allow the people to enjoy the collections that had previously been reserved for the elite.¹⁴⁵

Milan, Antwerp, Brussels all transformed private collections into public institutions and "spaces for storage and accumulation were re-articulated as spaces for exposure and exhibition."¹⁴⁶

Science was similarly the discourse of ordering, with the *Académie des Sciences* in Paris providing salaries for research workers and lavish facilities for experiments which in turn fed into the taxonomic project of the museum and out into the public arena through the instrument of public display. Similarly, as the edges of the known world contracted, oddities from the New World became desired collectibles and objects of fascination, encouraging further engagement with the newly emerging 'museum' audiences.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ MacGregor (1994)

¹⁴⁴ Hooper-Greehill (1992):167-191

¹⁴⁵ Ibid:184

¹⁴⁶ Ibid

¹⁴⁷ See Shelton (1994)

Displaying

Despite collections of fossils and other relics of the deep past being valued elements of cabinet and curio collections, the term ‘prehistory’ was not in common usage until coined by Scottish artist and antiquary Daniel Wilson in 1851, as the disciplines of geology, palaeontology, prehistoric archaeology and anthropology, developed. These areas of enquiry signalled an epistemic shift that re-ordered understandings of previous epochs, thinking taken up by museums as they split either into separate institutions along disciplinary lines or into departments within larger institutions – art, natural history, anatomy, botany, geology, zoology, ethnography and so forth.¹⁴⁸

As these new types of disciplinary museums flourished in the final decades of the 19th century, they played a key role in rendering understandings of the past visible and knowable in two ways: firstly as the ‘laboratory’ for the emerging disciplines, “providing the contexts in which the new pasts they organised could become thinkable and perceptible as new realities;” and second for “the part played by [their] exhibition practices ... in translating these pasts into a significant component of late 19th century public culture.”¹⁴⁹ While these developments both affected and involved museums internationally, their sway was greatest in Britain where they came to have a potent influence on late Victorian public culture. Suddenly, limitless vistas of pasts

going back beyond human existence, let alone memory, came rapidly into view as the once mute traces they had left behind were made eloquent through the application of new methods of analysis and interpretation.¹⁵⁰

These new methods included, most radically, the evolutionary theories proposed by Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer. Despite being fiercely contested, evolutionary thinking was championed by various luminaries within the science community and became fundamental to the thinking about the deep past at the very moment that such a past was coming into view. While disciplinary museums were the ‘laboratories’ for this radical new thinking, they were also the means of its articulation: the sorting and displaying of material in sequences was the method of evidencing evolutionary thinking in the material world, an enactment of the reasoning and a

¹⁴⁸ Alexander (1979)

¹⁴⁹ Bennett (2004):152

¹⁵⁰ Ibid

demonstration of its hypothesis. The lead proponent of this technique was Lieutenant-General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers, scion of a wealthy Yorkshire land-owning family and zealous collector of archaeological and ethnographic material. Amassing over 30,000 objects during the course of his life, he was well able to demonstrate his method from within his own holdings. To this end, the objects were

arranged in sequence with a view to show... the successive ideas by which the minds of men in a primitive condition of culture have progressed in the development of their arts from the simple to the complex, and from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous ...

Human ideas as represented by the various products of human industry, are capable of classification into genera, species and varieties in the same manner as the products of the vegetable animal kingdoms. If, therefore we can obtain a sufficient number of objects to represent the succession of ideas, it will be found that they are capable of being arranged in museums upon a similar plan.¹⁵¹

This style of arrangement was a revolutionary innovation in museum design and became the standard display configuration for the next 100 years. Pitt Rivers was celebrated as the pioneer who demonstrated how reliable human history could be built up bit by bit, in the shelves and show-cases of a museum; it was he ... who pressed home the study of living primitive peoples as a clue to the customs, myths and beliefs of our long dead ancestors.¹⁵²

This thinking became critically important as ideas of man's progression sounded into public understandings of scientific discourses.

Following the lead and the model of British institutions, colonial governments in each of the Australian states developed major public museums between the 1870s and 1890s.¹⁵³ Beginning with general collections, their focus increasingly shifted to ethnological collections, gathering pace as the fields of anthropology and archaeology developed towards the beginning of the 20th century. This shift was inspired by the emerging museology of Lieutenant-General Pitt Rivers, whose efforts were in turn furthered by material collected in Australia. The thinking which

¹⁵¹ Pitt Rivers (1874):xi - xii

¹⁵² Bennett (2004):65, quoting Keith 1913

¹⁵³ Kohlstedt (1983)

favoured typological categorising of objects, particularly ethnographic objects, of which Pitt Rivers was the most famous proponent, became increasingly dominant in both the fledgling Australian collections and the museological theory that guided their display, mostly through the agency of Baldwin Spencer.

The appointment of Spencer as Honorary Director of the National Museum of Victoria in 1899 was a defining moment in the development of Australian museology. Spencer's already ignited interest in ethnography had been stimulated during the Horn scientific exploring expedition to central Australia in 1894 when he joined the company as zoologist and photographer. It was on this trip that he met the Alice Springs postmaster Frank Gillen, who had been making his own ethnographic observations during his desert deployment. The two men formed a highly effective research partnership and in 1896 they mounted the most intensive field-work expedition ever attempted in Australia at that time. The resultant publication, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899), had an enormous influence on the developing theories of social evolution which positioned Aboriginal people as the most primitive in order of development.¹⁵⁴ By the time Spencer was appointed to the directorship of the museum, he was on the cusp of an international reputation as an expert in ethnography and social evolution, two fields that were increasingly convergent. The ripples of global influence emanating from Spencer continued through other specialist commentators working in similar fields, for example that of James Frazer who consulted Spencer extensively in the development of his equally significant study of comparative folklore, magic and religion *The Golden Bough*.¹⁵⁵

By the time of his appointment as director of the National Museum of Victoria in 1899, Spencer had developed a cohesive approach to the display of Aboriginal material culture. Drawing on his prior training at the Pitt Rivers Museum, he set about re-organising the processes of the NMV, beginning with a move to integrate its collections with those of the public library as a means of stressing its place in the development of knowledge. He then relocated the Museum's holdings of Aboriginal materials to the natural history section and installed the objects in an arrangement that

¹⁵⁴ Spencer and Gillen (1938)

¹⁵⁵ Mulvaney (1990)

demonstrated evolutionary principals.¹⁵⁶ These theories explained the decline in Indigenous population of the colonised world as a natural rather than violent process.¹⁵⁷



Figure 17. Baldwin Spencer's exhibition of the evolution of the Aboriginal boomerang¹⁵⁸

This conjunction of developing social theory, global notoriety and public display was a powerful mix that coagulated into the status quo for both exhibiting and thinking about Aboriginal material culture for the next 100 years (and which, according to Rodney Harrison as mentioned in the introduction, is still shockingly current). Spencer's arrangements of artefacts were extant in the Museum of Victoria until midway through the second half of the 20th century, and his 'evolutionary evidence' approach to display dominated Australian museums well into the 1980s.

Show us your stuff

Beginning then with the setting aside or separating of an object from common use, thus rendering it a *possession*, through to the role of museums in the construction of public discourse, this research project is deeply entangled in culturally specific behaviours around material culture. This in no way implies that other cultures do not also practice some or even all of these

¹⁵⁶ Mulvaney and Calaby (1985)

¹⁵⁷ Dauber (2006):71

¹⁵⁸ Bennett (2004):176, figure 7.1

activities, but in leading towards the National Museum of Australia, an undeniably distinct path through particular contexts can be followed. This trail of epistemological traces leads not just to the establishment of this social history museum (as discussed in chapter 7) but to the research proposal it produced to which this thesis is a response. In the light of this understanding then the proposition “[to] consider Indigenous people as collectors, curators and presenters of beloved objects, [in order to develop] new perspectives on Australian Indigenous history” might be re-phrased to ask the question of Aboriginal people: “how do you do what we do?” This uncovering of the subject/object positions implicit in the original proposal might be uncomfortable in such a bald re-framing, but by revealing the inner workings of the proposition a space is made for an alternative ontology to emerge.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁹ Appendix 1

5. Pear shaped

She has by now heard it many times before, but I explain my research to Deanna again, recording it onto the tape recorder. My pitch to her centres on the National Museum of Australia and its concern to broaden its interest in the project of Indigenous social history through its National Historical Collection. The research proposal is straightforward enough: Aboriginal people are, understandably, given the history of collecting in Australia, stereotypically seen as ‘museum victims’ whose precious possessions and ancestral remains have been acquired by sometimes greedy institutions for the purposes of examination, classification and display. By asking Aboriginal people to speak about the objects they hold dear, the power of that relationship will be reversed allowing new narratives to emerge. It sounds easy.

Deanna has visited and enjoyed the museum in Canberra and she understands the proposal. She nods politely, trying to find a response. ‘What sort of things?’ she asks. ‘Anything’, I say, ‘anything that tells about history, reminds you of the past, was handed down in your family, that you kept as a memento or you were given, or you thought was important enough to keep.’ She nods again and stands to put the kettle on. She’s struggling not to disappoint me. Firstly, she explains, her family moved around when she was a kid, each time starting anew from cooking pots up. And although she now has a lovely home of which she is justifiably proud, it was not always the case. As she struggled to raise her own nine children on Wallaga Lake mission and later in Nowra, similar circumstances prevailed. Keeping things was a luxury she never had the means to indulge. Nevertheless, I notice the china cabinet in the lounge room, the sideboard in the dining room, and the dressing table in the spare room are all full with what are obviously mementos, trinkets and collectables. I ask her to tell me about her ‘bits and pieces’ and she takes me on a tour around the house. “Jimmy picked this up from the tip” she tells me, pointing to a framed print of a Russell Drysdale painting – two figures in a streetscape. “I know it was done by a white artist but they remind me of Kooris.” Next are a couple of framed posters commemorating the opening of the Perisher Blue ski resort at which she gave the welcome to country. Gifts from children and grandchildren, bargains from sales and op shops, knick-knacks salvaged from garage sales and the poker-work boomerang all have their place. But Deanna

herself doesn't identify any of these as being particularly precious or precious enough to attribute something as important as 'history' to. What's important is already on my tape.

Over the next few months I visit six or seven more homes, several of them belonging to Deanna's grown children, others of relatives from within the extended family as well as friends and neighbours – wherever the contacts lead. Each time I explain that the project is part of the Museum's interests in Aboriginal social and material history and I ask about objects and history in as many different ways I can think of. Each time I ask, people try to think of something to help and suggest collections that immediately come to mind. Jimmy for example keeps a few old mobile phones in a gym bag in the garage, fascinated at the way in which the technology evolved; someone's son, like many young guys his age, keeps a collection of polyfoam stubby holders on a bookshelf in his bedroom; another lady further up the coast collects china frogs as decorations. In each house I am shown personal mementos, often proudly purchased 'bargains' from garage sales and op shops, or objects found miraculously on the side of the road – decorative elements that are about homemaking and domestic life. But when I explain the project, there is no resonance with the idea of objects as carriers of narrative, or with material culture and history as being particularly important to each other. As I am from the University and/or Museum (I leave the distinction intentionally blurred), they know there is an opportunity for representation and my interviewees quickly move on to topics of more interest – there are good stories to tell that need recording. I leave the tape going and let the conversations wander where they will.

Although I am developing a great archive of recorded material, the lack of engagement with the topic is an ongoing problem. It did not resonate with the Karri Yalla artists, and it is not resonating with Deanna and her generation. Perhaps it is my expectation. Like any community, there are bound to be people who are more interested in the project of keeping 'history' than others. I hear rumours of collections just outside my reach. A curator from the museum tells me about an old lady up in Griffith who turned her house into a keeping place, a nest of memorabilia from a life lived in the struggles of the land rights movement and the emergence of a national Aboriginal identity; I read a story by Margaret Somerville about an old cardboard suitcase with granny's clay pipe and dilly bag in it, stored lovingly under a bed; in her article *Aboriginal*

Family History, Maria Nugent footnotes a footnote from the *Australians and the Past* survey, citing two Aboriginal women who “explained that they each had their own little keeping places at home, where they kept mementos from the past. One woman talked about keeping some clothes belonging to her mother.”¹⁶⁰ How do I find these people?

Even though I’ve not managed to engage anyone with the idea of objects as historical vectors, I’ve now been around long enough to know that group activities are what piques people’s interest. Fishing, basket weaving workshops, barbeques, music festivals, community days are all enjoyable and well attended activities. Perhaps I need to frame my research as a community project if I want to drum up some engagement. Besides, the idea of a group enterprise brings other benefits. Rather than me going into people’s homes and asking questions, a public event allows people to speak directly into an authorized communal space already recognizable from within existing regional and local networks such as Elders groups, church groups and so on. This idea mimics the rationale behind contemporary museums which set out to create mutually agreed spaces out of multiple contributions, where objects are contextualized within a larger narrative which offer access and identification with the story. All I need is the means to bring people together and the project can begin:

¹⁶⁰ Somerville and Cohen (1990):147-149; Nugent (2003):146, fn 14

HISTORY PARTY

Date:

Location:

Have you got a special something hanging round at home that you would like to bring to our 'History Party'? We're looking for people to bring along their favourite objects and spin a yarn about their history...

Maybe you've kept your old footy jumper. What a great story that would make – the year you NEARLY won the cup!

Or maybe you've still got Gran's old pudding bowl. If only it could talk – how many stories of Christmas in the old days it could tell.

You might have saved an old poster or button from a protest or some tools from your trade.

Or maybe it is something that you inherited from the family.

Perhaps you just like to collect things – dolls, china, old fishing rods, who knows?

Whatever it is, if you think it is special and it tells a part of your history, bring it along. We're collecting Koori history for our 'Lost and Found' History Festival so come and lend your voice. We'll record your story and photograph you and your object. At the end, we'll collect up all the histories and put on an exhibition in Bega during NAIDOC week. You'll get a copy of the photos and your story on CD and a copy of the exhibition catalogue – because you'll be in it!

The recordings will also be used for our ABC radio documentary series called 'Lost and Found'. Listen out for it on Local ABC Radio (Eden 106.3 FM, Bega 810 AM, Batemans Bay 103.5 FM)

So join in and help us get the word out about Koori history in the area. Bring the family, bring an object and bring a story to our 'History Party' and be part of making history.

For further information you can contact Christine Hansen on 0438 203 445 or at Christine.hansen@anu.edu.au

Lost and Found

South East Koori History Festival

The 'Lost and Found' Koori History Festival is a community project planned to run over the first six months of 2006 within the Bega Valley region. Focusing on contemporary and living histories, the project aims to celebrate the depth and breadth of Koori influence in the region's character and the ways in which local histories are both preserved and communicated within families and communities.

Early in the year a series of 'history parties' will be held at libraries, keeping places, churches, school halls, or any other place where Koori people like to get together. Participants will be invited to bring an object that represents a moment of history – be it personal history, family history, community history or even an aspect of national and international history. As part of these events, participants will volunteer a story to which the objects relate. These stories will be recorded and photographs of the people and their objects will be taken. The audio recordings of the stories will be edited into 5-10 minute episodes of a radio documentary series. This series, under the name 'Lost and Found' will be played weekly on the Local ABC Radio Network (Bega), beginning in February and finishing in the first week of July.

The project will culminate in an exhibition held in the Bega Gallery during NAIDOC week. This multi-media collection of photographs of objects and their accompanying narratives, when viewed as a whole, will provide insight into history-telling practices within the local Indigenous community by focusing not just on oral histories, but on material culture and the ways in which objects are used to carry historical narratives. In this way, the exhibition will mirror strategies employed by contemporary museums, creating in effect a temporary mini-museum of local living Koori history.

As part of the 2006 NAIDOC celebrations, the exhibition will be launched with a major function at the Bega Gallery, attended by dignitaries from the area as well as all the 'history party' participants and their families. The entire festival of 'Lost and Found', including the radio series, the exhibition and the launch function, sets out to invite the Indigenous community into an environment in which their lives and histories are publicly celebrated.

For further information you can contact Christine Hansen on 0438 203 445 or at christine.hansen@anu.edu.au

The local ABC Radio network thinks this is a terrific idea and within moments of receiving my email, the morning show producer is on the line and I'm on air. The Bega Regional Gallery is happy for me to put in an exhibition proposal for the use of their gallery space and the Bega branch of the South East Region Arts Council funded by the NSW Ministry for the Arts offers assistance with applications and funding, although a friend makes an unkind sotto voce remark about my 'Antiques Roadshow' methodology. I'm inclined to agree but it is worth a try. I'm getting desperate.

A couple of the ladies who work in the office wander over to the table in the gardens of the Umbarra Aboriginal Culture Centre at Wallaga Lake to see if there is any action. The microphone and digital recorder are set up on the table, the camera is on the tripod and afternoon tea is spread out ready for the 'party'. The only action so far is the flies landing on the icing of the Boston bun. I try to engage the by-standers in conversation about the project. They think it is a great idea. They hope some people turn up. They themselves don't have anything but they'd be interested in what other people might have. I offer them some cake anyway. I wait an hour or so more before admitting defeat but eventually it is more embarrassing staying than going.

I try again in Eden a week later with the same result, despite the fact that I have rung my contacts in the town and personally invited them, have in fact been given assurances that they would turn up. I leave flyers with people I know and ask them to pass them on. No one rings.

I return to Canberra beaten. People are not engaging with the project, and I've exhausted all the different ways I can think of to express it. Perhaps it is my question that I need to start questioning. The original project proposed to the ARC was to investigate "the material objects that Indigenous people collect, display and hold dear within their homes and communities with consideration of the personal, family and collective significance of these items." Certainly I have seen objects collected, displayed and held dear. But when I ask people about them, they are mystified as to why I would be interested.

I conclude that the responses I am getting are either because of my inability to explain the research properly or a conceptual misfit is emerging. This project is based on the notion that collecting or preserving objects that hold narratives or meanings of the past is a historiographic practice that crosses cultural boundaries. The obstruction I am hitting brings that assumption into question. What are the veiled cultural beliefs that are concealed in such an overly familiar concept? The assumption that objects displayed and held dear are at the same time objects which hold “personal, family and collective significance” is not being supported by my experience. In order to understand the root of the problem, I need to take a step back and examine the origins of the question and to pick apart the unintentional but deeply ingrained ontological bias that frames this project.

I have known all along that the ladies of the south coast, like the rest of us, have lives that are littered with objects of indeterminate status that hang around in garages, cupboards and wardrobes - slightly too important to throw out, but not quite important enough to be offered to a researcher as evidence of history or as emblematic of cultural identity. So what is the moment in which these things transition into objects that have been ‘collected’, or ‘preserved’ or recognized as being significant? In this instance I am not looking to be the agent of that transition myself by identifying objects to which I could point and say ‘this carries an important historical meaning’. That is not to say that such intervention is never warranted. Quite patently museums not only have an interest in finding the means of appropriate representation but have a duty to do so. If that requires actively pursuing objects that are not held in current collections then that is appropriate and justified. This project is not about my agency as a curator however, but seeks to identify the ways in which the people I am speaking with use objects to “sustain a sense of dignity and purpose [where collected objects become] both autobiography and monument.”¹⁶¹

But this form of autobiography and/or monument seems not to have resonance with the Aboriginal people of south-east New South Wales of whom I have asked my questions. As much

¹⁶¹ Pearce 95:254

as the aims of this project are in keeping with the practices of the museum, and to be honest my own, it is not inspiring connections or insight in any of the people I've spoken to.

The way museums move objects between the personal and the public might be the first clue to the conceptual misfit I am experiencing in the field. Usually, ordinary objects of every day use go through a process of being employed before becoming worn out and discarded. However, occasionally events interrupt these flows when ordinary objects may, for some essentially irrational reason, survive. As Pearce observes:

Partly worn saucepans, for example, in the possession of their owner at death, escape the dustbin by moving through a house clearance sale. They become part of the world of rubbish, as does the collected ordinary in the eyes of the world, and, like all rubbish, take their chances of resurrection in the form of re-collecting.¹⁶²

An example of transformation in status of an object from junk to cherished is currently on display at the NMA in the exhibition *From Little Things Big Things Grow: fighting for Indigenous rights 1920-1970*. In curating the exhibition, the question of how to tell the story of a no longer existing mission station was raised. Through contacts in the community, a piece of tin formerly used as cladding for a hut on the Hollywood Mission site at Yass, NSW, was identified and a team of museum professionals was sent out to pick it up. In the intervening years the tin had been re-employed as the side wall of a chicken coop. The white gloved museum conservators nevertheless prised the tin off the chicken coop and gently laid it in a padded transport vehicle before removing it to the lab where the chicken poo was cleaned off with small instruments. This object, for all its modest material presence, tells the story of the mission huts in a way that is both direct and emotional. For the old mission residents who once lived in the huts, seeing the piece of tin overwhelms them with memories. For those who are seeking to learn, the tin evokes the materiality of the time and place in a way that text alone struggles to replicate. Social history museums such as the NMA are full of these kinds of objects. They tell stories of the working lives of ordinary people who are either exemplars of their experience (such as

¹⁶² Pearce (1995):382

migrant stories or working/labour stories) or they belonged to people who became famous during their lifetime, adding the history of their achievements to the provenance of the objects

In the private world collected material which comes from the personal past, although “capable of expressing and embodying profound meaning and deep feelings”, circulates in a different domain.¹⁶³ Bringing it into focus by presenting it as the carrier of a particular story would require a shift in the status of the object from a private and perhaps unarticulated meaning to a public or semi-public meaning, where the memory or narrative is shared and understood by others, including, perhaps, strangers. The objects which this research is asking about then, will, I hope, sit somewhere between these two domains – objects of everyday use that have survived and in surviving have become historic, and objects of personal meaning which hold feelings and memories of people and times past.

The way in which museums shift the hierarchy of an object from the private to the public means that the very idea of an object which carries meaning is linked to that of a museum ‘artefact’ with all its associated baggage. This link in turn evokes notions of representation and the requirement of such objects to tell big stories on a big stage. Maybe this is why the objects I could see so clearly on display in people’s homes were not offered for inspection; it was not that they weren’t loved or did not have meaning; it is that they weren’t representational enough. What my research participants knew explicitly, and which I only later realised, is that any whitefella asking about Aboriginal people’s private possessions, particularly one with the kind of institutional associations that I have, is necessarily asking about the site at which their possessions intersect with the wider narrative of Aboriginal history and the representation of cultural identity.

As a social history museum, the NMA is interested in representing the diversity of Australian experience, with a heavy emphasis on the nation’s first peoples, as it should as our premier and unashamedly nation-building cultural institution. However, although the Museum has abundant ethnographic material, objects that adequately narrate the story of 20th century south eastern

¹⁶³ Pearce (1995):243

Aboriginal life are by and large missing. This is not a situation unique to the NMA or Australia. Museums across the world that are struggling to find ways of representing Indigenous people appropriately are encountering the same ‘hole’, as veteran curator and consultant to the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian at its establishment (as she was to the NMA) Elaine Heumann Gurian has found:

Often the people in the lowest economic strata could hardly wait to exchange their objects for those that were more valued, giving no thought, at the time, to the preservation of the discarded material. So it goes for most peoples during their most impoverished historical periods.¹⁶⁴

The reasons for a lack of engagement with the *idea* of objects as historical record in this research however may be more complicated than the narrative of poverty suggests. Objects of everyday use are not easy to translate into objects of representation by the people who use them every day, no matter what their circumstances. Furthermore, everyday objects which might be useful as a means of telling stories about mission life, work or political struggle did not delineate the type of cultural distinctiveness that was an important element in maintaining a unique identity for many Kooris during the 20th century. Making ‘exotica’ such as boomerangs and woven baskets for tourists was a much more productive assertion of cultural distinctiveness than collecting and preserving commonly used familiar objects.¹⁶⁵

Another element in this disjuncture is that the museum’s dependence on the static nature of objects sits in opposition to the community’s more fluid engagement with the material world. The inability of the museum’s collection to narrate complex Indigenous histories of the south east, in as much as they are characterised by their interactions with and absorption of other cultural influences, is expressed as a lack or an absence. This absence frames the discussion about Indigenous material culture that sits outside an easily recognisable ethnographic context more generally, where Aboriginal people’s possessions that do not reference a pre-contact culture have not been seen as valuable. These notions of either value or absence disallow the ontological alternative in which material culture is not conceived of as static but as the carrier of process, where objects take their rightful place in the cycles of creation and decay to be re-made

¹⁶⁴ Gurian (2001):78

¹⁶⁵ See for example references to boomerang making in Kleinert (2006) and Nugent (2005)

and in the re-making to be invigorated. In an historical context Dawn Casey points out “the materials used to make [certain] items including bark, wood, grasses and feathers did not last and in some instances the destruction of objects were part of ceremony.”¹⁶⁶ Australian Aboriginal cultures are not alone in this. David Lowenthal offers a diverse range of examples to demonstrate the same point:

“When the product is preserved and venerated, the impulse to repeat the process is compromised,” wrote Chinua Achebe of Nigerian art. ... Museum retention of Melanesian churinga is likewise distressful; these artifacts, essential in tribal exchange rituals, must be destroyed after use so that new churinga can be made. The human life-cycle requires reiterated creation, exchange, and destruction of forms that embody or host beings.¹⁶⁷

In south-east Australia, the way objects remain in circulation within Aboriginal communities is a means of expressing kinship, community cohesion and shared participation, a cultural practice which remains extant. A Murri friend from Brisbane for example, takes great pleasure in telling me stories about seeing her possessions unexpectedly in the houses of friends and relatives and the way in which the recognition of the object’s journey is a source of great amusement to all parties.

Both intentional disposability and the cultural imperative for circulation work against the static nature of museum artefacts where the emphasis is on preservation and removing objects from circulation. The non-discursive evocation of the past that objects offer and which is so enjoyed by museum audiences is thrown into relief as a culturally specific practice when viewed against alternative attitudes to material culture. This disjuncture played into early representations of Aboriginal people in museums, where the proof of their ‘primitiveness’ was on display in the form of their objects. As anthropologists Peterson, Hamby and Allen point out:

Aboriginal people and their ways of life captured the European imagination not least because they were seen as humans in the chrysalis phase. Their nakedness, their lack of material possessions... confirmed this. It took nearly a hundred years... before it was

¹⁶⁶ Casey (2006)

¹⁶⁷ Lowenthal (2005):396

realised that this material simplicity was juxtaposed with great cultural and social complexity.¹⁶⁸

Although anthropologists may have examined this social complexity in great detail, the understanding of the ways in which objects circulate in contemporary urban contexts, which can be seen as an extant cultural process, has not been credited in Indigenous material culture studies.

The contest between flexible and adaptive relationships with material heritage and western heritage regimes such as heritage registers and institutions of conservation such as museums are not exclusive to an Australian context but are present in many communities that have remained in place. Archaeologist Denis Byrne experienced a similar disjuncture during his research in the Philippines, where he was exposed to the distance between western heritage regimes and Indigenous knowledge systems, where local participants viewed the archaeological or heritage record as part of the spirit world of which the material remains were the least important aspect.¹⁶⁹ Similarly James Clifford offers an example of the divergence between museums' preservation agendas and a more direct relationship to the impermanent nature of artefacts, when antique Zuni war-god figures repatriated from a museum collection in the south-west of the United States were allowed to rot on sacred ground, much to the horror of the curators, thus, according to the Zuni, completing their "interrupted traditional life journey."¹⁷⁰

The lack of engagement with my research question within the community forced me to think about the project in a new way. Particularly pertinent was consideration of the extent to which the museum is not just infused with, but is in fact a product of, deeply embedded cultural assumptions about the material world. Clearly, at least to my mind, there was an ontological mismatch at the root of this research project which caused the questions I was asking to fail. Yet despite this failure, the questions did not set up a contest between these alternative world views, where one way of thinking dominated the other. In fact, somewhat counter-intuitively, the reverse was set in train.. As a social history museum, the NMA is committed to its task of

¹⁶⁸ Peterson, Allen et al. (2008):1

¹⁶⁹ Byrne (1993), Byrne (2005)

¹⁷⁰ Clifford (1997):212

representing Australian society and Indigenous representation plays a central role in that endeavour. Likewise community, like many other Aboriginal communities, are interested in being represented and understand that the National Museum is an important venue of high cultural standing in which to have a voice. Although goodwill extends from both sides, the problem is that the medium, the objects through which a conjunction of intentions can take place, is missing.

The disjuncture I encountered between the notion of ‘collecting’ and the material culture interests of the community into forces me back into the origins of the project within the museum. The assumption about the primacy of the material world which underpins this study is not immediately apparent from within the institution. Out in the field it becomes glaringly obvious that I am asking questions from within a paradigm that is deeply embedded in centuries of western thinking. The whole enterprise of object based narratives in the context of a museum assumes a centrality of the material that is so natural as to be almost unrecognisable. That doesn’t mean that these particular Aboriginal people have no interest in how they are represented or in material culture or museums generally. On the contrary, like the rest of the population, they enjoy visiting museums as a leisure time activity, particularly if Indigenous people are represented, and respond with just as much interest to historical objects as any other group. But outside of their interest as an audience, their own historiographical practices are not symmetrically aligned with those of the museum in the way that the research questions of this project assume.

Although my observations lead me to a new understanding of the relationship between material culture and history in this community, I realise that picking apart the reasons for the failure of my question is an impossible task. It might be that the people I’ve been speaking to are mistrusting of me because I come from an institution such as a museum or a university and, given the history between us, are not comfortable revealing what they consider to be their treasures. Or it might be that poverty has played the major role in the dearth of what families would consider heirloom objects and that the forced migration between missions and reserves that characterises 20th century Aboriginal history of the south east made keeping objects almost

impossible. It might also be that the way objects circulate in this community is in itself a mark of a distinctive cultural practice, where the emphasis is on relationship rather than preservation or ownership. It might be that my research results are specific to this community and had I asked the same question in another place, Brewarrina or Kempsey or Tamworth for example, I would have had an entirely different outcome. On the other hand the failure of my question might have nothing to do with the specifics of the Aboriginal community but might equally have emerged from within the wider community amongst people of European and other descent. All I can be sure about is that if I was to arrive at a definitive understanding of the reasons for the failure of my question I would need to test all of these variables against each other and against other similar research, a massive undertaking that would ultimately contribute very little. Instead I decide to move on from my original question about objects and identity and to try and find a more useful engagement with the community.

Family history

Having asked a question about the connection between objects and history which was not resonant with or relevant to the interests of the community, I needed to reframe the project in a way that was interesting. I began my next discussion with Deanna on a different tack, by asking about the importance the past has for her. The answer, predictably, was complex and difficult and began with her reflecting on her own history. She told me about growing up in Wreck Bay and on Cowra Mission, working in hospitals as a domestic and later for the Aboriginal Health Service as a driver, raising nine children, fighting for rights, becoming a recognised traditional owner in her later years. She had a swag of stories about her own experiences and those of her parents but as the discussion progressed over the following weeks we stretched beyond living memory and we turned to the literature to try and fill in some of the gaps. Immediately we hit the obstacle that pioneering historian of Indigenous lives Dianne Barwick identified in 1981 when she observed that

Most aborigines grow up learning two kinds of history; the memories preserved by their families and the humiliating textbook history ... which denies the realities of their past and present.¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ Barwick (1981):75

In this instance, ‘the humiliating textbook history’ documents the sad extinction of the Ngarigo with the passing of the ‘last full blood’ in 1914. (A full discussion of this literature follows in chapter 13). Not only is this humiliating, it is wrong. Deanna has lived her life knowing the lie within this historical narrative of extinguishment. For me, the experience of reading the texts in the presence of someone who is directly affected by the story they preserve was distressing. This was my first flesh and blood engagement with the deep and ongoing hurt that legitimising processes (such as history writing) can cause. My own blithe approach to reading and thinking about history was thrown into relief by this engagement with Deanna’s reality and I suddenly saw the naivety in the original research question. The primary concern for Deanna and her family is to challenge their erasure and assert their presence. Understanding both the depth of the hurt and the enormity of challenging the dominant narrative puts my project into perspective. It is clear that history is a battleground, not a mantelpiece where mementoes rest in peace. The museum will have to wait its turn.

By the time I understand this, Deanna and I have become friends. We live within a couple of blocks of each other in one of the outer suburbs of Canberra and pop around to each other’s houses on the way to or from the shops. We chat about all manner of things but most importantly we discuss what she would like to get out of this project. Over and over she comes back to the sadness of her mother’s removal from country and family as a young girl. So much was lost in that removal; the stories, the language, the knowledge of country, the experience of family and the unspoken transmission of belonging. What Deanna wants is to connect those pieces up again in a family history. It might result in a book about the women of the Monaro or it might be a genealogy that traces the family back past the dismembering removal. Whatever it is, it will counter the lie of extinction.

I begin to be excited by the project again as its potential dawns on me. Exactly as Deanna specifies, a family history is what is needed, a lineage of named individuals with identities and histories that can penetrate the black mist. No longer ‘the Aborigines’ or ‘the natives’, but black tracker Alex Brindle, his brother-in-law and colleague Billy Rutherford, their fathers James Brindle and Billy Rutherford snr., their mothers Lizzy Bradshaw and Emily Peters. The mist clears to reveal named characters who navigate their way through the familiar terrain of the

Monaro Plains and Snowy Mountains, rendering it strange again, a forgotten historical landscape.