'A Box of Native Things':
Ethnographic Collectors
and the
South Australian Museum, 1830s - 1930s

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INTRODUCTION TO PART ONE

COLONIALISM AND THE ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM
(CHAPTERS ONE TO FIVE)

This thesis gives an account of one of the world's great colonial collections. At its broadest it describes a process affecting the conduct of relations between Europe and its colonies across the world throughout and beyond the age of exploration. At its narrowest it describes particular transactions yielding ethnomodern objects, which took place between Aborigines and Europeans during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

No forum has crystallised relations between coloniser and colonised more clearly than the ethnographic museum. Referring to such seminal texts as C.B. MacPherson's *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (1962) and J. Baudrillard's *Le Systeme des objets* (1968), a number of recent studies have focused upon ethnographic collecting as a crucial element in the formation of western identity. This discourse has identified ethnographic museums as crucibles in which events of the colonial era reacted and left their trace. As residues of those events, ethnographic collections have often been discussed as 'cultural property', with implicit overtones of misappropriation. Particular histories of appropriation associated with the Elgin Marbles, the Benin Bronzes or other iconic colonial collections are imputed to ethnographic collections in general. The greater the apparent disjunction between coloniser and colonised, the readier has been the implication of cultural theft. In the eyes of some analysts, even visitors to these museums are complicit. Torgovnik writes:

Why should we pretend that the contemplation of tribal art by European artists, aestheticians and audiences was politically neutral? Conditioned by control and condescension, fear and contempt, such relationships were not coolly or purely aesthetic, even when occurring far from tribal territories, in settings seemingly void of political implications (though actually rich in such implications), like museums, galleries, and homes.¹

This thesis suggests that such critiques of ethnographic museums require revision. Said's 'Orientalist' paradigm and Foucauldian discourse have tended to circumscribe the meanings of ethnographic objects, constituting them only through relationships of power arising from an interplay of colonial domination and subordination. That broad analysis has been applied to Aboriginal/European history as to other colonial histories.² But while the construction of cultural colonialism may be applicable to a generalised interpretation of Aboriginal/European history, the nearer one approaches the frontier of contact the less useful it appears. Notwithstanding the power relations which underpinned daily encounters between
Aborigines and Europeans, those encounters were also formed through pragmatism, opportunism and the gamut of understandings and misunderstandings accompanying a rich diversity of contact.

This study examines the developing role of the South Australian Museum as a repository for ethnographic objects garnered on the Aboriginal/European frontier. The data shows that while this museum may have been created by the forces of colonialism, its profile was shaped through the subsequent actions and transactions of its collectors. In the case of ethnographic material, these transactions occurred mainly on the colonial frontier. This fact necessarily provokes a re-examination of the frontier's role in Aboriginal/European history. A characterisation of that frontier as a line which separates cultures, explicit and implicit in much recent writing about Aboriginal history, seems inappropriate to this analysis. As Rees has observed, in constructing a 'resistance' model of Aboriginal history, Reynolds, Loos and others have 'not been so interested in documenting and highlighting that other major characteristic of Aboriginal-European interaction: accommodation'. The many hundreds of encounters between Aborigines and Europeans which generated the collections of the South Australian Museum suggest a different conclusion: that the frontier was less a line which separated than a zone which unified. That zone was also capable of generating new and potent forms of culture.

This approach modifies rather than challenges prevailing models of cultural colonialism. There is no doubt that, even as a unifying field, the frontier was never an even ground. Applying this analysis to the colonial period in North America for example, F. Jennings has observed that while a model of ruthless conquest by Europeans could usefully be replaced by a more complex account, the result is nevertheless 'a society dominated by transplanted Europeans but modified by a persistent Indian subculture'. Extending the analysis to the Australian situation, T. Swain writes that 'Aboriginal people in early south-east Australia used symbols of European power and culture not in attempts to eradicate Whites or even merely to overthrow their hegemony, but rather to establish moral relationships within an increasingly immoral world'. Creative processes of mutual acculturation occurred in frontier Australia in spite of unequal power relations between coloniser and colonised.

Notwithstanding examples of innovation in Aboriginal art (bark paintings, acrylic paintings, toos), religion (millenarian cults in Arnhem Land or the Kimberley), or language (the emergence of nineteenth-century pidgin English for example), resistance to the notion of mutual acculturation has been strong in almost every field of Aboriginal studies, from archaeology, linguistics and religion to material culture analyses. As J. Beckett has suggested, 'constructions of Aboriginality, whether popular or official', have been pervaded by notions of antiquity. The characterisation of Aboriginal culture as evocative of a past, even primitive form, has been most readily achieved within museums where the 'aura' of objects, as Walter Benjamin termed it, has tended to 'mask the intentions, meanings and skills integral to the production and appreciation of the objects'. The dominance of cultural relativism within social anthropological practice during the course of this century has done little to modify this tendency to locate Aboriginal culture within
another, implicitly prior, frame. Indeed, as Fabian argues, the discipline of social anthropology continues to reconstitute the 'primitive'.

From their origins in the cabinets de curiosité of earlier centuries, museums have built their collections in an attempt to comprehend the unknown in nature and culture. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries these institutions provided a frame for debate and experiment in this interpretative project, and their collections served as this project's data. Given that colonial expansion in the Pacific had begun much earlier, this role did not emerge until relatively late. This is not to say that Australian explorers, administrators and colonists did not regard ethnographic objects as significant or meaningful. From time of the First Fleet the form and function of ethnographic objects were useful categories of information. The first collections were formed within days of the Fleet's landfall at Botany Bay. The fledgling colony's principal legal officer, David Collins, wrote:

'It must be observed that the principal tribes have their peculiar weapons. Most of us had made collections of their spears, throwing-sticks &c as opportunities occurred; and on shewing them to our Sydney friends, they have told us that such a one was used by the people who lived to the southward of Botany Bay; that another belonged to the tribe of the Carn-mer-ray ... and they extend this peculiarity even to their dances, their songs and their dialect.'  
The colonists' interest in artefacts and Aboriginal culture traits soon faded as each colonial capital absorbed and overwhelmed local variants of Aboriginal material culture. By the time colonial museums were established, the variety of Aboriginal material culture noted by Collins was no longer readily available to be appreciated or collected within the ambit of ordinary colonial experience. This pattern applied to Adelaide. The remarkable and promising decade of ethnographic research and publication which followed the foundation of South Australia as a colony did not result either in a permanent collection of Aboriginal objects or a museum. In fact, the eventual creation of a museum placed natural history at the centre of new scientific endeavour in the colony. Ethnography occupied a peripheral role, and as the Aborigines of the Adelaide Plains became fringe-dwellers marginalised by the colonial economy, greater effort was directed towards acquiring and exhibiting Pacific Islands exotica.

Ethnography's place within museums in the British tradition was mediated by natural scientists as an extension of the natural history project. The gradual unfolding of the evolutionist model throughout the nineteenth century, coinciding with the colonial expansion of western powers, dictated the role to be filled by ethnographic objects from other societies as social markers along a path of human development. The elaboration of the classificatory method and the construction of a universal taxonomic grid rendered the task of museum ethnologists unproblematic: regional and typological gap-filling. In turn, the hierarchical character of the natural history project placed Aboriginal material culture into a key position on this grid, as a benchmark for other world cultures. In this way a remote colonial museum's collection entered an international sphere.

In common with other outposts of colonialism, the Australian frontier became the locus for
successful ethnographic collecting. Within Australia, those colonial capitals which retained active links with the various frontiers of pastoralism, trading, communications, policing and other bureaucracies, or missionary activity, stood to gain the largest ethnographic collections. Adelaide's prominence reflects that comparative geographical and political advantage, heightened by the scientific awareness of its Museum's director and governing committee from the 1880s until the First World War.

In Adelaide the processes of international and national colonialism were in play before the Aboriginal collections entered their expansionist phase. The Great Exhibition of 1851 in London's Crystal Palace helped clarify the new role of colonial museums and their collections. From the 1870s particularly, a great deal of colonial collecting was directed towards these Exhibitions. This fact affected all Australian museums, particularly Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide, prompting their curators to establish contact with collectors on the frontiers of European and Aboriginal contact.

The Exhibitions provided more than a market-place for ethnographic objects and natural history specimens. Compendious in their scope, their success depended upon their efficient organisation and the classification of their components. This elaboration coincided with the articulation of taxonomic scheme for ethnographic artefacts as expressed by E.B. Tylor and A. Lane-Fox (later Pitt Rivers), based on comparative, sociological method. These schema, heavily reliant upon evolutionist principles, were validated in the Philadelphia and Paris Exhibitions of 1876 and 1878.

The primitive status of Aboriginal artefacts was prominently reinforced at such events and was soon imported back to Australian museums, leading to the redefinition of ethnographic curios as anthropological specimens. From the 1880s onward ethnographic displays within colonial museums began to vie with natural science displays for space and for funding. In Adelaide's case this new role was underpinned by South Australia's own colonial expansion into the Northern Territory. Coinciding with the late international flowering of colonialism and with the major museum movement worldwide, it yielded a flow of ethnographic artefacts which eventually placed the Adelaide collections at the forefront of Australian museums.

While South Australia's colonial experiment established the optimum conditions for gathering a collection of frontier ethnography, that endeavour was likely to have been haphazard without a museum curator prepared to apply principles of selection and organisation to the objects and to the collecting process itself. The efforts of the Adelaide Museum's first Curator, Frederick Waterhouse, demonstrated how opportunity could be subverted by lack of interest in this regard. In contrast, Edward Stirling's record as Director, from the late 1880s until the First World War, revealed an effective alignment of priorities - those of an eclectic and practical scientist, politically experienced and trained in evolutionary theory - with the multiple opportunities presented by the colonial frontier. Just as Ferdinand von Mueller drew specimens and data from a network of botanical collectors across Australia, Stirling's exploitation of similar opportunities and his first-hand knowledge of the frontier brought him into direct contact with a range of
collectors. The motives and methods of these collectors, and the objects of their attention, are explored by category in the middle section of this thesis.

The final section of this study returns to the South Australian Museum itself, by examining the results of this concentrated period of collecting activity, an accretion of more than 740 individual collections ranging from a single object to several hundred objects. The profile of collectors examined in the mid-section of the thesis is based on an analysis of these collectors, most of whom were active during the half-century from 1890 to 1940. In contrast, only 350 collectors have contributed ethnographic material to the Museum in the half-century since 1940.

This study is largely restricted to the analysis of ethnographic collectors - those obtaining artefacts from living Aboriginal people. A similar number of collectors were responsible for supplying the Museum with Aboriginal stone tools and skeletal material not included within this study, and while their motives and methods have not been analysed here, it is worth noting that skeletal collecting, in particular, emerged as a priority during Edward Stirling's directorship.10 The discovery of the Swanport burial ground in 1911 and the subsequent excavation and examination of the remains unearthed there formed an important chapter in Australian archaeological history. Even before that episode, Stirling had accumulated a formidable skeletal collection and, after observing hollow log burials and tree burials during his 1891 transcontinental expedition, developed a particular research interest in mortuary practice. Stirling's collecting efforts were assisted by a network of medical colleagues with an interest in physical anthropology, discussed in Chapter Nine.

As mentioned, the study does not extend beyond the Second World War. There are three reasons for this. In the first place, the ratio of secondary collectors to primary collectors increased significantly after the War, as the Museum began receiving a greater number of ethnographic collections which had already passed from the original collector through other hands. The second reason is that while ethnographic collections continued to be derived from Aboriginal communities remote from European settlement, after 1940 the content of those collections tended less and less to reflect the technology and traditional cultural practices of hunter-gatherer peoples. Increasing numbers of ethnographic objects were influenced in their form and style by a collector's (and tourist's) market. This fact necessarily introduces new considerations in discussing the history of ethnographic encounters between collectors and Aboriginal people. In particular, and this constitutes the third reason for closing this study in the 1930s, the subsequent gradual dominance of Aboriginal art within the ethnographic market-place began to transform relations between collectors, museums and Aboriginal people. This author has dealt with the history of changing perceptions of Aboriginal art elsewhere, and the complex literature and historiography of the subject must now necessarily take account of intersecting critiques from both fields of art-history and anthropology, beyond the scope of this study.11