

# Exhibition Review

*Paradise Possessed: the Rex Nan Kivell Collection.* NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA. Canberra, Australia. August 1998 - February 1999.

This exhibition was organized to celebrate the centenary of the birth of Sir Rex Nan Kivell. About 160 pieces (from a total of 15,000 items) were selected to narrate the exploration and early European settlement of the Antipodes. Developed, as its curator, by Michelle Hetherington of the National Library of Australia, the exhibition contained pieces from the Middle Ages (a Latin prayer book) to the late nineteenth century.

Sir Rex Nan Kivell (1898 - 1977) was born in New Zealand and over a lifetime gathered artifacts, rare publications, and records relating to the exploration and early European settlement of New Zealand, Australia, and the South Pacific. Nan Kivell's family had an interest in rare books and antiquities, and Nan Kivell began collecting in London at the end of the First World War. He worked at the Redfern Gallery in London from 1925, and also maintained an interest in archaeology throughout his life.

Having already seen the exhibition several times, I was delighted to be asked to do a review. My interest had initially focussed on a portrait dating from 1814 of one of my relatives, Elizabeth "Betsey" Broughton (1807 - 1891). This watercolour portrait had been purchased by Nan Kivell in London, on the correct supposition that the background of the painting was not English. Betsey poses on a cliff framed by rocks and ocean waves, not in front of the more standard English portrait background of velvet curtains and flower arrangements.

The exhibition was organized on six major themes: "Terra Australis Incognita," "Curious to Discover," "Progress of Art," "The Furthest Eden," "Servants of the Empire," and "A Portrait of the Collector." The thematic layout and lack of strict chronological order meant that one could easily circulate without losing the thread of the themes.

The section of the exhibition on the history of the exploration of the

Antipodes began with several maps dating from 1527 to 1777 and revealed the regularity of visits to and mapping of the Antipodes by European explorers. These maps showed quite clearly that only a relatively small portion of the “Great South Land” was “discovered” and mapped by Captain James Cook in 1770, when he claimed the whole continent for Britain. These beautiful maps also revealed that Australia could have been claimed by any one of several European powers long before 1770. However, the earlier cartographers were in search of the fabled Fifth Continent, full of metals and precious stone, and not of the sparsely populated inhospitable land on which they had landed. They willingly mapped and described, but laid no claim to the land. The theme area within the exhibition culminated in a map drawn by Captain James Cook in 1777 showing the routes of all the major explorers in the South Pacific over the previous two centuries. The curatorial rationale for choice of these maps was clear: in combination with several publications of the explorers’ journals and of the mysterious tales surrounding “Terra Australis,” they eloquently told the story of the beliefs of our ancestors and of the gradual mapping of our part of the globe. As an archivist, this was my favourite corner of the exhibition, with perhaps the largest concentration of original, evidential records.

The exhibition covered the themes by focusing on some highly individual stories. *Elizabeth “Betley” Broughton*, could have been just a charming portrait of a young girl by early Australian artist, Richard Read, Senior (1765 - 1827). However, a letter by Betley’s father tucked into the frame of the portrait, connected it to the ship *General Boyd* which was shipwrecked in New Zealand in 1809. It had been on its way from Sydney to London via New Zealand when it was wrecked, and because almost everyone on board was lost, it was quickly claimed that any survivors had been captured and eaten by the Maoris. Relating to the same incident in 1823, some fourteen years later, a letter (in Maori and English) from a Maori chief to Governor Brisbane in Australia, sought an end to the accusations that the people on the *General Boyd* had been cannibalized. The “let our anger cease” letter of reconciliation talked about the swift retribution that had been dealt by Captain Thompson from England and the killing of Chief Tippehue and his son.

A display about Benelong (1764 - 1813), the first aboriginal person to travel to Britain after the settlement of New South Wales in 1788, covered another area of the relations between native people and settlers. Benelong has been long known as one of the first indigenous Australians to learn English, a letter written by him in 1796 to Captain Phillips, first governor of the colony and his protector, was a clear confirmation of that claim. Benelong wrote that he was well, eating every day at the Governor’s house but lamented the leaving of his wife: “He [another aboriginal man] came and took her away.” He thanked Mrs. Phillips for helping him get well and asked for some new socks and toiletries. Alongside Benelong’s letter was an engraved portrait of him by the

British artist James Neagle (1760 - 1822), presumably modelled after a portrait painted when Benelong was in England.

Yet another perspective was revealed by the compilation, "Dialect of Aborigines," written in Newcastle in 1825 by Lancelot Edward Threlkeld (1788 - 1859) – a missionary unhappy about converting the indigenous people in the Newcastle district, just north of Sydney. Threlkeld sought to document the language in an effort not only to understand these people, but also to help them deal with the British administration. The page on display had three columns: the first for the aboriginal word as it sounded in English, then a sentence in English to explain its context, and the third for remarks on grammatical points. It is extraordinary that such a unique early record of an indigenous language survived and found its way to the Nan Kivell Collection.

Another display told of the sad tale of convict Josiah Godber. While on route to Australia in 1817, he wrote his wife, full of hope of being freed after one year for good behaviour. However, in 1823, only six years later, a letter from his friend George Brassington advised Mrs. Godber of her husband's death. Tragedy for some, success for others. A letter written in 1826 by Governor Sir Ralph Darling (1775 - 1858) to the former Governor of New South Wales, Sir Thomas Brisbane (1773 - 1860), applauded the amount of land cleared by prison gangs.

Works by Augustus Earle (1793 - 1838), a freelance travel artist and writer formed a visual thread through the exhibition, capturing views which would soon change or disappear, an equivalent perhaps to Nan Kivell himself – a "virtual" traveller preserving what little there was about the social history and landscape of an early era. Earle documented both the people – as the hand-coloured lithograph *Bungaree, a Native Chief of New South Wales* from 1830 showed – and the landscape as exemplified by the watercolour *Entrance of the Bay of Islands, New Zealand* from 1837. He also published an account of his travels between 1827 and 1832, illustrated with lithographs, entitled *A Narrative of Nine Months Residence in New Zealand and Journal of a Residence in Tristan d'Acunha* (an island in the south Atlantic).

A cabinet devoted to Nan Kivell showed photographs, some from his childhood in Christchurch, another on the steps of the Redfern Gallery in London. It also included the original 1962 checklist of items in the collection and some letters exchanged with the Australian government over the purchase.

A post-modern touch was a folder containing copies of correspondence between Nan Kivell, the National Library, and other interested parties that led to the collection being acquired by the Australian government in 1962. The tale of the purchase is very complex, but it appears that Nan Kivell was irritated by a decision made by the New Zealand government over some architectural restorations, in addition to its apparent lack of enthusiasm for his collection. Conversely, the Librarian of the National Library of Australia, Harold White, was highly enthusiastic and was successful in gaining equal

enthusiasm and commitment from the Australian Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies (who actually met Nan Kivell). Inclusion of the correspondence, dating from 1946 to ca. 1970, and the transcript of an oral history interview with Nan Kivell in 1970, explained much about the rationale behind the collection and the intriguing dialogue with the Australian and New Zealand governments. These documents brought Nan Kivell's passion for collecting into focus and were a reminder to the visitor that the genesis of this exhibition was in the celebration of Rex Nan Kivell, not the marking of historical events.

A seventy-eight page publication accompanied the exhibition, entitled *Paradise Possessed: the Rex Nan Kivell Collection* (Canberra, 1998). It contains essays about the collector and the collection, and reproduces about thirty items from the exhibition. It also includes a full list of the exhibited items with their cataloguing information.

For the general public, the success of the exhibition lay in the variety of media used to present a picture of the European impact on the Antipodes and in the careful arrangement by themes. No one medium or perspective was dominant, yet the overall purpose of Nan Kivell's collecting zeal was very clear. The specialist dealing in one particular medium or place might have been disappointed that their interest was not fully explored, but the exhibition fulfilled its purpose of showing people in history – not the history of map making, or of landscape painting, or of just one geographical area.

As of February 1999, 2,758 images from the Rex Nan Kivell Collection, including Betsey Broughton and Earle's portrait of Bungaree, can be viewed on the National Library of Australia website at: <http://www.nla.gov.au/image1/>. Enjoy your visit.

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