

GAYE SCULTHORPE, MARIA NUGENT, and HOWARD MORPHY, eds. *Ancestors, Artefacts, Empire: Indigenous Australia in British and Irish Museums*

JOANNA SASSOON

Archivaria 94 (Fall/Winter 2022), pp. 286-291

Cite this article:

Sassoon, Joanna. "GAYE SCULTHORPE, MARIA NUGENT, and HOWARD MORPHY, eds. *Ancestors, Artefacts, Empire: Indigenous Australia in British and Irish Museums*". *Archivaria* 94 (Fall/Winter 2022): 286-291.

<https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13881>

Ancestors, Artefacts, Empire: Indigenous Australia in British and Irish Museums. Gaye Sculthorpe, Maria Nugent, and Howard Morphy, eds. London: British Museum Press, 2021. 256 pp.
9780714124902

JOANNA SASSOON

Curtin University, Perth, Australia

At first sight, this book appears irrelevant to Canadian archivists, focusing as it does on objects created by Australian Indigenous people and now held in British and Irish museums. Yet in its ways of thinking about collectors as agents of imperial ideologies and about the nature of cross-cultural engagement over the lives of materials and objects, this book provides an opportunity to reflect on potential relationships between the archival collecting mind and museum studies.

This book, one product from a large international research project funded by the Australian Research Council, starts with the idea that the dispersal of objects has its own history and is a conduit to larger histories. It is based on the understanding that museum collections are products of encounters and entanglements between imperial and Indigenous Peoples and intellectual traditions. It is inspired by the power of objects to prompt renewed engagements with scholars and source communities.

The editors' aims are threefold: to share knowledge about dispersed objects, to offer interpretations that draw those scattered objects together, and to contribute to reconnection and relation building between Australia and the British Isles. One key purpose is to re-engage Indigenous Peoples with their cultural heritage held in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. Of particular interest to archivists is the way this brings a "double vision" (p. 18) to objects and collections, with perspectives from Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and scholars based in Australia and the British Isles. This approach acknowledges the

many world views that authors bring to these objects, harnesses a range of imaginative ways to use them to highlight big themes of colonial history and identity, and reveals a wide gamut of social and imperial relations that surround objects and museum collections.

Objects and collections now held in a wide range of local, county, and national museums were located during foundational surveys, and the results are listed in detailed and valuable appendices. In 23 chapters, the 22 authors discuss around 160 objects from all over Australia, which are held in more than 30 museums in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. Supporting research is based on archives held in Australia and the British Isles and the book explains that these each have their own characteristics and periodicities, which are the products and reflections of their own histories.

The introductory section refers to objects held in national, regional, and local museums as a single “collection” to facilitate analysis of broader trends and patterns that have emerged over 220 years. These include the reasons for collecting, the nature of collectors and cross-cultural engagements, the kinds of objects collected, the gender of makers, and the journeys into and at times between collections. The subsequent four sections are structured thematically, by functions the authors see performed by small assemblages of objects: moving (engaging in mobility, movement, and travel circulation); telling (conveying and preserving purposes, meanings, and knowledge); unsettling (speaking to colonial frontiers); and performing (participating in exhibitions and performances). The chapters are self-contained, concise micro-histories based on these assemblages of objects drawn together by particular criteria – including date, collector, material, place, or community – which are juxtaposed or speak to each other in ways that allow larger themes to be drawn out.

The authors range from early career scholars to esteemed academics and curators with disciplinary knowledge in archaeology, anthropology, and history. They include people from Indigenous and non-Indigenous backgrounds and curators of significant collections, who are based either in the British Isles or Australia. In writing style, the authors use a range of narrative forms ranging from more traditional prose to elegiac and poetic responses.

By virtue of geography and history, Indigenous objects overseas are emotive objects. Together, in their removal from communities and their eventual placement in international institutions, they evoke an unsettling and ambivalent history of violence, loss, kindness, pain, generosity, and intimacy. It is therefore

unsurprising that this study is imbued with loss and grief; this is a consequence of using removed objects as part of truth-telling about colonization. Yet more recent histories are also infused with the emotional and creative impacts of re-engaging with these geographically distant yet culturally, historically, and at times legally significant items. The editors touch on debates about the future of collections and the role of museums and discuss “calling objects back” (p. 21). Here, the editors take an acknowledged middle ground and restate the importance of knowing the details of objects in order to involve interested parties in discussions and to contribute to increasing collaboration between institutions and Indigenous Peoples.

The editors explain that this book is but a starting point for discussion, and while they take an interdisciplinary approach and have expansive aims, there remain points that could be further teased out, particularly through an archival lens.

The editors wear their theoretical origins lightly – beyond a brief introductory discussion of Tim Ingold’s “meshworks” as a product of interactions among networks of agents, structures, processes, institutions, ideas, and objects (p. 18). Yet they could have clarified the terminology of less-mature theoretical strands. For example, literary and archival scholars have introduced the idea of the diaspora or displacement as a way to think about collections removed from their communities, while internationally, libraries prefer to use the term *distributed*. The terms used in the book – *dispersed collections* and *distributed objects* (p. 17) – come with individual meanings and intersecting nuances, which the editors could have explored in more depth to explain their thinking about these collections.

The scale of the removal of objects from Australian Indigenous communities is extraordinary, with 39,000 known items now residing in British and Irish museums and likely many more residing in European and North American museums. Authors pose questions about the impacts on communities of Europeans’ acts of “collecting,” which have given rise to an enormous sense of loss – both economic (Nugent, pp. 51–52) and cultural (Knowles, p. 200). However, commercial exchanges that had potentially quantifiable effects could have been discussed; for example, what were the social and community consequences of income raised with the sale of artifacts to collectors and tourists or directly to institutions (Morphy, Denner, and Blakeman, p. 79)?

Objects created by Indigenous people have long been subject to movement. A valuable early chapter looks at the “prehistorical” trade in objects among

Indigenous Peoples across Australia and allows for a richer understanding of the diverse nature of cross-cultural exchanges that occurred between Indigenous Peoples and collectors as “agents of empire.” The book then focuses on the journeys of objects from their source communities to international destinations and on contemporary re-engagements with those institutions and objects. Its central concerns are the contexts within which objects are created, circulated, exhibited, and interpreted and the meanings of overlapping past and present entanglements (p. 16). However, the authors are silent about the journeys that occur once objects enter museums – the entanglements that occur in the space between the decision to acquire an object and its “discovery” during the research conducted by these scholars. As the archival science literature over two decades has discussed, this powerful space is occupied not by passive keepers but by active shapers of past and ongoing meanings. The book’s lack of discussion of the ways in which institutional practices shape meanings is all the more curious an omission given the curatorial experience of its editors and their concomitant understanding of the impact, power, and often harm of their own choices around documentation, storage, collection management, and exhibitions.

At times, authors leave tantalizing leads hanging. In one example, a pincushion made by a Tasmanian Indigenous girl, Mithina, was noted in a box of curios among the possessions preserved by Eleanor, the daughter of Sir John Franklin (known for his discoveries in the Northwest Passage and as the former lieutenant-governor of Van Diemen’s Land) held at the Derbyshire Record Office (Sculthorpe, p. 145). While the archival mind is particularly attuned to the importance of meanings that arise from assemblages in context and to the way containers and their contents can speak to each other, there is no mention of the associated curios or a photograph to show the box itself. In another hanging thread, while surviving objects are the focus of the book, there is little discussion of “phantom” objects, known to have once been collected but that no longer survive, beyond a note about the potential of UK Board of Customs records for researching this question (Simpson, pp. 70–71). Other questions that are of interest to archivists but only hinted at include how objects are silenced when they are removed from their cultural contexts (Knowles, pp. 198–206) and the nature of the relationship between the object and the record, which is raised in a discussion about recording the making of string figures (McKenzie, pp. 216–223).

This is a beautifully produced book. Its photographs of artifacts are high quality, and the layout carefully places illustrations close to relevant text. The

object captions are informative, with sufficient references to trace each item. And while most of the chosen objects are intact, one is shown broken, and captions describe features such as faded ochre stains that are not visible in the relevant photograph. Yet the reproductions also reveal the broader values of authors, editors, and institutions and the unequal values placed on objects and archival materials. Photographs are also objects, and visual clues gleaned from their material form – including their condition, edges, and size – provide important evidence of the range of histories these objects carry. In this book, the way the photographs are reproduced – often cropped to show only their content and with measurements shown in centimetres while many historic photographic formats were naturally in inches – shows that they are included only for their illustrative value rather than for any additional evidence they might add to the objects and contexts they depict.

If one aim of this book is to build knowledge of these collections so as to improve access, then this aspiration is well summarized in the detailed appendices that outline museums that hold collections, finding guides to collections relating to each state, and brief biographies of some collectors. Yet while the editors acknowledge that access means much more than providing this information, and the archival science literature explores what “virtual reunification” of collections and “virtual repatriation” with source communities could look like, the editors go no further than a passing mention of digitization (including of metadata) to overcome the enormous geographical distance and reconnect source communities with these objects.

More broadly, the covers of this book contain an emotional cauldron fuelled as much by contemporary celebration, creativity, relief, and occasionally sheer joy at contemporary re-engagements as by grief and anger at the circumstances and the loss of the objects. Unlike those of many studies that use objects as conduits to larger histories, these authors are careful to acknowledge the diversity, complexity, and plurality of the origins of the objects themselves, the Indigenous creators and source communities, and the many histories they represent. Individually, each of these micro-histories makes for fascinating reading; together, they enable larger patterns of colonial and imperial history and collecting to be seen through objects removed from Indigenous communities.

The British Empire frames this project, which, beyond its geographic focus and in its goals and methods, offers more universal lessons about thinking with objects. It exemplifies the potential for sound historical research to provide

an ethical basis for reconciling the distance between objects and their source communities. It is also thoroughly readable. However, in line with many interdisciplinary humanities projects that draw on cultural theory about “the archive,” the book would have been stronger had the editors drawn on the wellspring of archival theory, including that written by Indigenous archivists. This would have enriched this book, particularly in discussions about where materials get their meanings and how the way that institutions – whether archives or museums – document and make materials available shapes ongoing engagement and re-engagement with these objects held across the world.