

**GAYE SCULTHORPE, MARIA NUGENT, AND HOWARD MORPHY (EDS.)** *ANCESTORS, ARTEFACTS, EMPIRE: INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIA IN BRITISH AND IRISH MUSEUMS*. LONDON: BRITISH MUSEUM PRESS 2021. 247 P. ISBN: 9780714124902

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The volume *Ancestors, artefacts, empire: Indigenous Australia in British and Irish museums*, edited by Gaye Sculthorpe, Maria Nugent, and Howard Morphy, explores the vast multitudes of Indigenous Australian (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples) collections within Great Britain and Ireland.

This book is the fruit of collaboration between researchers in Australia and the United Kingdom over the past decade, involving the British Museum, the National Museum of Australia, and the Australian National University. Through the efforts of these institutions and others, it is now estimated there are over 39,000 items of Indigenous Australian cultural belongings and Ancestral property scattered throughout British and Irish collecting institutions, such as museums, botanic gardens, and scientific societies. Many of these collections were amassed between the late eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries and are the result of Britain's imperial presence and colonial expansion within Australia.

Along with the book's editors, the volume's chapters are written by 19 other contributors, consisting of Indigenous research fellows and knowledge holders, curators, anthropologists, and historians. *Ancestors, artefacts, empire* is a major contribution to the field of Australian history and First Nations histories, as well as collection histories, museum anthropology, and museum practice. The overall aim of the book, as noted by the editors, is 'threefold: to share knowledge about dispersed objects and collections; to offer interpretations that draw those scattered objects together as a whole; and to contribute to processes of reconnection and relationship-building between British and Irish institutions and Indigenous Australian Communities' (16-17).

The book is structured in five parts, Part 1: Encountering Objects; Part 2: Moving Objects; Part 3: Telling Objects; Part 4: Unsettling Objects; and Part 5: Performing Objects. Each section, set out with multiple chapters, examines various aspects of museum practice and collection histories surrounding diverse objects, collections, or time periods and geographical regions within Australia, such as chapter 18, *Rough justice on the Kimberley Frontier* by Ian Coates with Peter Yui; or chapter 20, *Slow awakenings: institutional engagements with Indigenous art* by Howard Morphy and Gaye Sculthorpe.

Along with its extensive chapters, *Ancestors, artefacts, empire* also has three appendices: 1. Museums with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collections; 2. Finding Guide to Collections; and 3. Researching Collections. These appendices are an important contribution

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to the book, for as the editors state, the book is 'more [of] a beginning than [an] ending' (34), a tool which allows these collections in the United Kingdom and Ireland to be better known. Therefore, the appendices are a valuable guide to researchers, as well as to, more importantly, the descendants of the communities and peoples from which these collections derive. These historical collections do not simply represent 'static assemblages of material culture', instead 'they are creative technologies that enable [Indigenous] people to rediscover ancestral works and knowledge, recover stories, and make new connections and works' (13).

The book also contributes to wider contemporary debates within museum studies and collection histories, namely the colonial legacies of museums and ethnographic collections. Specifically, and topically, the popular narrative that ethnographic collections are comprised solely of stolen 'colonial loot'. This dominant narrative, though accurate for many collections, is, as the editors note, 'only part of the story' (19), as many objects were not solely obtained via violent means or stealing – some were traded, sold, gifted, or commissioned. *Ancestors, artefacts, empire* argues that the universal colonial loot narrative denies the nuances of cross-cultural interactions and the agency of Indigenous peoples, not only within Australia but across the globe.

A prime example which exhibits this nuance is Chapter 15 '*Intimate relations*': *objects from the Port Phillip District* by historian Penny Edmonds. Edmonds, bringing together historical sources, museum collections and objects, explores the complex and differing nature of cross-cultural relations within the Port Phillip District (later the Colony and now the State of Victoria), observing it was 'a place of confluence, a mixed space of cross-cultural encounter, intimacy and violence' (152). One collection Edmonds examines is the von Stieglitz collection in the Museum of Ulster, Northern Ireland (152- 155). The von Stieglitz collection epitomises the differing nature of cross-cultural frontier relations and collecting, as it constitutes objects that were obtained via frontier violence and warfare, as well as through exchange and gifting. This collection was amassed from the local Kulin peoples in and around Melbourne and the von Stieglitz pastoral holdings at Ballan, northwest of Melbourne, from 1836 to the mid-1850s.

Edmonds also highlights the nuances amongst the obtainment of objects via gifting, selling, or trading, as these relations were occurring due to colonisation, and many, but not all, were also obtained under unequal power dynamics. For example, the agency of Kulin peoples is illustrated in the writings of the colonist John Cotton, who records Daungwurrung people bartering 'opossum skins, squirrel skins... waddies [clubs], shields, and boomerangs' for foodstuffs, such as 'cabbages, carrots, melons, wheat, rice, sugar etc.' (155). Edmonds in her analysis of these practices notes how they represent Kulin peoples' traditional commerce and social relations, but also the necessity to obtain foodstuffs from Europeans in the wake of the British invasion, which had destabilised long-established food sources.

Perhaps the singular fault with the book is the omission of the Saffron Walden Museum in Essex in Appendix 2 (255- 258). Appendix 2 lists the museums and institutions which have collections from the State of Victoria, and the absence of this museum is disappointing. The Saffron Walden Museum contains an important collection from south-eastern Australia, being one of the earliest ethnographic collections from Victoria and the Melbourne region. The collection was amassed by John Helder Wedge, who was one of Victoria's earliest colonists, as the surveyor for the Port Phillip Association. However, this omission is a minor issue, and does not detract from the overall significance of this book.

*Ancestors, artefacts, empire* makes a valuable contribution to our understandings of Indigenous Australian museum collections, not only within the British Isles but globally. This work will no doubt spark a wave of new research, discussion, and interaction with Indigenous Australian collections currently found dispersed across Great Britain and Ireland.

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