# Smoke and Mirrors in Arnhem Land:
# What Expeditions Tell us about the Materiality of Crosscultural Encounters



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**Abstract**

By paying attention to the familiar, but under-scrutinized, socio-cultural formation that is an *expedition*, it is possible to understand better the materiality of anthropological research and of intercultural encounters more generally. A close reading of the 1948 American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land, in northern Australia, is contextualized by a set of broader observations concerning the history of expeditions and their significance to science, anthropology, and geographical exploration. The essay addresses the role of expeditions in distributing trade goods, paying special attention to the distribution of tobacco and its implications. The supply of drugs such as tobacco provides insight into the bio-chemical engagement with the human body that underlay the project of bringing science to an inhabited terrain.

**Keywords**

expeditions—history; exploration; American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land; history of anthropology; museum anthropology; culture contact; cultural brokerage; tobacco.

**Trade Goods**

Tony Last was bound for South America when he formed a shipboard friendship with a "genial passenger." One evening in the bar, a conversation occurred between Tony and this gentleman. The latter confessed:

> "I thought you were potty just now before dinner. Honestly I did, when you said you were going to Demerara to look for a city. Well, it sounded pretty potty. Then the purser…told me about you. You're the explorer, aren't you."
>
> "Yes, come to think of it, I suppose I am," said Tony.

In the wake of this exchange Tony reflected:

> it did not come easily … to realise that he was an explorer. Even the presence in the hold of two vast crates bearing his name and labelled NOT WANTED ON THE VOYAGE—crates containing such new and unfamiliar possessions as a medicine chest, an automatic shot gun, camping equipment, pack saddles, a cinema camera, dynamite, disinfectants, a collapsible canoe, filters, tinned butter and, strangest of all, an assortment of what Dr. Messinger called "trade goods"—failed to convince him fully of the serious nature of his expedition. Dr. Messinger had arranged everything. It was he who chose the musical boxes and mechanical mice, the mirrors, combs, perfumery, pills, fish hooks, axe heads, coloured rockets, and rolls of artificial silk, which were packed in the box of "trade goods" (Waugh 1948, 166–7).

Tony Last is the beleaguered protagonist of Evelyn Waugh's novel *A Handful of Dust* (1934). He set off for South America late in the novel after his privileged if banal existence as a country squire was shattered by two calamities: the death of his young son and the revelation that he had been cuckolded by one of London's more insipid specimens of manhood. Deciding that he should go abroad to recover, Tony retreated to his London club with some travel agent brochures. There, he met the charismatic explorer Dr Messinger, who shared a theory about a fabled city. By the end of lunch, Tony Last was signed up to accompany the doctor on an expedition to Brazil.

With so many "real" explorers to excite our attention, it might seem strange to open this discussion of expeditions and the processes of exchange they set in motion with an example from fiction. Yet in its very playfulness, Waugh's satire is instructive. When a writer succeeds in tickling the reader's funny bone, it is usually because some form of truth has been sounded. The list of Messinger's trade goods is one such "bone of truth". There is a whiff of authenticity to that strange ensemble of wind-up mice, mirrors, combs, perfumes, pills, fish hooks, et cetera. The novelist could have mined it from any of hundreds of journals of exploration. Characteristically, Waugh continued to milk the comic potential of trade goods. The toy mice turn out to be as large as rats, so that when the luckless Messinger sets one in motion, his terrified guides and carriers flee into the rainforest, never to be seen again (Waugh 1948, ch. 5).

Waugh could play with the notion of trade goods in a way that was perfectly comprehensible to his audience. That is because the convention of travelling with these commodities is deeply embedded in exploratory voyaging and travel, knowledge of which had migrated into popular consciousness and culture. Dating at least as far back as the Columbus voyages, the use of trade goods continued into the "golden" age of exploration and persevered well into the twentieth century, as can be seen in the equipment lists of countless scientific and anthropological expeditions, still being sent forth by universities and museums in the wake of World War II. The embeddedness and longevity of this practice, and the wealth of evidence concerning it, provide the bedrock for this essay, the aim of which is to probe the function and symbolism of expeditions, paying special attention to how they contribute to the transmission of knowledge and the collection of objects.

The anthropologist Chris Gosden, in an essay about anthropological collecting in New Guinea in the 1930s, notes that "collecting cannot be understood as an isolated activity, but must be seen as one which was deeply embedded in the overall set of colonial relations pertaining at the time" (Gosden 2000, 232). In a discussion that touches upon the sorts of imperial stagecraft lampooned by Waugh, Gosden looks at some length at the equipment and provisions taken into the field by the anthropologist John Alexander Todd. In so doing, he gives intriguing detail about the dress codes observed by colonial officials and the tailors on the edge of empire who could provide jackets and cummerbunds, cut to appropriate style. Understanding the costumery of expeditions can certainly enrich our understanding of how they function and how they

objectify the people they purport to "discover". This is equally true of the choice of trade goods that expeditons take with them—a subject that Gosden touches upon, albeit perhaps too briefly (Gosden 2000, 241). In this essay I suggest that an expedition's choice of objects for trade is highly significant for what it reveals about the culture and mindset of expeditionary travellers and their historical context.

Theoretically, when a European was planning an expedition into spaces "unknown," he had at his disposal a near infinitude of commodities that he might carry with him to trade. In practice, however, the range of objects was more restricted, even when practical constraints, such as the portability and durability of the object, are taken into account. The reasons for this restricted range are revealing. Explorers are typically cast as the paradigmatic pathfinders. But this should not distract us from the reality that exploration developed into a coherent imperial practice because those who indulged in it were emulators extraordinaire. They read the journals of their predecessors and competitors; they integrated pre-existing ideas, theories, and activities gleaned from others into their own journeys. The power of precedent affected the choice of trade goods and permitted a degree of consensus about the types of object considered most pleasing to the "savage" recipient. Informed by the specific micro-cultures that developed around exploration (see Driver 2001, 24–67), and inflected by the relevant regional, national, and imperial cultures of which the expedition was part, the selecting of trade goods constituted a curatorial exercise—one that was deeply expressive of the hierarchical preconceptions and ideological values of the men who drove the business of exploration. (My gendered language is of course intentional.) In a nutshell, the selection of objects provides insight into the explorer's assumptions and those of his society. Projections of savagery are tangibly manifest in a crate of trade goods.

To delve a little deeper into this labour of "curatorship," consider the examples of tradeable commodity given by Waugh. (As noted, all the classes of object he described have multiple precedents in actual journeys.) Starting with the inventory itself—no less an object than the things recorded on it—observe the glaring contrast between the richness of its assumptions concerning the intended recipients and the monetary value of the commodities themselves. In the cutthroat logic of expeditionary expansion, dealings with natives were meant to be cheap. For all its connectedness with the hothousing of capitalism—its complicity in that conjoint quest for

new commodities and new markets (splendidly exemplified by the exploration programs of the Dutch East India and Hudson's Bay companies)—exploration deliberately perverted the niceties of mercantile exchange. At its heart, exploration was underwritten by a gross disparity of value between the goods disbursed and the land, commodities, or services acquired in exchange.

Consider also the commonality of playthings and gimmicks in expeditionary trade: items like mechanical mice, intended to impress the recipients with their technological magic. Waugh's list also included perfume (presumably a cheap one), and this too is redolent with assumptions. Appealing to the senses rather than the intellect, long established clichés concerning the simple mindedness of savages are thus confirmed. Embedded in the distribution of toys and baubles is the implication that the recipient is infantile. Mirrors, an old favourite of the imperial traveller, are likewise intended to fascinate, amuse, and distract. As an imaging technology designed to reveal the self to the one who peers into it, the mirror supposedly lends wholeness to a native subjectivity that has been inchoate until the technology of the discoverer brings it into being.

**On Expeditions**

The selection of commodities for trade is replete with imperial values and expectations. Some objects have practical purpose while others are ornamental. A few are likely to be completely novel to the intended recipients while some, like fishhooks and hatchets, replicate in different materials a technology already familiar. The point I wish to emphasise is that the *concept* of an expeditionary journey provides an organisational template for exploratory travellers. The influence of earlier expeditions, sometimes in completely different parts of the world, creates generic expectations about how the journey should be administered and run. These precedents suggest to the organiser of the expedition a repertoire of commodities that is likely to be desirable to the "primitive" societies encountered in the course of the journey.

When discussing these issues, the very notion of an expedition commands attention. Expeditions are composites of knowledge, capital, equipment, and personnel. They are also inherently performative. The objects they carry have traditionally served as props, enabling those who display or distribute them to perform their own ethnicity, their European-ness. It is not surprising that in recent years there has been an increase in scholarship on the organization

and structure of expeditions, including studies of their impact on empire, science, popular geography, museology, and anthropology (for egs see, Bell, Brown, and Gordon 2013; Bell and Hasinoff 2015; Fabian 2000, 23–77). My own contribution to this field has addressed the generic qualities of expeditions in the modern epoch, arguing that the expedition, as a social unit detached from the host society which it nonetheless represents, can be likened to a time capsule since it presents, in miniature, a curated representation of the explorers' world (Thomas 2011 20-22). I have also argued that a cluster of traits and tropes are fairly constant in expeditionary journeys. They include: a fascination with the heroics of "man" versus nature; a commitment to the testing and disseminating of new technologies; an overall propensity to function as "machines for producing discourse"; and a particular connection between expeditions and the media of modernity (Thomas 2015b, 13-17). A more recent study of the influence of expeditions on the history of anthropology examines the influence of showmanship, adventurism, and gender politics on ethnographic fieldwork and reporting (Thomas and Harris 2018).

In describing the cumulative impact of this recent scrutiny of expeditions, the geographers Noam Lesham and Alasdair Pinkerton have noted the emergence of a more devolved perspective on the phenomenon: a "granular, at times even intimate, understanding of the expedition as a space mired with uncertainty rather than stoic resolve; immensely dependent on indigenous labour and knowledge; reliant to a greater extent on the benevolence of rulers in Cairo and benefactors in Adelaide than on the expertise of civil servants in Whitehall" (Lesham and Pinkerton 2019, 501). This perspective is no doubt affected by the widely differing foci that have been brought to bear on the subject. Indigenous guidance of and participation in expeditions now attracts strong interest (Kennedy 2013; Shellam et. al. 2016; Konishi et. al. 2015). The punitive expedition as an instrument of colonial violence and coercion has been investigated (Ballard 2017). A recent volume by historians of science, edited by Marianne Klemun and Ulrike Spring, is concerned with connections between experimentalism and the expeditionary enterprise. Klemun and Spring argue that with the blooming of scientific fieldwork after 1850, the expedition "became the laboratory in which knowledge—rather than items of nature—was examined against findings published in reports or books" (Klemun and Spring 2016, 8).

Klemun and Spring's analysis of the relationship between expeditions and experiments opens issues that are especially pertinent to the present discussion. The materiality of scientific travel, if it is to be understood holistically, is inextricably connected with the embodied relationships between expedition members and the places they visit. The historian of science, Vanessa Heggie (2014, 322–4), has written about an intriguing example of this process at work. She examines how several participants in the British Antarctic Expedition of 1910–13 adopted unique dietary regimes in order to compare their physiological effects under the extreme conditions of a polar winter. The manner in which these expeditionaries used their own bodies as sites of experimentation has many parallels in the realm of cross-cultural encounter.

The classic expeditions of maritime and geographical discovery bore all the traits of experiments. Their genesis lay in a supposition or hypothesis (a reputed river, passage, continent, city, civilization, or other quarry). An ensemble of persons, animals, and technologies was put together for the purpose of proving the veracity or otherwise of the theory. That the expedition is a testing ground explains the wide range of trade goods often taken into the field. The objects themselves were being tested—for their efficacy as trade goods in the first instance and, on another plane, for what they revealed about the knowledge, intelligence, customs, and impulses of the people with whom the expedition interacted.

For this reason, expeditionary observers took special interest in native responses to the technologies they distributed. The plasticity in the use value of objects—especially the deviations from European norms—were carefully recorded. Mungo Park, who made his first journey to the Niger late in the eighteenth century, provides some intriguing examples in his published journal. Park was forced to desperate measures in his trading arrangements. He had set forth from Pisania with a box of coins that he expected to manage judiciously for the duration of his journey, buying food and accommodation as he made his way through the turbulent polities that lay between him and his objective. The plan was disastrous. The combined effects of robbery and the taxation imposed at borders quickly left him penniless. From that moment, Park's survival depended on his ability to navigate the local political and belief systems, forming trade relationships from whatever he could scrounge. He sold locks of his own hair that were used for magic, and he wrote "saphies" or charms, as we see in this encounter with a Mandingo man who briefly gave him lodgings:

> when he heard that I was a Christian, he immediately thought of procuring a saphie; and for this purpose brought out his *walba*, or writing-board; assuring me, that he would dress me a supper of rice, if I would write him a saphie to protect him from wicked men. The proposal was of too great consequence to me to be refused; I therefore wrote the board full, from top to bottom, on both sides; and my landlord, to be certain of having the whole force of the charm, washed the writing from the board into a calabash with a little water, and having said a few prayers over it, drank this powerful draught; after which, lest a single word should escape, he licked the board until it was quite dry (Park 1799, 235–6).

In this account, the notion of writing is itself rewritten by the Mandingo man's innovative attempt to harness and internalize the power of a text. Although an extreme example, it is characteristic of the symbolic and semantic thickening that occurs when things are dislodged from their familiar habitat and enter the ambiguous world of the contact zone.

**The Cook at Umbakumba**

I will now turn to an expedition that has long intrigued me. The 1948 American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land (hereafter the Arnhem Land Expedition) was led by the photographer and self-taught ethnologist, Charles Pearcy Mountford, from South Australia. It was a large-scale anthropological and scientific investigation of the Aboriginal reserve of Arnhem Land in northern Australia. Like many twentieth-century expeditions, it was a hybrid affair combining an ambitious research agenda with soft diplomacy. The National Geographic Society, publisher of *National Geographic Magazine*, was the founding sponsor. The Smithsonian Institution and the Commonwealth of Australia subsequently became partners in this "friendly mission": an ostentatious demonstration of "good will" between Australia and the United States. It post-dated the Pacific War and predated the formalisation of the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security (ANZUS) Treaty in 1951. The expedition lasted from March until November 1948 and its official membership comprised seventeen personnel and support staff (for overviews see Thomas 2010; Thomas and Neale 2011).

As a discourse-producing exercise, the Arnhem Land Expedition yielded all manner of printed texts, ranging from press coverage to scientific reports, and a wide array of still

photographs, films, and sound recordings. The National Geographic Society, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies are among the repositories that hold archival media created by the expedition. Stashed in the vaults of numerous museums, most notably the National Museum of Natural History (Smithsonian Institution), the National Museum of Australia, the Australian Museum, and the South Australian Museum are large natural history and ethnographic collections assembled by the expedition scientists. These texts, media objects, and artefact and specimen collections signal an important aspect of the materiality of expeditions: their tendency to amass (sometimes enormous) concentrations of objects, many of which—by circumstance or design—are eventually warehoused in libraries or museums. The most controversial aspect of the collections gathered by the 1948 expedition is the large number of human bones that were stolen from Aboriginal mortuary sites and taken to Washington by the anthropologist Frank Setzler where he accessioned them into the Smithsonian collection. The Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History spent many years resisting a repatriation request, made by the Australian Government on behalf of traditional owners. The museum claimed that international repatriations were outside its remit. Eventually, in a major reversal of its position, the museum acceded to the Arnhem Landers' demands. The bones were returned to their owners in two instalments in 2009-10 (Thomas 2015a; Thomas and Bijon 2018).

Details of Setzler's bone collecting, including the lengths he went to in concealing it from his Aboriginal guides and hosts, were recorded in his journal (Thomas 2015a, 212). For Setzler and all the scientists on the expedition, keeping a diary was a normal—indeed obligatory—function of being out in the field. When I began to research this expedition, these first-hand testimonies were among my first ports of call. I thought I had consulted all extant diaries when, in 2009, an incident not unworthy of Conrad occurred. At a symposium on the 1948 expedition in Canberra, a stranger arrived bearing a manuscript. He was Andrew Bray, son of the late John Bray, who was recruited to the expedition as cook. The manuscript was John Bray's journal, a meticulous account of the expedition. Bray (1948, 16 March), as he explained in the opening pages, was a young veteran of the World War II. His craving for adventure led him to accept the position of cook despite its being "a job which I hate and about which I know

very little." To his comrades' relief, he was subsequently promoted to transport officer and a professional chef took over in the kitchen tent.

As a detailed record by someone in a support role on a scientific expedition, Bray's diary is invaluable. In addition to a wealth of data on the organizational and logistical challenges of maintaining an extended fieldtrip as it roved through a large and isolated Aboriginal reserve in the Australian tropics, it contains gossip and commentary about the scientific personnel, whom Bray regarded with a blend of fascination, envy, contempt, and affection. Although not formally a scientist, his extended stay among a company of researchers brought to the forefront his interest in natural history. In the expedition *Records*, Mountford (1956, xi) credits Bray as "Cook and Honorary Entomologist" in recognition of the large collection of insects he amassed. Bray is also credited as the collector of 179 specimens of reptiles and amphibians (179). Mountford's (1949, 751) *National Geographic* article on the expedition includes a photograph of Bray surrounded by bottled snakes and insects mounted on cards, captioned: "When Not Cooking, the Expedition's Chef Collected Insects, Lizards, and Snakes" (Figure 1). While Bray acquired the mantle of "collector," the article reveals that the labour of collecting was largely sub-contracted to inhabitants of the Aboriginal settlements where the expedition camped: "The entomologist's assistants formed what we called the 'cockroach committee,'" wrote Mountford (751). For payment, "adults received tobacco, children hard candies" (750). The purported humour of this remark permits the slippage of a veil that so often concealed the economic transactions on which the expedition depended. In contrast to the published statements, diaries and other expeditionary records (including invoices and inventories of equipment) establish that transactions involving tobacco were a routine part of life on the expedition.

**Insert Figure 1**

Bray's stewardship of the camp kitchen involved more than meal preparation. As the expedition's unofficial quartermaster, he was directly concerned with the management of provisions and other supplies: their rationing, storage, and security. Some of this work, especially what he regarded as the "feminine" role of manning the kitchen, he found disagreeable. He certainly felt overworked and insufficiently recognized by Mountford, whose leadership provoked discontent for many on the team (Thomas 2010, 156–7). As his zoological collecting reveals—and as historian Amanda Harris (2013, 368) has argued in an analysis of the

expedition's gender politics—John Bray was an "aspirational" member of the company. He sought to establish himself as a "player" in the expedition, rather than confine himself to his official position, which rendered him a mere functionary. In apparent emulation of Mountford, he privately acquired a small collection of Aboriginal artefacts, still in the possession of the Bray family. His literary ambitions are evident in the diary and in an unpublished novel, loosely based on the expedition, also in his son's possession.

In May 1948 the expedition was stationed at its first base, a highly unorthodox Aboriginal settlement named Umbakumba (Figure 2). Located on the east coast of Groote Eylandt in the Gulf of Carpentaria, it was run by a loincloth-wearing Englishman named Fred Gray (Figure 3), an honorary Protector of Aborigines and self-styled "superintendent." Gray had been there since the late 1930s when a fuel depot and weather station were being developed as infrastructure for the fledgling flying-boat service between Sydney and London. By then, he had been living in and around the Arnhem Land coast for some years, making a living as opportunity provided. With some Aboriginal acquaintances from the mainland, he formed a camp on Groote Eylandt and established gardens near the site that would become the Umbakumba settlement. Initially, the gardens supplied food to the contactors who built the air base. As a designated Aboriginal reserve, Groote Eylandt was supposed to be quarantined from unauthorized outsiders. Gray's presence was thus often queried and several times he came close to eviction. He was saved by his settlement's apparent success in feeding and educating its inhabitants. It was sympathetically described by one observer as "an experiment in native administration" (Marshall 1948, 133).

**Insert Figure 2**

**Insert Figure 3**

During his long tenure on the island, Gray hosted and supported a number of social scientists who conducted fieldwork among the local, Anindilyakwa-speaking people. Frederick Rose, a future professor of anthropology at Humboldt University, benefited from Gray's contacts and friendship. Rose returned to the island when the 1948 expedition arrived there, and helped broker the connection between Mountford and the locals (Monteath and Munt 2015, 89–97). Peter Worsley (2008, 84–8), later an international figure in sociology and anthropology,

was likewise assisted by Gray in the early 1950s when researching his doctorate on the island's economy and ecology (Worsley 1954).

Gray realized that favourable reports from researchers and journalists could help consolidate his somewhat tenuous position as self-appointed superintendent of an island settlement. The Arnhem Land Expedition, which brought science and media in a single package, resulted in favourable press for Gray. A *National Geographic* article by expedition writer-photographer Howell Walker (1953), entitled "From Spear to Hoe on Groote Eylandt", praised Umbakumba for its accomplishment in accelerating the social evolution of the locals. Gray required the inhabitants of the settlement to labour in the extensive vegetable gardens he had established: a supposed renunciation of their hunter-gatherer lifestyle. One reason why the settlement was tolerated by the government, despite its legally dubious status, was that "Gray's natives" (as documents invariably call them) were much healthier and better fed than the inhabitants of the official "half-caste settlement," run by the Christian Missionary Society (CMS) on the western side of Groote Eylandt (Australia Department of the Interior 1939–48; Northern Territory 1931–41). In the diary extract quoted below, John Bray refers to some of the residents of the CMS settlement as "mission natives." They were a group of highly skilled artists (Figure 4) whom Mountford had encouraged to move temporarily to Gray's settlement while the expedition was camped there, to produce paintings that would become part of the great haul of material culture acquired by the expedition. The artists received rations from the expedition kitchen for the period when they were making paintings and they also received regular supplies of tobacco.

**Insert Figure 4**

The importance of tobacco to the functioning of the expedition is made apparent by a crisis recorded in Bray's diary (1948, 14 May) that refers to several characters associated with the expedition. The aforementioned Frank Setzler was the Head Curator of Anthropology at the Smithsonian Institution's United States National Museum (which in 1957 became the National Museum of Natural History). Nanjirupeea was a resident of Umbakumba. Margaret McArthur was a nutritional researcher and the sole female scientist on the expedition. Bray wrote:

> Had a horrible discovery this morning when I went to the box to get some cigarettes for Margaret, to find that the bulk of the tobacco supply, about nineteen

> 20-oz tins, had disappeared. Reported it to Frank, and this afternoon had a yarn to Nanjirupeea, who blames the mission boys who are doing the bark paintings. He said he saw one of them planting a tin in the sand yesterday, and when I sent him for it, sure enough came back with an empty tin, no rust marks, quite fresh and clean, and obviously very carelessly opened—distinctly not a white man's job. Have asked him to recover the other tins if he can, but doubt whether this is possible now.

Bray's alarm at this development is not surprising. Such was their dependence on tobacco as a trade good that its loss could potentially bring the business of the expedition to a standstill. Moreover, as custodian and controller of all supplies, including tobacco, Bray could readily be accused of dereliction of duty.

**Transactions and collections**

The Arnhem Land Expedition was in large part a museum expedition, dedicated to the collection and classification of specimens. Setzler and three naturalists were employed by the Smithsonian. The anthropologist-cum-archaeologist Frederick McCarthy represented the Australian Museum in Sydney. Mountford was an honorary associate of the South Australian Museum, having been connected with that institution for many years. Mountford and McCarthy were passionate collectors of ethnological objects, as was Setzler. Arguments about how the collections—especially the rich haul of bark paintings—should be divided between institutions resulted in lifelong animosity between Mountford and McCarthy.

As noted previously, many expeditions downplay the processes of exchange they set in motion. So at times we need to read against the evidential grain. Mountford in his *National Geographic* article was prepared to reveal that John Bray used trade goods to obtain his collection of insects and reptiles, but he never hinted that his own (now famous) collections of bark paintings were acquired on similar terms. By turning to the business end of ethnographic collecting, it is possible to excavate the wider processes of encounter triggered by the presence of an expedition. In considering this matter, it is worth pointing out that the aspect of an expedition that attracts most scholarly and popular attention—its members' intrusion upon a foreign and in some way "unknown" field—is also the most ephemeral. As the museum

collections make plain, the transitory experience of journeying is rendered solid and permanent—it begins to fossilize—only *after* the expedition's return.

Collections of Arnhem Land material culture are noted for their colour, attractiveness, and conceptual complexity. They have informed landmark studies by anthropologists such as A. P. Elkin and Catherine and Ronald Berndt (1950), Howard Morphy (1991), and Luke Taylor (1996). Some objects, like the Bark Petitions of the 1960s (a protest against bauxite mining on the Gove Peninsula), have become celebrity objects in the history of Australian art (Eggerking 2013). Indeed, the beauty of many objects tends to obscure the transactional processes that gave rise to their production. This is vividly demonstrated in the prefatory pages of the Arnhem Land Expedition *Records*. Mountford (1956, xxx) opened the first volume with a description of the gatherings: "13,500 plant specimens, 30,000 fish, 850 birds, 460 animals, several thousand aboriginal implements and weapons, together with photographs and drawings of a large number of cave paintings … There was also a collection of several hundred aboriginal bark paintings and two hundred string figures." Noticeable in this text is the way in which the Aboriginal paintings and implements are categorized as specimens, comparable to the preserved plants, fish, and birds that were detached from the living ecology and artificially preserved. One can scan Mountford's extended analysis of the paintings he collected, and much of the metadata concerning them, and not find any mention of the exchange economies set in train by the expedition. Other records (including Bray's) establish that he did not "collect" paintings, plucking them from the social habitat as his colleagues collected flowers or fish. In fact, "the mission boys" mentioned by Bray in his account of the tobacco theft as "doing the bark paintings" were effectively employees of the expedition. (For "boys" read grown men—this is an example of the infantilization previously discussed.) The art acquired by the expedition was *commissioned*, with the painters being remunerated with tobacco, food and, in some instances, cash.

Despite Mountford's efforts to conceal this process and present himself as a "collector" rather than a "buyer," quite a lot can be deduced about the payment system used by these visitors to Arnhem Land. In part this is because the expedition was a site of considerable internal contest, prompted to some degree by its failure to live up to generic expectations concerning the function of expeditions and the places where they go. Expeditions are mythologized as

quintessentially mimetic projects. They are propelled by an underlying fantasy that they can mirror or capture a "true" likeness of what is out there. Participants in the Arnhem Land Expedition often measured it by this ideal, despite dealing on a daily basis with its essential falsity. We see this in the letters of Brian Billington, a medical researcher and expedition doctor who described with some incredulity Mountford's filming of a ceremony on Groote Eylandt. To create the impression of nakedness without compromising the film's suitability for a general audience, Mountford supplied the performers with loin cloths that he had carefully blackened with ink. "Ha Ha Ha," wrote Billington (1948), "Hollywood has nothing on C. P. M. [Charles Pearcy Mountford]."

Billington's ridiculing of the expedition documentaries says as much about his own racialised assumptions as it does about Mountford's. He implies that the film is a piece of fakery, a concoction of the filmmaker. Yet that is not the impression of senior elders with whom I have watched and discussed the footage of this and kindred ceremonies, including the film shot on Groote and at other locations visited by the Arnhem Land Expedition. They regarded the film as an important part of their own patrimony. There are deep complexities at work here, for in most cases the ceremonies documented were secret-sacred, intended only for initiated men. When I asked the men with whom I was working why the people in the film would have allowed white filmmakers to document these restricted rituals, I was invariably told that those old people in the were inspired to make a record for the benefit of future generations, including themselves (Thomas 2007; Garde 2011). Admittedly, these were retrospective speculations, made some sixty years after the date of filming. But there is also strong contemporaneous evidence that the films were seen as "authentic" in the Aboriginal world. Ronald Berndt's classic monograph, *An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land*, first published in 1962 and based on fieldwork in the 1950s, concerns the momentous decision of some Yolngu clans of northeast Arnhem Land (many of which were culturally connected with Groote Eylandt), to create a public monument near the Methodist church on Elcho Island that put on permanent display a set of secret ceremonial designs or *raŋga*. David Burumara, a protagonist in the movement who explained his motivations to Berndt, claimed that they created the monument because they were confident that if Yolngu shared this most sacred knowledge with the rest of Australia, the Australian government would reciprocate by making available to them forms of knowledge that had

hitherto been out of reach. Among other material aspirations, Burumara "was anxious that Elcho Island should have a library containing all the books produced by the 'white men'" (Berndt 2004, 75). Berndt drew from Worsley's doctoral research on Groote Eylandt to argue that what he called the "Adjustment Movement" on Elcho shared similarities with Melanesian cargo cults—a phenomenon that Worsley had subsequently analysed with great aplomb in *The Trumpet Shall Sound* (Worsley 1957).

A remarkable aspect of Berndt's account of the Adjustment Movement is that the radical and highly contentious decision to make *raŋga* viewable to women and non-initiates was prompted by the very films criticised by Billington. Several films about the expedition were distributed by the Commonwealth Film Unit. Copies were obtained by missionaries who screened them at the Elcho Island church before an audience that included men, women and children. As Berndt noted in paraphrasing Burumara, the problem with the films was the promiscuous way in which they had been distributed. White men, he complained, "take photographs of sacred things and show them to all the people throughout Australia and other places…" Burumara argued that "'The *raŋga* are our only wealth, they are valuable and precious. If these are shown publicly we should receive something in return'" (Berndt 2004, 39-40).

Clearly, the films were deeply shocking for people in Arnhem Land, but this had nothing to do with their being "faked". They were, on the contrary, too real. Persons knowledgeable about these ceremonies could overlook the trivial matter of loincloths. They realised that the exigencies of creating a performance under such conditions had necessitated certain alterations. Knowing little about the practicalities of film distribution, the performers had not realised that the expedition intended to make the footage public, let alone do something as preposterous as show men's ceremony to a female audience. The events around the Adjustment Movement are highly revealing, not only because they demonstrate the extent of the cultural fallout resulting from the researchers' visit, but because they show that the performative space of the expedition was by no means one-sided. For all its racial assumptions, the expedition created expressive opportunities for the Aboriginal people with whom it interacted. While the exchange processes it put in place through the distribution of trade goods served as one incentive for Arhem Landers to contribute to the expedition's ever-growing reserve of cultural capital, these immediate

material benefits were part of a larger paradigm in which artists and performers assumed agency in communicating their ideas to outsiders. This is as true of the filmed ceremonies as it is of the paintings, the craftwork, and indeed the whole extraordinary explosion of creative activity that gave rise to the expedition's astonishing collections of material culture. Burumara's conversations with Berndt are instructive, for they give insight into the kind of thinking that was in the air—an assumption, deeply rooted, that culture must be shared to be preserved; that through the channelling of objects and the ideas associated with them, outsiders could benefit from the wisdom of their ancestral knowledge. Not only was this a worthy end in its own right, but the value of that knowledge could bring reciprocal benefits to those who did the sharing.

To recover the full range of motivations of the many people who worked with the expedition is of course impossible. But we can assume that some if not many found interest and pleasure in interacting with the researchers. Mountford received plenty of assistance in making photographic records of "traditional" aspects of Aboriginal life. This sometimes required elaborate set-ups where activities or customs that were falling into disuse were reinvigorated for the camera. The films and still photographs taken by Howell Walker used a documentary different approach. Inculcated in the photojournalism of *National Geographic*, he was more inclined to document the observable reality of Aboriginal life in a contact situation. He was also interested in capturing the spectacle of the expedition itself. One way in which he did this was to produce images that portrayed the global reach of *National Geographic*. A photograph was published in which children on Groote Eylandt are seen looking at the magazine, which Walker himself had distributed (Figure 5). Photographs shot at Yirrkala, the expedition's second base, provide valuable evidence of Mountford issuing trade goods (Figure 6). Magnification of the images (which were never published) indicates that needles, thread, and small mirrors were among the booty distributed. These objects were wrapped in a square of fabric, itself part of the trade package. In a lecture film documenting the expedition, Walker (1950) again portrayed Mountford in the act of distributing trade goods. A group of men from Groote Eylandt are seen lining up to receive the tiny cubes of tobacco that the expedition drip-fed into the local economy. This explains John Bray's horror when he discovered the robbery of the expedition's tobacco supply. Tobacco, more than any other trade good, was the commodity central to their operations.

**Insert Figure 5**

**Insert Figure 6**

The anthropologist Mac Marshall, in a study of tobacco in Oceania, points out that "toward the end of the fifteenth century, a series of encounters and events was set in motion… in what we might call 'the first era of globalization'" (Marshall 2013, 20). Tobacco sits alongside sugar and coffee as one of those highly addictive commodities from the Caribbean that would transform the face of global trade. When Columbus and his crew encountered Taino Indians, they became the first recorded Europeans to see cigars being smoked. Seeds from this remarkable plant were collected and tobacco could be found in European herb beds by the mid-sixteenth century (Marshall 2013, 8-9). Acquired in the process of maritime discovery, tobacco leaf continued to travel with mariners and explorers. As Marshall drily notes, it "quickly became a necessity wherever it was introduced" (Marshall 2013, 7). This is to indicate that John Bray's short-lived "tobacco crisis" had an ancient pedigree, dating back to the origins of exploration in its modern incarnation. There are deep patterns at work here. Alongside the distribution of tobacco, which would be quickly ignited and transformed into smoke, came the set of objects collected by the expedition: plant specimens where growth and decay are suspended; fish in preservative solutions; and ritual objects, now in collections, that would traditionally have been secreted in caves or waterholes when the ceremony had ended so they could return to nature. Even if we acknowledge that consumables—edible or drinkable for the most part—constitute the bulk of commodities traded by human beings, a momentous cultural difference is revealed by the expeditionary transactions considered here. These representatives of a foreign society extracted enduring sentinels from a social universe where the ephemerality of things, of possessions, was as much a certainty as the cycle of the seasons. For the expedition members, emissaries of a capitalist world, the journey to Arnhem Land was directed at the garnering and export of knowledge that in one way or another took a material form. The expeditionary company was inherently accumulative, whereas the Aboriginal logic was to transform and disperse. In the case of tobacco, a dried plant is transformed into fumes. Once exhaled, it blends and disperses into the atmosphere itself.

We cannot ascribe to Mountford and his gang the dubious distinction of introducing nicotine to Arnhem Land. That economy of addiction predated the expedition by millennia.

Australia has its own repertoire of native, nicotine-bearing plants. There are more than twenty species of *Nicotiana*—often referred to collectively as *pituri*—most of which are found in Central Australia. They were typically chewed or placed against the gum. The leaves from these plants were traded vast distances prior to European invasion (Ratsch et al 2010). Dependence on tobacco, which developed quickly with the arrival of colonists, owes something to the breakdown of these earlier trade routes. In the case of Arnhem Land, smokable tobacco predated the British. Traders from the port of Makassar in South Sulawesi (now part of Indonesia) brought it each year when they came to harvest trepang (Macknight 1976, 97). Tobacco had been part of their economy since at least 1669 when Makassar fell under Dutch control. Marshall estimates that tobacco first arrived on the coast of northern Australia around 1700 (Marshall 2013, 14). Tobacco was among a range of items offered to recompense the clansmen who held the sea rights to these waters. Long pipes, made of bamboo, were the preferred means of smoking it. Many examples were collected by the Arnhem Land Expedition. There is a minor tradition of scholarship concerning the history of tobacco distribution and dependence in Aboriginal Australia (e.g., Jebb 2002, 236–9; Brady and Long 2003). However, the extent to which tobacco served as a currency in white Australia's dealings with the Aboriginal world remains insufficiently recognized. Its importance in encouraging the migration to missions, pastoral stations, and other settlements cannot be overstated. Like missionaries and graziers, ethnographers were expected to distribute tobacco in return for assistance.

For white people to hand out "smokes" or "baccie" was standard on the Australian frontier, as it was on many others. However, this did not make the practice agreeable to everyone involved. Terence E. Hays has written about the London Missionary Society's conflicted position on the issue. Missionaries loathed distributing it, yet were prepared to use it as an inducement for people to go to church (Hays 1991, 96). For the evangelical Anglicans of the CMS, it was an objectionable aspect of running their establishments. At Oenpelli Mission in the west of Arnhem Land, tobacco distribution was halted in the early 1950s, prompting heated argument with government officials who insisted that it be reintroduced. Eighteen CMS employees, all stationed in remote settlements, threatened to resign if they were compelled to re-introduce the distribution of tobacco (Montgomerie 1951a). One of the disgruntled staff wrote:

> From the point of view of anyone who was interested only in obtaining a maximum of work and a maximum of control over the Natives for a minimum outlay, it [tobacco] was ideal. It is strongly habit forming without interfering too much with the ability to work. The Native will suffer any amount of abuse and indignity rather than have his supply of tobacco cut off. This applies not only to the men, but to the women and young people as well (Montgomerie 1951b).

The role played by tobacco distribution in maintaining social control over Aborigines is made explicit in this observation. So concerned was the government that the lack of tobacco would cause mass departures from the mission, resulting in a possible exodus to the town of Darwin, that the reintroduction of tobacco distribution was made a condition of government funding of CMS operations (Driver 1951; Northern Territory 1950–51).

To return to the Arnhem Land Expedition, it is not surprising that the question of who stole the tobacco from the camp store at Umbakumba in May 1948 cannot be answered with certainty. Various ideas were mooted for securing the return of the expedition's property. In the heat of the moment, Bray (1948, 14 May) first proposed that the expedition "hold off the issue of rations and tobacco until all the tins were returned, full or empty." But this idea of effectively starving the thieves into submission was not pursued because the artists "may have packed up and left, to the detriment of the bark painting and such like for the Expedition." Five days after the tobacco was found to be missing, Mountford (who had been away from camp at the time of the theft) launched an investigation, gathering information from older men (who might well have been complicit in the theft). To Bray's (14 May) horror, Nanjirupeea, his kitchen assistant, was one of two "boys" found by Mountford to be guilty of the theft. Mountford then:

> proceeded to take the boys' savings from them—the whole lot—which they keep very carefully in a tobacco tin, and amounting in each case to about 1-pound. (They receive the princely sum of 2/- per week, for 14 hours work a day, 6 days a week). Unionists please note!

Bray was convinced of Nanjirupeea's innocence and said so fervently, pointing out that "at least a dozen of the boys have been busy smoking" since the loss of the tobacco. Mountford, who claimed that both "thieves" had confessed in an earlier discussion overseen by Fred Gray,

ignored him. Mountford, according to Bray, "reckoned these were the main culprits and their punishment would be an example to the rest." Mountford's high-handed justice did little for his already fragile leadership. Bray was disgusted and "damned near resigned on the spot" (14 May). A few days later Mountford thought better of the punishment—or perhaps received further information. The confiscated money was restored to the two young men.

My purpose in raising the incident of the tobacco theft is not, of course, to solve the mystery of who was responsible, but to probe it for what it reveals about the material nature of expeditions and how they go about their business. The dispersal of tobacco, a highly addictive drug, coupled with the dispensing of rations and to a lesser extent money, points to the tendency of expeditions to connect with existing colonial economies. Moreover, it is indicative of how expeditions exploit established zones of physiological dependency. Attention to the materialities of trade and to the ways in which scientific travellers initiated a very particular exchange process involving not only ideas, but substances and objects, provides insight into the reasons why the expedition as a cultural and political formation was so enduring and why it was so efficacious in the collecting and processing of knowledge.

**Conclusion**

James Boswell (1791, vol. 2, 510) recorded an incident when Samuel Johnson waved dismissively at an account of Cook's voyages: "one set of Savages is like another," he thundered; "These Voyages…will be eaten by rats and mice, before they are read through. There can be little entertainment in such books." As we now know, the good doctor was wrong on both counts. "One set of Savages" is not like another—part of the reason why the genre of exploration turned out to be so popular. Precisely *because* they exposed the human panorama in its diversity, people kept reading these books. Now, with digitization, the fruits of expeditionary activity are easily available as never before. Perhaps that explains why—in an era postdating the main project of terrestrial and oceanic conquest by at least a century—it is tempting to regard the newly available corpus of texts and objects thrown up by the Western impulse "to discover" as a field of discovery in itself, albeit for the armchair traveller. In reality, these archival "discoveries" are nearly always re-discoveries. As was the case materially for Cook, the "new" islands encountered in our textual voyaging are already old to someone else.

With this in mind, it is interesting to consider where our "re-discovering" is leading. Some thirty years have elapsed since the highly influential poststructuralist approaches of scholars such as Paul Carter (1987, 1992a, 1992b) and Mary Louise Pratt (1992) began to throw systematic critical light on exploration and the realm of the explorer. Unsurprisingly, these analyses concentrate on text formation and discourse production. Literary strategies claimed more attention than the role of objects. With the erosion of Marxist certitudes, the economies of expeditions seemed less important and issues of materiality less interesting, less pressing. The prioritization of discursive space over physical objects came at a cost, for it resulted in a diminution, and at times an outright eclipsing, of the real-world theatres where the great dramas of visitation and reception, invasion and resistance, were enacted.

Influenced by thinkers such as Nicholas Thomas (1999), the twenty-first century has seen a rich vein of scholarship on exploration that marks something of a return to the material realm. We see this in Felix Driver's (2001) investigation of how the Royal Geographical Society wrote the rulebook of geographical travel and endeavoured to regulate the competitive business of exploring and being recognized as an explorer. More recent studies, including books by Michael Robinson (2006), Clare Pettitt (2007), and Dane Kennedy (2013), do not neglect the role of discourse formation in exploration. Rather, they treat exploration as a matrix where the structuring effects of discourse are tested, sometimes to breaking point, by the actualities and contingencies of travel.

In this essay, I have argued that critical examination of the phenomenon of the expedition—a socio-cultural entity regulating the collection, distribution, and exchange of both objects and knowledge—can illuminate the politics and impacts of exploration in compelling ways. It opens up the micro-cultures of scientific hierarchies and exposes the intricacy of intercultural relations. In the supply of drugs such as tobacco, we gain insight into the sorts of bio-chemical engagement with the human body that underlay the project of bringing science to an inhabited terrain. In the spirit of "re-discovering" the legacy of expeditions, we might think again of Mungo Park's description of the man who ingested writing in order to internalize its vital force. The image is suggestive, for it points to the symbiotic relationship between object and discourse that is central to the implementation of power.

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**Figures**

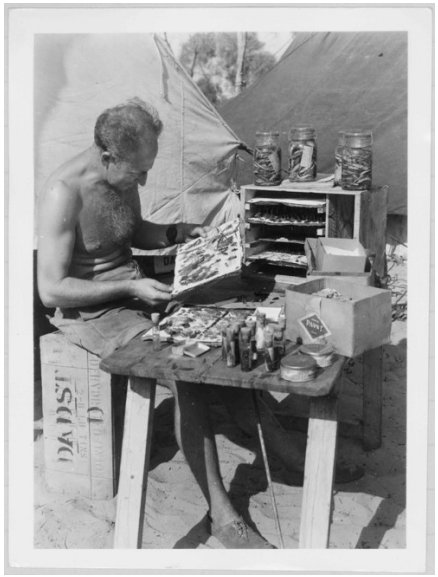

Figure 1: John Bray, cook and honorary entomologist, with insect and reptile collections during the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land, (1948), State Library of South Australia, Adelaide, PRG 487/1/2/202/2. Photograph Howell Walker

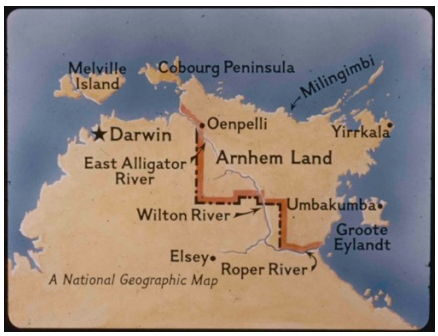


Figure 2: Map of Arnhem Land, Northern Territory of Australia, showing localities visited by the American Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land in 1948, National Library of Australia, Canberra, PIC/12323/122 LOC Cold store PIC MIL R. http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-148378255

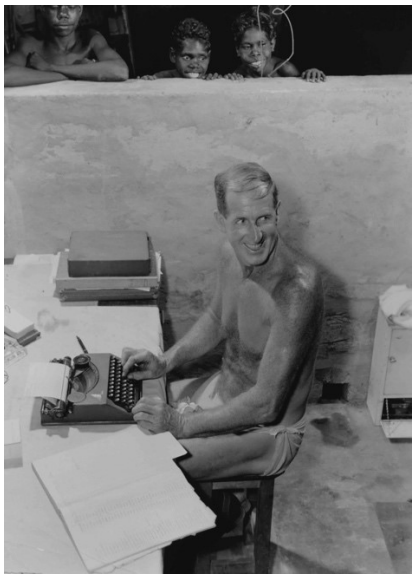

Figure 3: Fred Gray, the “superintendent” of Umbakumba Aboriginal settlement, with local boys watching on, (1948), National Geographic Stock, National Geographic Society, Washington DC. Photograph Howell Walker

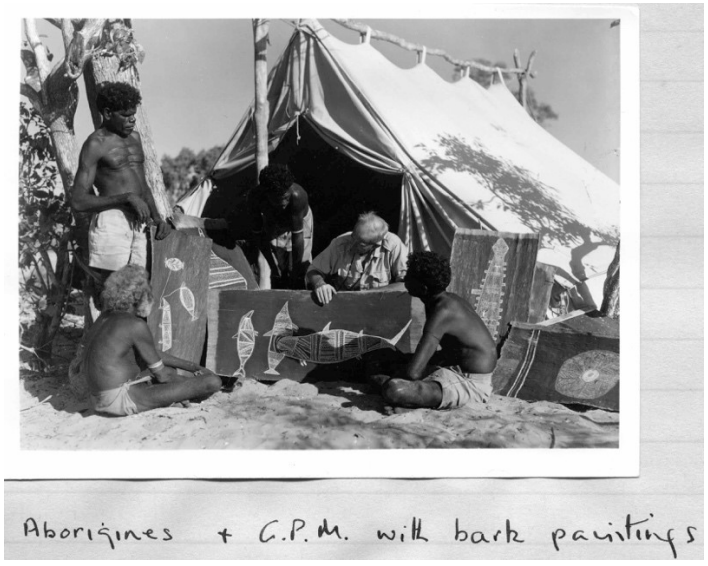


Figure 4: Charles P. Mountford with Groote Eylandt painters during the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land, (1948), State Library of South Australia, Adelaide, PRG487/1/2. Photograph Howell Walker (attrib.)

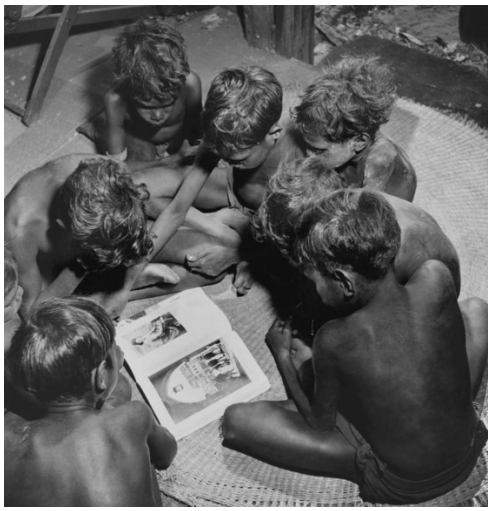

Figure 5: Boys looking at *National Geographic* during the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land, (1948), National Geographic Stock, National Geographic Society, Washington DC. Photograph Howell Walker

Figure 6: Charles P. Mountford distributing trade goods at Yirrkala, the second base of the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land, (1948), National Geographic Stock, National Geographic Society, Washington DC. Photograph Howell Walker