

Foreword

Our culture has a cornerstone, it's called respect.

—Clarence Jackson (*Galtín Asx'áak Daa naawú Tá Gooch*), *Tlingit elder and chairman of the Council of Traditional Scholars, on the occasion of the blessing of the gift of an ocean-going canoe to the Smithsonian on June 19, 2008.*

For the things themselves, the objects, there is no beginning, no end. Events, like a swirling mass of migrating birds, come together and then disperse, appear, depart, and then reappear, bound by the dictates of the weather of history and the tenacity of preservation. The extraordinary ethnological collections from the 1948 American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land, now partially housed at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History (at the state-of-the-art conservation facility, the Museum Support Center, in Suitland, Maryland), are as much a testimony to the complexities and sociopolitics surrounding an international natural history and anthropology-collecting expedition as they are a celebration of the practical, spiritual, and mythological bonds between the Aboriginal peoples of Groote Eylandt, Yirrkala, and Oenpelli (Gunbalanya) and their traditional homelands in Arnhem Land. The materials derived from the 1948 expedition to Arnhem Land are the most significant and substantial portion of the Smithsonian's ethnographic collections from Australia and the only collection from Australia to be systematically—scientifically—documented and acquired.

In this book Sally K. May charts the convolutions—part personalities, part sociopolitics, part science—that led to the formation of a cooperative scientific expedition to Arnhem Land. The Arnhem Land expedition was in many respects among the last of the large interdisciplinary exploring expeditions that began with the likes of Charles Darwin's voyage aboard the *Beagle* (1831–1836), and that culminated in the mid-twentieth century with the exploits of collector-scientists like Herbert Lang and James Chapin of the American Museum of Natural History's Congo Expedition (1909–1915) and Roy Chapman Andrews in China and Mongolia in the 1920s. These natural history and anthropology-collecting expeditions, popularized by newspapers and such publications as *National Geographic*, shaped public opinion about the character of scientific research, specifically the role of natural history museums, and provided the legacy of collections that today testify to the diversity and evolution of life on earth.

From its founding in 1846 the Smithsonian Institution has had a strong Americanist agenda, especially in matters pertaining to the indigenous cultures of North America. The very first publication of the fledgling institution, *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley* (1848), by Ephraim Squier and Edwin Davis, was a critical assessment of the Native American remains and earthworks of the American Midwest. Following the American Civil War, western expansion and the acquisition of new territories in the west and the north engaged the attention of all branches of the American government. Succumbing to the belief that the American Indians were a vanishing race, Smithsonian anthropologists in the Bureau of Ethnology (established by an act of Congress in 1879) under John Wesley Powell (the geologist and explorer who led the first party to explore the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon in 1869) conducted ethnographic, archaeological, and linguistic research among Indian tribes in the western United States, Canada, and Alaska. Coincidentally, Smithsonian archaeologists and physical anthropologists began to amass what was to become the world's largest museum collection of human remains (most of which were derived from North American tribal groups). Powell initiated an impressive publication series to document the research of his intrepid naturalists and anthropologists. The annual reports and bulletins of the Bureau of American Ethnology form the intellectual bedrock of American anthropology.

From its inception, Smithsonian anthropology has had a prominent materialist bias, a heritage derived from the proclivities of the Smithsonian's sec-

ond secretary, Spencer Fullerton Baird, who served from 1878 until his death in 1887. Baird, an accomplished ornithologist, arrived at the Smithsonian in 1850 as assistant to the founding secretary, Joseph Henry. It was Baird who played the prominent role in transforming the fledgling institution into a national museum with strong interest in natural history. Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, the scientific mission of the Smithsonian, including the nascent disciplines of ethnology and archaeology, served as a handmaiden to the growth of national identity through the collection, description, and categorization of the natural history of the American hemisphere. Gradually the Smithsonian expanded its collecting efforts beyond the immediate confines of the Americas as the United States, though too late to follow the European colonial experience, sought to assert its stature on the international arena. The legacy and zeal of Baird's naturalists were such that the natural history collections of the Smithsonian have grown in size and significance to become one of the largest such repositories and research centers in the world today, housing more than 125 million natural science specimens and cultural artifacts.

Under Spencer Baird and John Wesley Powell, Smithsonian anthropology had a decidedly strong focus on collecting material culture, under the assumption that cultures, like natural organisms, could be neatly categorized and described by their appearances and attributes. Several prominent early Smithsonian anthropologists were primarily trained as naturalists and brought their collecting zeal and recognition of the importance of provenience to their acquisition of ethnological materials. Linguistics was another sphere of interest to Smithsonian anthropologists, but here too accumulated vocabularies and word lists were often acquired under a salvage premise: that the native speakers were doomed to extinction and the Smithsonian archives represented the best means of preserving their linguistic diversity. Smithsonian anthropology has long prided itself on the breadth and significance (the relatively early acquisition and the incomparable documentation) of its anthropological collections.

Until about twenty years ago the Smithsonian's Department of Anthropology enjoyed a mostly quiet, reflective place in American anthropology, comfortable with its sobriquet as the "Nation's Attic" and somewhat at a distance from the discordant notes of an emergent, politically active, and socially engaged anthropology and from the radical transformations in the discipline of

archaeology beginning in the early 1970s. This aloofness has gradually dissolved under the impetus of the passage of the 1989 National Museum of the American Indian Act and the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). These precedent-setting legislative acts required the Smithsonian to return human remains as well as certain classes of artifacts (funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony) to the descendant communities from which the materials were appropriated. These legislative initiatives radically transformed the institution's relationship with Native Americans, opening up the collections and the archives to Native American researchers, archivists, elders, and artisans. While contentious at times, the intellectual environment brought about by the repatriation revolution has made the Smithsonian a far more receptive place for indigenous research and scholarship and has broadened the mandate of the anthropology department to become more inclusive and more nuanced in its responsibilities for the stewardship of the collections it controls. It was this climate of repatriation predicated on responsibility and respect that inspired the Arctic Studies Center (ASC), as a separate program of the Smithsonian's anthropology department, to take a conspicuous leadership role in reaching out to and working with native communities in Alaska, Canada, and Greenland. Through consultation and collaboration, the ASC facilitates access of northern residents to museum collections and archives, conducts community-based archaeological and ethnohistorical research, and supports efforts to celebrate and preserve the cultures and knowledge of northern Indigenous peoples through exhibitions and educational programs.

Since 1992 the Arctic Studies Center has partnered with Inuit and Innu communities in northern Labrador on a series of community archaeology projects that seeks to involve the full spectrum of northern community members in the creation and articulation of their history. With the passing of this generation of elders—the last people to be born in snow houses and tents and to grow up pursuing a subsistence-based lifestyle on the land—so passes the last best link to the hunting, fishing, and foraging way of life that is humanity's common heritage. With them passes much knowledge and wisdom, the special rapport between human beings, the land, and animals that has been eroded by village life and nearly extinguished by the urbanization and technology of the modern world. Country-based archaeology and history initiatives, informed by the moral authority of participating seniors and older people with country

experiences, have sought to instill in young people knowledge about the accomplishments of their ancestors, foster pride in Innu and Inuit identity, and directly involve communities with the construction of their past.

Somehow something of this northern research practice and paradigm reached the ears of Claire Smith and the organizers of the Fulbright Symposium, "Indigenous Cultures in an Interconnected World," held at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory in Darwin, Australia, on July 24–27, 1997. Together with a colleague, Daniel Ashini, an Innu activist and later president of the Innu Nation, I traveled to Darwin to participate in the symposium and discuss the nature of our collaborative research. Hosted by the University of New England (Armidale, New South Wales [NSW]), the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (Canberra, Australian Capital Territory [ACT]), the Northern Territories Museum and Art Gallery, and the Jawoyn Association (Katherine, Northern Territory [NT]), the symposium addressed key issues relating to Indigenous art and archaeology, repatriation and intellectual property rights, globalization, the impacts of economic development, and the survival of Indigenous cultures. Unlike many formal conferences—with interaction between speakers limited to paper presentations and perhaps a question or two—the open forums and discussion format of the Darwin symposium greatly facilitated, as archaeologists are wont to say, exchange and interaction. Indigenous participants and researchers from around the world had the opportunity to share their perspectives on governments, anthropologists and anthropology, social and economic development, cultural tourism and proprietary rights, and traditional lands and resources. It was readily apparent to all conference attendees that global economic and communication systems had radically altered the lifeways of even the world's most remote and marginalized communities. But far from signaling a diminution of cultural traditions and values, these facets of globalization held tremendous potential for supporting and encouraging cultural survival and even florescence as new economic and political perspectives could be brought forward, and new alliances between communities, researchers, and activists forged. The Fulbright Symposium at Darwin was a catalyst for many to pursue a more activist and socially conscious agenda that linked Indigenous community members with other groups in distant lands who shared similar social and economic threats to their lands and cultural heritage.

At the conclusion of the Fulbright Symposium some of us were fortunate enough to travel in Arnhem Land, visiting Pularumpi on Melville Island and the communities of Maningrida and Bulman, where we spent a brief time in a bush camp on the traditional lands of the Ngkalabon people. Having sought the permission of traditional landowners, we were escorted to rock-art sites at Naritjbambulan, Barunga, and Mataranka. Although a brief and fleeting introduction, it was apparent to those of us who have lived and worked with northern communities in the Canadian arctic and sub-arctic, Alaska, and Greenland that many of the issues confronting Indigenous communities in both Northern and Southern Hemispheres—pertaining to concepts of land tenure and ownership, the maintenance and continuity of traditional knowledge and controls over intellectual property, distinct artistic traditions, and notions of education and social services—had pronounced similarities. But most apparent, in Arnhem Land and in the Arctic, is the profound and pervasive notion of *respect* that infuses traditional Indigenous approaches to their land and their community: respect for the knowledge of older community members steeped in country experiences and traditional life ways, respect for the animals and resources the country provides, respect for the spiritual relationships and boundaries that link human beings with their environment and with the living world that surrounds them. Such lessons are timely indeed as the world tumbles into the maelstrom of resource extraction, overharvesting, global warming, and urbanization.

In January 1999, after the fourth World Archaeological Congress in Cape Town, South Africa, two Australian Indigenous delegations—one that included Peter Manaburu and Jimmy Wessan, accompanied by Ken Isaacson, Richard Hunter, and Claire Smith, and a second that included Irene Fisher, Eileen Cummings, and Tara Dodd (from the South Australian Museum)—arrived in Washington, D.C. Eager to repay the many courtesies and considerations that had been extended to me in Arnhem Land, I arranged for the delegations to visit the Smithsonian's Museum Support Center so that they might have an opportunity to examine the ethnographic materials from Australia and especially the materials acquired by the 1948 Arnhem Land expedition.

There is a profound silence in the remote shadowy corners of the "pod," the cement and steel building that serves as the museum's collection repository. Light, temperature, and humidity controls and dust-scouring filters and hermetically sealed doors create an imposingly sterile atmosphere that keeps time

in abeyance. The building is a time machine, for here, thanks to the collecting acumen of scholars and anthropologists who thought to acquire these things from distant lands and peoples, reside astonishing things, many things that but for the miracle of preservation and conservation might have vanished nearly altogether. At times the atmosphere in the pod can be electric with excitement as you wait, heart beating and mind racing, to see what treasures will be revealed in the next steel cabinet. At other times it is sobering, almost somber, as you realize that the people who made these objects—both humble, domestic things and astonishing things crafted for celebration and worship—have long passed away. Something of both these sentiments was palpable as we looked upon the collections from the 1948 Arnhem Land Expedition. For half a century the collection, including baskets, tools, and an astonishing array of bark paintings, had lain quiet and dark, nearly forgotten, in their cabinets. How remarkable that the first visitors to seriously examine the material from Arnhem Land would be Indigenous Australians, a fact that seems to confirm many of the suppositions about the increasing involvement and awareness of Indigenous communities in anthropological research that were prominently discussed at both the Fulbright Symposium at Darwin and the World Archaeological Congress in Cape Town.

Having traveled more than halfway around the world, the Australians were confronted by objects made by individuals from communities adjacent their own. Their response, a strange mixture of awe, uncertainty, appreciation, and respect, was a potent distillation of the sentiments of the Smithsonian curators, anthropologists, and collections management staff that showed such diligence in caring for the collections. The Smithsonian's Department of Anthropology and the National Museum of the American Indian recognize that they share an extraordinary responsibility, along with other large colonial institutions that house much of the world's patrimony, to facilitate access to the collections to the descendants of the people from whom the materials were derived. This will be both a great challenge and a great boon to museum anthropology in the future. The visiting elders, observing the respect and care "their" artifacts received, noted with satisfaction that their curation had assured preservation of materials no longer in use. In their inspection of the collection, Peter Manaburu and Jimmy Wessan provided information about the subjects of bark paintings and discussed the sacred significance of some of the objects.

Sensing that we all needed some fresh air the day following our visit to the Museum Support Center, we made an excursion to the Bombay Hook National Wildlife refuge on Chesapeake Bay to view the wintering flocks of waterfowl. However, it was a stop at Wye, Maryland, to see the four-hundred-year-old Wye Oak that most impressed the visitors. The ancient tree was likened to a place of dreaming where obvious care and respect (cables supporting the weight of branches, grounding wires to insure against lighting strikes, and a protective fence to keep visitors off the roots) had been lavished on it, leading the elders to concede that the local "white fellas" yet retained some awareness of the importance of significant things. The visit to see the Wye Oak was prompted by the memory I had of being shown a tree by a billabong near Bulman that our Ngkalabon guide pointed out as having great significance for the role it played in an Ancestral or "Dreamtime" story.

The inspiration and insight resulting from such visits are among the greatest delights of museum work. The Indigenous peoples of Australia confront many of the same challenges faced by communities throughout the north. It is exciting to know that in both places the wisdom and respect of honored elders (older people with country skills and knowledge) provides an impetus for an increasingly vocal, informed, and active cadre of Indigenous scholars to conduct anthropological research for themselves, their communities, and their descendants.

Postscript

On July 29, 2008, Sally K. May accompanied a delegation of traditional Indigenous landowners from Arnhem Land to Washington, D.C., to participate in the return of the remains of at least thirty-three individuals "collected" during the 1948 Arnhem Land Expedition and stored in the research collections at the National Museum of Natural History. Accompanying Dr. May was Donald Gumurdul and Alfred Nayinggul from Oenpelli (Gunbalanya), Joaz Wurramara and Thomas Amagula from Groote Eylandt, and Lori Richardson, Assistant Director of the International Repatriation Program (Commonwealth Government of Australia) and herself an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander woman. The human remains from Groote Eylandt and West Arnhem Land (Red Lily Lagoon, Arguluk Hill, and Injalak Hill) were formally returned to the community representatives from Gunbalanya and Groote Eylandt in a quiet ceremony at the Australian Embassy. In participating in the collection

return the Smithsonian became the first major American museum to return Indigenous remains to Australia. Surprisingly, however, the Smithsonian retained the remains of at least thirteen other people collected during the expedition, citing the official government-to-museum memorandum of agreement toward the disposition of human remains and archaeological material recovered in the course of the expedition. Australian-government spokesperson and Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin has affirmed the Australian government's commitment to helping Indigenous representatives from Arnhem Land to bring these remains home as well.

Curiously, the return of a portion of the human remains from Arnhem Land has been adamantly portrayed by the Smithsonian's Department of Anthropology as a "loan return" rather than a "repatriation," a mere administrative formality brought about as a result of the diligence of Dr. May's research and the concern of the Indigenous communities of Arnhem Land and the Australian government through the work of the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FACCSIA), and the Australian Embassy in Washington, D.C. Since the establishment of the Smithsonian's Repatriation Office in 1991, the office has adopted a strict "letter-of-the-law" approach to the repatriation of human remains, one tenet of which has been an adamant resistance to engaging in any foreign repatriation claims. Prior to the codification of policy by law, the department was involved in two high-profile repatriation cases, one concerning the return of several *Ahayu:da*—carved wooden ceremonial offerings—to the Zuni in 1987 and, in 1991, the return of the remains of approximately a thousand individuals of Alutiiq and Koniag descent to the Alaskan native village of Larsen Bay on Kodiak Island. Decisions for both of these repatriations—or returns—were predicated on moral and ethical grounds, not on legal mandates, which at the very least established a precedent for a more nuanced, expansive, and responsive approach to resolving the differences between anthropological institutions and descendant communities.

The resurgence of an awareness and interest in the collections of the 1948 Arnhem Land Expedition is a poignant example of the foresight and dedication of the researchers who made the collection, the stewardship of museum curators and conservators who have overseen its care and preservation, and the excitement and passion of researchers and descendant community members who find in the collection clues, memories, and testimonials to an

extraordinary tradition and legacy. Through the miracle of preservation these artifacts come back to haunt us. Our duty as curator, anthropologist, researcher, community member, or visitor is to celebrate both the traditions and ancestors from whence the collections were derived as well as respect and acknowledge the different perspectives and interests of the many parties who have an interest in the collections.

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Collecting Cultures

Myth, Politics, and Collaboration
in the 1948 Arnhem
Land Expedition

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