‘The remnants of a Stone Age people’: Race theory, technology, and ignorance in colonial Australia

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ABSTRACT: Colonial-era anthropology, ethnography, and collection were dictated by predetermined conclusions regarding race and technology that emerged in the eighteenth century and solidified by the mid-nineteenth. The Australian continent represented a testing ground for ideas on race and technology, especially in European studies of Australian Aboriginal people. Such notions converged with colonial policy and protection agencies, but protection measures were secondary to the acts of recording and collecting. This article uses the textual records of the leading anthropologists, ethnographers, and collectors in colonial Australia to build on prior research into Australian Aboriginal material culture and the prevailing attitudes of contemporary European observers, and explore how their preconceptions determined their research and collection practices.

Keywords: Scientific racism; three-age system; artefact collection; colonial anthropology; colonial Australia

Pernicious and flawed philosophies combined with emerging ideas on a hierarchy of technology to profoundly influence the practice of native[1] artefact collection and categorisation in the Victorian world. Coupled with the development of nineteenth-century anthropological theory, these ideas saw the colonised peoples of the world ranked under a series of misguided assumptions about racial and technological inferiority that would ultimately lead to the notion that the preservation of artefacts of

[1] The title of this article refers to a quote by Stanley D. Porteus (1931), used later in the text. A note on nomenclature: readers will quickly notice that I use ‘native’ instead of ‘indigenous’ to refer to Aboriginal Australians. This is a conscious choice as ‘indigenous’ has a tendency to create a totalising effect on modern native cultures that do not necessarily share much in common beyond the colonial experience. Paul Tapsell (2015), a Māori professor of Indigenous Studies at Melbourne University, has spoken about the ‘pre-indigenous’ wherein he argues that the use of the term ‘indigenous’ obscures the cultural complexity of communities labelled as indigenous and acts as more of a convenient term for the non-indigenous. As such, I have generally preferred the term ‘native’ when describing groups in generalised terms. It is a more universal word that could be applied to any original inhabitant of a region. One could write ‘native Aboriginal’ or ‘native Englishmen’, for example. Where I refer to the white settler populations of a region, I use ‘European’. ‘Australian’ would be a misnomer for much of the period I discuss in this article because Australia did not exist as a nation until 1901. Furthermore, ‘British’ is not entirely accurate in the Australian context and is inadequate to discuss some of the individuals in this article. For example, Dr Walter Edmund Roth was British-born but of Hungarian-Jewish descent (a fact that his political opponents pointed out in their criticisms of him). Using ‘European’ also has the interesting effect of homogenizing settler populations in the same way they sought to do to native populations.

what were imagined to be vanishing races was more important than the protection of those races. This article explores the historical relationship of such theories with ethnographic and collection practices, focusing on the Australian context in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The article argues that collectors' interpretations of the peoples they studied were predetermined by their own notions of racial and technological hierarchies. However, such notions failed to account for the true complexity of the material record that the individuals in this article collected because of their own assumptions of native authenticity. This article first broadly summarises European racial science before defining technological classifications that became crucial in the categorisation of cultures, particularly regarding dominant museum theories on display. Using Australian collections as a case study, I summarise the ideas of some of the most noteworthy anthropologists and natural scientists of the period to explore their relationship to the themes of the article and demonstrate that, despite a genuine empathy for native suffering, they regarded collection to be of greater importance than protection.

The aims of this article are broadly two-fold. First, I intend to expand my previous publications on this topic by exploring the written records of major anthropologists and ethnographers in the colonial period of Australia. Although the conclusions herein align with those of my earlier work, this article specifically emphasises textual records, drawing heavily on the writing of phrenologists, antiquarians, collectors, anthropologists, psychologists, colonial agents, and natural scientists. I have previously only lightly touched upon or not used many of these sources, but here I trace the legacy of their ideas from their eighteenth-century foundations through the colonial period, to finally suggest the implications of their assumptions well into the twentieth century. I discuss men who were instrumental in advising and framing government policies towards Aboriginal populations and the misconceptions they had. Second, this article is intended to reach an audience to whom Australian anthropology and colonial history are largely foreign and unknown. I hope that the sources and perspectives discussed enable readers to consider like practices in other periods and places beyond my subject.

Literature Review

This article explores in detail the notions of Aboriginal 'purity', race, and technology held by European scientists who conducted fieldwork among the native populations.[2] This includes research conducted a decade ago but builds on other research and ideas in which I have since engaged. For example, see *Frontier Shores* (Rowlands, 2016). I have previously argued that the collection record of Aboriginal Australia in this period was misinterpreted by the collectors of the material, who ignored, reviled, failed to notice, or sometimes destroyed artefacts that demonstrated cross-cultural contact and adaptation (Rowlands, 2011a; Rowlands, 2011b; Rowlands 2016). Later, I summarise these earlier arguments, but my focus here is mostly on the textual sources.

Other authors have discussed cross-cultural contact in Aboriginal artefacts and the desire for the

[2] This material includes prior research into primary source data that was not previously used, largely for reasons of brevity and flow, and was thought lost for some years.

'authentic', unadulterated object by European collectors in this period. Notably, Tom Griffiths (1996), Rodney Harrison (2006), and Phillip Jones (2008b) explored the antiquarian's and collector's desire for objects from a so-called Stone Age of Australia, which frequently led to more common cross-cultural objects being ignored or not noticed. These works have been accompanied by such noteworthy volumes as *The Makers and Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections* (Peterson, Allen & Hamby, 2008) that also considered notions of authenticity in the museum context, and how this shaped collection and display practices. My own PhD thesis explored these ideas by conducting a detailed analysis of roughly two thousand objects at two museums, gathered by two collectors, how the Queensland Museum constructed a flawed view of Aboriginal people as a Stone Age people in an exhibition that remained open from 1914 to 1985, and how such practices formed part of state-building in the colonial period and beyond. Within the context of Australian archaeology and anthropology, it is now well-accepted that collectors held profound biases regarding the peoples they studied, leading to mischaracterisation and under-representation of the cultural diversity of the material record.

This article owes a debt to the works cited above, as well as additional material on the historical individuals discussed throughout. Of particular significance here is the writing on Professor Baldwin Spencer (1860–1929) by John Mulvaney (2008a; 2008b), one of the most admired archaeologists in Australia, and whose work on Spencer had no rival. Furthermore, the collection of articles cited throughout from *The Roth Family, Anthropology & Colonial Administration* (McDougall & Davidson, 2008) is an indispensable source on a significant family in the field of anthropology during the colonial period, which relates to two of the major figures discussed in this article. Supplementing this source, other works on Dr Walter Edmund Roth have been used throughout, such as by Richard Robins (2008) and Kate Khan (1993). Although both authors discussed Roth's collection practices and his collection (at the Queensland Museum and Australian Museum respectively), they did not conduct detailed analyses of the presence of cross-cultural contact within the artefacts collected. This, of course, was not their aim, and such a perspective was the focus of some of my past research. Nevertheless, Robins and Khan provide additional invaluable insights to this article.

Race, Technology and the Museum

By the early nineteenth century, scientific racial theories were emerging as the central argument to justify why the European powers were displacing non-European people in the global competition for land, life, and labour. Following the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, it began to be understood that social, technological, and moral divisions were chiefly the product of differences in race.[3] Carolus Linnaeus (1707–78) and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach 1752–1840) were the earliest European commentators on race as a scientific concept. The former created a four-race model that the latter expanded into a five-race one, both seeking to classify perceived racial differences

[3] For example at the tail-end of the Enlightenment period, John Pinkerton wrote his *Dissertation on the Origin of the Scythians or Goths*, which posited that the origins of European greatness (particularly the north) lay in its supposed Gothic ancestry, 'accepting [excepting] only that of Ruffia [Russia], Poland, and Hungary' (1787).

scientifically (Gould, 1996). These theories were quickly adopted by racial theorists, yet, crucially, Blumenbach's assertion that his classificatory system did not imply that 'race' meant inherent human differences or social and evolutionary hierarchies were ignored.[4] For example, the Scottish antiquarian, John Pinkerton (1758–1826), described the differences between races as akin to those between breeds of dogs, with the Europeans being the hunting dogs and the rest being the lapdogs (1787). Evidently, the inevitable conclusion of those European scientists who supported the notion of racial difference was that the so-called European races were superior to non-Europeans. The Scottish phrenologist George Combe wrote, in 1832, that: 'The inhabitants of Europe, belonging to the Caucasian variety of mankind, have manifested, in all ages, a strong tendency toward moral and intellectual improvement' (as cited in Horsman, 1976, p. 398).

Race theory had been prevalent and enormously popular in Great Britain, long before the rise of Social Darwinism. The controversial anatomist and scientist Dr Robert Knox (1791–1862) had enjoyed a successful career travelling throughout England lecturing on the racial dominance of Anglo-Saxons.[5] Knox published *The Races of Men* in 1850, though he had enjoyed success on the lecture circuit since the mid-1840s. His principle belief was that humans had both a zoological and intellectual history and that the first determined the latter. Knox (1850) wrote that: 'Race is everything: literature, science, art, - in a word, civilisation depends on it' (p. 7).

Such theories combined with notions of technological epochs in civilisation that would then influence artefact collection and display and see native peoples categorised in exclusionary and backward terms. The Danish antiquarian Christian Jürgensen Thomsen (1788–1865) sought a means to conveniently describe and curate the vast collection under his care at the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen. He labelled the artefacts in his collection as belonging to a Three-Age system (Stone, Bronze, and Iron). Although there was some initial opposition to the idea, it had largely been accepted by the 1860s (Daniel & Renfrew, 1988). The effect of this on nineteenth-century natural science was profound, and it enabled collectors to describe peoples whose artefacts exhibited stone as their primary material as belonging to the Stone Age. While Europe had long since moved on from the manufacture of stone tools, many native peoples had not, and those collectors who gathered such objects began to classify their parent cultures as fixed in time, in a so-called 'primitive' condition. Such narratives sought to explain and justify European dominance and right-to-rule over the peoples they colonised.

[4] Blumenbach had written that 'although there seems to be so great a difference between widely separate nations . . . you see that all do so run into one another, and that one variety of mankind does so sensibly pass into the other, that you cannot mark out the limits between them'. Cited in Gould (1996), p. 407.

[5] Dr Robert Knox was chiefly controversial because he had been in involved in the Burke and Hare scandal in Edinburgh in 1828. William Burke and William Hare were two Irish immigrants who murdered sixteen people in Edinburgh in order to supply Knox with fresh cadavers for dissection in his anatomy classes. Whether Knox was aware he was being supplied with cadavers of the *little-too-fresh* variety is a matter of conjecture; however, he was able to escape prosecution at the cost of his license to practice anatomy. Burke was hanged after Hare turned King's evidence against him, while the precise fate of Hare is unknown and is the stuff of folk myth (reputedly, his eyes were torn or burnt out by a vengeful mob). For more context see, for example: Richardson, (1987).

That the Three-Age system had a major effect on anthropology museums, and theory is evident in contemporary records. According to the anthropologist Henry Ling Roth (1911), by which time he was the curator of the Bankfield Museum, almost all museums ran their ethnological displays on the same template as done by the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, and at Salisbury.[6] The Pitt Rivers system was essentially an evolutionary model of classification, not unlike Thomsen's Three-Age system, which used material culture to support a hierarchy of anthropological development from primitive peoples to European civilisation (Coombes, 1988). Lt.-General Pitt Rivers (1891), who founded the museum, saw his museum as primarily educational in purpose. In 1891, he declared:

> The masses are ignorant . . . the knowledge they lack is the knowledge of history. This lays them open to the designs of demagogues and agitators, who strive to make them break with the past . . . in drastic changes that have not the sanction of experience (p.115).

Lt.-General Pitt Rivers, as a military man, was fundamentally tied to the business of the British Empire, either in its defence or in its expansion. That museums based on his model became educational tools for the Empire is hardly surprising. This role was explicitly outlined and understood by major scientific organisations. For example, the Royal Anthropological Institute, in 1909, explained:

> Heaven-born Cadets are not the only Englishmen who are placed in authority over native races . . . . There are Engine Drivers, Inspectors of Police . . . Civil engineers of various denominations . . . to mention only a few whose sole opportunity of inhibiting scientific knowledge is from the local museum of the town or city in which they have been brought up (Cited in Coombes, 1988, p. 10).

At the close of the nineteenth century, museums had become integral to the research and theory of anthropology (Henare, 2005). Henry Ling Roth (1911) recommended that museums were best used when they displayed ethnological materials to demonstrate the relative development of an indigenous people and to educate Europeans as to the nature of the world's people. Anthropology, in the Victorian Age, assumed that the physical evolution of 'man' was related to everything he did, and that material culture studies could demonstrate the links between them (Coombes, 1988). Museum curators, therefore, had to make their exhibits informative by visually explaining the evolution of technology and indigenous peoples. This would often involve the presentation of objects in hierarchies, so as to emphasise a dichotomy between the old and the new. Hence, the evolutionary system of classification used in the Pitt Rivers Museum was ideal for this purpose. As Henry Ling Roth (1911) explained:

[6] To avoid confusion with Henry Ling Roth's younger brother Walter Edmund Roth, his full name is always used in this text.

> Now as regards the ethnological arrangement, the idea is to give within a certain or uncertain perspective a view of the manufactures of any given people, in order that we may get some notions it may be as to their productions, or to understand their position in the scale of art or manufactures, or to get some knowledge as to their general state of culture, or a fair idea as to what sort of people they are (p. 287).

What is important here, in terms of the collection record, its use, and how collectors and scholars evaluated native populations, is that such hierarchical views were chiefly useful to scholars in providing insight into European ancestry (Roth, 1911). As empathetic as many anthropologists were, or believed themselves to be, to the people they studied, they nevertheless could not avoid seeing through a lens that coloured native peoples as curios. Having been conditioned to think of others in racial or technological hierarchies, the collectors and ethnographers thus set to their work with ultimately flawed assumptions, and this is especially evident in colonial Australia.

The Australian Laboratory

Australia became a ripe testing ground for theories on racial and technological sophistication, partly because of the notion that its native population was doomed to extinction and because they were classified as incapable of escaping a Stone Age level of technology. On the 22nd of August 1770, Captain Cook claimed the eastern coastline of the Australian continent for the British Empire. However, it was not until the 26th of January 1788 that Governor Arthur Phillip annexed roughly half of the landmass for a tiny penal colony consisting of just over seven hundred convicts, two hundred marines, and three hundred naval officers and sailors (Frost, 2011). The settlement of Australia had been dictated on the false notion of *Terra Nullius*, an assumption that the land was without meaningful human habitation. In fact, hundreds of different Aboriginal language groups had inhabited Australia for at least sixty thousand years, developing ways of life eminently suited to the harsh landscape of the continent. Phillip was immediately aware that the new colony of New South Wales was in fact inhabited by native peoples, but he found it difficult to establish amicable relations with them. As a succession of governors replaced him and the tide of European settlement washed over Aboriginal land, conflict and exploitation of native lives and land followed.

Australia soon became a lucrative prospect for European settlers, particularly in marine and mineral resources. Europeans and Chinese people migrated in vast numbers to Australia, seizing opportunities for gold-mining and pastoral settlement (Khan 1993). This led to clashes with the native population who were too few in number in their own communities (often only existing in settlements of upwards of fifty people) to resist such a flood. Consequently, Aboriginal people lost access to their game and resources and, often, their lives. Ethnographers and anthropologists frequently discussed the depopulation of the Australian Aboriginal peoples in the face of European economic aggression. For example, the anthropologists Professor Baldwin Spencer and Francis James Gillen (1855–1912) were both engaged in active research among Australian Aboriginal peoples. They witnessed the harmful effect that European settlement had on them, describing exploitation and dwindling

populations (Rowse, 1998). Alfred William Howitt (1830–1908), an anthropologist and natural scientist, and Lorimer Fison (1832–1907),[7] an anthropologist and missionary, described the process of native depopulation in the face of European settlement as a 'line of blood' (1880, p. 181). Both men wrote that the native population of Gippsland in Victoria had shrunk from as many as 1,500 in 1839 to 159 in 1877. In the state of Queensland, the situation was perhaps grimmer, with the state employing the native mounted police in the extermination of Aboriginal settlements (Richards, 2008).

Despite frank condemnations of European violence and the economic and sexual exploitation of Aboriginal people on the frontier, Aboriginal decline was unquestionably an issue of race in the eyes of mainstream Victorian ethnographers and anthropologists. These opinions are evident in the observations of contemporary literature, from men such as Spencer and Gillen, and Fison and Howitt. Spencer and Gillen's *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899/1968), elaborated on racial decline:

> In the more southern parts [of Australia], where they have been long in contact with the white man, not only have their numbers diminished rapidly, but the natives who still remain are but poor representatives of their race, having lost all or nearly all of their old customs and traditions. With the spread of the white man it can only be a matter of comparatively a few years before the same fate will befall the remaining tribes, which are as yet fortunately too far removed from white settlements of any size to have become degraded (p. 7).

Fison and Howitt, as damning as they were of European violence against Aboriginal people, nonetheless believed that violence and loss of resources alone could not possibly account for the decline of the Aboriginal people of Australia. In their introductory section on the Kurnai (1880), they wrote:

> If the aborigine could have become physically and mentally such as a white man, he would have been in equilibrium with his new surroundings. If his physical and mental nature had been able to become modified with the changed conditions, he could have survived. But the former alternative is self-evidently an impossibility, and probably the strength of hereditary physical and mental peculiarities has made the latter alternative also an impossibility. The consequence has been that he is rapidly and inevitably becoming extinct (p. 185).

When Stanley D. Porteus (1883–1972), a professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Hawaii, was invited to study the Aboriginal people in 1928, his various researches and tests came to the single conclusion: 'They [Aboriginal people] are not unintelligent, but are certainly inadaptable to a civilised environment' (1931, p. 420). Porteus was a theorist on human intelligence, arguing that European races were inherently superior in mental faculties to others, and his assumptions on anthropological

[7] Both men were credited with having produced the first work of ethnography in Australia.

issues echoed those of professional scholars of the field on native levels of civilisation and technological sophistication. His preface includes this summation of his unique opportunity:

> I received an invitation from the Australian National Research Council to visit Australia and carry out a series of investigations on the mental status of the aborigines of that continent. With the exception of one or two very minor studies involving small groups of half-castes as well as full bloods, nothing whatever had been attempted in the way of psychological examinations of individuals of this most interesting race. Yet here in Australia are the remnants of a Stone Age people, cut off, in all probability, from other racial contacts for thousands of years and universally considered as belonging in the most primitive stages of culture (p. v).

Twenty years earlier, Henry Ling Roth (1911) had similarly written on the uniqueness of native Australians, although his perspective differed from some of his contemporaries. He had commented that: 'The Australians [Aboriginal people] are by most people looked upon as a degraded race, who are said to have no religion, and no government, and are in fact the worst of savages!' (pp. 287–88). Henry Ling Roth made it clear that he did not believe these views were true, but emphasised that their intellectual currency held value among European people in Australia and beyond.[8] He does not specify whether 'by most' refers to scientists like himself or the broader public, though it seems unlikely that the finer distinctions between 'degradation' and 'primitiveness' would have been of great interest to any but scholars. Despite his qualification that native Australians were not 'degraded', his general assumptions still tended to agree with his contemporaries that Aboriginal people existed in an exceptionally primitive state. Some other influential anthropologists in this period agreed with Henry Ling Roth's sentiments. For example, Howitt, in his *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*, wrote in 1904 that:

> The level of culture of the Australians cannot be considered lower than that of the ancestral stock from which they separated, and their language discloses nothing that can point to a former knowledge of the arts higher than that of the present time, in their natural savage state (p. 30).

Spencer and Gillen shared similar views on the state of Aboriginal civilisation though, like Henry Ling Roth, they were also doubtful of the truth behind overly negative stereotyping. They wrote that:

> It is sometimes asserted that the Australian native is degenerate, but it is difficult to see on what grounds this conclusion is based. His customs and organisation, as well

[8] It is important to stress here that 'degraded' in this context means that others considered them to have originally existed in a higher level of civilisation from which they had declined. Henry Ling Roth certainly objected to such a view but, nonetheless, there is no reason to suspect that he disagreed with the prevailing attitude among racial theorists that Australian Aboriginal were on a lower tier of sophistication than others.

> as his various weapons and implements, show, so far as we can see, no indication of any such feature . . . [There is] no evidence of . . . any stage of civilisation higher than the one in which we now find them (1899/1968, p. 54).

These views demonstrate that, within the Australian context, such writers observed Aboriginal people in terms determined by broader attitudes on race. Although exploitation by European peoples was considered, most observers concluded that native problems were racially determined: they could not resist because they were perceived to be of lower racial stock. This perception was reinforced by a flawed interpretation of the material culture that was gathered to feed the museum desire for objects of Aboriginal 'tradition'.

Protection and Collection

Observers like Spencer, Gillen, and Howitt were generous and even impressed by the lifestyles of the Aboriginal people of Australia where they observed them in what was considered their traditional state. Where Aboriginal people intermingled with Europeans, adopted their customs, habits, and materials, this was almost always considered to be a clear sign of the degradation of the Aboriginal race (Mulvaney, 2008a). Indeed, the perceived inability of Aboriginal people to adapt became the primary determinant of their inevitable extinction in the eyes of European researchers. This idea proved to be the fundamental notion for scientists in conceptualising the Australian Aboriginal during this period. The idea was so widespread and readily accepted that it clung to psychological, historical, and anthropological thought concerning Aboriginal people for decades. A key element to this notion that Aboriginal Australians could not adapt was drawn from the collection of material culture on the frontier. I have written extensively on how European collectors misread the objects they gathered and failed to notice the profound signs of adaptation within them, or how the collectors fetishised objects they defined as showing no cross-cultural contact (Rowlands, 2011b). Suffice to state here, the desire of collectors for the 'authentic' object led to a significant collection of native material showing foreign influence and adaptation to be ignored or, in some cases, deliberately modified to remove the admixture. Museums, likewise, sought collections of what they considered to be the unadulterated 'pure' material culture of native peoples, so as to display what were perceived to be the last relics of vanishing cultures. This desire for the authentic by museums drove the collection of material on the frontier. It also had a legitimating effect on the flawed interpretations of the artefacts collected since museums were the pre-eminent domain of cultural education at this time. Yet this collection also convinced the collectors and those who interpreted the collections that Aboriginal people were destined for extinction because the elision of so-called inauthentic material culture from the collected record constructed a false impression of native inadaptability.

Not all collectors were ignorant of the fact that Aboriginal people could introduce new ideas and innovations. Nevertheless, they felt that Aboriginal society was fundamentally opposed to adaptation. As Spencer and Gillen (1899/1968) wrote:

> That changes have been introduced, in fact, are still being introduced, is a matter of certainty; the difficulty to be explained is, how in the face of the rigid conservatism of the native, which may be said to be one of his leading features, such changes can possibly be mooted (pp. 13–4).

According to the anthropologist Adolphus Peter Elkin (1891–1979), Aboriginal adoption of European goods was determined based only upon the economic attractions of the goods or customs, and upon the zeal of the Europeans (especially missionaries) (1951). As Spencer and Gillen had observed, however, Aboriginal culture was seen as inherently conservative and utterly resistant to change. This apparently simple assertion is nonetheless completely contradicted not only by the material culture of Aboriginal people but also by the condemnations of the same observers towards Aboriginal material adaptation.

The material record, therefore, seemed to bolster the conclusion that Aboriginal people were doomed. The perception of the rapid destruction of the Aboriginal population bothered the more humanitarian impulses of some of the European population of Australia. At different times, the various states and territories adopted protection acts designed to slow the anticipated extinction of the native population, control its sexual reproduction, and segregate it from the European and other non-native groups. Anthropologists were key figures in this drive and often became informants to the various protection offices, or protectors themselves. For example, in Queensland, the 1897 *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* was created to protect and control the native population. It is demonstrative of the link between anthropology and colonial power that the most prestigious post of Northern Protector was filled by the British-born anthropologist and surgeon, Dr Walter Edmund Roth (the younger brother of Henry Ling Roth).[9] Roth was a surgeon, as well as a committed ethnographer and the Protector of Queensland Aborigines from 1897 until 1906.[10]

Roth, like Spencer, travelled to Australia to begin his career in the field of anthropological studies on the Australian Aboriginal people. Roth and Spencer considered Australia to be a rich country for research. Evincing the common view that Australian Aboriginals were within a few short generations of extinction, Spencer wrote in 1900 that: 'There is no end of pioneer work [in Australia] to be done and work which, in Anthropology at least, must be done soon if it is to be done at all' (Cited in Mulvaney, 2008a). Spencer and Roth shared the idea that to properly study Aboriginal people, one had to make themselves first of all thoroughly familiar with Aboriginal people and gain their confidence. On this matter, Roth commented in the preface to his 1897 publication that:

[9] The *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* (hereafter referred to as *The Act*) was largely established by the amateur anthropologist, politician, writer, and adventurer Archibald Meston. Meston received the less prestigious post of Southern Protector, a fact that incensed him and led to a bitter rivalry between himself and Roth. For Meston's report, which led to some of the policies of *The Act*, see: Meston, (1896).

[10] Roth became overall protector in 1904, after Meston was retrenched from his position.

> At Boulia, where strictly professional work was conspicuous by its absence, almost my whole time was devoted to a careful study of the local (Pitta-Pitta) language: only when this was sufficiently mastered did I find it possible to understand the complex system of social and individual nomenclature in vogue, and ultimately to gain such amount of confidence and trust among the natives as enabled me to obtain information concerning various superstitions, beliefs, and ceremonial rites which otherwise would in all probability have been withheld. To any future observers of, and writers on, the Queensland aboriginal, I would most strongly recommend this method of making themselves familiar with the particular language of the district before proceeding to make any further inquiries (p. v).

Roth was typical of many of the leading authors of anthropological and ethnological work in late-Victorian-era Australia who shared similar backgrounds in education, from which they gained similar disciplinary perspectives. For both Spencer and Roth, exposure to the field of anthropology came from their shared educational background and early experiences with the Pitt Rivers Museum in Britain (Mulvaney, 2008a). Roth and Spencer began their university studies in 1881, enrolling in a new course on Darwinian Biology at Oxford University's Museum of Natural History (Mulvaney, 2008b). Henry Balfour (1863–1939), who would later become the first curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum and remain in written contact with Spencer, was also enrolled in the same course as he and Roth. Roth and Spencer both actively collected for and eventually became directors of museums: Spencer as honorary director of the National Museum of Victoria and Roth at the Georgetown Museum, Guyana. Although many of their ideas of native peoples were premised on false assumptions and tended towards racial theories, and although Roth's policies as protector—which included segregation and the control of reproduction—would be considered a form of racism today, both men exhibited strong humanistic tendencies for their time, and Roth's policies emerged from a genuine desire to protect Aboriginal peoples.

The establishment of formal regulations over Aboriginal people created the necessity to regulate what classified an Aboriginal person. In order to have laws governing a certain kind of people, it was essential that what constituted that kind be properly understood. Race, therefore, became fundamental to the implementation of *The Act*. As an example of this, Roth was greatly concerned with the inter-breeding of Aboriginal people with 'Asiatics and Kanakas' (Cited in Ganter, 2008, p. 162). He wanted an amendment Bill to *The Act* under which permission would be needed to be sought from the protector for any cross-racial marriage with Aboriginal people. Europeans were theoretically exempt from this Bill, though not practically, as Roth believed passionately that for Aboriginal people to be preserved, there must be no admixture of race.

When Roth became the royal commissioner investigating claims of exploitation of Aboriginal people in Western Australia, in 1904, he also cautioned the state government of the danger of allowing racial miscegenation. The appointment of Roth to this post was largely the result of the bad publicity the state was receiving for its treatment of Aboriginal people. Indeed, Roth's report on the conditions in Western Australia would eventually be discussed in the House of Commons in Britain,

where it was claimed that 'cruelties committed in the dark ages' were going on in the state (Haebich, 1992). Roth warned the Western Australian government that there were far too many mixed-race children amongst Aboriginal people, and if this continued, the future of these children would 'be one of vagabondism and harlotry' (Cited in Haebich, 1992, p. 77). The perceived dangers of racial admixture was not an obsession peculiar to Roth, as it was shared by many of the leading ethnographers and anthropologists of the time in Australia.

While Roth recognised that mixed-race Aboriginal children were increasing in number, his estimation of the population of full-blooded Aboriginals was grim. Archibald Meston, the Southern Protector in Queensland, agreed with Roth's figure predicting, in 1902, that '50 years will finish it' (Taylor, 2003, p. 127). As Mulvaney (2008a) has observed, Roth often wrote to his old classmate Spencer and opined that Aboriginal people could not compete with the European population of Australia, nor adapt to new forms of life that would allow them to do so. Therefore, in his view, they were destined for extinction. Even so, Roth ignored the evidence of adaptation he collected, or that he saw in the growth of certain kinds of Aboriginal populations. He observed that Aboriginal children of mixed-race descent were more frequent on the frontier contradiction of assertion that Aboriginal people would die out. Yet, for Roth, there was no contradiction—like many other Victorian observers of race, pure-bloodedness defined the features of a racial type; admixture and miscegenation only diminished bloodlines.

The idea of racial miscegenation did not end at discussions of sexual relations but also filtered into broader cultural and technological issues. When Aboriginal people adopted the habits of Europeans, this was almost always seen as a bad thing. Similar propositions existed in the broader anthropological literature. For example, as early as 1880, Fison and Howitt had observed that Aboriginal customs were fast disintegrating in the wake of European settlement. As a result of the frontier contact between Aboriginal people and Europeans, Aboriginal people had been influenced by European culture. Fison and Howitt (1880) cautioned that: 'They [Aboriginal people] only adopted some of the habits of the white men; but with these they also adopted some of the vicious habits of the new comers' (pp. 183–4). In particular, Howitt believed that the influence of European goods and customs had been a pernicious one. In his 1904 publication, he romanticised traditional Aboriginal lifestyle and condemned the features adopted by Aboriginal people from Europeans:

> Such contrasts between the old and the new condition of things struck me forcibly at the Kurnai *Jereaeil*, where the people lived for a week in the manner of their old lives, certainly with the addition of the white man's beef and flour, but without his intoxicating drinks, which have been a fatal curse to the black race. That week was passed without a single quarrel or dispute (Howitt, 1904/1996, p. 777).

As stated, the collecting practices of anthropologists and others were influenced by these pre-conceived notions of race and technology. Roth's collection of Aboriginal artefacts is considered to be the most systematic and emblematic of Aboriginal material culture collections in this period. Besides the material Roth collected, Richard Robins (2008) defines Roth's other work as 'the most

significant body of anthropological work on Queensland Aborigines for that period' (p. 177). Roth's work cannot be removed from the context of the man himself, nor from his duties as protector or his publications on the ethnology of the Queensland Aboriginals. His collection also indicates how Roth and other collectors were constructing Aboriginal culture in accordance with their own notions.

Roth collected and catalogued a vast number of objects of Aboriginal material culture, and his patient and scientific recording of his collections rival any other collector of like artefacts at the time. Indeed, only the German collector Otto Finsch's collection of Pacific Island material culture shows greater attention to detail on an object-by-object basis (Rowlands, 2016). Of the artefacts that Roth collected for the Queensland Museum that I studied, 33 of 194 demonstrated clear evidence of cross-cultural contact. These included objects made with metal, ceramic, or European machine-manufactured cloth. Of the collection he gathered for the Australian Museum, 98 of 1,617 objects showed such materials.[11] However, if we consider that objects made with iron-headed chisels were used for engraving or shaping wooden objects, the actual incidence of cultural entanglement is likely much higher. Furthermore, as it was undoubtedly the case that Roth (and other collectors) had a distaste for collecting such 'impure' objects, the actual presence of cross-cultural contact and adaptation to foreign materials within Aboriginal culture was almost certainly significant.

This obsession with objects of pre-contact Aboriginal society could blind observers to what they were actually witnessing. For example, though not an artefact collector, Porteus (1931) had come to Australia to observe 'traditional' Aboriginal people, and he too missed the significance of what he saw. Consider his description that:

> To see how a Stone Age people actually make their weapons was not to be lightly disregarded. This matter of making stone or glass spearheads probably represents the aborigine's high-water mark of achievement in manual skill and design (p. 109).

Porteus concludes that Aboriginal people are 'Stone Age' and inadaptable, yet he fails to notice that the weapon making he is privileged to observe is being done with materials other than of Aboriginal making or naturally occurring in the environment (glass). Yet, observers and, especially, collectors sought 'authentic' Aboriginal Australia. When presented with evidence of integrated material, they either did not recognise it or considered these objects as degenerations. Such collections were then used by their host museums for display purposes, initially demonstrating the perceived cultural purity and inability to adapt of Aboriginal peoples. Nevertheless, more patient observation of the collected record has shown that even the material that was collected evinces that Australian Aboriginal people, at the time of collection, could by

[11] It is important to note that I excluded all objects considered to be Secret Sacred (culturally or spiritually sensitive artefacts) when I examined these collections. Although I was given full permission by the Queensland Museum and the Queensland Museum Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Consultative Committee to examine this material, I decided it was not necessary to use material reserved for initiated Aboriginal men and women for my own research agenda. Furthermore, some of the objects Roth collected have been lost, misplaced, or possibly repatriated since their original collection.

no means be described as inhabiting an inescapable Stone Age civilisation (Rowlands, 2011b) and, instead, creatively adapted foreign materials to their own purposes.

Conclusion

In the Australian context, Aboriginal people were considered primarily of interest for the same reasons as other native peoples. Howitt made this evidently clear when he wrote that: 'The Australians [specifically Aboriginal people] may therefore be classed as representing hunting tribes of the Neolithic age' (1904/1996, p. 9). Stone tools were the primary basis of Howitt's evidence for this deduction, and he considered Aboriginal civilisation to be fixed in development from time immemorial (Mulvaney, 2008b). Spencer explicitly stated the same views as Howitt. In an address to the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science, in 1921, he declared:

> The second [duty] is to protect [Aboriginal people] . . . The first is to study as carefully and intensively as possible, their customs and beliefs, and all that is included under the term of their culture, because they stand further back in time . . . than any other people still existing; they represent the last surviving relic of really primitive stone-age people; and it can only be a matter of comparatively a few years before they are extinct, or the surviving remnants of the tribes have lost all knowledge of their original tribes and customs (Cited in Mulvaney, 2008b, 157).

The disturbing implication here is that despite the observer's empathy for Aboriginal people in the face of European settlement, protecting Aboriginal people was considered to be a secondary aim to simply studying them. Such flaws in the European study of the 'other' have been notably stated by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in her *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2012), in which she argues that the elision of native voices and perspectives in such anthropology inextricably links Western research methods to the colonial mission, offering nothing of use to the peoples who were studied. Indeed, from the perspective of the men discussed in this article, the study of native peoples was chiefly of value because it helped to inform on the European past. Nevertheless, there was a sense of urgency to collecting and in establishing museum stores and exhibits of Aboriginal material culture. This sense of urgency in collecting artefacts was commonplace in Australia. For example, the Queensland Museum demanded Aboriginal material culture from collectors *before it was too late*, and many of the institution's regular collectors expressed the same sense of urgency. In other states in Australia, these sentiments were also common: Herbert Basedow (1881–1933), an anthropologist and Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory in 1911, believed that it was imperative to collect Aboriginal material culture before they became extinct (Kaus, 2008).

Australia was not alone in having collectors motivated by a fear of the extinction of their favoured subject. Since the Darwinian revolution of the 1860s, colonial territories and peoples gained a scientific significance. According to Henare (2005), those who studied the so-called primitive peoples of the world 'emphasised the urgent need to collect the material productions as

well as textual accounts of contemporary "archaic" peoples before they died out' (p. 214). Many of the quotations cited from Spencer and Gillen in this article refers to the urgency of material culture collection in regards Aboriginal people. For example, the preface to their *Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899/1968), states:

> The time in which it will be possible to investigate the Australian native tribes is rapidly drawing to a close, and though we know more of them than we do of the lost Tasmanians, yet our knowledge is very incomplete, and unless some special effort be made, many tribes will practically die out without our gaining any knowledge of the details of their organisation, or of their sacred customs and beliefs (p. vii).

Museums began to lose ground to universities as the primary area for the dissemination of anthropological theory, and artefact collection began to fall out of vogue. By the 1930s, Australian Social Anthropology was firmly ensconced in the university, with the museum being of peripheral importance to the field. Yet, the conception of Aboriginal people as relics of the Stone Age was so enshrined in the European imagination that, even when the museum's importance to anthropology was replaced by the university, observers still conceived of Aboriginal people in terms of flawed collections and arrangements of their material culture.

European race theories and ideas of technological hierarchies were intimately connected, and this determined early ethnographic and collection practices in the colonies. The written records of contemporary anthropologists and collectors demonstrate that such people viewed Aboriginal people as unchanging, stubborn, and resistant to adaptation. As has been shown in the cited texts, the prevailing view of European anthropologists and natural scientists regarding the survival of the Aboriginal people was that they simply could not adapt and that their extinction would occur soon enough as a consequence of this. As late as 1945, academic observers of Aboriginal society were still making this prediction. Elkin, in the preface to his 1977 edition of a book he first published in 1945, wrote that: 'In 1945, the depopulation of full-blood Aborigines, which began in 1788, was still continuing and their extinction in the not far-off future seemed inevitable' (p. vii). History has proven Elkin's earliest assumptions wrong, and the modern-day Aboriginal Australian population has shown robust growth.

Regardless, flawed theoretical constructions lingered for decades, leading to the mischaracterisation of Australia's native population and serious flaws in the work of noted anthropologists. Had these men more critically analysed the dominant European theories on race, their observations on the frontier would likely have profoundly differed. The material culture they collected would likely have differed in scope, and their analysis of their collections could have disproved their incorrect assumptions of inadaptability in Aboriginal culture. Unfortunately, their flawed assumptions buttressed exclusionist attitudes and segregationist and restrictive policies directed at Australia's native peoples, which helped to bolster the idea that Australia was a 'white man's country', not because of the European conquest of the continent, but because of pseudo-scientific views of racial and technological sophistication.

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