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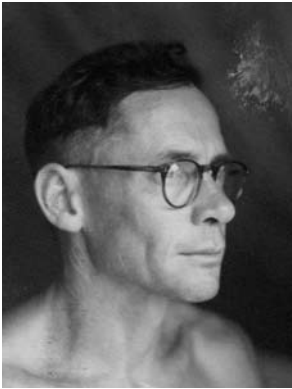


THE ARNHEM LAND EXPEDITION

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Thomas, M. 2008. In the wake of the Arnhem Land Expedition. *Explore* 30(1): 8–11.
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far left: Australian Museum curator Frederick D McCarthy in Arnhem Land. Photo Charles P Mountford, 1948, courtesy of the State Library of South Australia. PRG 1218/34/2835.

left: Expedition leader Charles P Mountford operating a magnetic wire recorder in Arnhem Land. Detail of photograph by Howell Walker, 1948, courtesy of the State Library of South Australia. PRG 487/1/2.

opposite: The RAAF transport moving the expedition party from Yirrkala to Darwin. Photo Frank M Setzler, 1948. By permission of the National Library of Australia.

Sixty years ago, a team of photographers, anthropologists and natural scientists flew to the Top End of Australia for an extended journey through Arnhem Land. The expedition set new standards, leaving behind a rich collection of documents and objects that are proving invaluable for understanding and maintaining Indigenous cultures, as historian Martin Thomas writes.

The 1948 American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land, as it was officially known, is often described as the ‘last of the big expeditions’. Despite the hype (and there was plenty of that), exploration – at least in the terrestrial sense – was not the main purpose. Rather, it was the frontier of knowledge that they hoped to penetrate, and this involved study of both the environment and its Aboriginal inhabitants. The make-up of the expedition encouraged cross-pollination among the researchers, who returned home with major interdisciplinary collections for their sponsoring institutions.

MOUNTFORD’S MISSION

The expedition was the brainchild of leader Charles P Mountford (1890–1976), the Adelaide photographer and self-taught ethnologist, who became a well-known authority on Aboriginal art and culture. Towards the end of World War II, when the Australian Government was eager to obtain favourable publicity for Australia, Mountford was sent on a lecture tour to educate Americans about his native land.

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In Washington DC, Mountford showed documentaries he had made in Central Australia. They caught the eye of Dr Gilbert H Grosvenor, the ‘father of photojournalism’, who for 55 years edited *National Geographic* magazine. When Grosvenor mentioned to Mountford that the

National Geographic Society had a research fund, and asked if he had an idea worthy of support, Mountford replied: ‘I’ve got more ideas than a dog’s got fleas’. An application was rapidly produced, and with a \$10,000 grant the Arnhem Land Expedition was born.

It would have been a fairly modest affair had not the Smithsonian Institution decided to send a team of scientists. The Smithsonian is both the national museum of the United States and a major research facility. The joint involvement of these two great American icons in the Arnhem Land venture was too much for Australian politicians to ignore. So the Chifley Government, sensing a diplomatic opportunity, signed up as an official partner in the expedition and made a serious commitment of money, resources and personnel. The government saw a chance to fuse science and geopolitics at a time when the bilateral relationship was being reshaped for the post-war era. Lasting for seven months of 1948, the expedition involved 17 researchers and support staff who worked from three principal bases in Arnhem Land.

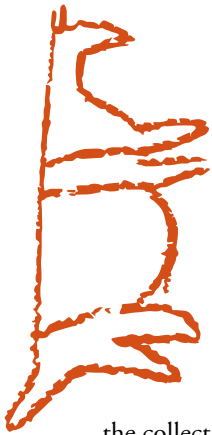
BOUNTY

In gathering collections, the researchers performed a herculean labour. The bounty included 13,500 plant specimens, 30,000 fish, 850 birds, 460 other animal specimens, and several thousand Aboriginal artefacts and paintings. A significant proportion of the ethnographic material was acquired by the Australian Museum. This was due to the participation of Frederick D McCarthy (1905–1997), the Museum’s long-serving Curator of Anthropology, who made a pioneering contribution to the study of Aboriginal material culture.

right: Gulumbu Yunupingu (left) and Nyapanyapa Yunupingu (right) look at digital photos from the Australian Museum. Photo Martin Thomas.

far right: On seeing digital photos of objects from the Australian Museum collection, Gulumbu Yunupingu gets out her current weaving projects. Photo Martin Thomas.

below: Painted twined basket from Yirrkala, Arnhem Land. Donated by Mr WE Harney. Photo Martin Thomas. E53216.



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The exquisite paintings and artefacts collected by the expedition have been the focus of my recent research. Supported by an Australian Museum Fellowship, I have been studying the collections and associated documentation left by the 1948 team: vast resources of film, sound recordings, photography and written reportage. Proudly positioned at the technological forefront, the expedition was 'multimedia' long before the term was coined.

UNDERSTANDING THE EXPEDITION

The challenge of interpreting the expedition 60 years later requires the full range of collected material to be considered. Arnhem Land artist Mawalan Marika, regarded as one of the brightest stars of mid-twentieth century Australian art, was among the painters whose work was collected. His works on bark are superb objects in their own right, but McCarthy, who was intensely interested in how things were made, also collected samples of ochre and examples of brushes used by painters – all held in the Australian Museum collection. To these we can add film footage of works being painted and notes on some of the localities and myths depicted in the paintings.

This evidential richness adds to the excitement – as well as the difficulty – of researching a history of the expedition. The sources are dispersed across many institutions in the US and Australia. With so many objects and documents, assembled by a diverse team, the logistical challenges are immense.

To these must be added the ethical dilemmas of interpreting an event so prominently sited at the interface of Western and Aboriginal cultures.

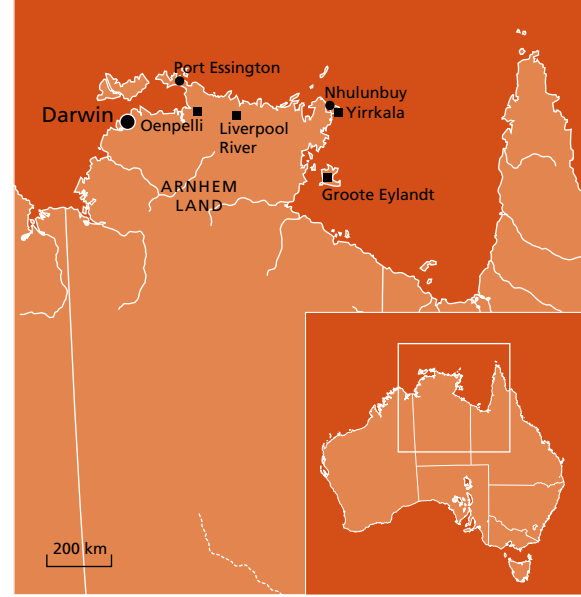
In the 1940s, the travails of the scientists were celebrated as evidence of Western ingenuity and expertise. But 60 years later we must acknowledge that expertise was hardly the preserve of the expedition team. Indigenous knowledge provided the intellectual capital for so much of what was accomplished. To this *cultural* contribution we must add the practical assistance given by Arnhem Landers – as guides and carriers, and as subjects in thousands of photos. This input is immediately apparent to people in Arnhem Land today. Unsurprisingly, they regard the collections and data amassed by the expedition as part of their own cultural heritage.



The Museum Fellowship funded me to visit Arnhem Land where I interviewed key knowledge holders. The terrible reality of Aboriginal life expectancy is such that few people remember the expedition directly. But interest in the collections and documentation could not be stronger. To find out about people's current understandings of the Museum collections, it was necessary to draw upon the multimedia quality of the expedition itself. I went to Arnhem Land with a laptop computer laden with digital images of artefacts and extracts from film and photographic archives.

In this way, a mountain of information could be readily transported back to its place of origin.

Thus equipped, I gave senior knowledge holders virtual 'tours' of the Museum



Northern Territory showing Arnhem Land and expedition collecting areas. Map Jeremy Austen.

collections. These sessions were videoed and recorded so that contemporary perspectives on the historic collections could be added to the Museum database. The most prolific contributor was Gulumbu Yunupingu, a distinguished artist and weaver who won first prize in the 2004 Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award. She invited me to her camp near the mining town of Nhulunbuy on the Gove Peninsula in north-east Arnhem Land. Gulumbu is not old enough to recall the expedition itself, but she could identify many of the people in the films and photographs and provided detailed information about scores of the objects and paintings collected by Mountford and McCarthy 60 years earlier.

Gulumbu spoke of her delight at seeing the beautiful work done by an earlier generation and the pride she feels in maintaining this ancient knowledge and passing it on to younger women.

Gulumbu spoke in her own Gumatj clan language, while her sister Margaret gave a running translation in English. This ensured that the information we recorded will be equally accessible to outsiders and to members of her own community. For all of us involved, it was an enlightening and extremely moving experience. When Gulumbu looked at the magnificent dyed baskets and string bags made by her forebears, she immediately called for samples of pandanus and banyan bark, and gave on-the-spot demonstrations of how the artefacts were made. Gulumbu spoke of her delight at seeing the beautiful work done by an earlier generation and the pride she feels in maintaining this ancient knowledge and passing it on to younger women.

Gulumbu is among the many people in Arnhem Land who believe that digital technology can help strengthen Indigenous culture. In Yirrkala, the former mission town where the 1948 expedition was based, the Aboriginal community recently launched the Mulka Project, a digital knowledge centre that makes film, photos and sound recordings from archives around the world immediately accessible to traditional owners. Photos from the Australian Museum collection have been added to the Mulka Centre's ever-expanding database.

The work with Gulumbu and other Arnhem Landers has resulted in a collaborative process that is beneficial to everyone involved. Naturally, Indigenous communities derive interest and pleasure from seeing how their forebears interacted with outsiders. Their testimony is having a profound impact on my project of trying to understand the 1948 expedition from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives. But what this type of research illustrates is the human and highly emotional attachment that people feel for their arts and crafts. It shows that the collected objects are anything but 'relics' of a former era – they are redolent with memories and associations, and they are part of the contemporary culture.

Martin Thomas is a cultural historian at the University of Sydney and a 2008 Smithsonian Fellow at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington where he is continuing his study of the 1948 Arnhem Land Expedition.

Further reading

Thomas, M, 2007. Taking them back: archival media in Arnhem Land today. *Cultural Studies Review* 13(2): 20–37.

Mountford, Charles P, 1949. Exploring stone age Arnhem Land. *National Geographic* 96(6): 745–82.

Mulka Project website: www.yirrkala.com/mulka