

## Edmund Milne's Collection

The National Museum holds several collections that are significant for various reasons: they are associated with well-known people, or particularly well-documented, are from areas not well represented in collections or include rare or special objects. Edmund Milne's collection falls into several of these categories. Milne himself is an important figure, his collection is well-documented compared to most other pre-1950 collections and it includes a high proportion of artefacts from south-eastern Australia.

Edmund Milne was born in England in 1861 and emigrated to Queensland with his parents 19 months later. They came as assisted immigrants and settled at the Mary River, where Maryborough is today. On leaving the Mary River for Sydney, in 1865, the Edmund was given a boomerang by an Aboriginal man whose identity is not known. By about 1868 the Milne family was living at Ulladulla on the New South Wales south coast and here Milne was again involved with local Aboriginal people including Coomee, a woman who was later to contribute items to Milne's collection. In 1876 Milne began his career with the New South Wales Railways. Forty-one years later, having worked his way up through the ranks, he was appointed Assistant Commissioner. He died less than nine months later, in Sydney, on 23 August 1917. He bequeathed his collection to the first national museum to be built in Canberra. The collection was destined to remain at his home in Ryde until 1931 when it was acquired by the Australian Institute of Anatomy, and remained there until the collections held at the institute became part of the National Museum's collection in 1985.

Milne's collection of Aboriginal artefacts, assembled between about 1880 and 1917, comprises some 1470 Aboriginal artefacts of which 415 are ethnographic items. All Australian states are represented, but about 90 per cent of the stone tools are from New South Wales and the majority of the ethnographic components are from New South Wales and Queensland. In addition, the collection includes 120 artefacts and stone tools from countries in the South Pacific, Europe and Egypt. From here I want to concentrate on the Aboriginal material.



Milne's collection is predominantly men's material and stone tools, but it is the geographical focus of the collection, and the level of documentation, that makes it remarkable. South-eastern Australia, on the whole, is not as well represented in museum collections as central and northern Australia. Milne recorded the names of Aboriginal people associated with particular objects which was rarely done on any scale until several decades after his death. He also recorded the sources of objects given to him and when he acquired them. A feature of the collection is 25 breastplates. Milne obtained information about several of the people named on the breastplates which would otherwise have been lost. Apart from the benefits of such documentation to the Museum, Aboriginal people living in the areas represented in the collection, especially descendants of those named, have made use of the collection, for example in family history research.

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Milne was also a photographer and his album includes a number of photographs of Aboriginal people, again mostly identified. Some of these people are associated with objects in the Milne Collection. Most of the other photographs in the album show carved trees.

As an amateur ethnologist Milne was keen to record information about Aboriginal cultures and historical episodes involving black or white histories and sometimes both. His record of one conflict episode on the then frontier on the Bogan River is probably the most complete account available, and records the conflict from both black and white perspectives. Although not acknowledged in his account, it is likely that Milne's source for the black perspective was Charlie Sergeant whose photograph illustrates the article. The caption to the photograph mentions that Sergeant's grandfather was one of those who attacked the stock camp on the Bogan in the 1840s.

Milne travelled widely due to his work and his two main pastimes – first aid work and the reserve rifle movement. Milne was an ambulance or first aid instructor with the railways and firmly believed that all employees should know first aid. He was a keen and competent rifle shooter, soon reaching marksman status. These hobbies activities enabled him to meet a lot of people, some of whom provided him with artefacts or showed him sites where he collected stone tools, recorded information or took photographs.

One of Milne's passions was to document trees bearing carved designs which were found at initiation and burial sites. Not only did Milne locate and photograph carved trees, but on some occasions was able to determine who was buried there or what the designs represented. In 1918 Robert Etheridge Jnr, then director of the Australian Museum in Sydney, published a monograph on this subject, dedicated to Milne and based largely on Milne's sites. As a self-taught amateur gentleman scientist, Milne valued highly his long association with Etheridge. In August 1914, by invitation, Milne presented a paper on carved trees to the Sydney section of the British Association for the advancement of Science (BAAS) Congress. Milne's paper was published later in the year in the *Scientific Australian*, the journal of an amateur anthropologists' group.

One unfortunate aspect of Milne's research into carved trees was that he opened a number of graves in order to glean information about burial practices. On one occasion while showing carved trees to a party including Sir Grafton Elliot Smith near Narromine following the BAAS Congress, a grave was opened and the party can be seen posed in a photograph with the skull of the grave's occupant on a stick in the foreground. No doubt this was encouraged by the scientists in the party and gave further credence to this aspect of Milne's research.

In 1913 Milne and some local men with an interest in history located the site where John Oxley's party had camped in 1817, close to the grave of an important Aboriginal man marked by two carved trees. As the first published record of carved trees, this would have been an incentive for Milne to search for the site. Partly due to information provided by Jacky Narang, an Aboriginal man at the time living in Orange, the party located the site, at Gobothery Hill, near the Lachlan River between Condobolin and Lake Cargelligo. They found one of the trees still standing and the other only a stump with a small part of the design remaining. Milne organised for the tree and stump to be cut down and sent to the Australian Museum. The following year facsimiles of the trees and a monument were erected, unveiled by the Minister of Labour John Estell. Billy Boyd, an Aboriginal man working on a nearby pastoral station informed Milne that the man buried in the grave was 'a great Lachlan chief' who had drowned while trying to cross the flooded Lachlan River. Knowledge about the man buried at Gobothery Hill is still retained by local Koori people who know him as Geramus. At the unveiling ceremony Geramus' grand-daughter Wooruddunny danced but unfortunately nothing further was recorded.

Milne read widely and passed his ideas about Aboriginal cultures and evolution onto the general public in lectures on 'The Australian Stone Age' and during visits to his private 'museum'. School children, visiting railway groups and those with similar interests were among those who visited his home to view the collection. Milne believed in aspects of evolutionary theory, but was unable to separate them from his strong religious beliefs. Milne also used lectures as an opportunity to promote positive ideas about Aboriginal people.

Milne expressed many of his ideas in an unpublished paper on the cultures of Aboriginal people of New South Wales, including his acceptance of the theory that Aboriginal people were living representatives of what Europeans were like in the Stone Age. Milne labeled some of his flaked stone tools 'Paleolithic' and the sole Tasmanian wooden artefact in his collection, a club, is similarly labelled. He also published several articles about Aboriginal people and historical events, as well as several obituaries for railway staff. Most of his published writings were written in a wishy-washy style that contains scattered facts among a sea of flowery words. This can be frustrating for anyone trying to gain information about Aboriginal cultures in an area where so little has been recorded. Nonetheless, there is value in his writings, and his collection more broadly, that can be used for this purpose, as well as for telling the fascinating story of Edmund Milne.

David Kaus  
Repatriation

