

*Herbert Basedow***Herbert Basedow →
a man of many professions**

Herbert Basedow's story is a fascinating one. He was probably Australia's first professionally-trained anthropologist and he was also a doctor, geologist and collector. He took part in several expeditions in central and northern Australia, between 1903 and 1928. It was on these expeditions that Basedow collected approximately 1600 Aboriginal artefacts and took around 2500 photographs of which approximately 40 per cent depict Aboriginal people, portraits and activities, or their sites. Today, this material is widely dispersed in museums in Australia and Europe with the National Museum holding by far the largest portion. As well, Basedow collected a range of geological, zoological and botanical specimens which are also widely spread. As yet, the Museum does not have a very good understanding of the extent of this material but the institutions holding these specimens include the South Australian Museum, the University of Adelaide, the Australian Museum, the Melbourne Museum and Kew Gardens in England. The only item collected by Basedow not related to Aboriginal people that the National Museum holds is a camel's nose peg!

A large part of the National Museum's Basedow artefact collection comprises men's weapons and tools and ceremonial items. Other significant components include 18 delightful little sculptures in stone, as well as carved wooden artefacts, by the Aranda artist Jimmy Kite acquired by Basedow in 1913, and a toy shield from the Alberga River, South Australia. Basedow took a photograph of an Aranda boy holding this particular shield and published a description of its manufacture. There are also a small number of women's objects, items of clothing, messagesticks, tapsticks and painting materials.



Aranda boy holding a toy shield and a boomerang. Alberga River, SA, early 1920s.
photo: Herbert Basedow, National Museum of Australia

In addition to the National Museum's holding, the state museums in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide as well as the Berndt Museum in Perth also hold Aboriginal artefacts collected by Basedow. There are other artefacts he collected in museums in Europe. The negatives to his photographs are also widely dispersed. As well as the National Museum's collection, other collections of negatives are to be found in the South Australian Museum and State Library and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. Prints of the photographs are mainly to be found in the Mitchell Library in Sydney, which also houses most of Basedow's papers.

Born in Adelaide in 1881 to German parents, Basedow attended Prince Alfred College before studying science at the University of Adelaide. He continued his studies in Europe, returning in 1910 with post-graduate degrees in anthropology, geology and surgery. Before he left for Europe, Basedow had already participated in two major expeditions funded by the South Australian Government – a prospecting survey to the north-west of the state (in 1903) and a geological mapping trip to the Darwin area (1905). Publications in anthropology and geology resulting from these expeditions, as well as other publications in geology, contributed to Basedow's success in completing his degrees in Europe in such a remarkably short time.

After returning to Australia, Basedow held two important government positions. The first was South Australian Assistant Government Geologist. He resigned from this position to become Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory after the Commonwealth took over responsibility for the Territory in 1911. He moved to Darwin but resigned after only five weeks in

Members of the Mackay Exploring Expedition to central Australia, 1926.

Herbert Basedow is in the middle row on the right.

photo: Herbert Basedow, National Museum of Australia



the job; apparently due to major disagreements with the Chief Administrator. While based at Darwin Basedow visited Bathurst Island where he collected a number of artefacts including five pukamani posts (four are held by the South Australian Museum and one was destroyed), believed to be the first ones collected.

Following his brief stint in the north, Basedow returned to Adelaide where he set up a medical practice and also consulted as a geologist. Some time before 1916 he took part in another expedition in central Australia but where and when he went remains a mystery. In 1916, he explored parts of the Kimberley region for oil-bearing deposits, and again in 1922, this time in the Victoria River district. One of the people who took part in the 1922 expedition was Frank Feast (see *Friends Newsletter* 2(4) 1991). Basedow met Feast when he went to Mt Gambier in 1919. He invited Feast to join him on an expedition the following year to central Australia, the first of four expeditions on which Feast accompanied Basedow. This 1920 trip was the last of three expeditions in 1919–20 that Basedow undertook to survey the health of Aboriginal people in South Australia in the north-east of the state, the southern areas west of Port Augusta and along the railway line to the border with the Northern Territory. On behalf of the Commonwealth Government Basedow continued this work over the border to Alice Springs, Hermannsburg, Arltunga and district.

On this trip he brought two young Aboriginal women with him back to Adelaide. Unndela and Tjikanna were to live in the Basedow home until his death in 1933, after which they were left to fend for themselves. While Basedow had what might be best described as a scientific interest in Aboriginal cultures, he consistently campaigned on their behalf for the last 15 years of his life.

In 1923 and 1924 Basedow took part in two vice-regal trips from Adelaide to Alice Springs. The first was with the governor of South Australia (Sir Thomas Bridges) and the other with Victoria's governor (Lord Stradbroke). After these, Basedow seems to have taken time off from major trips to focus on writing his first and most important book *The Australian Aboriginal*, which was published in 1925. Rather than being a comprehensive treatise on Aboriginal cultures, *The Australian Aboriginal* is more a collection of observations made by Basedow with some references to the work of others. It is well illustrated with a number of the

excellent photographs for which Basedow is renowned. Another book by Basedow, *Knights of the Boomerang*, was published posthumously in 1935. This book, too, is about Aboriginal cultures but when using it the reader needs to be cautious. Its idiosyncrasies have resulted in some problems with the book. Here Basedow tends to generalise some issues. For example, his account of initiation in central Australia is presented in terms of the story of a particular individual whereas his text is based on observations made on a number of occasions with several different language groups. To treat them all as having identical ceremonies is misleading.

Basedow also published several papers on Aboriginal topics (and others, particularly to do with geology), most of which are illustrated with his photographs. This is just as well because his photographs at the National Museum came with very little information and his publications are a major source of information in documenting them. The same can be said of the artefacts. Information about some of the artefacts Basedow collected was published by him but it has mainly been through other means that a large proportion of the collection has been documented. Matching the style of artefacts with the areas Basedow travelled means we can work out when they were collected and sometimes precisely where.

In the second half of the 1920s Basedow was to undertake his final two major expeditions. Both were financed by the wealthy grazier and adventurer Donald Mackay. The first, in 1926, was to the Petermann Ranges and travel was by camel and foot. Two years later a trip was made in Arnhem Land, travelling from Katherine to Roper River by horse and buggy and from Roper River by horse only, with mules carrying some of the gear.

In 1927, Basedow was elected to represent Barossa in the House of Assembly for the Country Party. He stood unsuccessfully again in 1930. Three years later he stood as an Independent and was re-elected, only to die suddenly later in the year. He was survived by his wife Nell; they had no children. In 1934, the Basedow Collection was offered to the Commonwealth and was purchased for £500. Norman Tindale of the South Australian Museum listed the collection for the Commonwealth for which the South Australian Museum received a portion of the collection.

The Basedow Collection was the first collection made by a professionally trained anthropologist and the third major collection to be acquired by the Commonwealth that would be destined for the National Museum's collection. It is a pity that it is not, overall, as well documented as it could be. This is not Basedow's fault, however, as when Tindale arrived to document the collection the artefacts were in one pile and labels in another (We don't know what happened to the labels). Nevertheless, it is a significant part of the National Museum's holdings of Indigenous artefacts.

David Kaus
Repatriation