



ISSN 1031-461X

Australian Historical Studies

Australian Historical Studies

Volume 49, Issue 1, February 2018



ISSN: 1031-461X (Print) 1940-5049 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rahs20

A Shield Loaded with History: Encounters, Objects and Exhibitions

Maria Nugent & Gaye Sculthorpe

To cite this article: Maria Nugent & Gaye Sculthorpe (2018) A Shield Loaded with History: Encounters, Objects and Exhibitions, Australian Historical Studies, 49:1, 28-43, DOI: [10.1080/1031461X.2017.1408663](https://doi.org/10.1080/1031461X.2017.1408663)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1031461X.2017.1408663>



Published online: 19 Feb 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 3415



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 3 View citing articles [↗](#)

A Shield Loaded with History: Encounters, Objects and Exhibitions

MARIA NUGENT & GAYE SCULTHORPE

This article discusses an Aboriginal shield in the British Museum which is widely believed to have been used in the first encounter between Lieutenant James Cook's expedition and the Gweagal people at Botany Bay in late April 1770. It traces the ways in which the shield became 'Cook-related', and increasingly represented and exhibited in that way. In the wake of its exhibition at the National Museum of Australia in late 2015 and early 2016, the shield gained further public prominence and has become enmeshed within a wider politics of reconciliation. A recent request from the La Perouse Local Aboriginal Land Council to the British Museum to review knowledge about the shield has contributed to a reappraisal of claims about its connection to Cook's 1770 expedition. Preliminary findings of this review are presented. In the process, the article addresses larger questions concerning the politics surrounding the interpretation of the shield as a historically 'loaded' object.

The shield which is the subject of this article was recently described by Gweagal elder Shayne Williams as representing 'a whole history of the country'.¹ Registered in the British Museum collection as Oc1978, Q.839, it is the one usually on display in Cabinet 96 in the Enlightenment Gallery.² It is the one now widely believed, although not proven, to have been used by one of the two Aboriginal men who opposed Cook's landing at Botany Bay in 1770, and to have been collected by Cook's expedition and taken back to England.³ This is the shield that

We recommend this article is read in conjunction with another article in this issue: Nicholas Thomas, 'A Case of Identity: The Artefacts of the 1770 Kamay (Botany Bay) Encounter', *Australian Historical Studies* 49, no. 1 (February 2018): 4–27. Thanks to the two anonymous referees for their comments. Thanks also to the participants (listed in footnote 37) in the workshop at the British Museum in which the shield was discussed, and which received support from the British Museum Research Fund.

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Parts of the research were funded by Australian Research Council grants [FT100100073] and [LP150100423].

¹ Shayne Williams, 'Our National Treasure', in *Encounters: Revealing Stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Objects from the British Museum* (Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2015), 50.

² The shield was not registered into the collection until 1978. Its registration number details the year it was registered (i.e. 1978). Q refers to method of acquisition being unknown. 839 is its number in a sequence of Q numbers for that year. For its online description, see: www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx?searchText=shield+botany+bay

³ See, for instance: Maria Nugent, *Captain Cook Was Here* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 40–2; Katrina Schlunke, 'One Strange Colonial Thing: Material Remembering and the

featured as Object 89 in the BBC/British Museum's *A History of the World in 100 Objects* and described by Neil MacGregor, the then director of the British Museum, as having 'become symbolically charged, freighted with layers of history, legend, global politics and race relations'.⁴ It is the one that was included, albeit in quite different ways, in two recent and related landmark exhibitions: the British Museum's *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation* in London (April to August 2015) and *Encounters: Revealing Stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Objects from the British Museum* (December 2015 to March 2016) at the National Museum of Australia (NMA) in Canberra.⁵ Out of the 151 objects borrowed from the British Museum for the *Encounters* exhibition, this shield dominated Australian media coverage, particularly in relation to the unfinished business of Australia's colonial history and public debate about the return of objects.⁶ Journalist Rosemary Neill, for instance, described it as the show's 'star exhibit'. This is the shield that Rodney Kelly, a Gweagal man from the New South Wales (NSW) far south coast, has campaigned to have returned to Australia since the *Encounters* exhibition closed, and which is currently the subject of a request to the British Museum for its return.⁷

Historian Tom Griffiths has recently written about this shield. He used his experience of seeing this 'powerful' and 'beautiful' object in the *Encounters* exhibition in the epilogue to his recent book on the craft of history, *The Art of Time Travel*. 'I gazed at it through glass, and through time', he writes. As an object that has become associated with a foundational moment in Australia's colonial history, and which had temporarily returned for the first time since it was taken away, the shield captured especially well Griffiths' theme of time travel. He presents it as an object heavy with history but one that remains open to interpretation and meaning-making as it continues to travel through time – and across space. 'The shield', he writes, 'is an emblem of encounter and it

Bark Shield of Botany Bay', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 27, no. 1 (2013): 18–29; Adrienne Kaeppler, *Artificial Curiosities, Being An Exposition of Native Manufactures Collected on the Three Pacific Voyages of Captain James Cook, R. N., at the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, January 18, 1978–August 31, 1978, on the Occasion of the Bicentennial of the European Discovery of the Hawaiian Islands by Captain Cook, January 18, 1778* (Honolulu: Bishop Museum, 1978), 183.

⁴ www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/about/british-museum-objects/ (accessed 30 July 2017). See also Neil MacGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (London: Penguin, 2012), 490.

⁵ Gaye Sculthorpe et al., *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation* (London: British Museum Press, 2015), 123; *Encounters*, 49.

⁶ See, for instance: Rosemary Neill, 'National Museum of Australia Resurrects Close Encounters', *The Australian*, 26 November 2015, www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/visual-arts/national-museum-of-australia-resurrects-close-encounters/news-story/8354e9543f25918bdad1bad56c14fd87 (accessed 30 July 2017); Paul Daley, 'The Gweagal Shield and the Fight to Change the British Museum's Attitude to Seized Artefacts', *The Guardian* (Australia), 25 September 2016, www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/sep/25/the-gweagal-shield-and-the-fight-to-change-the-british-museums-attitude-to-seized-artefacts (accessed 30 July 2017).

⁷ See, for instance: <https://facebook.com/Gweagalartefacts/> (accessed 30 July 2017); Hannah Ellis-Peterson, 'Indigenous Australians Demand Return of Shield Taken by Captain Cook', *The Guardian*, 8 November 2016, www.theguardian.com/culture/2016/nov/08/indigenous-australians-demand-gweagal-shield-captain-cook (accessed 14 May 2017); Sarah Keenan, 'Give Back the Gweagal Shield', *Critical Legal Thinking*, 8 November 2016, <http://criticallegalthinking.com/2016/11/11/give-back-gweagal-shield/> (accessed 14 May 2017).

embodies conflict, collection, dispossession, resistance – and now reconciliation'.⁸ His highlighting of its manifold meanings mirrors Gweagal elder Shayne Williams' expansive and inclusive view on the shield's significance. Williams says that the 'shield... would have strong meaning for Aboriginal people right across the country, and Torres Strait Islander people as well'. For him, this singular object not only represents 'a whole history of this country' but 'all Aboriginal people' too, precisely because 'the British', who were responsible for collecting it and who now have custodianship of it, annexed 'this country'. Placed at the very heart of histories of Indigenous/imperial/colonial encounters and the injustice, dispossession and unfinished business that resulted, the shield provokes, in Shayne Williams' words, 'all those sorts of discussions and areas to be explored'.⁹ Here, then, is an object that produces affect, positive and negative, and that activates cultural productions, political positioning and claim-making, along with various kinds of identification. For these reasons, the shield might best be understood, in Sara Ahmed's terms, as 'sticky' – as an object to which attention is directed and drawn, and to which ideas, values, and feelings, attach.¹⁰ And it's this quality that commends it as an object – and subject – for a contribution to a forum on Australian history and heritage.

Both singly and together, we have contributed to interpretive work on the shield and the encounter with which it is associated. Maria Nugent has published on the encounter between Cook's expedition and the Gweagal people at Botany Bay in 1770, and Gaye Sculthorpe curated the *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation* exhibition at the British Museum in 2015, in which the shield was included as a 'pivotal' exhibit.¹¹ As Curator and Section Head, Oceania, in the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, she is responsible for the Australian and other Oceanic objects at the British Museum and for improving documentation of, access to and interpretation of those collections. Since late 2016, we have been working together on an Australian Research Council Linkage Project, 'The Relational Museum and Its Objects', led by Professor Howard Morphy at the Australian National University, which 'aims to develop and pilot approaches that facilitate Indigenous people's access to and engagements with distributed

⁸ Tom Griffiths, *The Art of Time Travel: Historians and Their Craft* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2016), 197.

⁹ Williams, 50.

¹⁰ Sara Ahmed, 'Happy Objects', reprinted in *The Affect Reader*, eds Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 29–51.

¹¹ Maria Nugent, *Botany Bay: Where Histories Meet* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005); *Captain Cook Was Here: "To Try to Form Some Connection with the Natives": Encounters between Captain Cook and Indigenous People at Botany Bay in 1770*, *History Compass* 6, no. 2 (2008): 469–87; 'The Encounter between Captain Cook and Indigenous People at Botany Bay in 1770 Reconsidered', in *Strangers on the Shore: Early Coastal Contacts with Australia*, eds Peter Veth, Peter Sutton and Margo Neale (Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2008), 198–207; Sculthorpe *et al.*; Rachel Campbell-Johnston, 'Here Is Something We Took Earlier: Discovering Indigenous Australia', *The Times* (London), 21 April 2015, 8–9; Maria Nugent, 'Forty Millennia of Indigenous History at the British Museum', *Inside Story*, 2015, <https://insidestory.org.au/forty-millennia-of-indigenous-history-at-the-british-museum/> (accessed 31 July 2017).

collections and objects', and to contribute to the ongoing theorisation of the 'relational museum'.¹²

Our aim in this article is to describe some of the research and exhibition projects that are contributing to new – and revised – interpretations of the shield, and to consider the complicated politics of this work. While Nicholas Thomas' piece in this issue deals mainly with the question of the shield's uncertain provenance and histories of collecting and museums in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, our focus is more contemporary. We are concerned with the shield's social life since the 1960s, when it first came to the attention of Australian scholars, and which coincided with the period when Australian understandings of the history of Aboriginal/British relations and ways of telling it were beginning to be thoroughly revised.¹³ What did it mean for the existence of the shield to become public knowledge at that time? And what effects has that since had for the ways in which the shield has been interpreted, exhibited and discussed?

Whether approached as museum object, historic artefact or symbolic emblem, our focus is on two related aspects of the shield's history and social life. First, we are interested in the ways in which it came to be increasingly connected to Cook's first expedition and the encounter on the beach at Botany Bay in late April 1770, so much so that it is now probably impossible for that link to ever be severed completely, even though the evidence for such a connection was – and remains – relatively scant.¹⁴ We trace its fortunes over the last fifty or so years, as it has become embedded in, and a prop for, the story of the violent encounter between Aboriginal people and the *Endeavour* crew at Botany Bay in late April 1770, and as that 'foundational' encounter came to symbolise the traumatic history of unjust colonial relations.¹⁵ In tracing those processes, our intent is not only to engage with questions about the evidence for the object's historical origins. We wish also to draw attention to the ways in which the material object lent itself, because of its form and features, to a political and memorial project that recast the story of the foundational encounter between Cook and Aboriginal people in the terms of unjust violence and wrong. Just how perfectly formed that shield was – and is – as a support for storytelling about what that

¹² www.arc.gov.au/2015-linkage-projects (accessed 31 July 2017). For the concept of the 'relational museum', see: www.prm.ox.ac.uk/RelationalMuseum.html (accessed 31 July 2017).

¹³ See, for instance: Bain Attwood, ed., *In the Age of Mabo: History, Aborigines and Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996); Mark McKenna, 'The History Anxiety', in *The Cambridge History of Australia*, vol. 2, eds Alison Bashford and Stuart MacIntyre (Melbourne: Cambridge History of Australia, 2013), 561–80.

¹⁴ Nicholas Thomas, 'A Case of Identity: The Artefacts of the 1770 Kamay (Botany Bay) Encounter', *Australian Historical Studies* 49, no. 1 (February 2018), this issue.

¹⁵ See, for instance: Chris Healy, *From the Ruins of Colonialism: History as Social Memory* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997), esp. chs 1 & 2; Stephen Gapps, 'Performing the Past: A Cultural History of Reenactments' (PhD thesis, University of Technology, Sydney, 2002), <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/research/handle/2100/625> (accessed 31 July 2017); Nugent, *Botany Bay: Where Histories Meet*, 174–201; Nugent, *Captain Cook Was Here*, 105–37; Katrina Schlunke, 'Entertaining Possession: Re-enacting Cook's Arrival for the Queen', in *Conciliation on Colonial Frontiers: Conflict, Performance and Commemoration in Australia and the Pacific Rim*, eds Kate Darian-Smith and Penelope Edmonds (London: Routledge, 2015), 227–42.

encounter came to represent cannot be overestimated. What ought not to be overlooked either is the ways in which recent exhibition projects, staged over the last decade in Britain and Australia, have also contributed to turning what had hitherto been an uncertain connection between object and event into an article of faith.

This leads us to the second matter we want to consider. In recent months, we have been engaged, at the behest of the La Perouse Local Aboriginal Land Council (LPLALC), in a multi-modal study of the shield. In the wake of the public prominence it has acquired since its exhibition in London and Canberra during 2015 and 2016, the LPLALC requested the British Museum to do further research to clarify and determine, if possible, the shield's most likely provenance and history, and to clear up lingering misconceptions about it. During a meeting with Dr Lissant Bolton, Keeper of Africa, Oceania and the Americas of the British Museum, community representatives stressed the importance of knowing who has cultural rights to speak about objects and the potential risks of speaking out of place. This raises complex questions about how place, situatedness and location are conceived at any particular moment – and at what scales. This matter is, of course, made more complicated when the place of origin of an object is unknown or uncertain. In this case, the shield is entangled in local forms of authority in the region, and, as Shayne Williams reiterates, is also relevant to all Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

In the second part of this article, we present some of our preliminary research, highlighting the ways in which the evidence does not necessarily lead to Cook's *Endeavour* expedition at Botany Bay in 1770, but rather points towards several possible contexts and scenarios in which it could have been collected, as well as paths through which it could have arrived at the British Museum. Rather than providing definitive answers to matters of provenance, the research has instead prompted a return to examining the complex ways in which objects, such as shields like this one, were acquired in the early Sydney settlement and its surrounds, and distributed in collections in Britain and beyond. Those processes remind us that objects were often acquired not through systematic collection justified on scientific grounds. Rather they came into collections via circuitous, random, accidental and decidedly unscientific ways, as Denis Byrne shows in his insightful essay on colonial collecting and the 'ethos of return'.¹⁶ Returning to reconsider under-studied histories of collecting within the early British colony and along the New South Wales coast, the research horizon expands outwards from a shield in the British Museum to shields in British museums.¹⁷ Yet, while the situations in which the shield could plausibly have been collected are many, it remains an open question as to what ways – or indeed whether – this commissioned research will have a bearing on

¹⁶ Denis Byrne, 'The Ethos of Return: Erasure and Reinstatement of Aboriginal Visibility in the Historical Landscape', *Historical Archaeology* 37, no. 1 (2003): 73–86.

¹⁷ There is still much scope to draw together historical interest in the early British colony in New South Wales with material culture studies.

altering and influencing the meanings that this compelling object now so persistently encapsulates and engenders.

Becoming Cook-related: The shield and/in Australian history

Before it was selected for display in the British Museum's Enlightenment Gallery in 2003, the shield was not publicly well known. In the mid- to late 1960s, however, it had caught the attention of a coterie of curators and scholars, among whom were Australian archaeologists John Mulvaney, Vincent Megaw and Isabel McBryde. All were at the forefront of rewriting Australia's history through the lenses of ethno-history and archaeology, and became aware of the shield through research into early ethnographic collections in museums in Britain and through each other's work.¹⁸ Of the three, Vincent Megaw wrote most often about the shield, describing it in a series of papers and notes, spanning the 1960s to the 1990s.¹⁹ He consistently included reference to it in broader discussions of the relatively small amount of ethnographic material known to have survived from early 'contact situations' in Australia. Isabel McBryde, by contrast, published on the shield only once: in a lecture given in 1970 as part of a commemorative series for Cook's bicentenary.²⁰ Even though mention of the shield was only a minor element in her important and wide-ranging discussion about the value of the surviving written and textual records and objects from Cook's

¹⁸ For discussions of their respective contributions, see: Tim Bonyhady and Tom Griffiths, eds, *Prehistory to Politics: John Mulvaney, the Humanities and the Public Intellectual* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996); Ingereth Macfarlane with Mary-Jane Mountain and Robert Paton, eds, *Many Exchanges: Archaeology, History, Community and the Work of Isabel McBryde* (Canberra: Aboriginal History Monographs, 2005); Howard Morphy and Maria Nugent, interview with Vincent Megaw, Adelaide, 6 January 2017. For archival material relating to Megaw's research at the British Museum, see: Correspondence between Megaw and Bryan Cranstone, December 1965, Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, British Museum. In 1968 Isabel McBryde had a Nuffield Fellowship at Cambridge University's Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (now the Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology), during which time she worked on its Australian collections.

¹⁹ J.V.S. Megaw, *Archaeology, Art and Aborigines: A Survey of Historical Sources and Later Australian Prehistory* (first read at the Royal Australian Historical Society on 11 April 1967; first published in *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol. 53, part 4) (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1968); 'Captain Cook and the Australian Aborigine', *Australian Natural History* 16, no. 8 (1969): 255–60; 'Captain Cook and Bone Barbs at Botany Bay', *Antiquity* 43, no. 171 (September 1969): 213–16; 'Cook and the Aborigines', in *Employ'd as a Discoverer: Papers Presented at the Captain Cook Bi-Centenary Symposium*, Sutherland Shire, 1–3 May 1970 (Sydney: AH & AW Reed for the Sutherland Shire, 1971); 'More Eighteenth-Century Trophies from Botany Bay?', *Mankind* 8, no. 3 (June 1972): 225–6; 'Something Old, Something New: Further Notes on the Aborigines of the Sydney District as Represented by Their Surviving Artefacts, and as Depicted in Some Early European Representations', *Records of the Australian Museum*, Supplement 17 (1993): 25–44; "'There's a Hole in My Shield ...': A Textual Footnote", *Australian Archaeology* 38 (1994): 35–7. Megaw referred to a label on the shield, which he had mis-transcribed as 'Capt. Cook Acc.'. The label actually says 'CAP: COOK. ADD.', which appears to be a reference to Cook's manuscripts now held at the British Library.

²⁰ Isabel McBryde, 'The Contribution to Australian Ethnography', in *The Significance of Cook's Endeavour Voyage: Three Bicentennial Lectures* (Townsville: James Cook University of North Queensland, 1970), 37–47 plus plates.

first expedition for the fledgling field of Australian ethno-history, this piece has since been singled out as being responsible for connecting the shield to the encounter in 1770.²¹ It was the similarity between the shield and a 1771 sketch of one among many objects brought back on the *Endeavour* that convinced her. (See Nicholas Thomas' article in this issue.) For Megaw, it was Joseph Banks' mention of a hole in the shield that he had inspected at Botany Bay which tipped the balance towards conviction. While Megaw had earlier been more circumspect about it, simply pointing out that the shield was of a type 'certainly just as described in the journals of Cook onwards', when he last published on it in the mid-1990s he had become convinced that the shield at Botany Bay in 1770 and the shield in the British Museum were one and the same, and could refer by then to 'the *general acceptance* of the shield as a genuine trophy of the fateful events of Sunday 29 April 1770 and Banks' and Cook's subsequent collecting activities' (emphasis added).²²

None of the evidence, however, is decisive. Within the voyage accounts, including Banks', there is *no* account of the/a shield being collected, even though other collecting episodes are described, including of a cache of spears, some of which are now in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge University.²³ Indeed, when it comes to the shield, Banks is an unreliable witness and his comments are contradictory and inconclusive. For instance, in one extended quote he shifts from general to specific. He notes that in opposing the landing party, one man 'returned with *a* sheild', and soon afterwards mentions seeing children 'hid behind *the* sheild'. However, he notes that he and his companions 'resolved to leave the children on the spot without even opening the shelter', suggesting they did not collect the shield at that point.²⁴ In another section of his journal, he describes how the man who had used the shield against the landing party, 'left [it] behind when he ran away and we found upon taking it up that it plainly had been piercd through with a single pointed lance near the center'.²⁵ These statements about the same event and object do not correspond. So, the evidence offered in support of the shield being collected at Botany Bay is suggestive; none of it provides certain proof. There is not an explicit account of its collection; nor a record of its entry into the collections of the British Museum. Yet it was not empirical evidence alone that would inform interpretations of, uses of and knowledge about it. Equally influential in activating the shield was the changing nature of political and cultural contexts in which it came to light. As new forms of public storytelling

²¹ See Thomas.

²² Megaw, *Archaeology, Art and Aborigines*, 19; Megaw, "'There's a Hole in My Shield ...'", 37.

²³ J.C. Beaglehole, ed., *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks, 1768–1771*, vol. II (Sydney: Trustees of the Public Library of New South Wales in association with Angus and Robertson, 1962), 55; J.C. Beaglehole, ed., *The Journals of Captain James Cook: The Voyage of the Endeavour, 1768–1771* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press for the Hakluyt Society, 1955), 305; Nicholas Thomas *et al.*, eds, *Artefacts of Encounter: Cook's Voyages, Colonial Collecting and Museum Histories* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2016), 122–3.

²⁴ Beaglehole, *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks*, 55.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.

about the encounter between Cook's expedition and Aboriginal people at Botany Bay in 1770 emerged, a space was created for a shield fitting the description of this one.

As the story or myth of that 'foundational' encounter at Botany Bay in 1770 shifted across the 1970s and 1980s, from being a celebratory settler story about national birth to an elegiac remembrance of Aboriginal dispossession, much greater attention was given to its violent nature. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century renditions had commonly represented Aboriginal people as posing little threat and resistance; they had, as well, depicted Cook as peace-maker and benevolent hero.²⁶ By Cook's bicentenary in 1970 and beyond, such narratives had been rejected, as the story was retold as a violent encounter that inaugurated a long and unending history of brutal colonisation.²⁷ In many ways, the/a shield encapsulates *this* essential meaning: it is, as both Banks and Cook described it, a 'defensive weapon', retrieved and used as protection against assault.²⁸ The heft of the heavy shield, shaped purposefully to curve around the torso, singular in its use, all adds to its suitability for, and resonance within, this particular storytelling tradition. A hole in its centre adds to this perfect articulation between object and event. Peter Yu speaks for many when he writes that:

when I first saw [the shield] in 2014, I wondered whether the hole was evidence of the exchange of spears and gunfire that marked the first encounter on the shores of Botany Bay, in contravention of His Majesty's explicit instructions.²⁹

Similarly, when considering the purpose and cause of the enigmatic hole visible near the shield's centre, Tom Griffiths asks: 'Or, as many elders believe today, was it caused by a bullet from Cook's gun?'³⁰ As our research, discussed below, shows, the hole could not have been made by any gun; but given the ways in which the shield is displayed and presented, it is not surprising that the hole should be seen as signifying violence inflicted by a British firearm.

Embedded within this legendary encounter in Australia's colonial history, the shield cannot help but be steeped in contemporary politics and preoccupations. When on display in the British Museum's Enlightenment Gallery, it appears to exist at the crossroads where imperial and colonial histories intersect with contemporary culture and politics.³¹ Cultural theorist Katrina Schlunke captures this when she describes it as possessing a kind of 'force' that can prompt, or activate, certain kinds of cultural production, political positions and responses, and

²⁶ Healy; Nugent, *Captain Cook Was Here*.

²⁷ Aboriginal oral histories were especially powerful in revising old narratives about Captain Cook. See, for instance, Deborah Bird Rose, 'Remembrance', *Aboriginal History* 13 (1989): 135–48.

²⁸ Beaglehole, *The Journals of Captain James Cook*, 396; Beaglehole, *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks*, 133.

²⁹ Peter Yu, 'Plotting the Future by Learning from the Past', in *Encounters*, 32.

³⁰ Griffiths, 197.

³¹ For a review of the British Museum's Enlightenment Gallery, see: Jonathan Jones, 'Return to the Modern World', *The Guardian* (online), 13 December 2003, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2003/dec/13/heritage.art (accessed 4 August 2017).

new modes of meaning-making. She is especially interested in this shield's potentially destabilising or unsettling effects, that is, in the ways in which it might 'emerge as a particular kind of disruption to a colonial culture that has used material artefacts to mark other strict divides between the Indigenous and the modern, past and present, and between Indigenous ownership and white possession'.³²

The *Encounters* exhibition at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra provided a different interpretative context. When the shield went on display at the NMA in late 2015, it did not take long for it to produce the kind of disruption that Schlunke imagined, particularly when it was claimed by descendants of the people who had opposed Cook's landing at Botany Bay in 1770. On the closing day of the Canberra exhibition, Rodney Kelly and his family made a powerful public plea for the shield to remain in Australia and to be returned to 'country'.³³ His campaign for its return has since involved three visits to Britain, one in 2016 and two in 2017. He has received support from the NSW Greens Senator David Shoebridge for the request to the Trustees of the British Museum for the shield's return. At the same time, members of the La Perouse Aboriginal community and its representative body, the La Perouse Local Aboriginal Land Council, have continued to engage with the British Museum and the National Museum of Australia, building on relationships forged during the development of the *Encounters* exhibition.³⁴ They have an interest in the care and custodianship of material culture held by those institutions, and are concerned about questions of access to it. They are, moreover, interested in exploring ways in which such material might be better used for educational purposes – including of the British public about Indigenous Australians and British colonisation.

Re-viewing the shield: New perspectives on an old object

Since late November 2016, we have been working with colleagues to review all information currently available about the shield, and carrying out new research using interdisciplinary methodologies.³⁵ The research has involved reconsidering species distribution of red mangrove in New South Wales (from which the shield is made); examining evidence for Aboriginal trade networks in the archaeological record and early contact period; identifying like shields for comparison in the

³² Schlunke, 'One Strange Colonial Thing', 19.

³³ See: Murrum (Rodney Kelly), 'STATEMENT TO BRITISH MUSEUM REGARDING GWEAGAL REPATRIATION October 25th 2016', www.firstcontact1770.com/single-post/2016/10/25/STATEMENT-TO-BRITISH-MUSEUM-REGARDING-GWEAGAL-REPATRIATION-October-25th-2016 (accessed 5 August 2017).

³⁴ In preparation for the exhibition, a film of Rodney Mason and Shayne Williams making a spear at Kurnell on Botany Bay's south shore was made by Natasha Fijn, and shown as part of the *Encounters* exhibition.

³⁵ In particular, Caroline Cartwright, scientist, British Museum; Val Attenbrow, archaeologist, Australian Museum; Jonathan Ferguson, Curator, Royal Armouries, Leeds; and Nicholas Thomas, Director, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA), Cambridge.

collections of the British Museum, and other museums around the world; reviewing all museum records and registers to establish the earliest possible date on which it could have entered the British Museum collections; reconsidering and better contextualising historical records (visual, textual and archival) that have been used to argue the shield was collected in 1770; casting our historical net wider by, for instance, re-reading First Fleet and later records and reviewing early colonial images for details of shields of this type; and analysing evidence about exchange and collecting in the early British colony at Sydney, including the extensive collecting networks and activities of people like Joseph Banks and Philip Gidley King.³⁶ In particular, our aim is to test the argument – or widely-held belief – that the shield was collected at Botany Bay in 1770. Preliminary findings were presented and discussed at a two-day workshop at the British Museum in May 2017, and while research is ongoing on some matters, other issues were largely settled and definite conclusions reached.³⁷

As indicated above, the exhibition of the shield in Australia recently has provoked the revival of the popular idea that the hole was possibly caused by Cook's firearm as he violently made his way ashore in late April 1770. We approached this issue from a number of angles and methodologies: collections research, historical analysis and scientific testing. Comparison with other shields of a similar type extant in other museum collections, or described in historic accounts or illustrations, suggests a hole – or holes – near the centre is a common element in shields of this type.³⁸ Shields at Manchester Museum (Reg. No. H723) and Great Northern Museum, Newcastle (1998.H214) show holes right through the body and other shields in British and Australian museums have many indentations from spear damage. Early illustrations such as those by Thomas Watling or Joseph Lycett show holes on shields being used as targets. Indeed, perforated shields were so common that Lieutenant Williams Dawes was given the phrase 'noroogal camy' meaning 'holes made in a shield made by a spear' to include

³⁶ Independent of the request to the British Museum to conduct further research, Nicholas Thomas had already begun to re-examine the relationship between the British Museum shield and the shield depicted in the 1771 drawing by John Frederick Miller now housed at the British Library (see his article in this issue). He has also begun important work that attempts to reconstruct the ways in which Cook's and Banks' collections were distributed and dispersed on their return to Britain. This is painstaking work that relies on fragmentary records of auctions, exhibitions, patronage and inheritance.

³⁷ Participants included Shayne Williams and Noeleen Timbery from the La Perouse community, Sydney, Gaye Sculthorpe, Lissant Bolton and Caroline Cartwright from the British Museum, Jonathan Ferguson from the Royal Armouries, Nicholas Thomas, MAA, Cambridge and Maria Nugent from the ANU. A paper was read on behalf of Val Attenbrow, Australian Museum.

³⁸ Shields have been examined in person or through photographs or online from museums in Australia and the UK. These are: British Museum Oc 1908,0513.32, Oc 4979, Oc 1980 Q 722, Oc 1926,0313.37; MAA, Cambridge Z29058; Manchester Museum H723; Great Northern Museum, Newcastle 1998.H214; Saffron Walden Museum SAFWM 1835.29 (E157A); National Museum of World Cultures, Netherlands, RV-74-30; Museum Victoria X880; National Gallery of Victoria Ac2011.237; South Australian Museum A72500; Australian Museum E077681, B001788, E0096186, E17170. Other shields not examined to date exist in collections at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, the National Museum of Northern Ireland, and the Ethnological Museum of Berlin.

in his Eora vocabulary.³⁹ Written accounts from Joseph Banks in 1770 onwards describe shields with holes pierced right through by a 'lance' or spear.⁴⁰ John Hunter provides this particularly revealing description:

I was one day on shore in another part of the harbour, making friendship with a party of natives, when in a very short time, their numbers increased to eighty or ninety men, all armed with a lance and throwing-stick, and many with the addition of a shield, made of the bark* of a tree; some were in shape an oblong square, and others of these shields were oval; these were the first shields we had seen in the country.

Upon examining some of these shields, we observed that many of them had been pierced quite through in various places, which they by signs gave us to understand had been done with a spear; but that those shields will frequently turn the spear, they also showed us, by setting one up at a small distance, and throwing a spear at it, which did not go through.

They were much surprized at one of our gentlemen who pulling a pistol out of his pocket, that was loaded with ball, and standing at the same distance, fired the ball through the thickest part of the shield, which they examined with astonishment, and seemed to wonder, that an instrument so small should be capable of wounding so deep.⁴¹

The very strong likelihood of the hole being spear damage has been supported by scientific study. While not conclusive, a British Museum scientific report produced in 2010 revealed that the hole was 'very irregular and ragged', and so intentional perforation by a tool or deliberate boring were both ruled out. It was suggested, rather, that such irregularity matched comparative examples of impact or damage points.⁴² Attenbrow and Cartwright concluded in 2014 it was probably caused by spear damage.⁴³ Recent analysis of the hole by Jonathan Ferguson, Curator of Firearms from the Royal Armouries, discounted the possibility that the damage was made by a firearm. Of possible weapons that could have been used in the period circa 1770–1820, none are consistent with the size, shape or qualities of the hole in the shield. The maximum width of the hole, 13.5 mm, is less than the size of ammunition used in a service pistol, and for the musket that Cook describes himself firing.⁴⁴ Indeed, it is the wrong size and shape for a gunshot of any sort. A musket ball or any missile would be

³⁹ William Dawes notebooks, SOAS Library, University of London, MS 41645, www.williamdawes.org (accessed 2 August 2017).

⁴⁰ Beaglehole, *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks*, 133.

⁴¹ *The First Fleet Journal of John Hunter, October 1786–August 1788*, edited and introduced by John Currey (Melbourne: The Colony Press for the Banks Society, 2006), 57–8. *He later discovered them to be made of wood.

⁴² Caroline Cartwright, Janet Ambers and Joanne Dyer, Examination of an Australian bark shield (Oc1978,Q.839), CSR Analytical Request No. AR2010/41, unpublished British Museum report (2010).

⁴³ Valerie J. Attenbrow and Caroline R. Cartwright, 'An Aboriginal Shield Collected in 1770 at Kamay Botany Bay: An Indicator of Pre-Colonial Exchange Systems in South-Eastern Australia', *Antiquity* 88 (2014): 885.

⁴⁴ Beaglehole, *The Journals of Captain James Cook*, 305.

expected to cause a hole larger at the rear than at the front, which is not the case with this hole. European ammunition would also be expected to leave a lead residue, but an X-ray of the shield done in 2010 showed no signs of lead. This was confirmed by X-ray fluorescence (XRF) testing at the British Museum in 2017.

The shape and material of the shield have also been reconsidered through comparison to others in collections, and those documented and described in written accounts and early illustrations. Many features of the shield conform to type. Its overall shape (elongated oval with pointed ends, slightly convex), its length and width, and its inserted wooden handle, are not unique. Many extant and recorded coastal shields, particularly from Sydney north to Port Macquarie, are shaped like this, even though the curvature can differ to varying degrees, and they typically have an inserted handle.⁴⁵ Recent research has also clarified past confusion as to whether it is a shield of 'bark' or 'wood'. Although often still described as being made of bark, it is in fact of wood, with remnants of bark remaining only on the outer layer. This suggests it might be a shield of the 'arragong' type, which David Collins recorded as being heavier and harder to procure than the 'elemong' type, and which Attenbrow and Cartwright had classified this one as.⁴⁶ The undecorated surface with remnants of bark, is not, however, common. McDonald and Harper have recently shown that of a total of sixteen shield designs evident in rock art in the coastal Sydney and Hawkesbury River region, only about 20 per cent of the assemblage were 'undecorated shield motifs'.⁴⁷

The identification of the wood as red mangrove, a species that does not grow as far south as Sydney – in fact its southerly extent is more than 500 km north – had already cast some doubt about where the shield actually came from. In fact, Shayne Williams was particularly concerned to have the wood identified because of its reddish hue, and queried its relationship to Botany Bay since red mangrove does not grow there. Grey mangrove is predominant in that region. Some scholars, Val Attenbrow in particular, have sought to stem such doubt by providing evidence of and arguments for Aboriginal trade networks, although we would caution against assuming too much overlap between practices of trade before and in 1770 and those observed from 1788 onwards.⁴⁸ A shield collected after 1788 could have been acquired from either Sydney itself, or during any of the early surveying or exploration journeys further north along the coast such as the Hunter Valley or Port Macquarie region. Shield styles from the far north

⁴⁵ For example, Lisa Di Tommaso, *Images of Nature: The Art of the First Fleet* (London: Natural History Museum, 2012), 40–1; Thomas Dick, 'The Origin of the Heliman or Shield of the New South Wales Coastal Aborigines', *Journal of the Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales* 49 (1915): 282–8.

⁴⁶ Attenbrow and Cartwright, 886. See also: Val Attenbrow, *Sydney's Aboriginal Past: Investigating the Archaeological and Historical Records* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2002), 96–7.

⁴⁷ Jo McDonald and Sam Harper, 'Identity Signalling in Shields: How Coastal Hunter-Gatherers Use Rock Art and Material Culture in Arid and Temperate Australia', *Australian Archaeology* (May 2016): 6–7.

⁴⁸ Attenbrow and Cartwright, 883–95.

coast such as the Richmond River region are, however, quite dissimilar to this shield, so it is unlikely it came from that far north.⁴⁹ What this shows, though, is that the wood identification, rather than adding sustenance to the argument that the shield was collected at Botany Bay in 1770, has complicated matters. Banks had described seeing shields in the process of being made at Botany Bay:

That such sheilds were frequently usd in that neighbourhood we had however sufficient proof, often seeing upon trees the places from whence they had been cut and sometimes the sheilds themselves cut out but not yet taken off from the tree; the edges of the bark only being a little raisd with wedges; which shews that these people certainly know how much thicker and stronger bark becomes by being sufferd to remain upon the tree some time after it is cut round.⁵⁰

Why then would a shield of another wood type be found there?⁵¹

Material analysis only takes us so far. In a bid to answer lingering questions concerning potential collectors of the shield, we look to evidence about early forms of ethnographic collecting in the Sydney region.⁵² While the *Endeavour* voyage journals include no actual account about a shield or shields being collected, which makes the matter of its collection in 1770 inconclusive, what we do know is that shields quickly became collectable items in the early Sydney settlement and that many found their way into private and public collections in Britain. As early as 1792, the British marine, Watkin Tench, commented: 'As very ample collections of all these articles [i.e. spears, shields, nulla nullas] are to be found in many museums in England, I shall only briefly describe the way in which the most remarkable of them are made'.⁵³ In a desire partly to maintain friendly relations, colonial authorities prohibited colonists and convicts from collecting, but apparently to little avail. The authorities also understood these artefacts were necessary for the livelihood of the Aboriginal people, 'strictly prohibiting every person from depriving them of their spears, fizeggs, gum, or other articles'.⁵⁴ However, 'the convicts were everywhere stragglng about, collecting animals and gum to sell to the people of the transports, who at the same time were procuring spears, shields, swords, fishing-lines, and other articles from the natives, to carry to Europe'.⁵⁵ Collecting, whether by exchange, gift, barter or otherwise, was, as Isabel McBryde has shown, a common feature of

⁴⁹ See Isabel McBryde, 'Museum Collections from the Richmond River District', in *Records of Times Past: Ethnohistorical Essays on the Culture and Ecology of the New England Tribes*, ed. I. McBryde (Canberra: AIAS, 1978), 135–210.

⁵⁰ Beaglehole, *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks*, 133–4.

⁵¹ Identification of the wood of a number of coastal shields is ongoing. At publication, none of these have been identified as red mangrove.

⁵² Megaw, 'Something Old, Something New', 25–44.

⁵³ *Sydney's First Four Years: Being a reprint of A Narrative of the expedition to Botany Bay and A complete account of the settlement at Port Jackson by Captain Watkin Tench*, introduced and annotated by L.F. Fitzhardinge (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1961), 283.

⁵⁴ David Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, vol. 1 (London: Printed for T. Cadell Jun. and W. Davies, 1798), 17.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

interaction between Aboriginal people and colonists until the late 1820s.⁵⁶ Grace Karskens has noted also that there was prestige in sending material back home from the colony ‘to great institutions and personages’, and Joseph Banks, through whom this shield might have come into the British Museum’s collections, was certainly considered a ‘great’.⁵⁷ David Philip Miller has described the ways in which ‘Banks’s accumulation of specimens, records, and correspondence ... was ... a vital part of his role as a center of calculation’.⁵⁸ From 1788, we know that Banks was corresponding with Governor Phillip to help him acquire Aboriginal crania. Two were sent, which are still in Gottingen.⁵⁹ Banks had his own large and growing collection and also, as Chalmers has described, as well as being a Trustee until his death in 1820, acted as an unofficial agent for the British Museum. He was a regular donor of objects, as can be seen in the Museum’s early registers. From time to time, objects went back and forth between Banks’ house and the Museum.⁶⁰ Even so, an examination of the British Museum’s Trustee Minutes, officer’s reports and registers shows that although Banks did give objects regularly until his death in 1820, no specific mention has yet been found of any Aboriginal object that he donated. However, that does not completely rule him out. He had an extensive network of collectors at Port Jackson, including Governor Phillip, John Hunter, as well as the botanists, Robert Brown and George Caley. In 1810, Caley returned to London bringing with him Daniel Mowattin, an Aboriginal man who worked as his botanical assistant. They spent time with Banks to help sort his collection in Soho Square. In 1810, Robert Brown, who had been with Flinders on the *Investigator* and had stayed on in New South Wales, started working for Banks as a librarian. These were men who had close contact with Aboriginal people and could have given Aboriginal objects to the British Museum. While Brown, Caley, Hunter and King donated items of natural history, no records have been found to confirm that any of these men donated Aboriginal items to the British Museum.⁶¹

Whatever the details of its actual acquisition, a strong case can be mounted for the shield being in the British Museum by 1817. The *Synopsis of the Contents*

⁵⁶ Isabel McBryde, ‘“... To Establish a Commerce of This Sort”: Cross Cultural Exchange at the Port Jackson Settlement’, in *Studies from Terra Australis to Australia*, eds John Hardy and Alan Frost (Canberra: Australian Academy of the Humanities, 1989), 170.

⁵⁷ Grace Karskens, *The Colony: A History of Early Sydney* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2009), 258.

⁵⁸ David Philip Miller, ‘Joseph Banks, Empire, and “Centers of Calculation” in Late Hanoverian London’, in *Visions of Empire: Voyages, Botany, and Representations of Nature*, eds David Philip Miller and Peter Hanns Reill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 29. See also: Daniel Simpson, ‘The “Despotism” of Joseph Banks? Naval Infrastructure and the Origins of Ethnographic Collecting in Australia’, in ‘Agency, Encounter and Ethnographic Collecting: The Royal Navy in Australia, c. 1772–1855’ (PhD thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2017).

⁵⁹ M. Fishburn, ‘The Field of Golgotha: Collecting Skulls for Joseph Banks’, *Meanjin* 76, no. 1 (Autumn 2017): 104–16.

⁶⁰ See: Neil Chalmers, *Joseph Banks and the British Museum* (London: Routledge, 2007).

⁶¹ A comparable example is ‘Bungaree’s Club’, now in the Pitt Rivers Museum, for which the collection history is unclear, although it is known that Bungaree was close to the naturalist Robert Brown. See: <http://objects.prm.ox.ac.uk/pages/PRMUID1117.html> (accessed 11 August 2017).

of the *British Museum* in that year describes 'a wooden shield' being on display among other objects from the South Seas over cases 11 to 14.⁶² There are no records of Cook bringing back any shields from his first voyage and in the places he visited (except Australia) people did not use shields. Moreover, the first shield from Australia to be registered into the collection was not until 1839. Given these factors, there is a good case to be made that the shield which is the subject of our discussion is the one mentioned in the 1817 *Synopsis*. A hole in the top of the shield is consistent with it being 'hung' on display. The displays described in the *Special Report* in 1805 note against the sides of the room, and over the cases, 'spears for sticking fish, Bows and Arrows, Paddles, a Boat, Model of War Do. Clubs and Spears from various Islands in the South Sea', but no shield.⁶³ Such an omission, however, is not absolute confirmation that a shield did not exist somewhere among what one museum official once referred to as the 'vilest trash' of artificial curiosities relegated to the basement.⁶⁴

While the evidence is patchy, it does raise the question, how might the British Museum have acquired a shield from Australia between 1805 and 1817? The answer is, of course, in many possible ways, as ethnographic objects continued to travel back from the colony to the imperial centre. Large quantities of Aboriginal weapons were brought to London in 1807, for instance. Among Banks' papers is a 'Schedule of Articles of production of the South Seas on board His Majesty's Ship Buffalo in Governor King's care', dated 19 November 1807. It included boxes of materials for Joseph Banks; objects belonging to Governor King including 'six boxes of war instruments, and other articles; human bones and head, animals, skin'; and, belonging to the officers, '17 boxes of bird's skins – shells, insects, seeds, dried plant, tools, utensils, and weapons of the natives'.⁶⁵ Could the shield have been among this material? A link with Banks is possible since after 1808 he played a key role in re-arranging the South Seas Room.⁶⁶

Basic object and collection research like this remains a crucial aspect of museum work, even though it tends to be criticised by those who argue that empiricism and connoisseurship are a continuation of the museum's 'enlightenment' origins and out of keeping with contemporary efforts to decolonise imperial and colonial institutions. Yet, respected art historian and museum curator, Ruth B. Phillips, argues otherwise. Speaking about the Canadian context, she reminds us that

basic research is still at a very preliminary stage for the majority of Native North American museum objects, yet the questions of style and periodization that it illuminates have an importance that goes beyond the purely

⁶² British Museum, *Synopsis of the contents of the British Museum* (London: Cox & Baylis, 1817), 6.

⁶³ British Museum, *Special Report ...*, unpublished report, British Museum, Archives. See extract in J.C.H. King, *Artificial Curiosities from the Northwest Coast of America* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1981), Appendix 3: 99–100.

⁶⁴ Chalmers, 16.

⁶⁵ State Library of NSW, SAFE/Banks Papers/Series 39.104 CY3005/783 & CY 3005/739. Thanks to Daniel Simpson for alerting us to this.

⁶⁶ Chalmers, 16.

academic. They have been rendered urgent by First Nations movements of cultural renewal and claims for the repatriation of museum objects, both of which depend on the ability to establish local histories of production, use, and exchange. A well-known Northwest Coast artist and community leader with a degree in anthropology once remarked, for example, that if museums cannot provide basic information about the attribution of objects in their collections, they have no right to continue as custodians. In this sense, collections-based research and the sharing of its results with originating communities is itself a form of repatriation.⁶⁷

In the case of *this shield*, a recent round of research has been motivated by concerns about the veracity of previous research on which claims about it had been based over the last fifty or so years. The politics of repatriation, which had been activated by the shield's exhibition in Australia in 2015 in particular, has made such research more urgent. While we are under no illusion that the question of the shield's history can ever be completely settled (the evidence, in our view, is too patchy), we also recognise that its entanglement within the history and symbolism of the 'foundational' encounter is now an integral part of the story of its social life. Yet, whether the shield is Cook-related is, in some ways, beside the point. Its significance does not rely upon that association alone. This is a shield of undeniable value. It is probably the earliest surviving shield used by Aboriginal people on Australia's east coast, and of a shield type about which still surprisingly little is known. More than this, it is an object that has been instrumental in activating a project that is generating new knowledge, not just about the object itself, but about Aboriginal shields from coastal New South Wales more broadly. As Wiradjuri artist Jonathan Jones' work on shields from south-eastern Australia has clearly shown, these objects and collections offer great scope for many kinds of historical, memorial, artistic and repatriation projects – indeed for telling, as Shayne Williams says, 'a whole history of this country'.⁶⁸

Maria Nugent
Australian National University
Email: maria.nugent@anu.edu.au

Gaye Sculthorpe
The British Museum
Email: gsculthorpe@britishmuseum.org

⁶⁷ Ruth B. Phillips, 'Re-placing Objects: Historical Practices for the Second Museum Age', *The Canadian Historical Review* 86, no. 1 (March 2005): 94.

⁶⁸ Jonathan Jones, *barrangal dyara (Skin and Bones)* (Sydney: Kaldor Public Art Projects, 2016); Jonathan Jones, 'A Symphony of Lines: Reading Southeast Shields', in Sculthorpe et al., 74–8.