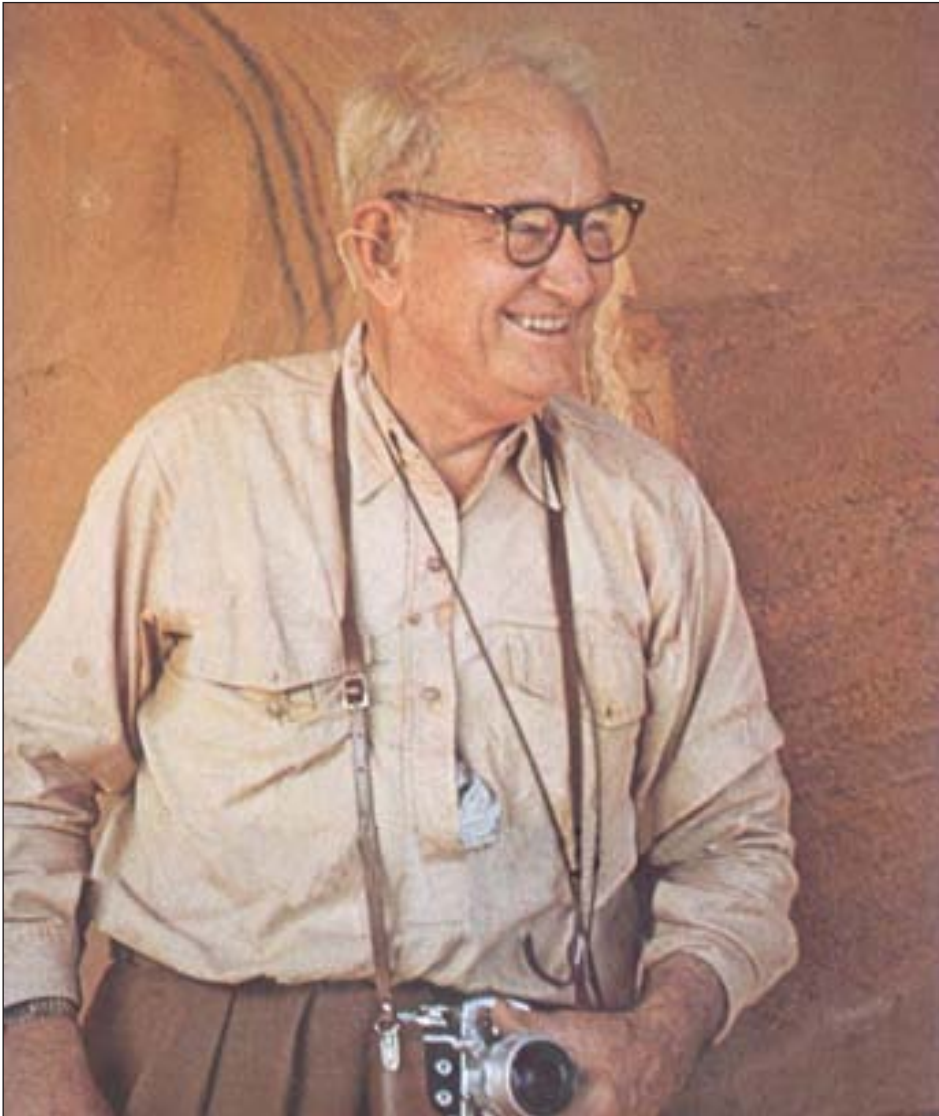


## 2. Inside Mountford's Tent: Paint, politics and paperwork

Philip Jones



**Figure 2.1 Charles Percy Mountford (1890–1976) at Uluru, ca. 1960**

Photograph by M. Lamshed 1972. From Lamshed, M. 2972, *Monty. The biography of Charles Mountford*

Photographs of Charles Mountford suggest few of those qualities of refinement and discerning judgment generally associated with internationally known art historians or ethnographers. Indeed, Mountford's bluff demeanour and his utter lack of pretension better match the careers he transcended—those of the farmer, the tram conductor and the telegraph technician. His own nickname, 'Monty', seemed to confirm his place outside the academy, reflecting the style of his more popular publications, such as *Brown Men and Red Sand* (1948). Indeed in later life, Mountford was characterised more than once as a bumbling, opportunistic amateur with a tin ear, hardly capable of making sense of the rich anthropological data he gathered. Yet, with all their defects, Mountford's *Nomads of the Australian Desert* (1976) and *Art, Myth and Symbolism* (1956) are works of substance and scholarship, and his extraordinary career as a discoverer and promoter of Aboriginal art is overdue for reassessment.<sup>1</sup>

Mountford's original manuscripts have been little studied, and contain rich insights. Among the most telling documents in terms of defining his role is a letter he received in January 1956 from a young anthropologist who would become one of the most influential specialists in Aboriginal art, laying the basis for much of its contemporary academic interpretation. Nancy Munn had arrived in Canberra during late 1955 and was soon to begin her extended, intensive fieldwork at Yuendumu. She laid out her research proposal for Mountford and wrote, a little plaintively: 'There is no one here who both understands the problem of Aboriginal art (and of art in general) and who knows the Australian field; thus I am relying upon your knowledge and interest for guidance.'<sup>2</sup> Significantly, Munn's letter, written early in 1956, arrived shortly before Mountford published his extensive work *Art, Myth and Symbolism*—the first of the four volumes of the *Records of the American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land*. Her appreciation was founded on Mountford's 1930s journal articles analysing the symbolism and mythology associated with Western Desert art.<sup>3</sup>

---

1 Mountford's life and career has been only partially assessed by biographers—by M. Lamshed (1972, *Monty: The biography of C. P. Mountford*, Rigby, Adelaide) and by Philip Jones (2000, 'Mountford, Charles Percy (1890–1976)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography. Volume 15*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., pp. 431–3).

2 N. Munn to C. P. Mountford, 5 January 1956, Correspondence, vol. 14, PRG 1218/28/14, pp. 1–2, in Mountford-Sheard Collection, State Library of South Australia (hereafter SLSA).

3 These articles included: Mountford, C. P. 1937, 'Aboriginal crayon drawings: relating to totemic places belonging to the northern Aranda tribe of Central Australia', *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia*, vol. 61, pp. 81–95; Mountford, C. P. 1937, 'Aboriginal crayon drawings from the Warburton Ranges in Western Australia relating to the wanderings of two ancestral beings, the Wati Kutjara', *Records of the South Australian Museum*, vol. 6, pp. 5–28; Mountford, C. P. 1938, 'Aboriginal crayon drawings III: the legend of Wati-Jula and the Kunkarunkara women', *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia*, vol. 62, pp. 241–54; Mountford, C. P. 1938, 'Contrast in drawings made by an Australian Aborigine before and after initiation', *Records of the South Australian Museum*, vol. 6, pp. 111–14; Mountford, C. P. 1939, 'Aboriginal crayon drawings, IV: relating to every-day incidents of the Ngada tribe of the Warburton Ranges of Western Australia', *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia*, vol. 63, pp. 1–13; Mountford, C. P. 1939, 'Aboriginal crayon drawings, Warburton Ranges, Western Australia', *Oceania*, vol. 10, pp. 72–9.

Another letter has a bearing on this question. It was written by the person to whom a young and brilliant anthropology student of the 1950s, such as Munn, might have been expected to defer: Mountford's old enemy, A. P. Elkin. It was Elkin who had apparently vetoed Mountford's otherwise successful application during 1940 for a Carnegie Fellowship to pursue his study of Aboriginal art in the Western Desert.<sup>4</sup> In May 1945, hearing of Mountford's appointment as leader of the Arnhem Land Expedition, Elkin wrote to the Secretary of the National Geographic Society in Washington, DC, urging that an anthropologist be appointed. 'Mr Mountford', he wrote, 'who is a good photographer, especially of still subjects, and who has done valuable work in the recording and copying of native art, is not a trained social anthropologist, much to his own regret'.<sup>5</sup>

What was it that annoyed Elkin so much about Mountford? Was it that he was a self-taught dilettante, whose dabbling in art and populist lectures, films and publications threatened to overshadow the fragile and complex plant Elkin was nurturing in the hothouse atmosphere of the Sydney University anthropology department? Perhaps Mountford's robust approach to anthropology and art, untutored and unconstrained by theory, and founded on direct transactions with the artists themselves, exposed insecurities in the new discipline. Mountford's close alignment with the 'Adelaide school' of anthropology—scorned by Elkin for its superficial, data-oriented approach—was certainly a factor. This chapter explores some of the background to Mountford's emergence as leader of the 1948 Arnhem Land Expedition and examines this leadership under pressures that were, in part at least, fuelled by his feud with Elkin.

Mountford was encouraged by Adelaide anthropologists and ethnographers such as J. B. Cleland, T. D. Campbell and (at least until the mid-1930s) N. B. Tindale, whose collaboration on the Board for Anthropological Research resulted in an intensive team methodology—distinctly at odds with Elkin's individual model of participant observation.<sup>6</sup> During the 1930s, Mountford had participated in three of the annual Board for Anthropological Research expeditions to Central Australia. As a recorder of Aboriginal art and motifs, he had become familiar with the workings of a multidisciplinary expedition composed of diverse professionals, qualified in the fields of physical anthropology and natural history. During a packed fortnight, they interacted closely with a large group of Aboriginal people, person by person, obtaining sociological data and physical measurements according to the scientists' specialisations, recording songs and ceremonies and material culture processes with notebooks, 16 mm film and

---

4 This claim was made by Mountford himself, within his correspondence, and has not been verified.

5 A. P. Elkin to Secretary of NGS, 30 May 1945, Correspondence, 1945–1949, p. 12, PRG 1218/17/4, Mountford-Sheard Collection, SLSA.

6 See Jones, P. G. 1987, 'South Australian Aboriginal history: the Board for Anthropological Research and its early expeditions', *Records of the South Australian Museum*, vol. 20, pp. 71–92.

wax-cylinder recorder, collecting artefacts and, in the case of Tindale and Mountford, obtaining hundreds of crayon drawings on large sheets of brown paper, depicting mythological routes and sites.

In contrast, Elkin's fieldworkers were trained to work alone, becoming accepted by an Aboriginal group, learning the language, and applying specialised anthropological skills to analyse a social network essentially undisturbed by their presence. If this could be described as careful angling across several seasons, the South Australian approach was more like an afternoon's intensive trawling. That said, the bounty of those Board for Anthropological Research expeditions—including thousands of artefacts, photographs, genealogies, film and sound recordings—is certainly more tangible, and perhaps more useful today, both to Aboriginal descendants and to researchers, than relatively arcane data concerning kinship and social relations. The crayon drawings gathered by Tindale and Mountford not only represent the precursors of the Western Desert art movement; they have also been deployed as documents of traditional knowledge and landownership.



**Figure 2.2 Unidentified man drawing on brown paper sheet during Mountford expedition to Central Australia, probably 1940**

Photograph by C. P. Mountford. From M. Lamshed 1972, *Monty. The biography of Charles Mountford*, p. 137.

The crayon drawing technique had been pioneered by Daisy Bates and Herbert Basedow as a means of delineating tribal territories, and was refined by Tindale during his long career as a curator at the South Australian Museum. The idea was to make sheets of brown paper and crayons available to Aboriginal men (and to a lesser extent, women), with the suggestion that the artists depict their key waters or ritual sites. These sites and their connections to important mythological trajectories were later annotated and documented in English and relevant Aboriginal languages with advice from the artists, assisted by an interpreter. Aboriginal people participated enthusiastically and the technique resulted in a rich haul during the 1930s. In no case, it seems, did Tindale and Mountford ever encounter blank sheets. Tindale's comment during the 1934 Ooldea expedition that 'the natives seem to be tireless in their interest in their own drawings...each intent on his own subject and apparently oblivious to the efforts of others' is equally applicable to Mountford's experience.<sup>7</sup> Later, following the expedition's return, the drawings would be assembled and analysed in relation to territorial boundaries or mythological trajectories, and placed in context by reference to texts, songs or ceremonies recorded by expedition members. In other words, what might appear now to have been a rapid and cheap method of gathering a priceless art collection was in fact an innovative research tool, with multiple possible outcomes. For Tindale, these had much to do with his tribal boundary and mapping project, helping him to adjust or redefine the data he had gleaned in the field or from secondary sources, resulting in a series of articles and his grand synthesis of Australian data, published in 1974.<sup>8</sup> For Mountford, it became an intertwined investigation of mythology and art, in which his field documentation of narrative was combined with an analysis of motifs. By 1948, this research methodology was more sophisticated, integrating evidence from primary sources (the bark paintings themselves) with data from his own field observations as well as those of Elkin, Ronald and Catherine Berndt, and, most especially, W. Lloyd Warner. In 1951, Mountford wrote to Warner at the University of Chicago, praising his book *A Black Civilization* (1958) ('by far the high point of any piece of research work done on any Australian tribe'), and explaining how much he had relied on it in 'searching for details on some of the fragmentary myths that I had collected in connection with the bark paintings' acquired during the Arnhem Land Expedition.<sup>9</sup>

---

7 N. B. Tindale, Journal of a visit to Ooldea to study the Aborigines, November 1934, p. 185, AA338/1/13, South Australian Museum Archives.

8 Tindale, N. B. 1974, *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia: Their terrain, environmental controls, distribution, limits and proper names*, The Australian National University Press, Canberra. See bibliography for Tindale's articles on Western Desert art and crayon drawings.

9 C. P. Mountford to Lloyd Warner, 2 April 1951, Correspondence, vol. 10, pp. 120–1, PRG 1218/28, Mountford-Sheard Collection, SLSA. Mountford was referring to Warner, W. L. 1937, *A Black Civilization: A social study of an Australian tribe*, Harper and Brothers, New York.

Mountford's first expedition involving the crayon drawing technique took place in 1935 with Tindale and Cecil Hackett, among Ngadadjara people of the Warburton Range. Later that year he collected drawings from Luritja and Anangu people at and near Uluru. After almost 10 years spent locating and describing rock art for which there was no surviving Aboriginal knowledge, this form of evidence was a revelation for Mountford. It enabled him to test propositions about art, myth and symbolism to a degree unimagined by his international correspondents, such as the English art historian and critic Herbert Read or the American art historian Carl Schuster, co-founder of New York's Museum of Primitive Art and author of the 12-volume *Social Symbolism in Ancient and Tribal Art* (1966).<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 2.3** Yattalunga rock shelter paintings, near Gawler, South Australia

Photograph by C. P. Mountford, 1920s. By permission of South Australian Museum Archives. AA228.

---

<sup>10</sup> Schuster's mammoth work of synthesis, intended only for museums and libraries, was condensed and published in 1996 with Edmund Carpenter as co-author, as *Patterns That Connect: Social symbolism in ancient and tribal art* (Harry Abrams, New York). Mountford's extensive correspondence with Read, Schuster and other international art historians is preserved in the Mountford-Sheard Collection, SLSA, Adelaide.



**Figure 2.4 Mountford's photograph of rock engravings at Panaramittee, north-eastern South Australia, ca. 1930**

By permission of South Australian Museum Archives. AA228.

Mountford had previously resisted the temptation to speculate about the meaning of rock-art motifs that he had documented in his surveys of South Australia's mid-north, Flinders Ranges and north-east, but now he encountered a flood of authoritative data directly from Aboriginal artists of the Western Desert. With their guidance, he was able to link motifs not only with their

immediate, symbolic meanings, but with elaborate and lengthy mythological itineraries. Like Tindale, Mountford soon became aware of the risks associated with generalised interpretations. 'By far the greatest number of designs in use', he observed in 1937, 'are so highly conventionalized as to be indecipherable without the assistance of the artist who produced them'.<sup>11</sup> The skills required to successfully document links between motifs and meaning and to analyse the art's formal characteristics derived from Mountford's experience as a meticulous recorder of rock art and his abilities as a clear and engaging writer. As a result, by 1948, he neither needed anthropological training nor regretted its lack.

At the same time, Mountford displayed the limitations of an ethnographer of his day. His acceptance of the imminent demise of traditional beliefs and cultural practices was widely shared during the early and mid-twentieth century; it fuelled the sense of urgency that drove both the Board for Anthropological Research expeditions and Elkin's research program. Mountford's 1945 assertions that 'the simple art of these people would be the first aspect of their culture to disappear', and that by obtaining more than 1500 documented crayon drawings from Central Australia he had 'saved the art of the Central Australian from extinction', might seem apocryphal, even arrogant, today.<sup>12</sup> But they were unexceptional for their time. Indeed, even by 1956, when *Art, Myth and Symbolism* was published, Mountford had no way of knowing that his own promotion of Aboriginal art would help to stimulate an unprecedented renaissance in its production, in both Arnhem Land and Central Australia. This renaissance would lead ultimately to the upending of a time-honoured paradigm that Aboriginal art was an iterative, unchanging form in which artists were restricted to traditional motifs and a three- or four-colour palette. The transformed paradigm became that of an innovative, adaptive culture, distinguished by brilliant individual artists with expanding reputations across a range of media—an outcome barely imaginable for Mountford and other 'salvage ethnographers' during the 1940s.

The collegial partnerships behind the Board for Anthropological Research expeditions of the 1930s had meant that little formal leadership was required. Each scientist knew his role and each contributed to the camp organisation. Mountford knew that the 1948 Expedition posed a much greater organisational challenge, with formidable responsibilities and an untested team of strangers, but he assumed that as independent professionals their daily research activities would not require close direction, leaving him sufficient time to pursue his own research. His 1930s experience had given him a straightforward technique for realising those objectives. Preparation for the Board for Anthropological

---

11 Mountford, 'Aboriginal crayon drawings from the Warburton Ranges in Western Australia relating to the wanderings of two ancestral beings, the Wati Kutjara', p. 21.

12 Mountford, quoted in May, S. K. 2003, 'Colonial collections of portable art and intercultural encounters in Aboriginal Australia', *Before Farming*, vol. 1, no. 8, pp. 1–17, at p. 2.



Research expeditions had involved simply laying in a stock of brown paper and crayons. For the 1948 Arnhem Land Expedition, he needed to organise the cutting of sufficient bark in the wet season, well ahead of commencement, and to be sure that there were sufficient quantities of ochre. The Australian Museum archaeologist Frederick McCarthy was also aware of this requirement, and he and Mountford collaborated to secure a supply of bark through the Darwin Native Affairs Administration office.<sup>13</sup> One hundred sheets of bark (of unspecified dimensions) were cut by Milingimbi staff during a visit to Roper River in February 1948, and were sent to Groote Eylandt for the Expedition's use.<sup>14</sup> It is likely that these sheets were further divided, and were used at Yirrkala. Mountford was supplied with a further 100 bark sheets at Oenpelli (now Gunbalanya). The small size of the Expedition barks from the three Expedition stations (barely one-fifth the size of those Donald Thomson had collected during 1941) can probably be attributed to the limited supplies of cut bark.<sup>15</sup> So also could Mountford's decision to provide paper to artists at Yirrkala and Oenpelli. Mountford wrote: 'As the supply of prepared sheets of bark at Yirrkala and Oenpelli became exhausted, I provided the artists with sheets of rough-surfaced dark grey and green paper.'<sup>16</sup>

Mountford also planned ahead in the matter of pigments. He corresponded with the Board for Anthropological Research cinematographer E. O. Stocker (who also directed a paint company in Sydney) to order a stock of red ochre, yellow ochre, graphite, kalsomine and binding agents and to seek advice on paint binders.<sup>17</sup>

---

13 F. D. McCarthy to C. P. Mountford, 16 January 1948, PRG 1218/17/4, Mountford-Sheard Collection, SLSA. McCarthy's observation to Mountford that '[y]ou will require some hundreds I suppose' suggests that McCarthy's interest in acquiring bark paintings emerged only after joining the expedition.

14 Native Affairs patrol officer Coate informed Mountford on 27 April 1948 that 'Mr T. H. Hanna of the Methodist Overseas Mission, Milingimbi, has advised that he has procured on your behalf 100 sheets of bark' (Coate to Mountford, 27 April 1948, PRG 1218/17/4, Mountford-Sheard Collection, SLSA). Mountford noted that these sheets were forwarded to Groote Eylandt.

15 The Thomson barks were displayed in the exhibition *Ancestral Power and the Aesthetic* at the Ian Potter Gallery, University of Melbourne, June to August 2009, curated by Dr Lindy Allen. See: <[http://www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au/art\\_exhibitions\\_detail.aspx?view=156](http://www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au/art_exhibitions_detail.aspx?view=156)>

16 Mountford, C. P. (ed.) 1956, *Records of the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land. Volume 1: Art, myth and symbolism*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., p. 13, fn. 47. At Yirrkala, the prepared bark supply ran out in mid-August, according to Bessie Mountford's journal entry of 31 August 1948: 'Perhaps all to the good. The paper is proving an easy medium, and the drawings grow more interesting. Besides drawings on paper can be stored so easily, right at the bottom of one's large trunk' (Bessie Mountford diary, PRG 187/1/3, Mountford-Sheard Collection, SLSA). For another perspective on this issue, see also May, S. 2010, *Collecting Cultures: Myth, politics and collaboration in the 1948 Arnhem Land Expedition*, Altamira Press, Lanham, Md, pp. 161–2.

17 See, for example: E. O. Stocker to C. P. Mountford, 14 January 1947; 2 January 1948; and Mountford's own letter to Stocker of 11 December 1947, inquiring whether it would be possible to premix Stocker's 'Wesco' powdered binder with dry colours (Correspondence, 1945–49, PRG 1218/17/4, Mountford-Sheard Collection, SLSA). Stocker indicated that the red and yellow ochres would be from mines 'north of the MacDonnell Ranges'.

None of the Expedition publications or records so far examined offers clues as to whether these pigments were actually used during the Arnhem Land Expedition; ochre provenancing and other analytical projects might provide answers.<sup>18</sup>

Mountford gained something else through his association with the Board for Anthropological Research. Its members were accustomed to rapid publication through specialist medical or scientific journals, or through the *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia* and the *Records of the South Australian Museum*. Publication helped to assure access to a small pool of research funding available through the University of Adelaide or the Australian National Research Council. From 1926 until 1939, approximately 110 scientific papers by board members on the results of the expeditions were published, including nine papers by Mountford. He published another 21 papers on diverse topics, including Aboriginal art, during the same period.<sup>19</sup>

Mountford also took the lead from Tindale and began contributing newspaper articles, using the earnings to support his own research. This popular style of writing suited Mountford and he used it more broadly, particularly as his ethnographic films began finding a wide audience during the early 1940s. But Mountford's publications were not merely descriptive. He had grasped a central fact about Aboriginal art: it linked place, story and identity, and the art of each cultural region comprised an essentially fixed corpus of symbols and motifs, expressed differently by individual artists, but held as shared heritage and revealed to each generation in conjunction with song and ceremony. Indeed, it could be said that Mountford's special gift was to grasp this key idea, and to relay it to a broader public, laying the basis for an unfolding appreciation of Aboriginal art and culture during ensuing decades. These insights, which Mountford took to Arnhem Land, allowed him to begin recording mythological details for bark paintings systematically from the moment of the Expedition's arrival on Groote Eylandt. Colin Simpson's observation that each evening at Oenpelli Mountford could be seen in his tent 'surrounded by bark paintings, writing up his notes' applied also on Groote Eylandt and at Yirrkala, even if the pressure of administrative duties and the controversy over leadership at Yirrkala in particular meant that both the quantity and the quality of his record declined markedly after the Groote Eylandt camp.<sup>20</sup>

---

18 The author is a co-investigator on a current Australian Research Council (ARC) funded project with the aim of arriving at chemical signatures to match ochres in museum collections and ochre mines. In a survey of the Expedition's works on paper, Sarah Bunn, conservator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, has detected the presence of crayon in a small number of paintings (M. Thomas, Personal communication, 7 October 2010; S. Bunn, Personal communication, 23 November 2010).

19 See Jones, P. 1987, 'South Australian anthropological history: the Board for Anthropological Research and its early expeditions', *Records of the South Australian Museum*, vol. 20, pp. 71–92; Stone, W. W. (ed.) 1958, 'Charles Percy Mountford. An annotated bibliography, chronology and checklist of books, papers, manuscripts and sundries, from the library of Harold L. Sheard', *Studies in Australian Bibliography No. 8*, Stone Copying Company, Cremorne, NSW.

20 Simpson, C. 1951, *Adam in Ochre: Inside Aboriginal Australia*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.

Mountford's immersion in Aboriginal art was more intense than that of any of his anthropological colleagues in Australia. It occurred well before a market had emerged, and well before the phenomenon of known, let alone collectable, Aboriginal artists. Notably, Mountford's acquisition of knowledge in a field that rapidly became appealing to academic anthropologists for its potential in linking mythology, place and totemic identity also placed him on a collision course with Elkin and the Berndts. In the meantime, the relative anonymity of Aboriginal artists predisposed Mountford to think in terms of a universal artistic impulse, shared with artists from all cultures—indeed presumably with Mountford himself, for he had won prizes for artistic photography as early as 1923, when he had worked for the Postmaster General in Darwin.<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 2.5** Mountford's photograph of a 'Sunday afternoon corroboree, Katherine River', entered in a Darwin photographic competition during his employment there, 1920–23

By permission of South Australian Museum Archives. AA228.

<sup>21</sup> Mountford won prizes in six sections in the 1923 Northern Territory Photographic Competition, including for 'Original or Imaginative Study...A very clever manipulation of a curling column of smoke arising out of a bowl, the smoke taking the shape of a human face' (*Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, 4 September 1923, p. 7).

Untrained in social anthropology, Mountford wanted the Aboriginal artistic impulse to float free of totemic obligation—or free enough to transcend the parameters of customary relationship as delineated by academic anthropologists such as Ronald Berndt and Elkin. In the introductory chapter to *Art, Myth and Symbolism*, Mountford conceded that Arnhem Land art comprised several categories indicating specific purpose and function, such as ‘sacred art’, ‘magical paintings, by means of which the aborigines believe they can control nature, punish enemies, and increase the supply of the food animals’, and ‘didactic bark paintings’, but he nevertheless concluded that Aboriginal art ‘is predominantly non-magical, that is, the aborigines paint because they want to, and not for some material advantage’.<sup>22</sup> Surprisingly perhaps, Mountford did not use the observable talent of key individual artists to advance this argument. His push for international recognition of Aboriginal art saw him negotiating as early as 1938 with the Museum of Modern Art to host an exhibition in New York. Had it gone ahead we might be certain that it would have promoted Aboriginal art as a ‘corporate’ contribution to world culture, rather than elevating individual, named Aboriginal artists. For Mountford, as for many collectors and recorders until the late twentieth century, Aboriginal art’s reiterative and tradition-bound character necessarily overshadowed, if not subsumed, individual artists’ identities. Albert Namatjira, the subject of a book by Mountford (published in 1944, followed by Lee Robinson’s 1947 film, which Mountford helped produce), constitutes the rule-proving exception, for the very reason that Mountford judged the Arrernte artist’s painting to be hybrid in its origins and influences. To Mountford, Namatjira’s individual artistic success reflected his liberation from traditional mores.<sup>23</sup>

By the time of the 1948 Expedition, Mountford’s looser interpretation—bordering upon the notion of ‘art for art’s sake’—had begun to appeal to a wide international community of art historians, particularly Herbert Read, Carl Schuster, Leonhard Adam, Madeline Rousseau and even the doyen of rock-art investigators, Abbé Henri Breuil. These scholars were all concerned to trace universal themes in art history and all corresponded with Mountford. These contacts, and others with diverse anthropologists and curators, gave Mountford a sense of credibility and purpose that expunged the amateur’s taint—at least in the eyes of those viewing the Expedition in a positive light. In stark contrast with his standing with A. P. Elkin and the Berndts, Mountford had become an international authority in an emerging, exciting field.

---

22 Mountford, *Records of the American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land*, vol. 1, p. 6.

23 For further analysis of this proposition, see Jones, P. G. 1992, ‘Namatjira: traveller between two worlds’, in J. Hardy, J. V. S. Megaw and R. Megaw (eds), *The Heritage of Namatjira. The watercolourists of Central Australia*, Heinemann, Melbourne, pp. 97–136.

Once the Expedition began, Mountford knew that most of his days would be spent on paperwork and administration, organising supplies, signing cheques and smoothing out difficulties. The pressure was relieved considerably by his gifted and patient wife, Bessie, who undertook secretarial duties in her own, adjoining tent, redrafting and typing his official correspondence, checking the accounts, and providing—in Bill Harney's words—'the backbone to the party'.<sup>24</sup> Largely confined to the camp itself, Mountford needed a contained and efficient strategy for his main professional objective: obtaining and documenting artworks. His method was essentially the same as that employed during the 1930s Board for Anthropological Research expeditions: 'to ask the men to make bark paintings for me, seldom suggesting subject. At the end of the day, the artists brought the work to my tent, related the associated myth, and explained the meanings of the designs.'<sup>25</sup>

Mountford's Groote Eylandt journal contains the fullest exposition of his bark-painting documentation. For its time, it represents the most detailed set of documentation of individual artworks collected by a field ethnographer in Australia, if not internationally. Headed with the artist's name and moiety, each entry contains a simple diagrammatic sketch laying out the main elements of the painting, followed by Mountford's unfolding narrative of the relevant myth as it evokes the events and sites represented.<sup>26</sup>

Mountford's strategy at each of the three Expedition camps was to engage a group of Aboriginal men as general workers who would not only fetch and carry provisions as required, but also remain on the payroll as artists. On Groote Eylandt, this pool of workers corresponds neatly with the artists documented in Mountford's journal. At Yirrkala and Oenpelli, this correspondence is less obvious, but discernible nevertheless. The pool of workers and paid artists at those camps is also identifiable from the published records, but by the time the Expedition struck camp on Groote Eylandt at the end of the first week of July, Mountford's capacity to fully document the bark paintings had become severely compromised.<sup>27</sup>

---

24 Harney to C. P. Mountford, 24 May 1950, Correspondence, vol. 8, pp. 93–4, PRG 1218/28, Mountford-Sheard Collection, SLSA.

25 Mountford, *Records of the American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land*, vol. 1, p. 13. Sally May has suggested that Mountford's published assertion that he seldom suggested subjects to the bark painters is contradicted by his diary entries in which several such suggestions are documented (May, 'Colonial collections of portable art and intercultural encounters in Aboriginal Australia', p. 12). My conclusion is that these entries (and other, published references, such as Mountford, *Records of the American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land*, vol. 1, p. 73) constitute the very exceptions allowed for by Mountford's published statement.

26 See particularly: C. P. Mountford, *Expedition to Arnhem Land, 1948, Art of Groote Eylandt*, vol. 1, April 11 – July 7 1948, PRG 1218/17/18, Mountford-Sheard Collection, SLSA.

27 See, for example, AASEAL Correspondence, vol. 5, March–July 1948, pp. 421–36, PRG 1218/17/8, Mountford-Sheard Collection, SLSA.



**Figure 2.6 Charles Mountford taking notes as Mawalan Marika explains details of a painting, while two other Yolngu artists (so far unidentified) look on, Yirrkala, 1948**

Photograph by Howell Walker. By permission of *National Geographic* magazine, December 1949.

Mountford's apparent lack of attention to the vital details of artistic attribution at Yirrkala and Oenpelli has puzzled researchers examining the 1948 Expedition, and has tended to reinforce the orthodox view of his status as an amateur. Mountford's apparent bias towards the mythological content of bark paintings—transmitted through corporate ownership, rather than through individual artistic creativity—suggests one explanation. Howell Walker's photograph of Mountford discussing a painting with Yirrkala artists supports this interpretation; any or all of the Yolngu men surrounding Mountford might have painted the picture being discussed, or, at least, held particular sacred knowledge relevant to it. Undoubtedly, this factor might have blurred a work's attribution, especially if it had been painted hours earlier, out of Mountford's sight. But the real reason for Mountford's diminished capacity to capture the same standard of documentary detail as the Expedition moved from Groote Eylandt to Yirrkala and Oenpelli lay in the complex politics of the Expedition itself. Circumstantial evidence suggests that those tangled strands extended even to Elkin's indirect role in the leadership coup, which occurred in Mountford's tent at Yirrkala, following the party's arrival from Groote Eylandt.



**Figure 2.7** The cartoonist Eric Jolliffe visited the Expedition for long enough to capture a playful sense of the cultural distance between the party and the 'natives'

By permission of State Library of South Australia. Mountford-Sheard Collection.

If the Expedition is regarded as a three-act play, its crisis was reached early in the second act, at Yirrkala. The precipitating event was the non-arrival and eventual stranding upon a reef of the *Phoenix*, the barge carrying the party's supplies and equipment to Groote Eylandt. The resultant uncertainty and the

breakdown of the Expedition's inadequate radio obliged Mountford and a small party (including anthropologist Frederick Rose) to hike 50 km eastwards across the island from the Umbakumba camp through floodwaters to the Angurugu mission, to organise alternative supplies. Despite his efforts, Mountford became the focus of discontent as key allegiances were forged between Expedition members. Given the size and complexity of the Expedition party, this was likely to occur with any leader. It was not surprising that the chief American scientist, anthropologist Frank Setzler, formed a close working relationship with Frederick McCarthy. McCarthy already had an independent brief to obtain bark paintings for the Australian Museum, and was soon on a collision course with Mountford. The ruction ultimately surfaced during later negotiations over publication and distribution of the collection, in which McCarthy accused Mountford of asserting ownership over part of the collection and directing a proportion of it to the South Australian Museum.<sup>28</sup>

Australian scientific and exploration expeditions had often experienced conflict between members, most notably during the Burke and Wills Exploration Expedition of 1861–62 and the Elder Scientific Exploration Expedition of 1891–92. But this was the first major expedition in which members could communicate directly with organisers and backers, independently of the leader.<sup>29</sup> The result was that the National Geographic Society in Washington, DC, the Native Affairs Department in Darwin, the Department of Information in Canberra, and probably A. P. Elkin in his University of Sydney department were aware of the Expedition's initial difficulties with the stranded *Phoenix*, soon after the first camp was established at Groote Eylandt, and subsequently formed a picture of a disorganised expedition under the leadership of a man overly preoccupied with Aboriginal art.

On Groote Eylandt, the key intermediary between the Expedition and the Native Affairs branch was Howard Coate, a patrol officer who had been deputed to the Expedition from Darwin at Elkin's request and against Mountford's advice. A few months earlier, Coate had already undertaken his own research into Aboriginal art under Elkin's supervision, successfully relocating the remarkable Wandjina rock paintings reported by George Grey in the Kimberley during his 1838 expedition.<sup>30</sup> Elkin's friendship with Coate extended over a 40-year period,

---

28 It should be noted here that even now, more than six decades later, it is unclear just how many of the 1948 barks are contained within the South Australian Museum collection. Mountford revisited Arnhem Land during 1949 and 1951 and it is clear that on the latter trip he commissioned a number of barks to 'replace' those that he had been unable to retain in his possession long enough to include in his preparatory research for the 1956 records volume. Several of Mountford's Yirkala barks in the South Australian Museum collection, published as 1948 barks in the records volume, were undoubtedly collected during 1951.

29 Discussed in Jones, P. 1996, 'The Horn Expedition's place among nineteenth century inland expeditions', in S. R. Morton and D. J. Mulvaney (eds), *Exploring Central Australia: Science, the environment and the 1894 Horn Expedition*, Surrey Beatty & Sons, Sydney, pp. 19–28.

30 Grey, G. 1841, *Two Expeditions of Discovery in North-Western and Western Australia During the Years 1837, 1838 and 1839*, (2 vols), T. & W. Boone, London, vol. 1, p. 214. Coate's findings were published by A. P. Elkin (1948, 'Grey's northern Kimberley paintings re-found', *Oceania*, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 1–15).



and it is reasonable to conclude that they continued to communicate during the course of the Arnhem Land Expedition. Coate later admitted, without denying the charge, that Mountford had regarded him as 'a "spy" for Elkin'.<sup>31</sup> In fact, Coate's official role, as specified by the Department of Native Affairs, was 'purely an observer', prompting a wry journal entry by Mountford: 'we have another less pleasant name for men like that.'<sup>32</sup> On Groote Eylandt, Coate's first allegiance was to the Native Affairs office, which reported in turn to Canberra-based Department of Information officers, whose primary concern was the Expedition's success at generating favourable publicity. In the eyes of these bureaucrats, Mountford had been appointed for his capacity to make promotional films about Australia, incorporating ethnological and natural-historical themes. Disturbing reports of his consuming passion for collecting and recording Aboriginal art, together with allegations of poor management, began to reach the Darwin and Canberra offices. Mountford's artistic enthusiasms could readily be interpreted as a fundamental distraction from the Expedition's stated scientific objective: to understand how the Arnhem Land Aborigines made their living from the land.

Coate's presence became a critical factor. Mountford had worked hard to have Bill Harney, the celebrated bushman-writer and patrol officer, appointed to the Expedition as a representative of the Commonwealth's Native Affairs branch. Prior to the Expedition, Harney had kept Mountford informed about the activities of the Berndts and Elkin in Arnhem Land, reassuring him that they and other visitors had not 'touched the main things of importance' and that there was plenty of art left to investigate.<sup>33</sup> During early 1947, Mountford had even asked Harney to have some of the older men at Yirrkala make drawings on paper 'similar to the bark paintings', to 'give me a start on what to expect next year'.<sup>34</sup> Harney eventually joined the party at Yirrkala, replacing Coate. Harney's contribution to the Expedition was significant in terms of his logistical support and his informal gifts as a storyteller and bushman. Unlike Coate, who was omitted altogether, Harney appears as 'guide and liaison officer' in the full listing of Expedition participants published by Mountford in the official records.<sup>35</sup>

---

31 McGregor, W. (ed.) 1996, *Studies in Kimberley Languages in Honour of Howard Coate*, Lincom Europa, Munich, p. 7. Bessie Mountford's diary entry for Saturday, 31 July 1948 reads: 'We are more than ever convinced that friend Coate is the cause of most of our trouble. He is apparently an over zealous reporter to an unfriendly Govt Dept. Though why a C/wealth Dept should set out to be unpleasant to an officer of another C/wealth Dept makes little sense' (Bessie Mountford diary, p. 324, PRG 187/1/1, Mountford-Sheard Collection, SLSA).

32 Mountford diary entry, 23 May 1948, p. 308, PRG 1218/17/12, Mountford-Sheard Collection, SLSA.

33 Harney to C. P. Mountford, 6 June 1947, AASEAL Correspondence, vol. 1, 1945-47, PRG 1218/17/4, Mountford-Sheard Collection, SLSA.

34 C. P. Mountford to Harney, 5 February 1947, AASEAL Correspondence, vol. 1, 1945-47, PRG 1218/17/4, Mountford-Sheard Collection, SLSA.

35 Mountford, *Records of the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land*, vol. 1, pp. xi and 21. Coate is unmentioned throughout the volume.

RELATIONSHIP TERMS.

Mother	.....	...	TUNTOOROKA	tu-to-o-ro-ka
Father	...	...	NUNWARAKA	nu-nu-wa-ra-ka
Father's Father	...	...	NUNMARARAKA	nu-nu-ma-ra-ra-ka
Father's mother	...	...	TUMINGJARAKA	tu-ming-ja-ra-ka
Mother's father	...	...	NUMINGJUNINGJARAKA	nu-ming-jun-ing-ja-ra-ka
Mother's mother	...	...	TUNGQUARAKA	tu-ng-qu-a-ra-ka
Mother's brother	...	...	NAYPARKA	na-y-par-ka
Father's sister	...	...	IUBYARAKA	iu-by-a-ra-ka
Father's father's sister	...	...	TUMMARAKA	tu-ma-ra-ka
Father's mother's brother	...	...	MUMIJJARAKA	mu-mi-ji-ja-ra-ka
Mother's father's sister	...	...	TUMIJJUNIJJARAKA	tu-mi-ju-ni-ji-ja-ra-ka
Mother's mother's brother	...	...	MUNGQUARAKA	mu-ng-qu-a-ra-ka
Elder brother	...	...	NOVARAKA	no-va-ra-ka
Elder Sister	...	...	TIAPARAKA	ti-a-pa-ra-ka
Younger brother	...	...	NEKESKARMAJAJARAKA	ne-ke-ska-rma-ja-ja-ra-ka
Younger sister	...	...	TANTIRMUJARAKA	tan-tir-mu-ja-ra-ka
Son	....	....	NEKESKOWARAKA	ne-ke-sko-wa-ra-ka
Daughter	....	....	DATSOOWARAKA	da-tso-o-wa-ra-ka
Son's son	....	....	NUMMARARAKA	nu-ma-ra-ra-ka
Son's daughter	...	...	TUMMARARAKA	tu-ma-ra-ra-ka
Daughter's son	...	...	BERIRUNGWARAKA	be-ri-rung-wa-ra-ka
Daughter's daughter	...	...	TIJARUNGWARAKA	ti-ja-rung-wa-ra-ka
Sister's son	...	...	NAPARACA	na-pa-ra-ca
Sister's daughter	...	...	TAPARACA	ta-pa-ra-ca
Sister's son's son	...	...	NEKESKAPIJARAKA	ne-ke-ska-pi-ja-ra-ka
Sister's son's daughter	...	...	TANTIRABIJARAKA	tan-tir-a-bi-ja-ra-ka
Sister's daughter's son	...	...	BERIKUNGUARAKA	be-ri-kun-gu-a-ra-ka
Sister's daughter's daughter	...	...	IATIUNGQUARAKA	ia-ti-ung-qu-a-ra-ka
Mother's mother's brother's daughter	...	...	TATICAKA	ta-ti-ca-ka
Mother's mother's brother's son	...	...	NATICAKA	na-ti-ca-ka
Wife or husband's sister	...	...	TATANGYARAKA	ta-tang-ya-ra-ka
Husband or wife's brother	...	...	NAYIBGYARAKA	na-yib-gy-a-ra-ka
Self - male or female	...	...	NAIYUA	na-i-yua

**Figure 2.8 Anthropologist Fred Rose's list of Groote Eylandt relationship terms, annotated by Mountford**

By permission of State Library of South Australia. Mountford-Sheard Collection.

In the meantime, Mountford was lucky to have had anthropological guidance on Groote Eylandt from Frederick Rose, a good friend of Fred Gray, the superintendent of Umbakumba Aboriginal Settlement (see Thomas, this volume). Rose had written to Mountford as early as 1945 with a request to join the Expedition, and later made it plain that he shared Mountford's distrust of Elkin.<sup>36</sup> The pair had met in Sydney during 1947. Rose gave Mountford his own

36 Rose to Mountford, 24 June 1945, AASEAL Correspondence, vol. 2, 1945–1948—Applications, p. 3, PRG 1218/17/5, Mountford-Sheard Collection, SLSA. Two years later, Rose recommended a female graduate (Pamela Beasley) to Mountford, assuring him that 'I can vouch in no uncertain terms for the fact that she is anti-Elkin (although for obvious reasons her tongue is in her cheek until her M.A. is finished this term) and anti-functional and pro-evolutionist' (Rose to Mountford, 6 October 1947, *ibid.*, p. 29).

notes on Groote Eylandt social organisation and totems, and negotiated with key elders for the performance of the ceremonial cycle, which absorbed Mountford's attention during the Expedition's last weeks on the island. But Mountford's role in organising, provisioning and documenting these ceremonies through film and sound recordings was exposing him to further criticism.



**Figure 2.9 Mountford recording ceremonial songs with the Groote Eylandt man known as 'India', near site of ceremonies. Mountford's journal confirms that he played a major role in recording during this cycle of ceremonies, June 1948**

Photograph by Howell Walker. By permission of *National Geographic* magazine, December 1949.

It was always risky to hold ceremonies close to a mission, as Mountford himself had discovered during Adnyamathanha ceremonies held at his instigation at Nepabunna in South Australia's Flinders Ranges during 1937. The sudden endorsement of traditional ritual not only compromised the missionary who had otherwise sought to suppress it; it also triggered tensions within the Aboriginal group, particularly between older ritual leaders and younger men who were beneficiaries of the missionary's new order. Mountford later observed that there had been 'some opposition by the local residents of Groote Eylandt to the performance of this ceremony, the missionaries objecting because they considered that the ceremony was evil, and the superintendent of the Umbakumba settlement [Gray] because it interfered with the planting of his garden'.<sup>37</sup> Both Mountford and Expedition cook, John Bray, made observations and diary entries indirectly indicating that Coate (a lay-missionary) was the

<sup>37</sup> Mountford, *Records of the American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land*, vol. 1, p. 21.

source of rumours that the Groote Island Arawaltja ceremonies would result in ritual killings and payback. As it happened, Mountford's decision to proceed with the ceremonies almost resulted in physical violence between young men of the Umbakumba camp and those attached to the Church Missionary Society mission on the east coast, and he was obliged to shift the ceremonial ground.<sup>38</sup> Bessie Mountford documented other tensions surrounding this event, such as the resistance to their fate of two young wives who had been promised to older men, but who preferred younger men: 'the whole population is involved as families take sides—the girls for them, the husbands against.'<sup>39</sup> Mountford's management of these difficult circumstances was adroit enough, but the Expedition's progress was being reported rather differently to Darwin and Canberra. Tensions between members were rising to the surface and, as Bessie Mountford observed of her husband, 'the continued stress of an organisation that will not function completely is beginning to wear him down'.<sup>40</sup>



**Figure 2.10 Arnhem Land Expedition at the third camp, Oenpelli (now Gunbalanya), 1948**

Photograph by Howell Walker. By permission of *National Geographic* magazine, December 1949.

Matters came to a head immediately after the Expedition arrived at its second camp, among the Yolngu at Yirrkala. On 10 July, the Administrator of the Northern Territory, Arthur Driver, and the Acting Director of the Department of Information, Kevin Murphy, flew in, accompanied by the US Consul in Adelaide, Elvin Seibert. Mountford's tent was the venue for a meeting between himself, Setzler, Driver and Murphy, during which, as the other scientists

38 See Mountford to Director-General of Information, 29 July 1948, Correspondence, vol. 5, March–July 1948, p. 462, PRG 1218/17/8, Mountford-Sheard Collection, SLISA; Diary entry by John Bray for 12 June 1948, pp. 64–5 (M. Thomas, Personal communication, 7 October 2010).

39 Bessie Mountford diary, 7 May 1948, p. 116, PRG 187/1/1, Mountford-Sheard Collection, SLISA.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 118.

observed, voices were raised. Mountford was informed that he was relieved of the leadership, which would pass to Setzler, and that he was to confine his activities to photography and to producing the films required by the Department of Information. The delegation flew out that afternoon and the camp remained eerily quiet as the news circulated. But within 24 hours the situation was reversed. The Americans met the following morning, and Setzler was informed by his colleagues, led by ornithologist Bert Deignan, that they still considered Mountford the rightful leader. Setzler was forced to renounce the leadership by telegram and to apologise to Mountford. McCarthy and Coate remained silent, but they were regarded by Mountford as complicit, if not instrumental, in the attempted coup. Within a day or two, Mountford received the following cable from the executive officers of the Smithsonian Institution and the National Geographic Society:

Glad know Yirrkala new base established. Congratulate you as leader expedition and your associates on results reported to date. Best wishes continued progress under your able leadership.<sup>41</sup>

From that point, Mountford's leadership was fundamentally accepted, but the pressures of administration continued to mount. He was the first to recognise that he could no longer meet the standard of documentation set on Groote Eylandt. Shortly after this event, he wrote in the following terms to his friend Alexander Wetmore, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution:

The prohibition, by the Department of Information, on my carrying out of research on the primitive art of the native peoples is indeed a sad blow, though I am still doing odd research work. My allotted duties are those of leadership and film director. So you will see my enemies, of whom you have already had some knowledge, are still active and powerful.<sup>42</sup>

Mountford's pared-down art-collecting methodology, giving precedence to mythological content over artistic provenance, became his only means of continuing research. That methodology—supplemented by Mountford's fieldwork and strategic collecting during subsequent visits to Arnhem Land (particularly that of 1951)—formed the backbone of *Art, Myth and Symbolism*.

---

41 Cablegram reproduced in AASEAL Correspondence, vol. 5, March–July 1948, p. 552, PRG 1218/17/8, Mountford-Sheard Collection, SLSA. By the time of the publication of the expedition records in 1956, Mountford was able to treat the matter with irony, writing: 'The day after reaching Yirrkala, we received a pleasant surprise in the form of a visit from the American Consul for South Australia, Mr E. Seibert, who had made the journey to see his American colleagues; the Administrator for the Northern Territory, Mr A. R. Driver; and the Director-General of Information, Mr Kevin Murphy' (Mountford, *Records of the American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land*, vol. 1, p. xxvii).

42 Mountford to Wetmore, 29 July 1948, AASEAL Correspondence, vol. 5, March–July 1948, p. 464, PRG 1218/17/8, Mountford-Sheard Collection, SLSA.

Surprisingly, even Mountford's fiercest critics—Elkin, McCarthy and the Berndts—failed to notice that the volume drew on research and bark paintings collected after the 1948 Expedition. Nevertheless, it remains one of the most detailed and accurate records of an Aboriginal art and material culture collection to be published in Australia. That Mountford was able to produce this work at all, given the obstacles facing him during the 1948 fieldwork, was a notable achievement. His considerable experience in the field, both with Aboriginal people and with fellow researchers, undoubtedly equipped Mountford to survive the vagaries and pitfalls of a seven-month scientific expedition—the most complex and successful venture of its kind in Australian history.

These events and undercurrents, interlocking with the distinctive island, seashore and lagoon landscapes encountered by the researchers, not to mention the contrasting cultural groups of Aboriginal people and the three varying sets of mission practice and personnel at Angurugu, Yirrkala and Oenpelli, make the Arnhem Land Expedition triptych a fascinating object of study. Mountford's resilience as a fieldworker (sustained cheerfully by his wife and most of his colleagues despite being undermined before, during and after the Expedition) and his dogged commitment to obtaining a rich and durable record of Arnhem Land art make him a compelling central character in this historic tableau of Australian art and science.