

13. The Responsibilities of Leadership: The records of Charles P. Mountford

Denise Chapman and Suzy Russell

In 1948 Charles P. Mountford led the American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land—one of the largest and most comprehensive scientific expeditions ever undertaken in Australia. A part-time ethnographer, Mountford worked consistently through the late 1930s into the early 1960s (something that was often possible only whilst on leave from his paid employment).

The Mountford-Sheard Collection of the State Library of South Australia (PRG 1218) holds the wealth of material gathered by Mountford throughout his career. Indeed, the Arnhem Land Expedition was the catalyst for the collection to be organised and donated. Like many of the Expedition members, Mountford was exhausted upon his return. To recover, he went to stay with his friend Harold Sheard in the coastal town of Port Elliot. During this stay, Sheard observed Mountford sorting through his Arnhem Land work, and became worried when he saw Mountford discarding papers that Sheard thought might hold future value. Sheard began a project to assemble Mountford's entire private archive, and sought a suitable repository for the collection. With the encouragement and collaboration of South Australia's State Librarian, Hedley Brideson, the bulk of the collection was donated to the State Library in 1957.

Brideson recounted in a 1998 interview that he first met Mountford when he invited him to give a presentation to a Sunday-school class. The two crossed paths again at various functions and in time they came to discuss Sheard's growing collection of 'Mountfordiana', with Mountford joking at one point that Sheard was soon going to be 'sleeping out on the lawn' and that he 'couldn't cope with it anymore'. To this Brideson responded, 'All right then, let us have it. We'll find somewhere to put it.'¹An extensive bibliography prepared by Sheard accompanied the donation in 1958, and Mountford requested that the collection be named Mountford-Sheard to reflect his friend's substantial contribution.²

1 B. M. Robertson and R. Starke, Interview with Hedley Brideson, 1998, OH 478, State Library of South Australia (hereafter SLSA), Adelaide.

2 Sheard, H. L. 1958, *Charles Percy Mountford: An annotated bibliography, chronology and checklist of books, papers, manuscripts and sundries*, Stone Copying Company, Cremorne, NSW.

More material was donated in the following years, and the Mountford-Sheard Collection became the first of several ethnographic collections acquired by the State Library under Brideson's directorship.

While the South Australian Museum might have seemed a more logical home for Mountford's work, it is likely that the frosty relations between Mountford and Museum Director, Norman Tindale (to be expanded on below), made this impossible. According to Brideson, 'it was no good Mountford seeing the Museum', and if Mountford had taken the collection to Tindale, his response would have been 'throw the bloody lot out'.³

In this chapter, we will discuss the contents of the Mountford-Sheard Collection generated before, during and after the historic Expedition. Through these records, and through the diaries of Mountford's wife and honorary Expedition secretary, Bessie, we will highlight the work accomplished by Mountford as well as some of the many challenges he faced. This self-taught South Australian ethnographer was considered by many to be unqualified to assume the eminent role of Expedition leader. We will begin by exploring how Mountford came to be appointed to the position.

Mountford Makes the Grade: The origin of the Arnhem Land Expedition

The idea for the Arnhem Land Expedition originated in 1945 when Mountford was on a lecture tour of the United States, organised by his employer, the Commonwealth Department of Information. During this tour, which commenced just after Christmas in 1944, Mountford recorded an extraordinary 4000 pages in his journal, and described in detail the events leading to the suggestion of an expedition to Arnhem Land. The tour included a pivotal presentation to the National Geographic Society (NGS) at Constitution Hall in Washington, DC. Mountford referred to the crowd of more than 4000 as the 'intelligensia [sic] of Washington' and remarked that one could not buy a ticket to such a show.⁴

It is apparent from Mountford's journal that the presentation of his work to such an eminent audience was a major coup; his enthusiasm and sense of satisfaction are evident. He writes that although nervous, he tried to behave nonchalantly, as though speaking to such a large, illustrious group was an everyday occurrence. Despite an awkward moment when the film broke during the screenings, Mountford felt afterwards that he had 'made the grade', and Dr Alexander

3 B. M. Robertson and R. Starke, Interview with Hedley Brideson, 1998, OH 478, SLISA.

4 C. P. Mountford, 2 February 1945, Records relating to Charles Mountford's Journeys to America and to Melbourne, 1944-46, p. 19, PRG 1218/16/2, SLISA.

Wetmore, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, congratulated him after the show.⁵ Mountford wrote that night, ‘I don’t think I need to bother about Tindale’s innuendos from now on.’⁶ This is one of many references to a career-long professional rivalry between the two men. Their working relationship began in 1925 when they collaborated on a paper about rock engravings rediscovered by Mountford at Morowie, in the mid-north of South Australia.⁷ By 1945 the two had encountered each other innumerable times. Mountford was an Honorary Assistant in Ethnology at the South Australian Museum, and he travelled with Tindale during a 1935 field trip to the Warburton Range.

In a field deeply divided between ‘professionals’ and ‘amateurs’, Mountford felt that he was dismissed by Tindale and others—most notably A. P. Elkin—as insufficiently trained to have his scientific work taken seriously. This accounts for Mountford’s mention of Tindale’s ‘innuendos’ in his US journal. Mountford struggled against this perceived inferiority throughout his career and it troubled him to the end of his life. In a 1968 interview, Mountford, still harbouring these resentments, recounted how a funding application was undone by Tindale—he ‘killed it, damned it out of sight’—and stated that ‘everyone knew Elkin’s opinion of me, because he’d been trying to down me for many many years’.⁸ But the derision was not entirely one-sided. Throughout his notes, Mountford cast doubts on Tindale’s findings. Pamphlets and articles collected by Mountford, by Tindale and other authors, are peppered with annotations in which he disagrees with the authors’ findings.⁹

Tindale was working in military intelligence and stationed at the Pentagon at the time of Mountford’s 1944–45 lecture tour of the United States. He was invited to attend a presentation given by Mountford on 18 January 1945 at the Department of the Interior. His presence unsettled Mountford, who recorded in his diary: ‘I was sure that T[indale] would get up and give a sub-lecture, but curiously enough, he kept quiet.’¹⁰ Later, following a lecture at Washington’s exclusive Cosmos Club, on 5 February, the Secretary of the NGS suggested that Mountford approach the society for a grant to carry out more research.¹¹ Arnhem Land was purportedly chosen because it was perceived that little research had been done on the natural history and ethnology of the area (a suggestion disputed by anthropologists Elkin and Ronald and Catherine Berndt).¹² From the

5 Ibid., p. 23.

6 Ibid., p. 27.

7 Tindale, N. B. and Mountford, C. P. 1926, *Native Markings on Rocks at Morowie, South Australia*, Royal Society of South Australia, Adelaide.

8 Charles P. Mountford, *Autobiographical Notes* [sound recording], 1968, PRG 1218/39, SLSA.

9 Authors’ personal observations of annotations present on a wide range of materials in the Mountford-Sheard Collection and Personal Library of C. P. Mountford.

10 C. P. Mountford, 18 January 1945, Records relating to Charles Mountford’s Journeys to America and to Melbourne, 1944–46, p. 425, PRG 1218/16/1, SLSA.

11 Ibid., 5 February 1945, pp. 77–85.

12 Gray, G. 2007, *A Cautious Silence: The politics of Australian anthropology*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, pp. 191–4.

outset, the plans were dogged by political wrangling between the authorities and within the anthropological community. Mountford commented: 'All this intrigue, play and counter-play is rather awful when all I want to do is to collect this information for future generations, and to create a better understanding of the aboriginal people.'¹³

Mountford received approval for the work from the NGS whilst still in the United States, and then had to secure the support of the Australian Government, which he managed—tentatively—with help from Sir Frederic Eggleston, the Australian Minister to the United States. A second lecture tour of the United States in 1946 was used to further plan the Expedition. Once back in Australia, plans progressed rapidly for departure in March 1947, but the Expedition was postponed, finally getting under way in March 1948.

'Fools, rogues and bad fortune': The Groote Eylandt camp¹⁴

Mountford's personal journal—documenting the beginning of the Expedition and the Groote Eylandt camp—exceeds 600 pages. From the moment of take-off for the Top End, his writing was prolific. The prologue was a swipe at Elkin,

who has caused me a great deal of trouble in the past, because of his extreme jealousy (he is angry because he was not placed in charge of this expedition), has been trying to underground me up here...It has been a remarkable battle against Departmental stupidity and the malicious underground attacks of Elkin.¹⁵

The journal's recurrent themes include Mountford's experience of responsibility, administrative and logistical issues, illness, observations of other participants, and personality conflicts. Mountford also wrote about aspects of the physical environment, including the weather, which heavily influenced transport arrangements, and recorded his interactions with Aboriginal informants and his opinions of the mission superintendents and their methods.

13 C. P. Mountford, 19 February 1945, Records relating to Charles Mountford's Journeys to America and to Melbourne, 1944–46, p. 271, PRG 1218/16/2, SLSA.

14 Charles P. Mountford, 3 May 1948, Expedition to Arnhem Land 1948, vol. 1, Personal Journal, p. 273, PRG 1218/17/12, SLSA.

15 Ibid., 18 March 1948, p. 13.



Figure 13.1 Charles Mountford filming from the blister of a Catalina seaplane en route to Groote Eylandt, 1948

By permission of the State Library of South Australia. PRG 1218/34/2841.

There were 47 tonnes of gear in need of transport and this more than any other issue haunted the organisation.¹⁶ The workload put considerable strain on Mountford's health, yet he felt only *he* had the influence and ability to oversee the organisational matters. He perhaps felt that by handling these tasks alone, he could prove his capabilities as a leader. For instance, when the *Phoenix*, a supply barge, failed to arrive on Groote Eylandt, and radio communication also failed, Mountford, along with anthropologist Fred Rose, patrol officer Gordon Sweeney and a group of Aboriginal men, made a treacherous 60 km trek to Angurugu Mission station to use the radio and find out what had happened. Mountford was fifty-eight at the time, and in his journal he expressed frequently how his health issues were affecting him. During the journey to Angurugu, he described himself as 'long passed the "boy-scout" stage', of a 'mature age', and as having lived a 'soft life' for a number of years previously:

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. xxiii.

I would never have contemplated such a journey from choice, but the food situation is getting serious, the telephone does not work, and no-one but myself would be in the position to make the decisions. So there was nothing else to do but go. I was not happy about the matter.¹⁷

Waist-deep swamps extended for miles, and, before reaching the mission, Mountford was nearly swept away when he fell into a fast-running stream. He grabbed a tree branch and was rescued by some Aboriginal boys who were waiting nearby.¹⁸

Mountford also recorded in his journal an account of the fraught sea journey to Boucaut Bay near Milingimbi, where the *Phoenix* was stranded. Fred Gray, the superintendent of Umbakumba Aboriginal settlement, took them to the stranded barge in his 10-m launch, *Wanderer II*, which was buffeted by heavy seas for five days. They reached Milingimbi, relieved to find that the barge had floated off the reef and was resting safely in the mud. They loaded some of the scientific equipment onto their boat and, taking ornithologist Bert Deignan with them, set out for a six-day, equally fraught journey back to Umbakumba. Then, as Mountford wrote, 'on 24th May...five weeks after her scheduled time, the *Phoenix* entered Little Lagoon with the supplies for which we had waited so long'.¹⁹ Now, with all of the scientists and equipment in one place, the work could at last get under way.

The party worked on Groote Eylandt and adjacent islands from 4 April until 8 July—about seven weeks longer than anticipated, due to the late arrival of the *Phoenix*. Mountford believed this was advantageous as it offered greater opportunity for study, although the delays necessitated the abandonment of planned work on the Roper River.

The next campsite was at the Yirrkala Methodist mission on the Gove Peninsula. Mountford said little about it in his journal. In fact, after the move, the first entry in his personal journal was made weeks after their arrival at Yirrkala, on 28 July: 'For a whole month I have not had time to write in my diary,' he wrote. He went on to record a summary of their trip from Groote Eylandt and arrival at Yirrkala on 8 July, writing 'we reached Yirrkala on the 8th and'—but he never finished the sentence.²⁰ It is interesting to note that although Mountford continued to record his ethnographic findings, and numbered another 82 pages in this final notebook, signalling his intent to continue writing, this was the final entry in his personal journal.

17 C. P. Mountford, 13 April 1948, Expedition to Arnhem Land 1948, vol. 1, Personal journal, p. 199, PRG 1218/17/12 SLSA.

18 Ibid., p. 213.

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

20 Charles P. Mountford, 28 July 1948, Expedition to Arnhem Land 1948, vol. 2, Personal journal, p. 651, PRG 1218/17/13, SLSA.

While we have found nothing that directly explains this cessation (neither Charles nor Bessie Mountford wrote specifically about the matter), it is hardly coincidental that this change in habit occurred about the time of the leadership discussion of 10 July (see Jones, this volume). Having been directed by the Department of Information, which oversaw the Expedition, to concentrate on filmmaking, photography and administrative matters, Charles Mountford was under pressure to squeeze the most out of every day.²¹ The pressures of leadership left little time for personal note taking. The desire to continue with investigation of Arnhem Land painting took precedence over recording a personal journal. In his Yirrkala field notes, he wrote, with barely concealed frustration, ‘I will not have time to gather the interpretation of more than a few [paintings] from this locality, because of other duties’.²² Without any further narrative from Mountford, it becomes difficult to discuss the Mountford-Sheard Collection in a chronological fashion. Instead, the remainder of this chapter will discuss the collection thematically.

An Eye for Detail: Photography and fieldwork

Mountford was a keen and talented photographer, with an artistic eye that is evident in his portrait photography. The significance of his portraiture—often used in his and others’ publications—lies in his ability to capture a shared humanity. While much ethnographic photography of his era focused on people as ‘objects’, Mountford’s style produced images of both ethnographic and aesthetic appeal: the thoughtful study of a woman and infant or a child at play.

The Mountford-Sheard Collection contains almost 2500 photographs (1900 black-and-white negatives and 600 coloured slides) taken during the Arnhem Land Expedition. A portion of these has been reproduced in Mountford’s personal and fieldwork journals and in photograph albums. The albums do not hold unique information, but do distil and present what Mountford thought to be his best images on a given topic.

Mountford photographed and described artworks at each of the three Expedition bases. The collection contains two large volumes of the analysis of Groote Eylandt artworks. For some of these, Mountford was able to record associated myths in writing, music and song. One journal contains typescripts of songs and their meaning.²³ He also described recording sessions, including the reactions of the local people when hearing their songs played back.

21 Bessie Ilma Mountford, 10 July 1948, Diary: Expedition to Arnhem Land, p. 258, PRG 487/1/2, SLSA.

22 Charles P. Mountford, Expedition to Arnhem Land, 1948: Art of Yirrkalla, p. 101, PRG 1218/17/20, SLSA.

23 Charles P. Mountford, Expedition to Arnhem Land, 1948: Art of Groote Eylandt, PRG 1218/17/18, SLSA.



Figure 13.2 Two Aboriginal children play in a wooden toy canoe, Groote Eylandt, 1948

Photograph by Charles P. Mountford. By permission of the State Library of South Australia. PRG 1218/34/2756.



Figure 13.3 Portrait of Yirrkala artist Mawalan Marika, 1948

Photograph by Charles P. Mountford. By permission of the State Library of South Australia. PRG 1218/34/3350.



Figure 13.4 Bark painting created for Charles P. Mountford on Groote Eylandt (artist unknown). The painting depicts the mythical sea eagle Iniwakada (species *Haliastur indus*), 1948

By permission of the State Library of South Australia. PRG 1218/35/1574.

Mountford also recorded non-ceremonial music, bird calls and didjeridu. The State Library of South Australia holds approximately 50 minutes of original recordings, relating to Groote Eylandt, Delissaville (now Belyuen) and Oenpelli (now Gunbalanya).²⁴ The results of Mountford's fieldwork in Yirrkala are contained in the bound volume *Expedition to Arnhem Land, 1948, Art of Yirrkalla* [sic], which contains 176 pages of notes, photographs and drawings of bark paintings; woven, decorated and painted objects; and rubbings of engraved objects.²⁵ As in each of his fieldwork journals, here bark paintings are illustrated with a small photograph. Next to the photo, Mountford drew a mock-up of the artwork with descriptions and annotations pointing out important aspects of the design and its associated story.

²⁴ Charles P. Mountford, National Geographic Society, Arnhem Land Expedition, Aboriginal songs recorded by C. P. Mountford, 1948, PRG 1218/17/49-54, SLSA.

²⁵ Charles P. Mountford, Expedition to Arnhem Land, 1948: Art of Yirrkalla, PRG 1218/17/20, SLSA.

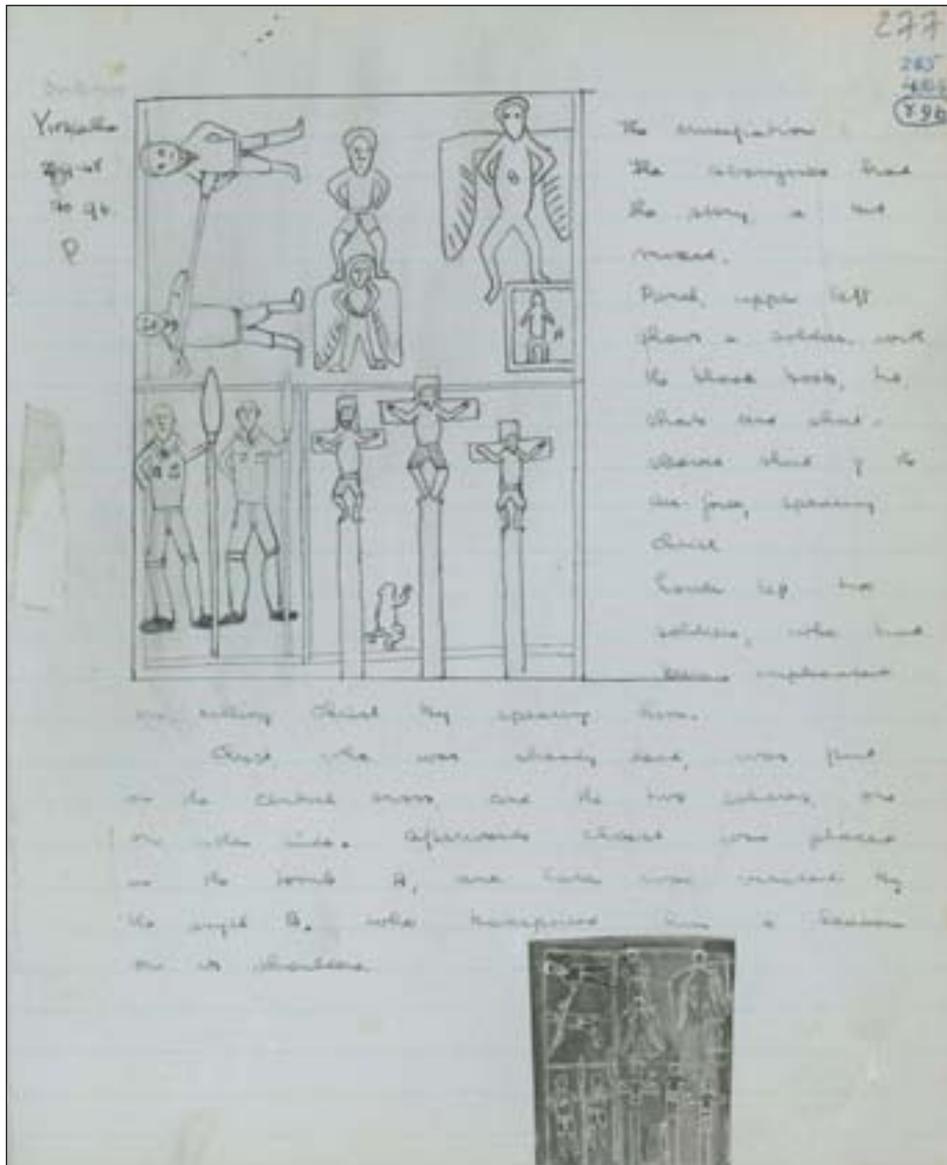


Figure 13.5 Field notes relating to a painting depicting the crucifixion, created by Mawalan Marika for Charles P. Mountford in Yirkala, 1948

By permission of the State Library of South Australia. PRG 1218/17/20, p. 277.

During the Expedition's third and final camp at Oenpelli, Mountford spent most of his time documenting the rock art of the area, mostly around the massifs Injalak and Arguluk, with brief sojourns to Inagurdurwil, Cannon Hill and Obiri (now Ubirr). Mountford was advised of the best spots to see such artwork by Alf Dyer, the Church Missionary Society representative at Oenpelli. Dyer

corresponded with Mountford before the Expedition's departure, describing the best sites for rock art. Dyer's letters include hand-drawn maps showing the distribution of paintings.²⁶ The cave paintings of Western Arnhem Land are acknowledged as some of the world's most significant, and thousands of sites have been located in the area. Mountford described them as 'the most numerous and beautiful series of cave paintings that we know of in Australia'.²⁷ Four large volumes in the Mountford-Sheard Collection contain highlights of the pictures Mountford took of rock art galleries in and around Western Arnhem Land.²⁸ Each figure is assigned a unique number and there is a record of its location and size plus a visual description. There is a photograph and/or a sketch of the figure, but generally little or no ethnological interpretation.



Figure 13.6 Marawana (Larry) sitting on top of Injalak Hill looking out over Oenpelli (now Gunbalanya), 1948

Photograph by Howell Walker. By permission of the State Library of South Australia. PRG 1218/35/1703.

Mountford returned to Oenpelli in 1949, and the *Adelaide Advertiser* reported that this trip led to the 'new' discovery of cave paintings at Obiri—a shelter 18 m long and 2.7 m high containing tens of thousands of figures. Mountford hoped the site could become a national reserve, so that the paintings could be

26 Alf Dyer to Charles P. Mountford, 4 February 1948, pp. 113–15a, PRG 1218/17/7, SLSA.

27 Mountford, *Records of the American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land*, vol. 1, p. 109.

28 Charles P. Mountford, *Expedition to Arnhem Land, 1948: Art of Oenpelli*, PRG 1218/17/21–24, SLSA.

properly protected as well as enjoyed.²⁹ (The area is now part of the Kakadu National Park.) Some of the colour photographs taken during this trip and the 1948 Expedition were later included in a book of Aboriginal art published for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 1954.³⁰

'Dear Monty': Correspondence in the Mountford-Sheard Collection

In the extensive correspondence and administration files of the Expedition, Mountford's labour can be best appreciated. Mountford (with the assistance of wife, Bessie) was sending and receiving up to 10 letters and telegrams a day, covering every aspect of the Expedition. Overall the seven volumes of correspondence give a fascinating insight into the Expedition's administration, before, during and after its completion. It is remarkable to scan these pages and consider the many facets of the Expedition with which Mountford was occupied.

Evident in the correspondence files is the conflict that arose between Mountford and the administrative staff of the Arnhem Land missions, most notably the two Church Missionary Society (CMS) missions: Groote Eylandt and Oenpelli. J. Bruce Montgomerie of the CMS complained that it was 'extremely difficult to work in harmony and goodwill with him...he expected all work on the Mission to cease while he used the Aborigines for various works required to be done'.³¹ Whether this conflict was the result of Mountford's personal behaviour or whether as leader he shouldered the responsibility for the actions of the whole party and their stakeholders is difficult to know. Certainly, there were other anthropologists, such as Donald Thomson and the Berndts, who came into conflict with the CMS.³²

There is a continual stream of correspondence between the missions and Mountford, arguing about the payment of accounts and the compensation given for the use of Aboriginal labour. The final resolution of these matters came more than a year after the completion of the Expedition, with the Department of Information finally settling all payments. Mountford had kept comprehensive records of all transactions—to satisfy his own needs as well as those of the

29 Charles P. Mountford, *Aboriginal Art Oenpelli*, Manuscript, 1949, PRG 1218/17/47, SLSA.

30 New York Graphic Society 1954, *Australia: Aboriginal paintings, Arnhem Land*, New York Graphic Society by arrangement with UNESCO, New York.

31 Cole, K. 1975, *A History of Oenpelli*, Nungalinga Publications, Darwin, p. 61.

32 *Ibid.*; Gray, *A Cautious Silence*; Cole, K. 1980, *Dick Harris, Missionary to the Aborigines: A biography of the Reverend Canon George Richmond Harris, M.B.E., pioneer missionary to the Aborigines of Arnhem Land*, Keith Cole Publications, Bendigo, Vic.

budget-conscious department. A meticulous and stubborn person, he could never bring himself to agree with the missions' tally and he disputed the records they produced to support their claims.³³

Another important event documented in the correspondence files is the previously mentioned attempt to oust Mountford from his position as leader soon after the party's arrival at Yirrkala. As the Mountford-Sheard Collection contains no diarised accounts from this time, it is only through correspondence files and Bessie Mountford's journal that we are able to gain insight into his perspective. In a letter to Alexander Wetmore written two weeks after the incident, Charles Mountford wrote that the visiting officials had

accused me of mismanagement (though all their accusations were based on incidents caused by the stranded *Phoenix*), made insulting remarks about my status as a scientist, and forbade me to carry out research work...Mr. [Kevin] Murphy [of the Department of Information] then offered the control of the scientific personnel to Mr. [Frank] Setzler [the deputy leader]...to my surprise Setzler did not refuse the position.³⁴

When Bessie Mountford asked her husband what the meeting had been about, he gravely replied, 'I have been demoted as leader. Frank is to take my place.'³⁵ Bessie Mountford noted that

Murphy was anxious for film, and thought to secure more of Monty's work in film-making by demanding that Monty leave all research to the professionals. [He] emphasised that Monty was a film director, *not* a scientist, and was very rude in his emphasis. He had also been regaled with gossip through some channel or other.³⁶

News of the visitors' agenda spread slowly at first, but Bessie Mountford wrote that when told, Herbert Deignan was 'shamed to sickness by the action of his colleague' and vowed to sort it out.³⁷ The next day, the American scientists met, and Bessie Mountford believed it was their influence that led Setzler to belatedly refuse the leadership offer. 'Never have I seen a man so utterly defeated as Frank S. He later confessed to Monty that never in his life had he been given such a drubbing: that he had never realised just how awful a thing he had done.'³⁸

Shortly thereafter, Bessie typed a telegram from Setzler to Murphy at the Department of Information: '[A]fter conferring with my American colleagues

33 Charles P Mountford, AASEAL Correspondence, Volume 7, 1949, PRG 1218/17/10, SLSA.

34 Charles P Mountford to Alexander Wetmore, 29 July 1948, pp. 463–4, PRG 1218/17/8, SLSA.

35 Bessie Ilma Mountford, 10 July 1948, Diary, p. 254, PRG 487/1/2, SLSA.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 258.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 256.

38 *Ibid.*, 11 July 1948, p. 260.

I find it impossible to accept the position you offered me. Regards Frank Setzler.' (Beneath this, Mountford added a cryptic 'No?')³⁹ Tensions eased in the following days and Bessie Mountford believed that some good might have come from the event, both in firming up loyalty for her husband and in helping him face some of his shortcomings. She noted he was 'adopting a less rigid manner in matters of control'.⁴⁰

'She accepted discomfort and asked no favours': The diaries of Bessie Mountford

As indicated above, the diaries kept by Bessie Mountford (PRG 487/1) form a valuable counterpoint to the Expedition's scientific records. She was Mountford's second wife, and he usually referred to her as Johnnie, after her maiden name, Johnstone. She acted as honorary secretary throughout the Expedition. The couple was married in 1933, eight years after the death of Charles's first wife, Florence (née Purnell).

Prior to, and following, the Expedition, Bessie Mountford had an active political career, advocating for women's rights and political representation through organisations such as the League of Women Voters. This organisation promoted equal rights in marriage, divorce and in the workforce, and Bessie Mountford gave conference papers and wrote essays for the cause. In addition, she campaigned for the support of war widows, family endowment and other organised welfare assistance. She ran as an independent candidate for the seat of Hindmarsh in the 1938 and 1941 South Australian state elections, battling a political system geared against the success of women. During the 1960s, she served as Vice-President of the League of Women Voters of South Australia, and continued to campaign with associated national organisations such as the Australian Federation of Women Voters.⁴¹ In addition to her considerable secretarial duties during the Expedition, Bessie assisted various members of the party with their work; she specifically mentions helping Setzler, Specht and Walker.

The journalist Colin Simpson, who joined the Expedition at Oenpelli, wrote of Bessie Mountford:

Mrs. Mountford, when she was not busy with correspondence, book-keeping, and the typing of her husband's notes, could always interest herself in her surroundings. She showed no chagrin at being left

39 Frank Setzler to Kevin Murphy, 12 July 1948, PRG 1218/17/16, SLSA.

40 Bessie Ilma Mountford, 14 July 1948, Diary, p. 268, PRG 487/1/2, SLSA.

41 Bessie Mountford, League of Women Voters of SA, SRG 116/28 1941–1965, SLSA.

behind when others went off to arduous, exciting places. She accepted discomfort and asked no favours. She never took rank to herself as the leader's wife, but she was always and admirably the wife of the leader.⁴²

Bessie often drafted Expedition correspondence. It is unclear whether it was first dictated by Charles or whether the words were her own, with him acting as editor. Much of the correspondence in the bound volumes held by our library is typed, yet there are numerous handwritten annotations by Charles, which would suggest the latter.

In addition to hundreds of pages of notes, Bessie Mountford's diaries contain photographic inserts, the provenance of which is unclear. She described the particulars of her journeying, including travelling conditions, weather and landscapes, and reflected on interactions between the Expedition members, her husband's experiences, and the people she met. Her notes reveal her as observant, opinionated, intelligent and compassionate.

When Bessie first encountered the Aboriginal people of Umbakumba, she wrote: 'Like all other native people I have met they are quick to laugh.'⁴³ She described the women as very shy and commented on the people's Western form of dress, their way of working, and on how society and ceremony might have been affected by trade, war and other European contact. She set out to deliberately interact with Aboriginal women, when time off from her own work permitted:

I tried to talk to some of the native women this morning, but...They do not speak my tongue...I did admire the construction of their carrying dishes, which, unlike the Central Aust. people, is made of bark. A long piece about a yard long is husked and cut into wide strips about a quarter of the way from each end. These are drawn together and tied with bark so as to give a carrying dish about 18 to 21 inches [46–53 cm] long.⁴⁴

At Yirrkala, Bessie wrote of teaching two Aboriginal women, Bali and Bangara, to crochet, and recorded details of a traditional naming ritual, communicated by an Aboriginal woman.⁴⁵ Also at Yirrkala, she attended a religious sermon, and she remarked in exasperation about an unsuitable analogy the speaker used to impart a parable about recognising Jesus, which frightened and confused the Aboriginal congregation: 'the discourse of the young speaker was so illogical that I fear I finished up wanting to shake white people who presume beyond their knowledge, if not beyond their capacity.'⁴⁶

42 Simpson, C. 1973, *Adam in Ochre: Inside Aboriginal Australia*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, p. 64.

43 Bessie Ilma Mountford, 4 April 1948, Diary, p. 67, PRG 487/1/1, SLSA.

44 *Ibid.*, 9 April 1948, p. 72.

45 *Ibid.*, 30 August 1948, 4 September 1948, pp. 53, 62, PRG 487/1/3.

46 *Ibid.*, 5 September 1948, p. 63.

She empathised with the circumstances of other non-Aboriginal women, removed from their familiar surroundings and coping with remote life on the settlements. She described Marjorie Gray, the wife of Fred Gray, as an Englishwoman from the city who 'feels the loneliness of this way of life...[is] not flexible of mind, but is kindly of heart and simple in manner'.⁴⁷ Of their goodbye, she wrote:

[M]y heart ached for her. Ever since she reached Groote Eylandt the thought of the people of the expedition staying with them has been a beacon towards which she has carried on. Someone was coming! Now—it was no wonder she cried when I bade her farewell...it took me all of my self control not to sit down and weep with her.⁴⁸

Bessie Mountford knew the Expedition's departure would be a sorrow for Mrs Gray, who had no prior knowledge of what to expect when she received Fred Gray's proposal by telegram in England. Eventually, Marjorie moved back to her home country, in 1967, to 'look after her father', where she remained permanently.⁴⁹

It must have been difficult to separate the dual roles of secretary and wife, but we are able to observe Bessie's love and support for Charles (despite their sleeping in separate tents) in her personal journal. Following the attempt to oust him in Yirrkala, she writes:

Of course I was quick to protect and, if possible, comfort, encouraging the poor hurt creature, to talk and ease himself...Whatever I have been curtailed by in the way of heat and insect pests were as nothing for the fact that I could be near Monty at so critical an hour.⁵⁰

As Bessie was one of only two women on the Expedition, these diaries also serve as a rare and useful woman's perspective.

In addition to her Arnhem Land diaries, material donated by Bessie Mountford to the State Library includes genealogical information, letters, and a diary she kept on her husband's 1940 expedition to Central Australia.

A Continuing Legacy

The Mountford-Sheard Collection is a historically significant and valuable record of anthropological fieldwork of the mid twentieth century. The collection

47 Ibid., 4 April 1948, p. 65, PRG 487/1/1.

48 Ibid., 8 July 1948, p. 238, PRG 487/1/2.

49 Dewar, M. 2006, 'Fred Gray and Umbakumba: the 1930s and 1940s', *Picturing Relations: Groote Eylandt Barks Symposium*, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, Vic., 23 September 2006, p. 4.

50 Bessie Ilma Mountford, 10 July 1948, Diary, p. 254, PRG 487/1/2, SLISA.

is of obvious cultural significance to the Aboriginal communities of Arnhem Land. Mountford kept erratic, yet detailed, notes on various aspects of art, religion and ceremony. Furthermore, the archive gives insight into the day-to-day joys and hardships of the ethnographer at work. While Mountford's detractors questioned his scientific credibility, scholars have subsequently acknowledged that much of his work, including that accomplished on the Arnhem Land Expedition, contributed to the popularisation of Aboriginal art both in Australia and overseas.⁵¹

The Expedition collected 25 tonnes of material including nearly 500 paintings on both bark and paper. In 1956, many of these were distributed to Australian state art galleries and museums. Tracey Lock-Weir has written that these were the 'first Aboriginal works collected in the field and accepted by public art galleries, not only for their ethnographic significance, but also for their aesthetic qualities'.⁵² Philip Jones argues that Mountford 'achieved more success than any other individual in promoting Aboriginal art...during the 1950s and 1960s', and that the collection acquired during the Arnhem Land Exhibition 'formed the basis of Aboriginal collections in Australian art museums'.⁵³

Aboriginal communities, scholars and authors continue to seek access to the Mountford-Sheard Collection, poring over old ground or finding new threads to spin out. While there might still be questions concerning Mountford's methods or his manner, there can be no disputing the continuing legacy of the collection he entrusted to the State Library of South Australia.

51 Lock-Weir, T. 2002, *Art of Arnhem Land 1940s–1970s*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; May, S. K. 2000, *The last frontier? Acquiring the American–Australian Scientific Expedition Ethnographic collection 1948*, BA (Hons) thesis, Flinders University, Adelaide; Neale, M. 1998, 'Charles Mountford and the "bastard barks"—a gift from the American Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land, 1948', in L. Seear and J. Ewington (eds), *Brought to Light: Australian Art 1850–1965*, Queensland Art Gallery, South Brisbane, pp. 210–17.

52 Lock-Weir, *Art of Arnhem Land 1940s–1970s*.

53 Jones, P. 1988, 'Perceptions of Aboriginal art: a history', in P. Sutton (ed.), *Dreamings: The art of Aboriginal Australia*, Viking, Ringwood, Vic., pp. 171–3.