

Foreword

This publication is one enduring result of the first major event dedicated to exploring and re-evaluating the legacy of the 1948 American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land. The symposium *Barks, Birds & Billabongs* was organised and hosted by the National Museum of Australia in November 2009.

The National Museum was ideally placed to undertake this collaborative venture. Initially, the Australian Institute of Anatomy, which had sent a team of biomedical researchers on the Expedition, had custodianship of the Commonwealth’s share of the Arnhem Land Expedition collection. In 1984, some 270 ethnographic objects from this collection were transferred to the National Museum. With the opening of the Museum in March 2001, objects from the collection could be displayed.

In 2009, the Museum ventured into a closer examination of the complex cross-cultural, multidisciplinary dimensions of the 1948 Arnhem Land Exhibition.

In mounting *Barks, Birds & Billabongs*, the National Museum worked closely with the Smithsonian Institution and the National Geographic Society—original partners on the Expedition (with the Australian Government). This symposium was designed to recapture something of the collaborative spirit of the Expedition that was a watershed event in Australia’s cultural and scientific history.

This publication has been undertaken by the Australian National University, our neighbour and natural collaborator on projects of intellectual significance.

The Museum is well positioned culturally to engage in this project, with its strong commitment to Indigenous programs and collections. Indeed the Museum’s collection has built on the original base and includes an extensive, magnificent and historically significant collection of bark paintings. Our commitment to Indigenous agency and voice informs the management of our Indigenous collection, exhibitions and employment practices. The Museum’s continued emphasis upon and dialogue with Indigenous Australia resonates with the strong Indigenous community participation and focus of this international symposium.

Exploring the Legacy of the 1948 Arnhem Land Expedition draws upon the Museum’s research commitment. Northern Australia is an area where the Museum has had a long research involvement. The expertise of our staff covers Indigenous and environmental histories, the history of science, biography,

archaeological research in the region, the history of conservation and national park programs, and the emergence of a thriving contemporary Aboriginal art movement.

From the perspective of the National Museum of Australia, *Barks, Birds & Billabongs* was a project that ideally combined our research interests, our deepened understanding of our collection and our capacity and willingness to enter into fruitful partnerships across Australia and internationally.

Andrew Sayers
Director, National Museum of Australia



Project Director, Margo Neale, Council of the National Museum of Australia Chairman, Daniel Gilbert, and the Governor-General of Australia, Quentin Bryce, meeting Manikay performers (left to right) Djangirrawuy Garawirrtja, Manimawuy Dhamarrandji, Djombala Dhamarrandji and Gordon Lanyipi at the *Barks, Birds & Billabongs* symposium, 2009

Photograph by George Serras