

Prologue

The triumphs and travails of the American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land were front-page news back in 1948. In the decade that followed, the release of the official film productions, the widespread display of art, craft and scientific collections in museums and galleries, and high-level coverage in *National Geographic* ensured that a global audience numbering millions of people was exposed to aspects of the Arnhem Land venture. From this high point, its profile inevitably diminished with the passing of the years, to the extent that the Expedition became known for the most part only by specialists. Scholars in fields ranging from ornithology to ethnomusicology would advance their particular projects by making use of the rich collections and documentation assembled in 1948, some only dimly aware that a greater story lay behind the objects. The transnationalism of the Expedition, which did so much to boost its profile in the first instance, now weighed against it. For someone trying to understand the event in its totality, the dispersal of collections, photographs and documents across Australia and the United States presented logistical challenges of a high order.

The extent of these challenges—and the exciting prospects they signalled—became evident to the three of us as we established the steering committee for Barks, Birds & Billabongs, the National Museum of Australia symposium that was the stimulus for this book. Although we had trodden somewhat different paths, we had come to a common conviction that the cross-cultural engagement that distinguished the Arnhem Land Expedition was of enduring significance. Margo Neale, a curator of Aboriginal art, became intrigued by the remarkable paintings on bark and paper amassed by the Expedition, many of which were acquired by Australia's six state art galleries in 1956. They were foundational to the major collections of Aboriginal art that subsequently developed. As an archaeology student in the 1990s, Sally K. May picked up on another thread of the story when she investigated the often fraught politics that influenced the dispersal of the Expedition's ethnographic collections between Australia and the United States. For Martin Thomas, a historian long interested in photography and broadcasting, the Expedition's electronic recordings of Aboriginal music—produced in collaboration with the Australian Broadcasting Commission—were what prompted him to delve into the Expedition story. We all agreed that so large and complex an event deserved to be better understood.

By any standard, the adventures of the 17 men and women who formed the Expedition party make for an intriguing story in their own right. But more than that, the event encapsulates some of the great themes that have come to define our own epoch. In terms of geopolitics, the desirability of a joint scientific

project between Australia and the United States was symptomatic of the mood post World War II. The theatrics of the Expedition were a public face to the secret negotiations that resulted in the military alliance that was formalised as the ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand and the United States) Pact in 1951. In terms of the history of science, the interdisciplinary make-up of the Expedition party is indicative of the growing status of ecology post war, and with it the dawning recognition among Westerners that our ecosystems—comprising both natural and human heritage—are resources worthy of protection rather than exploitation. But it is the breadth of the Expedition's interest in Aboriginal society and culture that represents the most prescient aspect of its inquiries. The paradox at work here is intriguing, for the Expedition was initially justified on the grounds that Arnhem Land's Aboriginal cultures, particularly its strong traditions of dance, music and painting, were on a fast track to disappearance. Fortunately, these dire predictions were erroneous. Far from disappearing or assimilating with the wider population, the descendant communities take a lively interest in the way their forebears interacted with the visiting researchers 60 years ago.

Barks, Birds & Billabongs was convened as a way of expanding the scope of what is normally thought of as historical inquiry. We hoped to encourage an understanding of the Expedition and its era, and we wanted to grapple with the many facets of its legacy. Some of these—such as the preservation of wonderful paintings and artefacts—are a source of wonder and pleasure for contemporary Arnhem Landers. Others—such as the removal of human remains—have caused argument and grief. These and many other issues were put on the agenda because we believed that a continuation of the original transnational and cross-cultural conversation was urgently required. This book is a continuation of that dialogue, involving 24 of the scholars who contributed to the original conversation.

Sally K. May, Margo Neale and Martin Thomas

Steering Committee

Barks, Birds & Billabongs Symposium



Map showing main sites visited by the Arnhem Land Expedition

Exploring the Legacy of the 1948 Arnhem Land Expedition

NAME	ROLE	INSTITUTION
Charles P Mountford	Leader, Ethnologist and Film Director	Honorary Associate Curator in Ethnology, South Australian Museum, Adelaide
Frank M Setzler	Deputy Leader and Archaeologist	Head Curator, Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution, Washington
Herbert G Deignan	Ornithologist	Associate Curator of Birds, Smithsonian Institution, Washington
David H Johnson	Mammalogist	Curator of Mammals, Smithsonian Institution, Washington
Robert R Miller	Ichthyologist	Associate Curator of Fishes, Smithsonian Institution, Washington
Raymond L Specht	Botanist	Lecturer, Department of Botany, University of Adelaide*
Frederick D McCarthy	Anthropologist	Department of Anthropology, Australian Museum, Sydney
Harrison Howell Walker	Photographer and Staff Writer	National Geographic Society, Washington
Bessie I Mountford	Honorary Secretary	NA
William E Harney	Guide and Liaison Officer	NA
Peter Bassett-Smith	Cine-Photographer	NA
Keith Cordon	Transport Officer	NA
John E Bray	Cook and Honorary Entomologist	NA
Reginald Hollow	Cook	NA
Brian Billington	Medical Officer	Institute of Anatomy, Canberra
Margaret McArthur	Nutritionist	Institute of Anatomy, Canberra
Kelvin Hodges	Biochemist	Institute of Anatomy, Canberra

* Specht held this position in 1956 when this volume of the Records was published.

Members of the Arnhem Land Expedition as listed in volume 1 of *Records of the American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land, 1956*.