

# Introduction

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Every day, most of us probably use a depiction or abstracted illustration of the world around us—perhaps a map, photograph, diagram or street sign—to help us negotiate our way and understand where we are. We take for granted a handy tool such as Google maps or a more traditional format such as the Melway street directory. Although we know these are highly schematised, we perceive them as straightforward representations of the real world, conveying information that has been derived scientifically and objectively. Few of us, I suspect, stop to ponder the possibility of cultural or historical biases or omissions in their creation.

But maps, scientific illustrations, diaries and other forms of records are laden with cultural values that are by no means universal or objective. Some of the articles in this issue of *University of Melbourne Collections* examine maps and other records of the world around us. Our authors demonstrate how these are products of very specific times and cultures. We are immediately struck by this when we look at something produced a hundred or more years ago, but perhaps we cannot see it in the products of our own culture today. Medieval maps of the world tell us more about religious belief than about the locations of cities,

mountains and oceans, as Matthew Ducza explains in his article, but does this make them any less telling as documents? Dorothy Prescott's contribution shows how the maps of Australia made by the 19th-century English geographer John Arrowsmith illustrate a progressive 'filling up' of the continent as British interests moved further and further inland. To the first Australians however, the areas shown by Arrowsmith as blank were of course anything but empty. They were full of familiar geographic features such as rivers and hills. The land provided shelter, sources of food and raw materials. It was, as it is today, also defined politically according to a family or group's intimate connection with a particular piece of country.

Dr Donna Leslie's exhibition *Seeing the natural world* at the Ian Potter Museum of Art juxtaposed Aboriginal and European ways of perceiving Australia's flora and fauna. By placing bark paintings from Arnhem Land and Groote Eylandt beside European-style natural-history prints and drawings of Australian plants and animals, Dr Leslie vividly highlighted differences and similarities in individual, cultural and collective artistic visions.

European discovery of a very new environment was documented not

only in pictures but also in words: through letters, diaries, government reports and the like. The journal of a pioneering squatter in Victoria's Western District records his first impressions of the land and its potential for economic development, as well as his brief encounters with the local Indigenous people. Melinda Barrie and Sophie Garrett draw upon holdings from the University of Melbourne Archives in their commentary.

Indeed, it is the diversity of sources—maps, artworks, manuscripts, books and more—held across the 30 cultural collections of the University of Melbourne, that make these fascinating comparisons possible. I hope you enjoy these and the other articles in this issue of *University of Melbourne Collections*.



Dr Belinda Nemeč is the editor of *University of Melbourne Collections*.