

Retirement and recollection

Dr Ray Marginson AM and the Donald Thomson Collection

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The Donald Thomson Collection has been described as ‘one of the world’s most important ethnographic collections relating to Australian Aboriginal people’.¹ Bringing together material acquired from Arnhem Land, Cape York, the Great Sandy Desert and the Gibson Desert in Western Australia, it also includes a small amount originating in the Solomon Islands and West Papua (formerly Irian Jaya). This remarkable assemblage of cultural material was amassed as a personal research and reference collection by the anthropologist and biologist, Donald Thomson, over a career that spanned more than four decades. For much of this time, Thomson worked at the University of Melbourne: initially as a research fellow (Bartlett Research Scholar) attached to the Department of Anatomy (1932–37 and 1945–53) and later as a senior research fellow (1953–64) and finally professor (1964–68) in the Department of Anthropology.² In later life Thomson was concerned ‘not to let the care of any part of his collection pass out of his hands [which] resulted in few people ever seeing it until after his death’,³ in 1970.

The Donald Thomson Collection was officially established three years later, when all of his

research and reference material was placed on a long-term loan to Museum Victoria in 1973.

The ethnographic artefacts and specimens remain the property of the University of Melbourne, while Donald Thomson’s literary estate, which had been left to his widow, Mrs Dorita Thomson, was located at the museum alongside the collection. This particular ‘literary’ component of the collection—made up of notes, diaries, drawings, photographs, film, sound recordings and manuscripts—would be listed on the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Register in 2008. It is probably best known to the wider public through the acclaimed film, *Ten canoes* (2006), which was based upon its photographic holdings.⁴

The collection’s richness and comprehensiveness can be conveyed by a simple description of its contents. It includes 7,200 artefacts, accompanied by 5,300 pages of field notes and 11,000 pages of transcriptions; 10,580 photographic prints, negatives, glass plates and transparencies; 7,600 metres of colour film and various sound recordings; approximately 2,000 natural science specimens; 400 maps; and over 300 scientific illustrations in pen and ink,

ochres and watercolour. There is also a quantity of language notes, genealogies, diaries and natural science notebooks; plus newspaper clippings, correspondence, reports and unpublished manuscripts relating to Thomson’s academic career as an anthropologist and biologist, as well as to his social justice work.⁵ Not surprisingly, the collection is particularly valued for ‘its careful interweaving of various sources of information and documentation and images’.⁶

This year, 2013, marks the 40th anniversary of the formation of the Donald Thomson Collection and of the decision to entrust it to the custody of Museum Victoria. It also sees the retirement of Dr Ray Marginson AM from his role as inaugural chairman of the Donald Thomson Collection Administration Committee, in which capacity he has overseen the collection’s foundation and management for the past four decades. This committee, made up of representatives of the museum and the university, is responsible for the maintenance of the collection (ranging from care and conservation to research and interpretation). The following account of the collection’s establishment draws upon an unpublished typescript by Dr Marginson.



Recollections

When Ray Marginson joined the University of Melbourne in 1966 as its first vice-principal,⁷ Donald Thomson had been elected to a personal chair in anthropology only two years before. Sadly, Thomson's time as professor would be short, as he retired in 1968 and died in 1970 at the age of 69. Dr Marginson recalls of that time:

I first sighted the Donald Thomson collection when it was housed in one of the original medical buildings on the east side of the Parkville campus, and also in part of a Storey Street house [in Parkville],⁸ bought by the University during those frantic days of tremendous growth in student numbers in the post-war period, partly due to the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme. On Donald's death, I inspected the collection more thoroughly, with the help of Donald's last secretary, Ms Judith Wiseman. I realized it was beyond the capacity of the University to sort, curate, and preserve this major collection. This was also firmly the view of the then Vice Chancellor, Sir David Derham (1920–1985).⁹

It was decided to propose an agreement between Donald's widow, Mrs Dorita Thomson, the University and the Museum [of Victoria] in which the objects would be donated to the University and transferred to the custody of the Museum on long-term loan for preservation and curatorial responsibility, with the University retaining ownership of those items regarded as belonging to it. The Vice Chancellor was of the view that all objects collected from the point when Donald was funded by the University, fell into that category. This was a sensitive and difficult issue but it was eventually settled amicably. The family retained ownership of the copyright and ownership of all the manuscripts and articles, field notes, drawings, photographs, audiotapes and maps. The bulk of the holdings of objects was then donated formally to the University in terms of a tripartite agreement and transferred to the Museum for its 'expert attention for their present and future preservation ... and display'.¹⁰ The agreement was signed between the three parties on the 28 March 1973 and the Donald Thomson Collection was transferred to the then Natural History Museum, part of the

National Museum of Victoria in 1973.¹¹

Once transferred to the Museum, the herculean task of cataloguing, housing and researching the collection was taken up. In discussing this period in the life of the collection (after 1973), Dr Marginson places particular emphasis on the contribution of one individual—that of Judith Wiseman.¹² As he recounts:

Everyone connected with the collection has paid tribute to Judith's immense contribution and skill in her work on the collection. This included transcribing 4,000 pages of Donald [Thomson's] handwritten field notes into 7,000 typed foolscap pages, the start of the work in sorting, printing and labelling the 1,100 photographs from negatives and glass plates; and sorting, identifying and listing 5,000 artefacts. She also undertook further cross-referencing of objects in the collection with the field notes and photographs and systematically compiled some of the language information. All this was done with a vigorous refusal to accept any payment (although we eventually persuaded her to accept petrol money from her fairly distant Bayside home to the



Museum). She was greatly aided by the close co-operation with the collections manager, Ms Rosemary Wrench and museum staff led by the Collection curator, Lindy Allen, and, very importantly, the goodwill and advice of Mrs Dorita Thomson. Judith Wiseman was also greatly aided by her friends in the Melbourne Women's Walking Club.

To mark her official retirement in 1979, the University recognized formally her scholarship,

dedication and the unique quality of her work by conferring on her the degree of Master of Philosophy *Honoris Causa*. When she finally retired from work on the collection, the Donald Thomson Administration Collection Committee presented her with a copy of Michael Meszaros' Thomson medallion.

In 1996, an essay Judith had written originally in 1984 intended as part of the bicentennial Aboriginal History

of Arnhem Land but never published, was co-published by the Museum and University as a photographic essay titled 'Thomson Time, Arnhem Land in the 1930s'.¹³

This photographic essay,¹⁴ one of several books on the Donald Thomson Collection produced during Dr Marginson's chairmanship, documents Thomson's published and unpublished work relating to Arnhem Land. It also records Thomson's

academic and special awards, as well as listing past and present (to 1996) members of the Collection's Administration Committee.

A more recent project that also emerges from this 'long and fruitful collaboration between the University of Melbourne and Museum Victoria', is *Ancestral power and the aesthetic: Arnhem Land paintings and objects from the Donald Thomson Collection*, an exhibition organised by the collection's curator, Lindy Allen, which was held at the university's Ian Potter Museum of Art in 2009 and subsequently toured by Museum Victoria throughout Australia in 2011–12.¹⁵ This exhibition is testimony to the skill and commitment of the Museum Victoria staff who have enhanced the collection's significance through extensive and continuous research. Moreover, it demonstrates very clearly the fact that after 40 years in the joint custody of the university and museum, and under the chairmanship of Ray Marginson, the 'collection continues to evolve, generating new knowledge and contributing to Indigenous cultural strength'.¹⁶

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- 1 Museum Victoria, 'Donald Thomson Collection', Collections & Research website, <http://museumvictoria.com.au/collections-research/our-collections/indigenous-cultures/donald-thomson/>, accessed 25 July 2013.
- 2 Howard Morphy, 'Thomson, Donald Finlay Fergusson (1901–1970)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 16, Melbourne University Press, 2002, amended and published online at <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/thomson-donald-finlay-fergusson-11851/text21213>, accessed 27 July 2013; Bruce Rigsby and Nicolas Peterson (eds), *Donald Thomson: The man and scholar*, Canberra: The Academy of Social Sciences in Australia, 2005, pp. 243–4.
- 3 Nicolas Peterson, 'A biographical sketch of Donald Thomson', in D. Thomson, *Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land* (compiled and introduced by Nicolas Peterson), Carlton: The Miegunyah Press, 2003, p. 16.
- 4 See 'Donald Thomson Ethnohistory Collection', Australian Memory of the World Program, www.amw.org.au/content/donald-thomson-ethnohistory-collection.
- 5 For the contents and history of the collection, see Lindy Allen, 'Tons and tons of valuable material: The Donald Thomson Collection', in Nicolas Peterson, Lindy Allen and Louise Hamby (eds), *The makers and making of Indigenous Australian museum collections*, Melbourne University Press, 2008, pp. 387–418.
- 6 National Library of Australia, 'The Donald Thomson Collection', Museum Metadata Exchange, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/version/198718269>, accessed 2 September 2013.
- 7 Dr Ray Marginson came to the university from the Commonwealth Public Service and, as vice-principal, was responsible for the areas of financial policy, accounting systems and budgets, control of buildings, maintenance, grounds and property. He took a keen interest in the university's cultural collections. For details of his career, see a series of interviews with Dr Marginson in *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 3, December 2008; issue 5, November 2009; issue 7, December 2010; issue 9, December 2011.
- 8 One of the illustrators who assisted Donald Thomson, Ann E. Lissenden-Gumley, also recalls working on the collection in the Storey Street house in the late 1960s. See M.F. Playne, 'The line drawings, paintings and painted photographs of five women artists', in Rigsby and Peterson, *Donald Thomson*, p. 237.
- 9 The distinguished jurist and university administrator Sir David Derham was appointed vice-chancellor of the University of Melbourne in 1968. Confronted by a large budget deficit and managerial deficiencies, he sought to remedy these problems by 'decentralis[ing] aspects of academic administration and financial responsibility'. (Cecily Close, 'Derham, Sir David Plumley (1920–1985)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 17, Melbourne University Press, 2007.) The transfer of the Donald Thomson Collection to the care of Museum Victoria should be set against this context of fiscal austerity and restructuring. Derham retired as vice-chancellor in 1982.
- 10 Agreement between Dorita Maria Thomson (the donor), the University of Melbourne and the National Museum of Victoria Council, 28 March 1973.
- 11 Ray Marginson, unpublished manuscript, 2013.
- 12 Ms Judith Proctor Wiseman, a graduate of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Melbourne, commenced work as a research assistant and secretary to Donald Thomson in October 1969.
- 13 Marginson, unpublished manuscript.
- 14 Judith Proctor Wiseman, *Thomson time: Arnhem Land in the 1930s: A photographic essay*, Melbourne: Museum of Victoria, 1996.
- 15 Lindy Allen, *Ancestral power and the aesthetic: Arnhem Land paintings and objects from the Donald Thomson Collection* (catalogue of exhibition held at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, 2 June – 23 August 2009), Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, 2009, n.p.
- 16 Chris McAuliffe and J. Patrick Greene OBE, 'Foreword', in Allen, *Ancestral power and the aesthetic*, n.p.