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Cross-references, keywords, and networks: the continuing story of a complex collection (26 September 2017)

Collections in large museums and archives are not uniformly documented. Museums Victoria (MV), in Melbourne, Australia, holds around 17 million items, including natural history specimens, history and technology artefacts, and Indigenous cultures, as well as archives and a library. Parts of the collections are rarely seen, let alone used. Documentation for some of these lesser items has changed little since the days of catalogue cards, the same data simply migrated from system to system for decades without being edited or updated.

Therefore, when exploring the past, present, and future of collection documentation it is often useful to look at the other end of the spectrum. Collections that are considered significant, and which have been the focus of lots of institutional resources, can tell us a lot about the 'gold standard' of documentation in a particular era; or, at least, let us talk about documentation practice with fewer claims that its limitations are due to insufficient resources or curatorial disinterest.

The Donald Thomson Collection is a prime example. As one of only two collections at MV on UNESCO's Memory of the World Register, it is widely considered one of the most significant ethnographic collections in the world. The collection contains around 7,200 artefacts, 2,500 natural history specimens (Thomson started his career as an ornithologist and continued his interest in natural history throughout), 11,000 photographs, audio visual material, and significant archival content, including field notes, diaries, drawings, and transcriptions.

Since arriving at the National Museum of Victoria in 1973 (on loan from the Thomson family and the University of Melbourne),¹ the collection has been the focus

¹ The artefacts and specimens from the collection are on long-term loan from the University of Melbourne, while Thomson's 'literary estate' (photographs, audio visual material, field notes, diaries, transcriptions, and drawings) remain the property of the Thomson family. In 1973 the family, University and Museum entered into an agreement that entrusted the Museum with management of the collections. The agreement, managed by the Thomson Committee, remains in place today.

of project funds and considerable resources, and has been widely used by curators, researchers, indigenous communities, and creative artists.²

Thomson spent the majority of his career at the University of Melbourne, while most of his collecting took place on expeditions to Australia's far north, first to Cape York Peninsula, and then Arnhem Land.³ The collection also includes items from the Great Sandy and Gibson deserts, and from Papua and the Solomons. This paper looks at examples from Cape York. "Here," Thomson later wrote, "with these happy, genial, carefree fishermen, I served my apprenticeship as an anthropologist."⁴

The top of Cape York Peninsula is about 3,000 km (or 1,860 miles) from Melbourne. The last 660 km of that is the Peninsula itself, a mixture of cattle grazing country and wilderness which even today has a small population – around 18,000, about 60% of whom are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Much of the material collected by Thomson was from in and around Princess Charlotte Bay, and relates to the fishing and hunting people of that area. One of their prized catches was the dugong – one of only four species of marine mammal from the order Sirenia still extant (the other three being species of manatee). While on the Cape, Thomson collected artefacts related to dugong hunting, such as a rope with harpoons (DT3324)⁵ and a harpoon head (DT3332),⁶ along with a wealth of other beautiful quotidian items.

The documentation of this material starts with the meticulous work of Thomson himself. As Senior Curator Lindy Allen writes:

² See, for example, Nicolas Peterson et al., eds., *Donald Thomson: The Man and Scholar* (Canberra: Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia with support from Museum Victoria, 2005); Louise Hamby, "Thomson Times and Ten Canoes (de Heer and Djigirr, 2006)," *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 1, no. 2 (May 2007): 127–46, doi:10.1386/sac.1.2.127_1; Paul Memmott and Shaneen Fantin, "Symbolism and Meaning in Aboriginal Architecture," in *Gunyah, Goondie + Wurley: The Aboriginal Architecture of Australia* (St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 2007), 232–56; John Moore, *Thomson of Arnhem Land*, videorecording (Film Australia, 2000); Justine Philip and Don Garden, "Walking the Thylacine: Records of Indigenous Companion Animals in Australian Narrative and Photographic History," *Society & Animals* 24, no. 1 (February 5, 2016): 34–62, doi:10.1163/15685306-12341386.

³ Donald F. Thomson and Nicolas Peterson, *Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land* (Melbourne: Currey O'Neil, 1983); Moore, *Thomson of Arnhem Land*; Donald F. Thomson, "The Story of Arnhem Land," *Walkabout*, August 1946, 4–22.

⁴ Donald F. Thomson, "The Fishermen and Dugong Hunters of Princess Charlotte Bay," *Walkabout*, November 1956, 34.

⁵ Museums Victoria Collections. <https://collections.museumvictoria.com.au/items/153392>. Accessed 31 August 2017.

⁶ Museums Victoria Collections. <https://collections.museumvictoria.com.au/items/153400>. Accessed 31 August 2017.

It seems that the template for the documentation of the ethnographic material was derived from, or was at least influenced by, the tags he attached to biological specimens, as both share a similar hierarchy of information.

Both the biological and anthropological tags include: an identification of the actual specimen; its indigenous name and translation of stems or elements of that word or phrase; the group from which it was collected or with which it was associated; the place and date of collection. Both tags can be annotated with relevant commentary or notes that might relate to the circumstances of collection, including from whom Thomson collected it or the maker where known. In addition, his nightly journal or field notes entries can provide further information and indicate any images taken that might relate to its manufacture or circumstances of collection. Any related images themselves are also frequently annotated with captions or commentary. Thomson probably wrote and attached the tags immediately or shortly after acquiring a specimen or object. They constitute the primary source upon which the museum's cataloguing has been based.⁷

Allen's description of Thomson's work provides some indication of the wealth of contextual information and related archival material included in the collection. Turning this richness into a usable catalogue was, as Thomson Committee chair Ray Marginson admitted, a "herculean task."⁸

Thomson had been very protective of his collection, so that when it arrived at the National Museum of Victoria (precursor to MV) in 1973 few people knew it in any real detail. Plus, many of the relationships between items noted by Allen were not immediately apparent. Thankfully, Judith Wiseman came to the museum too. Wiseman worked as Thomson's assistant prior to his death, and was one of the few people who could decipher his scrawling handwriting.⁹

The resulting project planned to produce duplicate typed catalogue cards for all the items, and to transcribe all of Thomson's field notes. To give some idea of the scale of the task, by October 1975 the team had produced 1,500 catalogue cards of approximately 5,750 required. Wiseman estimated primary documentation of the collection would take until at least 1980. It turned out transcribing would take longer, Wiseman working for more than fifteen years to produce around 10,000

⁷ Lindy Allen, "Tons and Tons of Valuable Material: The Donald Thomson Collection," in *The Makers and Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections*, ed. Nicolas Peterson, Lindy Allen, and Louise Hamby (Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Publishing, 2008), 396–97.

⁸ Alison Inglis, "Retirement and Recollection: Dr Ray Marginson AM and the Donald Thomson Collection," *University of Melbourne Collections*, no. 13 (December 2013): 36.

⁹ Hogarth, Christine. 1980. "Donald Thomson Collection - Completion of Basic Curation." National Museum of Victoria File, Administration - General - The Donald Thomson Collection, Administration Committee - Minutes of Meetings 1973-1982. Museum Victoria Archives.

typed foolscap pages. As for cross-referencing, Wiseman concluded in a report from 1978, that would: "continue more or less forever."¹⁰

As work on Thomson progressed in the 1970s, a change was coming. The Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS) recommended the use of standard forms and codes as part of collection documentation: "to achieve Australia-wide uniformity."¹¹ Their hope was to bring information about distributed collections of Indigenous culture together in a single computer-processed master list. The Thomson project had a Graduate Cataloguer working on this from 1977. But by 1980, though all the artefacts had now been catalogued and coded, AIAS funding for the work had dried up.

The Thomson Committee, keen to disseminate information about the collection beyond the walls of the museum, decided the next step was therefore microfiche.

Preparing, coding, and assembling the microfiche catalogue took another seven years. Released in 1987, *Aboriginal Artefacts in the Donald Thomson Collection - A Microfiche Catalogue*¹² was in many ways an impressive feat. The booklet at the front includes an index by geographical and tribal areas, and one by subject. The latter is essentially a hierarchical taxonomy of functions (though Thomson himself had drifted away from true functionalist and structural-functionalist practice early in his anthropological career).¹³ Thus, entries for the rope with harpoon heads, and the individual harpoon head (which included a photograph), were made available to the public for the first time.

Meanwhile, the pace of technological change was beginning to accelerate. At what was now called Museum of Victoria work on a Titan catalogue was well underway. This was then superseded by Texpress. Both systems were developed by Knowledge Engineering Pty Ltd, the company who would go on to develop KE EMu. By the time development on EMu started in the late 1990s the Indigenous Cultures section of the museum had four specialist databases – Ethno, Audio Visual, Manuscript, and

¹⁰ Judith Wiseman. 1978. "The Donald Thomson Collection - Work still to be done - March, 1978." National Museum of Victoria File, Administration - General - The Donald Thomson Collection, Administration Committee 1975-1982. Museum Victoria Archives.

¹¹ Alan L. West. 1978. "Summary statement on funding of salaries - The Donald Thomson Collection." National Museum of Victoria File, Administration - General - The Donald Thomson Collection, Administration Committee 1975-1982. Museum Victoria Archives.

¹² E. G. Ramsay, *Aboriginal Artefacts in the Donald Thomson Collection a Microfiche Catalogue* (Melbourne: University of Melbourne and the Museum of Victoria, 1987).

¹³ Howard Morphy, "Thomson, Donald Finlay Fergusson (1901–1970)," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography [Online Edition]* (Canberra: National Centre of Biography, Australian National University), accessed July 31, 2015, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/thomson-donald-finlay-fergusson-11851>.

Archaeology – with over 90,000 records in Ethno alone. This was just one of over 220 databases across the organisation.

The launch event for EMu finally arrived on 20 July 2006, ten years after the Museum had put out a call for a new cataloguing system. As EMu was developed and implemented, and 50 or so high-priority databases cross-mapped and migrated to the new system, physical transformation was also underway, with new Melbourne Museum building opening in 2000. Another milestone was reached shortly afterwards, when the number of visitors to the Museum Victoria website exceeded the number of physical visitors across all three museum sites for the first time.

Moving forward again, to September 2013, after years of work and community consultation, the First Peoples exhibition opens at Melbourne Museum. The dugong rope is one of many Thomson items on display, and visitors now have the opportunity to interact with collection information on a touch-screen in the gallery. The display includes basic metadata about each item, but there is much more than the geographic and functional categories found in the earlier catalogue. The text mentions of “dugong magic,” and includes the story of Katarra.

Katarra “lived in the days of the Wulmpano (Totemic Ancestors).” After trying to copy the way women made string, Katarra worked out a new way to make rope from Hibiscus fibre. The people were greatly impressed and cried out: ““You have found a good rope. It is strong and good for us all – let us all use it.”” Then: “Katarra made a great coil of rope and it was turned to stone; and remains to this day as a rock at Wallambilon (Temple Bay). After this, Katarra went away and was turned into a *min’ya* (animal), Katarra, the silver gull, as we see him now.” The rope is more than just a piece of hunting equipment. It is linked to myth, community, and country, its story related to physical features of the landscape and animals found in the region. Accompanying the text is one of Thomson’s photographs, and an image of a silver gull.¹⁴

But the story of Katarra here is not one provided by today’s community members. Though no reference is provided, the text is a near-complete quotation from Thomson’s 1934 article on the dugong hunters of Cape York. That article includes a wealth of information on the practice, including evocative descriptions of the hunt and pictorial content including a sketch of the canoe with the dugong rope in position, and an image of dugong bones on a grave, the latter reinforcing the notion

¹⁴ Digital display in the ‘Working Country’ exhibit. First Peoples gallery, Melbourne Museum. Museums Victoria, 2013.

that the relationship between hunters, their communities, and the dugong went far beyond the functional.¹⁵

Wiseman referred to cross-referencing, and if we return to the microfiche catalogue we can see the results of some of that work. TPUB 5 is Thomson's article on dugong hunting; TPH 2813-28 refers to photographs of men making dugong ropes; and the harpoon has a reference to Thomson's field notes. If we follow these cross-references into the archives and library we would find much of the richness that appears in the First Peoples gallery today.

The intersecting nature of this material is one of its key strengths. Anthropologist Nicolas Peterson writes of the Thomson Collection:

Its importance lies not only in its size and comprehensiveness ... but in the superb documentation of the items and the interrelationships between objects, photographs and notes which make it unique among collections from this period and a rich resource both for anthropologists and archaeologists, and as an historical archive for the people of Cape York and Arnhem Land.¹⁶

Other scholars agree with Peterson's assessment. Yet, if we look at the rope and harpoons online (which, as noted earlier, attracts more visitors than the physical museum) we only get a brief description of the hunt which is less evocative than Thomson's, and none of the connections to myth, country, and the silver gull. What is more, the Summary is duplicated across numerous objects; it is a description of the hunting process, not the item. Beneath is some fielded metadata which can be used to trigger new searches, but which doesn't provide any contextual information about the people, places, groups, or events named.

And here we encounter a key issue: the dominance of search at the expense of other means of discovery in modern information infrastructure. Text search no doubt has its strengths. For example, a user can locate all the items related to dugong much faster than in the microfiche catalogue, which only has indexes by function and geography. Using search we can also find the other items collected by Thomson. But the archives and library collections are not included online, meaning we only find artefacts and some narrative text; and, as discrete records without cross-references, it is left up to every individual user to work out how items relate. (This remains the case for most institutions, including those that incorporate archival description and library catalogue records into their online sites.¹⁷)

¹⁵ Donald F. Thomson, "The Dugong Hunters of Cape York," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 64 (1934): 237–64, doi:10.2307/2843809.

¹⁶ Thomson and Peterson, *Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land*, 13–14.

¹⁷ Michael Jones, "Artefacts and Archives: Considering Cross-Collection Contextual Information Networks in Museums," in *Museums & the Web: Selected Papers and Proceedings from Two International*

In what seems a backward step, the years of work completed by Wiseman and others on identifying and documenting cross-references for Thomson is no longer visible. Today, I can find out more about the powerful inter-relationships noted by Peterson if I track down one of the few remaining microfiche machines in my University library and look at the rope and harpoons in the 1987 catalogue than I can find by looking at the same items online (beautiful colour images notwithstanding).

This should not be the case. Digital technology allows us to encode these cross-references as active links, but it also supports much more. We should be expanding on them; moving beyond discrete records indexed for search, toward building relational networks of content to manage collections-based knowledge so that items and their contexts can be explored in interesting, flexible ways.

If we find an object of interest, like the dugong rope and harpoons, we should be able to see references to the collector, descriptions of the activity they were used for (which need to be separated out from item level description), published references, and links to materials used. And these should be defined relationships, rather than just hyperlinks. Where relevant these relationships can be dated and further described. The connections become components of description in their own right.

For example, when something is collected that can be described as an 'event' which connects an artefact and an individual, rather than being an attribute of the artefact alone. Materials like hibiscus could lead us into a world of discovery about that plant through resources like the Atlas of Living Australia. We should be able to find a biography of the collector, particularly for significant figures such as Thomson. And we should find references to archival evidence and published resources, as well as transcriptions (where they exist, as they do for Thomson).

Embracing relationality in this way starts to produce networks where users can navigate between elements of interest, and entities which we know are connected, rather than each new user having to do all the work themselves. As we start to work in this way, the data starts to fill the spaces between things, rather than being contained within discrete item records, connecting collection items through a rich network of associations. Two-way relationships go further, opening up pathways between people, archives, resources, and objects rather than forcing complex stories into hierarchical classifications and function-centric catalogues.

Conferences, ed. Nancy Proctor and Rich Cherry (MWA2015: Museums and the Web Asia 2015, Melbourne, Australia: Museums and the Web, 2015), 123–35,
<http://mwa2015.museumsandtheweb.com/paper/artefacts-and-archives-considering-cross-collection-knowledge-networks-in-museums/>.

Museum documentation thus becomes a process of capturing and managing knowledge networks. Anthropologists, social scientists, archaeologists, and museologists have been describing and analysing networks such as this for more than fifty years now. In 1988, just one year after the Thomson microfiche catalogue was published, anthropologist Clifford Geertz wrote: “The illusion that ethnography is a matter of sorting strange and irregular facts into familiar and orderly categories – this is magic, that is technology – has long since been exploded.”¹⁸ It is time museum documentation caught up.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it is only by rethinking our documentation models we can hope to effectively capture multiple perspectives on the same material. The existing Thomson documentation in both the microfiche and online versions remains centred on white Australians, white collectors, and predominantly white institutions. We need to maintain this information, but we must also incorporate different networks of meaning and context.

What network would the man who made the rope see associated with this artefact? What sort of intersecting, parallel, or contrapuntal histories do such readings support? Considering these options means stepping away from the rigid formulae of the past and embrace the ability of the digital to connect single things into multiple contexts simultaneously. Only then can we move into a space where layers of meanings, cultures and contexts overlap and intersect, allowing us to reveal the breadth and depth of meanings surrounding the things we seek to preserve.

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¹⁸ Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1988), 1.