

Transactions and Transformations: artefacts of the wet tropics, North Queensland

Edited by Shelley Greer, Rosita Henry, Russell McGregor and Michael Wood



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Transactions and Transformations: artefacts of the wet tropics, North Queensland

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COVER

Cover image: Rainforest Shield. Queensland Museum Collection QE246, collected from Cairns 1914.
Traditional Owners, Yidinji People

NOTE

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The ARC Discovery project 'Objects of Possession: Artefacts Transactions in the Wet Tropics of North Queensland 1870-2013' research team standing next to some *Bagu* in the Cairns institute.
Left to Right: Bard Aaberge (PhD candidate on the ARC project), Shelley Greer, Russell McGregor, Maureen Fuary, Trish Barnard, Mike Wood, Corinna Erkenbrecht, Rosita Henry.

Walter Edmund Roth: Ethnographic collector and Aboriginal Protector

Russell McGREGOR and Maureen FUARY

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Walter Roth ranks among the most prolific collectors of Aboriginal artefacts from North Queensland, including the Wet Tropics, as well as being one of the leading ethnographers in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Australia. He was also one of Queensland's first official Protectors of Aboriginals, appointed immediately after that colony introduced its now-infamous *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act, 1897*. This paper explores Roth's twin careers as ethnographic collector and Aboriginal Protector, teasing out the connections and commonalities between the two. It was for his achievements in ethnography and collecting, as well as his medical expertise, that he was appointed to the Protectorship. He carried out both his anthropological work and his administrative duties with determination and dedication. Yet his continuing activities as an ethnographer and collector contributed substantially to his downfall as a senior figure in Aboriginal administration. The paper also positions Roth in the historical context of an evolving Australian anthropology, with particular pertinence to North Queensland.

□ Walter Roth, ethnographic collecting, Aboriginal protection, North Queensland, Aboriginal artefacts, Australian anthropology

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FIG. 1. Walter E. Roth. Loquan's Photo Studio, Georgetown, Guyana, 1918. Source: John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland. Neg: 158695.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Walter Edmund Roth (1861-1933) was the pre-eminent collector of North Queensland Aboriginal material culture (figure 1). Most of the over 2,500 artefacts he collected in Australia came from North Queensland, and a substantial proportion of these, probably around 500, were from the region now known as the Wet Tropics, particularly from the Atherton Tableland, Bloomfield River, Cairns, Cape Grafton and the Tully River. Items collected from this region include signature artefacts such as bicornual baskets, brightly painted shields, single-handed hardwood swords and bark blankets, as well as more unusual items such as snail-shell knives from Dunk Island, children's toys from Cairns and Cape Grafton, and wooden 'trumpets' from the Bloomfield River (Khan, 1993, 1996). Roth was, as Kate Khan (2008a) characterised him, 'the man who collected everything', and the 'everything' encompassed a remarkably diverse array of artefacts from the Wet Tropics.

Roth was not just a collector; he was also an ethnographer who described in meticulous detail the manufacture and use of the artefacts he collected (and of others he did not collect). Although he published works on Aboriginal languages, rituals, beliefs and social organisation, his most substantial output was in material culture studies and it is primarily in that domain that his reputation as an anthropologist rests. His major anthropological works in Australia are a series of eighteen bulletins on North Queensland ethnography published between 1901 and 1910, and an earlier work of 1897, *Ethnological Studies Among the North-West-Central Queensland Aborigines*. He also wrote five ethnographic reports on the Aboriginal people of specific regions of North Queensland: Princess Charlotte Bay, the Pennefather River, the Middle Palmer, Cooktown and the lower Tully River. Although he does not have the academic stature of his contemporary, Walter Baldwin Spencer, with whom he studied biology at Oxford University in the 1880s, Roth has an assured place among Australia's anthropological pioneers. His ethnographic studies were highly

regarded in his own times, Roth being appointed President of the Anthropology Section of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science in 1902; elected to membership of the anthropological societies of Berlin and Florence in the same year; and appointed Queensland correspondent to the Royal Anthropological Society of Great Britain and Ireland in 1904 (Khan, 2008a: 185; Reynolds, 1988). By the time of his death, he had earned a reputation sufficiently substantial to warrant a lengthy obituary by Melville Herskovits in *American Anthropologist* (Herskovits, 1934).

In addition to his roles as collector and ethnographer, Roth was a senior administrator of Queensland Aboriginal affairs, as the first Northern Protector from 1898 to 1904 and the second Chief Protector (succeeding Police Commissioner William Parry-Okeden) from 1904 to 1906. His performance of these roles has been examined by several historians (Ganter & Kidd, 1993; Kidd, 1997: 50-59; Whitehall, 2002) so need not be recounted in detail here. Several aspects, however, are particularly pertinent. Roth had been appointed Northern Protector for his experience and expertise in Aboriginal affairs: his *Ethnological Studies Among the North-West-Central Queensland Aborigines* had convinced the relevant colonial officials that he possessed an appropriate understanding of Aboriginal people, and his work as a medical practitioner among the Aboriginal people of north-western Queensland had convinced the same officials of his dedication to their welfare (Khan, 1993: 12). He carried out his duties as Protector with diligence and determination, enforcing the provisions of the Act with particular rigour in the northern maritime industries where the exploitation of Aboriginal workers and the sexual abuse of Aboriginal women were prevalent. Indeed, he seems to have relished the exercise of authority, regardless of whether it was upon Indigenous or non-Indigenous people, although his authoritarian tendencies coexisted with a sincere commitment to advancing (as he saw it) Aboriginal well-being.

This paper recounts Roth's careers as ethnographic collector and Aboriginal administrator, teasing out the connections between the two. While we are attentive to his role as a leading collector of rainforest Aboriginal material culture, the paper essays a broader assessment of his contribution to, and place in, North Queensland anthropology. This broader picture is essential, we believe, if Roth's contribution to rainforest Aboriginal ethnography is to be properly appreciated. Indeed, the very concept of 'rainforest Aboriginal material culture' is an anachronism, projected back from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century to a turn-of-the-twentieth-century ethnographer who never invoked it. That does not render the concept useless, but it does reinforce the point that historical understanding of Roth's rainforest work demands its contextualisation in his encompassing careers as both collector and Protector.

ETHNOGRAPHER AND COLLECTOR

It was during his tenure as Northern Protector that Roth collected most of his ethnographic specimens, although he began collecting before then. In a letter to Baldwin Spencer dated 10 May 1898 (four months after his appointment as Northern Protector) he stated that he had been collecting in North Queensland for the previous four years and had by then amassed 'about 600 separate objects'.¹ In his 1899 official report as Northern Protector, he noted that his collection now comprised 'upwards of 800 articles' (quoted in Khan, 2008b: 187). By the beginning of 1905 his collection had grown considerably, for in February that year (that is, several months after his promotion from Northern to Chief Protector) he sold 2,000 artefacts and 240 photographic plates to the Australian Museum in Sydney (figures 2 and 3).² Before then, between 1900 and 1903, he had made three donations totalling

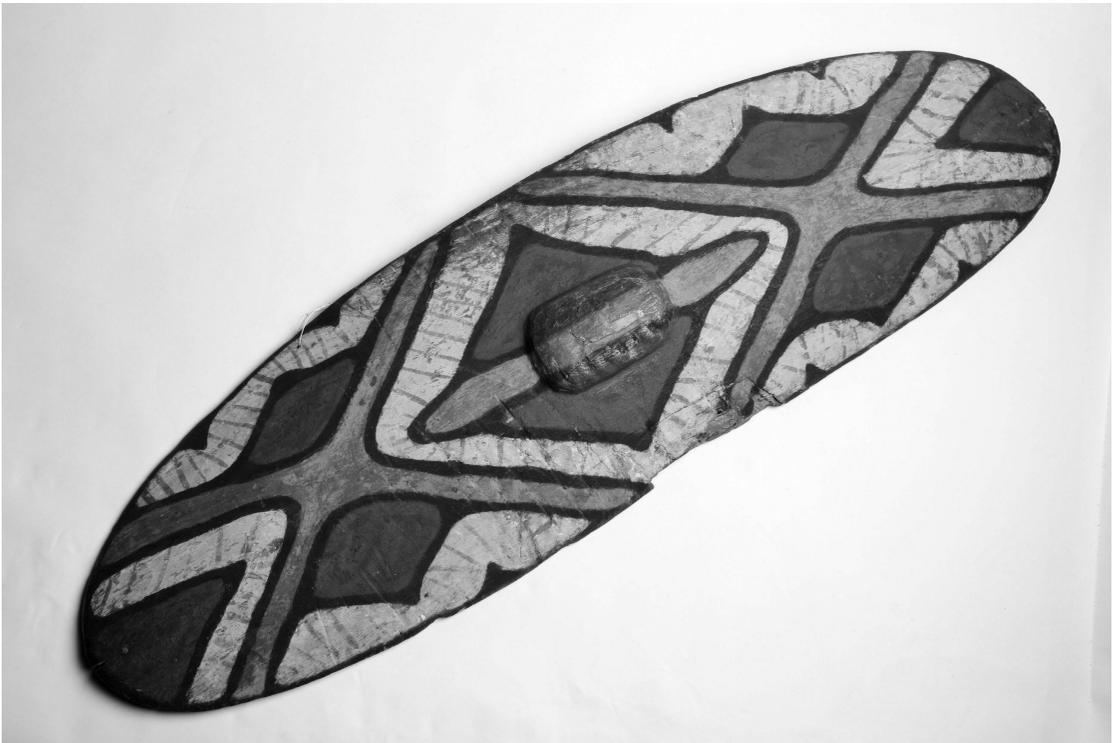


FIG. 2. Rainforest shield, collected by Roth at Cardwell in 1902. Photo by Rebecca Fisher. Source: Australian Museum, Roth Collection: iE03431-001+03.

around 230 artefacts from North Queensland to the Queensland Museum and also gave or sold ethnographic items to the British Museum and other overseas institutions.³

Roth welcomed the opportunities for ethnographic collection and observation offered by the Northern Protectorship. He also appreciated the extent to which the power he exercised as Protector would facilitate his collecting activities. Only weeks after his appointment, he wrote to Baldwin Spencer:

I am indeed a lucky fellow: the Protectorate of the whole Northern and Central Districts is in my hands. The main, and the only drawback is that, travelling about so much and over so large an area, I shall be prevented learning any language thoroughly.⁴

Anthropological research and collecting were specified among his duties, Chief Protector Parry-Okeden directing Roth to make 'from time to time such

local collection of ethnological and anthropological interest as possible' (quoted in Khan, 2008b: 183). However, travelling may have proved more onerous than he had anticipated. His official reports indicate that he maintained a punishing schedule of travel, and while this may have facilitated the collection of a broad sweep of artefacts from around the north, the limited time he could spend in any one place surely limited the kind of ethnographic work he could conduct. Perhaps it was partly for this reason that he focussed on material culture rather than on social structure, descent systems and non-material aspects of culture as the other leading Australian anthropologists of the day – the Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen duo and R.H. Mathews – did.

As a collector, Roth was meticulous, precisely following the scientific protocols of the time. The prescriptions set out in the 1892 edition of the British Association for the Advancement of Science's *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* might have served as a template for his collecting practices:

It is of importance to obtain from natives any portable specimens of their handiwork, tools, weapons, dress, ornaments, fetishes, &c., and where possible, the native descriptions of the objects, whether the tools, for instance, are for any special work, &c. Models should be secured where the originals cannot be obtained or are too large for transport, e.g., canoes, houses, &c. Not only are the finished objects worth collecting, but also the raw material used in their manufacture, where this has any special character ... The commonest things in use are generally the most valuable from an ethnological point of view, though masterpieces of native art are of artistic value, and therefore should not be despised. At the first moment of leisure the objects should be labeled with the locality where they were obtained, and their use, and any other particulars. (quoted in Petch, 2007: 21)

In line with this advice, Roth collected not only completed artefacts but also samples of the raw material from which they were made and examples of items in a part-finished state. For example,



FIG. 3. Bicornal basket, collected by Roth at Atherton in 1898. Photo by Rebecca Fisher. Source: Australian Museum, Roth Collection: iE014913+02s.

the Roth Collection at the Australian Museum includes a partially completed bicornual basket from Atherton, collected in 1898 (figure 4). He also collected implements and utensils that incorporated materials of European provenance such as iron and cotton cloth. Although these constituted only a small proportion of his collections (Rowlands, 2011), Roth gave no indication that he considered such items inauthentic or lacking in worth (Khan, 2008a: 181-183).

Exactly how he acquired the items in his collection is unclear, though probably most were obtained by barter, a standard item of exchange at the time being tobacco. In April 1900 he informed C.W. de Vis, curator of the Queensland Museum, that he was given an annual allocation of tobacco 'in order to purchase curios from the blacks for your museum'.⁵ Tobacco seems to have been Roth's main medium of exchange, although he also paid for artefacts with items such as cloth and beads (Robins, 2008: 176). Whether he also paid for his informants' time – an

essential component of his ethnography since Roth sought not merely to collect things but to explain their manufacture and use – is unknown. In any case, the extraordinary powers with which he was vested as Protector undoubtedly enhanced his capacity to collect both objects and information from the Aboriginal subjects of the Act. Roth also built up his collections by exchanges with other collectors and institutions. In September 1897 he advised the curator of the Queensland Museum that a 'complete aboriginal male skeleton has come into my possession: I shall be glad to offer it to the Museum in exchange for some aboriginal things of which I am in want to complete my own collection'. A letter from Roth a few days later indicates that the museum had accepted his offer.⁶

Apart from the very real advantages conferred by his official position, Roth's techniques of ethnographic collecting were unexceptional for his times. Trade, barter and exchange were the standard means of acquiring Aboriginal artefacts (Erckenbrecht et al., 2010; Henry, 2015; Robins, 2008). It was his omnivorous approach to collecting, combined with the precision and exactitude of his observations on the production of material goods, that set Roth apart from the majority of his fellow ethnographers in Australia. Generally shying clear of overt theorising, his ethnographies were devoted to the specific and the concrete: to material culture as a domain worthy of scientific study in and of itself rather than merely as an adjunct to sociological speculation or as a commentary on curios.

Roth's capacity for keen observation and his attentiveness to detail are strikingly evident in his ethnographic bulletins. Occasionally he seems to have been guessing on the basis of limited or fragmentary knowledge, but usually the data are dense. For Roth (1901), the primary purpose of his ethnographic bulletins was to document 'the rapidly-increasing quantity of scientific material which, in accordance with the Home Secretary's instructions, has been collected since my appointment as Northern Protector of Aboriginals'. These bulletins are essentially printed databases and the knowledge contained therein is arranged in encyclopaedic

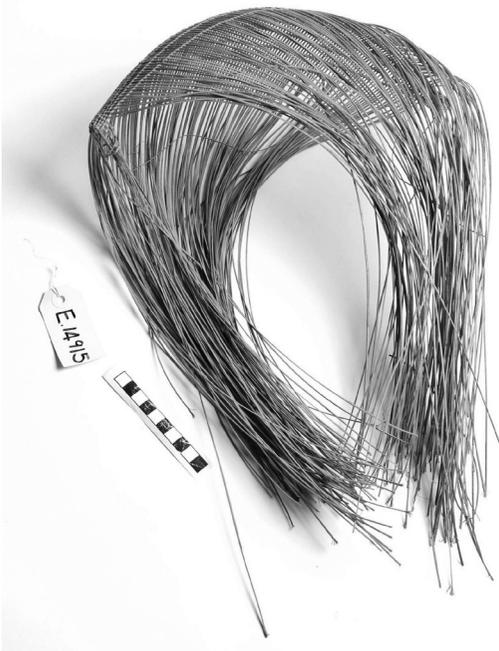


FIG. 4. Bicornual basket in process of manufacture; collected by Roth at Atherton in 1898. Photo by Rebecca Fisher. Source: Australian Museum, Roth Collection: iE014915+01.

fashion (Fuary 2004a). Emphasis is firmly on the specific rather than on any generalisations that may be drawn from the data, and each bulletin is organised around a central topic in which ‘types’ of implements, weapons, games, activities and so forth are explored in detail across North Queensland. The arrangement seems to have been designed to facilitate scientific comparisons across Queensland, Australia and other parts of the world, and may have been influenced by Roth’s familiarity with the Pitt-Rivers’ system of museum display from his years at Oxford in the 1880s.

Roth conducted an essentially comparative and interdisciplinary anthropology of a kind that was side-lined, and even disparaged, after the watershed years of the 1920s when long-term fieldwork in a single society became the methodological and theoretical norm in British anthropology. It was from this point that anthropology began sequestering itself as a discipline in its own right. Roth, however, ‘did ethnography’ as it was done at the turn of the twentieth century, before the disciplinary shutters were put up; and as Fuary (2004a) has discussed elsewhere, he was a member of what Morphy (1997: 27) characterised as a ‘dispersed community of scholars who saw themselves as having complementary and overlapping roles in pioneering a new science rather than as people occupying different positions of sub and super-ordination in some global academic hierarchy’.

While Roth’s anthropology was similar to, and congruent with, that of his contemporaries, it was also distinctive in crucial respects. He did not carry out field-based studies of single societies like those of Spencer and Gillen in Central Australia and the Gulf of Carpentaria (Austin-Broos, 1999; Fuary, 2004a; Mulvaney, 2008; Mulvaney et al., 1997, 2000) or of Haddon, Rivers and other members of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Strait (Fuary, 1998, 2004a, 2004b; Herle & Rouse, 1998). Yet while the Spencer and Gillen and Haddon and Rivers studies differ from Roth’s in the specificity of their ethnographic focus, they show similar surveying, collecting, classifying and comparative dimensions to those in Roth’s ethnographic bulletins.

Indeed, they all exhibit the characteristic of the seeing-eye of the anthropologist: the observer of, rather than participant in, the society in question. Of this approach, Johannes Fabian (2001: 54) writes:

Above the ground, the seeing eye became the root metaphor of knowledge. The observing gaze [of the anthropologist] *delivered the material; visible order created by classification provided its meaning.* (our emphasis)

As the scientific ‘seeing eye’, Roth neither saw nor tried to see ‘societies’ in the way Spencer and Gillen or Haddon and Rivers did. Rather, he saw technologies, techniques, material means of winning a livelihood, as well as, to a lesser extent, languages, rituals and other discrete elements of Aboriginal cultures (figures 5 and 6). He neither purveyed a holistic vision of an Aboriginal society nor pretended to do so.

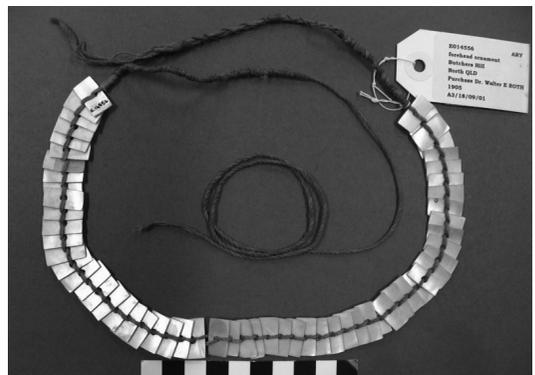


FIG. 5. Nautilus shell forehead band, collected by Roth at Butchers Hill in 1898. Photo by Rebecca Fisher. Source: Australian Museum, Roth Collection: iE014556+01.



FIG. 6. Model canoe, made at Yarrabah; collected by Roth at Cape Grafton in 1897. Photo by Rebecca Fisher. Source: Australian Museum, Roth Collection: iE013451+03.

One consequence of Roth's ethnographic mode is that although the Roth Collection at the Australian Museum includes possibly the most comprehensive collection of rainforest Aboriginal artefacts in the world, Roth's own commentaries on these artefacts convey very little sense of the rainforest environment or of how the objects related to that environment. His ethnographic bulletins describe in painstaking detail the manufacture and use of implements and weapons which have come to be regarded as exemplary of rainforest people, including large painted shields, hardwood swords, woven cane bicornual baskets and beaten bark blankets. Verbal descriptions are supplemented with carefully executed line drawings and in some instances photographs. However, the artefacts are decontextualised from the environment in which they had been manufactured and used. Certainly, no concept of rainforest Aboriginal people, as a sub-set of the larger category of 'the Aboriginal race', emerges from Roth's writings. His practice of publishing his findings as vast catalogues, organised in terms of categories of material objects or activities, militates against any such concept of distinctive Aboriginal types. Roth did categorise Aboriginal people in various ways: in terms of broad geographical area (for example 'North-West-Central Queensland blacks'); more specific geographic locators (for example 'Bloomfield Blacks' or 'natives of Dunk Island'); and by using peoples' own terms for themselves, often in combination with place-names (for example 'Kuungganji-Cape Grafton blacks' and 'Koko Yellanji-Bloomfield natives'). He was meticulous in specifying the area and/or group from which artefacts were collected and activities described, since this information was crucial to his systematic documentation of Indigenous material culture. However, he made very few, if any, attempts to explicitly relate a group's physical environment, rainforest or otherwise, to its culture, material or intangible.

Even when Roth focussed on a specific Aboriginal group, his discussion decontextualised people from their physical environment. His one-hundred-page 'Scientific Report ... on the Natives of the (Lower) Tully River' gives copious information on the weapons and implements of the group he called the 'mallan-para blacks'. He described how they painted

their wooden shields and woven-cane baskets, adding that the designs were purely decorative and had 'no meaning'. He explained that bicornual baskets were 'made by men only, but used more by the women' and that cannibalism was rife, although people were seldom killed with the intention of eating them (Roth, 1900: 17, 70, 87). Yet, apart from his identification of the area as the lower Tully River valley and occasional mentions of distinctive fauna such as cassowaries, he gave no indication that the people he described lived in a predominantly rainforest environment. Roth clearly expressed an appreciation of the fact that different Aboriginal groups had different material cultures, different practices, rituals and so forth; yet he shied away from linking these differences to the environments in which they lived.

Unlike an ethnography today, in which the focus is on a people first and foremost, on socio-cultural context, a group's social organization, culture, cosmology and their human 'being' (Austin-Broos, 1999), Roth's ethnographic bulletins focus on 'types' of objects, implements, practices and so forth. From his descriptions emerge very piecemeal, one-dimensional delineations of Aboriginal people as social beings. They give only staccato glimpses of parts of the life of a people, not rounded depictions of them as living, breathing human beings with motivations, desires and interests. The lacunae are in no small measure related to what Roth was trying to achieve as collector-anthropologist while engaged in a demanding, full-time job as Protector. They also relate to the manner in which he interacted with Aboriginal people, the intermittent bursts of time spent in their company and the conventions and orientations of anthropology at the time. On the last of these, Austin-Broos (1999: 211) has remarked on the contemporary tendency to sequester data from theory, noting that 'ironically, it is possible that one of the reasons that Gillen's and Spencer's data have often proved so useful to others (including Durkheim) is that they lack the interpretation that would make them an integrated portrait of a way of being'. When we consider the piecemeal yet useful data collected and catalogued by Roth, we can see that this is an

even more remote possibility for him. As Fuary (2004a) has argued, Aboriginal people cannot emerge from his bulletins as anything other than producers of material objects and discrete practices. They are, in effect, produced by him as producers, and as products themselves of their cultures.

Roth's ethnographies are remarkably lacking in overt theorising. Even the narrative of evolutionary progress, which informed Spencer and Gillen's and most other contemporary ethnographies as well as material culture studies, most famously in the case of Augustus Pitt-Rivers, is seldom apparent in Roth's studies. Only occasionally it peeks through. In Bulletin No. 16: Huts and Shelters, Roth made occasional remarks suggesting a progressive sequence of building structures, with the 'breakwind' at the primitive (in the sense of temporally prior as well as structurally more basic) extreme and the ridge-pole hut at the 'most advanced' end (Roth, 1910: 55, 58). Even here, however, the imputations of progressive sequence are mere casual remarks and the bulletin as a whole is consumed with Roth's characteristic preoccupations with what Aboriginal people made, how they made it and what they did with it. Throughout the bulletins, the paramount organising principle is the type of material object, with discussion and illustration deployed so as to maximise description and minimise theoretical or interpretative commentary.

Among anthropologists at the time, theoretical nescience could be positively valued. Perhaps the best-known instance is Baldwin Spencer's statement that he sent Gillen 'endless questions and things to find out, and by mutual agreement he reads no one else's work so as to keep him unprejudiced in the way of theories' (quoted in Mulvaney & Calaby, 1985: 172). Regardless of the empirical accuracy of the claim, Spencer's assumption was that information collected by his Central Australian collaborator was of superior quality because it was theoretically untainted. Roth lacked the luxury of a (supposedly theoretically naive) collaborator, but he acted as his own theoretical censor in his ethnographic studies, perhaps in the belief that this would enhance the value and veracity of his observations. The theoretical innocence of his studies cannot be attributed to ignorance of theory.

He studied evolutionary biology at Oxford, and in correspondence with Spencer he sometimes referred to theoretical issues in anthropology and to Pitt-Rivers' principles of museum display.⁷ In publications, however, he adopted a rigorously objective-scientific stance, minimising speculation and generalisation while maximising detachment and description. He took those qualities to an extreme, much further than Spencer.

In his major books, Spencer kept theory at arm's length, generally sequestering overt theorising into prefaces and introductions while the main body of the texts recounted in detail the observed mode of living of Aboriginal people.⁸ Roth did not allow theory to intrude even this far. Sometimes he used the prefaces to his ethnographic bulletins to indicate how the data therein may relate to the work of others, but such explanations did not engage with the theoretical issues of the day such as evolutionism or diffusionism. More usually, he used his prefaces to explain why the data were organised around that bulletin's theme, a topic on which he could become defensive, as in the preface to Bulletin No. 7: Domestic Implements, Arts, and Manufactures, where he wrote:

Fault will probably be found with the inclusion in the present Bulletin of certain implements used for fighting and hunting purposes: similarity of origin and workmanship are my excuses in the former case, while omission from a previous Bulletin (no. 3 – Food, its Search, Capture, and Preparation) is all that I can plead in the latter.

I regret the irregular sequence in which the separate branches of the subject have been treated: workers in the Field of Primitive Culture will, however, appreciate the difficulties attendant upon any attempts at obtaining logical order. (Roth, 1904)

The final words were crucial, for Roth saw it as his responsibility to impose logic and order, as best he could, on a cache of disorderly and slippery material culture. That is what drove his typological imperative to collect, collate and categorise.

ROTH THE PROTECTOR

The imposition of order was also the imperative behind Roth's actions as Northern Protector and Chief Protector of Aboriginals. These positions had been created to administer the 1897 *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act*, which was a governmental response to revelations of shocking levels of exploitation and abuse of Aboriginal people, especially in the north of the colony. Consequently, Roth was a key figure in Queensland's governance of its Aboriginal people at the crucial time when the colony made the transition from older, more *laissez faire* methods toward more modern and intrusive modes of regulating inter-ethnic relations. In the protective regime thus established, the hand of the state fell heaviest on Aboriginal people, who were reduced to the status of wards and treated as incompetents, but the government also restricted and regulated, to a far greater extent than ever before, the actions of non-Indigenous people who had dealings with Aboriginal people. The subsequent history of the *Aboriginals Protection Act* as a tool for the oppression of Aboriginal people has tended to obscure the fact that in its early years it was experienced very much as an imposition upon white and other non-Indigenous people, who could no longer deal with Aboriginal people as they pleased (Ganter & Kidd, 1993; Kidd, 1997: 36-79; Whitehall 2002). Those impositions upon white men in the hitherto largely unregulated frontier regions of North Queensland inspired the resentment that led to Roth's undoing.

While Roth sought to impose order on both black and white, he treated the two parties quite differently, depicting the faults of Aboriginal people as due primarily to incompetence whereas the failings of non-Indigenous people were represented more as the outcomes of immorality. Dealing first with the former, his attribution of incompetence to Aboriginal people – particularly their supposed inability to adapt to the European presence – was certainly not unusual at the time. It was a standard, almost universal, assumption among turn-of-the-

twentieth-century Europeans (McGregor, 2011: xvii-xxv). However, Roth's adherence to this assumption warrants comment since in his ethnographic work he was at pains to demonstrate the ingenuity of Aboriginal people, their devising of intricate technologies and possession of complex languages. As Kate Khan (2008a: 171) has observed, Roth's ethnographic writings were, among other things, attempts to foster among settler Australians a more positive image of Aboriginal people. Yet when it came to the governance of Aboriginal people he emphasised their ineptitudes. In a letter to Baldwin Spencer in 1903 he wrote:

I quite agree with you in your views about teaching the aboriginals too much:- views endorsed by the northern missionaries themselves; indeed glancing at my reports you will see that they are really reformatory and industrial schools. I quite agree with you as to the pauperising, pampering and over-'education' to which the blacks have been subjected in other states.⁹

His statement accords with Ganter's and Kidd's assessments that the 1897 Act, as originally implemented and administered, was not so much a radical new attempt at social engineering as an extension, into the Aboriginal domain, of existing welfare measures for the care of those deemed unable to look after themselves (Ganter & Kidd, 1993; Kidd, 1997: 36-79).

In line with the presumption of Aboriginal ineptitude, Roth endorsed the then-prevalent assumption that the Aboriginal race was doomed to extinction. He informed Baldwin Spencer that he based his administrative practice on the following four points:

- (a) in the struggle for existence, the black cannot compete with the white
- (b) it is not desirable that he should mix with the white
- (c) with advancing civilisation, the black will die out
- (d) while he lives, the black should be protected from the abuses to which he is subjected by the white.¹⁰

By his own account, then, Roth's severe and exacting administration of the 1897 Act was a gigantic exercise in smoothing the pillow of a dying race. The same could be said of a great deal of protectionist administration and legislation. Roth, however, was unusual, not in believing that the Aboriginal race would soon die out but in seldom saying so. Perhaps this was another instance of his reluctance to speculate or generalise. The statement quoted above is from his private correspondence, and we have been unable to find a single published statement by Roth unequivocally endorsing the doomed race idea (although there are few gesturing vaguely in that direction). Other scientists and administrators at the time showed no such reticence (McGregor, 1993, 1997).

While Roth was reticent about projecting an Aboriginal future, his official reports reveal him as a man confident in the exercise of authority and in the rightness of his own judgements. He wrote with absolute assurance on his own decisions to grant or refuse Aboriginal women permission to marry, to send Aboriginal and 'half-caste' children to missions and reformatories, and on the numerous other interferences his position obliged him to carry out. Unlike his counterpart, Archibald Meston, Southern Protector of Aborigines from 1898 to 1903, Roth was a consummate bureaucrat and apparently valued by Queensland political figures for that fact. Indeed Roth and Meston, the first two senior protectors of Aborigines in Queensland,¹¹ were extraordinarily ill-matched, the former being an urbane scientist-bureaucrat, the latter a largely self-educated journalist and raconteur who showed neither aptitude for, nor interest in, official paperwork (Ganter & Kidd, 1993; Holland, 2013: 35-53). They frequently clashed, which may have been a factor behind the end of both men's careers as Protectors. For Roth, however, the major factor behind his leaving the position was the antagonism he stirred up among powerful interest groups in North Queensland.

When Roth first took the position of Northern Protector in 1898, he had widespread support from the North Queensland settler community. That did not last long. Within two years his rigorous

enforcement of the protective aspects of the 1897 Act had antagonised numerous pastoralists, pearlers and other employers of Aboriginal labour as well as many others who were accustomed to the colonial convention of having 'a free hand with the blacks' (Loos, 1982). Their attempts to evade the new controls over their interactions with Aboriginal people inspired Roth to intensify governmental powers, one outcome of which was an *Amendment Act* of 1901 which tightened government regulations over employment and sexual relations (Kidd, 1997: 51-53; Roth, 1902: 1149). So the antagonisms escalated, and his opponents sought opportunities to undermine the Protector. They had some highly placed allies, including the member for Cooktown in the Legislative Assembly, John Hamilton.

Roth's growing band of enemies did not have to search hard to find the Protector's points of vulnerability. One was his ill-advised foray into what he had termed, with spectacular insensitivity, 'ethno-pornography': essentially an anthropological inquiry into 'primitive' sexuality (Roth, 1897: 169-184). Among other things, it involved photographs of an Aboriginal couple engaged in sexual intercourse, which Roth took to prove a point about the procreative potency of the subincised penis. In 1904 John Hamilton publicised the fact that Roth had taken these photographs, insinuating that they were the product of a depraved and lascivious mind. Roth's own correspondence on the matter suggests that he was astounded that anyone could misinterpret his purely scientific inquiries as prurient indulgences in sexual sensationalism and perplexed by the furore that erupted once the existence of the photographs was made public (Richards, 2010: 168-176). But he had gifted his enemies with a deadly weapon. An article in the *New Endeavour Beacon*, a Cooktown newspaper hostile to Roth, fulminated:

The bawdy photographs ... taken 'in the interests of science' [would] disgrace a common Port Said exhibition – and Port Said photos are ... the dirtiest filth on earth. There is not much Aboriginal protection in depicting filthy and degrading as well as unnatural scenes. (quoted in Richards, 2010: 175)

Those whom Roth had accused of exploiting the 'flesh and blood' of Aboriginal people could point to his flagrant exploitation of their bodies, and to Roth's own defilement of Aboriginal sexuality into filthy pictures more degrading than any act of lustful frontiersmen (McGrath, 2008).

Also giving ammunition to his enemies, in 1905 – that is, while he was Queensland's Chief Protector of Aboriginals and shortly after the 'ethno-pornography' controversy came to a crescendo – he sold a huge ethnographic collection to the Australian Museum in Sydney for £450. As indicated earlier in this paper, a large proportion – probably the majority – of this material must have been collected while Roth was Northern Protector and his legal right to dispose of it in this manner was extremely doubtful. In his annual reports he had referred to ethnographic collecting as part of his official duties, and in his report for 1899 he stated that his 'anthropological and ethnological collections ... are now to be considered the property of the nation' (quoted in Khan, 2008b: 187). For his many Queensland critics, the fact that Roth donated only about 300 items to the Queensland Museum, whereas he sold over 2,000 to a southern institution for private gain, was proof of his perfidy. Again, those who resented Roth's punctilious performance of his duties as Protector smelled blood.

The scandal-mongering *Truth* newspaper launched a series of attacks culminating in an article published on 8 April 1906, which stated:

When Dr. Roth was appointed Protector there was a clear understanding between himself and the Government that all curios, weapons, and aboriginal specimens, collected by him during his period of office, were to be the property of the State. That understanding was made secure by an agreement which is still in existence, and available when required. There was no ambiguity in the business, and it was referred to on, at least, two occasions by the Minister when passing the Estimates. It was also publicly acknowledged by Roth when being examined before the bar of the Legislative Council in 1901. (Anon, 1906a)

A week later, *Truth* published a three-page spread itemising each of the 2000 artefacts and 240 plates he sold to the Australian Museum, prefaced by a lengthy exposition of the shortcomings and moral lapses of Walter Roth. The Protector, according to *Truth*, was guilty of grossly unethical conduct by selling, for private gain, a collection that was rightfully the property of the state (Anon, 1906b).

It is unclear why Roth sold his collection to the Australian Museum (Henry et al., 2013: 33-34). That he chose to lodge his collection there rather than in Brisbane is not surprising. The Queensland Museum at the time was in a parlous state, with no director between 1905 and 1910, reduced staff and poor storage facilities, whereas the Australian Museum was well positioned to care for a major collection of artefacts. Roth enjoyed good relations with senior staff of the latter institution, including its curator, Robert Etheridge, who was about to set up a separate Department of Ethnology within the museum (Robins, 2008: 178). Yet while the superior scientific credentials of the Sydney institution might explain why Roth chose it over the Queensland Museum, it does not explain why he sold, rather than donated, the items. Roth's collecting and his associated ethnographic studies appear to have been motivated by dedication to science rather than desire for material gain. And, considering that he was already entangled in controversies over his allegedly 'filthy' pictures and his enforcement of the provisions of the Protection Act, he may be expected to have avoided acts that would inevitably add to the controversy. Perhaps he was naive about matters such as social reputation; some of his utterances on the 'ethno-pornography' controversy point in this direction. Perhaps he had already decided to leave the Chief Protectorship. In any case, he submitted his resignation (for the second time) in May 1906 and soon afterward sailed to British Guyana to take up a position as Magistrate and District Commissioner. There he resumed his career as an ethnographic collector and recorder.

CONCLUSION

Roth's expertise as an ethnographer and collector helped secure his appointment as Northern Protector of Aboriginals in 1898. Eight years later, his ethnographic inquiries and collections furnished his many enemies with the weapons they needed to terminate his career in Aboriginal administration. His assumption of personal proprietorship over ethnographic artefacts collected in the course of his official duties, together with his incautious inquiries into Aboriginal sexuality, indicate serious misjudgement on Roth's part. Yet as an ethnographic observer and collector, his work was extraordinary for its level of detail and precision of empirical evidence. He carried out his ethnographic work with the same rigour and determination that is evident in his actions as an Aboriginal Protector, and with the same dedication to imposing order and regulation upon an unruly world.

While Roth's work alone cannot possibly allow us to adequately understand just who the Aboriginal people of North Queensland were or how their societies operated, it can, together with subsequent, more detailed and engaged ethnography, archival research, history and archaeology, allow us to fill in many of the blanks. Without Roth's anthropology, the gaps in our knowledge of North Queensland Aboriginal people, including those of the rainforests, would be far wider. As it stands, in collaboration with Aboriginal peoples from the rainforest regions, we can use this material fruitfully, drawing upon the knowledge of living descendants and related others, to flesh out or even correct Roth's reports and bulletins. In so doing, it is hoped that a fuller view of the traditional owners of the Wet Tropics of North Queensland and their societies will emerge.

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□ ENDNOTES

1. Roth to Spencer, 10 May 1898, copy of letter held by Australian Museum, Sydney; original in Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.
2. S. Sinclair, Secretary, Australian Museum, to Roth, 13 March 1905, Australian Museum Archives, AMS 6, 204/1905.
3. Dr Roth's Monthly Progress Report, December 1903, Queensland Museum Correspondence Files; Queensland Museum, Old Donor and Purchase Registers: D10422, 1900; D11827, 1903; D12083, 1903.
4. Roth to Spencer, 19 January 1898, copy of letter held by Australian Museum, Sydney; original in Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.
5. Roth to de Vis, 15 April 1900, Queensland Museum Correspondence Folders, Anthropology Laboratory.
6. Roth to Curator, Queensland Museum, 30 September 1897, and Roth to Curator, Queensland Museum, 4 October 1897, both in Queensland Museum, Australian Anthropology Archive Series. As this exchange indicates, Roth collected skeletal material as well as artefacts. Here, however, we focus on his collection of artefactual objects, which comprise by far the largest proportion of his collections.
7. See for example Roth to Spencer, 10 May 1898, copy of letter held by Australian Museum, Sydney; original in Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.
8. See for example Spencer & Gillen, 1899, 1904; Spencer, 1914. Spencer tended to be more theoretically explicit in his journal articles and conference addresses.
9. Roth to Spencer, 8 February 1903, copy of letter held by Australian Museum, Sydney; original in Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.
10. Roth to Spencer, 6 October 1902, copy of letter held by Australian Museum, Sydney; original in Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.
11. From 1898 to 1904 William Parry-Okeden was their superior officer as Chief Protector, but this was an *ex officio* role consequent upon his position as Commissioner of Police. Parry-Okeden had very little involvement in administering Aboriginal affairs.

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