Images of Aboriginal Australians
1773-1901
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This exhibition features dozens of early photographs including those from the Elder Expedition in 1891-92 and the Spencer and Gillen photographs from 1901 – see and hear their wax recording cylinders, the earliest recordings of Aboriginal songs. See the first published images from the Society’s rare books collection.

From 3 MAY to 30 SEPTEMBER 2011
Tues., Wed. 10 am – 3 pm
Thurs., Friday 10 am – 1 pm
In MAY only
Sunday 1 pm – 4 pm
As part of statewide celebrations for the 175th anniversary of the founding of South Australia, the Society is proud to exhibit a selection of images of Aboriginal Australians from its rare books and photograph collections.

The exhibition is in part a tribute to the original inhabitants of our state and Australia as a whole. The images, often with accompanying text, largely speak for themselves. They are the images presented to the world by the Europeans of the time offering a unique insight into their attitudes and prejudices but also a glimpse of the real people behind the portraits.

Most of the rare books come from one of the treasures of South Australia – the York Gate Library – which the Society purchased in London in 1905. S.W. Silver, the original owner collected many of the early books on the discovery and colonization of Australia. As such the earliest published images of Aboriginal Australians are well represented here. In fact it is a selection that would be the envy of many major libraries.

A number of the photographs displayed have links to the Society. For example, the Society managed the 1891-92 Elder Scientific Exploration Expedition which was the first time photographs were successfully used in an Australian expedition.

One of the albums of F.W. Gillen photographs once belonged to Thomas Gill, the Society’s first Treasurer and the album of Aboriginal portrait photographs (ca 1883) taken by Paul Foelsche was donated by Lady Frances Caroline Brown in 1911. Lady Brown was an active member of the Society who travelled widely and had a special interest in anthropology.

As a bonus, visitors to the exhibition are able to hear excerpts from the earliest recordings of Aboriginal songs. A member of the Society donated the recording equipment used by Spencer and Gillen in 1901 which is probably why the Society was given the wax cylinders for safe keeping. Collaborative arrangements are in hand with Museum Victoria and the South Australian Museum to ensure that these recordings are nationally catalogued and shared.

The images and recordings in this exhibition represent a contribution to our understanding of early European contact with indigenous Australians. It is also a reminder of how geography was enhanced by what were at the time the new technologies of photography and sound recording and this embrace of technology continues to the present.

My thanks to Kevin Griffin, the Society’s Library Manager for curating the exhibition and preparing this record of the event.

Rod Shearing

PRESIDENT, ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA
This is the first published illustration of Aboriginal Australians. *The Endeavour* sailed into Botany Bay on 28 April 1770. The crew went ashore to get water and were threatened by two men brandishing weapons.

The illustrations of Aborigines in Governor Phillip’s account were not based on drawings sent from Sydney but upon neo-classical ideas of the noble savage.
HUNTER, John

An historical journal of the transactions at Port Jackson and Norfolk Island… compiled from the official papers, including the journals of Governors Phillip and King and of Lieut. Ball; and the voyages from the first sailing of the Sirius in 1787 to the return of that ship’s company in 1792.

LONDON • JOHN STOCKDALE • 1793.

This illustration was engraved by the poet and artist William Blake who was personally interested in the place of ‘savages’ in Christian theology. The text on the adjacent page (p. 414) is included.
Tasmania is referred to as ‘Cape Diemen’ – Bass didn’t prove it was an island until 1798.

The first of a series of eight engravings of an Aboriginal initiation ceremony observed by the author in January 1795. The text on the adjacent page is also included. Collins arrived with the first fleet and was responsible for the new colony’s legal establishment.
1807 PERON, François

Voyage de découvertes aux Terres Australes... Atlas historique par MM Lesueur et Petit.
PARIS, DE L'IMPRIMERIE IMPÉRIALE, 1807

Two copper engravings of drawings by Nicolas-Martin Petit, one of the artists on the famous Baudin voyage of exploration, 1800-1804. He contributed a number of portraits of Tasmanian Aborigines. Some are hand-coloured. The engraving above is from the same volume from a drawing by C.A. Lesueur.

1820 OXLEY, John

Journal of two expeditions into the interior of New South Wales.
LONDON • JOHN MURRAY • 1820

A Native Chief of Baturst (i.e., Bathurst) drawn by John Lewin who was more noted for his illustrations of birds and insects.
Aborigines are minor players in Lycett’s famous book of scenic views. His family group walking out of the composition in this view are obviously based on William Blakes’ engraving published in Hunter’s book referred to above (1793).
LLOYD, E.

A visit to the antipodes with some reminiscences of a sojourn in Australia, by a squatter.

LONDON • SMITH ELDER • 1846

The Squatter’ is thought to be E. Lloyd who was in Adelaide during Sturt’s departure for Central Australia in 1844.
George French Angas was the eldest son of one of the founding fathers of South Australia.

He first visited the new colony in 1844 and travelled widely painting scenes for this book.

For the many Aboriginal illustrations he drew extensively on the work of William Cawthorne, a local school teacher who had extensive knowledge of Aboriginal culture.

He returned to South Australia in March 1860, and was chairman of the district council of Angaston from 1860-62.

He spent the last 23 years of his life in London.

PART OF PLATE 32 The Aboriginal inhabitants
1874  BOOTH, Edwin Carton

Australia. Volume 1.
LONDON • VIRTUE AND CO (1874–1876) • 2 VOLUMES.

ADJACENT PAGE 14: The Gwalior Plains

1878  SMYTH, R Brough

The Aborigines of Victoria: with notes relating to the habits of the Natives of other Parts of Australia and Tasmania. 2 volumes.
MELBOURNE • JOHN FERRES, GOVERNMENT PRINTER • 1878

From Volume 1

1875  FORREST, John

Journal of… the exploring expedition through the centre of Australia…
WESTERN AUSTRALIA. LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL.
PARLIAMENTARY PAPER, NO.1, 1875.
1879 BLAIR, David

The History of Australasia. MELBOURNE • MCGREADY, THOMSON & NIVEN • 1879

1879 TAPLIN, George

The folklore, manners, customs and languages of the South Australian Aborigines
ADELAIDE, GOVT. PRINTER, 1879.

FRONTISPIECE: A camp of the Narrinyeri, Lake Alexandrina
The Library holds four other books by the Rev. George Taplin, mostly on the Narrinyeri, including a grammar of the language.
TO THE NORTH-EAST.

See! where the allied armies camped,
Where planned and painted drums thumped:
'Tis still the same—the same wild scene,
As through the phlegmhow noise had been,
Gray Tomboraks still the skies
With bold and many front shining;
And grove, and glen, and long-bended rocks
Echo the ever-shuddering shocks
Of waters dashed with headlong force—
Wild-extents leaping on their course;
In dark Mecuna's rule the stream,
Reflects the shimmering solar beam.
There the proud lyre-bird spreads his tall,
And seeks the notes of hill and dale,
Whether the wild dog's placid howl,
Or cry of piping water-fowl,
Or the shill parrot's answering screech,
As, dangling glee-like o'er the stream,
Its beam revolved from the peak,
The whirred veldt of the foal.
Here! and what a change is there:
And yes the landscape still is fair:
Here smiled the woodland by the rill,
The gone!—the waters turn a mill.
There, the Mirbanga village lay—
Mirbanga maidens, where? O say!

Photograph taken in the grounds of the Jubilee Exhibition building, North Terrace, 1887. From an album of photographs of South Australia.
ca 1883  Album of photographs by Paul FOELSCHE (1831–1914)

Foelsche was born in Germany and migrated to South Australia at the age of 25. He joined the Mounted Police, was stationed at Strathalbyn and then transferred to the Northern Territory in 1869. From the 1870s Foelsche became the leading photographer of the Northern Territory. His photographs were widely distributed. His Aboriginal portrait studies sent to Germany earned him the praise of the Kaiser, who presented him with a gold hunting watch. This album was presented to the Society by Lady Brown in 1911.

1887

Dick Cubadgee, a young man of the Warramunga people who was brought to Adelaide by the explorer David Lindsay. Photographed at the Adelaide Jubilee Exhibition in 1887. His story is told in Philip Jones’ book Ochre and Rust, Wakefield Press, 2007 (pages 187–223).
The Elder Scientific Exploration Expedition, 1891–92

This was the first expedition in Australia to successfully use the camera. The expedition, led by David Lindsay, was organised by the South Australian Branch of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, and named after Sir Thomas Elder, who provided the funding.

Dr Frederick John Elliot was the expedition’s medical officer and photographer. This set of Aboriginal photographs from the expedition is quite rare, probably less than 20 sets were produced. A selection from the 36 albumen paper photographs is displayed here.

Aboriginal men from the Lake Killalpaninna Region, West of Koppera-manna Mission Station who were acquitted of the charge of murder at Port Augusta, November 1888.
WILLIAM WILLSHIRE (1852–1925)

Willshire joined the South Australian Police Force in 1878 and was posted to Alice Springs in 1882. In 1891 Willshire’s men attacked sleeping Aborigines camped at Tempe Downs station. Two men died and their bodies were cremated. F.J. Gillen, Alice Springs sub-protector of Aborigines, investigated the reported episode and committed Willshire to Port Augusta for trial for murder. As he was the first policeman to be so charged, and colonists felt their rights challenged, emotions ran high: public subscriptions provided Willshire’s £2000 bail and retained Sir John Downer for his defence. Aboriginal witnesses attended, but problems over accepting their evidence resulted in Willshire’s popular acquittal.


Participants in the case of the QUEEN vs WILLIAM WILLSHIRE (who was arrested for murder in April 1891). Their names are listed on the back of the photograph, with their respective roles.

Eight witnesses in the Willshire case

‘Mounted Constables Willshire and Wurmbrand, with the Native Police in Camp, in Central Australia, 26th May, 1887.’
The library holds two other publications by Willshire, both on the vocabularies of Central Australian Aborigines.
Two Warumunga men at Tennant Creek

Photograph taken by Francis Gillen, ca 1895. The original glass plate negative is held by the South Australian Museum (no. 271 in Gillen’s original series).

Five photographs from an album belonging to the Society’s first treasurer Thomas Gill. Many of the photographs were taken by F.J.Gillen.
The oldest sound recordings in South Australia – and the first to record Aboriginal songs

Wax cylinder recordings of Aboriginal songs made by W.B. Spencer and F.J. Gillen using equipment donated by a member of the Society. For a photograph of the wax cylinders see the Introduction to this catalogue.

The equipment would have looked similar to the above. Most of the recordings were made in March 1901 at Charlotte Waters (now part of the Northern Territory, just over the border). In the 1950s the Society arranged for the recordings to be transferred to reel to reel tape and in 2010 the tapes were copied to compact discs. Copies of the discs were sent to Museum Victoria for inclusion in the comprehensive website www.spencerandgillen.org

Visitors to the exhibition were able to play the first song on Disc 1, a corroboree with an introduction by Sir Baldwin Spencer.
opportunity of close observation will be gone, for the Exterminator has immolated nearly all. Contrary to the general opinion, their customs and habits offer supremely interesting matter for study. There is much in them—circumcision, mutilation, marriage, burial, etc.—which resembles the customs of the ancient Jews, the rites of African negroes, and the habits and beliefs of aboriginal races in other parts of the world. Few peoples have secured less scientific attention, and the omission is almost a slur on the honor of the British student.

In communication with each other the Australian natives had a system of signs and codes as comprehensive, because more universally utilised, as the noble brotherhood of Freemasons. By raising the hands to the ears and lips, and by other rapid, mystic signs, messages of peculiar significance were conveyed without waste of words. These were as aptly understood in Western Australia as in New South Wales and South Australia, and varied but little. They knew nothing of writing, of agriculture, or of building houses and ships. There was not much greater difference between the languages spoken in different parts of Australia than between the dialects of English counties and German provinces. The roots of the words were generally the same all over the continent.

The sound of their chattering in their camps was pleasing. Many of their words were exceedingly tuneful, because of the prominence given to vowels. When recounting the incidents of the hunt, or any other of the episodes of their day, they seldom adhered to the prosaic form of ordinary narrative, but gradually had recourse to poetry, and chanted with extraordinary vigor. Battles, hunting scenes, death celebrations, long tramps—all were rendered into song and poetry. Pretty were the vowel cadences, and sweet was the effect of rude dirges and chants carried by the wind over hill and creek and scrub to a distant
Aborigines.

THEREIJ HABITS AND CUSTOMS.

Historical records of the aborigines of any part of the continent are unfortunately meagre and fragmentary, and in most cases very unsatisfactory. No unwritten law, divided into districts, such being inhabited by different races of people distinctive in features and varying in habits, manners, traditions, and dialects. This, however, would appear to be of no consequence, as the aborigines of Australia. Among the complicated of their history there is a pretty general consensus of opinion that they exhibit evidence of traces of having sprung from one family, the natives of all parts of the continent being similar in habits and customs; their habits and customs similar, and their language not varying in a much greater degree than the dialects of some of the countries in Europe. Moreover, various theories have been advanced to account for this, but it is unnecessary to enter into this argument, as the primary object of this article is merely to give a short and succinct outline of a race which probably for many centuries occupied Australia before the advent of the white man. Possibly in no other instance has there been such a rapid disappearance of the original inhabitants of a land before the march of progress and civilization as has been the case with the aborigines of Australia. The history of the native of Western Australia differs in no material point from that of the aboriginals in other States, and here, speaking of the settled part of the State, with the exception of those who still survive in their original locations, the same remarks apply. It is true that in the north the race is fast diminishing, but that is owing not to extermination from the whites, but to the original religious beliefs, and also the Government of the State, have been very solicitous in endeavouring to ameliorate the condition and render the lives of these races a declining race as peaceful and happy as possible. Their limbs are stunted and lean to a remarkable degree, appearing to be, though not really, deficient in muscular development. They do not have high cheekbones, but they have retroussing forehead, protruding brow, nose narrow and sunken at the bridge, with broad and expanse nostril, roundings immediately of the face, and thin lips, while, as a rule, their teeth are not only white, but of the finest quality. The people are red and the hair is black and wavy, not finely or woolly, which is characteristic of the African negro. In fact, quite clean and dressed, it is fine in texture and extremely glossy, and needs according to Locksley, to be washed in the course of the day's work. The social formation is narrow and lengthy, and larger in the males than the females. As an indication of the height and bulk of the native it may be mentioned that the average measurement of fifty aborigines primaries was 5ft. 5 1/2 inches, and that the average weight of all races was 145 pounds. The absence of intelligence they were supposed to possess on account of the inferiority of the language, is an error into which several chroniclers have fallen, but reports supplied from various schools established for aborigines.