

Transitional traditions: 'Port Essington' bark-paintings and the European discovery of Aboriginal aesthetics

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Abstract: *The earliest surviving bark-paintings from northern Australia derive from the Cobourg Peninsula but until now little was known of their circumstances of collection. We examine 28 extant or described bark-paintings thought to be from the Port Essington region, note the formal qualities of the imagery they contain and describe their history as far as is possible. We compare the imagery with some of the region's rock- and more recent bark-art, note relevant instances of early European-Aboriginal contact and outline the ways in which the barks may have been obtained. We conclude that many of the barks from the late 1800s were initially acquired by Paul Foelsche. We argue that Foelsche's activities sparked interest in bark-paintings among collectors and museums and that it was Foelsche, rather than Baldwin Spencer, who initiated the bark-painting 'industry' that now dominates art from the Northern Territory's 'Top End'.*

Aborigines from the Northern Territory's 'Top End' are globally renowned for their brilliant bark-paintings, powerful aesthetic and spiritual creations that express Aboriginal relationships to land, other species, other persons and the Ancestral Beings that created the world (e.g. Morphy 1991; Taylor 1987). They are equally well known for their fantastic rock-art, with thousands of sites containing hundreds of thousands of polychrome images of recent times and monochrome paintings of life as it was many thousands of years ago (e.g. Chaloupka 1993; Chippindale & Taçon 1998; Lewis 1988; Taçon 1989). The two traditions, of painting on rock and bark, are intimately related and, indeed, many of the first Europeans to explore parts of north Australia noted abandoned bark shelters, the inner walls of which were adorned with figurative images (e.g. Campbell 1834:157; Carrington 1890:73; Taylor 1987:27; Wilkins 1929:185 and plate opp. 177). Bark-paintings of various sorts were also noted in south-eastern Australia, including Tasmania (Cooper 1994 and Groger-Wurm 1973:1-5 provide the most comprehensive summaries of early accounts). Unfortunately, most early examples from the south have not survived, a 'bark drawing' collected before 1876 at Lake Tyrrel, Victoria, now in the Melbourne Museum, and another in the British Museum being notable exceptions (Massola 1958; Smyth 1878).

However, there is a particularly striking body of work from 1870s northern Australia that provides insight into not only Aboriginal aesthetic concerns but also contacts between Aboriginal peoples and Europeans at that time. These barks were collected at or near Port Essington, a British outpost on the Cobourg Peninsula abandoned in 1849 to the harsh environmental elements that had made life miserable for its first European inhabitants.

There are 28 extant or described bark-paintings thought to have been collected from the Port Essington region. The largest surviving collection, of ten Port Essington bark-paintings, resides at the Macleay Museum, University of Sydney (Davies 2002:14-21; Figures 1 and 2). There are two others from the area

in the British Museum (Figure 4), and the Australian Museum once had a sizeable collection. Unfortunately, the latter was lost to the infamous Garden Palace fire of 1882 (Strahan 1979:39). However, there are two barks in the Australian Museum that were acquired after the fire. The Berndt Museum of Anthropology, University of Western Australia, has a further bark believed to be from Port Essington and another is illustrated by Basedow (1907:58, fig. 72). Unfortunately, little documentation survives to accompany the barks and until now their collection circumstances have not been well investigated. The aim of this article is to explore the mystery of where, when and how the barks were obtained and, indeed, by whom.

The Port Essington Barks at the Macleay Museum

The Macleay Museum's barks were first published in 1878, after presentation to the Linnean Society of New South Wales by Dr James C Cox (1834–1912) on 26 August of that year. They originally consisted of 11 sheets of bark with 18 images, but one bark with a goanna, described but not illustrated by Cox, was lost sometime in the late 1800s or early 1900s. The ten remaining barks are considered the world's most important nineteenth-century collection of such paintings. Their depicted images consist of six human figures, five turtles, two goannas, two crocodiles (Figure 1), two birds and a dugong (Figure 2). However, there remains much mystery as to exactly where they were collected and how they came to Cox. Part of the problem is that he stated that the barks were from 'Essington Island'. Cox's (1878:155–6) statement to the Linnean Society was very definite, despite there being no such known location:

The drawings on sheets of bark, which I have laid before the Society this evening, were obtained from the natives on Essington Island, on the north coast of Australia. The aborigines of the Australian continent appear to have been in the habit of painting on a similar material; unfortunately, owing to the perishable nature of the bark and to the pigment used, commonly pipeclay, being easily defaced, few of these illustrations have been saved.

Cox's comparison of the barks from 'Essington Island' with those 'of the Australian continent' in his introductory statement reinforces the view that the paintings came from an island off the north coast rather than the peninsula where Port Essington



Figure 1
'Essington Island' bark-painting of a crocodile, Cobourg Peninsula, Northern Territory, WJ Macleay Collection, Macleay Museum (P992), collected before August 1878; drawing from Cox (1878(3) plate 16, no. 12) (photograph courtesy of Macleay Museum)

lies. In no other historical sources can reference to an 'Essington Island' be found, so until now it has remained a mystery location. Cox also did not say who collected the barks or exactly when but it is likely that it was sometime in 1878. If the paintings were not collected at Port Essington, then who exactly made them and from where were they obtained? First, however, it is necessary to examine all known and/or surviving bark-paintings said to be from the Port Essington area and to define the larger style region.

Collections at other museums

The Australian Museum has hundreds of bark-paintings but only two surviving works are possibly from the Cobourg Peninsula. The first depicts two emu-like birds and a male macropod in red-and-



Figure 2
'Essington Island' bark-painting of a dugong, Cobourg Peninsula, Northern Territory, WJ Macleay Collection, Macleay Museum (P993), collected before August 1878; drawing from Cox (1878(3) plate 16, no. 18) (photograph courtesy of Macleay Museum)

white. There is some cross-hatching and other line infill. The piece was purchased from Sandra Holmes in 1963 and attributed to Port Essington by Ed Ruhe in 1982. The second piece is both more spectacular and better documented. It consists of a large male figure in red-and-white, with genitalia prominently featured (Figure 3). In 1922, Dr George Horne donated the bark to the then National Museum of Victoria. It was transferred to the Australian Museum in 1936, joining a large collection of objects donated by Horne in 1926, shortly before his death (Anon. 1928:59). The bark is claimed to have been collected

at Cape Don, to the west of Port Essington, and likely dates to the late 1800s or the early 1900s. The museum's original collection of 11 Port Essington barks was acquired by Australian Museum Collector Alexander Morton between October 1878 and March 1879, who returned from his collecting expedition in late March 1879 (below). Although these were destroyed, a photograph of them on display at the Ethnological Court, Sydney International Exhibition Garden Palace, reveals details of their subject matter (Anon. 1881, opp. 143; Strahan 1979, fig. 199). A list of subjects was published in the Annual Report for the Australian Museum (1879, appendix X):

Native paintings in clay on bark representing
 Iguana.
 Echidna.
 2 Crocodiles.
 Iguana (Hydrosaurus).
 2 Hydrosaurus.
 2 Turtles.
 Dugong, &c.

The final '&c' refers to a male human-like figure, which can be seen quite clearly in the surviving photograph of the collection on display in the Garden Palace. The barks were also listed in the Ethnological Catalogue of the Sydney International Exhibition 1879, under numbers '1576–1587' and described as 'Port Essington Native Drawings on Bark' (Anon. 1880:43).

The British Museum has two bark-paintings attributed to the Port Essington area, which, according to Ruhe (1966:8), 'can be dated with certainty before 1868 and may be several decades older'. Ruhe based this age estimate on being told that one of the paintings, of two human-like figures, was from the Haslar Museum and that it, along with other Haslar Museum artefacts, came to the British Museum via Henry Christy's collection after his death in 1865. Haslar Hospital is a Royal Naval Hospital near Portsmouth. The Haslar artefacts were collected by men serving in the Royal Navy. Two collections were received by the British Museum from Haslar. The first was in 1855, the second as part of Christy's own collection after his death in 1865. This is what led Ruhe to believe that they predated 1868, but the pieces listed as being from Haslar do not have acquisition dates on their catalogue slips. The first bark, with paintings of a macropod and two human-like figures in white, has a handwritten label on the back stating: 'Native drawing from the natives of Port Essington. Executed with their left hands'. The wording and style of the label is consistent with other



Figure 3
Large male figure in red-and-white, with genitalia prominently featured, donated to then National Museum of Victoria in 1922 by Dr George Horne, transferred to Australian Museum in 1936 (E42588). The bark is claimed to have been collected at Cape Don, to the west of Port Essington, and likely dates to late 1800s or early 1900s (photograph courtesy and copyright of Australian Museum)

late nineteenth-century labels. The second, with two human-like figures, has a handwritten label on the bark: 'M.704. From the Haslar Museum' (Figure 4). Further catalogue information indicates that the first was not registered until 1967 and that there is no information as to when it was collected. Whether the second actually is from the Haslar collection cannot be verified; the current catalogue information was not recorded until 1973.

The University of Western Australia's Berndt Museum of Anthropology also has one bark-painting supposedly from Port Essington. This sheet of bark

has six images: an unidentified fish, a turtle, a goanna, a tall wading bird (such as a crane, heron or stork) and two unknown designs. It was obtained by the museum in 1981, after being examined by anthropologist Ronald Murray Berndt. It is thought to date from the 1870s. A further Port Essington bark was published by Basedow in 1907. It has images of a dugong, a macropod, a human-like male, a bark canoe with a harpoon line connecting it to a sea turtle, and a boat with three Macassan or European figures on deck (Figure 5). These figures appear to be wearing clothes and Basedow (1907:58–9) suggested that the boat 'may be intended for one of the Malay proas that have been in the habit of visiting the north coast of Australia for many years past'. The whereabouts of this painting are not known.

The Cobourg–Crocker style region and validation of where collected

The 28 bark-paintings attributed to the Port Essington area contain 51 distinct images, with three barks containing six subjects each, three with three and two with two. The rest have one subject dominating the bark sheets. All have rough edges and are asymmetrically shaped, as if cut from a shelter rather than especially prepared for trade. Indeed, the Macleay barks have particularly rough edges, as if hacked out with an axe with little regard for the resulting shape. Most of the depictions comprise reptiles (41.2%), while human figures make up about one-quarter (25.5%). The most common individual subject is a human-like figure. There are 13 human-like figures, some of which may represent human beings, others more probably spirit beings. Seven have male genitalia, three appear female and three could not be assessed for gender. Additionally, there are three small human figures that appear to be representations of Macassans or Europeans on a large boat. Turtles are the next most common subject with nine images (18%), eight of which are sea turtles and one of which is a long-neck turtle. There are eight goanna images (16%), five birds (10%: three emus, two heron/stork/ crane-like), four crocodiles (9%), three macropods (6%), three dugongs, two unknown designs (4%), and one each of an echidna, a fish, a bark canoe and a boat. The latter two are the only artefacts depicted; the canoe has a harpoon line linking it to a sea turtle.

If one compares the Port Essington bark figures with more recent bark-paintings, they are found to be most similar to those of Iwaidja artists, including many from Crocker Island (e.g. Morphy 1999:165;



Figure 4
Bark-painting with two human-like figures, from the British Museum (Q73.Oc.17), possibly ex. Haslar Museum and dating to either pre-1865 or late 1870s (photograph courtesy and copyright of British Museum)

Taylor 1989, 1999). Port Essington is usually associated with the Garig language, although nineteenth-century Iwaidja vocabularies have also been collected from this area, suggesting close association. The Iwaidja artist whose work the Port Essington images most resemble is Paddy Compass Nambatbara (or 'Namadbara', c. 1898–1978). He was born only 20 years after many of the Port Essington barks were collected. On the other hand, the Port Essington barks differ in terms of certain style features, infill and subject matter



Figure 5
Photograph by Paul Foelsche, c. 1877–85, Port Darwin or Port Essington, Northern Territory (courtesy of the Archives, South Australian Museum, AA96). The bark painting in the lower left corner is the same as that illustrated by Basedow (1907:58, fig. 72), who stated that it was 'found by Mr P. Foelsche at Port Essington'.

from bark-paintings collected near Oenpelli by W Baldwin Spencer in 1912 (Spencer 1914). They also are different from those removed by Captain Carrington in 1884 from Field Island, near the mouth of the South Alligator River (now at the South Australian Museum: Carrington 1890; Mountford 1957; Worsnop 1897). They are very different from paintings from the Katherine River (Basedow 1907) and early pieces from the Goulburn Island area (Bleakley 1928; Mountford 1939). As well, they differ from more recent works by western Arnhem Land artists associated with territory south of Cobourg– Croker Island (e.g. Brody 1984; Mountford 1956; Taylor 1987, 1996).

When one compares the Port Essington bark-paintings with the most recent rock-art of the Northern Territory, there are more subject matter similarities with the Keep River region to the west than with western Arnhem Land to the south. In the Keep River region, the two most common subjects in recent rock-paintings are also human-like figures (54%) and reptiles (25%) (Taçon et al. 2003). Elaborate sea turtle designs also figure in the recent Keep River rock-art body. This is in contrast to western Arnhem Land where rock-paintings of fish are most common (54% of all painting: 63% with X-ray features), followed by human-like figures (16%) (Taçon 1989). On the other hand, some infill style features, such as diamond/triangle designs and aspects of internal anatomical features, are more similar to western and central Arnhem Land rock-paintings. Indeed, dot infill in combination with other designs is common to recent central Arnhem Land rock-art and bark-painting (Taçon & Garde 1995).

Once one learns the specific Cobourg–Crocker features, attribution of undocumented nineteenth-century bark-paintings should become easier. To this end the specific features of the Port Essington barks are described in detail. Specific stylistic traits include infill composed of either, or a combination of, dots, hatching, cross-hatching and/or triangle/diamond designs. The diamond/triangle infill is similar to that used by more recent western Arnhem Land rock- and bark-painters, such as Najombolmi (Haskovec & Sullivan 1986; Taçon & Chippindale 2001). Distinctive sea turtle designs that have elaborate stylised anatomical and infill detail feature in Port Essington bark-imagery, while goannas shown as if seen from above, but sometimes with heads in profile, are also common. Sometimes internal features of animals or human-like figures are shown with a simple 'X-ray' technique combined with lines that delineate major body segments.

Some of the most obvious and distinctive stylistic traits occur with human-like figures. For instance, male human-like figures invariably have a knobby penis shown in obverse, with one or two testicles described by circles on thin lines, usually one at each side (e.g. see Figures 3 and 4; Cox 1878, plate 15, no. 10). Female human-like figures usually have small breasts but large, anatomically detailed vulvas. Human-like figures are shown either standing or in a sitting/lying pose by way of the hocker-figure convention of representing humans with arms and/or legs bent at elbows and knees (cf. rare hocker figure on a Raffles Bay, Cobourg Peninsula, fishtail-shaped

club: Etheridge 1893, plate XXII, opp. 427). And all human-like figures have feet showing prominent heels (see Figures 3 and 4), very different from the feet depicted by artists to the south. Indeed, instead of having feet in profile, as is common elsewhere, the feet more closely resemble footprints, as one would see them from above.

The human-like figures are particularly reminiscent of those made by more recent Crocker Island artists, especially in terms of these distinctive feet and genitalia. For instance, one of Paddy Compass Nambatbara's bark-paintings is extremely similar to one of the British Museum pieces, featuring two human-like figures. Indeed, it is almost as if the two artists had worked closely together, sharing both stories and style. Nambatbara's work, *Two Mimi spirits* (Morphy 1999:165, fig. 110), shows a male Mimi with a long, thin body and limbs to the left and a similarly slender female to the right. Both have open mouths and hatched or solid infill. Their feet, with prominent heels that make them resemble footprints seen from above, are virtually identical to the feet of a pair of figures on the British Museum bark (see Figure 4). But in this painting the thin-bodied male is on the right while the female is on the left. The British Museum figures have similar infill and open mouths; additionally, both also have tongues sticking out. On both barks, male genitalia are portrayed in similar ways, with testicles shown as circles attached to thin lines and penes consisting of narrow shafts that end in enlarged plumb bob-like shapes.

Other examples of Nambatbara's work show the same features for human-like figures as those found on Port Essington barks in terms of infill, body designs, mouths, genitalia and feet (e.g. *Mimih dancers* c. 1965, pictured by Taylor 1999:37, fig. 2.6; *Maam, malignant spirits associated with love magic* 1963, Taylor 1989:27–8, figs 1 and 2; and *Mimi spirits associated with love magic* 1963, Taylor 1989:29, fig. 3). The work of Jambalula, another Crocker Island artist, is also similar to some Port Essington pieces, as well as to Nambatbara's, but shows some influence from Kunwinjku to the south as well. In terms of the 1960s pieces from Crocker Island artists, Taylor (1999:36) commented:

Enlargement of the genitals was used to suggest the licentious behaviour of these spirits. Internal decoration of the figures was not elaborate at this time and the overall effect in paintings of animals was of very white figures, with some basic x-ray detailing in red. In some

works more elaborate coloured hatching is used, but not coloured crosshatching.

The Port Essington barks could be summarised with the same description. Perhaps the Port Essington human figures also portray Mimi and Maam spirits. As Taylor (1999:36) noted, 'Love magic figures often show human figures with enlarged genitals engaged in coitus'. One of the Macleay barks illustrates such an event, although Cox (1878:157, plate 15) mistakenly interpreted the two figures to be 'frogs'. Most of the rest of the human-like figures resemble Mimi or Maam, although one of the lost Australian Museum males and that in the current collection may relate to something else. Interestingly, there are no human-like figures resembling Croker Island or Kunwinjku bark- or rock-art sorcery figures, images with stingray or other spines in joints and genitals (Chaloupka 1993:206–11; Taylor 1999:36).

Who could have collected at Port Essington, and when?

While it may seem a daunting task to reconstruct the history of the collecting of the Port Essington barks, some suggestions are made here. The Cobourge Peninsula was the site of two attempts by the British to settle northern Australia in the nineteenth century (Fort Wellington at Raffles Bay 1827–29, and Victoria, Port Essington, 1838–49). Following the abandonment of Victoria in 1849 and the establishment of the town of Palmerston (later renamed Darwin) in 1869, the region appears to have been visited only by buffalo shooters (Hodgson 1995:55).

A thriving town in the 1870s servicing the emerging pastoral industry and buffalo shooters, Palmerston soon attracted the first professional museum collectors. Among the earliest of these collectors was Edward Spalding (1836–1900), a taxidermist and collector who spent six months from May to September 1877 collecting natural history specimens and ethnographic artefacts in the Port Darwin region for William John Macleay (*PLNSW* 1878 [2]:269; cf. Hodgson 1995:54–66 for a survey of other collectors). The next museum collector to arrive in the region appears to have been Alexander Morton, a collector for the Australian Museum in Sydney, who arrived in Port Darwin in October of 1878. While Spalding and Morton were professional museum collectors, the collecting activities of Paul Foelsche (1831–1914), Sub-Inspector, later Inspector-in-Charge, Northern

Territory Mounted Police, from 1870 to 1904, should not be overlooked (*ADB* 4 1979:192–3). Indeed, the collecting of the Berndt Museum's bark-painting, one of the few attributed to a specific field collector, is attributed to Foelsche. However, the attribution is a recent one, by Ronald Berndt in 1981. The history of its collection, as outlined on the corresponding file card, throws further light on its history:

Purchased by the Museum. Shown to R.M.B. during a visit to Adelaide by the proprietor of Moghul Aniques (*sic*), and subsequently freighted to Perth. R.M.B. believes the bark to have come from Mr. P. Foelsche, Inspector of Police of the Northern Territory, and collected at Port Essington in the mid-1870's. It was bought privately in the mid 1940's (*sic*) and sold to Ned Roberts (Moghul's proprietor) in 1976... Probably painted by an artist from the Ndawuli, Wurugu or Garig language groups, and is in the 'old' Yiwadja style.

If Berndt's attribution is correct, that the bark is both from Port Essington and was collected by Paul Foelsche, then it is reasonable to assume that Foelsche collected other barks from the area. This is confirmed by Basedow (1907:58, fig. 72), who published one of the barks in the Cobourge–Croker style region analysed above. This same painting was also included in a photograph along with other objects collected by Foelsche (Foelsche Collection, South Australian Museum Archives, AA96). In reference to the work in general, Basedow reports 'A group of drawings on a single piece of bark was found by Mr. P. Foelsche at Port Essington and is represented in fig. 72' (see Figure 5).

Foelsche (1881) himself briefly commented on bark-painting subject matter in one of his papers presented to the Royal Society of South Australia:

They made drawings of existing objects, but the only ideal one the writer saw was a grotesque representation of a debil debil, an evil spirit, which they much dreaded. Rude but bold native drawings of outlines of birds, beasts, and fishes, plainly recognizable, were shown. One representing a shark was very characteristic of the creature delineated; so was another of a porpoise.

In a later publication on the peoples of the Northern Territory's north (Foelsche 1882:15), he further noted:

DRAWINGS

By natives are met with among all tribes, generally representing existing objects. The only imaginary object I have seen painted is the so-called 'Devil-devil'

(appellation borrowed from Europeans), an evil spirit in whose existence all natives believe, but for whom each tribe has a different name. Natives are constantly in dread of this spirit when travelling in the bush.

Elsewhere, in reference to the Unalla tribe of Raffles Bay, Cobourg Peninsula, Foelsche (1886:273) states: 'This tribe paint rudely all sorts of figures on stones and sheets of bark'. Foelsche was in a good position to collect bark-paintings and other examples of Aboriginal material culture, as he travelled widely as part of his duties in the Northern Territory Police Force, from 1869 until his retirement in 1904. During this period he spent much time in the Cobourg area and was considered 'the Northern Territory's foremost photographer' (Jones 1996:223). In the process, he became an ethnographer in his own right, providing information, photographic images and large collections of Aboriginal objects to collectors and anthropologists both in Australia and overseas. Jones' (1996:197) description of him in this regard is very succinct:

As a former Hussar (born in Hamburg) and an efficient policeman committed to protecting and extending European interests on the northern frontier, Foelsche fitted the imperial mould of survey ethnographers. His neatly numbered specimens and formally made photographs arise from this circumscribed context. His published work on Aborigines provided data within established criteria without exploring new areas of research.

Jones (1996:216) argued that Foelsche's role was pivotal to the ethnography of northern Australia, his influence developing after 'his commissions during the late 1870s to supply Waterhouse and South Australia's Special Commissioner, Guy Boothby, with natural history specimens, artefacts and photographs for the Philadelphia, Paris, Melbourne and Sydney Exhibitions'. The Paris exhibition of 1878 is particularly important as it is the 'first documented occasion on which official European interest in Aboriginal bark-paintings was revealed' (Jones 1996:216) for specific collection and display, as part of a list of requested items sent as a letter in 1877. Soon after, Cox (1878) acquired and presented the Macleay pieces to the Linnean Society of New South Wales, perhaps not coincidentally. Cox's interest in bark-paintings may have been stimulated by Smyth's 1878 publication.

In terms of other persons who may have collected the Macleay Museum barks, it is extremely unlikely that Cox, himself, was the direct collector. As

Richardson (1971:72) noted for his other interests, 'Cox did very little field collecting himself, but relied on the exchanging and buying of shells to compile his famous collection (Letters, Mitchell Library Sydney)'. It is most likely this is also true of the bark-paintings now in the Macleay Museum. A medical practitioner whose main interest was in shells, Cox had a large collection of artefacts from Australia and the Pacific Islands. In 1879, he exhibited more than 300 items from his ethnographic collection at the Ethnological Court of the Sydney International Exhibition (*Sydney International Exhibition catalogue* 1880, nos 507-894 and 1757-1790). Much of this collection was offered for sale after the exhibition closed. Significantly, the Port Essington barks now in the Macleay Museum were not displayed by Cox, which suggests that William John Macleay probably acquired them between August 1878 and the opening of the exhibition in November 1879. It is likely he received them in late 1878, as his 1879 diary, still extant, made no mention of them.

Cox was associated with the management of the Australian Museum from the 1850s, later becoming Chairman of the Board of Trustees in 1890 and President from 1891 to 1912. As Chairman of the Exchanges Committee in 1878, he was involved in recommending that Alexander Morton be sent to collect at Port Darwin in late 1878 (Australian Museum Archives, Exchanges Committee, 1 August 1878, C.20.78/19). His association with the Australian Museum and the Linnean Society of New South Wales would have meant that he had extensive contacts with professional collectors such as Morton and Edward Spalding. He was also a close friend of William John Macleay and a regular visitor to his home, having known him since the 1850s when both were members of the Philosophical Society of New South Wales.

Regrettably, we may never know who collected the bark-paintings now held by the Macleay Museum or when they were given to the museum. The records and library of the Linnean Society of New South Wales were destroyed in the Garden Palace fire in 1882 and Macleay's private journals are incomplete; the relevant years (1877 and 1878) are not extant (WJ Macleay journals 1874-76, 1879-81). In addition, a considerable amount of nineteenth-century documentation relating to the Macleay Museum's ethnographic collection was either destroyed or lost sometime between 1934 and 1950 (Davies 2002:12). Some correspondence relating to the museum was pulped during World War II (Macintosh 1949:165-7). As

well, museum correspondence and records were also destroyed in the 1950s and early 1960s.

It is possible that Edward Spalding may have obtained them in 1877, during his north Australian collecting expedition for WJ Macleay. Macleay received Spalding's collection of Port Darwin material in about the middle of August 1877 (*PLNSW* 1878 (2):213; cf. Davies 2002). However, a more likely scenario is that Foelsche gave the barks to an intermediary, who subsequently passed them on to Cox. Perhaps this also led to confusion about their origin on so-called 'Essington Island', the exact location being lost or distorted as the objects passed through several hands.

It is probable that Foelsche also collected in preparation for and during Alexander Morton's excursion on behalf of the Australian Museum. Morton departed Sydney in September 1878, arriving at Port Darwin in October. He returned to Sydney on 29 March 1879 with 'some specimens of native paintings of animals etc' (EP Ramsay to Trustees 32/3/1879, pre-1883 Correspondence, Series 7, Letters Received E60.79.3). That he received assistance from Foelsche is indicated by letters from Edward P Ramsay (Australian Museum curator 1874–94). On 20 September 1878, Ramsay wrote to 'The Police Magistrate, Port Darwin', informing him that 'I have sent our collector Alex Morton to your district to collect specimens of Natural History for our Museum' (Australian Museum Archives 1877–1884a). He then asked if he would assist Morton with the collection of objects and provide him with advice. On 26 April 1879 he followed this up with a letter on behalf of the trustees, thanking him for all he did for Morton during his stay (Australian Museum Archives 1877–1884b). In a later letter to Ramsay (12 May 1879; C.40.78.5), Morton stated that Inspector Foelsche 'was also very kind to me during my stay at Port Darwin'.

O'Donnell (1980) and later Taylor (1987:26) claimed that the bark-paintings reported by Cox (1878) are in fact the same as the 11 barks that Morton acquired for the Australian Museum. This is not possible, because Cox presented the Macleay Museum paintings to the Linnean Society of New South Wales on 26 August 1878, before Morton had even arrived in Port Darwin. Furthermore, a close examination of the subject matter of the Macleay Museum barks and the former Australian Museum collection confirms that they are different.

The only other Europeans who extensively roamed the Cobourg–Croker region in the 1870s were John Lewis, EO Robinson and their associates.

John Lewis took out a pastoral lease over part of the Cobourg Peninsula in 1871, visiting in 1874 in search of two lost explorers from Africa: Permain and Borrodale (Lewis 1922:129). He later returned to build a station residence at Port Essington in 1875. In his 1922 publication, opposite page 156, a photograph of the station residence shows a large gathering of Aborigines outside its front fence (c. 1878). Berndt and Berndt (1954:127) reported that, within a year of the residence being built, there were over 250 persons camped nearby. However, this may have been a seasonal gathering of peoples from across the region and beyond, as a few years later, in June 1880, Berndt and Berndt (1954:127) noted that Foelsche only saw 'a few friendly natives at the Cobourg Cattle Company's Station'. Importantly, however, this shows that Foelsche was a visitor to the station residence and that perhaps it was here where he most frequently interacted with many of the region's Aborigines. Indeed, it appears that he even assisted the company: 'In the late 1870s and 1880s he performed various duties (in an unofficial capacity) on behalf of the Cobourg Cattle Company while John Lewis and his partners were in Adelaide' (Peterson & Tonkinson 1982:17). Crucially, among the many letters Foelsche sent to Lewis is one dated 9 October 1878 in which he commented on the movement of Aborigines he has seen during his recent visits to Lewis' property (South Australian Archives PRG 247/2). This is only a few weeks after Cox's address to the Linnean Society and shortly after Morton arrived in Port Darwin, in early October. This, along with other letters, puts Foelsche on the scene, rather than Lewis, during the crucial period when both the Macleay and the Australian Museum bark-paintings were obtained.

EO Robinson first arrived in the region in 1874, settling on Croker Island and visiting Cobourg sporadically. However, after his partner, Wingfield, was murdered at the end of 1879, he moved to Port Essington. Robinson managed the Cobourg Cattle Company for four and a half years, from 1880 until 1884, whereupon he moved to Bowen Straits to manage the Revenue Station from 1884 to 1899 (Searcy 1905:47). Thus, unless the late 1870s bark-paintings actually were obtained on Croker Island for exchange with Foelsche at Port Essington, which seems unlikely, then Robinson may have not been directly involved. Indeed, most references to Robinson indicated that he had good knowledge of Aboriginal culture but was more interested in employing friendly Aborigines to work on his various trepang, cattle or other ventures (Searcy 1909:20–1). However, he did

write a note about the region's 'Öirig tribe' (Oitbi people) which is particularly significant in that it includes the meaning of various words and gestures, the nature and purpose of message sticks, kinship and the extent of traditional territory (Robinson 1879/80). In the note he also refers to the murder of Wingfield on Croker Island while he was visiting Port Darwin. It was Wingfield's death that made him decide to move to Port Essington (Searcy 1909:20–1) and this is where he wrote his notes on the Oitbi, perhaps at Foelsche's request. As can be seen below, this little-known group may be quite significant in terms of understanding exactly where the Macleay Museum barks originated.

'Essington Island' and the Öirig (Oitbi)

In 1879, Robinson noted that the northern bounds of the Öirig (Oitbi) tribe 'are from Raffles Bay in a direct line to the head of Port Essington Bay from there in a direct line to Trempang Bay'. He also recorded that the group was then reduced to '28 all told' and that 'Some years ago the smallpox carved off a great number of them. It was probably conveyed here by Malays'. He also said that the Öirig tribe was closely affiliated with the Mananallo (Unalla): 'The Öirig live in one part of the country and the Amanallo in another. But they speak the same language and always unite for offense or defense' (Robinson 1879/80:1). Later, it is obvious that his comments refer to one or both groups, including the references to Raffles Bay. In 1881, Foelsche (1886:271) commented similarly for the Unalla of Raffles Bay, stating: 'My informant relates that small-pox was introduced into this tribe in 1866 by Malay trepang fishers, who annually frequent the coast'. Whether Robinson was Foelsche's informant for this information is certainly a possibility, for Foelsche also commented on the Raffles Bay group being reduced to 30 persons. Tindale (1974:235), in reference to the Oitbi, adds that 'The "Raffles Bay" tribal language of Foelsche was obtained principally from this people'. Tindale (1974:234) also located the Oitbi at the 'South coast of Cobourg Peninsula; Sir George Hope Islands'. That this people moved along the coast and among the islands is confirmed by Lewis (1922:151–2).

Earl (1846:241–2) gave a much more precise and the earliest description of the Oitbi, their relationship to other groups and the extent of their territory:

The Coburg Peninsula itself is occupied by four distinct communities. Three of these inhabit the northern and

central parts of the peninsula, while the fourth, which is the most numerous and powerful, occupies the entire southern coast and the islands of Van Diemen's Gulf; the upper portion of the harbour of Port Essington being also in their possession. This last appears to have only recently acquired territory upon the peninsula; indeed it would seem that at no very distant period, the pressure of a powerful people in the interior of the continent had driven one tribe in upon another, until several distinct communities have been crowded up within the Coburg Peninsula, where until very recently, they have been making war upon each other to such an extent, that two of these have, within the memory of natives now living, been reduced from numerous bodies to mere scattered remnants.

These four tribes are distinguished among each other by the term which in the particular dialect of each designates the monosyllable 'No'. Thus the tribe which inhabits Croker Island and the country about Raffles Bay (and which appears to have originally consisted of two tribes, which have amalgamated to such an extent that characteristic distinctions are almost entirely lost) is termed 'Yaako'; the Port Essington tribe goes by the name of 'Yarlo,' the western tribe by that of 'Iyi,' and the great southern tribe by that of 'Oitbi.'

The main languages of the area discussed by Earl are actually Garig, Iwaidja and Ilgar. These three closely related languages are known by linguists as the 'Arrkbi' group, based on the word for 'human, man, Aboriginal person' in all three languages. 'Oitbi' likely derives from 'ujbi', a language variety descriptor based on 'no'. Such terms for language varieties or dialects of a single language are common in Aboriginal Australia. Problems with accurate transcription by English speakers recording Aboriginal language words from this region and in this period are well known (Murray Garde, pers. comm., 2004).

Importantly, a major part of what Earl referred to as Oitbi traditional territory is Endyalgout Island, the coast 25 km to the south of it marking the start of the present-day Iwaidja boundary with Amurdak (Amarak) people. Indeed, from this island, the head of Port Essington, also Oitbi territory, could easily be reached by sea. From there it was just a short hike to the abandoned settlement of Victoria (1838–49) and John Lewis's Port Essington station residence. 'Endyalgout' is an English corruption of the Aboriginal placename *Injalung* (in-jull-goong), still used by Arrkbi of the region today (Murray Garde, pers. comm., 2004). The island is part of the Iwaidja-speaking Agarlda patriclan's territory.

If there is any island location from which the Macleay bark-paintings originated, Endyalgout seems a good candidate. It also is easy to see how confusion could have arisen afterward, as anything from Endyalgout Island or elsewhere across the peninsula was funnelled through Port Essington before being shipped to Port Darwin, Sydney or elsewhere. Endyalgout Island could thus have been misinterpreted by Cox as 'Essington Island'. Indeed, the barks could have been collected by Foelsche, Robinson or the 'Oitbi' people themselves and brought to Port Essington. After all, for some time Foelsche had been trading tobacco, flour and other goods for other examples of local Aboriginal material culture (Berndt & Berndt 1954; Jones 1996). And the Indigenous inhabitants of the Cobourg–Croker Island region had long participated in elaborate trading relationships with a range of other Aboriginal groups (Hodgson 1995), as well as foreigners such as the Macassans (Macknight 1976). Of course, some of the barks Foelsche shipped south could have come from Port Essington itself as there was an Aboriginal camp close to the beach, consisting of bark 'humpies'

(see Figure 6; Berndt & Berndt 1954:127; Lewis 1922; Searcy 1909:20).

Other possibilities are that the barks came from the Sir George Hope Islands, which are closer to Port Essington and also within Oitbi territory, or possibly Croker Island. However, Croker seems a bit far and the Sir George Hope Islands are quite small. The latter also appear to have not been inhabited for significant lengths of time until a mission school was set up on Greenhill Island around 1900 (Taçon 1988), but they have long been considered important places for hunting dugong, turtle and barramundi (Cobourg Peninsula Sanctuary Board 1987:65). Whether collected at Port Essington or brought from Endyalgout Island or some other offshore location for trade, it was from Port Essington that Foelsche most likely forwarded or traded them to an intermediary, who perhaps acquired them specifically for Cox.

Conclusion

The Macleay Museum Port Essington bark-paintings are some of the most outstanding surviving examples of early Aboriginal designs, other than at rock-

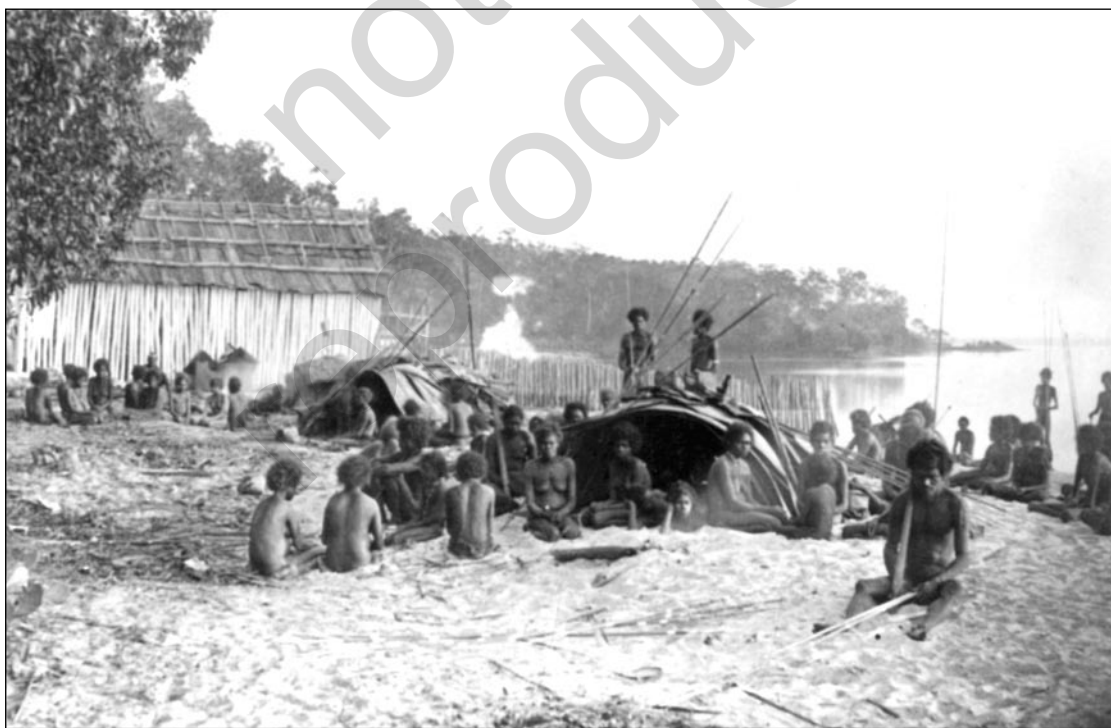


Figure 6
Photograph by Paul Foelsche, November 1877, of a 'Native Camp, Port Essington' (courtesy of the Archives, South Australian Museum, AA96)

art sites, forming an exceptional body of visual material culture. They also are among some of the first Northern Territory barks to have been purposely sought out and collected for their aesthetic, exotic and unique cultural appeal. As Jones (1996:216) noted, it was in the late 1870s that official European interest in Northern Territory bark-paintings began. This period marked the turning point for the bark-painting tradition, with the start of a trade that soon was to become a thriving industry. These transitional years are therefore crucial to our understanding of early European acceptance of Aboriginal art and resulting changes towards art as commodity that occurred from contact in this part of Australia.

It appears that Paul Foelsche was involved in some way and that, if he did not directly obtain the barks from abandoned shelters, then he received them from someone such as EO Robinson and/or the Aborigines themselves. Groger-Wurm (1973:4) considered Spencer's acquisition of barks at Oenpelli in 1912 to be 'the earliest account of a sale of bark-paintings', but we contend that the process began much earlier with Foelsche. Indeed, Foelsche in one way or another probably gathered and then forwarded most if not all bark-paintings acquired across the Cobourg Peninsula in the 1870s.

It can also be concluded that Foelsche supplied Morton with bark-paintings and other objects for the Australian Museum and that the Australian Museum pieces destroyed in the Garden Palace fire of 1882 are not the same as those reported by Cox and now in the Macleay (cf. O'Donnell 1980; Taylor 1987:26). Stylistically, the Macleay Museum's Port Essington bark-paintings are definitely from the Cobourg-Croker Island region, most probably made by people once referred to as Oitbi or Öorig. The Macleay barks may well have originated from Endyalgout Island, Cox's 'Essington Island' being a confusion and combining of 'Endyalgout Island' and 'Port Essington'; however, exactly where they came from will probably never be known.

The British Museum pieces are also from the Cobourg-Croker Island region and likely date to the same late 1870s period, rather than pre-1868. Indeed, the settlement of Palmerston (at Port Darwin, later named Darwin) was not established until 1869 (Macknight 1969:20) and there was little European activity between the abandonment of Victoria, Port Essington, in 1849 and the settlement of the Port Darwin area. The larger British Museum piece, with depictions of a macropod, a human-like male and a lizard, is directly comparable to some Macleay pieces,

the lost Australian Museum works and the Berndt Museum bark. Furthermore, the likeness between the macropod and that of the Basedow (1907) bark obtained by Foelsche is so close as to have been made by the same artist. The piece said to have been derived from the Haslar Museum closely resembles a 1960s work by Iwaidja artist Paddy Compass Nambatbara, who was born not long after most early bark-paintings from the region were collected.

There is no record of what Aborigines thought about having their paintings collected or the personal relationships that may have developed between individual artists and the first European collectors such as Foelsche. Furthermore, we may never know exactly what the designs made by the 1870s Aboriginal inhabitants of the Cobourg Peninsula meant to them. Certainly, they portray key food animals such as turtle, goanna and dugong. They illustrate certain hunting practices, water transport and the arrival of foreigners. They also reflect beliefs through the depictions of human-like spirit beings. They likely were put to many uses and had multiple levels of meaning, as Kunwinjku and Rembarnga peoples to the south still recount for their own works made in bark- and rock-shelter contexts (Taylor 1987:27-8):

Kunwinjku today, who have sheltered regularly in both bark houses and rock country caves during their youth, and occasionally still do in the present, describe these two contexts of painting as being equivalent. Rembarnga neighbours of Kunwinjku have continued to decorate their wet season bark shelters until comparatively recent times...These artists describe the purpose of the paintings as for the illustration of stories told to children and for the pleasing decoration of their home...Shelter paintings may also be described as illustrations of outside versions of Ancestral myths which were told to children as amusing stories, although more important ceremonial interpretations could also be attributed to them.

Port Essington area bark-paintings are rare treasures. They are testament both to longstanding Aboriginal traditions and to changing contacts with non-Aborigines, providing us with a window into some European interests in north Australian Aboriginal culture at a time when diseases such as smallpox were greatly reducing Aboriginal numbers, and Europeans were encroaching on Aboriginal lands. If it were not for the attention paid by people like Paul Foelsche, our understanding of the region's rich heritage would be greatly diminished.

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