

Philip Jones, *Ochre and Rust: Artefacts and Encounters on Australian Frontiers* (Wakefield Press, 2007): a review article by Russell McDougall.

Wakefield Press (Adelaide, S.A.) is regrettably extraordinary these days, an independent Australian book publisher with a mission to publish 'good stories' and 'beautiful books.' *Ochre and Rust* fulfils that mission admirably. The publisher celebrates its twenty-first birthday this year, and its mission statement actually undersells its achievement, for Wakefield Press has published over six hundred titles in that period, some even hitting best-seller lists, and has regularly won literary, design and production awards. As the winner of both the inaugural Prime Minister's Literary Award for Non-Fiction and the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory's History Book Award in 2008, *Ochre and Rust* has been much lauded already. But neither 'history' nor even 'non-fiction' in fact catches the wide importance of this remarkable book.

The cataloguing-in-publication keywords provided for the National Library and printed on the copyright page include: Aboriginal Australians (Antiquities; Implements); Frontier and Pioneer Life (Australia); Australia (Race Relations – History). So these are the headings under which you might find the book in your library or bookstore. You probably will *not* find the book in a catalogue search using identifiers such as: Museums (Museum Studies or Museology), Heritage (Heritage Studies), Material Culture or Anthropology – although of course all of these might be considered sub-categories of Non-Fiction. History is not used to dealing with objects; and museology has only just begun to make the link between objects, documentary archives and other forms of testimony. Even less likely, then, that you might find *Ochre and Rust* shelved in Biography.

The biography of the object is an emergent genre. *Ochre and Rust* pushes the possibilities by offering a multi-biography, comprising the lives of nine objects. As a species of life writing, of course, biography is conventionally concerned with the human subject; and most biographies focus on the single soul, the unique individual. Some have taken a wider view, making a family, or a rock band, or a circle of writers their focal point. But the contribution of biography to history remains contentious, whether of single or multiple human subjects. While some follow Carlyle in regarding it as a branch of history, others criticise the genre for its alleged confusion of the forest with the trees. (In fact, the development of the group biography can be seen as one not-very-satisfactory response to that criticism.) On the whole, biography continues to be regarded as a literary genre, a species of memoir, one of the lying arts; but the rise of constructivist theory within literary circles, with the paradigm shift from self to subject, has threatened the validity of the genre even there. The vexing question of truth arises. Modern biographies tend to give readers mostly what they want for themselves – the revelation of a deeply meaningful and secret life. To ask after the secret lives of *things*, then, is one aspect of the genre's reinvention, moving it into the post-human realm, where human and the non-human categories of existence begin to blur. This is particularly of interest for frontier subjects, since the processes of *othering* across the divide have often included the animalizing of Indigenous peoples.

The nine objects whose lives are narrated by Philip Jones in *Ochre and Rust* have been assembled from a variety of colonial frontiers and archived in the South Australian Museum – *curated* – in some cases by the author himself. Each object thus has acquired the value of an artefact. But the museological phase of its existence is far from the whole life story. More than twenty years ago, Arjun Appadurai demonstrated in *The Social Life of*

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Things (1986) that the commodification of an object represents only one possible phase in its social life. In fact, some museum objects – as artefacts – are devalued over time, while others gain in cultural capital according to changing tastes and paradigms. The writing of the full life, then, as far as possible, is an act of salvage scholarship, an attempt to *display* the subject not only as it *is* but as it has been, *changing through time*. With Aboriginal artefacts especially this involves their moving through different regimes of value – entering (and in some cases exiting, and re-entering) the commodity sphere of museum collection and display. One message in the telling, working back in time from the present museological moment, is the complexity of culturally constructed origins, and the importance of affiliations beyond the context in which the objects now function. Alternatively, looking forward, the life stories of artefacts rarely end with death (or destruction): even in desecration, their fate is open-ended.

In one way or another, each object in Jones' multi-biography has been obscured or restricted from view, deprived of its larger story and hence its historical significance. Of course, each object performs a role in the 'memory theatre' of the South Australia Museum too, specifically (as the book's subtitle suggests) assisting our re-remembering of the frontier. What took place there, until recently remembered only in terms of conflict and fragmentation, we now see increasingly in terms of the entanglements that have made us who we are. The artefacts of our frontier encounters are themselves part of the drama of our collective consciousness. The value of this book, then, is to remind us of the *performativity* of objects as part of our *ongoing* frontier engagements.

As Jones puts it: 'The frontier is not a hard line separating cultures but a zone, which may unify and can also create new forms of engagement, new forms of exploitation.' Artefacts here are crucial, for they function as symbolic as well as material objects – 'as a medium along which important ideas passed, from colonised to coloniser and back again.' This frontier is not only a 'contact zone,' as Mary Louise Pratt influentially proposed in *Imperial Eyes* (1992), thereby abandoning the allegedly over-determined historical term 'frontier;' it is also a communication zone. The idea of one culture trying to see into or (as Jones says) past the other is inadequate to describe the impulse to *exchange*. The biographical focus on objects in the process of exchange gives us a frontier with a third dimension – that is, *depth of field*.

The frontier discourse here is not one that creates the conditions for forgetting violence, as Patricia Limerick argued in her rejection of the F-Word in US history. It owes as little to the Frederick Jackson Turner model of progress as it does to the Jindyworobak discourse of rejuvenation in the Australian context. Some objects in *Ochre and Rust* unravel stories of loss and human tragedy, others of enrichment and expansion. Exchange acknowledges the possibility of savagery and civilization from both sides. Nicolas Rothwell, in his review in *The Australian*, sees the book as highlighting 'the emergence of a new kind of writing about Australia's history and landscape: an ambidextrous writing, inspired by the thought-worlds of both the groups of people who now make up the surface layers of the past.' Mike Smith, in his review (in *Recollections: the Journal of the National Museum of Australia*), even refers to an emerging 'literary canon' of works that would include, for example, Barry Hill's *Broken Song: T.G.H. Strehlow and Aboriginal Possession* (2002). The word 'literary,' coming from an archaeologist and environmental historian, is revealing. But *Ochre and Rust* is not of the 'creative non-fiction' species. Instead, it is a literary history of apparently non-literary subjects – that is, objects.

A whip belonging to an officer of the First Fleet begins its life as an Aboriginal club. The life of a metal-headed axe, secreting the narratives trace of a doomed colonial journey of

exploration, unfolds as a study of Aboriginal responses to the arrival of iron. Every artefact described and identified contains the trace of a human-interest story, of a severed history, which Jones patiently and modestly proceeds to re-member with great narrative skill – like the story of William Cawthorne, ‘tormented by guilt for his people’s dispossession of the Adelaide Plains Aborigines,’ who could easily have stepped out of Henry Reynolds *This Whispering in Our Hearts*, or like Dick Cubadgee Jappangarti (‘King Tapanunga’), the Warramunga man who guided the David Lindsay’s expeditions through Arnhem Land and the Gulf Country, and whose remains only recently were returned and laid to rest in Tennant Creek. His story, as Jones reconstructs it, begins with a set of fire-sticks, as Cawthorne’s does from a broken Aboriginal shield. Importantly, object and subject are entwined. After all, the subject-object relationship is central to the question of how indigeneity is conceived and performed (as well as to the question of how whiteness is assumed). Jones’ carefully nuanced biographies enact a liberation of objects from the accretion of taxonomies and preconceptions that have encrusted them through museological processes of collection and display, making them once again frontier objects of engagement.

When an Aboriginal club becomes transformed as an English naval officer’s whip, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological account of the relationship between body and object – where the body has intention but the object does not – seems less than useful for describing experiences of materiality. It is not the passivity of the artefact that engages us, however it may be displayed. It is its dynamism, its potentiality as a social and historical protagonist. You would think that the question of how objects engage us might be central to museum studies. But, as Mike Smith says, the new museology has told us ‘almost nothing about how museum objects can be read in ways that make a fresh contribution to our understanding of history.’ This, he argues, is why *Ochre and Rust* is so important; and I must agree.

Last year I visited the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, and witnessed an installation by Gérard Mermoz, entitled ‘Objects in Performance.’¹ Mermoz had begun two years earlier with a series of photographs entitled ‘Histoires and Bestiaires,’ recording choreographed encounters with figurines from different cultures and different periods within a single frame. In one, for example, two antique wooden monkeys confronted a kerosene iron from the 1930s. The objects were paired like actors on an empty stage, inviting the viewer — not only through the pose of the artefacts but also by their proxemics and their different materialities – to ponder the problematic of the indigenous and the exotic. Neither actor was a free agent: the monkeys appeared as captives of the kerosene tin, positioned ‘half-way between portraiture and figure study.’ Two years on and the objects are no longer frozen in photography; they have been scattered through the Pitt Rivers Museum, so that one stumbles upon them unexpectedly, amongst a collection of combs, for instance, reinterpreting the cabinet of curiosities with which the museum as an institution derives. Objects that function as art, or as ornament, interact with objects usually interpreted as ethnographic. And as the figurines interact with the ethnographic artefacts we begin to ponder the inscrutable expressions of both, the proxemics of their spatial relation and the tensions arising through these representative cultural encounters. Making objects perform like this serves to question their function, their identity as exotic object or indigenous artefact. A china figurine of a fragile-looking Victorian fop fans himself in the shade of a gigantic wooden African carving. In another tableau, titled ‘Good Day, Mister Darwin,’ the young anthropologist confronts an ape. They lock eyes amidst a crowd of other figures – from Africa, China, India and Europe –

¹See <http://objectsinperformance.blogspot.com/>

some human, others animal. They seem disorientated. Anything might happen, except that it already has, for they are re-enacting a scene from the 'Family of Man' photographic exhibition curated by Edward Steichen in 1955 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the purpose of which was to prove visually the universality of human experience. (The exhibition is now on permanent display at the Castle of Clervaux in Luxembourg.) Many of Mermoz's staged confrontations are historically impossible, deliberately anachronistic, and dramatically ironic. The installation operates a shift in the status of the objects, from 'artefacts' to 'actors' – a frontier engagement strangely reminiscent of *Ochre and Rust*.

The encounters in *Ochre and Rust* are not fictional encounters, with the author playing puppet-master to a host of figurines from different cultures. Still, Jones' biographical remembering of frontier encounters through museum artefacts has in common with Mermoz's visual method of montage the creation of a kind of poetic anthropology, where objects are transformed and, in their transformation, propose a new idea of history. Like the Soviet film maker Sergei Eisenstein's view of montage as 'an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots,' it has depth: 'each sequential element is perceived not next to the other, but on top of the other.' Ochre and rust were not among the actors on the day I visited the Pitt Rivers Museum, but they might have been, if Jones had scripted the object drama. His object biographies, like the new theatre of objects – with its roots in the aesthetics of symbolist theatre – are part of a larger re-evaluation. They remind us of the importance of material objects to human communication in the contemporary world. The artefacts of *Ochre and Rust* are objects in the process of becoming, objects in exchange.

Russell McDougall