This paper considers how reassessing the Yirandali collections compiled by Mary Montgomerie Bennett, held at the British Museum (BM), in order to understand their place in the history of Aboriginal and settler relations in Australia, allows for an understanding of these relations that then enables museums to give voice to the multiple dialogues the collection contains. The collection Bennett compiled is intimately tied to the land that it was collected on, and remains relevant in self-determination politics and land rights debates for contemporary Yirandali people today. The processes of making this collection reveal a series of relationships between Aborigines and settlers that allow us to understand that particular historical moment, and are local to that time and place. In addition Bennett’s writings provide us with...
a historical narrative on the period within which the collections were made. Mary Montgomerie Bennett (nee Christison) was born in 1883, and lived at Lammermoor Station, Queensland, (figure one) from the following year.\(^2\) As she grew up she watched her father Robert Christison collect objects from the Yirandali people he employed on the station and her mother take photographs of them. Compiling her father’s notes, her own observations, her mother’s photographs and the family’s collection of Yirandali objects Bennett produced the first detailed account of the Yirandali, as well as a discussion of her family’s relationship with them.\(^3\) Her experience of growing up alongside Aboriginal people, having Aboriginal men and women look after her and become her friends, motivated her to dedicate her life to campaigning for better rights for Aboriginal people. Bennett sent some of her family’s collection to the BM because of its reputation at the time as an institution that held some of the most important ethnographic collections in the world. In addition Bennett also wanted to demonstrate that far from dying out, Aboriginal people were still present in the landscapes that she inhabited.

This reassessment of the collection fits into a number of debates surrounding museums as sites for the renegotiation of relationships between indigenous people and colonial societies. Discourse surrounding the way that museums engage proactively with communities, particularly in relation to Australian collections, has emerged since the late 1970s, initiated by recommendations made at the 1978 UNESCO regional seminar in Adelaide. At this seminar Aboriginal people ‘argued for the important role that owners and leaders of particular cultural traditions can have in giving life to existing collections of lifeless objects’.\(^4\) The call to reinvigorate these collections in turn generated a series of collaborative research projects between museums and originating communities. Thus in the last thirty to forty years Aboriginal people have had an increasing presence in the work of Australian museums, affecting not just how curators work with their collections’ originating communities, but also how curators perceive the collection as a whole. The engagements between museums and originating communities in European museums followed these Australian engagements, and the last few decades have seen a notable increase

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2 The dotted area on the map designates Yirandali country. Lammermoor Station was located within this boundary.


in these interactions. The 1978 UNESCO seminar in Adelaide, in which Aboriginal people highlighted a need for these engagements, ‘arose out of changes in the political and social climate in Australia and was fuelled in part by the referendum of 1967’. The outcomes of the referendum included the inclusion of Aboriginal people in the census, and new legislation specifically targeted towards Aboriginal people. These outcomes demonstrated growing public support for Aboriginal rights, although the effects were slow to be seen. The referendum was partly called as a result of pressure received from the Sydney Freedom Rides of 1964 and 1965, which campaigned for Aboriginal rights, most notably an end to segregation in some rural communities. Museums then became part of the politics of identity for Aboriginal people and a way of controlling and contributing to the way they were represented. This period also saw a change in the way Australian history was written with historians such as Manning Clark, Noel Loos, Lyndall Ryan and Henry Reynolds attempting to fill ‘the great Australian silence’ which William Stanner argued had existed in the current histories of Australia since colonization and which largely ignored the Indigenous perspective. Loos asked difficult questions such as ‘how many settlers did Aborigines kill?’ as a method for examining Aboriginal resistance to colonialism in Queensland as well as situating the reality of the situation and dispelling the myth that there was nothing to react against. Reynolds’ focus on frontier violence sought to expose the violence and failings within colonial administration. Clark, through his six volume narrative of Australian history, sought to tell his own version of Australian history through the people Clark believed to be the key proponents of that history. Clark also considered the failings in the Australian colonial administration and suggested changes. In addition, a number of Indigenous writers emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The introduction of Indigenous-focused narratives into the historical framework has created a lot of controversy, with those texts that privileged an Indigenous viewpoint, and were critical of its subsequent failures being

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6 Bolton, 45.
8 Loos, 214.
defined by Geoffrey Blainey during speeches he made on immigration policy in Australia in the early 1980s, and further developed upon in a 1993 article in *Quadrant*, as ‘black armband historians’, whilst those that described the period after colonisation as good were called the ‘three cheers historians’. Finding a way to mediate those histories is complex, particularly for museums.

Museums were theorized as sites of conflict in which these divergent and sometimes directly opposed versions of contact history competed against one another in order to be heard. However, in the last five to ten years museums have begun to move away from the notion of competition, to instead engage in looking at how the multiple voices in museum collections can be mediated and presented alongside one another within the exhibition space. As part of this shift, many have called for exhibitions to show all traces of a collections history. Thus this paper asks how the Christison collection can be presented within a museum exhibition in light of the changing face of Aboriginal and settler relations in Australia.

**The Christison Family, Lammermoor Station and the Yirandali**

In order to understand the significance of the Christison collection within the history of Indigenous and settler relations in Australia, it is necessary to consider how the collection was made, the historical context that surrounded its making, why it was made, and how it continues to remain relevant and important to the Yirandali today. To do this it is then also pertinent to investigate Bennett, who remains the central figure in this history, considering her life and work in relation to Indigenous and settler relations. Bennett grew up on Lammermoor Station, south of Prairie in north Queensland. In order to access this historical context we, like contemporary Yirandali people today, have to go through records made by settlers, government officials and anthropologists. Without this documentation, particularly that made by the Christison family, many of the details around how these objects were collected, what they were used for, as well as who the people in the photographs are, would not be understandable to a contemporary audi-

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12 In this paper the phrase ‘the Yirandali’ refers to those people who lived at or are related to those people who lived at Lammermoor Station.
ence. Even though Bennett did not collect the objects or take the photographs, she did formulate the constituent parts into one collection as it is seen today.

Bennett describes her childhood as ‘paradise ... Sunday was the children’s favourite day... they trailed off on a walkabout with ... the blacks’. Bennett and her siblings understood the Yirandali to be their friends, adopting their father’s attitude in their treatment of them. Near the end of her life Bennett told an interviewer ‘that I returned to Australia to serve the people who had made my childhood happy’. Bennett’s early exposure to a situation where a settler and the Aboriginal people on whose land he was squatting, could live together in relative peace, remained with Bennett throughout her later life. This positive situation, which contrasted greatly with what Bennett saw happening to Aboriginal people elsewhere in Australia, inspired her to take a stand against abuse towards Aboriginal people.

When Bennett was seventeen the decision was made to sell Lammermoor Station and return to England. Only a few years later, in 1915, Robert Christison died and it was shortly after this that Bennett began work on a publication recounting the life of her father and his life and work in Australia. Bennett’s book, Christison of Lammermoor, was published at the beginning of 1927, and it is through this publication that we can begin to understand the context within which the Christison collection was created. It is also the primary source used by contemporary Yirandali people who want to understand their history, as very few written or oral histories about the Yirandali have been passed down amongst families. The book is a tribute by Bennett to her father, although Alison Holland has argued that the book ‘became something of a polemic for the creation of a inviolable Native State and a celebration of the kind of benevolent paternalism her father portrayed in his dealings with the blacks’.

In the book Bennett set the scene for what Queensland would have been like in 1866 when Christison established Lammermoor Station. Relations between settlers and Aborigines in Queensland at the time were described thus by Bennett:

... white men were scarce and the blacks were hostile ... the bush ... held a larger population than native resources could nourish, and the chief

13 Bennett, 207.
cause of tribal warfare was trespass on waters and hunting grounds, and food reserves; so the aboriginals saw with consternation white men their strange horned and woolly hordes emptying waterholes that had seemed permanent and paddling the lily-covered lagoons, and probably reported that the whites were bad. Frequently squatters had their heads battered in then the native police under their white officer would be sent to shoot the murderers, or, if they were not known, any blacks they might happen on.16

Between 1861 and 1900 economic development in Queensland was almost solely dependent on ‘the expansion of primary industry’.17 William Landsborough’s survey of the land had highlighted suitable areas for pastoral runs to be established and many pastoralists followed these recommendations. One of these pastoralists was Christison. In 1868 the first of the gold rushes began on the Gilbert River, causing more Europeans to come into the area in the hope of making their fortune. This increased European population started to put pressure on the already tense relations between the Indigenous population and white settlers. In addition the establishment of the Queensland Native Mounted Police did nothing to ease tensions. They often made settlers feel safer but the fear that they produced in the Aboriginal population led to many revenge attacks on settlers, the most well known being the Wills Massacre. Nineteen stockmen were murdered by people from the Kairi language group in what is described as a surprise attack.18 In retribution the native police then killed about seventy Aboriginal people. This event made settlers in isolated areas fear for their lives.19 Morwood estimates that around ten to fifteen per cent of the European population were killed by Aboriginal people during the 1860s.20

In 1867 a local meeting was held by pastoralists at Bowen, south of Lammermoor Station, where it was proposed that on a number of stations Aboriginal people would be let in, meaning that they would be allowed onto the station land and allowed to live and hunt there, subject to certain conditions.21 Christison had been practising this since he had established Lammermoor Station. In order to demonstrate that he could work suc-

16 Bennett, 47.
18 Reynolds, The Other Side of the Frontier, 104.
19 Ibid., 79.
21 May, 65.
cessfully with the Yirandali Christison captured and gained the trust of a Yirandali man. The process of befriending of him is described by Bennett:

... in order to convince the Dallebura of his friendly intentions Christison chose a fine-looking young fellow and rode after him...he secured the black fellow and brought him home and chained him to a veranda post. He fed him, gave him a blanket, taught him to smoke and succeeded in convincing him of his friendly intentions, while he picked up what he could of the Black fellows language...Christison called him Barney, and the Black fellow made a name for Christison- Munggra...Barney wanted to camp near Christison. Christison agreed, saying you and me two fellow messmates.²²

This description appears to contradict Christison’s desire to establish friendly relations with Aboriginal people. However within the context of the time period Christison felt that this was his only option given the fraught nature of relations between settlers and Aboriginal people in Queensland. Securing Barney to a veranda post and providing him with food and water in an attempt to establish a peaceful relationship with him was within the context of this period, a liberal act.

After the meeting at Bowen several pastoralists began letting Aboriginal people onto their stations. Despite the successful relationships established by a number of settlers, in 1869 Gray of Hughenden Station, to the northeast of Lammermoor Station, wrote to the Colonial Secretary, noting that on many stations in the Mitchell District Aboriginal people were ‘rewarding station holders by spearing their cattle and doing other mischief’. ²³ Boyd Moorhead, the manager of Bowen Downs Station, to the south of Lammermoor, also reported, in 1867, that ‘local clans has destroyed his sheep, not to satisfy their hunger, but their

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²² Bennett, 402-407.
²³ May, 66.
spite’. In 1870 the situation reached a head and a large number of local pastoralists petitioned the Department of Native Affairs for something to be done. Mark Finnane has noted that ‘the dispersed and late settlement of Europeans [in Queensland] meant a heavy call on police resources’, and so an outpost of the Queensland Native Mounted Police was subsequently set up in Hughenden.

In addition to the question of whether or not to let the Aboriginal people onto their stations, settlers debated amongst themselves about the value of using Aboriginal people as labour. Due to the frontier conditions, there were few white people willing to work on these newly established stations in North Queensland in the 1860s and 1870s. Those that were there were enticed away by the discovery of gold. Charles Bowly, a jackaroo, who worked for Christison in 1874 wrote, ‘there are no men to be had … even Chinamen want £2 a week to stop as cooks or shepherds’. Thus many people began to take in Aboriginal workers as stockmen and cooks on their stations. In addition to stockmen Aboriginal people were employed as housemaids and nannies. As a correspondent for *The Queenslander* noted in 1898, ‘many of us are working the stations with blackboys and members of our own family. Very few of us can keep a servant, and a governess or tutor for our children is out of the question’. Proving that this was not the case, Christison employed Wyma, a Yirandali woman to look after his children. By using Barney, the Yirandali man whose trust he had gained, as a go between, Christison offered work to all Yirandali people who wanted it. He provided food and wages for them. The rough contract between Christison and the Yirandali people could be described in terms of ‘country belonging to you. Sheep and cattle belonging to me’.

Mark Cryle has questioned Christison’s harmonious and respectful relationship with the Aboriginal people around Lammermoor Station. Cryle writes that while Christison’s treatment of Aboriginal people was more humane than that of other European settlers, his motivations were more practical and his actions

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27 May, 2.
28 Bennett, 68.
Alison Clark

more brutal than Bennett implies. Christison’s main aim was to make a profit and build a successful pastoral station. To do this he needed a reliable supply of cheap labour and the Yirandali provided this. Cryle argues that there is a disparity between how Bennett described Christison’s treatment of the Yirandali and what his actual opinion of them was. Bennett writes that Christison’s method of punishment was ‘wallopings for the naughty, tobacco and rations for the faithful blacks’.  

However, in Christison’s diary we see a less kindly approach:

I have now made up my mind to treat them like wild animals, kindness is no use. The better they are treated the worse they are- war to the knife with the men and the whip to the boys. Have now tried all means to civilise them, they now have themselves to blame for what will accrue thereafter and they will soon find out how bitter enemies we are when forced to punish them.

Christison appears to have been caught between idealism and the reality of the situation, which was proving more difficult than he had imagined.

The Christison collection was produced during this period of conflict between settlers and Aborigines. Challenged by other pastoralists, Christison felt compelled to demonstrate he could live and work harmoniously with the Aboriginal population. More importantly, the collection reveals itself as another historical source for the relationships between the Christison family and the Yirandali people who lived on Lammermoor Station. It was formed through exchange between members of the Christison family and the Yirandali language group for food and clothes and through gifts from the Yirandali to the Christison family. For example several message sticks in the collection at the BM show how an Aboriginal object was adapted from being a way of conveying meaning across great distance to become a means of communication between the Yirandali and the Christison family, such as one message from Yirandali man Mickey reading: 'Mickey wants warm coat, shirt and trousers. Mickey plenty look out dog, [looking after the kangaroo hounds]'. Another example can be seen in two axes or tomashawks in the same collection, one (figure two) of which was a present from nursemaid Wyma to Christison’s eldest daughter, Bennett, made by Barney.

30  Ibid., 81.
31  Christison Family Papers and Lammermoor Station Records, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland, Australia, Robert Christison Diaries, Box 9568, TR1867.
32  Bennett, 42. The message stick referred to here is BM object Oc1927.0610.12.
33  The object referred to here is BM object Oc1901.1221.9.
In 1927 before returning to Australia, Bennett decided to donate some of the collection to the BM.\textsuperscript{34} In total the BM accepted a collection of forty-seven photographs taken by Mrs Mary Christison and seventeen objects originally collected by Robert Christison, all donated by Bennett.\textsuperscript{35} The BM did not accept all of the objects Bennett offered for donation and so the Horniman Museum received a fire-saw and the Pitt Rivers Museum received a fire-saw and two wooden clubs. In reference to Christison’s Scottish heritage Bennett also donated fourteen objects, and a set of nineteen photographs and notes duplicated from those left with the BM, as well as a map of Yirandali country to the Royal Scottish Museum, now National Museums Scotland in Edinburgh. Finally, Bennett also donated all of her father’s diaries, personal papers and a selection of fourteen objects to the State Library of Queensland (SLQ), and some copy prints and personal papers went to the University of Queensland Fryer Library, and Townsville Public Library.

\textbf{After Lammermoor}

Bennett’s account of the sale of Lammermoor Station implies that Christison wanted to ‘find a purchaser who will treat my blacks well’ and allow them to stay on the property, recognizing that it was their land.\textsuperscript{36} According to Bennett ‘the wife of the new owner of Lammermoor Station cared tenderly for the old blacks and sent frequent news of them to Christison’.\textsuperscript{37} However whilst some of the older Yirandali people remained at Lammermoor Station, and some remained on Christison’s other stations, many others were sent to Cherbourg and Woorabinda Native Settlements near Bris-

\textsuperscript{34} In 1927 Bennett became involved with the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, later joining the British Commonwealth League. Bennett felt that more people needed to give voice to the problems being experienced by Aboriginal people and joined the feminist campaigns attempting to do this. Her role in the feminist campaigns began in London, but really gained force once she returned to Australia in 1930. From 1930 onwards Bennett wrote prolifically on the treatment of Aboriginal people, publishing her views whenever and wherever she could. See Bennett, \textit{The Australian Aboriginal as a Human Being}, (London: Alston Rivers Ltd, 1930); \textit{The Aboriginal Mother in Western Australia}, (London: British Commonwealth League Conference), 1933; Bennett, \textit{Hunt and Die: The Prospect for the Aborigines of Australia}, (London: Anti-Slavery Society, 1950). These writings were informed by periods spent living at Forrest River Mission, and Kunmunya Mission in the Kimberley, and Mount Margaret Mission near Kalgoorlie in Western Australia.

\textsuperscript{35} To date there are fifty-three photographs in the BM collections. From the original donation two photographs are lost. Eight photographs in the current collection are copy prints. In addition to Bennett’s donation, Robert Christison also donated 41 objects to the BM himself between 1901 and 1904.

\textsuperscript{36} Bennett, \textit{Christison of Lammermoor}, 246.

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Ibid.}, 267.
bene, Palm Island off the coast of Townsville or Hughenden Reserve to the north east of Lammermoor Station. Where you were sent in Queensland ‘would all depend on the colour of your skin, if you were darker you went to Palm Island or Bamigah and up the coast, the lighter skinned ones went to Yarabah, or Cherbourg’.38 Hughenden also ‘had an Aboriginal reserve, the people they used to send there [went] to work at Richmond, and ... when they got old and couldn’t do anything they got sent back to Hughenden’.39

In the 1990s these policies of removal were investigated when the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Inquiry looked into the forced separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. The subsequent report, Bringing Them Home, gave a public voice to the Aboriginal children who were removed from their families to either missions or native settlements where they would be taught how to be what was termed ‘civilised’.40 Occasionally station owners arranged for Aboriginal people in their care to be made exempt, meaning that the Protector of Aborigines could not remove them from that situation. Yirandali woman Sarah recalls that her ‘mum and dad were exempt from that because my mum was brought up by the mayor of the town, in high society if the protector knows you are being well looked after then there is no need to send you elsewhere around the country’.41 Despite this exemption, Sarah’s mother still had to ask permission from the local protector to get married to her husband. Christison had arranged exemptions for many of the Yirandali working on Lammermoor Station. However, after the station was sold, exemptions did not continue.

Sarah’s family are one of the few Yirandali families that have remained in any real proximity to traditional country. By 1934 one third of Indigenous people in Queensland were living on missions and settlements.42 Stephanie, another Yirandali woman, has described how her grandfather was removed from Lammermoor Station and sent to Cherbourg Native Settlement.43 For Stephanie and her family the Bringing Them Home Report gave validation to the Indigenous oral histories about the stolen generations, once again high-

38 Interview CB002 with Sarah, May 2011.
39 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 64.
43 Interview CB005 with Stephanie, April 2011.

92
lighting the conflict between Indigenous and settler narratives in Australian history. The report discusses in intricate detail the realities of life at settlements such as Cherbourg, with one witness commenting that ‘we could have a corroboree if the Protector issued a permit. It was completely up to him. I never had a chance to learn about my traditional and customary way of life when I was on the reserve’. Residents at Cherbourg were forced to speak English and any display of Aboriginal culture was forbidden, unless as part of a show for visitors. Having grown up in an environment where holding knowledge about your own language group was discouraged appears to have generated a feeling of disempowerment within Stephanie, who is unable to talk about the Christison collection with any sense of authority. She sees the book _Christison of Lammermoor_ as the true history of that period and her own knowledge as simply ‘memory [which can be] seen as unsubstantiated’.

For Stephanie’s family in particular the Christison collection represents emotional ties back to country and especially the country of which their ancestors spoke. The publication _Christison of Lammermoor_ also gave them a chance to learn about their ancestors’ way of life. Much of Stephanie’s sense of disempowerment in relation to the collection comes from how this background has contributed to her view of the museum as an institution that knows best. Whilst she sees the curator, or the researcher as being an authority figure, in fact when Stephanie discusses her grandfather’s oral histories they are richer than any of the documentation that is held in the archives. When shown photographs of the objects and copies of the photographs her own opinions on the collection, and way of interpreting it provides that Indigenous narrative.

For Sarah and Stephanie their participation in projects that allow them to engage with Yirandali cultural heritage demonstrates the continual relevance of material culture like the Christison collection to them. It also allows for the historical and contemporary Indigenous narratives not just on this collection, but also on the history of relations between settlers and Yirandali people, to emerge. These narratives can enrich the existing documentation thus giving us a variety of perspectives.

In addition to involving themselves in museum consultation projects several Yirandali people are involved with cultural heritage clearance, an initiative run as part of the Cultural Heritage Program within each state’s department.

44 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 133.
that looks after roads or mining or infrastructure. The initiative gives the traditional owners of the land a say in the way that the land is used. Representatives from the relevant Aboriginal language group are paid by the government to conduct land surveys alongside a government official and usually a freelance anthropologist, geologist or archaeologist relevant to the job, who is also paid by the government. As an example from a report by the Queensland Government’s Department of Transport and Main Roads states:

... previously unidentified cultural heritage values may exist on or under the area in question. It is prudent for a project proponent to undertake a systematic inspection of the area to be affected (commonly called a cultural heritage survey or cultural heritage clearance) to establish if cultural heritage values are present in an area. Such an inspection should be undertaken in conjunction with the Australian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander party for the area.\footnote{46}

Through looking at these projects we can see the current nature of relationships between pastoralists and Aboriginal people in particular regions. In the area that Sarah works she notes that there is still conflict over who has the right to what is found on the land, and who has the right to that land altogether. She notes that:

... a lot of graziers pick ... up [Aboriginal objects] and if they’ve got them they don’t want to tell you because they think you’re gonna come and claim back their land ... Now most graziers here when they want something done, they go through the Department of Natural Resources ... but there again you’ve got to do cultural clearance ... graziers pick ... up [objects] and they don’t tell you where they are ... one good thing about doing [cultural clearance] is just sharing [the objects] with people showing what there is out here and stuff.\footnote{47}

As a child Sarah was brought up by a prominent white family and educated with the white children in the house. Her comment, that as a result of this upbringing she ‘never knew how it felt to be Aboriginal’ demonstrates a feeling of ‘not belonging’ that occurred due to alienation from her own country and language group.\footnote{48} However, her re-engagement with Yirandali cultural

\footnote{47} Interview CB002 with Sarah, May 8 2011.
\footnote{48} Ibid.
heritage as a result of working with a Yirandali man Jason on a native title claim, and through her own current work on cultural heritage clearance projects has generated within her a sense of authority over the way people speak about Yirandali history. The rise in self-determination politics since 2003, with its roots in the 1970s campaign for Aboriginal rights, has meant that Aboriginal people have become more involved in the way their traditional country is used by external agents, such as mining companies. Documentation - both object and paper based - that can establish an ongoing connection with the land for the Aboriginal people making a native title claim is sought by lawyers and anthropologists who are usually instructed by the language group making the claim. Objects found through these cultural heritage clearance projects and those objects housed in museums, such as the Christison collection, that demonstrate historical ties to the land can then be used as documentation in native title claims. The work Sarah has done with archaeologists on cultural heritage clearance has enabled her to think about the processes involved in making many of the objects present in the Christison collection. When I showed her the photographs of the Christison objects she spoke about the materials they would have been made from and where you could find this in Yirandali country. Sarah also took me to see a scarred tree and explained how bark would have been cut out of the tree at an angle to use for a shield. These trees are evidence of Aboriginal presence on the land and many of them can be up to 200 years old. Whilst Sarah had described to me feelings of alienation from Aboriginal culture growing up, it was clear that as a result of her work with these cultural heritage clearance projects she had begun to feel more tied to her Aboriginal heritage. The historical events that contributed to feelings of alienation in her childhood and later on may then account for her defensiveness towards outsiders who express an interest in her cultural heritage, which she values both as a self-determining Yirandali person, and as a way of engaging her own family in their cultural history, to ensure that they do not experience the alienation she did growing up.

Interviewing Yirandali people about the Christison collection gives us some of the narratives that form part of the collection’s complex history. Understanding these narratives and how they can interact with others comes from an understanding of how Yirandali people and settlers have interacted. In addition considering not just how museums consult with indigenous people but also how indigenous people are consulted for other projects outside of a museum setting is an important contextualisation tool.

49 Ibid.
EXHIBITING THE CHRISTISON COLLECTION TODAY

Curator Phillip Jones has suggested that museum exhibits should not simply focus on one narrative within an object or collections history when it is exhibited. He urges museum professionals to move away from the common view of the non-reflective museum that simply presents objects as examples of a single culture. Instead, he explores a new way of looking at museum objects, considering not just their Indigenous history but also their European history, and what these objects have to say about the encounters that were taking place around them. Jones’ call for museum exhibitions to simultaneously incorporate the multiple narratives present in a single object, or a collection, reflects a concern that museums have contended with for the past five years. By accepting the multiple meanings of Aboriginal objects and their ‘ownership’ by several communities and audiences, museums are beginning to create new dialogues, networks and identities around objects. This paper has attempted to present some of the many narratives present in the Christison collection. Drawing on an exhibition case study I will now discuss the conflict that exists in attempting to exhibit these multiple narratives.

In June 2011 selected items from the Christison collection were displayed as part of the new permanent ‘Landmarks’ gallery (figure three) at the National Museum of Australia (NMA). In 2003 a high profile review of the NMA made

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Jones, Ochre and Rust.
a series of recommendations for the revision of the museum’s new galleries.\textsuperscript{51} This report, known as The Carroll Report, was a product of political, historical and cultural debates that had surrounded the NMA since its inception between 1975 and 1980 and its opening in 2001. The Carroll Report responded to Keith Windschuttle’s criticisms of the NMA after its opening. Windschuttle argued that the NMA conformed to a black-armband vision of history, and believed that the museum should focus on well-known key people such as Captain Cook, rather than on the minorities who only played a little part in the shaping of a national history. Essentially, Windschuttle, alongside the Carroll Report, argued for a more traditional version of a museum, one that told stories in a linear chronological order and told a single unified version of history.

In particular the Carroll Report advised that the NMA should reconsider the themes and narratives in the existing ‘Nation’ gallery. In response, the NMA developed the concept of ‘Creating a Country’, a gallery that would replace the Nation gallery. Nation had opened in 2001 and approached Australian history through a series of symbols, or iconic objects, for example the Hills hoist washing line, and the racing horse Phar Lap’s heart. The aim of Creating a Country was to provide ‘a general history of Australia’s economic, social and political conditions. Key moments in Australian history and experience were to be explored through specific places and their pasts’.\textsuperscript{52} The exhibition brief that came out of the report also suggested that ‘a focus on place also helps reveal the layered historical meanings of landscape and acknowledges the museum’s obligation under its act to include indigenous and non-indigenous voices in representing the past’.\textsuperscript{53} It was hoped that this new focus would allow the gallery to move away from creating a unified notion of what Australia is. It would instead allow for multiple experiences and a variety of perspectives on Australia as a nation, which in turn would reflect the country’s twenty-first century, multicultural population.

Through the development process Creating a Country was rebranded as ‘Landmarks’. The approach within Landmarks was to be ethno-historical, and the exhibition needed to appeal to all major age groups, all socio-economic and educational backgrounds, and all gender and ethnic groups. History would be
explored though place, and in turn through objects from that place. The gallery would also feature interactive multimedia stations to ‘let visitors access information, explore objects and view landscapes related to the place interpreted at that point’.\textsuperscript{54} Within this context the Christison display of Yirandali objects was conceptualised in order to address two of the gallery’s ten themes: ‘the sense of diversity or differences between people involved in historical encounter’, and ‘the character of economies and working life related to the historical moment’.\textsuperscript{55} The Christison display was included in the module ‘Never Enough Grass’, which examines how ‘the pastoral industry underpinned colonial affluence and expansion in the nineteenth century’.\textsuperscript{56} It features seven Yirandali objects: a necklace, child’s axe, boomerang, kingplate, club, a throwing stick and a headband. The objects were borrowed from both the BM and the SLQ. The Yirandali objects form part of a wider display about Bowen Downs Station. The owners of Bowen Downs Station had a tense relationship with the Aboriginal language group, the Iningai, on whose land Bowen Downs Station was established. In 1871 a group of Native Mounted Police were dispatched to Bowen Downs Station by the Queensland government to protect the pastoralists from the Iningai. The inclusion of Yirandali objects from the Christison Collection in this module provides a wider context for this narrative as Christison placed conditions on the Native Mounted Police. Behind the main display case are three objects from Bowen Downs Station, a map showing the locations of Bowen Downs Station and Lammermoor Station, and two panels featuring quotes from Boyd Moorhead, the manager of Bowen Downs Station, and Christison, the manager of Lammermoor Station. The historical quotes from Christison and Moorhead present contrasting views on Aboriginal people at that time, and in that place. Christison speaks of developing relationships with the Yirandali whereas Moorhead comments on the necessity of conflict and the death of Iningai people in order for white settlers to establish themselves.

The exhibition brief for Landmarks highlighted the need for the presence of both the Indigenous and non-indigenous voice in representing the past. To fulfil this criterion, the NMA worked with Yirandali representatives in developing the content for the exhibition display. As the objects from the BM would only arrive in Australia in time for the gallery reopening, this consultation included a visit to the SLQ to inspect fourteen objects from Lammermoor Station, and associated photographs. The representatives held the objects and

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 14.
spoke on and around them, discussing the relevance of the objects to them and their family, as well as mentioning family memories of Lammermoor Station that had been passed down through time. When I spoke to Stephanie, who was involved in this consultation, she spoke about the way that the SLQ has cared for the Christison objects in their collection stating that ‘I was really happy they [SLQ] did it all, packed it [the object] with wool, I thought it was very good’. Stephanie was happy that the library has looked after the objects by storing them well so that future generations of Yirandali people can visit the library and access the collection. We also discussed a visit she had made to Lammermoor Station. Stephanie said ‘I was really excited about the stuff [the building ruins] that we did see, I looked and I sort of felt it when I put my hand on it, I felt it you know.’ Stephanie’s excitement was, she noted, attributed to the fact that she was seeing for the first time the objects and places her grandfather has spoken to her about, they were for her ‘sites of memory’, enabling her to understand his history better. Her response demonstrates the importance of the collection and its history to her. It also shows the enduring connections people feel to material culture, and demonstrates how important consultation projects between museum collections and originating communities can be for both the indigenous people involved as well as the museums.

Photographs of this consultation and selected quotes from the transcripts of the interviews are available for viewers to look at in the Landmarks interactive multimedia station, which also includes a selection of historical photographs taken by Mrs Christison of Yirandali at Lammermoor Station. The interactive multimedia station provides a contemporary Indigenous perspective on a narrative about the interaction between settlers and Aborigines that has largely been dominated by the Christison family. The juxtaposition of contemporary and historical photographs in the interactive multimedia station presents an ongoing story of Yirandali culture and society. Though the emphasis in the main display of objects is on the historical narrative given by Christison and Bennett, it does highlight the collaborative relationship between the Christison family and the Yirandali.

Throughout the entire Christison display we get a sense of the multiple voices that are present in the Christison collection. However the way that the multi-

57 Interview with Stephanie.
58 Ibid.
59 Maria Nugent, ‘Sites of Segregation/ Sites of Memory: Remembrance and Race in Australia’, Memory Studies, 6, 3 (2013), 299.
ple voices are presented to the visitor is problematic. The historical perspective is privileged in the main display of the Never Enough Grass module whilst the contemporary perspective is privileged in the interactive multimedia station. The visitor can therefore easily visit the exhibition and view the main display, and not access the interactive multimedia station, or vice versa. An additional problem is the use of technology. When I visited the exhibition two of the screens in the interactive multimedia station were not functioning. If the third screen had been broken visitors would have been unable to access the Indigenous voice at all. There is also no clear linkage for the visitor between the two sections of what is essentially meant to be one display. A further criticism of the Christison module, which was made by the Yirandali people who were involved in the consultation for it, has been that it does not fully discuss who the Yirandali are, either historically or now. If we are to judge the exhibition by the exhibition brief, then we can see that the emphasis is meant to be on the pastoralist and his response to the Indigenous population, not the pastoralist and the Indigenous people. Despite this, the curator has included an Indigenous voice, alongside the historical one, so that both voices are present. The two voices, however, conflict in the exhibition space. As a result of the spatial separation of these two dialogues their narratives do not cohere.

Throughout its mediation of historic and contemporary dialogues Landmarks continually highlights the importance of the relationship between people and the land. The very existence of the Christison collection, and the quality of its associated documentation, demonstrated a collaborative relationship between Christison and the Yirandali in relation to land use, in which the Yirandali and the Christison family each allowed the other the live peacefully on the land. In addition the presence of a contemporary Yirandali voice in the interactive display in Landmarks highlights the continual importance of the land to the Yirandali, despite their considerable geographic dispersal. Their contemporary narratives speak of an emotional tie to Lammermoor Station and to Yirandali country, which are generated through their physical engagement with these historic objects. Contemporary responses to the collection by the Yirandali people whose history this material is a part of, has been varied but the overriding message that comes through is the importance of this collection to people’s relationship with the land. For example Stephanie remarked ‘when I saw it all I thought about him [her grandfather] sitting around the fire telling all his stories about it. I broke down. He used to tell us, Cherbourg is my home but Lammermoor is my real home’.60 Land-
marks is about specific stories of place and how these stories have shaped the national landscape of Australia. The Christison display highlights the importance of physical land to both Indigenous people and the settlers.

When analysing the Christison display it is worth considering the constraints within which the museum has had to work. For exhibitions that deal specifically with Indigenous material culture, there is an impetus for the NMA to conduct consultations with Indigenous communities and to provide that Indigenous narrative. Museums in the United Kingdom do not have to do this, although they would like to be able to do so. Thus whilst the exhibition struggles to fulfil Jones’ brief, it is successful in terms of fulfilling its own exhibition objectives.

**CONCLUSION**

Many of the relationships between settlers and Aboriginal people that resulted in museum collections were influenced by Australian government laws and practices. As we have seen in Queensland, pastoralists’ practice of keeping Aboriginal people off their properties developed from tensions between Aboriginal people and settlers during the early period of colonisation. The Christison collection is a product of these tensions. If Christison had not challenged the belief that Aboriginal people and pastoralists could not live in harmony with each other, the Yirandali would not have lived and worked on Lammermoor Station. Without this relationship the Christison collection and its rich associated documentation would not exist and it would not be possible to trace the descendants of the Yirandali people who lived and worked at Lammermoor Station. However it is important not to rely solely on the documentation provided by Christison, but to also with other historic sources. In addition by engaging with the collection and with material culture in other cultural heritage projects contemporary Yirandali people are reclaiming these collections and the contentious histories that they are a part of in order to make their own narratives heard. Driving this paper has been a concern to consider how, once this collection has been reassessed and many of the narratives on the collection made available, a museum can adequately give voice to them. Obviously we are never going to know all of the narratives as this is a constantly changing and growing process. However what the NMA case study reveals is that in order for a museum to attempt to exhibit these multiple narratives it needs, where possible, to employ a variety of interpretive methods within the exhibition. In addition this case study highlights the problematic nature of the employment of these different methods, and Jones’ task. That is not to say it is an impossible task. However it requires museums to pay close attention to the way that these narratives are presented to the visitor.
List of Figures

Fig. 1: Yirandali country. From a map sketched by the author. Courtesy and copyright Mark Gunning.

Fig. 2: Axe. Oc1901.1221.9. Collected by R Christison. Courtesy and copyright The Trustees of the British Museum.

Fig. 3: The Christison case in the Never Enough Grass module, of the Landmarks gallery at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra. From a photograph taken by the author. Courtesy of the National Museum of Australia.