

Indigenous Knowledge and the Hann Expedition: Re-Examining Scientific Collections From Colonial Expeditions

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Abstract

An examination of the motivations, dynamics and activities of colonial exploring expeditions can provide valuable insights into the ways in which the colonial mindset shaped the development of natural history collections in colonised lands. The *Indigenous Knowledge and the Hann Expedition: Re-examining scientific collections from colonial expeditions* project is working to redress these omissions in the historical record by re-contextualising the botanical specimens collected on the 1872 Northern Expedition and re-connecting them with the Aboriginal Country from which they were collected (Dalley et al. 2024).

The 1872 Northern Expedition, led by William Hann, sought to establish the mineral and agricultural potential of Cape York Peninsula in northern Queensland, Australia. Alongside Hann, the expedition party included Jerry (Aboriginal guide), Dr Thomas Tate (botanist), Norman Taylor (geologist) and three other European men: Warner, Stewart and Nation. It was this expedition, with its reports of gold on the Palmer River, that triggered Queensland's biggest goldrush and led to an influx of more than 20,000 settlers, with disastrous consequences for the Aboriginal people who occupied the area (Taylor and Huxley 2020).

Between June and November, the expedition party travelled from Mount Surprise north to the Stewart River, before returning south via the coast at Cooktown and Weary Bay (Taylor and Huxley 2020). Geological specimens were collected by Taylor, and botanical specimens were collected by Tate and Taylor (Dowe and Taylor 2019). The botanical specimens collected by Tate and Taylor, now held at [Royal Botanic Gardens Kew](#) (K) and the [National Herbarium of Victoria](#) (MEL), were enumerated by John Dowe and Peter Taylor (Dowe and Taylor 2019). It has since emerged that the [Queensland Herbarium](#) (BRI) holds an additional 18 botanical specimens collected by Tate during the expedition

(Council of Heads of Australasian Herbaria 2024). These specimens—along with expedition diaries and maps—will provide a stimulus for regional engagement that explores the intersection between the Hann expedition, colonial science, and the ongoing impacts of colonial violence on Indigenous peoples.

The project is being led by three direct descendants of members of the expedition party: Nicole Huxley (descendant of Jerry); Peter Taylor (descendant of Norman Taylor) and Cameo Dalley (descendant of Thomas Tate), making the project uniquely—and powerfully—positioned to examine the personal, scientific and sociopolitical legacies of the expedition (Dalley 2021). It was co-designed with Balkanu Cape York Development Corporation and the three herbaria that house the expedition’s botanical collections. Through engaging in truth-telling with Aboriginal knowledge-holders on Cape York Peninsula to openly share and discuss historical truths around colonial violence and dispossession—while highlighting the strength and resilience of First Peoples (ANTaR 2024)—the project team hope to correct historical omissions that have stood for more than 150 years and provide a more complete picture of the way in which colonial plant collections were made.

Initial engagement is being undertaken with Aboriginal communities in Cape York will be undertaken to generate shared history-making and elevate Indigenous knowledge and memory to develop countervailing historical narratives and recontextualise the botanical specimens collected on the expedition. All engagement with Aboriginal communities will be held on-Country, i.e., on lands to which the Aboriginal peoples being consulted are connected via law, cultural practice, spiritual belief, language and/or custom (AIATSIS 2024).

At the time of writing, the three descendants are continuing a series of region-specific engagements that are generating interest in—and support for—Indigenous-led knowledge-sharing and the documentation of untold stories. Based on this initial show of support, the project partners will likely seek funding for a broader Indigenous-led program of on-Country truth- and storytelling around key events that followed the 1872 Hann Expedition.

Alongside the on-Country truth-telling, the project will help herbaria develop protocols for recording Indigenous Cultural Knowledge (ICK) shared by Aboriginal knowledge-holders in ways that uphold cultural safety and principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Data Governance. Through two-way knowledge sharing, we hope to enrich the specimens both culturally and scientifically by:

- acknowledging the histories of specimens and the Traditional Owners of the lands on which they were collected;
- accommodating ethnobotanical enrichment of specimens by recording ICK alongside Western scientific knowledge in collection management systems, if requested by Traditional Owners; and
- connecting specimens to Country via enhanced georeferencing utilising Aboriginal knowledge of plants and place, and Expedition resources.

This symbiotic blending of botanical science and Indigenous Cultural Knowledge will 'give voice to Country' through knowledge partnerships, helping to heal the past, and to better understand and conserve the complex biodiversity of Cape York.

Keywords

herbarium, botany, specimens, colonialism, Cape York, Queensland

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Conflicts of interest

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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