

Petroglyphs of Dampier—Foreword

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As well as conducting and supporting “research in fields relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies ...” and publishing and assisting in the publication of the results of such studies, the statutory functions of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies include establishing and maintaining “a cultural resource collection consisting of materials relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies ...” (CoA, 1989).

In his address to the National Press Club in November 2014, the chair of the Institute’s council, Professor Michael Dodson AM, outlined three phases of the history of the development of the Institute over the 50 years since its inception (Dodson, 2014). In particular, Dr Dodson focussed on the Institute’s collections and emphasized challenges facing them:

AIATSIS is not able to adequately protect its current collection and nor are we able to go out to communities, and to recover materials held in private—in biscuit tins and shoe boxes—that are perishing. We’re not able to find and protect items of unique significance that contain the stories of past and more recent generations. ... Nor can we gather the stories of those who have lived through the massive changes of the past twenty-five years. ...

The Institute needed a “comprehensive and urgent plan to identify, gather, safe-keep and share, the Indigenous heritage of this nation”. He foreshadowed a major public-private initiative focussing on the Institute’s collections. This initiative has commenced with the establishment of a foundation and re-focus of resources on the collections and their research potentials.

This emphasis on the Institute’s collections is relevant to the present book. During and subsequent to his fieldwork, from the late 1970s, the research consultant and rock art specialist then employed by the Institute, Dr Michel Lorblanchet, lodged a substantial collection of reports and related materials in the Institute’s library and photographic archives. These materials, supplemented by items from Lorblanchet’s own files, provide the basis of the current publication.

Many will be aware of the breadth and depth of the Institute’s collections—Dodson’s address has some amazing details of the extent of its holdings—and their potential to provide for the development of useful accounts relevant to the history and anthropology of Indigenous Australians.

This book is a pertinent reminder of this potential. I commend the example of Rio Tinto in supporting its development through its Conservation Agreement with the Commonwealth, and the scholarly work of the author, translators and editors in its realization, and I encourage others to have in mind the potential of—and the need for—similar works drawing on the collections available at AIATSIS.

References

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<https://aiatsis.gov.au/gallery/video/its-too-late-call-secure-australias-indigenous-heritage>