Exchanges, Comparative Advantage, and the Historical Construction of Collections

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This paper explores the involvement of the National Museum of Victoria (now Museum Victoria) in the inter-museum exchange system during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a mechanism of collection building at that time, museums actively exchanged artefacts and specimens. The trade was global and had its origins in a collegial ethos, but by the late-nineteenth century, the trade had become a mechanism for cash-strapped institutions to build their collections. In 1857, only a year after the National Museum's founding, Frederick McCoy linked the Museum into the exchange system (Pescott and Grimwade, 1954: 39, McCoy, 1858a). The Museum's involvement in this trade substantially continued until the 1930s.

This system is important because it places the knowledge and research framework of early museums within an economic framework. The items exchanged were not random and unconnected, but symbolically linked. In exploring the symbolic value embedded within the exchange process, we can examine how the exchange system contributed to the shaping of knowledge.

Museum collections are historical artefacts and what is collected and how it is collected represent snapshots in time (Pearce, 1995). The collections reflect social attitudes at the particular moment of each
item's acquisition. A collection therefore consists of layers of stratum. Each of these layers is a window into the changing social ideas of the time. This view of the museum has been the focus of much contemporary research (Bennett, 2004, Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, Griffiths, 1996, Sheets-Pyenson, 1988). Nevertheless this focus primarily gravitates around ethnographic collections (Ames, 1992, Peterson et al., 2008). These collections were instrumental in the early days of anthropology, but were then largely ignored by mainstream anthropology. Therefore, research into the formation of these collections shines a light on different aspects of cultural encounters. These encounters, however, were often colonial, and therefore the material construction of collections sit within a politically charged environment. This view means that the museum's collections are artefacts of colonialism and therefore reflect ideologies of colonialism (Ames, 1992, Bennett, 2004, Sheets-Pyenson, 1988: 12-17). Collection therefore reflects changing social values. This methodology can also apply to natural history collections, with collections reflecting the development of scientific beliefs.

Founded in 1857, the National Museum of Victoria was a natural history museum, ethnographic museum and science and technology museum. The museum has a complex history that reflects many different ideological agendas. For example, the first director, Frederick McCoy, strongly believed that ethnographic artefacts were works of "human ingenuity" and were more "appropriately depicted in the public library" (McCoy, 1861) and they were until 1870, when indigenous artefacts were included in the newly created National Art Gallery. However, they were then transferred to the technology museum in 1893 (Pescott and Grimwade, 1954: 93).

McCoy strongly argued against the inclusion of humans under the theme of natural history. This was in contradiction to many of the beliefs in the colony at the time. On his death however, McCoy lost the battle. The new director, Walter Baldwin Spencer, was a biologist, and a believer in Social Darwinism. A trailblazing anthropologist, Spencer immediately closed the technology museum and transferred the ethnographic collection to the natural history museum. This placement of the ethnology collection reflected shifting ideological attitudes, from being works of knowledge placed in a library, to being considered artworks, to being models of technological advancement and then to being considered products of nature. This example demonstrates that museums are grounds of contested space in which the dissemination of knowledge also reflects changing attitudes. Yet museum collections are about more than just reflections of past social beliefs. They are also re-
flections of an existence in a global marketplace.

Located on the periphery, the National Museum operated in a marketplace of acquisitions (Sheets-Pyenson, 1988: 21). The natural history collection was commissioned during a gold rush bonanza. Therefore, some of the standout treasures of the collection were purchased, with Frederick McCoy lavishly exuding largesse. Bonanzas, however, come to an end. The purchasing power of the museum was tied to the economic fortunes of the colonial government. Nevertheless, from the museum's creation, McCoy also built the collection through exchanges.

Frederick McCoy was involved in over seventy exchanges during his time as director. These were sometimes small local deals with private individuals, but often were inter-institutional exchanges that were at times complex transactions. The currency for these exchanges was surplus material; therefore, like other economic systems, the inter-museum exchange system relied on comparative advantage. McCoy had a steady stream of donated Victorian fauna to work with. From these donations, McCoy would put together a sample collection and forward the collection to European and American museums.

McCoy was not on his own, many directors of colonial or peripheral museums used exchanges to build their collections (Sheets-Pyenson, 1988). The geologist, Julius Haast, created the Canterbury Museum in New Zealand, primarily through exchanges (Von Haast and Von Haast, 1948). Haast is indicative of the entrepreneurial spirit that encapsulated these early directors. He was employed to undertake a geological survey of Canterbury province in New Zealand and approached McCoy in 1860, offering to send his “collection of N. Zealand fossils on condition that” McCoy “describes them and returns duplicates and sketches of the unique specimens” (McCoy, 1860: 305). As an addition, Haast supplied McCoy with a few moa bones as a gift. Like Haast, McCoy made similar gestures of largesse, offering Professor Owen at the British Museum Victorian fauna and Tasmanian Devil bones (McCoy, 1858b: 86-88), in turn McCoy would regularly forward Lyrebird specimens to Francis Gould (Fleming, 2001: 210, 215). These offerings of specimens as gifts represented collegial practice and a shared ethos of intellectual endeavour. They were also adverts that demonstrated the strengths of particular collections, opening opportunities for future exchanges.

Although Haast contacted McCoy before possessing a museum, he contacted him with the intention of building one. In 1861, Haast proposed an exchange of moa bones for Victorian fauna, asking for duplicates
stating, "I have the intention to begin a museum for the province of Canterbury" (Haast, 1861). Haast (1863) continued to pursue the deal: "I shall be extremely glad to receive anything, which you may be able to send. Various birds and quadrupeds, recent and fossil shells, entomological specimens will be very acceptable. I hope in about 6 months we shall be able to open an [sic] Museum, having already received large collections from Europe and I should like to be able to exhibit and also name Australian specimens, as we do not yet [sic] any. I cannot very well send you anything before the opening of our museum as I am not yet certain, what implicates our [sic], but you may be sure we shall not be behind-hand in sending you acceptable things in exchange."

Haast's statement epitomises the comparative advantage that underwrote the exchange system. Haast had moa bones but not much else. McCoy had access to Australian fauna, and some duplicates of overseas specimens. Through exchanges, both sides could build their collections. Exchanges also reflected ideological views on the nature of museums. McCoy believed in multiple centres of creation and therefore wanted species from across the globe (McCoy, c.1898). This belief necessitated exchanges. These exchanges, however, were painful deals. The relationship eventually soured between the two men. Haast routinely complained of McCoy's lack of correspondence. Haast was not alone in this complaint, many of McCoy's correspondents complained how little McCoy put pen to paper. Haast had hoped that McCoy would be more productive in the naming and describing of specimens. Disgruntled with McCoy, and wanting to build his own museum, Haast asked for his specimens back (Haast, 1864). McCoy courteously responded forwarding the specimens in September 1864. The impression from Haast's letters is that he felt McCoy was treating him like a mere collector and not a partner in research. However, for McCoy, the key issue was the flipside of comparative advantage. Moa bones were rare, and therefore expensive. The deal for a *Dinornis maximus* was not finalised until 1876. Haast's wish-list consisted of 676 species; however, McCoy only forwarded 200 Australian birds. Haast refused to close the deal and demanded more in exchange. After a further year of negotiations and threatened legal action, Haast agreed to a further seventeen exotic mammals. This was a drawn-out argument on the symbolic value of the moa.

The skeleton became a major drawcard. In poster advertisements for the museum, McCoy pictured the moa skeleton, along with the stuffed gorilla and diprotodon cast as one of the museum's star attractions. Richard Owen had demonstrated the visual significance
of extinct animals. Tony Bennett (2004: 40) argues that "Owen dazzled his contemporaries by reconstructing extinct forms of life (the moa, dinosaurs) on the basis of their fragmentary remains and exhibiting them - lest they be taken for a magician - with all the authority that the expert-as-showman could muster". McCoy was quick to catch on to the visual importance of large extinct creatures, writing to Owen as early as 1858: "could we by begging or buying, get a set of casts of your great Dinornis bones" (McCoy, 1858b: 88).

It was well known that McCoy was eager to gain moa bones. The dialogue between McCoy and Haast demonstrates the agency within comparative advantage. Material structures of acquisition directly limited and shaped McCoy's museum. Therefore, the potential agency of museums was being shaped by the political economy of collection. Both McCoy and Haast had access to surplus supply, however their agency was limited by the value of their specimens. An underlining theme in McCoy's and Haast's correspondences is the transformation of Julian Haast into Julian von Haast. A key aspect of this was the moa skeletons. Haast continually emphasises his success in acquiring the moa skeletons in his correspondence with McCoy. He was also emphasising the global interest in these skeletons.

McCoy was clearly irritated by Haast's success. In response to Haast's insistence on more specimens, McCoy argued his 200 Australian Birds were "the value being about the same or nearly equal that of the skeleton of Dinornis maximus in the market" (McCoy 1876: 161). The collapse of the relationship around the exchange is most clearly seen in McCoy's letter to Henry Ward, in which he states, "I dare say Dr Haast would not like me to get them, but that is nothing to the purpose in business transactions with you." (McCoy, 1881: 29) McCoy's irritation was not based on scientific disagreements. His irritation was purely economic.

It demonstrates that Haast's success was not therefore limited to science. Science and the economy of acquisition were intimately related. Haast's scientific success was equally dependent on his success in the marketplace around science. Comparative advantage shaped the agency of the museum. This dialogue shows the symbolic value of particular specimens at that moment in time. Extinction increased value, with very few skeletons; Haast was able to create a large natural history collection. In comparison, McCoy operated in a marketplace that did not value his specimens. Therefore, the type of species that museums collected in the nineteenth century was linked to marketplace demand.

As Bennett argued, museum directors were showmen. Bennett uses the analogy of the magicians, who
transformed scattered bones into marvels of creation. Underpinning this however was access. Richard Owen was at the scientific centre of the British Empire. There was imperial nationalist pressure on colonial museum directors to support Owen’s research. For example, McCoy (1874: 84) responded to a Victorian Parliamentarian in the following manner: “I have the honour to acknowledge the receipt of your minute of the 14th instant and beg to say that I am intimately acquainted with Professor Owen and his works, and will strongly advise that the government should recommend the sum asked for to Parliament as it will do great honour to the Colony and service to sciences.

“The work on which I am engaged referred to in part of Mr Francis minute, is confined to Victorian Organic remains, while the material of Professor Owen’s work on the bones of Marsupials abound chiefly in the caves of New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia comparatively few beyond these I have described occurring in Victoria, but the contribution asked for from this colony to a general work found on the numerous collections forwarded to the British Museum is highly desirable.”

McCoy’s letter implies the quasi-federative mindset of the imperial minded colonial museum director. The relationship between the Victorian National Museum and the British Museum during the nineteenth century was one of dependency. As the letter demonstrates, there was a naturalised belief of colonial subservience to the scientific centre. Nevertheless, McCoy rarely exchanged with British institutions, choosing instead to exchange with European, American or other colonial institutions. More importantly, for our purposes, the letter also demonstrates the importance in finding a large stash of fossils. It is also another example of McCoy’s bad position regarding comparative advantage. For in the letter, McCoy admits that he does not have access to these fossils. Soon after taking control of the museum, McCoy sponsored an excavation in search of megafauna, writing to Owen: “We are trying to find some more of the large mammalian remains by excavating in the swamps near Mount Macedon in which were found the large jaws and teeth and bones of extremities sent home to you by Dr Hobson (of which I wish you could spare us a cast).” (McCoy, 1858b: 87) However, by 1874, McCoy realised that he did not have access to the fossils of marsupial megafauna.

Although containing himself with the belief that any marsupial finds would be small, McCoy sent collectors to find marsupials in Gippsland, which in the late nineteenth century was still covered by dense temperate rainforest. McCoy even hoped to find the
Tasmanian Tiger, writing to his procurer Cyril Stafford "it has been rumoured that the Tasmanian Devil and Marsupial Wolf have been found in the locality in which you are now collecting, the Director request that you will use your utmost endeavours to procure specimens of the same for the museum." (McCoy, 1873: 582) He also sponsored excavations in Omeo in search of Diprotodon remains (McCoy, 1882: 87). However, after only finding remains of extinct kangaroo, McCoy called off the excavations (McCoy, 1883: 133). Such finds were important for science, but they were also important for the commerce around the museum.

Similar to McCoy, Walter Baldwin Spencer also used exchanges to build the collection. The same issues of comparative advantage affected Spencer. However, Spencer, although a biologist, was also interested in anthropology. His interest in anthropology provided a new supply of "rare" material to exchange. Writing to his friend Henry Balfour in 1897, Spencer exclaimed "in a few years they will make them 'to order' which means that the makers have never seen them used but that they have been told about them and are willing to manufacture them for a 'consideration'" (Spencer, 1897: 3). When Spencer wrote this, McCoy was still director of the museum, and Spencer's involvement with the museum was marginal; however, within two years, McCoy would be dead and Spencer would be director. On taking control, he transferred the ethnology collection to the natural history museum, and subsequently built one of the largest collections of Australian aboriginal material culture in the world (Mulvaney, 2008).

In all correspondence with other museums, Spencer emphasised scarcity. Scarcity, however is relative. For as Spencer admitted, "in a few years they will make them 'to order'"; therefore, Spencer played the comparative advantage game, emphasising cultural originality as a valued commodity as opposed to tourist kitsch. This was the era of salvage anthropology (Penny, 2003). Social Darwinism dominated anthropological thought in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Australia, so indigenous cultures were perceived as primitive and destined for extinction (Griffiths, 1996). Spencer's collecting practices therefore pursued an agenda of salvage anthropology (Mulvaney and Calaby, 1985, Mulvaney, 2008).

Today, exchanges in material culture are considered unethical. Nevertheless, Spencer's exchanges could have been an extension of salvage anthropology. Whilst conducting interviews as part of my research, a palaeontologist who had exchanged rare fossils with other institutions argued that exchanges were an ethical practice in relation to palaeontology. The argument
being, if museums only possess local material and the museum is destroyed, all those specimens are lost. Spencer could have had similar thoughts. Living during the period of salvage anthropology, Spencer certainly had the belief that aboriginal culture was about to be destroyed.

Spencer’s exchanges were numerous. For example, through exchange he built a substantial collection of Native American artefacts. One stand-out piece was a totem pole from Skidegate, Queen Charlotte Islands, for which Spencer exchanged 251 artefacts (Spencer, 1908). Out of these 251 artefacts, only 173 were registered on the museum catalogue. Although there is always a backlog with cataloguing, the fact that 78 objects weren’t registered, indicates Spencer was procuring for trade as much as he was for collecting.

Spencer’s actions also demonstrate that comparative advantage often revolved around perceptions of rarity built on an idea of social value. Spencer emphasised in all his works that the aborigines were a dying race and that their culture was disappearing. He played into this when exchanging with foreign museums. For example, he estimated his collection sent to the Field Museum to be worth £100, whilst the totem pole and accompanying house was valued at $5,000. Spencer didn’t buy the house, but argued the specimens were a “fair exchange” (Spencer, 1911, Newcombe, 1912). Similarly, Spencer wrote to St. Petersburg Museum of Anthropology: “It is getting very difficult to secure genuine Australian aboriginal objects and therefore I feel that it is not possible to place any definite monetary value on them, more especially the 'sacred' objects, the stone implement collection and the photographs. The latter being printed from my own negatives. These three at least, are not procurable elsewhere."(Spencer, 1916: 165)

In each exchange, Spencer blurred monetary comparisons, preferring instead to emphasise the near destruction of aboriginal culture, with the subtext “this is a last chance offer”. The most intriguing things are the photographs. Once taken, Spencer could produce as many of these as he wanted; they were not scarce or rare. Yet in each exchange that included photographs, Spencer surrounded descriptions of the photographs with the language of rarity.

In talking up the exchange value of his collection, Spencer drew on prevailing anthropological ideas. This gave Spencer a strong bargaining position regarding comparative advantage. In this regard, Spencer was continuing a tradition already established by McCoy. Spencer also exchanged objects across disciplines; for example he exchanged seven Australian mammals for a cast of a Hawaiian Idol from the Ka-Hole-a-Keawe
Equally, these cross-disciplinary exchanges played on perceptions of rarity. The aforementioned deal included a King Island wombat, which was already extinct on King Island by the time of the exchange (it still survives on Flinders Island however). These deals were not random events, but encapsulated world views from the time. Each of these exchanges represents material culture archives in the history of ideas.

1. This figure is determined from analysing McCoy’s letters and his reports to the Library and Museums’ Board of Trustees from 1870 onwards.

2. Haast wrote in broken English.

3. This was literally the case. Haast gained his title after donating a Dinornis maximus skeleton to the Austrian royal family (Sheets-Pyenson, 1988: 35).

4. The irony with this, is that he exchanged many species that would soon become extinct.