



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
SYDNEY

## Creating a master list for the 'official collection'

Susie Davies, RA, Excavating MacGregor, 2017

In 1897 MacGregor referred to the assemblage of artefacts which he had begun depositing in the Queensland Museum as the 'British New Guinea Collection ... the official collection of this Colony.' After two years of solid work, we have now created a Master List of the 10,970 objects in MacGregor's Official Collection! This is an essential element of our project since we plan to examine the collection as sets of multiple assemblages. Why did this seemingly simple task take so long? Recounting our methodology highlights the complexity of dealing with museum records from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, long before procedures were standardised, let alone converted into digital formats.

The first consignment sent by MacGregor, containing nearly 3,000 items, arrived at the Queensland Museum in late October 1892. The accessioning, storage and display of such a large collection of artefacts would present challenges for any contemporary museum let alone a nineteenth-century institution with few qualified staff. To make matters worse, it seems there was no list of contents. Curator Charles de Vis, assisted by untrained employees, appears to have been unfazed. He systematically gave numbers to the objects (Figure 1) and recorded object type, general description and measurements in the Ethnology Register (New Guinea). Subsequent consignments were accessioned into either the first or second volume of this register. The Ethnology Register (New Guinea) (Figure 2) proved to be the most reliable source for making a definitive Master List of MacGregor's multiple consignments, for no contents lists have been located.



Figure 1. Lime Gourd (9678). This lime gourd (9678) shows the distinctive style of red paint numbering which is largely associated with objects from Transfer 46. The 'Mac 3239' relates to the later re-registration of this object into the MacGregor Collection Register in 1919. Image courtesy of the Queensland Museum, not for reproduction.

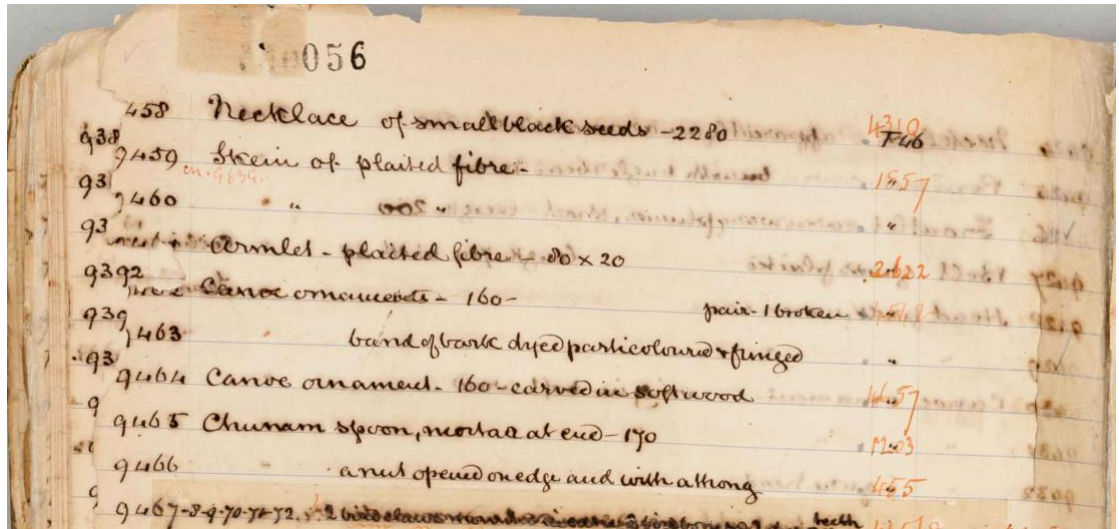


Figure 2. Ethnology Register (New Guinea), Volume 1, p. 56. The numbers on the left side are the QM registration numbers (e.g. 9465). Transfer numbers are seen at the top of each page (right side), in this instance 'T46' (Transfer 46). Localities were recorded to the right of the Transfer number. Blanks in this area indicate that the object had no accompanying locality label. The red ink numbers are 'Mac' numbers assigned to objects from 1915. Image courtesy of the Queensland Museum, not for reproduction.

The task of transcribing data from the *Ethnology Registers* was not without problems. While the poor condition of some pages presented challenges in ascertaining localities and registration numbers, a more serious problem were duplicated numbers. Occasionally, MacGregor artefacts were given numbers that had been previously assigned to objects from other collections (Figure 3). From time to time registration was broken up by the arrival of non-related collections that were entered in and among the MacGregor objects. For example, the sequence of numbers related to Transfer 52 was interrupted by several hundred objects (mainly arrows). After much debate we eliminated these because they are not associated with a relevant transfer number.

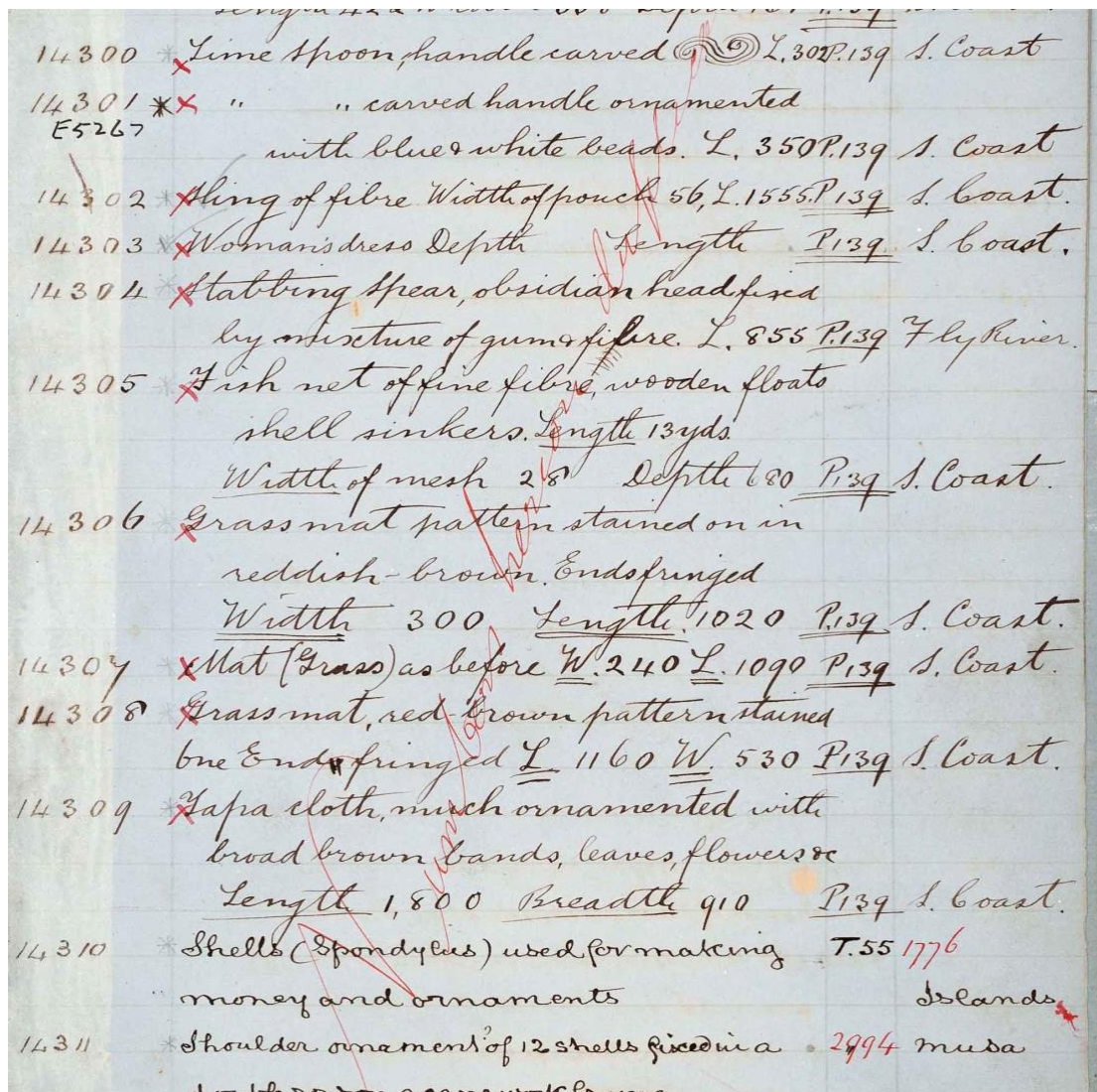


Figure 3. Ethnology Register (New Guinea), Volume 2, p. 11. Example of duplicated numbers. "P139" refers to Purchase 139 (Isles, Love & Co) purchased 23 July 1895 while T55 refers to the beginning of the Transfer 55, part of the official collection received 11 January 1896. Both P139 and part of T55 were allocated numbers which were previously assigned to other objects. Image courtesy of the Queensland Museum, not for reproduction.

To help understand problems identified when working with the registers and to confirm the receipt of official collections and any subsequent outwards transfers or exchanges, archival research was undertaken. Receipt of objects associated with the official collection was (with one exception) traced through the Queensland Museum's Donor Register, Volume 3 (1887-1899). Collections of natural history and ethnology received from MacGregor were usually treated as an inwards governmental transfer. Each consignment was assigned a specific 'Transfer' number (e.g., Transfer 46; Figure 4). Twenty consignments dated 1889-1898 during MacGregor's administration of the British colony were traced through the Queensland Museum registers. Eight contained ethnographic material (sometimes mixed with natural history

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specimens): 1892 (Transfer 46); 1893 (Transfer 47); 1894 (Transfer 52); 1896 (Transfer 55); 1897 (Transfers 60 and 68); and 1898 (Transfers 70 and 74).

DATE	British	Colonial	Foreign	Exchange	Transfer	Lot	NAME	ADDRESS	DESCRIPTION	LOCALITY	095	Notes	Recd. of
October 20 <sup>th</sup>	179	159					Urquhart, E. L.	Soloncurry	Fossil fish	lands E. of Glenary.			
" 17 <sup>th</sup>							Wild, G. F.	Museum	Beetles & Ants	Wexley			
" 20 <sup>th</sup>							Davidson, L. A.	Wexley	Birds	Wexley			
" 21 <sup>st</sup>							Under Secretary	Dept of Agric.	Publication	on Australia			
" 21 <sup>st</sup>							Bertram, J. W.	Dunwich	Insects	Stradbroke Id.			
" 22 <sup>nd</sup>							Wallmann, H. J.	Wardell Waterst	Rockslides				
" 22 <sup>nd</sup>							Indian Museum	Calcutta	Publication	on India			
" 22 <sup>nd</sup>							Royal Society of Tasmania		Publication	on Tasmania			
" 23 <sup>rd</sup>					46		MacGregor, W. B.	N. Guinea	Zoology & Ethnology	British N. Guinea			
" 23 <sup>rd</sup>							May, J. W.	Bundaberg	Worms & Mollusca	coast off Bundaberg			
" 23 <sup>rd</sup>							Nestor, A.	Clussex Street	Ethnological	Queensland			
" 23 <sup>rd</sup>							Dept of Mines	Geological Survey	Publication	on N. Wales			

Figure 4. Donor Register volume 3 (1887-1899), p. 95. This page shows the receipt of the first collection of ethnology from MacGregor in October 1892. A single-line entry records the receipt of the collection as Transfer 46 (see column titled 'Transfer'). Image courtesy of the Queensland Museum, not for reproduction.

A survey of the Queensland Museum *Inwards Correspondence* files and registers revealed letters from MacGregor (and others associated with the administration) concerning the shipment and general nature of collections. Other sources, such as the *Minute Book* of the monthly meetings of the Board of Trustees, provided some background information about the arrival of consignments and occasionally, progress with unpacking and accessioning. As previously noted, no lists of contents were found in association with any archival correspondence accompanying the collections. The laborious task of making lists of the collections appears to have been left to curator Charles de Vis as he unpacked the collections (Figure 5).

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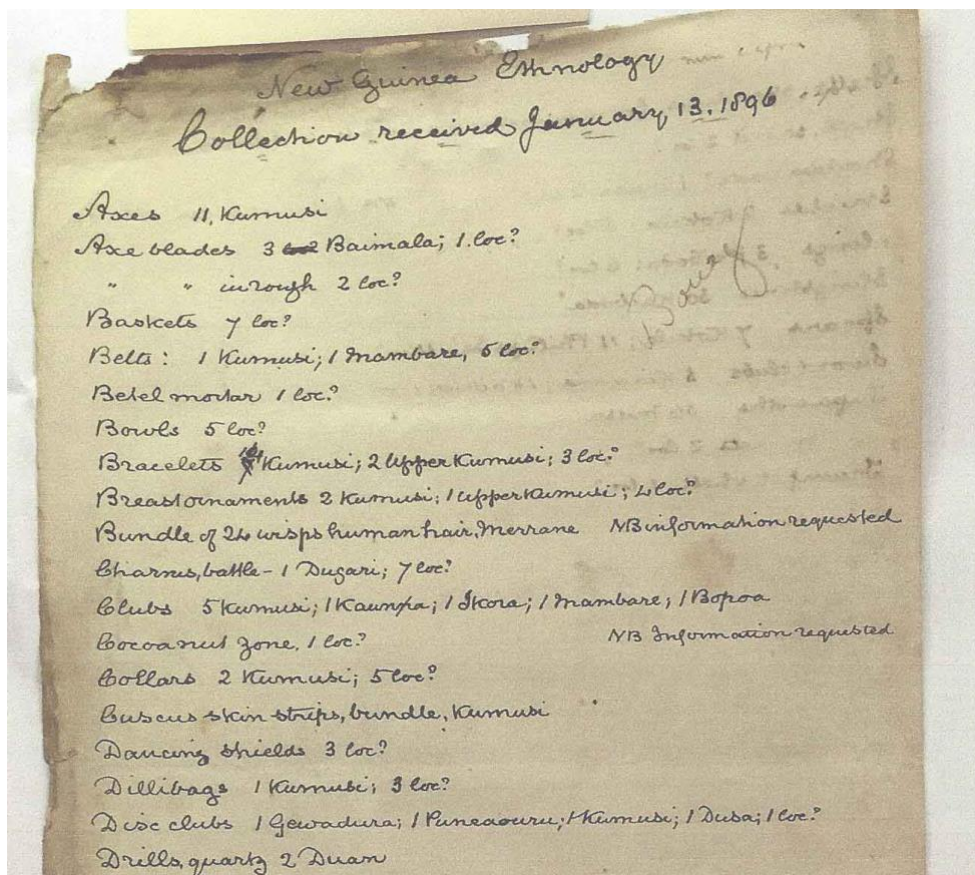


Figure 6. Outwards Exchanges Register (1884-1909), showing part of an outwards exchange of objects from the official collection in 1894 (Exchange 140). Note the absence of registration numbers. Image courtesy of the Queensland Museum, not for reproduction.

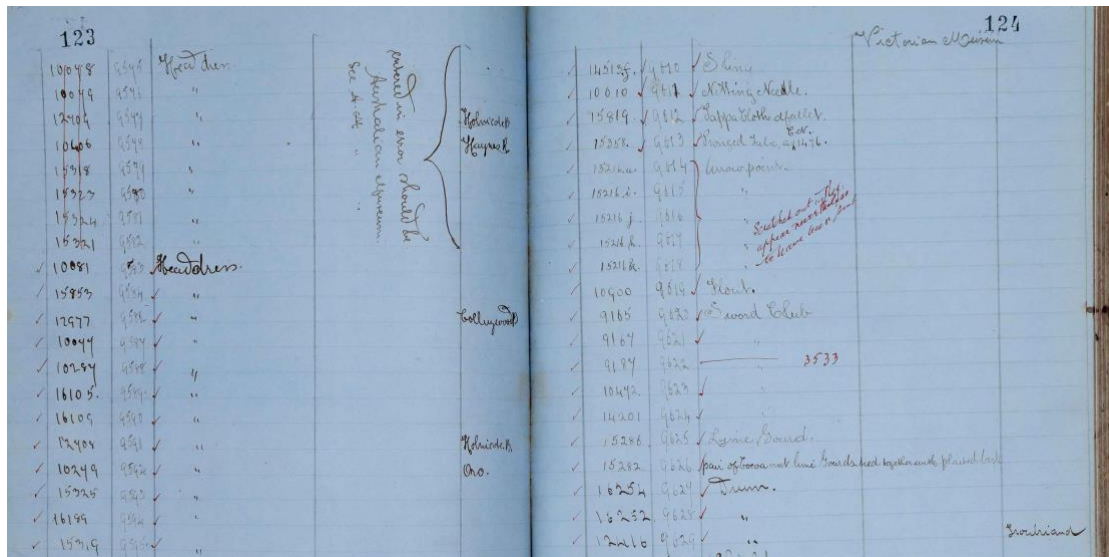


Figure 7. Control Register, 1897. Sample page showing selection of 'duplicates' for Victoria. The register numbers in the first column are the QM Ethnology Register numbers. Those immediately to the right are the control numbers which were assigned to objects. The remarks column contained localities but some of these do not match the corresponding entries in the Ethnology Registers. Image courtesy of the Queensland Museum, not for reproduction.

The process of creating the Master List and database has involved careful transcribing of data from the Ethnology Registers (New Guinea) into a spreadsheet. All the peculiar spellings (and abbreviations) for localities (and objects) recorded in the registers were transcribed as they preserve the historical integrity of the collection. This is valuable because closer scrutiny of the localities shows that some are associated with specific government officers who were involved in their field acquisition. This method of documenting the collection greatly increases the capacity for extracting 'collecting episodes' and associating them with particular individuals and/or Papuan communities. Consequently, a much broader and more complex picture of the collection emerges, as one not solely connected to MacGregor himself.

The Master List database also tries to match the 'de Vis' number sequence (i.e. original registration number) with subsequent catalogue numbers assigned to the objects at the Queensland Museum and other institutions where they were transferred. At the Queensland Museum, 'Mac' prefix numbers relate to the MacGregor Collection Register, commenced in 1915. This document has been found to be seriously flawed and is a very poor account of the collections sent by MacGregor. Firstly, since this register was created to provide a record of the official collection in the Queensland Museum at that time, it does not record the duplicates dispersed to other museums in 1897 (around 3,000 objects) or objects exchanged or transferred out before 1906. Secondly, it includes some 650 non-Macgregor objects (comprising 16 various collections) which were inadvertently accessioned into the MacGregor Collection Register (Figure 8). E prefix numbers in the Queensland Museum relate to the period from 1911 when objects found lacking labels or information were re-registered into a new E Register (Ethnology Register). Seemingly no attempt was made to match the objects with items in the 1890s Ethnology Registers (New Guinea). Thus, it is possible that there could be objects with an 'E' prefix in the Queensland Museum which may be part of the official collection, since the location of around 700 objects on the Master List cannot be accounted for at present.

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QUEENSLAND MUSEUM				COLLECTION OF NEW GUINEA ETHNOLOGY			
REGISTER OF THE "MACGREGOR"							
DATE	REGISTRATION NO.	PL. OF DEPOSIT	NAME OF DEPOSITOR	LOCALITY	NEW GUINEA ETHNOLOGY REG. NO.	REGISTRATION NO.	REMARKS
1915	2333	NGE	Collar one-way light green w/ stripes in black and red	NE Coast	12568		
Ref. Col.	4		Necklace large black leaves, seeds - 3 strands	NE Coast	14444	X	GM 12/18
Ref. Col.	5		Necklace one-way light green w/ stripes in black and red	NE Coast	12642	X	GM 12/18
Ref. Col.	6		Necklace copper shells & large black seeds	?	91805	X	ANGM 12/18
Ref. Col.	7		20" crocodile tail	F. Cape Colony	T.28	X	ANGM 12/18
Ref. Col.	8		one leaf, imprinted bark	Oro	10210	X	GM 12/18
Ref. Col.	9		20" one-way light green w/ stripes in black and red	NE Coast	14396	X	ANGM 12/18
Ref. Col.	2340		Necklace one-way light green w/ stripes in black and red	Oro	10265	X	ANGM 12/18
Ref. Col.	1		20" one-way light green w/ stripes in black and red	NORTH EAST COAST	91261	X	T.52 ANGEM 12/18
Ref. Col.	2		20" one-way light green w/ stripes in black and red	?	5497	X	E 9625
Ref. Col.	3		75 x 57 long, narrow, flat	?	8474	T.28 X ANG. M.	
Ref. Col.	4		75 x 60 long, narrow, flat	?	8472	T.28 X ANG. M.	
Ref. Col.	5		75 x 60 long, narrow, flat	?	5458	X	E 9630
Ref. Col.	6		75 x 60 long, narrow, flat	?	5458	X	E 9645
Ref. Col.	7		75 x 60 long, narrow, flat	?	5478	X	E 9629
Ref. Col.	8		75 x 60 long, narrow, flat	?	8466	T.28 X ANG. M.	
Ref. Col.	9		75 x 60 long, narrow, flat	?	5462	X	E 9629
Ref. Col.	10		75 x 60 long, narrow, flat	?	5477	X	E 9639
Ref. Col.	11		75 x 60 long, narrow, flat	?	8475	T.28 X ANG. M.	
Ref. Col.	12		75 x 60 long, narrow, flat	?	5473	T.28 X ANG. M.	
Ref. Col.	13		75 x 60 long, narrow, flat	?	5477	X	E 9628
Ref. Col.	14		75 x 60 long, narrow, flat	?	8457	T.28 X ANG. M.	
Ref. Col.	15		75 x 60 long, narrow, flat	?	5474	X	E 9627
Ref. Col.	16		75 x 60 long, narrow, flat	?	8463	T.28 X ANG. M.	
Ref. Col.	17		75 x 60 long, narrow, flat	?	5459	X	E 9647
Ref. Col.	18		75 x 60 long, narrow, flat	?	5467	X	E 9642

Figure 8. MacGregor Collection Register (commenced 1915), p. 59. This register was supposed to record the official collection then remaining in the Queensland Museum. The numbers on the left side of the page are 'Mac' numbers (e.g. Mac 2333). The other numbers seen on the right side are registration numbers assigned by Charles de Vis in the 1890s and these can be cross-referenced against the Ethnology Registers (New Guinea) (e.g. Mac 2333; original Ethnology Register number was 12568). The crossed out entries on this page are objects not associated with MacGregor's official collection (e.g. T28). Of the 26 entries shown here, only eight are part of the official collection.

While a Master list and associated database of the official collection is a major achievement that will be invaluable for future research, additional forensic and archival research is required to settle some issues regarding locality discrepancies and to take advantage of data recorded on original object labels. Trying to ascertain the whereabouts of the 700 missing objects is at the top of the list!

By Susie Davies, 24 March 2017.

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