



## **Finding MacGregor in the British Museum**

Robin Torrence, Australian Museum, 2016



*British Museum label made especially for the Macgregor duplicates. The De Vis catalogue number, written in black ink, is visible on the left.*

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*Original labels showing, on the left, the red "B" used to identify duplicates for the British Museum and, on the right, the De Vis catalogue number and collection locality.*

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This blog was written for *Excavating MacGregor: reconnecting a colonial museum collection*. A University of Sydney, Australian Museum and Queensland Museum project funded by the ARC.



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Soon after Sir William Macgregor began sending objects from British New Guinea to the Queensland Museum in Brisbane for safe keeping until the new territory had its own museum, the independent colonies in Australia demanded a share for their own museums, because they were contributing to the cost of administering their sister colony. After much discussion and debate, (summarised in Michael Quinnell's (2000) seminal article), it was agreed that a set of artefacts would be selected for each of the museums in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria, and a similar share would also be apportioned for the British Museum. The intention was for the museums to use the objects as a kind of 'currency' to exchange with collectors and other museums for material that they did not have. The 'duplicates,' as they were termed, were selected by the Queensland curator, Charles De Vis, and duly sent off between August-September, 1897. The Control Register at the Queensland Museum records what was supposedly selected and De Vis also sent the museums a contents list of the shipment. Reconstructing the history of what happened to each set of 'duplicates' is turning out to be very interesting. The subsequent biographies of the collections after they left Queensland reveal contemporary attitudes about (1) objects as a store of value, (2) the importance of ethnographic material in a natural history museum, (3) New Guinea and its inhabitants, and also, perhaps, (4) prejudices toward Sir William Macgregor himself based on his social class.

As noted in the blog about her trip to the UK, Jude Philp discovered that the material donated to the Cambridge Museum of Anthropology by Macgregor through his friend Barron von Hugel was not immediately showcased in the exhibitions. Instead, it seems to have taken a back seat to Alfred Cort Haddon's field collections from the Torres Strait that arrived about the same time. In fact, much of the Macgregor material was not catalogued until many years later. Consequently, Jude, assisted by collection manager Rachael Hand, undertook substantial detective work in the registers and annual reports to identify the material gifted by Macgregor.

Since we know from the Queensland Control registers which objects were selected as duplicates, it was surprising to read on the British Museum website describing them as 'Oceania (New Guinea) material from Macgregor Collection apparently acquired by British Museum in 1897, by uncertain means, and not listed or formally registered at the time.' Six artefacts were entered into the Q register (set up for 'Found unnumbered'), but it wasn't until 1990-1996 that another 80 were given MCG numbers. What had happened to the remainder? In September 2015 Jude Philp and Robin Torrence set out for London to discover the fate of the substantial set of missing duplicates.

The first place to look for information was in the British Museum (BM) archives where original correspondence was kept and in the Annual Reports housed in the Anthropology Library. Following leads given to us by Jill Hassell, (Museum Assistant in the Africa, Australia and the Pacific Department), we located the original letter sent to the British Museum from Queensland Curator Charles De Vis with a list of the Macgregor duplicates sent to them. Notations in pencil indicate a slightly higher count of 721 compared to the 715 on the typed list. Clearly, someone had carefully unpacked the boxes and checked the contents against the original list. There were also two sketches on the list next to 'piece of bamboo' and 'pronged tube.' These turned out to be useful in identifying the objects in the collection.

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Brisbane September 24th 1907

## LIST OF DUPLICATE NEW-GUINEA ETHNOLOGY FOR THE BRITISH MUSEUM

527	Arrows ✓	2	Bamboo bows ✓
57	Palmwood bows ✓	2	Sago adzes ✓
31	27 Adzes ✓	12	Axe blades ✓ 15 ✓
6	Axe mounts ✓	1	Pounder ✓
33	30 Disc clubs ✓	2	Mulberry headed clubs ✓
3	Plaited baskets ✓	2	Dilly bags ✓
✓ 1	Nets	1	Bag cape
✓ 1	Pig catcher	10	Plaited belts ✓
1	Gauntlet ✓	2	Armlets ✓
10	Bracelets ✓	1	Ear ring ✓
30	Necklaces ✓	1	Breast ornament ✓
1	Frontlet ✓	2	Whip like rods ✓
1	Tappa cloth board ✓	1	Pronged tube
1	Peice of bamboo	1	Float ✓
2	Shields ✓	12	Samples of twine ✓
	2	Samples of raw fibre	

The numbers on the attached sheets are the localities of some of the  
Arrows the rest are unknown.

List of Macgregor 'duplicates' sent to the British Museum.

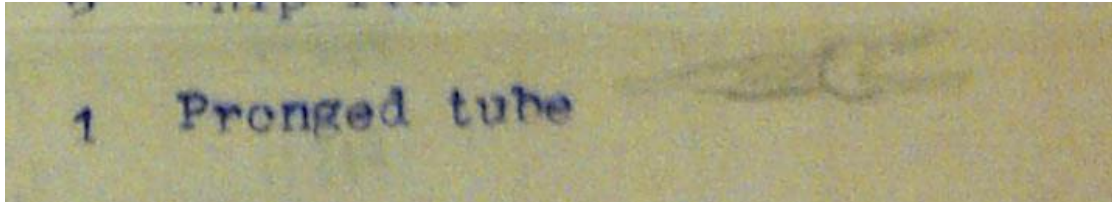
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Close up of sketch on De Vis list.



Pronged tube in the British Museum collection (Q98.OC.2).

Among the manuscripts were handwritten Trustee's minutes that reveal the values ascribed by the British Museum to this substantial donation of material from the new colony.

*"Read a report by Mr Read, 29th December of the presentation by the Government of Queensland, through the curator of the Queensland Museum, Brisbane, of a selection of ethnological duplicates from Sir W. Macgregor's collections of natural history and ethnology from British New Guinea. Mr Read explained that of the specimens already received, a considerable number were duplicates of examples in the New Guinea collections in the British Museum, as was likely to be the case with future similar consignments, and he proposed if authorised, to transfer to foreign and other Museums as presents from the Queensland Government, all such duplicates (including those now in his hands): that Government to be advised accordingly when thanked for the donation."*

-Trustee's Minutes, 8th January, 1898.

Armed with the knowledge that the Macgregor artefacts were not considered worthy enough to enter the British Museum collection because they were not considered as unique, how were

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they treated? When examining the catalogued objects, it was surprising to find that at some point the BM had special labels made for the collection. These round stickers have 'Macgregor Coll. 1897' printed at the base leaving room to add the place where they were collected, if known. The locality information seems to have been taken from some older, round serrated labels (from Queensland or British New Guinea?) that often also include the original number assigned by De Vis in Queensland, or from a placename written directly on the artefacts. We can surmise, therefore, that someone at the BM was interested enough in this collection to organise proper labels and to put time and effort into adding localities. Why, then, were they never catalogued nor exchanged as intended? Instead, they were stored with another collection of 'duplicates' derived from the original Christy bequest. And there they sat until the 1990's when 80 were entered into a MCG catalogue. More recently, the BM collection team have begun exploring these historic artefacts now housed in an off-site store. Our search began with exploring some large boxes filled with impressive objects and bundles of arrows.

Since not all artefacts bear the formal labels, it has been difficult for BM staff to identify the missing Macgregor duplicates. However, once we got our eye in, they were fairly obvious because many still bear the numbers assigned in the catalogue that De Vis made when the collection first arrived at the Queensland Museum. These were either written directly on the objects, as in the case of the arrows, or on metal or paper labels attached to small or soft objects such as belts or necklaces. Many also bear a red or blue "B" in chalk, crayon, or ink that was clearly used when the duplicates were sorted out in Queensland. In three days we identified an additional 392 Macgregor artefacts to bring the total in the BM to 476, which is 66 per cent of what was originally received. We suspect many others are still buried somewhere in the store room among other 'duplicates.'

It was quite a surprise to see what had been classified as duplicates in the 19th century. Many of these shields, clubs, baskets, belts, and necklaces would be highly prized by modern day museums and collectors. Unlike their history at the Australian and Melbourne Museums, why weren't the BM Macgregor 'duplicates' exchanged? Like the Cambridge Museum of Anthropology, was this institution overwhelmed by the enormous amount of material that was being accumulated during a major period of expansion for the museum? It is also remarkable that while these objects lay dormant, BM curators continued to purchase similar material from auction catalogues. Perhaps the Macgregor collection was conceived as consisting of utilitarian objects rather than the fine art which the British Museum most desired at that time. Did the curators prefer to obtain items from contacts they knew well, rather than from a distant colonial administrator who was not a member of the upper class? These are among the questions we hope to pursue in further comparison with collection biographies of the duplicates at the other museums in Sydney and Melbourne. Most importantly, we hope that our research is helping to awaken interest in a highly significant collection whose existence and history at the British Museum has almost been totally forgotten.

**Quinnell, M. 2000 "Before it has become too late': The making and repatriation of Sir William Macgregor's Official Collection from British New Guinea. In O'Hanlon, M. and Welsch, R. (eds), *Hunter the Gatherers*, pp. 81-102. Oxford: Berghahn Books.**

By Robin Torrence, 2016

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