From "wretched savages" to the world's "most beautiful" artefacts: British ethnographic collections from Western Australia

The Department of History at Royal Holloway University of London and The British Museum are pleased to announce a funded studentship for doctoral research, awarded under the AHRC's Collaborative Doctoral Partnership Scheme.

The Project

‘From "wretched savages" to the world's "most beautiful" artefacts: British ethnographic collections from Western Australia’ will be co-supervised by Dr Zoë Laidlaw, Reader in Imperial and Colonial History at Royal Holloway, University of London, and Dr Gaye Sculthorpe, Curator, and Section Head, Oceania, at The British Museum. The British Museum holds c.1200 Aboriginal objects, photographs and postcards from Western Australia. Dating between 1821 and 2015, the collections include some of the oldest ethnographic objects ever collected from Western Australia. As a museum was not established in W.A. until the 1890s, a large number of objects from the colony are held in collections elsewhere: some in other Australian and international cities, but the most historically significant at the British Museum. They include collections made by explorers such as Phillip Parker King and David Carnegie; early colonists, including Samuel Talbot; policemen like Inspector Ord; colonial administrators such as Governor Broome; missionaries including the Rev. James Love; and activists for Aboriginal rights such as Mary M. Bennett. Inspired by this collection, the project will produce the first history of British ethnographic collecting in Western Australia. In 1688, William Dampier reported Aborigines in Western Australia to be ‘the miserablest people in the world’, yet by 1936 the British Museum described a donation of Western Australian spearheads as the ‘most beautiful … made by any natives in the world’. This project will explore how the making, distribution and exhibition of such objects helped shape ideas about value, place and identity in Western Australia.

The successful applicant will examine and systematically document objects relating to the Australian ethnographic collections from Western Australia in the British Museum and potentially in other UK institutions. Information will be sought about the makers where known, the collectors, the range of objects collected and the methods of collection. The student will consider how and in what forms these objects were made, circulated, and subsequently entered British collections and how they were understood by collectors, settlers, and British institutions. The range of materials within the scope of the project is large, including materials beyond the British Museum. There is, therefore, considerable opportunity for the appointed student to shape and focus the PhD project according to their interests. For example, s/he may choose to focus generally on Western Australia, or to study particular regions within it in-depth, or to study differences between types of collectors such as colonial administrators or missionaries. Depending on the approach chosen, it may be useful to provide some comparative perspectives from another Australian colony/state. The
successful candidate will thus be encouraged to refine their own PhD topic, working within the area defined by some or all of the following questions:

- Who were the British collectors of ethnographic collectors of objects from Western Australia? What networks were they part of in Australia and Britain, and what collecting practices did they engage in?
- What was collected? How did these collections reinforce and challenge existing knowledge paradigms about Aboriginal people in Western Australia? What kinds of agency of Aboriginal people are evident from a study of these activities?
- How did the collecting practices in Western Australia compare with experiences in other Australian colonies?

The successful applicant will join a small team of researchers based at the British Museum and working on its Australian collections. S/he will also benefit from an international collaboration with Western Australian researchers (‘Collecting the West’) ahead of the 2020 re-opening of the Western Australian Museum. This PhD project will complement ‘Collecting the West’, providing a view from the former imperial metropole and creating improved understanding of the significance and meaning of British collections in local, national and global arenas. There will be networking opportunities to work with colleagues and Aboriginal communities in Western Australia as well as at The British Museum.

**The Studentship**

The project will fund a full-time PhD studentship for up to three and a half years. Throughout the research process, the student will divide his or her time between the British Museum and Royal Holloway, where a full academic training programme is provided. Visits to other institutions may be required based on the focus of the research and in response to the project’s over-arching research questions.

As well as undertaking research training at Royal Holloway, the successful student will also be inducted and trained at the British Museum where he or she will learn about this unique institution and its collections. The student will also be expected to participate in a common joint specially designed research training programme run especially for all CDP students supported by the National Museums, the British Library, National Archives, English Heritage and other holders of AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Partnerships.

The focus for the three and a half years of study will be on the successful development and completion of the thesis, and within this timescale the student will also be expected to share research outcomes at the Museum and attend relevant conferences. The studentship offers a unique opportunity to engage with a number of national institutions and possibly also Aboriginal communities relevant to the research.

Subject to AHRC eligibility criteria, the scholarships cover tuition fees and an annual grant (stipend) towards living expenses. The 2017/18 value of the stipend is likely to be £17103 per annum (including London weighting). In addition, the British Museum will provide up to £1000 per year to support the student’s research costs at and for the Museum. Students are also able to apply for up to £750 from the AHRC’s Research Training Support Grant.

For further details about postgraduate research in History at Royal Holloway, see: [http://www.rhul.ac.uk/history/prospectivestudents/postgraduateresearch/home.aspx](http://www.rhul.ac.uk/history/prospectivestudents/postgraduateresearch/home.aspx)
For further details about Collaborative Doctoral Awards at the British Museum, see: http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/research_projects/collaborative_doctoral_awards.aspx

Supervision

Doctoral supervision will be undertaken by Dr Zoë Laidlaw at Royal Holloway and Dr Gaye Sculthorpe at the British Museum. Supervisions will take place at least monthly. Annual reviews at either Royal Holloway or the British Museum will also include an additional advisor from Royal Holloway.

Qualifications and Eligibility

Candidates with backgrounds in history, anthropology, human geography and museum studies are particularly encouraged to apply for this studentship.

Candidates must:
- have a first or upper-second class honours degree or equivalent.
- have completed a master’s-level qualification by the time they begin PhD study.
- be a resident of the UK or European Economic Area (EEA).

Students are eligible for a full award of fees and living allowance if they have i) ‘settled status’ in the UK (meaning no restrictions on how long they can stay); and ii) been ‘ordinarily resident’ in the UK for three years prior to the start of the studentship and iii) not been residing in the UK wholly or mainly for the purpose of full-time education, unless they are UK or EU nationals. Students from EU countries other than the UK are generally eligible for a fees-only award. To be eligible for a fees-only award a student must be ordinarily resident in a member state of the EU, in the same way as UK students must be ordinarily resident in the UK.

Start Date: the preferred start date is 1 October 2017.

Application procedure

Informal enquires can be made, or further details about the research project’s scope discussed, by contacting Dr Zoë Laidlaw (zoe.laidlaw@rhul.ac.uk) or Dr Gaye Sculthorpe (gsclulthorpe@britishmuseum.org).

Applications should be made to Royal Holloway’s PhD History programme via the university’s online application system, citing Dr Laidlaw as supervisor: www.rhul.ac.uk/studyhere/postgraduate/applying/howtoapply.aspx

In addition to completing the online application form, your application should include:
- A 1-2 page statement outlining your interest in the research project.
- A copy of your first degree and postgraduate qualifications.
- A current CV.

If you are making a formal application, please contact Dr Gaye Sculthorpe (gsclulthorpe@britishmuseum.org) or Dr Zoë Laidlaw (zoe.laidlaw@rhul.ac.uk).

Closing date for applications: 5pm, Wednesday 29 March 2017.

Interviews will take place at the British Museum in late April. Short-listed candidates will be asked to make a 10-minute presentation at their interviews on a topic to be advised.