

## White Australia has a Black History: Sources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in the National Library of Australia

*Written and presented by John Thompson at the Indigenous Research Ethics Conference, 27-29 September 1995, organised by the Centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Participation, Research and Development, James Cook University of North Queensland.*

The National Library includes amongst its collections a rich body of pictorial material which documents many aspects of the history of Australia. As a source for understanding the historical interaction between the First Nation people of Australia and the European settlers, this collection of engravings, paintings, drawings and photographs is as indispensable as it is also a powerful and disturbing record of displacement and marginalisation. While many of these images have become well-known individually - Augustus Earle's *Portrait of Bungaree* c. 1826 is especially notable - there is an obvious value in consolidating a list of holdings which collectively form an important visual record both of the invasion of Aboriginal Australia and of the strength of the vigorous assertion of Aboriginality which has been one of the triumphs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the last years of the twentieth century.

Taken chronologically, the National Library's holdings of primary source materials - manuscripts and associated archival records, pictures, films and oral history interviews - constitute an important part of the national record of the difficult and at times painful history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the years since European settlement.

Through these materials, it is possible to trace most of the major themes which define the history of Australia's indigenous people from the eighteenth century until the present day. While much of that history is disturbing, it is also a history of surprising resilience and, in our own day, one of affirmation and assertion. As a national collecting institution, the National Library has in recent years acquired an important body of materials which embody and represent key aspects of the Australian debate about issues of Aboriginal identity and sovereignty.

Judith Wright, great Australian poet and in the latter half of her long life a committed and forceful campaigner ... has placed into the National Library her papers which document the campaign to secure a formal Treaty with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as an essential prerequisite to a process of national reconciliation. Kevin Gilbert's ... papers also reside in the National Library where they are part of a body of material which reflects both the anger of displacement and the energy of political activism which has since come to be embraced strongly as a force for change.

(The) National Library has ... become the repository of the personal papers of the late Eddie Mabo, a collection which offers some record of his life and career over almost thirty

years and of his tireless campaigns for an on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Mabo died four months before the Court delivered its judgement. The National Library's acquisition of the Mabo Papers is a powerful acknowledgment that the Library exists for all Australians as a 'keeping place' for those records which define our collective identity as Australians and which record the range and diversity of the national story. The responsibility to gather and preserve these materials confers another responsibility that of providing access so that the historical record may be scrutinised and interrogated. Such materials are part of the collective memory and the precious heritage of all Australians. And for Indigenous Australians, they have a particular importance in the process of keeping alive the memory of a people once threatened with extinction.

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**Eddie Mabo  
at James Cook  
University, early  
1980s**

## Indigenous literacy ambassador

The Indigenous Literacy Project, which recognises that most people in remote Aboriginal communities still cannot read or write English, has appointed dreaming08 keynote speaker Dr Anita Heiss as an ambassador. The Indigenous Literacy Project has now been running for five years and is run in conjunction with the Fred Hollows Foundation with Therese Rein as patron. The project has already raised \$400,000 towards specific literacy projects in remote Aboriginal communities, including Wilcannia in NSW.

The project will culminate with Indigenous Literacy Day on September 3. For further information go to <http://www.worldwithoutbooks.org>

## New Aboriginal Anthology

Australian Society Association Chair and dreaming08 keynote speaker Dr Anita Heiss, has co-edited the Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature (Allen and Unwin) with Peter Minter. Launched in Sydney on 7 May 2008, the book is the first comprehensive collection of writings from Indigenous Australia. The editors embraced a wide definition of literature and the anthology includes journals, letters, petitions, songs, poems, plays and novels.