Chapter 2
Chained to their signs: remembering breastplates

Chris Healy

For just as nature abhors a vacuum, so the vertiginous cultural interspace effected by the reflection makes many of us desperate to fill it with meaning, thereby defusing disconcertion. To resist this desperation is no easy task. After all, this is how cultural convention is maintained. But let us try. Let us try to uncover the wish within such desperation and be a little more malleable, ready to entertain unexpected moves of mimesis and alterity across quivering terrain, even if they lead at the outermost horizon to an all-consuming nothingness. — Michael Taussig

At first glance, breastplates might appear to be just another device in the technology of colonial capture in Australia. Take the photograph of Bilin Bilin wearing a plate inscribed ‘Jackey Jackey — King of the Logan and Pimpama’ (see Illustration 1). The plate, the chain and the conventions of photography produce a Yugambeh elder as a shackled criminal on display — he is both a primitive in tableau and one of ‘the usual suspects’. The image seems to both document captivity and evoke those ‘frontier photographs’ of Aboriginal prisoners in the desert bound together with heavy chains attached to manacles around their necks. This initial impression is right in that it recognises some of the ways in which colonial captivity is not only about actual imprisonment but equally about how captivity is understood, represented, interpreted and made historical. Still, in this chapter I want to persuade you that breastplates and photographs of breastplates performed other roles: as cross-cultural objects and signs. In particular I want to emphasise two processes: first, the ways in which the exchange of breastplates encapsulates some of the ambivalences of colonial encounters; and second, the fact that the processes involved in post-colonial remembrance of breastplates
have been more horrific than their colonial interchange. My argument works against the tendency to regard the relatively distant colonial past as the time of injustice towards indigenous peoples which should, therefore, be judged as a history of human and moral failure. Such gestures are both true and too glib in attempting to separate past from present. My suggestion is that the remembrance of breastplates is an example of a colonialism that constitutes our present, a remembrance that belongs not only to dead generations but also burdens the living.

The first use of breastplates in Australia is recorded in 1815. In that year Lachlan Macquarie, Governor of New South Wales, gave to Boongaree a plate engraved ‘Boongaree — Chief of the Broken Bay Tribe 1815’ and a regimental uniform. Both, it seems, were soon thrown away.3 This minor setback did not deter Macquarie who, in the following year, distributed a number of plates at the first of what would be annual ‘friendly gatherings’ at Parramatta, held until 1835. Those upon whom Macquarie wished to confer ‘chieftainship’ were presented with engraved brass plates. The design of the plates derived from gorgets, military decorations worn by British regiments in the eighteenth century, which in turn derived from armour used to protect the throat — a piece of metal which stopped the wearer from getting it in the neck. Distributed until the 1930s, primarily along the East Coast but in all states of Australia except Tasmania and South Australia, the plates signified a number of different but interrelated narratives — ownership, political strategies, mis-recognition. They marked alterity and made familiar Aboriginal ‘chiefs’ into ‘kings’, ‘queens’ and ‘princes’; they also recognised service and heroism.4

Breastplates, according to the substantial survey put together as a catalogue for the exhibition Poignant Regalia, were two sided. On the one hand, ‘breastplates show...attempts on the part of the Aborigines to somehow come to terms with the needs of the Europeans’.5 On the other hand, they were a means by which non-Aboriginal people conferred ‘titles’ on indigenous people. ‘Collectively’, writes Cleary, ‘the inscriptions on the breastplates tell the story of European domination and subjugation through years of indiscriminate slaughter and martial law imposed on Aborigines’.6 Let’s begin with those two sides.

1. Whose plates are these anyway?
   ‘Aboriginal breastplates’?

Are these ‘Aboriginal breastplates’ or should we think of these plates as made by and therefore speaking about non-Aboriginal people?
All of these objects were given to Aboriginal people, so in this sense they belonged to Aboriginal people. But for gifts to be owned they have to be accepted or avowed in the terms offered by the exchange. It's easy for an ungrateful recipient to become unworthy of a gift, and conversely a gift given without worthy intentions is one which can be rejected as worthless. Immediately, then, we confront two questions: in what ways did Aboriginal people understand, and how did they make use of these gifts?

In a very moving article, ‘Bilin Bilin — King or Eagle?’, Ysola (Yuke) Best, great-great-grand-daughter of Bilin Bilin, writes about the photograph of her ancestor wearing the plate:

Look into the eyes of Bilin Bilin, yes, they tell a story of the burden he was forced to bear when these intruders failed to respect his family and land. The metal plate and chains are symbols of his burden.7

In this photograph Bilin Bilin is framed to perform a vision of primitiveness: his nakedness and the breastplate name him as an authentic lone indigene. Implicit in this solitude is the image's melancholy animated by the white myth of Aborigines as a 'vanishing people'. To judge by another photograph of Bilin Bilin at the Deebin Creek Industrial Mission, it would seem that he had considerable successes in ensuring the survival of many of his people, but at what cost? In this photograph too he is wearing the plate, stage right but somehow central, and surrounded by people who are respectably dressed, industrious in an industrial mission and most definitely surviving. Perhaps the breastplate here is, like the European garb, a burden to be borne as a sign of accommodation, or perhaps, as Phil Gordon suggests, the 'recipients may have been looked down upon because they were seen to be assisting the white man's never ending quest for land and control over the land and Aboriginal people'.8

In the absence of substantial documentation of Aboriginal interpretations of the plates it is hard to answer these questions about Bilin Bilin with any certainty. But we do not have to decide if the plates identified canny tacticians or collaborators — as if such labels could tell us a great deal. The few records of Aboriginal responses or reactions to breastplates are the product of white interpretations. In late nineteenth-century Queensland the German ‘ethnographer among cannibals’ Carl Lumholtz thought that, ‘Every native is anxious to become “king”, for the brass plate, which is considered a great ornament also secures the bearer many a meal’.9 In 1835 a Reverend Handt writes that, when invited to join him at his fire,
three Aboriginal men who possessed plates refused, saying they were gentlemen. Cleary interprets the account thus: ‘The import of their reply was that it was a gentleman's privilege to give not take orders’.

This conclusion seems confused on at least two fronts. It is not clear what the relationship is between an invitation to join someone at a fire and taking 'orders'. Of course 'invitations' and 'status' can be deeply imbricated but we get little sense of how these complicated relationships were understood in this instance. Second, and this is a mistake widely shared among those non-indigenous people writing about the plates, there is a clear assumption that the white *intent* inscribed on the plates is transparently adopted by their Aboriginal wearers. In this case the intention is (assumed to be) that the wearers were being granted the status of European gentlemen and that their recipients adopted this European status as their own. Cleary relates another instance in which a similar, if even more transparent, understanding of the meaning of the plates is demonstrated. In this second case, from 1849:

> the Commandant at Brisbane had given a breastplate inscribed 'Moppy, King of the Upper Brisbane Tribe' to an influential Aborigine: 'The rest of the tribe could not, of course, read the inscription on the plate; but being shrewd enough to discover that it had meaning, they requested the supposed Boraltchou [a runaway convict assimilated into the tribe] to explain to them what it meant. And when told that it signified that Moppy was their master, and that they were all his servants, they got into a prodigious talking at his supposed usurpation of kingly authority over themselves, as free and independent natives of Australia, and insisted that Moppy should carry back the plate to the Commandant, under pain of death'.

This story may have served some purpose for its narrator in terms of representing the egalitarian impulses of indigenous people or it may well tell us more about Boraltchou’s role in his adopted community. Certainly the story alerts us to the ways in which non-indigenous people understood the political role of breastplates. But I think it’s a white fantasy to imagine that breastplates functioned as a command for Aboriginal people — to believe that because the plate names Moppy as king of the tribe, that the plate had the effect of making him king of the tribe. Moppy might well have used the plate in order to promote his authority, but the plate itself may not have achieved the effect it named; white magic was simply not that strong.
So it is difficult to be sure about how Aboriginal people understood and used breastplates as semiotic objects deployed in the often violent, baffling and unequal world of colonial exchange. Certainly, the plates were understood as part of the power-play of signs and exchange, they were both target and shield. There might be further clues in the fact that, although a significant number of plates survive, there are relatively few photographs of Aboriginal people wearing them. Maybe the plates were simply uncomfortable or impractical; certainly one recipient is reported to have found her plate was too heavy and she was rarely sighted wearing it. There may have been moments of shared recognition and mutual regard in their receipt, but for this to be more than wishful white thinking we'd need to know more about the particularity of the exchanges, about which there are precious few details. So, in the end, perhaps the plates were felt to be demeaning or unattractive, perhaps they were traded or perhaps other uses were found for them — uses beyond the white semiotic intent engraved on their surfaces.

For indigenous people contemplating these plates today there are further complicating factors beyond the instability of the objects themselves — particularly the questions of how they were collected, their current ownership and the emotional resonances of the plates. Photographs of the plates being worn connote a world (not an actual world) in which Aboriginal people are wandering around as labelled exhibits in an open-air museum. Disturbing and shocking as this is, the story of the survival of these breastplates may be even more sordid. The provenance of many extant plates is vague. However there is enough ambiguity in the accounts of finding breastplates to indicate that some may have been found as a result of deliberate and 'accidental' grave-robbing. Plates are described as being 'unearthed at the old Aboriginal Reserve', discovered on a property that included 'their burial ground' and exposed after big floods 'unearthed his remains and swept them away leaving the heavier metal plate'. And another: 'Aborigines generally buried their dead in an upright position... They did not dig very deep graves so their heads would not be very deeply buried. If Mulwaree Tommy's plate was hung around his neck in death, this is perhaps how it came to be ploughed up'. It is clear that, for some collectors, bodily remains were just as collectable as breastplates. These associations are, inevitably and understandably, painful for indigenous people and recall the implications of museums and their collections in such practices. Ysola Best is keenly aware of these possibilities:
Bilin Bilin died c1901 and it has been alleged that he was buried seated in an upright position, in a high rocky shelter overlooking the Albert River in the nesting place of eagles. Has he been left in peace or has the sanctity of his burial place been invaded by scavengers seeking to gather human remains for scientific studies and brass plates for museum collections?27

So for some Aboriginal people at least it would seem that, although the plates might act as mnemonic objects which can invoke an ancestor or provide a more general link with the past, in the end breastplates are overdetermined by their origin as colonial objects deployed for colonialism’s (worst) ends.

Phil Gordon, writing ‘an Aboriginal point of view’, offers a more heterogeneous perspective. He evokes the strongly conflicting emotions experienced in the face of the plates and their images: ‘anger, hate and sorrow [and] pride...because they also symbolise not only past inequalities but the fact that Aboriginal people have survived and continue as a people against huge odds today’.18 When I first read this sentence I was puzzled as to how Gordon could feel pride in staring at these ambivalent objects. The anger and the hate make sense to me, not only in terms of the past but equally through the ways in which breastplates articulate with other ‘brandings’ like the twentieth-century Queensland mission ‘dog-tags’. A sense of sadness too seemed appropriate. Sorrow is, I believe, an emotion which can be shared when confronting some of the losses inaugurated by colonialism — despite Aboriginal resilience, the absence of all those peoples, all that knowledge and all those languages is a deeply sorry inheritance. But why pride? For Gordon breastplates can be regarded with, or inspire, pride because they are signs of colonialism’s failure. Because breastplates are not ‘monuments’ to a successful genocide, Gordon’s celebration is a simple but profound one: ‘Aboriginal people have survived and continue as a people against huge odds today.’ To understand how breastplates can mark that extraordinary achievement we have to dwell on their meanings for non-Aboriginal people.

II. Whose plates are these anyway? ‘Degraded symbols of colonialism’?19

Because the history of colonial dispossession, violence and inhumanity hangs heavily over my sense of an Australian landscape, I view breastplates with a kind of pre-emptive foreboding. Being
aware of the history of colonial encounters I assume that these objects, if not stained with blood, are at least marked by the injustice which enabled their production. And this impulse is right, I can prove it. Take this example of vicious satire in relation to royal titles from the *Australian*, 27 May 1844:

Distinguished Foreigners. Among the distinguished visitors at the levee at Government House on the Queen's Birthday, by some unlucky oversight (for which we humbly apologise to their sable Majesties) the names of King Bungaree and Queen Gooseberry, who were in attendance in full regal costume, were omitted. Her majesty was attired in a new pink robe of very curious workmanship, and a Dunstable straw bonnet, wearing the order of her tribe in the form of a crescent, suspended by a brass chain from her ebon neck, and a natural rose, in honor of her Royal Sister Victoria, on her forehead. The King — bless his sable Majesty! — appeared in a rusty cast-off suit, enveloped in a new blanket, which hung in graceful folds about his royal person, rendered irresistibly monarchical by a short pipe being thrust, transversely, through the cartilage of his royal nose.20

The ‘joke’ for the white writer, and no doubt for many of his readers, is in the first place simply mockery of the uncivilised, which is then doubled by the absurdity of a primitive claiming sovereign status. The witticism becomes a kind of torturer’s amusement at the damage they’ve been able to inflict. But the joke is also directed at those whites so stupid as to believe that the granting of the status of royalty could be anything other than a bad joke. In other words the arrogance and hatred in these lines is about how plates were read and understood by those fools, both black and white, who believed in them as anything other than buffoonery. It is this aspect of the production of plates that is missed if we think of them as being about the conferring of ‘fantasy titles’. It’s certain that breastplates were in no sense adequate or mutually recognised signs of exchanges between equals. But what gestures, words and artefacts of cross-cultural interactions are? Mis-recognition and murder, captivity and exchange, disdain and wonder, and much else besides were all part of the invasion and occupation of Australia. We hide the variability of those processes when we employ the term ‘colonialism’ in an abstract way. Useful as the term is, particularly for its descriptive value, analytically it is important to hold onto the sense that colonialism consisted of differential processes. Thus if breastplates are not simply bad colonial objects, then the problem becomes one of artic-
ulating the specific historical use of breastplates in colonial performances. If we accept that, as a general proposition, the colonisation of Australia did not require the use of breastplates, and if we accept that there were (many) whites, like the writer in the *Australian*, who saw no use in breastplates, then we need to ask what kinds of purposes the plates served for some non-indigenous peoples.

In the first place, the breastplates were a state initiative. The earliest Australian breastplates were, you will recall, conferred by the representative of royalty in the colony. They were, as Cleary writes, ‘a token of recognition from one “chief” to another’. Macquarie’s rule, more than that of any other colonial governor, exemplifies the contradictions of autocracy, ‘liberalism’, violence, dispossession, incorporation and acceptance with which Aboriginal people had to deal. At the same time as he was holding his picnics for Aboriginal people, Macquarie had issued proclamations that outlawed armed Aboriginal people or unarmed groups of six or more from coming within a mile of any town, village or farm occupied by British subjects. Aboriginal men in breach of this proclamation could be shot by landowners or convict servants, in which case Macquarie instructed that their bodies be hung ‘on the highest trees and in the clearest parts of the forest’. Those men who abided by the proclamation were offered a ‘“passport” or certificate, bearing his signature, that would permit them to move across their land and protect them from being injured or molested’. In this context, breastplates were an attempt at domination, of a different order from systematic shooting. Macquarie regarded Aboriginal people as his (i.e. the Crown’s) subjects. Unfortunately for him, they were subjects who had yet to consent to that status. So Macquarie’s seemingly ambiguous actions — shoot some Aboriginal people and ‘reward’ others — makes sense as a repertoire designed to establish the conditions of governance. The plates were an element in that repertoire.

Even before Macquarie returned to the Northern Hemisphere his monopoly over the distribution of plates became a matter of some concern for other colonists. However, with Macquarie’s replacement by Sir Thomas Brisbane, the distribution of settler-bestowed breastplates throughout New South Wales proliferated significantly between 1830 and 1850, as the land under colonial control expanded. This led to the use of lead and other metals in the breastplates, stylistic variation and major inscription changes. Cleary interprets this ‘privatisation’ of breastplate distribution as leading to their debasement; they became a ‘medal’ bestowed independently of the Crown’s representative for any number of reasons.
This is certainly evident in inscriptions such as ‘Mr Verge’s King Charlie’ and ‘Mr Verge’s King Michie’ granted in the Macleay River district, where conflict was severe. But equally I’m struck by two more productive aspects of this privatisation. First, it makes transparent the fact that the colonisation of Australia (and hence our contemporary sense of who might take responsibility for those processes) depended on both state initiatives and those of relatively autonomous settlers. The complex process of ‘contact’ — the literal dispossession of indigenous people, episodes of negotiation, intimidation, accommodation, subordination and so on — was performed as much by individuals as by state functionaries. Secondly, and this is particularly noticeable in the variety of breastplate inscriptions, the non-governmental distribution of breastplates highlights some of the more intimate and personal aspects of colonial relationships. Compare, for example, the impersonal act of Macquarie conferring the generic title of ‘king’ with a much later inscription: ‘Paddy/For Saving Life’. Would it be too much to imagine some shared respect in the use of the honorific in the inscription ‘Mr Briney of Pialliway’, or some mutual gratitude or even common warmth in the plate inscribed ‘Presented to Baraban by Sheperd Laidley/In remembrance of 9th Decr 1867’ that features an engraved scene of a drowning child being rescued. My point is a simple one: breastplates are varied, and in their forms and inscriptions, and in written accounts, it seems that they served a number of non-Aboriginal goals. Breastplates are neither exclusively Aboriginal nor non-Aboriginal, but transactional objects produced in various modes of colonial exchange, besides those of capture. However, the post-colonial remembrance of breastplates is a different matter.

III. Remembering genocide

For non-Aboriginal people, I think breastplates can shock because the cold brass is so clean and yet so encrusted with a patina of colonial relationships we would rather forget. Remember the double nature of Macquarie’s first breastplates: they were insignia given to people who could be shot, and they were tokens of recognition — target and shield. This doubleness was repeated 165 years later when, in the early 1980s, a breastplate sold at auction in Sydney for $6,500. A report of the sale noted: ‘Farmers in the Narrandera district used to nail them to trees for potshot practice. Keen bidders at a recent Sydney auction treated them with much more respect’.24 From tar-
get to brand-name — the association of breastplates with the right to shoot Aboriginal people is displaced onto the use of the plates for target practice and displaced again onto collectors’ benign bidding which, while respectful of the market value of the plates, should not be taken as indicative of respect for indigenous people. These displacements enable one of those characteristically modern historiographic conceits: a separation of past from present which enables the here and now to be a place which is always so much better (‘Keen bidders at a recent Sydney auction treated them with much more respect’). In this sense breastplates are objects which represent the distance between a violent past and a respectful present. However, in this final section I want to suggest that it’s worth regarding breastplates (and photographs of Aboriginal people wearing breastplates) as proleptic objects, i.e. objects directed towards, or involving, a calculation about the future. Rather than, or perhaps in addition to, thinking about breastplates as representations that fix meaning, I want to consider them as attempts to remember for the future, objects which anticipate successful genocide. Let me unpack this somewhat convoluted proposition.

Some breastplates are historical in the sense of commemorating an event. This is particularly the case with plates distributed as ‘rewards’ or in recognition of service bearing inscriptions such as ‘Woondu/of/Amity Point/Rewarded by the Governor,/for the assistance he afforded with five of his countrymen,/to the survivors of the wreck of the Steamer “Sovereign” …’, or ‘A reward for merit to/Charley/of Tullungunnullly’. These plates record, acknowledge or memorialise existing relationships and thus can be said to be already archival in their production. But the vast majority of plates in using ‘fantasy titles’ are future-oriented: in naming and identifying a king or a queen they do not account for the past but seek to put in place relationships which will be of use in the future. The plates would enable non-indigenous people to recognise those with whom they might bargain. The hope of those who conferred them was that their recipients would magically become what the inscriptions proclaimed them to be. The inscribed titles are thus less ‘fantasy’ and more attempts at magic by white people. Perhaps the best example of this mimetic magic, and an example that takes us to the post-colonial remembrance of breastplates, is the plate given to Coomee Nullanga in the first decade of the twentieth century:

A nice brass shield, suitably inscribed, has been sent to old ‘Coomie’ (Maria) who is the only survivor of the old
Murraramang Aboriginal tribe. It has been given to her by Mr Milne, Railway Inspector of Orange, who was in Milton a short time back on holiday. Mr Milne takes a deep interest in the Aboriginal races and is supposed to have the best collection of Aboriginal weapons in New South Wales. The stipulation is that ‘Coomie’ must not part with her shield til death.25

The breastplate given to Coomie Nullanga is inscribed, ‘Coomie/Last of her Tribe/Murraramang’. This inscription is, if not unique, certainly rare. Very few of the breastplates recorded in the catalogue of Poignant Regalia and the book Kingplates are in fact ‘plates given...to the last living member of a tribe’. Most existing and recorded brass plates refer, as I’ve already noted, to titles or recognise the provision of a service. Paradoxically, it is precisely breastplates as marking ‘the last’ which feature in remembrances of them. For example, in 1952 Fred McCarthy, a Curator of Anthropology at the Australian Museum, wrote:

A tragic aspect of the contact between the whites and the natives in Australia is revealed by the plates given, as many of them were, to the last living member of a tribe — thus they represent the final act in the struggle of our native tribes in those localities.26

McCarthy is not alone. There are also literary and historical references to the plates being give to ‘the last’. Why are the plates remembered as things they were not? What does McCarthy mean when he writes that the plates ‘represent the final act’?

Coomee was, predictably enough, not the ‘last of her tribe’ as her breastplate (pro)claimed. Even as Coomee was ‘passing’, in Daisy Bates’s ambiguous term, or ‘fading’ as the 1990 local history imagined the matter,27 nearby the Bomaderry Infants Home was being established for a predominantly indigenous ‘clientele’ by Miss Thompson, ‘a missionary to the Aborigines’. Today we would describe Miss Thompson’s ‘mission’ as an institution involved in the systematic removal of Aboriginal children from their families in order that they be raised white and, it was hoped, thus be assimilated. So, if the inscription on Coomee’s breastplate was not a statement of fact, what was it? It was mimetic and proleptic.28 The plate was inscribed not only with the words I’ve already quoted but with three parallel lines on either side of the inscription about which the accession notes comment, ‘The three parallel gashes with raised edges either side of the breastplate inscription are similar to the initiation scars described by Milne on Coomee’s shoulders’.29 In other
words these marks on the plate literally reproduced what are said to be Coomee’s bodily scars while the inscription names her status — the last. These two features also make sense of the plate as proleptic because the plate was, I think, intended to stand in for Coomee once she was dead. The photograph of Coomee wearing the plates is obscene because the photograph actually performs what the breastplates are remembered as recording; it is a photograph of a woman who is of value because she is dead. This image and the other photographs are shocking in that they anticipate the death of the person photographed, both pre-empting and performing the prophesy of the death of ‘the last’. The plates announce that event before its occurrence, and are, in the absence of bodies, the recorded proof of a successful extermination. The camera operates as the hands of a clock moving forwards in time, so that we see the imagined future. The photographs, like the breastplates themselves, are not representations but evidential artefacts of methexis — the performance of a seemingly successful genocide which could then be melancholically recalled.

I think of the light which emanates from the breastplates, as Barthes would have it, like an umbilical cord linking the body and the gaze. I think of the wax cylinder recordings of Fanny Corcoran Smith, once believed to be the last person able to sing Aboriginal songs in Tasmania. Seated across the table from her as she was about to be recorded were men who spoke about how wonderful it would be to study these songs after Fanny had died. Even before her last breath expired, they were looking forward to studying the physical reproduction of her bodily voice. I think of the body-casts made of Khoisan in South Africa, another people imagined as dying whose body traces were collected in anticipation. A vacuum opened up before the colonisers, in their erasure of alterity, which they were desperate to fill, to replace bodily absences with body traces which could be studied: sounds, casts and signs on plates. One last colonial performance, that of dying for the record, just had to be recorded. And so the post-colonial remembrance of breastplates began by calling them headstones of ‘the last living member of a tribe’. This mis-remembering of colonial history left no place for post-colonial Aborigines. It sought to erase the ‘unexpected moves of mimesis and alterity across quivering terrain’ both historical and present.
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2. Perhaps the most famous of such photographs is 'Native Prisoners in Chains' by Frances Birtles, which appeared in The Lone Hand, 1 March 1911.


The breastplates included in the exhibition reveal the following divisions: 15.2% Chiefs, 57.7% Kings, 4.3% Queens, 3.8% Royal Couples, 2.2% Royalty, 5.4% Rewards, 4.8% In Recognition of Service and 6.5% Unspecified Recognition. These groupings would be broadly representative of the entire range of extant breastplates. The other major account of breastplates is Jakelin Troy, King Plates: a history of Aboriginal gorgets, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1993.

6. Cleary, p.11.
10. Cleary, p.11.
1. Cleary, p.11. Jimmie Barker makes in a similar point about ‘inappropriate Kings’ not being respected by Aboriginal people in his biography, The Two Worlds of Jimmie Baker: the Life of an Australian Aboriginal 1900–1972, cited in Troy, pp.41–42, where she also argues that changing Aboriginal responses to breastplates is a reflection of changing Aboriginal social relationships under pressure from colonialism.


12. Cleary, p.44.
15. See Letter of E. Reid to E. Milne 13 October 1911, which reads in part, ‘she [Hopping Molly] died some five or six years later and was buried on the sea shore...Some years afterward...I was informed that there were some human bones on the beach, and upon investigation, I found the skeleton of “Hopping Molly”...the identification rested upon the old residents of the place, who upon being shown the thigh and shin bone...declared it to be the leg of Hopping Molly, the knee joint having become completely ossified, which caused her to hop, and from which she derived her name...This was one of the best curios I ever saw...I finally decided to give it to [Dr Forbes who very much coveted the same]...a matter I have very much regretted ever since, as I should have never separated it from the plate [that of ‘Billy Kelly King of Broadwater’ the husband of ‘Hopping Molly’]’ (Cleary, p.76). See Troy, pp.45–50, for a discussion of the role on Edmund Milne as a collector.
17. Cleary, p.17. Troy, p.39, also notes that ‘[Jimmie] Barker inherited a
gorget from a man who had been like a father to him and it became
a treasured relic’.
18. ‘British disdain for the indigenous people has been well enough
recorded as has been their utter inability to come to terms with a
society that did not conform to their own. Their creation and distri-
bution of “king plates” is a prime example. In Aboriginal society
there were not kings, queens or chiefs — laws were made by a con-
sensus reached by a council of tribal elders, who, unlike today’s soci-
ety, could not buy their way into the decision-making process.
Membership was attained by virtue of acquired wisdom, experience
and community respect…The king plates were an attempt to legit-
imise the procedure whereby regal status could be bestowed by the
British but became, instead, degraded symbols of colonialism, engen-
dered from the values of the conqueror and inflicted upon those
whom they oppressed and whose “kingdom” they were in the
process of stealing. The driving motive of the colonisers was to
appropriate the land from its indigenous owners and establish them-
selves on it, but the lifestyle, culture and indeed the very presence of
Aboriginal people directly conflicted this goal’ (Paul Behrendt in
Cleary, p.19).
20. Cleary’s contention is that these ‘badges of distinction’ were ‘an
attempt at social control and domination’, p.9.
24. Milton and Ulladulla Times, 6 February 1906. See also National
Museum of Australia, Breastplates File, 35/310 f.165. ‘The breastplate
was presented to Coomee by Edmund O Milne in 1909. He has first
become acquainted with “Coomee” about 1868 when a boy attend-
ing school at Ulladulla. In those days it was stated by her that she
remembered her grandmother speaking of “the first time the white
birds came by”, an allusion to the sailing ships of Captain Cook or
the First Fleet.’ See also the discussion in Troy, pp.35–8 and p.82.
25. Frederick McCarthy, ‘Breast-plates: the Blackfellows’ reward’, The
Australian Museum Magazine, 10, p.327.
26. Alex McAndrew, Memoirs of Mollymook, Milton and Ulladulla, Epping,
27. The only sense in which the inscription might be regarded as a fact
would be the sense in which Coomee might have been regarded as the
last ‘full-blood’, to use the contemporary expression. Whether
Milne or anyone else actually believed that is of no consequence to
my argument that the plate performs the conclusion of a seemingly
successful genocide.
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