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Schomburgk's Chook: the entangled South Australian collections of a German naturalist

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the politics of museums, collections and the untold stories of the scientific 'specimens' that travelled between Germany and Australia, this article reconstructs the historical, interpersonal and geopolitical contexts that made it possible for the stuffed skin of an Australian malleefowl to become part of the collections of Berlin's Museum für Naturkunde. The author enquires into the kinds of contexts that are habitually considered irrelevant when a specimen of natural history is treated as an object of taxonomic information only. In case of this particular specimen human and non-human history become entangled in ways that link the fate of this one small Australian bird to the German revolutionary generation of 1848, to Germany's nineteenth-century colonial aspirations, to settler–Indigenous relations, to the cruel realities that underpinned the production of scientific knowledge in colonial Australia, and to a present-day interest in reconstructing Indigenous knowledges.

KEYWORDS

German colonialism; colonial Australia; natural history collections; Richard Schomburgk; malleefowl (*Leipoa ocellata*)

Introduction

Recent years have seen a growing interest among museum practitioners, as well as the greater German public, in the history of objects acquired in colonial contexts. This turn to colonial objects forms part of a broader shift in the status accorded to colonialism in Germany's memory culture. Long neglected or wilfully ignored, Germany has for a long time been reluctant to accept the responsibilities arising from the nation's colonial past. Heike Hartmann, co-curator of the popular exhibition 'German Colonialism: Fragments Past and Present' at the *Deutsches Historisches Museum*, thus foregrounds the current debate as an opportunity to create 'relationships between potential heirs', building on a 'confrontation with a history that is divided yet shared'.¹ Objects and specimens collected in the colonial era have a particular role to play in this process, as demonstrated, for instance, by the heated discussions around the current reassessment and relocation of some of the Berlin's ethnological and ethnographic collections, which are to be housed, as of 2019, in the Humboldt Forum in Mitte.

This discussion has been most pronounced around the difficult legacy of human remains, collected in a variety of contexts that continue to be held by German institutions.

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Prior to the politically sensitive return of 20 skulls from Berlin to Namibia in October 2011, there had only been occasional cases of repatriation from Germany, none of which attracted much interest. Now, however, there appears to be a growing public consensus about the necessity for repatriation.² Increasingly, this debate is widening to include other kinds of objects, especially cultural artefacts from various Indigenous communities housed by German museums, universities and private collections.³ Here, also, questions are being asked about the legal context of the objects' acquisition and their adequate management by museum staff and researchers. How are such items to be cared for and stored? How, if at all, should they be made accessible to the public, and possibly displayed? There is a slowly growing understanding of the kind of connections and obligations that these objects might establish between European collecting institutions and Indigenous communities today.

It might seem slightly eccentric to discuss the study skin of an Australian malleefowl that is at the centre of this essay within the context of debates about the legacy of German colonialism and the attendant politics of collection, display and repatriation. Nevertheless, I want to situate my discussion of this unassuming object within such a framework for two reasons that foreground the entanglements of human and animal lives in our social histories. On the one hand, Berlin's malleefowl skin forms part of what clearly constitutes the biggest body of artefacts gathered by nineteenth-century collectors: the vast natural history collections held by eminent metropolitan institutions such as natural history museums and botanical gardens. The relevance of these objects for a critical engagement with Germany's colonial past might, of course, not be immediately apparent. As the natural world is habitually understood as lying outside of the sphere of human influence, natural history collections can easily seem irrelevant to the human-centred history of colonialism. Long treated as taxonomically stable, and hence immutable representations of the non-human world, these objects have only recently begun to be re-articulated within the economic, infrastructural, ideological and epistemological frameworks that brought them to Europe's collecting institution.⁴ Such a reassessment is important, not least, because most nineteenth-century collectors did not focus on one field of collecting alone. Yet, the artefacts they accumulated were often subsequently redistributed according to the logics of a diversifying scientific field and are now housed by different institutions. Consequently, seemingly harmless objects, such as the bird skins deposited in the archive of our natural history museums, have become separated from more controversial specimens such as secret sacred objects or human remains held in anthropological and historical medical collections, which were often gathered by the same group of collectors. The need to look at these objects alongside one another in any serious reassessment of present-day natural history collections constitutes one of the central arguments of this paper. After all, Richard Schomburgk, the collector of Berlin's malleefowl, contributed much more than just bird specimens to the city's vast colonial archives.

The discussion of an *Australian* object, on the other hand, offers an important contribution to the current reassessment of Germany's colonial legacy, because, as highlighted in the introduction to this volume, the Australian colonies are seldom featured within the context of such debates. This constitutes a significant oversight and, again, this essay sets out to prove this point with reference to Richard Schomburgk. German-born scientists and collectors profited from the opportunities the British Empire gave them in the period

before Germany gained access to overseas territories of its own,⁵ and the knowledge they produced in the Australian colonies should not be separated from the exploitative economic and administrative contexts within which such knowledge was assembled.

Against the backdrop of these considerations, this essay reconstructs some of the historical, interpersonal and geopolitical contexts that made it possible for the study skin of an Australian malleefowl to become part of the collection of Berlin's Museum für Naturkunde. In doing so, it enquires into the kind of contexts that are typically considered irrelevant when a specimen of natural history is treated as a carrier of biological information only. In the museum's bird, I will argue, human and non-human history become entangled in ways that link the fate of one small Australian animal to the German revolutionary generation of 1848, to Germany's nineteenth-century colonial aspirations and to the cruel realities that underpinned the production of scientific knowledge in colonial Australia.

Encountering an Australian bird in Berlin

Schomburgk's malleefowl arrived in Berlin two decades before the 1889 opening of the monumental building of the Museum für Naturkunde that we know today. It was initially held by the Zoological Museum, one of the three collections housed by Berlin's Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität that would merge and move to the new premises after the collections' sheer size – comprising over one and three quarter million specimens, occupying two-thirds of the University's main building – made such a move necessary.⁶ The collections' astonishing growth during the nineteenth century conveys the period's ever-increasing interest in natural history, a pursuit which was at least partly incited and sustained by aggressive imperial expansion.

In the context of this development, objects found in nature, such as the malleefowl, underwent a change in status. Closely examined and described per taxonomic principles, compared to other specimens with the help of reference works, catalogued and finally deposited in the institution's storage facilities, they were transformed from individual plant or animal to representatives of their species. Once assigned their place, most of the objects collected were never seen again by the greater public. Likewise, with Berlin's malleefowl: for the better part of its existence as a natural history object it has remained shelved in the museum's vast archive of, by now, around 200,000 bird specimens. Even though the new spatial arrangement of the collections on the new premises meant that the institution would open its doors to a general audience for the first time, the so-called 'dual arrangement' of the collections divided them into a curated set of educational displays and a second, much larger, research collection, ensuring that most artefacts housed by the museum remained out of bounds to the public.⁷

The Berlin malleefowl came back into view in 2010, when it was displayed in an exhibition celebrating the museum's bicentenary, where '[l]ittle known, yet spectacular original exhibits, selected antique collection cabinets and cases, pictures and historic documents' were chosen to 'bear witness to the eventful history of the museum'.⁸ As an object in the anniversary display, Berlin's malleefowl formed part of an epistemological shift that has seen animal objects lose much of their value as truthful records and realistic representations of the natural world. While they are progressively removed from the display cases of natural history museums in favour of computer-animated models and 3-D projections,

study skins and animal taxidermy are increasingly treated as historical artefacts which allow us to engage with the various cultural, political and ideological forces that shaped nineteenth-century practices of collecting, preserving and displaying animals.⁹ In keeping with this new understanding of animal objects, the curators of the bicentenary display did not show the malleefowl in the context of its natural habitat, nor did they assign it a place in the taxonomy of Australian birds. Instead, it was taken to ‘bear witness’ to the museum’s collecting history, and hence it was introduced in relation to a particular time and context of collection. Presented in a glass cabinet, the bird was shown alongside a black and white portrait of its collector Richard Schomburgk, whom the exhibition’s catalogue lauded for bestowing the museum with ‘the world’s most complete collection of nineteenth-century animals from South Australia’.¹⁰ The Berlin malleefowl was thus returned to the historical moment in which it had entered the world of natural history: South Australia, 1861.

Richard Schomburgk

Moritz Richard Schomburgk arrived in Adelaide in August 1849 on the Barque *Princess Louise*, an emigrant ship chartered by the Berlin-based South Australian Colonisation Society. Schomburgk’s biographer Pauline Payne describes how, contrary to the frequent portrayal of South Australia’s German diaspora as religiously motivated, many of the passengers on board were not fleeing religious persecution but were ‘people with professional and business training, artists, musicians and skilled craftsmen’.¹¹ This group of professionals affiliated with educationist and pastor Dr Carl W. Mücke had become disillusioned with the stalling of political reforms which had initially been promised after the proto-democratic uprisings of 1848. They had hoped to be able to put their political beliefs into practice in a new setting.¹² For some of them, more tangible fears of political persecution were certainly motivating forces: prior to their departure, Schomburgk’s older brother Otto, for instance, who was also part of the group, had been imprisoned on charges of demagoguery and the illegal membership in a progressive student fraternity.¹³ And yet, Richard Schomburgk was not leaving for political reasons alone. Throughout the nineteenth century, German migrants who were trained in the natural sciences like he was made use of Anglo-German scholarly networks and travelled to the British colonies in search of better employment opportunities.¹⁴ In the early Victorian period, Australia appears to have been a particularly popular destination, with scholars such as Ferdinand Müller, Georg Neumayer, Wilhelm Bandowski and Gerard Krefft moving to these colonies, prompting Rod Home to speak of science as a ‘German export to nineteenth-century Australia’.

The third of four brothers, Schomburgk had not been destined for such a scholarly future. He had been apprenticed as a gardener, first in Merseburg and later Potsdam, where he acquired some basic knowledge of botany and chemistry, and picked up practical skills such as grafting and the care of hot-house plants.¹⁵ His opportunity came in 1840 through his brother Robert Hermann Schomburgk, who, by that time, had left behind a failed career in plantation and slave-labour-based commerce, first in Richmond, Virginia and later the Caribbean island of St Thomas. Robert Schomburgk had just returned from British Guyana, where he had carried out an explorative expedition for London’s Royal Geographical Society, and he was now a British Government official about to embark

on an expedition to survey and ‘fix’ the eastern and western boundaries of British Guyana. On behalf of the Prussian Government, with the order to collect new flora and fauna as well as ethnographic specimen for the Berlin Botanic Gardens and the Royal Museum, Richard Schomburgk was invited to take part in this expedition as a natural historian.

After returning home, Schomburgk published his three-volume account of the expedition, *Reisen in Britisch-Guiana* (1847),¹⁶ which would eventually earn him a doctoral degree, academic fame and strengthen the good contacts he already had with enlightened circles around the University of Berlin. His preface to the first volume – quoted here from a posthumous English language edition – outlines his cautious claims to scientific credentials, while simultaneously insisting on the relevance of his previous ‘direct experience with nature, the most stimulating of teachers’:

And although, conscious of my weakness, and in spite of the want of a scientific training, I have ventured to make my observations public, the necessary pluck was due to the encouragement and sacrificing support rendered me by men of learning, as I realise only too well the claims that Science makes on works of this kind, and that I am the last person to satisfy them. The fact is, that as a gardener I was not familiar with every essential scientific problem connected with the branches of Natural Knowledge foreign to my profession [...].¹⁷

It seems that Schomburgk could indeed count on the ‘sacrificing support rendered to [him] by men of learning’. It had been none other than Germany’s eminent naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, for instance, who had lobbied the Prussian king to finance Schomburgk’s participation in the expedition, co-funded its publication and who would later help organise the release of Schomburgk’s older brother, Otto, from prison. The brothers, Richard and Otto, could also count on Humboldt’s support in their decision to emigrate to South Australia: their passage was eventually sponsored by the renowned German geologist, Leopold von Buch, a wealthy friend of Humboldt’s.

Moreover, it seems that Schomburgk was able to uphold and expand these networks of scientific exchange and support once the brothers had established themselves in South Australia with a successful farm, orchard and vineyard on a property adjoining the Para River. Right from the start, they reported back the meteorological observations that they carried out with the help of a ‘microscope and other necessary meteorological instruments’ that Otto had requested from the Academy of Sciences in Berlin prior to their departure.¹⁸ After Otto’s death in 1857, Richard appears to have intensified these networking efforts. He dealt commercially in plant specimens that he ordered from Europe, took on the role of curator of a small natural history museum located in the Gawler Mechanics’ Institute and began to collect natural history as well as anthropological specimens for European institutions.¹⁹ While Schomburgk’s efforts were soon to pay off with his appointment as the director of Adelaide’s Botanical Gardens in 1865, the timing of the shipment of the malleefowl to Berlin falls into this slightly earlier and less settled period.

Malleefowl knowledge

At the time when Schomburgk shipped his malleefowl to Berlin, European collectors would already have known the bird by the name of *Leipoa ocellata* from John Gould’s monumental seven-volume *Birds of Australia* (1840–1848),²⁰ in which the British ornithologist lauded the malleefowl as ‘among the most important of the ornithological

novelties which the little-explored regions of Australia have lately unfolded to us'.²¹ The bird, Gould went on to explain in his supplementary *Handbook to the Birds of Australia*,

is rendered highly interesting from the circumstance of its not hatching its own eggs, which instead of being incubated in the usual way, are deposited in mounds of mixed sand and herbage, and there left for the heating of the mass to develop the young, which, when accomplished, force their way through the sides of the mound and commence an active life from the moment they see the light of day.²²

From Gould's assessment of the malleefowl's significance for natural history, it is obvious why it would have been advantageous for Richard Schomburgk to send a study skin of this particular bird back to Berlin, making it the first specimen of a malleefowl in German collections. In Australia, Schomburgk had access to Gould's publications and had contacted Wilhelm Peters, zoologist and curator at the Berlin Museum, with the offer to send home any of the birds described by Gould should the museum desire them.²³ Moreover, since the malleefowl's habitat is limited to certain regions of South Australia and Victoria – areas where Gould himself had hardly been able to collect – Schomburgk must have felt that he could still contribute something new about this important animal.²⁴ He published his own observations on the bird with the *Monatsberichte*, issued by the German Royal Academy of Sciences,²⁵ and in the journal *Leopoldina*, published by the German Academy of Natural Sciences.²⁶ His correspondence with Gould about his findings is partly reproduced in the latter's *Handbook to the Birds of Australia*.²⁷

By this time, Schomburgk would have known the malleefowl quite intimately: in the most fundamental sense, he had eaten both the animal and its offspring and written home to describe how 'the colonists hunt the bird not for its tasty meat alone but also for its even tastier eggs'.²⁸ Conceptually, he made use of the power of metaphor to render the bird familiar when taking recourse to its German name *Thermometerhuhn* – thermometer hen – alongside the Latin scientific nomenclature '*Leipoa ocellata* Gould' in his writings. While the term 'thermometer' refers to the bird's particular breeding technique, according to which the male constantly monitors the temperature of the nesting mound with its beak, it is the term 'Huhn' that interests me. In German, 'Huhn' serves as a generic name for animals of the order of Galliformes. In everyday parlance, however, the expression has the meaning of 'chicken', or the Australian colloquial 'chook' – that is, of a domesticated fowl. Schomburgk's German name for the animal thus conceptually likened malleefowls to farm birds; an allusion with real-life implications, as it turns out. In keeping with his self-fashioned persona as hands-on gardener-cum-scientist in the preface to his *Reisen in Britisch-Guiana*, Schomburgk experimented with keeping malleefowl in pens on his farm and tried to assess the species' suitability for breeding. He placed eggs in the nests of his domestic chooks and wrote on the young birds' behaviour after hatching. Unfortunately, his domestic malleefowls remained strictly separate from the other farm birds, and while they continued to build impressive nesting mounds, they would not lay eggs in captivity.²⁹ Thus clearly familiar with malleefowl from daily encounters on his farm, Schomburgk would have gained another, even more intimate knowledge of the Berlin malleefowl from killing and skinning the bird, from preserving its skin and making it ready for shipment to the Berlin Museum.

'Pioneers of culture'? German scientific colonialism

Through Schomburgk, who was able to transform his hands-on encounters with the malleefowl on the colonial frontier into the language of ornithology, knowledge about South Australian fauna eventually also began to circulate in discourses outside the natural sciences which attempted to articulate a distinct German variant of colonialism. After all, the British Empire not only held career opportunities for German-born naturalists such as Schomburgk, but British colonial practices were also the yardstick against which German writers developed their own sense of a desired future for the German colonial endeavour as the benevolent and enlightened counterpart to the British example. The pivotal role accorded to German-born naturalists in the British colonies within this discourse is evident, for instance, in an 1864 essay on the Schomburgk brothers in *Die Natur*; a journal published in Halle between 1852 and 1874, which popularised the findings of science for a broader readership. Written by one of their fellow 1848ers, Otto Ule, the text forms part of a series of articles in which Ule sought to articulate a distinct German form of colonialism by portraying the explorers, missionaries, or settlers as 'pioneers of culture'. The essay's opening passage presents Ule's rationale for these portraits as follows:

We present to our readers [...] a whole family of pioneers of culture. These we won't see acting among the savages, fighting against barbarism and sowing the first seeds of civilisation in humanising sensations, tastes, manners and aspirations. The country that they have devoted themselves to has, but for a few sad remnants, unfortunately already been stripped of its native population; and these remnants, caught in a process of accelerated decline, will most probably not merit the attempt of civilising them. But the country itself is wild, and is in need itself of being awakened from this state of savagery, so as to become accepted as a legitimate member amongst the cultured nations and peoples of the world.³⁰

Ule's 'pioneers of culture', of which the Schomburgk brothers are his prime example, are described here as fundamentally different from (British) colonial agents 'acting among the savages [and] fighting against barbarism'. They are also cast in a particular relationship with notions of indigeneity: while – in a classic invocation of the dying race discourse virulent at the time – South Australia's Kurna people are only relevant to Ule's narrative in so far as they are 'sad remainders [...] caught in the process of accelerated decline', the notion of an unspoiled indigeneity, as well as the civilising labour it elicits, are displaced onto the country's 'wild' landscapes instead. The understanding of a distinct German form of colonialism that is proposed here is thus one that actively disavows the violence of dispossession in the name of a disinterested, but hands-on, applied science. Schomburgk's own seemingly trivial efforts to domesticate the malleefowl, as well as his subsequent agricultural experiments in the acclimatisation of non-native plants as director of the Adelaide Botanic Gardens,³¹ become intelligible, in this context, as partaking in the civilising project of awakening a conceptually de-peopled landscape from the 'state of savagery'.

It is important to critically engage with this projection of a benevolent and enlightened German variant of colonialism, not only because of the necessity to counter such disavowals of the exploitative economic and administrative contexts to which German-born naturalists contributed and from which they profited, but also because of its ongoing currency in present-day memory cultures in both Germany and Australia. In the Australian context, Gerhard Fischer has provided a comprehensive critical

commentary on the vast number of celebratory accounts of German settlers in Australia from the 1980s and 1990s.³² Two more recent examples from Australian writing on Schomburgk and his contemporaries are particularly relevant to the topic at hand. In his introduction to the 2011 volume *Germans: Travellers, Settlers and their Descendants in South Australia*, Peter Monteath describes Schomburgk and his fellow travellers on board the *Princess Louise* as having ‘brought with them an intellectual energy and cosmopolitanism which bestowed huge benefits on what was still a tiny and precarious colony’.³³ Also writing about Schomburgk, Engelhard Weigl equally stresses the ‘differences between the Schomburgk brothers’ treatment of the natural resources of the new colony and that of the English colonists of the time. Commenting on Schomburgk’s career as director of the Adelaide Botanic Garden, Weigl lauds Schomburgk’s recommendations for having been grounded in ‘the special climatic conditions of the Australian continent’, while former director George William Francis is criticised for having been ‘motivated more by the extravagant needs of the English upper classes’.³⁴

I see the need for foregrounding the cosmopolitan mind-set of the *Princess Louise* travellers within the context of efforts to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of South Australia’s often Anglocentric colonial historiography, and I also consider it valuable to learn about the particular Prussian understanding of economic botany that Schomburgk brought to Adelaide’s Botanic Garden. Yet, the particular *German* context of heated debates about the legacy of German colonialism in which this essay is written makes it imperative, for me, to remain cautious of the way in which such accounts might repeat a fashioning of nineteenth-century German colonists as benign ‘pioneers of culture’. Here, it is crucial to interrogate the manner in which German actors were often conceptually shielded from the violent realities of the colonial frontier precisely by their alleged ‘cultured’ nature or scientific orientation. One strategy to counter such accounts has proven fruitful in the context of this study: questioning the place of Indigenous life-worlds and knowledge in the production of European writing about the malleefowl.

Ngow, Ngow-oo

Although in *Die Natur* Ule could only see ‘sad remainders [...] caught in the process of accelerated decline’ in South Australia’s Kurna people, and while their fate might initially seem irrelevant to the assemblage of malleefowl knowledge in the metropolis, a closer look at the production of this knowledge renders the vital role of Indigenous actors in this process visible again. It returns us to precisely those violent realities of the colonial frontier that Ule claims to be so alien to his ‘pioneers of culture’.

One point of entry into such contact histories is Gould’s extensive nomenclature for the malleefowl in his *Birds of Australia* (1848). In full it reads:

LEIOPOA OCELLATA, Gould.

Ocellated Leipoa.

Leipoa ocellata, Gould, in *Proc. of Zool. Soc.*, October 13, 1810.

Ngow, Aborigines of the lowland; ngow-oo, of the mountain districts of Western Australia.

Native Pheasant, Colonists of Western Australia.³⁵

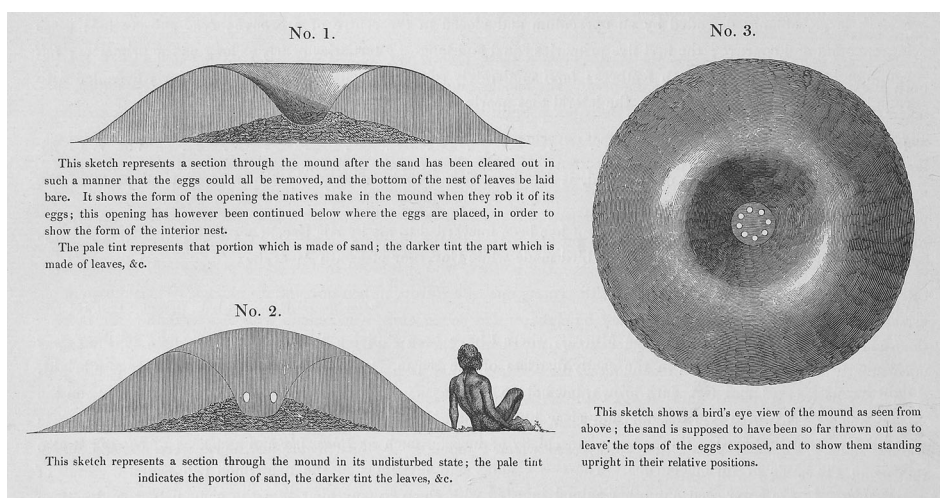


Figure 1. John Gould, *Birds of Australia*, 1848, vol. i, p. lxxiv.

As was common practice for ornithologists at the time, Gould attempted to record all names previously given to the birds he described. And while he appears to have been unaware of the malleefowl's German appellation 'Thermometerhuhn', he included Indigenous names from two distinct locations in this opening paragraph and provided even more in the brief essay on the bird in the his 'Introduction to the Birds of Australia'.³⁶ Moreover, and possibly due to the bird's status as 'among the most important of the ornithological novelties which the little-explored regions of Australia have lately unfolded to us',³⁷ Gould's introduction also presents a series of diagrams produced for him by George Grey, Governor of South Australia, that serve to illustrate the bird's nesting habits – significantly, the only diagrams in the publication's bulky seven volumes (Figure 1).

The inclusion of a nude Indigenous figure seated on the side of the malleefowl mound with his or her back to the viewer is puzzling. Was the figure placed there merely to indicate size? It seems that there is more to it, because Indigenous Australians are also mentioned in the caption to one of the diagrams, which is said to show 'the form of the opening the natives make in the mound when they rob it of its eggs'.³⁸ In fact a closer look at Gould's writing on the malleefowl reveals a dense network of Indigenous collaborators who helped produce European knowledge about this bird; an observation, for that matter, that holds true for all first-hand accounts of the malleefowl of which I am aware from the middle of the nineteenth century.

Governor Grey, for instance, specifies that he arrived at his account 'by cross examination of several natives' and states he is 'quite satisfied of its truth'.³⁹ (Grey, cited in Gould 1848, vol. i: lxxv). John Gilbert, a collector in Gould's employ, similarly acknowledges his 'account of the habits, manners, and nidification of this bird [to] have been detailed to [him] by Mr. Armstrong, the aboriginal interpreter, and some of the more intelligent natives of Western Australia'. Later he describes 'questioning one of the men attached to Mr. Moore's expedition, [who] gave [...] a similar account of its habits and mode of incubating'.⁴⁰ The knowledge that the two men attain from their Indigenous interlocutors

includes information on how the mound is built ('The natives say they scratch up the sand for many yards around, forming a mound of about three feet in height'⁴¹), on the number of eggs deposited per breeding season ('the eggs are deposited to the number of twelve and upwards, and covered up by the birds as laid; or, as the natives express it, 'the countenances of the eggs are never visible'⁴²) and includes Indigenous names for the animal from several regions ('The native name for the bird on the Murray River is Marrak-ko or Marra-ko; in Western Australia the name of the bird is Ngow-o or Ngow. The name in Western Australia is given from the tuft on its head, Ngoweer meaning a tuft of feathers'⁴³). More than anything, it is evident from these reports just how much European naturalists depended on Indigenous expertise and labour in their collection of specimens. John Gilbert describes his first encounter with a malleefowl mound as follows:

[S]o anxious was I to see the hidden treasures within that [mound] that in my haste I threw aside the black fellow and began scraping off the upper part of the mound; this did not at all please him and he became very indignant, at the same time making me understand 'that as I had never seen this nest before I had better trust to him to get out the eggs, or I should, in my haste and impatience, certainly break them.' I therefore let him have his own way, and he began scraping off the earth very carefully from the centre [...]. The native informed us that the only chance of procuring the bird was by stationing ourselves in sight of the mound at a little distance, and remaining quiet and immovable till it made its appearance at sun-down; this I attempted, and, with the native, encamped within twenty yards of the mound about an hour before sunset [...].⁴⁴

In each of these passages, European scientific knowledge about the malleefowl is discernible as emerging from a dense network of communication and exchange between European naturalists and Indigenous collaborators. Schomburgk's malleefowl writing is no different. Furthermore, his comments let us catch a glimpse of the competition that must have prevailed between settlers and Kurna people over the malleefowl and its eggs as a food source. Gilbert and Grey had already noted the importance of this animal in Indigenous diets ('The natives are exceedingly fond of them, and rob the mounds two or three times in a season'⁴⁵). From Schomburgk, we now learn that settlers also hunted the bird and its eggs and that its population had already declined significantly by the time he wrote his account:

Harassed by a dog, the birds fly to the next branches of a tree, the dog then indicates their presence by barking. [...] The hunter can now creep closer to the bird, which becomes an easy target for his gun. A friend of mine has killed 16 specimens within four weeks in the manner just-mentioned. [...] The bird is hunted by natives and colonists alike for its tasty meat and its even tastier eggs. Their number has thus already been diminished to such an extent that the moment does not appear to be far in the future when this most interesting feathered creature like the dodo or the nestor parrot will become extinct.⁴⁶

In a curious echo of Ule's invocation of the dying race discourse, for Schomburgk the malleefowl is 'caught in a process of accelerated decline', though he shies away from spelling out the repercussions that its disappearance might have for the region's Indigenous population. And like Ule's writing, Schomburgk's account of the malleefowl is thus characterised by a wilful disavowal of colonial violence in the name of disinterested science.

Entangled collections

While we might say that information about Indigenous life-worlds on the colonial frontier was recorded rather inadvertently in early European writing about the malleefowl, Indigenous Australians were soon to become a subject in their own right in Schomburgk's communication with Berlin. As director of the Adelaide Botanic Garden, he continued to cultivate his network of exchange with private individuals, learned societies and institutions, including the Berlin-based Berlin Society of Anthropology, Ethnology and Prehistory (BSAEP). The society elected him as a corresponding member in July 1879, and around this time his name repeatedly appears in the BSAEP's *Verhandlungen* (Transactions) in association with various gifts, among them copies of George Taplin's *Australian Aboriginal Folklore*, William Wyatt's *Some Account of the Manners and Superstitions of the Adelaide and Encounter Bay Aboriginal Tribes*, 'a newly-published work on The Native Tribe of South Australia', 'a stone knife and seven magical boards from South Australia' – objects which have since been identified as the first Central Australian *tywerrenge* to have entered European collections – as well as a report compiled by an unnamed 'friend' on 'manners and customs of the tribes living deep in the interior of South Australia'.⁴⁷ As early as the beginning of the 1870s, and only a little over a decade after he had sent the malleefowl to the Museum für Naturkunde, Schomburgk also shipped another kind of organic material to Berlin: the BSAEP's catalogue cards indicate that two skulls of Indigenous Australians, currently housed in the society's collection, arrived in Berlin from South Australia. In both cases the donor is specified as 'Dr. Schomurgk' or 'Schombergk', respectively.⁴⁸

While there is very little information to date on where and how exactly these ancestral remains came to be in Schomburgk's possession – they are currently undergoing further provenance research – there are two points to be drawn from their presence in present-day Berlin collections for the argument of this essay. Firstly, it should not surprise us that Schomburgk, the celebrated early collector for Berlin's natural history museum and revered director of Adelaide's Botanic Garden, also dealt in human remains. The networks as well as the infrastructure required for preparing, packing and shipping skulls, hair samples or skeletal remains overseas were already well in place from the ongoing and large-scale shipment of animal bodies. Secondly, the entangled history of human and non-human pasts that becomes visible here has repercussions for how we need to engage with our colonial collections today: in late nineteenth-century Australia, animal specimen, plant samples and ancestral remains were often gathered by the same group of collectors. Only later, and in the metropolis, was this diversity of objects divided up into separate collections and came to be housed by different institutions. As a result, the puzzle of adequately provenancing the ancestral remains in the BSAEP's collection, for instance, might not be solved if one follows the leads from Schomburgk to ethnography alone. The key might well lie in the archives of Berlin's Museum für Naturkunde or in files documenting the early days of Adelaide's Botanic Garden, possibly in the very folder that also contains malleefowl correspondence.

The implications of this insight are threefold, at least. In the face of such entangled collections we need approaches to research that are international in focus (looking at archives in Germany and Australia), interdisciplinary in design (capable of critically engaging with knowledge produced in the sciences and the humanities) and, most importantly, willing –

through collaboration with Indigenous communities, for instance – to take the voices of Indigenous actors marginalised by colonial archives seriously. Ideally, a collaboration such as this would unearth biographical information about the two ancestors currently in the BSAEP’s collection, thus enabling their repatriation to country. Through such conversations, new malleefowl meanings hitherto ignored might also become apparent: there is strong evidence that the bird was not only of nutritional value but also of great spiritual significance to different Indigenous groups with whom European collectors interacted.

Coda: stargazing

Indigenous Australians had significant knowledge of the night sky and frequently incorporated celestial objects and transient celestial phenomena into their oral traditions.⁴⁹ In researching this traditional knowledge, ethno-astronomists, together with historical astronomers, frequently draw on the first detailed publication on Aboriginal astronomy by William Stanbridge, who recorded his conversations with two elders of the Boorong clan of the Wergaia language group from the dry Mallee country in northwest Victoria.⁵⁰ These conversations took place between 1848 and 1851, roughly the same time period as when Gould published his *Book of Birds* and when Schomburgk sent home his malleefowl skin. In Stanbridge’s writing, we find references to a star with the local name of Neilloan, which Stanbridge identifies as Lyra, better known today as Vega. ‘Loan’ is the name for malleefowl in the local language, and hence Boorong astronomers, as recorded by Stanbridge, linked the seasonal appearance and disappearance of Vega in the Australian night sky between April and September, with the breeding cycles of the malleefowl. While Stanbridge’s account would thus confirm, once more, the importance of malleefowl eggs in Indigenous diets, his essays also recorded another important aspect of malleefowl knowledge: The prefix ‘nei’, indicates a thing or person who possesses great powers. For the Boorong, at least, the malleefowl was thus not simply an earthly creature to be hunted and eaten, but an animal that had its cosmogonic counterpart in Neilloan in the night sky.

Notes

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27. Gould, *Handbook*, vol. ii, pp 165–166.
28. Schomburgk, ‘Zur Fortpflanzungsgeschichte der Leipoa’, p 119. See footnote 29 for the full translation.
29. ‘Als ich kürzlich der schmackhaften Eier wegen ein solches Nest plünderte, bemerkte ich, dass ein Vogel eben die Eischale zu durchbrechen anfang. Ich nahm das Ei mit nach Hause und legte es einer brütenden Henne unter.’ (Schomburgk 1861); ‘Obgleich Leipoa in Bewegungen und Sitten den Haushühnern sehr ähnlich ist, hält sie sich doch, wenn sie in gezähmten Zustände auf dem Hühnerhofe gehalten wird, streng abgesondert von den andern Hofbewohnern. Ihr Trieb zum Nestbau verlässt sie auch in der Gefangenschaft nicht, trotzdem sie keine Eier legt: Schomburgk, ‘Zur Fortpflanzungsgeschichte der Leipoa’, p 118.
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37. Gould, *Birds of Australia*, vol. v, p 167.
38. Gould, *Birds of Australia*, vol. i, p lxxiv.
39. Grey, cited in Gould, *Birds of Australia*, vol. i, p lxxv.
40. Gilbert, cited in Gould, *Birds of Australia*, vol. v, p 167.
41. Gilbert, cited in Gould, *Birds of Australia*, vol. v, p 167.
42. Gilbert, cited in Gould, *Birds of Australia*, vol. v, p 167.
43. Grey, cited in Gould, *Birds of Australia*, vol. i, p lxxv.
44. Gilbert, cited in Gould, *Birds of Australia*, vol. I, pp lxxv–lxxvii.
45. Gilbert, cited in Gould, *Birds of Australia*, vol. 5, p 167; Grey, cited in Gould, *Birds of Australia*, vol. i, p lxxv.
46. ‘Denn von dem Hunde bedrängt, fliegen sie auf die nächsten Zweige eines Baumes, der Hund zeigt dann durch Bellen die Gegenwart des Vogels an, und während letzterer keinen Blick von dem Hunde abwendet, gelingt es dem Jäger mit Leichtigkeit, sich in die unmittelbare Nähe des Vogels zu schleichen, welcher dann ein sicheres Ziel seiner Flinte wird. Während ein Freund von mir auf die eben erwähnte Weise binnen 4 Wochen 16 Stück erlegte, befand sich unter dieser Zahl nur ein einziges Männchen. [...] Nicht allein von den Eingebornen, sondern auch von den Colonisten wird dem Vogel nicht bloss seines schmackhaften Fleisches, sondern auch seiner noch schmackhafteren Eier wegen nachgestellt. Hierdurch wird seine Anzahl derartig vermindert, dass der Zeitpunkt nicht fern zu liegen scheint, wo dies so höchst interessante gefiederte Wesen gleich der Dronte und dem Nestorpapagei zu den ausgestorbenen Arten gehören dürfte.’ My translation. Schomburgk, ‘Zur Fortpflanzungsgeschichte der Leipoa’, pp 118–119.
47. Heinrich Beyrich, ‘Eingegangene Schriften’, *Verhandlungen der Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte* 16, Sitzung vom 15 März 1884, pp 224–225; Fedor Jagor, ‘Ein Steinmesser und sieben Zauberhölzer aus Süd-Australien’, *Verhandlungen der Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte* 11, Sitzung am 15 März 1879, pp 105–106; Rudolf Virchow, ‘Untitled’, *Verhandlungen der Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte* 11, Sitzung am 19 Juli 1879, p 283; Virchow, ‘Eingegangene Schriften’, *Verhandlungen der Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte* 11, Sitzung am 20 Dezember 1879, p 456; Virchow, ‘Eingegangene Schriften’, *Verhandlungen der Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte* 12, Sitzung am 12 Juni 1880, pp 204–205; Hilary Howes, *Provenance Report*:

Berlin Society of Anthropology, Ethnology and Prehistory (BSAEP), 2016, <http://www.aga.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/161125_HilaryHowes_BSAEP-ProvenanceReport.pdf>.

48. Howes, *Provenance Report*, p 18. In fact, even during his travels in British Guyana, Schomburgk collected ethnographic material, as well as human remains. He ‘exhumed three skeletons near the village of Pirara, one of which was later exhibited “in the Anatomy Museum at Berlin”’: Howes, *Provenance Report*, p 18.
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