

Caroline Tennant-Kelly collection discovered in a Northern Rivers farmhouse in New South Wales, Australia.

Kim de Rijke, University of Queensland,
k.derijke@uq.edu.au

Tony Jefferies, University of Queensland,
tonyjefferies@optusnet.com.au

On December 14th 2009 we drove from Brisbane, southeast Queensland, down to the home of Grahame and Stephanie Gooding near Tintenbar in the Northern Rivers district of New South Wales.

The purpose of our trip was to take possession of what we have since come to call the 'Caroline Tennant-Kelly Collection'; the papers and effects left by the anthropologist at her passing in 1989. Its discovery was the culmination of some adroit detective work, and considerable perseverance on the part of Kim: first, via Heather Radi's online biography, ascertaining that Tennant-Kelly had passed away in the town of Kyogle, and then taking the steps that led to finding her legacy in the hands of local cattleman Grahame Gooding.

There was a quality of the miraculous in the whole event, for we had been convinced that Tennant-Kelly's fieldnotes, unpublished papers, and the like had long since disappeared. And in regard to the facts of their preservation: undoubtedly the chances of the collection having wound up in the local tip greatly outweighed those of an intelligent and sensitive person utterly untrained in this field recognising their value, and with no prospect of personal gain, holding on to them for the intervening twenty years.



Considering the collection had spent twenty years in various spare rooms and sheds it was in marvellous condition: a riotous jumble of letters, manuscripts, notebooks, photographs and miscellanea contained in six dilapidated archival boxes and a large cardboard carton. We have since estimated it to consist of approximately 1,800 separate items.

Tennant-Kelly's career can be divided into four chapters, all of which are represented in the collection: her early life as a playwright and theatrical producer in Brisbane and Sydney (1922 to 1932), as anthropologist working in Aboriginal Studies in Queensland and New South Wales (1932 to 1940), as anthropologist specialising in, particularly, post-war immigration (1944 to 1955), and lastly her career in the sociological aspects of urban-planning, particularly the consequences and implications of Sydney's rapid post-war expansion (1955 to 1970). In addition, there is a great deal of personal material: letters, poems, family photographs, travel writing, and more.

Tennant-Kelly's anthropological work in Queensland initially sparked our interest in her, particularly her well-known Oceania article of 1935: '*Tribes on Cherburg Settlement, Queensland*'. There was also the abstract of a paper, which was presumed lost, delivered at the 21st ANZAAS conference in 1932, '*The Aborigines of Fraser or Great Sandy Island, Queensland*' (thankfully, it is included in the collection).

It is this second period of Tennant-Kelly's professional life that is likely to be of most interest to Australian anthropologists generally. Having now had the opportunity to undertake a preliminary exploration of the collection, we both feel it is no hyperbole to state that, in terms of southern Queensland at least, the collection represents the

most significant body of Aboriginal ethnographic material to emerge since Winterbotham's work with Gaiarbau, Paddy Flynn and Cobbo Williams in the late 1950s, and, in terms of Cherbourg, surpassing in quality and extent the material gathered by Norman Tindale during his much shorter sojourn there some five years after Tennant-Kelly.

Before turning to an elaboration of Tennant-Kelly's Australian ethnographic material it is pertinent to note the private correspondence between Margaret Mead and Tennant-Kelly, of which the collection includes some 100 pages. Their correspondence, particularly that from the late 1920s, is likely to add to the knowledge available on Mead's anthropological work, the Sydney academic social scene in which both moved, and their personal characters more generally. In addition, there is significant correspondence with, and references to, other anthropologists of note: A.P. Elkin, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, Raymond Firth, Reo Fortune, Gregory Bateson, Ian Hogbin, S.F. Nadel, Camilla Wedgwood, Phyllis Kaberry and Ursula McConnell.

Having worked in native title in Central Queensland, and therefore acutely aware of the general paucity of historical Australian Aboriginal ethnographic material from the region, we could hardly contain our excitement at the quantum leap the Tennant-Kelly Collection represents in this regard. Firstly, there is the purely ethnographic material itself, collected, for the most part, under the headings of the ethno-linguistic groups. These groups are delineated in *'Tribes on Cherburg Settlement, Queensland'* and consist of most of the groups well-known from the region: Batjala, Kabi, Wakka, Goa, Kalali, Bidjara, Gangulu and Darumbal. Significant material however was also collected from other groups such as the Wiri and Yirendali further north while references are made to groups from Cape York and the Gulf of Carpentaria. The amount and quality of information gathered for each one varies and depends, no doubt, on the availability and quality of Tennant-Kelly's respective informants.

Tennant-Kelly's line of enquiry into Aboriginal social organisation and religious life generally conforms to the anthropological interests of her day, and those we associate most strongly with the structural-functionalist approach of Radcliffe-Brown and her mentor Elkin. The primary data therefore includes wordlists (including kin terms), kinship structure

diagrams, notes on totemism, religious ritual practices, territorial knowledge and genealogies; all the classic ethnographic concerns.

Broadly speaking, Tennant-Kelly was interested in a theme that stayed with her throughout her professional life and which she referred to as 'culture contact'. Her focus in Queensland was therefore on the effect a Government Settlement like Cherbourg was having on Aboriginal society and culture. Space does not permit here an in-depth study of Tennant-Kelly's background and motivations; suffice to say, she was an extraordinarily independent woman who was neither impressed nor intimidated by the behaviour of Queensland public servants and missionaries, an outlook that would eventually land her in trouble.¹

From the moment one begins to study Tennant-Kelly, admiration and respect grows. This was a woman unusual in the Australian context: like her friend and colleague, Camilla Wedgwood, from an upper middle-class English background with a strong sense of social duty and confidence around political power. To some degree she stood outside Australian society, which is perhaps an ideal position for an anthropologist who had to negotiate the largely racist jungle of pre-war officialdom and emerge with any integrity. The Caroline Tennant-Kelly collection is a treasure that will assist immeasurably the understanding of various aspects of early to mid-twentieth century Australian society. It contains Aboriginal cultural material previously unknown and missing; and it will assist anthropologists, historians, linguists, political scientists and others in their analysis of key socio-political and cultural aspects of issues that continue to be relevant in Australia today. The collection is being donated to the Fryer Library at the University of Queensland.²

¹/ See for example: Kidd, R. (1997) *The Way We Civilise: Aboriginal Affairs – The Untold Story*. St. Lucia: The University of Queensland Press, pp. 125-136.

²/ We thank Professor David Trigger, supervisor of our respective PhD and MA anthropological research projects at the University of Queensland, for his assistance in our Tennant-Kelly research. While we are happy to answer questions regarding the significance and background of this collection, questions regarding access should be directed to the Fryer Library (phone: +61 (0)7 3365 6236, email: fryer@library.uq.edu.au).