

COPY 4 Feb 2013

## McWilliams, Robert

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**From:** Allen, Lindy  
**Sent:** Friday, 1 February 2013 5:23 PM  
**To:** McWilliams, Robert  
**Subject:** FW: PC Cole

Percival C Cole was a solicitor and private collector in the early twentieth century. He amassed a collection of over 700 objects, which included a number of rare wooden artefacts from Victoria. Nevertheless, although Cole acquired some choice artefacts from Victoria, his collection was strongest in objects from Central Australia, the Kimberley and Northern Australia. By the early twentieth century, wooden artefacts from South East Australia were scarce — therefore most South East collections were either historic hand-me-downs from the nineteenth century or archaeological collections. Henceforth Cole's focus on northern Australia reflected early twentieth century desires for 'authentic' Aboriginal goods. Cole's relationship with the National Museum lasted over 40 years. He first approached the museum in 1902, soon after Baldwin Spencer returned from his and Francis Gillen's trek across Australia. Cole maintained that he was "making a full study of Australian ethnology and naturally wish[ed] to obtain as many specimens as I can" and a "special study of boomerangs" of which he had "over forty" in 1902, Cole also requested any "surplus Central Australian weapons" but in particular "the ordinary Central Australian implements" (Cole 5/12/1902). This led to a number of exchanges in 1903 and 1904 in which some Spencer and Gillen material was swapped for historic objects from Victoria and other items from Central Australia. Cole was an avid collector, purchasing many old Victorian collections in the first years of the century. He also had connections with the stone tool collecting community, purchasing the entomologist and amateur archaeologist Charles French's stone axe collection in 1903 (Cole 12/6/1903).

Adorning his home at 24 Wattle Valley Road in a leafy part of the Melbourne suburb of Canterbury, Cole's collection of over 700 objects must have been impressive, and overwhelmingly cramped in his middle class Federation house. "Owing to lack of space", Cole attempted to sell his collection to the museum in 1921 (Cole 11/4/1921). The museum rejected the offer because of lack of funds. It is unclear whether Cole found an alternative buyer in 1921, but by 1930 he still had an extremely large collection of approximately 200 objects and again approached the museum as a potential buyer. The fact that Cole continually asked the museum's advice regarding prospective buyers suggests that he was out of touch with the broader marketplace. He also argued that his collection was "rare" and should not leave the state, and that if he "were in the position to do so" he "would be delighted to make a gift of" his "collection to the museum" (Cole 1/10/1930). In 1940, Cole again wrote to the museum stating, "I am very anxious not to dispose of the collection and deem it a favour if you could advise me as suggested" (Cole 20/2/1940). Cole valued the collection as £300 but only asked £100 for the collection, the museum however offered merely £50 (Mahony 3/5/1940; Cole 21/5/1940). At this stage the museum was financially in a poor condition, with the war economy, the museum's budget was cut by 25% and Mahony was using his own wealth to support collection acquisition (Mahony 22/5/1940; Obituary 27/9/44). Cole died in June 1951 and his daughter Mrs W C Fisher sold the small remainder of his collection to the museum.

Indigenous Cultures Department, "Collections 1939-1969: PC Cole Collection" Unpublished Manuscript, Melbourne: Museum Victorian ICD Archive

Written by Dr Gareth Knapman, former researcher at Museum Victoria.

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