

The 'acts of courtesy' shown to a missionary couple at Hermannsburg and Kunmanya missions, recorded in lantern slides

The Monash Indigenous Studies Centre has just received a gift of over a hundred and fifty magic lantern slides and 35mm transparencies. The slides were made by the anthropologist and Presbyterian missionary H. R. (Harry) Balfour (1875-1962) and his wife Katie.

Lead CI Martyn Jolly, along with Bronwyn Coupe from the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, visited Professors Lynette Russell and Ian McNiven at the Centre to look at the slides, which are still in their original boxes. Together, we discovered that the slides were made in Central Australia near Hermannsburg, the Finke River, and Ernabella, and in the Kimberley at the Kunmunya Presbyterian Mission.

Whilst working as a missionary Balfour collected indigenous material culture and made ethnographic films and photographs. He donated some of his photographs to the [British Museum](#), and some objects such as baskets and weapons to [Museums Victoria](#). An ethnographic film he made in 1933, *Worora and Ngarinjin tribes at Kunmunya*, is online at the [State Library of Western Australia](#) and a report on the Kunmunya Mission Balfour prepared for the Presbyterian Church in 1933 or 1934 is available through the [National Library of Australia](#).



Professor Lynette Russell with the newly donated glass magic lantern slides by H. R. Balfour and Katie Balfour.

Although one or two of the images are duplicated in the British Museum collection and in the Presbyterian Church report, taken together the sequenced collection of magic lantern slide lectures which have now been donated to the MISC provides a much more complex, nuanced and intimate picture of the interactions between Indigenous people and missionaries than those bald museum artefacts and documents. In both Central Australia and the Kimberley we see the relationships unfolding as the Balfours go on, for instance, four-day camping trips and picnics with Indigenous people, and encounter ceremonial sites.

In his report of the Kunmunya mission, which is mostly about the 'Christianising' of the local people, Balfour also reports on his reason for making the magic lantern slides and the ethnographic film.

I attended several ‘cobba cobbas’, and was most interested in all that I saw and heard of the customs, etc., especially of the acts of courtesy shown amongst themselves and even extended to us. They also invited me to see their sacred objects, and the cave in which they were kept. I took some ‘cine’ pictures of these, and also of stone implements being made, and Mr. Love suggested that copies of these should be sent to the British Museum as a permanent record, as soon these things will be lost to science for ever. I took many other photographs, which I trust will stimulate more interest in this branch of our Church’s work.



H R Balfour, A picnic in Central Australia near Hermannsburg or the Finke River, c1930. Lantern slide.

Balfour was obviously disappointed in the lack of interest shown by most Europeans in Indigenous culture. For instance, when he visited Munya, a government run Aboriginal station, on his way to Kunmunya he was astounded that the station manager’s wife had shown so little interest in the Ngarin-Yan people she employed that she wasn’t aware that for years they had been making spear heads and other implements just a hundred yards from the homestead.



The Balfour glass slides join a rapidly growing archive of missionary generated material that we are discovering in Australia and around the world. It will provide rich resources for future research into this troubled, but extremely important part of our history.

The MISC is a good place for these slides to end up. The Centre has already been involved with several key projects animating Indigenous heritage. For instance the [Monash Country Lines Archive](#) has partnered with Indigenous communities to create 3D digital animations which and preserve their language through intergenerational learning. The animations also reinforces Indigenous rights in their cultural and intellectual property, through the preservation and archiving of history, knowledge, songs, and performance contained within their language.

H R Balfour, Kunmunya Mission, The Kimberley, 1933-34. Lantern slide.