



Treasures Curator, Nat Williams with a selection of the Baines slides at the National Library of Australia.

## Thomas Baines' (incomplete) exploratory series

**The Project's Research Fellow, Elisa deCourcy spoke with Nat Williams, Treasures Curator at the National Library of Australia about a curiously incomplete collection of lantern slides created by the British artist and explorer (John) Thomas Baines. The glass lantern slides, hand-coloured photographic copies and adaptations of Baines's paintings, have been mounted in thick wooden frames.**

Thomas Baines was born Norfolk, England in 1820 into a middle class home. His father worked as a master mariner, but both his maternal grandfather and father had a keen interest in painting and drawing. Baines began his professional life as a coach painter but quickly became seduced by the prospect of adventure and exploration in the Empire. He sailed to South Africa in 1842 to start afresh as a watercolourist and portrait painter. His foray into the imperial enterprise began in earnest when he explored the Eastern Cape and Orange River in the late 1840s. In 1851 when he was sponsored as the official war artist to the British forces at the Cape Frontier War but left after a year. He travelled to London and his paintings and drawings came to the attention of the Royal Geographic Society (RGS) who subsequently commissioned him as artist/storeman to join Augustus Charles Gregory's 1855 expedition through north Australia. He later joined missionary David Livingstone's 1857 campaign to open up Zambezi trade and then James Chapman's 1861 mission to Victoria Falls. Baines spent a brief period of the 1860s in London, nursing a damaged reputation from fallings-out



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with expedition leaders or associates. Later in the 1860s he returned to South Africa and participated in numerous commercial surveying expeditions into the region's rich mineral hinterlands. He died in Durban in 1875 from dysentery.<sup>1</sup>

**EdeC:** *Nat, in what way do you — or don't you — think these slides distil the itinerant imperial career of Thomas Baines?*

**NW:** Thomas Baines is someone that the National Library holds in considerable depth, in all formats: lantern slides, printed volumes, oil paintings, works on paper and preparatory watercolours. We also have his handwritten account, in the form of an amusing newsletter, which he penned aboard *The Bluejacket* en route to Australia in 1855 to entertain himself and his fellow passengers. Baines is really interested in the frontiers of the Empire and documenting them in artistic form. He is very versatile in terms of the cross-section of media in which he worked. Much of the Library's collection comes from his time on the Gregory expedition, that is, the works of his that were not acquired by the RGS and which he must have retained before they made their way to various family members and the art market and, ultimately, to the Library. Until recently most of Baines' works were held in the RGS archives in London. As a matter of interest, the RGS sold most of Baines' art and journals pertaining to the Gregory expedition in 2013 after the financial crash and in order to fund their pension liabilities.<sup>2</sup> The Kerry Stokes Collection in Perth acquired them in this sale.

The lantern slides are different. They are something Baines painted for his own purposes and interest. They depict similar scenes of his travels to that of his commissioned works but they were never handed over to the RGS.

**EdeC:** *Can you tell me a bit about the slides?*

**NW:** Sure, you have to recognise that the eight slides are only a portion of what would have been perhaps a 25, 30 or 40 slide series. Some have pencil markings etched into the top faces of their cedar frames perhaps indicating the slide's place in a sequence of images. Numbers like, '17' and '22' seem to suggest that there were originally more than eight shown in any one sitting.

In the eight we have, there is one of a scene in the Malay Straits, one depicting the *Welwitschia* plant in Africa (which Baines had discovered) and the rest are of Baines' passage to, or travel within, north Australia. Each slide has been meticulously hand-painted in oils with delicate shading in the sky and landscape, and considerable detail in the dress of the figures. The aesthetic is akin to the style of a miniaturist and was achieved through hand tinting or painting on top of a tiny photographic copy of the much larger painting or lithographs. Each slide is palm-sized so their creation would have been a laborious and fiddly task. You can see digitised copies of the Baines slides in the National Library's [catalogue](#) and zoom in on them to appreciate the skill involved. What is not evident in the digitised version is that each of the slides has a lengthy handwritten caption struck to its wide cedar frame. These captions, of sentence length, detail exactly where in an expedition the view comes from and what the audience would have been seeing. There is a real sense of control both in the process of their creation and in Baines' categorisation of each view.



**EdeC:** *So the lantern slides' significance lies in both how they reflect Barnes' larger archive of official expedition artwork and also in how they stand apart from it as unofficial documents of his expeditions?*

**NW:** Yes, definitely. Although we only have eight, I think it is fair to say that the lantern slides are what Baines uses to re-imagine his role and importance. He fell out with significant members of his parties on both the Gregory and Livingstone expeditions. He held the joint role on these excursions as both storeman and artist. In both campaigns he was accused of either pilfering or misusing supplies and his reputation was eroded in each instance. His slides, which he showed in regional English towns like Hull and city venues such as the Highgate Literary and Scientific Society in London, were a way of retrieving his integrity as an explorer, asserting his centrality to the expeditions they depict, and eliciting funding for future ventures.<sup>3</sup> One example of this is the slide showing Baines and two of his Northern Australian party in an altercation with indigenous people in the Gulf of Carpentaria. In this slide we see Baines in a diminutive position, ostensibly assuming the role of negotiator rather than aggressor – though he gestures with his left hand to his gun-wielding colleagues sheltering in the boat. He is symbolically holding the Union Jack whilst encircled on land and sea by hostile 'natives'. His slide would have conveyed a sense of drama to people sitting in Britain, who likely had never seen Australian indigenous people. It also would have illustrated Baines' active command in ensuring his party's safety. These slides were intended to rehabilitate Baines' reputation and reassert his standing as a heroic explorer and agent of empire.

**EdeC:** *So, if you did not receive the slides as part of the RGS purchase in 2013, how did they end up in the Library's collection?*

**NW:** In the 1960s an individual walked into Australia House in London with a box of eight slides. These were the slides we are looking at today. As mentioned earlier, each slide had clearly inscribed titles on their cedar frames and they were of identifiably Australian scenes. The Library's Liaison Officer at the time recommended the individual go and see the eminent art collector Rex Nan Kivell at the Redfern Gallery, at

no. 20 Cork Street, about a 20 minute walk away. Nan Kivell bought the sides for £ 10 each. The record of the vendor has so far not been uncovered, neither has the remainder of the series of which they are a part. Interestingly, the slide of The Bluejacket is the only known image of the ship's first passage to Australia. Sadly, the oil painting which Baines worked up and which can be seen in the slide, has been lost and is not in the Stokes Collection with the remaining A C Gregory works.

Reginald ('Rex') Nan Kivell was born in New Zealand in 1898 but migrated to London during the First World War when enlisting in the Allied campaign. He served briefly and ingloriously, but chose to remain in London after the war's end. Aside from being a very successful modern art dealer and gallery owner, Nan Kivell was an avid collector of imperial objects – rare books, ephemera, realia, prints and paintings, particularly pertaining to the Antipodes and the Pacific. He amassed an amazingly rich collection numbering tens of thousands of pieces. In 1959 he sold parts of his collection for a modest sum, considering its significance, to the National Library after years of complex negotiations. The eight Baines lantern slides were part of one of the Library's Nan Kivell acquisitions.

**EdeC:** *That is incredible. Aside from what you have already told me, what intrigues you most about these slides?*

**NW:** I am pretty fond of Baines. He was a man of his time, but to cover the ground that he did was amazing, especially for someone who lacked extensive artistic training and didn't come from a wealthy family. I think it is timely to think about Baines and his slides. He, in his lifetime, and the slides after his death, have moved through the channels of the imperial world, backward and forward from the metropolis, telling complex and unique stories about exploration on the frontiers.

***Do you know of any slides in your gallery, museum or private collection that could be part of the missing pieces of the Baines series? Or, do you hold a slide series that you think warrants a Spotlight interview?***

1. Elizabeth Baigent, '(John) Thomas Baines 1820-1875', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, available online at: <http://www.oxforddnb.com.virtual.anu.edu.au/view/article/1095> 2. For records of the sale of Baines commissioned artwork see: 'The Sale of artworks by Thomas Baines North Australian Expedition 1855-57', Royal Geographic Society, accessed on 25 August 2016 at <http://www.rgs.org/AboutUs/Governance/Sale+of+artworks+by+Thomas+Baines+North+Australia+Expedition+1855-57.html>; Steve Hawkes, 'Australia pays \$6m to shore up Royal society', Sydney Morning Herald, 13 June 2013, accessed on 26 August 2016 at: <http://www.smh.com.au/money/australia-pays-6m-to-shore-up-royal-society-20130613-2o5lj.html> 3. Elizabeth Hartrick, 'Thomas Baines: Empire man and magic lanternist' in Kate Darian-Smith, Patricia Grimshaw, Kiera Lindsey and Stuart McIntyre eds. Exploring the British World: Identity, Cultural Productions, Institutions. Melbourne: RMIT Publishing, 2014: 540-55.



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