

# [ exotica ]

THE MACQUARIE COLLECTOR'S CHEST



IN THE PICTURE GALLERY

STATE LIBRARY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

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STATE LIBRARY OF NEW SOUTH WALES 2005

The Picture Gallery presents highlights from the collections of the State Library of New South Wales.

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### A free exhibition from 7 December 2005 to 26 February 2006

State Library of New South Wales  
Macquarie Street Sydney NSW 2000  
Telephone (02) 9273 1414  
Facsimile (02) 9273 1255  
TTY (02) 9273 1541  
Email [library@sl.nsw.gov.au](mailto:library@sl.nsw.gov.au)  
[www.atmitchell.com](http://www.atmitchell.com)

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Curator: Elizabeth Ellis  
Project manager: Jo de Monchaux  
Editors: Helen Cumming, Andrew Woodward  
Graphic designer: Dominic Hon  
Exhibition designer: Martin Wale  
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For more information about the Macquarie era, go to the Library's new, award-winning website <[www.atmitchell.com/journeys](http://www.atmitchell.com/journeys)> and follow the links to 'History of our Nation'.

**Front cover:** The two panels of the chest's closed top lid form a single image of a variety of fish found in NSW waters (detail).

**Inside front cover:** These beetles, presented in decorative arrangements, are found inside the chest's top compartment (detail).

**Inside back cover:** The lower right-hand drawer contains two boxes of shells, their original gilded dividers forming geometric star-like patterns (detail).

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THE MACQUARIE COLLECTOR'S CHEST

It is a very special pleasure to unveil the Macquarie Collector's Chest to our visitors in this Picture Gallery exhibition. The chest is one of the State Library's most significant acquisitions in recent times and is one of the most important items of Australiana to emerge in the past 50 years.

The chest also serves to remind us of the power of such historical survivors as cultural artifacts, embodying the stories of our past through the enrichment of the great Mitchell Library collections.

While you can never surpass the experience of viewing an original object of great rarity and beauty, the State Library has embarked on an exciting journey of discovery — opening up its unique collections to the world through the dynamic website experience of [atmitchell.com](http://atmitchell.com).

Internet users can now travel through the collections in ways which could previously only be achieved by visiting the Library in person. Now, through [atmitchell.com](http://atmitchell.com), web visitors can enter into a virtual world of wonder and delight as they discover the riches held in this great institution.

As the Macquarie Collector's Chest is opened, revealing its treasures, it becomes symbolic of the [atmitchell.com](http://atmitchell.com) initiative: taking viewers back to a distant time in our own history, while enriching them with an experience which will live on into the future.

Dagmar Schmidmaier AM  
State Librarian & Chief Executive

December 2005

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THE MACQUARIE COLLECTOR'S CHEST



*For over 150 years one of the most beautiful and mysterious objects from the first decades of European settlement in Australia lay forgotten and unnoticed, except as a plaything for several generations of children, in the attic of a Scottish Highlands castle.*

The story of this historical piece, which at first sight appears to be a plain wooden box, and how it finally came back to its place of origin, is interwoven with the last years of Lachlan Macquarie's long term as Governor of New South Wales. It is also associated with his later decline and death, and that of his beloved, but profligate only son. The chest is an extraordinary survivor, a celebration of friendship, patronage, and a personal exploration and discovery of the new colony. It still retains some of its secrets as mysteries to tantalise us, and its complete story is yet to be revealed.

## THE Governor, THE Commandant AND THE Painter

The relationship between Lachlan Macquarie, the fifth Governor of NSW (1810–1822), Captain James Wallis of the 46th Regiment and Commandant of the Newcastle penal settlement (1816–1819) and Joseph Lycett, a convict artist, illustrates the close interconnections which occurred in the small but complex colonial society of the day. Their association is also central to the most valid conjecture as to why the Macquarie Collector's Chest was created.

Joseph Lycett was convicted of forgery at the Shropshire Assizes in 1811. He was described as a portrait and miniature painter from Staffordshire and embarked for Sydney on the convict ship *General Hewitt*. In a coincidence of fate, the convict architect Francis Greenway – who would play a decisive role in Macquarie's Sydney – was also on board the *General Hewitt*.

On arrival in Sydney in February 1814, Lycett was granted a ticket-of-leave and employed as a clerk in the Police Department. However, he was not able to resist his old stock-in-trade and in May 1815 was convicted of forging bank notes and sent to Newcastle in July 1815 to work in the coal mines. After Wallis took command of the Newcastle settlement, Lycett enjoyed less onerous duties. According to evidence in the report of Commissioner J.T. Bigge (into Governor Macquarie's administration of NSW), Lycett assisted with the designs for the new Christ Church building — which appears in the background of several of the collector's chest paintings — and is also said to have painted an altar-piece for the church.

From July until early August 1818, the Governor and his party set off on a grand tour of the Lower Hunter and Newcastle, complete with a military band to add to the sense of occasion.

Macquarie regarded Newcastle, a place of secondary punishment for convicts from Sydney, as one of his great successes, largely orchestrated as a result of the rapid building program over the previous two years by Captain Wallis at the Governor's direction.

One of Macquarie's official duties was to open the new Christ Church, with its high tower. On 2 August 1818, the Reverend William Cowper led the first service in the church for between 500 and 600 mostly convict persons to the Governor's great pleasure.

It is probable that Lycett and Wallis collaborated on drawings used in the production of engravings for Wallis's *An Historical Account of the Colony of NSW*. This volume, with its glowing dedication to Lachlan Macquarie, appeared at the time Commissioner Bigge was investigating the Governor's administration in NSW and may have been intended, partly, as a testimonial supporting Macquarie's regime and achievements.

In the General Orders of 24 December 1818, shortly before Wallis's departure from the colony, the Governor expressed his high opinion of Wallis's 'zeal, judgement and ability'. In a letter dated 15 February 1819 to Earl Bathurst, Secretary of State for the Colonies in London, Macquarie recommended Wallis for 'favour and protection as an officer of high merit, and whose conduct as late Commandant of the settlement of Newcastle ... has deservedly met with my unqualified approbation and commendation'.

Both Wallis and Lycett received official recognition from Macquarie, according to their stations. In 1820, Macquarie sent three watercolour views by Lycett to accompany a despatch to Earl Bathurst to demonstrate progress in the colony. Macquarie departed from the colony in February 1822 with a menagerie of colonial fauna amongst his baggage.

He died in London in July 1824, his reputation in official circles destroyed in the aftermath of the Bigge Report (1822), which was highly critical of his administration in NSW.

In September 1822 Lycett left Sydney to return to England, having been granted a free pardon by Macquarie in November 1821. Once back, Lycett dedicated his book, *Views in Australia* (issued in London in 1824), to Earl Bathurst. No doubt in his 'strategic' dedication, the artist had an eye to the main chance as Macquarie, his colonial patron, had already passed on. Lycett once again resorted to forgery and died in early 1828 from a self-inflicted wound while imprisoned. Wallis, however, lived until 1858, after almost 30 years of retirement from the army.



## AN ANTIPODEAN Pandora's Box



Concealed inside the chest's austere exterior are a sequence of painted panels, hidden drawers and layers of exotic natural history specimens which may be gradually opened out to display gorgeous, brilliantly-hued arrays. When all the panels and drawers are fully unveiled, they evoke for the contemporary viewer the same sense of breathtaking wonder and delight experienced by early European visitors on first encountering Australian fauna and flora.

The reasons for creating the chest, as well as the artists and craftsmen responsible, remain ultimately elusive despite attempts to solve the puzzle. Like many beautiful and enigmatic objects, the mystery is part of its charm. Even the description as a 'collector's chest' is somewhat misleading, because it was not made to house classified scientific arrangements of specimens in the hierarchical manner of a true collector's chest.

Rather, the chest was created as a decorative object to display exotic specimens and was almost certainly intended as a special presentation piece to celebrate the colony of NSW.

It is now generally accepted that the chest originated in NSW around 1818. It is constructed of a combination of Australian rosewood (*Dysoxylum fraseranum*), native from the Hunter River to the Port Macquarie regions of NSW, and of red cedar (*Toona ciliata*) found (in the early 19th century) all along NSW coastal regions from the Illawarra to the north. Both types of timber were used (and prized) by local cabinet-makers from the early years of European settlement.

The top lid combines beautifully figured cedar, finished with silver ash and ebony stringing in a geometric design and edged with imported satinwood bands. There are three external drawers in the lower front section of the chest. The chest stands on its original four short, turned, removable Regency-style legs.

The fittings include flat brass military-style handles to open the drawers, and other brass hardware. The larger versions of the handles, repeated on the sides of the chest, resemble the carrying handles on sea chests.



## INFINITE Variety

The contents of the chest consist of natural history specimens and, apart from the lower front drawer, appear to be more or less intact. The arrays of specimens are quite astonishing in their freshness and state of preservation.

Inside the top compartment are four glass-topped boxes, edged with gilded and cedar banding, which contain collections of NSW specimens of butterflies, beetles, insects and spiders, presented in decorative arrangements.

Beneath the removable painted panels in the concealed side drawers are seaweed and algae specimens, and in the two trays of the centre compartment are 45 stuffed birds of Australian species, including a tawny frogmouth, satin bowerbird, regent bowerbird, and a variety of kingfishers, parrots and herons. One of the two smaller drawers in the front of the cabinet contains two glass-topped boxes with another 35 smaller ornithological specimens such as wrens, robins, honeyeaters, finches, firetails and pardalotes. Most of the birds retain their original handwritten tags, numbered to refer to a list of contents which is no longer extant.



All the birds were found in the Sydney and Newcastle regions in the early 19th century. Some have subsequently become scarce or rare because of urban development, reduction of habitat and the introduction of predators.

The excellent condition of the bird specimens — which are assumed to have been stuffed in NSW by an expert taxidermist for the original presentation — is due in part to the insect repellent qualities of the cedar, but also to the long period within a closed chest housed in a stable environment in a generally cool, relatively dry climate. The merits of Scottish castles as favourable conservation locations seem to be proven in this instance. Arsenic was also likely used in the preparation of the bird specimens and this has helped with their preservation.



The lower right-hand drawer contains two boxes of shells, one of larger specimens, the other smaller (below left). These retain their original gilded dividers, forming geometric star-like patterns. The arrangements do not appear to be attempting any scientific order, but rather an appealing decorative display.

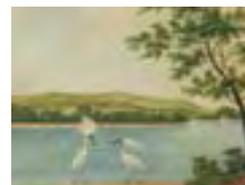
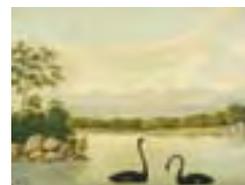
The original collectors and taxidermists, whose work has survived so well, are unidentified. The name of the cabinet-maker, however, has been narrowed down more conclusively to one William Temple, a convict working in Newcastle from September 1817 who had previously worked in Sydney with Lawrence Butler, another skilled convict cabinet-maker.

The single lowest drawer, extending across the width of the case, contains a miscellany of items which are only a portion of the original contents. These include Solomon Islands artefacts, toucan bills from Central America, dried Pacific Ocean flying gurnard (fish) and other unrelated items of memorabilia (below right). It is interesting to note that Macquarie acquired a collection of ethnographic items while in NSW, some, no doubt, given to him as souvenirs. Items from this collection were sold at auction in England in 1962.



## Painted Panels

One of the most striking features of the chest are the painted panels which appear once the top lids are opened up. There are 13 paintings which can be divided into three groups according to their subjects: the first group consists of seven images of pairs of birds and one image of a pair of kangaroos; the second is the single image of an arrangement of fish on the top lid; the third group is four views after engravings which appear in Matthew Flinders' published account of his voyage on HMS *Investigator* as the first person to circumnavigate Australia from 1801 to 1803.



The panels depicting pairs of birds show the following species (top to bottom): black swans, royal spoonbills, brolgas, a native duck and cotton pygmy goose, and (not illustrated) egrets and pelicans, a galah and crested pigeon. All the species represented were (and some still are) commonly found in the Lower Hunter River, Port Stephens and Central Coast regions of NSW.

The backgrounds in the paintings were probably intended to allude to the birds' natural habitats, while at the same time possibly giving clues about the artist and perhaps even about the reasons for the chest's creation. All the backgrounds of the first group can be identified as locations in or around Newcastle, the Lower Hunter River and Lake Macquarie (then known as Reed's Mistake).



Three of the views include buildings of the Newcastle settlement. These can be dated quite accurately, as a manuscript plan of 8 August 1818, drawn by James Meehan, Deputy-Surveyor-General, shows the town as it appears in the egrets (left) and spoonbill paintings.

Works attributed to Lycett, which may be considered in association with the collector's chest paintings, are other engravings of the town of Newcastle in both *An Historical Account* and in his own *Views in Australia*; the large oil on canvas *Inner view of Newcastle*, c. 1818, once in the possession of James Wallis and now in the Newcastle Regional Art Gallery; *Newcastle looking towards Prospect Hill*, oil on timber panel, c. 1816-18, also in the Newcastle Gallery; and another oil on timber panel, *A Night Corroborree at Newcastle*, in the Dixson Galleries collection, State Library of NSW. This work has the church, signal station and Nobby's Island in the background, and relates to the engraving, plate 6 in *An Historical Account*.

The second painting group – the two panels on the closed top lid forming a single image of a variety of fish found in NSW waters – is reminiscent of the large oil painting on canvas of fish of NSW by John William Lewin, now in the Art Gallery of South Australia. There are no other known examples, apart from these, of such early colonial genre paintings. However, the background of the fish panel once again points to Lycett in its similarities to such examples as the aquatint, *View on the Wingecarribee*, in his *Views in Australia*. Could it be that Lewin – who had enjoyed the patronage of Macquarie from soon after his arrival in NSW – made a contribution of his own to the chest?

Or is it just a coincidence that the two earliest and most accomplished colonial genre paintings both depict arrangements of fish, but by different artists, that is, possibly by Lycett for the chest and Lewin for the oil on canvas?



The third group – the four views on panels intended as covers for the seaweed and algae in the two concealed side drawers of the top compartment – do not relate to the topographical and natural history sequences of the other painted panels. They are after engravings from drawings by William Westall, which were published in Matthew Flinders' *A voyage to Terra Australis ...* (London, 1814) and as a separate volume, *Views of Australian Scenery*, issued in the same year.

## THE LONG WAY Home

The Macquarie Collector's Chest spent most of its life until the late 1980s in Strathallan Castle in Scotland, near Auchterarder, Perthshire, the former ancestral home of the Drummond family, Viscounts Strathallan.

James Andrew Drummond, who became 6th Viscount Strathallan in 1824, was a close friend of Lachlan Macquarie. Their first encounter was in the Chinese trading port of Macao, in the last years of the 18th century. Macquarie, then an ambitious young officer stationed in India, had taken his ailing wife, Jane, to Macao in the hope that she would regain her health. This proved in vain and Jane died in July 1796. However, Macquarie did meet fellow Scot Drummond, who was in Macao to further his trading interests, on a visit from his base in the British trading sector in Canton. This was to be an enduring relationship as Drummond and several generations of his family remained closely associated with the Macquaries and their estate until the early 20th century.

Macquarie appointed Drummond executor of his estates and guardian of his only son (born in Sydney in 1814, to his second wife Elizabeth), Lachlan. The latter became a close friend of Drummond's eldest son, William, who inherited the title of 7th Viscount on his father's death in 1851. Lachlan junior's debts and dissolute lifestyle led him to borrow heavily from William Drummond. Shortly before his death in May 1845 (caused by a drunken fall down the stairs of Craignish Castle), Lachlan junior altered his will with two codicils dated April and December 1844, leaving most of his land and possessions, including those inherited from his parents, to William. Only the Gruline estate on the Isle of Mull, which he bequeathed to his wife, Isabella (née Campbell), was kept aside. The chest and other items with a Macquarie family provenance were presumably lodged with the Drummond family after Lachlan junior's death, if not before.



**Left to right:** Lachlan Macquarie, Lachlan Macquarie Junior, Elizabeth Macquarie

Lachlan and Elizabeth Macquarie miniatures: artist unknown, c. 1819, watercolours on ivory, in japanned wood frames

Lachlan Macquarie Junior: Richard Read, c. 1818, watercolour on card

William Drummond's son, James David, became 8th Viscount Strathallan in 1886. In 1914 his widow, Margaret, Viscountess Strathallan, sold a significant collection of Macquarie letters, documents and pictorial items at a sale listed by Sotheby, Wilkinson & Hodge, London. The Mitchell Library negotiated directly with her to purchase the main sequence of Macquarie papers in a private transaction in January 1914 before the auction.

Most of the items offered at the auction were also acquired by the Mitchell Library, including one of the two known sets of the preliminary Sydney printing of James Wallis's engraved views of NSW. One of the engravings is annotated with a manuscript presentation inscription from James Wallis to Elizabeth Macquarie.

In 1910, Strathallan Castle and its contents were sold by the Drummonds to a Yorkshire wool manufacturer, Sir James Roberts. His descendants retain the estate. In a letter to the Mitchell Library dated 11 February 1986, the present owner, Sir William Roberts, stated that he believed the Macquarie Collector's Chest was in the castle when it was purchased by his great-grandfather.

On a visit to Scotland in 1986, Alan Davies, the State Library's Curator of Photographs, went to Strathallan Castle and took a series of photographs of the chest – the only records of it in the location in which it rested for over a century and a half.

In April 1989, the Macquarie Collector's Chest, then known as the Strathallan Chest, was auctioned by Sotheby's in Melbourne and went to one of the most notable private Australiana collections of the present era. In 2004, the State Library of NSW acquired the chest in a private sale, thus allowing it to rejoin, after a long separation, the Mitchell Library's holdings of Governor Macquarie's personal archives. It could be said, then, that the chest had made its final journey and come home at last.

## THE Riddle OF THE CHESTS

One of the greatest mysteries surrounding the Macquarie Collector's Chest is that it has a pair – very close in detail, but not exactly so. The latter has been in the Mitchell Library since 1937 when it was presented by the great benefactor and philanthropist, Sir William Dixon. There are no other known examples of Australian colonial craftsmanship which bear any resemblance to these two items.

In contrast to the Macquarie Collector's Chest, the Dixon Galleries Collector's Chest has lost most of its contents. It retains only the shells in one lower drawer within two compartments, replicating the same types and style of arrangement as the shell drawers in the Macquarie chest.

We know nothing about the Dixon chest prior to its acquisition by Sir William Dixon in 1937 for 100 guineas from a London fine arts dealer, Robert Frank of Bruton Street, Mayfair. When the chest was thoroughly examined

and restored for the Library in 1986–87, there was obvious evidence of quite substantial previous restorations to the internal construction. From this, it may be surmised that the Dixon chest had been in the possession of several owners and dealers before 1937.

No more direct links have yet emerged between the chests and the principal players, Macquarie and Wallis, or the secondary supporting cast of the Drummond family, Lycett, Temple, possibly Lewin and others. We do not have any actual evidence of the commissioner of the chests, the circumstances of their presentations and exactly how one almost certainly came to be in the possession of Macquarie before he left Sydney; who owned the Dixon chest before 1937, nor why they should be so similar.

Did Wallis decide to have a chest made for himself decorated by 'his' convict artist and then, delighted by the effect, have another made for presentation to his governor on the great occasion of his visit to survey the wondrous improvements in Newcastle? Or did Macquarie commission one chest for his friend, James Drummond, copied from another possibly already in the possession of Captain Wallis? All that can be said with certainty is that the final secrets of the chests are still awaiting discovery.

Elizabeth Ellis  
State Library of NSW

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The Macquarie Collector's Chest will be the subject of a book by Elizabeth Ellis to be published by Melbourne University Publishing (Miegunyah Imprint) in late 2006.

