

## **What Would Indigenous Taxonomy Look Like? The Case of Blandowski's Australia**

Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll

The encyclopaedia compiled by the explorer Wilhelm von Blandowski (1822–1878) has an exceptional focus on local Aboriginal collection practices in Australia. While other expeditions in the nineteenth-century British Empire were ostensibly interested in geology, geography, zoology, and botany, Blandowski's encyclopaedia of Australia from 1862 represents the changing natural and cultural environment of his Aboriginal “friends.”



Plate 1, Title and Contents of Blandowski's 10 years' experience in Australia (1862)

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Wilhelm von Blandowski, Plate 1, Title and Contents of Blandowski's 10 years' experience in Australia, Australien in 142  
Photographischen Abbildungen, 1862.

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Blandowski established the first museum for natural history in Melbourne and was employed by the Queen of England as the first government zoologist in the colony of Victoria. Over ten years (1849–1859) Blandowski compiled images and theories about the environment in the Pacific. His oeuvre during this time is deeply indebted to the artists Andrew Bartholomew, Ludwig Becker, Gerhard Krefft, Gustav Mützel, Fredrick Schoenfeld, James, George, and William Redaway, and others as yet unidentified

The hundreds of illustrations he commissioned represent the Indigenous guides and informants that were commonly used in scientific explorations to obtain specimens and provide identifications and details of habitat. Indigenous environmental knowledge and cultural classifications (names, relationships, cosmologies) thereby found expression in the field records of the natural philosophers and the artists with whom they worked.

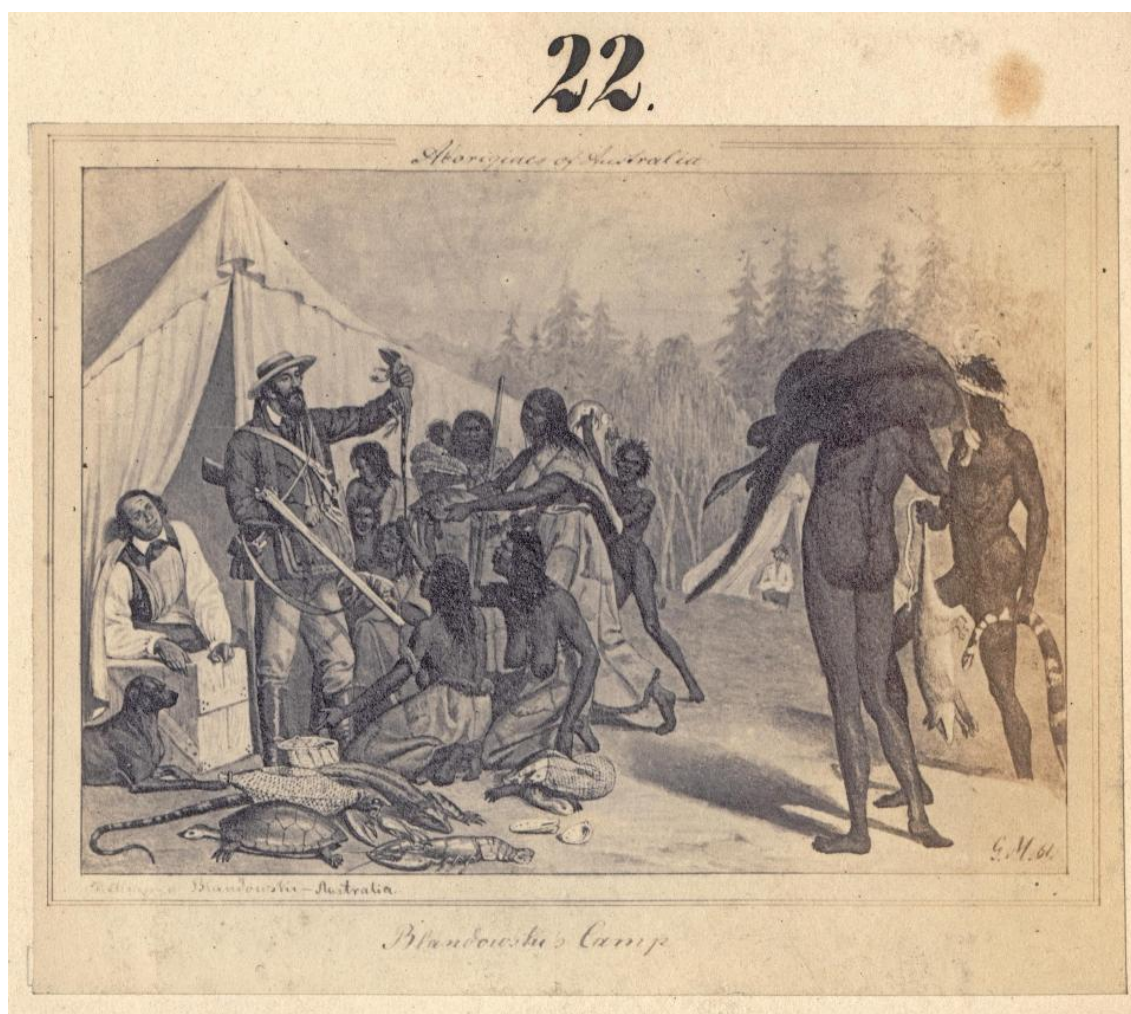


Plate 22, Blandowski's camp (1862)

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Wilhelm von Blandowski, Plate 22, Blandowski's camp (1862), *Australien in 142 Photographischen Abbildungen*, 1862.

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The Blandowski collections embody systems of local knowledge, yet remained excluded from dominant systems of classification when the information returned to European metropolitan centers. Blandowski's own career arguably fell into obscurity and failed precisely because he tried to foreground Aboriginal classification. The hundreds of field drawings from Australia made by the artists he employed represent a cross section of Aboriginal life and ecology that is not recorded in any other archive and is partially extinct in the natural world. The material he collected is furthermore significant because it presents the demand for an expansion of classification systems used to organize colonial collections in such a way that issues of race, gender, class, discipline (art/science), and geography (Australia/Europe) are no longer premises for exclusion from the history of science.

### Further readings:

- Allen, Harry, ed. *Australia: William Blandowski's Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*, Canberra, ACT: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2010.
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- Blandowski, William. "Recent Discoveries in Natural History on the Lower Murray." In *Transactions of the Philosophical Institute of Victoria, from September to December, 1857, inclusive 2/2* (1858): 124–37.
- Blandowski, William. "Ueber die Ureinwohner Australiens." In *Sitzungs-Berichte der naturwissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft Isis zu Dresden 10–12* (1861): 101–10.

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