

WALTER BALDWIN SPENCER AND THE PITT RIVERS MUSEUM

ALISON PETCH

Walter Baldwin Spencer (1860–1929) is best known as a biologist and anthropologist of Aboriginal Australia. He was not born in Australia, however, but in England, where he lived until early 1887 when he was twenty-six years old. He was brought up in Manchester and, following a period there studying medicine at Owens College, was in 1881 awarded a scholarship at Exeter College to study natural science at Oxford.

Spencer studied with Henry Nottidge Moseley (1844–1891), the Linacre Professor of Human and Comparative Anatomy, and attended Edward Burnett Tylor's (1832–1917) lectures on anthropology. In a letter of 18 February 1884 to his friend Howard Goulty, Spencer remarked of Tylor's lectures: 'perhaps the most interesting part is the practical, when he sits down and shows how these men actually made their implements or at least how they can be made' (quoted in Mulvaney and Calaby 1985: 59). Relatively little information about Tylor's early lectures has survived, but it is clear that they impressed their listeners and remained in their minds for some time after the event. At this point, though Tylor was past his prime, he was still in good health.

After graduating in 1884, Spencer worked as Moseley's demonstrator, or assistant, in the Comparative Anatomy department from Easter 1885. His duties included the supervision of laboratory classes and giving a course of lectures, but he also reorganized the zoological collections in the University Museum (*ibid.*: 55), something that must have helped him in his future career at the National Museum of Victoria, where he was responsible, among other things, for the zoological collections.

In May 1882 Moseley had been put in charge of the ethnographic collections at the University Museum. A little later Spencer commented about him in another letter to Goulty, dated 21 June 1885, that

I have been much surprised...to find that though...Comparative Anatomy is Moseley's subject, yet he really knows considerably more concerning anthropology than even Tylor: in fact Moseley is a very remarkable man and when brought at all closely into contact with him you soon feel that he is no ordinary man. Of course he has been almost everywhere. (*ibid.*: 45)



Figure 1. Photographic portrait of Walter Baldwin Spencer, by an unidentified photographer, date unknown, but presumably in the early to mid 1880s when Spencer was in his early to mid twenties; taken from a print (PRM 1998.356.30) made from a glass plate (B1702Q) of an earlier print of unknown origin. Courtesy and copyright, Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

After 20 May 1884, when Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers (1827–1900) signed the deed of gift donating his collection to the University, Moseley’s responsibilities included the Pitt Rivers collection. This consisted of some 20,000 artefacts—ethnographic, archaeological, and antiquarian—acquired by Pitt-Rivers between 1852 and 1884, all of which were at the time still on display at the South Kensington Museum in London. Spencer, as Moseley’s assistant, was asked to help in transferring the collection to Oxford. He was supervised in this task by both Moseley and Tylor. The transfer began in June 1885 when Moseley wrote to William Gamlen, Secretary to the University Chest, that ‘I am off to town with Tylor to

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superintend'.¹ Tylor also travelled up to London, staying at the Athenæum. Spencer remarked to Goulty:

The Government people are removing it...but we can't trust them to do the labelling... We three begin in the mornings and go on till 5.30 with only a short break for lunch. However, it is rather interesting, if tiring work: Tylor himself is of course the best anthropologist in England and a very nice man indeed. (ibid.: 60)

In his later book *Wanderings in Wild Australia*, Spencer wrote about his early anthropological training:

Before coming out to Australia it had been my good fortune to come into contact with and work under Dr. Tylor... All that I knew of Anthropology was gained from personal contact with him and from my old chief in Oxford, Professor Moseley... My anthropological reading was practically confined to two books, Sir Edward Tylor's "Primitive Culture" and Sir James Frazer's little red book on "Totemism," the forerunner of many other famous ones in later years. (Spencer 1928: 184)

It is believed that Spencer continued to work on the Pitt Rivers collection up to the time he left Oxford for Melbourne, at which time he was repaid for his hard work when Tylor provided him with a reference:

When an applicant for the Chair of Biology in the Melbourne University, Dr. Tylor, with whom I had been working in connection with the removal of the Pitt Rivers Collection to Oxford, in a letter that he gave me, expressed the belief that he thought I might be able to do some work of value if ever I chanced to come into contact with savage peoples. (ibid.: 185)

Spencer of course, lived to fulfil this wish, becoming an eminent anthropologist, famously working with his colleague Francis James Gillen (1855–1912) among the Arrernte people of central Australia and writing a series of well-known books. Mulvaney and Calaby, Spencer's biographers, say that Tylor wrote concerning the Melbourne professorship:

There is one point in your candidature especially interesting to me, that if you hold an Australian appointment you will come in contact with interesting questions of local Anthropology, and I am sure from our experience together in the Pitt-Rivers Museum that you are able to do valuable work in this line as well as in your regular biological works. (ibid.: 70)

From the end of October 1885, another of the natural science graduates, Henry Balfour (1863–1939), had also begun to work specifically on the Pitt Rivers collection, sharing the keeper's office in the University Museum with Spencer while they sorted the collection (ibid.: 60). This led to a life-long friendship and a correspondence that ended only with Spencer's death in 1929. The surviving

correspondence is held in the manuscript collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum, though it is clear that parts of the correspondence have been lost. The two men confined the content of most of their letters to professional matters, but they also visited each other in their homes, when Spencer chanced to be in England or Balfour in Australia, and reminisced about their days as students at Oxford.

Spencer and Balfour also wrote to seek each other's advice and help on anthropological matters. Spencer asked Balfour what he knew about the concentric circle design,² and Balfour asked Spencer about Aboriginal trade routes in Australia.³ Later Spencer collected artefacts for Balfour (for the Museum), especially after Spencer and Gillen's journey across Australia in 1901–2.⁴ Sometimes Balfour asked for specific artefacts; for example, he asked Spencer to send an example of a particular form of stone axe the Museum lacked.⁵ In total Spencer donated 179 artefacts to the Pitt Rivers Museum, all of them from Australia. Most of them (159) were collected by Spencer and Gillen during their 1901–2 expedition from South Australia to Borroloola in the Northern Territory. He rather modestly referred to these, in a letter to Balfour dated 6 January 1903: 'In a few weeks you ought to receive one or two boxes containing certain things which Gillen & I collected'.⁶ These included some secret/sacred material, as well as items of everyday wear (such as neck ornaments), and weapons and tools. The objects were gratefully received, as noted in the Museum's annual report:

Most noteworthy of all, perhaps, is the series of native objects collected by Prof. W. Baldwin Spencer and Mr. Gillen during their recent remarkable journey across Australia from South to North. The series presented by Prof. Spencer is very representative, and includes a very fine *nurtunja* used in sacred ceremonies, probably the only one of its kind in this country. (Balfour 1903: 557)

A few other objects were collected from Melville Island when Spencer spent a year in Darwin in the Northern Territories in 1912. The remainder were items collected by others, including Gillen (two 'churingas' or *tywerrenge*, donated in 1924), Alfred William Howitt (1830–1908), and Alfred Stephen Kenyon (1867–1943), as well as stone tools from Victoria, field-collected by Spencer during his amateurish archaeological diggings in 'middens'. After his death his family donated another eighty-four artefacts (mostly tools) from Spencer's last field trip, to Tierra del Fuego. At the same time, Spencer's family donated part of his manuscript collections (field notebooks, and correspondence), along with a collection of photographs from his fieldwork, mostly in central Australia but also in Tierra del Fuego.⁷

Spencer also maintained his relationship with Tylor. Some of their letters survive in Spencer's papers at the Museum. Spencer asked for Tylor's support when he was working on his and Gillen's first monograph, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (Spencer and Gillen 1899). He seemed very unconfident, telling Balfour that he had contacted Tylor to ask him to look through the manuscript and hoping that Tylor would write a letter recommending the book to publishers.⁸ It seems, however, that

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James Frazer was of more practical use to Spencer in his later career than Tylor, who may already have been affected by ill-health. Frazer introduced the manuscript to his own publisher, George Macmillan, who eventually published all of Spencer and Gillen's anthropological work.

Whether or not Tylor had been of any real help in arranging the publication of Spencer and Gillen's first monograph, Spencer was still moved to express publicly his debt to him in the preface to the book:

Finally, we have to express our deep sense of the obligation under which we lie to Dr. E. B. Tylor and Mr. J. G. Frazer. It need hardly be pointed out how much we are indebted to their work as indicating to us lines of inquiry, but in addition to this we have received from them the most cordial personal encouragement and help. They have most kindly read through the proofs...and in offering them our warmest thanks, we venture to express the hope that the work may prove to be worthy of the interest which they have taken in it. (*ibid.*: x)

It seems that in his early years in Australia Spencer may have wished to return to England. Although he told Balfour that the climate in Oxford did not suit him,⁹ he decided in 1898 to apply for the vacant Linacre Chair in Comparative Anatomy (held in the past by his mentor Henry Nottidge Moseley, then by E. Ray Lankester), though he later withdrew his application when he was actually in England (Mulvaney and Calaby 1985: 186). Mulvaney and Calaby suggest that the long sea journey over and the keen reception he was given at the Anthropological Institute may have made him realise the advantages—for fieldwork especially—that he would have to give up if he left Australia. It may even be that a reminder of the awfulness of the English winter weather proved persuasive. This was the only occasion on which Spencer made any attempt to return to a position at Oxford.

Spencer utilized the time he had spent working on the Pitt Rivers collection to great effect in his later career. It provided inspiration for him to involve himself with anthropological matters during his first field trip into central Australia (the Horn Scientific Exploring Expedition of 1894), which led to his collaboration with Gillen and, ultimately, to their fieldwork and monographs (see Petch 2000). In addition, however, it probably led to his third career, that of museum director.

Spencer was the honorary director of the National Museum of Victoria, in Melbourne, from 1899 to 1928. He held this post at the same time as continuing his work as Professor of Biology at Melbourne University and his anthropological fieldwork and writing. It is unlikely that Spencer could have performed this job without his experience at Oxford. Spencer had first been made a trustee of the Public Library, Museum and Gallery in June 1895. In 1896 he was appointed chairman of the National Museum Committee (for Victoria). When the post of director of the museum became vacant Spencer applied for it on an honorary basis and thereafter retained both roles, which gave him considerable personal and financial power. The author of a recent history of the National Museum of Victoria, now Museum Victoria, says of Spencer, at the time of his appointment:

He was...in touch with the latest developments in science and museums, but beyond that he was a pioneer in the field of anthropology—still in its infancy in Australia.... Spencer was a larger than life figure, and...an autocrat among the Trustees. Not only the Museum but the National Gallery and the Public Library would benefit from his engagement with them. (Rasmussen 2001: 122)

His decision to forego payment for the post, and his securing of an agreement that he could decide where the money saved (£300 a year out of the Museum's total annual grant of £2,000) would be spent, gave him lasting financial control of new developments at the Museum (Mulvaney and Calaby 1985: 248, Rasmussen 2001: 136). Spencer's experience with the Pitt Rivers collection after it had been transferred to Oxford, when Balfour and he had been forced to work with it in the cramped conditions of the University Museum, probably influenced his decision to ensure that the new premises for the National Museum of Victoria in Swanston Street, Melbourne, included adequate preparation areas (Rasmussen 2001: 129).

As well as being the overall honorary director, Spencer also took a personal interest in preparing exhibits, including the new ethnographic displays, which were located close to the main entrance. Spencer was supported by three paid curators, including R. H. Walcott—who oversaw the ethnographic displays. In 1902 he offered to show the new Aboriginal displays to Balfour: 'I have got...a good many Churinga & other things of lesser value. When you come out here I will show you a big case in our Museum of sacred ceremonial objects such as will make your mouth water'.¹⁰

In their biography, Mulvaney and Calaby (1985: 247) make the point that, although Spencer was familiar with redisplay work from his time at the University Museum in Oxford, he now had to make time for it among his other pressing duties as Professor of Biology and field-working anthropologist. On this occasion, however, he was able to bring his skills to bear with both zoological and ethnographic artefacts. Although the post of director may seem to us now to be largely a managerial one, it is clear that Spencer thought of it as very much a hands-on post. He wrote labels for the new displays at Swanston Street: 'there is nothing like trying to arrange a big collection for revealing to you your colossal ignorance: when you sit down to write a descriptive label then you begin to realize how defective your knowledge is' (quoted in Rasmussen 2001: 129).

Spencer placed the Australian ethnographic displays alongside the natural history specimens. In recent years this has been criticized:

The new prominence of this material was preferable to the fate of the rest of the Industrial and Technological Museum [which was closed] but it did have the unfortunate effect of removing material belonging to the indigenous people of Australia from the human context of comparative technology and reclassifying it among the flora and fauna of a natural history museum. (ibid.: 135)

Spencer's decision to display it in this way may, however, have been taken in the light of his experience at Oxford. For when Spencer left, the ethnographic collection

was still part of the University Museum with its emphasis on natural history and human anatomy. It may well have seemed more natural to Spencer, with his evolutionary-minded scientific training at Oxford, to amalgamate 'primitive man' and his possessions with the natural world, than it would have done to have included them with fine art or antiquities. Indeed, Spencer specifically suggested in 1904 that his museum should not house Egyptian antiquities, which he suggested would be better placed in the National Art Gallery 'to save confusion' and duplication (Mulvaney and Calaby 1985: 255). Here again he was echoing a position he would have been familiar with in Oxford, where Egyptian antiquities were displayed at the Ashmolean Museum (then still in Broad Street).

In 1901 Spencer published a guide to the ethnographic collections at the National Museum, which sold almost 2,000 copies in its first edition, at a cost of sixpence each (Rasmussen 2001: 140, Mulvaney and Calaby 1985: 251). In his preface to the third edition Spencer points out what he wanted the Australian ethnographic displays to achieve:

In consequence of the peculiar interest which attaches to the Australian aboriginals, a special gallery has been devoted to the exhibition of their weapons, implements, and ceremonial objects. These have been arranged so as to show, as far as possible, series of objects belonging to tribes from the various parts of the continent. For example, the forms of shields used in different tribes are shown in one case, boomerangs in another, sacred and ceremonial objects in another.... In the re-arrangement of the collection duplicates have been rigidly excluded, so that each specimen has a definite place and meaning in the series in which it occurs. (Spencer 1922: 7)

All his 'professional' museum career Spencer continued to promote the use of taxonomic arrangements of ethnographic material, precisely as he had seen it in the Pitt Rivers collection. It is ironic that he retained this display style long after it had become unfashionable for ethnography, but that from the first he was attempting to provide displays of zoological specimens that presented them in more 'life-like' surroundings. By 1922, the Australian ethnographic displays did include at least one attempt at a diorama-type display, a composite view of a 'scene illustrating Australian Aboriginal life' (ibid.: 136 and pl. 33 opp. 136).

Spencer personally donated many artefacts, photographs, manuscripts, films, and sound recordings from his own travels in central and northern Australia. Among the most important collections were the thirty-eight artworks he collected in the Alligator Rivers area of western Arnhemland in 1912, an extremely early example of the collection of such art (Allen 2001). Spencer had been interested in Australian Aboriginal 'schools of art' since 1897 when he had written to Balfour proposing to look further into them after he and Gillen had published *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (in 1899),¹¹ although he never did so, except as part of more comprehensive works.

One of the more controversial categories of artefacts donated (and displayed) by Spencer was the secret/sacred material, including *tywerrenge*. In his guide to the

collections Spencer acknowledged that these items ‘may only be seen by the initiated members of the tribe and are carefully hidden from the sight of women and the uninitiated’ (Spencer 1922: 106), but he seemed to see no irony in the fact that they were being viewed by every public visitor to the museum. In addition to the proscribed nature of these artefacts, he was aware that most ceremonial items, from Central Australia at least, would have been made, temporarily used, and then destroyed. This did not stop him from collecting them in the field or putting them on public display. Spencer’s display of such material is illustrated in his guide (ibid.: pl. 16 opp. 94).

From a contemporary perspective, such attitudes are very problematic, but probably most museum curators at the time would have shared his unconcern—certainly Balfour did not turn down Spencer and Gillen’s offer of Arrernte secret/sacred material, and indeed the material was placed on public display at the Pitt Rivers. The controversy regarding Spencer and Gillen’s collection of such artefacts has been discussed at length elsewhere (see, for example, Petch 2000) and need not be reiterated here, except to say that whilst Spencer (and Gillen) were aware of the problems that were caused to Aboriginal society by the appropriation of such material, however legally in European eyes, this did not altogether stop them from collecting it.

In his guide to the National Museum’s ethnographic displays Spencer also boasts of the comprehensive nature of his own field collection:

Every specimen figured in *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia*, *Across Australia*, and *The Native Tribes of the Northern Territory*, is in the Museum collection, together with the whole of the material, including photographic negatives and phonographic records secured by Mr. Gillen and myself during the progress of our work. (Spencer 1922: 8)

With unusual foresight for the time, Spencer was thus apparently using the Museum’s collection to archive the records of his fieldwork; later his daughters would follow his lead when they donated his remaining manuscripts, after his death, to public collections (Petch 2000: 319).

It is also clear that he wanted to use the guide to encourage further donations to the museum: ‘It is earnestly to be desired that those who have the opportunity of doing so will assist in the procuring of specimens which will serve either to fill some of the many gaps which occur in the collection or to enhance the value of the reserve collection’ (Spencer 1922: 8). This desire to ‘fill gaps’ mimicked the similar concerns of both Pitt-Rivers and Balfour. In addition, the wish to create ‘study collections’ reflected a similar situation to that at Oxford. Study or reserve collections, a category that has now been discarded from many museums’ practice, comprised similar artefacts to those in the mainstream museum displays that were not curated in the same way. Spencer described them as ‘the duplicate specimens—that is those which in essential features, though perhaps slightly different in detail, are similar to

others in the collection, and the exhibition of which in public would therefore serve no adequate purpose...placed in the reserve collection which is available for the purposes of study' (ibid.: 7–8). Such 'duplicates' could be handled in a more robust way and even, upon occasion, dismantled, in order to better study their manufacture.

Not only did Spencer donate a large number of artefacts that he had collected in the field in central Australia, he also encouraged his friends and colleagues to do likewise. According to Mulvaney and Calaby (1985: 249–52) in 1899 Spencer donated, or was associated with the donation of, some 528 new ethnographic objects to the Museum. In 1897 the National Museum's collection included 1,190 ethnographic objects and by 1902 it was reported that there were 1,775 ethnographic objects on display with a further 2,217 'duplicates'; by 1928 there were 36,000. Spencer used the duplicates to create an international ethnographic collection, exchanging Australian ethnographic items with other museums throughout the world, including the Pitt Rivers. Spencer also did much to promote the expansion of the stone tool collection at the National Museum. He used his local connections in Victoria to amass a large local collection. This was perhaps another reflection of the Oxford collections, as stone tools were a strong point of the Pitt Rivers collection (where, numerically at least, they represented more than a quarter of the total).

The final benefit that Spencer bestowed on the anthropological world was to encourage others to undertake fieldwork in Australia and its dependent territories and neighbours: including help for Bronislaw Malinowski whilst he was based in Australia before his famous anthropological fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands (Wayne 1995: xv). Whilst this helpful attitude may be due more to Spencer's supportive personality and cannot necessarily be credited to his time at Oxford, it seems clear the support Spencer received early in his career from fieldworkers and academics such as Moseley and Tylor had in turn encouraged him to support others.

Spencer returned to the United Kingdom relatively rarely. In early 1914, however, he was in Oxford, where on 29 January he addressed the sixty-first meeting of the Oxford University Anthropological Society (OUAS) on 'The Life of the Australian Tribesmen'. From the handwritten minutes of the meeting we know that he used a kinematograph and a phonograph to illustrate his talk.¹² By this time Spencer must have been a fluent speaker. Not only was he known for his professorial lectures, but he had also given numerous lectures and talks throughout Australia on the subject of his anthropological fieldwork (Mulvaney and Calaby 1985: 218). Some of these talks were given to scientific societies but many others were public, and very popular, lectures illustrated with film and sound recordings made during his fieldwork with Gillen. So popular did these talks of Spencer's become that by 1903 a friend remarked that Spencer must have repeated the same talk some fifty times and that he must know it by heart (ibid.). His talk to the OUAS was one of the best-attended of its pre-war meetings with 135 members recorded as being present.

After Spencer's death in South America in 1929 the OUAS devoted its 257th meeting on Thursday 30 October 1930 to a memorial lecture by Tom Penniman—later to succeed Balfour as curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum (see Larson and Petch

2007)—entitled ‘Spencer’s Last Voyage’. A number of Spencer’s old natural science students and colleagues were present, as well as anthropological colleagues, among the eighty members and visitors attending.¹³ The event was even reported in *The Times* of 5 November 1930:

The President of the Oxford University Anthropological Society, Mr. T. K. Penniman, gave last Friday [*sic*] a memorial address on the character and work of the late Sir H. [*sic*] Baldwin Spencer, to a large audience at the University Museum. Mr. Henry Balfour, Curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum, was in the chair, and a large number of Spencer’s friends and contemporaries at Oxford—many of them eminent in the scientific world—were present.

Mr. Balfour, Mr. Howard Goulty, Sir James Frazer, Sir H. J. Mackinder, Professor S. J. Hickson, Dr. G. C. Bourne, and Dr. R. R. Marett, rector of Exeter, spoke after the paper, contributing interesting, personal reminiscences bearing on his zeal, energy, and painstaking accuracy of observation and record. Sir James Frazer bracketed the two Oxford men, Spencer and Sir E. B. Tylor, as the world’s foremost anthropologists, and said that in his opinion Spencer’s field-work among the aboriginal Australians was the most important and revolutionary contribution to anthropology the world had known, and one which could never lose its value to science. (Anonymous 1930)

With R. R. Marett, Penniman went on to edit Spencer’s journal of his expedition to Tierra del Fuego and his scientific correspondence (Marett and Penniman (eds) 1931, 1932). It is clear that Oxford anthropologists held Spencer in high regard.

Many years after his time at Oxford, Spencer wrote to Balfour about his time there:

it was the old Pitt Rivers collection that first gave me my real interest in Anthropology. It was I think in 1884 or 5 that Moseley asked me if I would spend the vacation in helping to pack up the collection which was then housed at South Kensington. I did a great deal of the packing up & it was intensely interesting to have Moseley & Tylor coming in & hear them talking about things. I remember well that Moseley seemed to know a great deal more than Tylor in regard to detail & of course after his experience on the ‘Challenger’ he could speak of many things with first hand knowledge but Tylor with his curious way which you may remember of every now & then as it were ‘drawing in his breath’—I don’t know how otherwise to express it—simply fascinated me. It was intensely interesting to a young man like myself & also a great privilege to come into such personal contact with two such workers. Of the two it struck me at that time that Moseley had the greater technical knowledge but Tylor the wider outlook.¹⁴

Arguably then, General Pitt-Rivers’s gift of his collection to Oxford can be seen as, at least indirectly, being responsible for Spencer’s interest in anthropology and thus for some of the earliest and most influential anthropological fieldwork in Australia.

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Notes

1. University of Oxford, University Archives, UC/FF/60/2/2.
2. Walter Baldwin Spencer (WBS) to Henry Balfour (HB), 10 May 1897; University of Oxford, Pitt Rivers Museum, Manuscript Collections, Spencer papers, Balfour correspondence, letter 1.
3. HB to WBS, 28 September 1898; as note 2, letter 5.
4. WBS to HB, 6 January 1903; as note 2, letter 8.
5. HB to WBS, 7 June 1915; as note 2, letter 17.
6. As note 4.
7. Further information about the relevant collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum is available in the online versions of the Museum's databases, accessible via the Museum's website at <<http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/databases.html>>.
8. As note 2.
9. As note 2.
10. WBS to HB, 28 August 1902; as note 2, letter 7.
11. WBS to HB, 20 September 1897; as note 2, letter 2.
12. University of Oxford, Pitt Rivers Museum, Manuscript Collections, Oxford University Anthropological Society Papers, Minute Book.
13. As note 12.
14. WBS to HB, 24 September 1920; as note 2, letter 21.

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About the author

Alison Petch is a project researcher, and registrar, at the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford. Since April 2006 she has been employed on 'The Other Within: An Anthropology of Englishness at the Pitt Rivers Museum', a research project funded by a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council. She has a long-standing interest in the Australian work of Walter Baldwin Spencer and Francis John Gillen.

Address for correspondence

Alison Petch, Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, South Parks Road, Oxford, OX1 3PP; alison.petch@prm.ox.ac.uk.