

ETHNOGRAPHIC COLLECTIONS OF GOVERNOR LA TROBE NOW IN THE MUSEE D'ETHNOGRAPHIE DE NEUCHÂTEL, SWITZERLAND

ISABEL MCBRYDE*

INTRODUCTION

Charles La Trobe, first governor of Victoria, is remembered primarily as its administrator, guiding the early settlement through the troubled years of pastoral boom and depression, through the turbulent years of successive gold rushes, to its establishment as a separate, independent Crown colony. He was also a man of wide scholarly interest (see Prescott's verdict on his Mexican book, quoted in Gross 1956:7-8). An indefatigable traveller, he was described by Washington Irving as "... a man of a thousand occupations; a botanist, a geologist, a hunter of beetles and butterflies, a musical amateur, a sketcher of no mean pretensions, in short a complete virtuoso." (quoted in Gross 1956:7). So, perhaps I should not have been surprised in 1972, when working in the Neuchâtel Museum of Ethnography in Switzerland,¹ to find his name listed as the donor of the earliest items in their Australian collections -- six clubs and six shields contributed in 1842.

La Trobe's interest in natural history and pioneers of Victorian settlement, and his plans to write a history of the colony, serve to explain the existence of the collection. Meanwhile, the fact that his wife, Sophie, was a member of the prominent Montmollin family in Neuchâtel, and that he was resident in that city, as tutor to the family of the Comte de Pourtales, from

* Dr. McBryde is a Reader in the Department of Prehistory and Anthropology, The Australian National University, P.O. Box 4, Canberra, A.C.T. 2600, Australia.

1824 to 1827, probably accounts for his decision to donate the collection to the Société d'Histoire Naturelle de Neuchâtel (which contributed the nucleus of the museum's collection) rather than to a British institution. The main significance of the La Trobe collection is that it was acquired during the period of initial contact between settlers and Aborigines. The artifacts involved were registered at Neuchâtel just seven years after Batman first selected land on the shores of Port Phillip Bay (and three years after La Trobe's arrival as district superintendent), and as such they are amongst the earliest surviving wooden ethnographic implements known from Victoria.

Items of material culture dating to the period of initial culture contact in Victoria are rare, as in southeastern Australia generally. This is because settlement took place in a period of increasing tension between Aboriginal tribes and settlers. In New South Wales, martial law was proclaimed at Bathurst in 1824 in response to open conflict, and Sydney was soon to be torn apart by reactions to the Myall Creek massacre and trials. Martial law had also prevailed in Van Dieman's Land. As a result, migrating pioneers from these two colonies arrived in Victoria with vivid memories of open warfare. In the thirties, Aborigines and their culture were therefore seen as obstacles to pastoral expansion rather than objects of curiosity or scientific interest, and three decades were to elapse before amateur anthropologists began to collate surviving first hand information about the tribes which once occupied this state. Some ethnographic collections were also assembled during this period (such as that of R.E. Johns (see Cooper 1975), which is housed in the Burke Museum at Beechworth, and was sent to the Paris International Exhibition in 1878), but these are typically poorly documented, and are not representative of one region or of one period. Much basic research must therefore be carried out on such collections before they can provide a framework for studies in contact period material culture and pre-contact technology. The lack of precisely-dated artifacts makes it difficult to assess the impact of European technology, or tribal disruption, on Aboriginal crafts in the contact period. Collections of artifacts made in the last few decades of the nineteenth century may well reflect an amalgam or merging of forms, techniques of manufacture, and design elements used in decoration, that were once regionally-distinct. Differences in quality between traditional artifacts and their successors were noted by some observers. For example, Curr (1883:270) writes

Their arms are wonderful productions when it is remembered they were wrought with stone implements, pieces of shell, bone etc, and it is remarkable that, though their fabrication was enormously facilitated by the iron tools they got from us, they fell off in beauty, and got to have a sort of slop look about them.

The craftsmanship and feeling for linear decoration apparent in the artifacts of the La Trobe collection (but especially the incised shields) are impressive, and these items seem to have been manufactured before culture contact had an impact on traditional art and technology. Herein lies the value of the La Trobe collection.²

PROVENANCE OF THE LA TROBE COLLECTION

The La Trobe collection would be of much greater value if the provenance of individual pieces were known, but unfortunately I have been unable to trace detailed documentation for them. In La Trobe's own copy of the *Mémoires de la Société des Sciences Naturelles de Neuchâtel* for 1846 (now in the La Trobe Library, Melbourne) his donation is simply recorded as "... composé de 40 espèces d'oiseaux d'une riche collection d'insectes, de plantes et d'armes." (Miss Reynolds, private communication), and no further details are given. Nor is any additional documentation or relevant correspondence to be found in the records of the Neuchâtel Museum, which acquired the artifacts in question from the City natural history collection in 1904 (at which time they were given their present museum accession numbers -- Mme. Keller, private communication). Admittedly, the provenance of one of the shields is given as "Port Phillip", but this need not imply the immediate environs of Melbourne or the bay, since all parts of the new colony in which land had been taken up were originally known of by that name.

This conspicuous lack of relevant documentation is regrettable, particularly since La Trobe was so careful a scholar, fully trained in the observation of natural history. His thoroughness in other areas is exemplified by the magnificent collection of letters from early Victorian pioneers and other historical material, brought together for the planned history of the colony, and now a vital source of information for all students of early Victoria (Bride 1893).³ Since this invaluable collection includes much interesting ethnographic information, we must conclude that full documentation probably existed at one time for the La Trobe collection of artifacts in the Neuchâtel Museum.

From the outline of the projected history, preserved in his papers in the La Trobe Library, we can see that La Trobe intended to discuss the Aborigines in Part Two, which was to have included the natural history of the colony, and settlement in 1851 (H587 (616)). It was typical of the man, and his period, to view the Aborigines as but part of the region's natural history, to be discussed in the same context as its fauna, flora and geology. In the same papers we find reference to notes on "plants and food of the natives" (H7528/621). The Aboriginal artifacts he collected, particularly those given to the Neuchâtel Museum by

his daughter after his death, may well have been acquired to illustrate this history.

There are two other collections of La Trobe papers that may contain information pertinent to the ethnographic collection of 1842. One, which I have not yet had the opportunity of studying, is in the Record Office of the State of Neuchâtel, under the control of the Montmollin family (Mme. Keller, private communication). The other is held by the La Trobe Library in Melbourne, and was presented by La Trobe's grand-daughter, the Baronne Godefroy de Blonay of Vaux. In the latter, most of the material relating to the Aborigines consists of official letters and memoranda dealing with conflict situations, but there are two items of relevance. One is an outline of the projected history of Victoria already referred to, and the other is a compilation made by his daughter in 1874-5 of his notes and memoranda on field trips conducted between 1839 and 1854 (BX79/1). This item may give some clue as to La Trobe's opportunities for collecting Aboriginal artifacts in the years preceding 1842. There are no references to specific contact with the Aborigines or to the collection of weapons, but areas that were visited are mentioned, and these included Wilson's Promontory in 1839; Geelong, the Yarra area, Dandenong and Western Port, Cape Schank, Mornington Peninsula, the Goulburn River, and Werribee in 1840; Geelong, Cape Schank and Western Port, Portland and the Campaspe district in 1841. In addition, he visited the Barwon Mission Station (at Buntingdale) in July 1841; Le Soeuf's station on the Goulburn in July 1842; and Parker's station on the Loddon in 1843. These last two visits are too late for pieces that reached Neuchâtel by 1842, but perhaps are relevant for provenancing the other La Trobe artifacts in the Neuchâtel Museum. Unfortunately, notes on journeys made in the early years of his administration are brief, as he relied on short notes and his wife's diaries. La Trobe only kept details of his trips after 1845.

Though these records do not assist in provenancing the collection of 1842, it seems most likely to have come from south central Victoria, between Geelong and Western Port, and south of the middle reaches of the Goulburn and Campaspe Rivers.

THE LA TROBE COLLECTION OF 1842

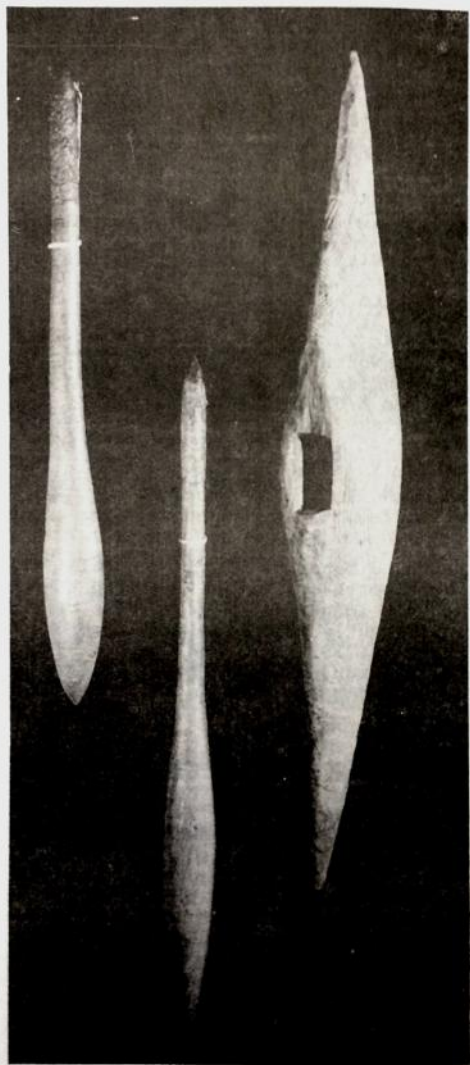
The La Trobe collection of 1842 includes six clubs and six shields. One of the shields, 1105, is clearly stated as from Port Phillip, while two others, 1126 and 1127, are said to come from Queensland, though their features and history would argue a Victorian origin.

In both form and decoration all six shields can be matched against later illustrated examples from Victoria (see Smyth 1878, 1:330-3; Howitt 1904:337) and specimens in the Beechworth collection (Cooper 1975:57-69). Number 1105 is a parrying shield, lenticular in section, with its handle cut from the solid wood of the shield's body (see Plate 1. c.f. Smyth 1878, 1:331, Figures 126-7). The other five shields are of the type used to ward off spears, and are broader, with a shallow U-shaped section. All bear impressive incised decoration, comprising symmetrical, "mirror image" patterns formed by groupings of parallel incised lines, some with ochre or pipeclay infill (see Plates 2-5). These five shields vary only in the manufacture of the handle, and in the shape of their ends. All but 1130, whose handle is cut from the solid wood (see Plate 5b), have separate handles composed of short pieces of pliable sapling inserted into holes cut in the face of the shield. Shield 1128 (Plate 3) is more elongated than the other four shields (c.f. Plates 2, 4 and 5), and its ends are longer and thinner. The Beechworth collection includes a number of shields with detachable handles (numbers 22, 24, 31 and 50. See Cooper 1975:59 and Figures A/B) that resemble the La Trobe shields illustrated in Plates 2-5 in both shape and decoration. Shields of this type are also shown in sketches of Yarra district Aborigines, probably drawn by William Thomas, included with the Brough Smyth papers in the La Trobe Library (sketches 1, 6 and 7).⁴

Upon comparing the dimensions of the Neuchâtel shields with those in the Beechworth collection, we find that on average the former are slightly longer (97.3 cm vs 87.1 cm), though they do not differ significantly from specimens recorded by Giglioli, Smyth and Spencer (at 95.0 cm. See Cooper 1975:63). The significance of the variations in form, construction of handle, and in decoration amongst Victorian shields cannot yet be assessed.

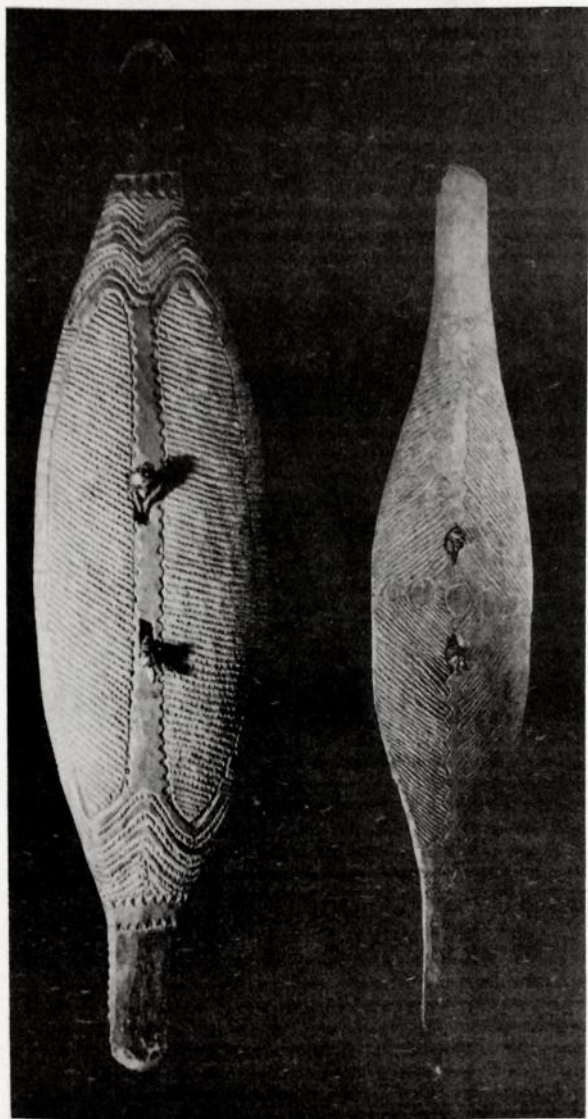
The six clubs in the La Trobe collection also conform to illustrated examples of Victorian clubs with flared heads (see Smyth 1878, 1:299, Figure 56; 300, Figure 57; Howitt 1904: 265, number 5). When it occurs, decoration takes the form of panels or bands of parallel incised short strokes, or lines of small chevrons. In most cases the butt is shaped to a point and the grip above it is roughened by cross-hatching or scoring. There are several clubs similar in form and decoration in the Beechworth collection (numbers 74, 89, 83 and 95. See Cooper 1975:49), and these lie within the same length range (between 60 and 73 cm) as the Neuchâtel specimens. Other comparative measurements on these two, admittedly very small, samples appear in Table 1, below.

Plate 1: La Trobe Collection parrying shield and clubs
(from top to bottom: 1105; 1093; 1094).



Photograph: Musée d'Ethnographie, Neuchâtel.

Plate 2: La Trobe Collection shields for warding off spears
(upper: 1126; lower: 1127).



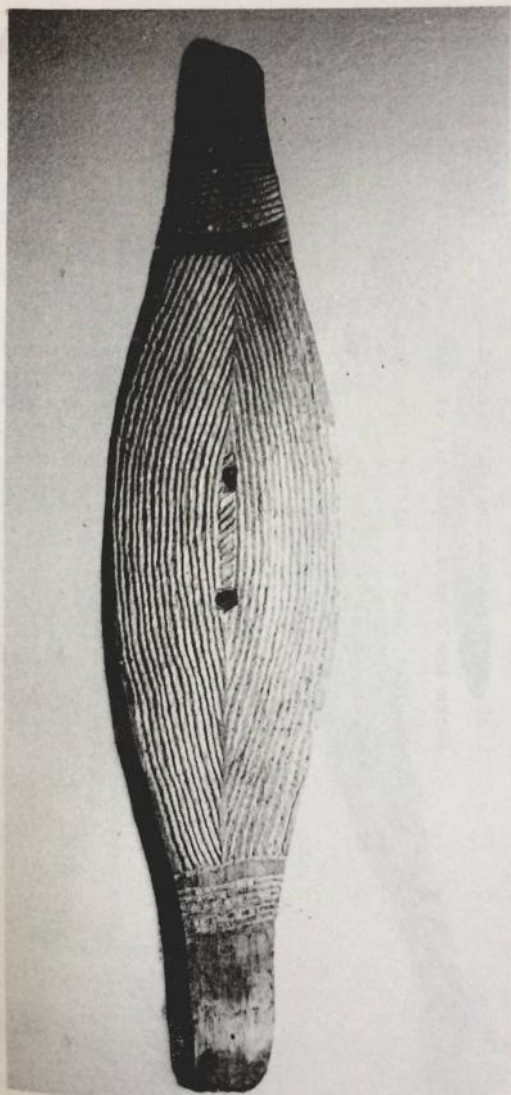
Photograph: W. Hugentobler, Musée d'Ethnographie, Neuchâtel.

Plate 3: La Trobe Collection shield 1128. Note the precision and symmetry of the decorative design.



Photograph: W. Hugentobler, Musée d'Ethnographie, Neuchâtel.

Plate 4: La Trobe Collection shield 1129.



Photograph: W. Hugentobler, Musée d'Ethnographie, Neuchâtel.

Plate 5: Face and back of La Trobe Collection shield 1130, showing the incised decoration (which lacks the overall symmetry of that on other shields), and the different method of constructing the handle.

Photograph: W. Hugentobler, Musée d'Ethnographie, Neuchâtel.

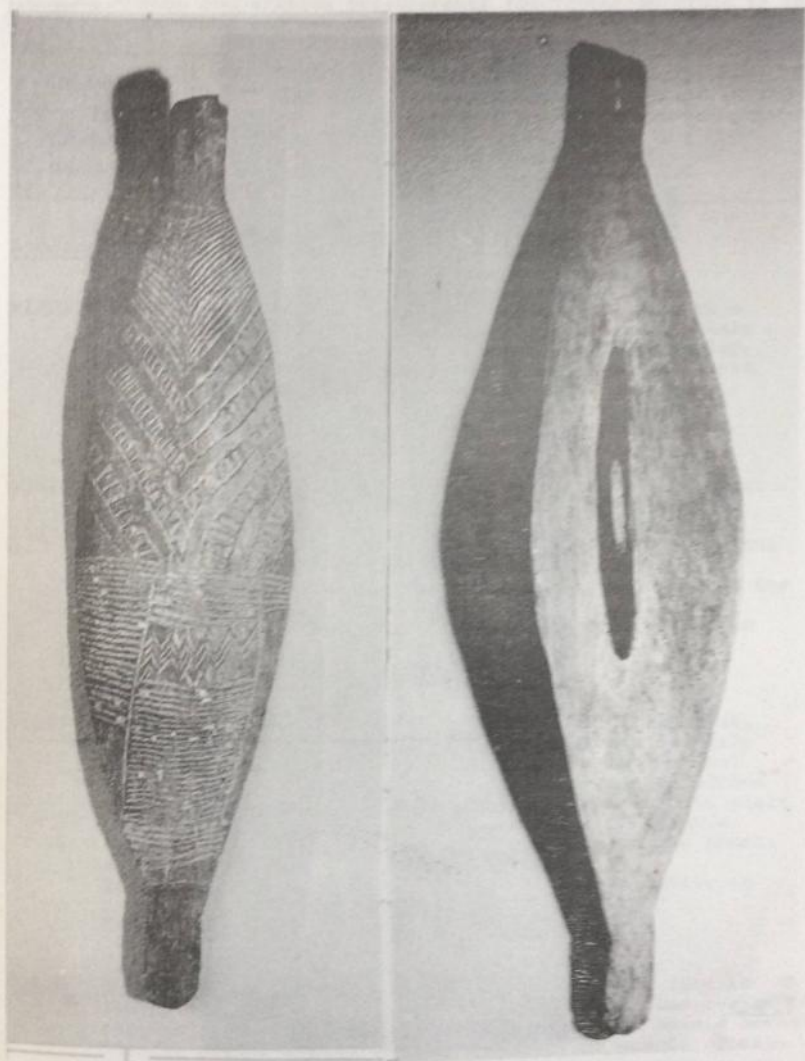
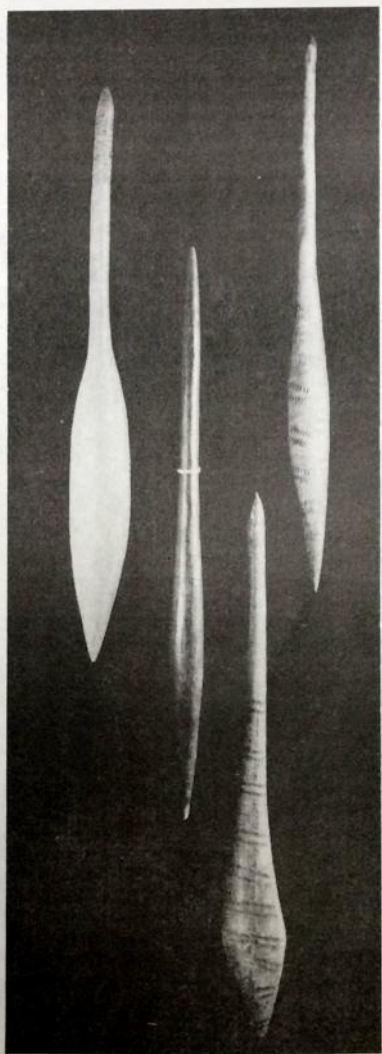


Plate 6: La Trobe Collection clubs (from top to bottom:
1092; 1097; 1095; 1096).



Photograph: Musée d'Ethnographie, Neuchâtel.

Table 1: Some comparative measurements for Victorian clubs in the La Trobe and Beechworth collections

Collection	Mean Length (cm)	Mean Maximum Width (cm)	Mean Maximum Thickness (cm)
La Trobe	68.1	6.2	3.6
Beechworth	66.8	7.5	5.0

A Description of the Artifacts

- V1105 Parrying shield, lenticular in cross-section, with a handle cut in the solid. It is decorated with panels of parallel incised lines filled with white pipeclay. The ends are pointed, and were shaped by an implement that left broad tooling marks. Plate 1.
Provenance: Port Phillip.
Dimensions: 78.1 cm x 12.0 cm (at centre) x 5.1 cm.
- V1126 Shield of a kind to ward off spears; broad, with short ends, rounded and serrated at the edge. The face of the shield is decorated in a symmetrical design of finely-cut, incised lines, coloured red and white. The back of the shield is plain, and the handle is a separate piece slipped into holes cut in the face of the shield. Plate 2.
Provenance: listed as Queensland, but more likely to be Victorian.
Dimensions: 115.2 cm x 28.0 cm.
- V1127 Shield for parrying spears, in form similar to V1126, though the incised decoration seems less meticulously executed. The design, as in V1126, is a symmetrical one of parallel lines centering on five circles across the centre of the face. The back of the shield is plain. The handle is formed by a separate piece of pliable sapling. Broad tooling marks are visible on the short, squared off ends. Plate 3.
Provenance: listed as Queensland, but more likely to be Victorian.
Dimensions: 96.7 cm x 20.0 cm.
- V1128 Shield of the kind used in spear combat. The face is decorated with a complex symmetrical curvilinear design of parallel incised lines, the two sides of the shield almost forming mirror images of each other. The handle, once

separate, is now missing. Plate 3.
 Provenance: not localised.
 Dimensions: length 110 cm.

- V1129 Shield of the same type and form as V1127, the separate handle now missing. The design covering the face of the shield is of parallel incised lines, its effect simple, flowing and symmetrical. The ends are short and blunted. Plate 4.
 Provenance: not localised.
 Dimensions: length 94.0 cm.
- V1130 Shield similar in shape to V1129 but it has its handle cut in the solid. The incised decoration on the face, however, is distinct in that though it is composed of units of parallel lines (straight or in chevrons), the overall design is not symmetrical but composed of two distinct elements of lower and upper half. The ends are plain, short and blunted. Plates 5a,b.
 Provenance: not localised.
 Dimensions: length 88.5 cm.
- V1092 Club with wide flaring head; lenticular in cross-section. The club is mostly plain, but has some 8 cm of hatching at the butt end of the handle to provide a grip. The butt is pointed, as is the head. There are possible traces of red ochre. Plate 6.
 Provenance: not localised.
 Dimensions: 73.0 cm x 7.4 cm (maximum width) x 3.2 cm (maximum). The handle is 36.0 cm x 2.5 cm (diameter).
- V1093 Plain club with flared head, pointed at the butt and tip. The head is oval in cross-section, the handle circular. The butt end of the handle is cross-hatched for 8 cm to provide a grip. Plate 1.
 Provenance: not localised.
 Dimensions: 66.0 cm x 5.0 cm (maximum) x 3.61 cm. The handle is 2.5 cm in diameter.
- V1094 Decorated club with flared head. The decoration consists of parallel rows of short strokes ("tally marks") on the handle, and parallel rows of tiny chevrons on the head forming rectangular panels to give an overall decorate scheme (c.f. Smyth 1878, 1:299, Figure 156). The two surfaces differ in decoration near the tip of the head. Both butt and the tip of the head are pointed, but bear no obvious tooling marks. There is a panel of deep hatching near the butt end of the handle to form a grip. The

head is oval in cross-section, the handle circular (2.8 cm in diameter). Plate 1.

Provenance: not localised.

Dimensions: 60.9 cm x 6.5 cm (maximum) x 4.5 cm (maximum).

- V1095 Decorated club with flared head. The incised decoration, repeated on both sides of the club, consists of ten double rows of short strokes joined by a central line of tiny chevrons. The handle is circular in section, 2.4 cm in diameter, and was shaped to a pointed tip by a tool leaving broad marks. There is no roughening of the grip section. Plate 6.

Provenance: not localised.

Dimensions: 67.5 cm x 9.0 cm (maximum) and 3.0 cm (maximum).

- V1096 Club with flared head and incised decoration, consisting of pairs of rows of short strokes ("tally marks") on the head and a band of five rows of smaller short strokes at the top of the handle. The club is circular in cross-section throughout, with both tip and butt pointed. There are clear tooling marks on the butt, yet no cross-hatching to make a grip above it. Plate 6.

Provenance: not localised.

Dimensions: 69.9 cm x 5.4 cm (maximum) x 4.5 cm (maximum). The handle is 2.0 cm in diameter.

- V1097 Plain club with flared head, pointed at the tip. The head is oval in section, and the circular handle, 2.3 cm in diameter, is pointed at the tip. There are no visible tool marks on this implement, nor any hatching on the handle to form a grip, except for a narrow band 7.2 - 7.5 cm from the butt. Plate 6.

Provenance: not localised.

Dimensions: 71.3 cm x 4.3 (maximum) and 3.1 cm (maximum).

OTHER ARTIFACTS OBTAINED THROUGH LA TROBE

In the year 1842 the Neuchâtel Museum also acquired three other Aboriginal artifacts from Victoria, a shield (V1106, from "Port Phillip") and two clubs. These were donated by Von Muller, the botanist responsible for establishing Melbourne's Botanical Gardens. La Trobe encouraged Von Muller in this enterprise, and

we can assume that he was at least in part responsible for this donation.

In addition, there are some late nineteenth century items from the Yarra tribes in the Neuchâtel Museum. A number of these, comprising shields, a club, a boomerang and a stone axe (V1103-4, 1091, 1111, 1164 and 1165), were donated by Charles Leuba in 1889, while others (V1102, 1089, 1090, 1112-4) came via de Pury in 1912. Earlier, in 1894, Samuel de Pury donated three paintings by William Barak, last senior man of the Wurunjerri at Coranderrk. These are items of considerable historical interest, and include a landscape (1238) and two corroboree scenes (1237, 1239). In his later years at Coranderrk, Barak was famous for his lively paintings (Bon 1931; Howitt 1904:70-2; Massola 1960; Nicholls 1939, R.J.R. 1929). Both Baron Guillaume de Pury and Charles Leuba were friends of the Montmollin family (Gross 1956:34-5), and their decisions to travel to Australia and establish vineyards in Victoria must have been influenced by La Trobe. So, in a sense, these items also owe their existence to La Trobe.

In addition to these artifacts, the Neuchâtel Museum holds some bone and wooden artifacts from Australia that may once have belonged to La Trobe, as they were donated (in 1895) by Mme. Godet who was one of his daughters.

NOTES

1. My thanks are due to Professor Gabus, Director of the Musée d'Ethnographie at Neuchâtel, for his kindness in offering me every assistance in my work on the Australian collection in his Museum and for permission to illustrate this paper with photographs provided by the Museum. I am greatly indebted to Mme. Cilette Keller of the Museum who gave me much help, not only while I was in Neuchâtel, but later in checking on historical records. For advice on relevant historical documents in Australia I must thank Miss Reynolds of the La Trobe Library, Melbourne.
2. Nor can we deny the historical value of this collection, through its association with one of Victoria's most notable political figures.
3. La Trobe fully realised the historical value of this collection, and returned it to the colony's public archives in 1872 when, overcome by illness and blindness, he realised that the projected history would not eventuate (Gross 1956:130-2).

4. Note that the decorated spear shield with blunted ends shown in Thomas's sketch number 7 has acquired elongated pointed ends in Bride's printed version (1898: number 7 in the Plate opposite page 70).

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