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James Mitchell's games table

Earlier this year, Brisbane rare book dealer Jörn Harbeck acquired a group of early 19th-century items with a direct and documented provenance to the Scott, Mitchell and Merewether families in New South Wales. The most significant item in the group is a c. 1833 games table made of hardwood with ebony and mother-of-pearl inlays. He argues that the table of Anglo-Indian origin was commissioned for colonial surgeon Dr James Mitchell by his mother-in-law, Augusta Maria Scott.



1
Unknown maker,
probably Indian.
Games table,
hardwood with
mother-of-pearl
and ebony inlays,
Bombay (?),
c. 1833. Made for
New South Wales
colonial surgeon
James Mitchell.
H 74, W 79 and D
55 cm. Collection:
Harbeck Rare
Books, Brisbane

JÖRN HARBECK

From the beginning of the convict settlement at Sydney Cove in 1788, the British colonies in India and Australia were connected through a variety of links. As James Broadbent pointed out in his book *India, China, Australia*,

‘the social links between India and the colony have long been recognised, but imprecisely: the more obvious aspects, such as the influence of the military, have often been crudely overrated and the more subtle links of business and kinship overlooked. Less studied still have been the commodities themselves, the physical evidence of both trade and society.’¹

India, China, Australia surveys the furniture, silver, ceramics and other goods imported from India and China. Broadbent notes that the suite of Indian furniture formerly at Horsley Park, NSW, forms ‘the most important surviving group of provenanced Anglo-Indian furniture in Australia’.² However, not many pieces of furniture identified in this survey have a known colonial provenance. Furthermore, ‘more of the pieces identified have a provenance to Tasmania (Van Diemen’s Land) than to New South Wales.’

Broadbent wonders whether ‘simply, the bulk of imported goods in New South Wales melted into anonymity’.³

The Games Table

Made of hardwood – most likely teak and padouk – that has aged to a rich and lustrous dark yellow and brown patina, the games table is in beautiful original condition. The chess board at the top consists of fields of mother-of-pearl and ebony inlays. It slides out to reveal an interior backgammon board, also inlaid in mother-of-pearl and ebony. Four ebony cradles at the base of each section of the board provide assistance in keeping pieces in place during a game.

There are a further 32 small inlaid squares, one at the tip of each of the 24 backgammon points and four arranged around each of the two central discs. Each of these squares consists of 16 tiny squares of mother-of-pearl and ebony alternating in a checked pattern. Two central round mother-of-pearl inlays (38 mm diameter) are engraved with James Mitchell’s monogram ‘JM’. The table has two compartments with hinged lids at the sides containing a total of eight removable teak boxes of varying sizes for the storage of games pieces. It stands on a column leg with carved twisted rope decoration and on a quadraform base with carved scrolled feet (**plates 1 - 3**).

The table is clearly derived from a design in George Smith’s *The Cabinet Maker and Upholsterer’s Guide*, published in 1826. This form of furniture arrived in Australia around 1830.⁴ While based on Smith’s design, the table is slightly out of proportion. The top is a little too wide and the column a little too fat; the scrolled feet are squashed and elongated and the carved flowers at the top of the feet appear a little too prominent. All of these features are common in furniture made in India to British designs.

The type of hardwood used and the ebony and mother-of-pearl inlays further support an Indian origin, as does the method of construction. For example, the craftsmen used wooden dowels rather than metal screws to apply the four carved feet to the base, while the base itself is attached to the column leg by a double mortise-and-tenon joint.

As Amin Jaffer has pointed out: ‘Indian artisans were renowned for their skills as copyists, and Europeans were astonished by the facility with which they were able to reproduce western objects’.⁵ Jaffer adds that ‘... furniture



designs were disseminated throughout the East Indies in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, both through printed patterns and the movements of objects themselves’.⁶

The central round monogrammed mother-of-pearl inlays used in this table are reminiscent of Chinese mother-of-pearl gaming counters, which were often engraved with a monogram. When I acquired the table, one of its teak boxes contained a group of 16 Chinese gaming counters in various shapes, all engraved with Chinese scenes. ‘Counters ... can be divided into two categories: bespoke counters with the crest or monogram of a family; and ready-made ones’.⁷ The four rectangular counters acquired with the table are engraved with James Mitchell’s monogram (**plate 4**). Goods such as these counters often reached Australia via

2

Unknown maker, probably Indian. *Games table*, Bombay (?), c. 1833. Showing interior backgammon board and side compartments. Collection: Harbeck Rare Books, Brisbane

3

Unknown maker, probably Indian. *Games table*, Bombay (?), c. 1833. Detail showing mother-of-pearl disc inlay monogrammed ‘JM’. Collection: Harbeck Rare Books, Brisbane



4
Chinese gaming
counter, custom-made
for James Mitchell and
monogrammed 'JM'.
Collection: Harbeck
Rare Books, Brisbane

India, and the use of inlays inspired by gaming counters further suggests a connection with the subcontinent. Not least, its provenance points to this table being a piece of Anglo-Indian furniture.

Provenance

James Mitchell (1792–1869) was born in Fife, Scotland (**plate 5**). He joined the Army Medical Corps in 1810 and after active service in Europe and America during the Napoleonic Wars 'was appointed assistant surgeon to the 48th Regiment then stationed in New South Wales and arrived in Sydney in November 1821'.⁸ In June 1823 he was transferred to the Colonial Medical Department as an assistant surgeon and posted to Sydney Hospital. He was promoted to surgeon in 1829.

Mitchell had been granted 2,000 acres (809 ha) at Burratorang in 1822, and in the next fifteen years acquired holdings in the Hunter district by grant and purchase, including the Burwood and Rothbury estates. In 1826 he was a founding member of the Australian Subscription Library, a precursor of the Public, and now State Library of New South Wales.

Only a few months after James Mitchell embarked, Robert and Helenus Scott arrived in New South Wales in early 1822. The Scott brothers had been born in Bombay in India, where their father, Dr Helenus Scott the elder, was an East India Company surgeon and President of the Bombay Medical Board. About 1797 Dr Scott married Augusta Maria Frederick, daughter of Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Frederick. Frederick had 'entered the

East India Company's service, as a Captain, about the year 1776'.⁹ He is recorded as serving as a Major in the Bombay Army in 1778.

Augusta Maria Frederick's birth is usually given as c. 1775, but *Burke's Peerage* records it as 1776.¹⁰ This means that she was either born in India or was a very young child when her family moved there. Following her father's death in 1791, she 'inherited some of the immense wealth which had been amassed by her ancestor Sir John Frederick',¹¹ who had been a wealthy merchant and Lord Mayor of London in 1662.

The Scotts had six children, and at least the first five were born in Bombay: another Augusta Maria (1798–1871), Robert (1799–1844), Alexander Walker (1800–1883), Helenus John (1802–1879), David Charles Frederick (1804–1881) and Patrick (?1809–1887). They lived at Poway (Powai), then a small village just outside Bombay, where from 1799 they leased the Poway Estate.¹² When Dr Scott was away in Bombay for longer periods he regularly wrote to his wife at Poway.¹³

In 1809 the Scotts returned to England, but 'restive conditions in Britain ... were dispiriting to resourceful spirits like the Scotts'.¹⁴ There were plans for at least one of the brothers to return to India to practise law: 'It would have given me much satisfaction to know that Wm Lee is willing to give you & Walker instruction in Sanskrit ... I consider this language as of the greatest consequence to a young man going to India in the Law'.¹⁵

Instead the Scotts, possibly encouraged by Sir Joseph Banks, sought a future in the young colony of New South Wales. In late 1821 Dr Helenus Scott, accompanied by his sons Robert and Helenus, embarked on the *Britomart* for Sydney. Dr Scott died suddenly on the voyage and was buried at the Cape. His two sons received land grants in the Hunter Valley after their arrival in early 1822. Their combined property Glendon, where they soon began breeding blood horses, was adjacent to James Mitchell's Rothbury. The three men formed a friendship, and 'their search [for wives] would link them closely forever'.¹⁶

Augusta Maria Scott (**plate 6**), and her daughter continued to live in England and on the continent for many years, Mrs Scott finding 'quite horrid' the idea of her sons 'being surrounded by convicts'.¹⁷ This sentiment was mirrored by what friends in Bombay thought:

Your brother Edward showed me a letter from Van Diemen's Land, by which I was glad to see that Helenus was going to England. I cannot imagine that it should be necessary for the sons of such a man as his Father was to look for employment in a barbarous land.¹⁸

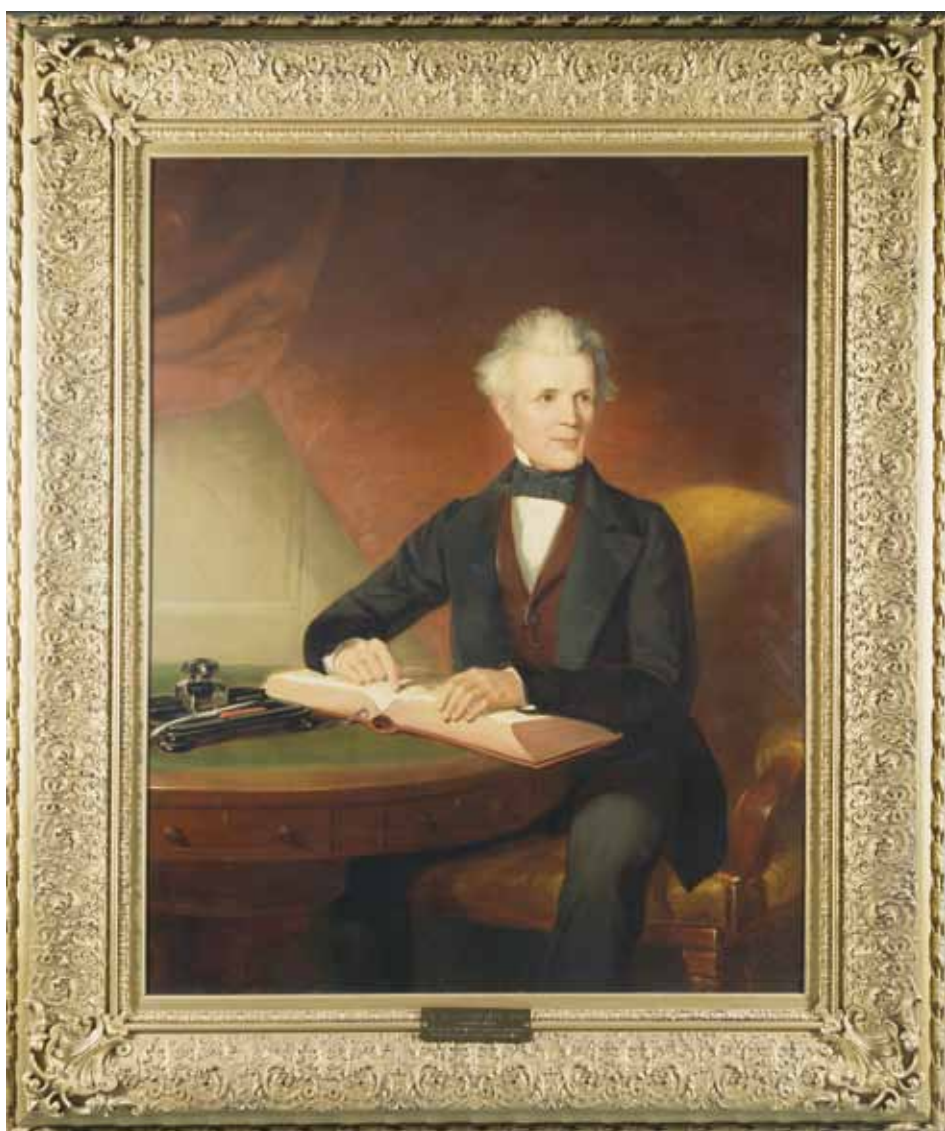
Following her husband's death in 1821, Mrs Scott was left an estate of over £24,000, including property interests in Bombay. Another family friend writes from there:

In regard to the future management of your affairs in this country, I have no prospect of being able to remain long in it ... I would advise the Executor therefore to grant power of attorney to your two brothers, and to join with them anyone or more of the gentlemen connected with the Agency in India whom you would wish to employ. I shall before leaving the country deliver to Major Edward all papers connected with Poway.¹⁹

The third eldest of the six Scott children, Alexander Walker, was also keen to establish himself in Australia. Although without any experience, he 'could not resist the new continent with its ... obvious potential to make money'.²⁰ Walker, as he was known, had decided to become a merchant, had purchased a ship, and named it the *Australia*. He arrived at Newcastle on 17 January 1827.

His brother Robert had tried in vain to dissuade him: 'It tends simply to this that unless a man by long experience can understand markets ... he is sure sometimes or other to be taken in'.²¹ Robert Scott's views of his brother's business acumen proved right and 'this and voyages to the colony in 1829 and 1831 proved financially disastrous'.²² Businesses set up later with James Mitchell, including an iron foundry and a salt works, proved more successful.²³

On his last voyage in 1831 Walker Scott brought his mother and sister to New South Wales. Arriving in Sydney on 20 August 1831, at the beginning of the golden age of the 1830s, and bringing her considerable wealth, Mrs Scott purchased Cumberland Place on Bunker's Hill in The Rocks from the wealthy merchant Robert Campbell senior. The house 'had been designed by Francis Greenway in 1825, with early 1830s additions by John Verge'.²⁴ It would have appealed to Mrs Scott, as it 'was



a unique Australian variant... of the upper loggias of the grand merchants' and officials' houses of Calcutta'²⁵ (plate 7). Following this 1831 voyage, Walker Scott was keen to establish trade with India. 'The family was now together except for David and Patrick who were in India ... and already there were plans to trade with Calcutta and Bombay, where Patrick could arrange the cargoes'.²⁶

On 22 August 1833 Miss Scott (the younger Augusta Maria) married Dr James Mitchell, 'with whom she had corresponded for some years'.²⁷ The Mitchells moved into Mrs Scott's house, Cumberland Place, where James Mitchell opened a private practice. In *The Australian Colonial House*, James Broadbent gives us a detailed description of Cumberland Place. It

was essentially a large bungalow or verandah-cottage ... The central pavilion was ideally suited to the superior status of

5
Marshall Claxton
1813–81), *Dr James Mitchell*, 1854.
Oil painting in gilt frame.
Collection: Mitchell
Library, State Library of
NSW, ML 7



6
Miss Sharpe
[attributed to],
Augusta Maria Scott,
(c. 1775-1840) 1820.
Watercolour on ivory
miniature. Collection:
Mitchell Library,
State Library of NSW,
MIN 353

the house and to its siting. It formed an impressive entrance piece, with an arcade below and, it appears, a loggia above with ... views over the quay, the town, the Government Domain. ... It is likely that the first-floor room to which the staircase led and which, in turn, opened into the upper loggia was a drawing room ...²⁸

It is highly likely that the games table stood in this drawing room and was used there by the Scott and Mitchell family in their leisure hours and when entertaining visitors.

An inventory of 'Family Treasures' compiled c. 1950 by a descendant of James and Augusta Maria Mitchell describes the games table as 'belonging to Augusta Maria Scott'.²⁹ As it was clearly made for James Mitchell, the family appears to have used the term 'belonging' to describe that it came from Mrs Scott. I suggest that Mrs Scott gave the games table to James

Mitchell, possibly as a wedding gift. Given the Scott brothers' long friendship with Mitchell and the correspondence between them, it seems possible that their sister's marriage to Mitchell had been agreed before her arrival in Sydney. Given also that two of Mrs Scott's sons were in Bombay at the time, David or Patrick Scott may have commissioned the table in Bombay on their mother's behalf.

Why did Mrs Scott go so far afield to commission a piece of furniture when Sydney cabinet-makers were producing high-quality pieces in the 1830s? Augusta Maria Scott had lived in Bombay until the age of 34, and maintained strong links with India after her departure. Her two brothers remained in India and had distinguished careers in the Bombay Army. She corresponded with them and friends there after she left. Two of her sons were in Bombay when she came to Australia in 1831 and another son in Australia was keen to establish trade with India. Most importantly she would have been very familiar with Anglo-Indian furniture and would no doubt have had such furniture in her house at Powai. She may also simply have regarded Anglo-Indian furniture as superior to anything produced in New South Wales.

There is ample evidence that the Scotts appreciated the arts of India and China. A 'beautiful Bombay box', is recorded in Robert Scott's will and left to his sister Augusta Maria Mitchell.³⁰ Augusta Maria Scott owned a Chinese ivory fan, most likely given to her by Dr Scott just before their return to England in 1809, bearing the monograms of five of her six children and her husband's monogram on the guard.³¹ This interest continued after their return to England and in 1816 Dr Scott published *Some Remarks on the Arts of India*.³²

Living at Cumberland Place with Mrs Scott, the Mitchells had three children and continued to prosper through James Mitchell's extensive business dealings. Their first child, born in 1834, was yet another Augusta Maria, later Mrs Edward Christopher Merewether. 1836 saw the arrival of the Mitchells' second child, David Scott Mitchell, Australia's greatest book collector and founder of the Mitchell Library (**plate 8**). A second daughter, Margaret, was born in 1840.

The table almost certainly entered the Mitchell household at some time in the 1830s and would have been a familiar sight for the Mitchell children at Cumberland Place. We know that David Scott Mitchell was a keen



whist player in later life, and probably played chess too. The Mitchell Library today contains four books on chess from his personal collection and with his ownership entry, including the second edition of Howard Staunton's *Chess-player's handbook*,³³ published in 1848, when Mitchell was 12 years old.

After his father's death in 1869 the table passed into David Scott Mitchell's possession. He continued to live at Cumberland Place until 1871, the year of his mother's death, then 'moved first to another address in Cumberland Street, and, in 1877, to what was then Darlinghurst'.³⁴ His father's games table moved with him and stayed with him all his life.

A 1930 label written by Edith Merewether, the wife of Mitchell's nephew Henry Merewether, is attached under one of the two side lids and records: 'This table [...] came from of David S Mitchell's house.' The inventory of Merewether 'family treasures' records that after David Mitchell's death in 1907 his sister Augusta Maria Merewether asked her son Henry to select nine pieces of furniture from his uncle's house, one for each of her children. The games table was then

passed down through a further three generations in the Merewether family.

Jörn Harbeck is a Brisbane-based dealer in important rare books, manuscripts and historical art. He has recently started dealing in antiques.

Notes

- 1 James Broadbent, *India, China, Australia. Trade and Society 1788 – 1850*, Historic Houses Trust of NSW, Sydney, 2003 p 9.
- 2 *Ibid* p 106.
- 3 *Ibid* p 10.
- 4 Kevin Fahy & Andrew Simpson, *Australian Furniture Pictorial History and Dictionary*, Casuarina Press, Sydney, 1998, p 384.
- 5 Amin Jaffer, *Furniture from British India and Ceylon*, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 2001 pp 76–7.
- 6 *Ibid* p 94.
- 7 Bill Neal, *Chinese Mother of Pearl gaming counters*, ChezBill, n.p., 2007 p 6.
- 8 Elizabeth Guilford, 'James Mitchell, (1792–1869)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mitchell-james-2462/text3295>.
- 9 [John Philippart], *The East India Military Calendar, vol 3*, printed for Kingsbury, Parbury & Allen, London, 1826 pp 285–6.
- 10 Charles Mosley (ed.). *Burke's Peerage and Baronetage and*

7

Conrad Martens (1801–78), [Dr Mitchell's residence, Cumberland Place, The Rocks, Sydney], 1842. Collection: Historic Houses Trust of NSW, Caroline Simpson Collection, L2005/1



8

Dalton's Royal Photographic Studio, *David Scott Mitchell*, 1864. Photographic portrait in *Album of photographs of family and friends*, c. 1863 – 1892. Collection: Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, PXC 831

Knightage, 107th edition, Burke's Peerage (Genealogical Books) Ltd, Wilmington, Delaware, USA, 2003, vol 1, p 1490. Her elder sister Martha was born in 1775, her younger sister Lucy in 1777. Two brothers, Charles and Edward, followed in 1778 and 1784.

- 11 Paul Brunton, 'The collector collected', *A Grand Obsession. The D S Mitchell Story*, State Library of NSW, Sydney, 2007 p 28.
- 12 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Powai>
- 13 Scott Family Papers, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, ML A2260
- 14 Eileen Chanin, *Book Life. The life and times of David Scott Mitchell*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, North Melbourne, 2011, p 25.
- 15 Dr Helenus Scott to Robert Scott, 10 Oct 1820, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, ML A2260.
- 16 Chanin, *op cit* p 23.
- 17 Augusta Maria Scott to Robert Scott, 23 Apr 1823, Scott Family papers, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, ML A2260.
- 18 A family friend [signature illegible] to Augusta Maria Scott, 24 Oct 1822, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, ML A2260.
- 19 William Jenkins (?) to Augusta Maria Scott, 24 Oct 1824, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, ML A2260.
- 20 Marion Ord, *Historical drawings of native flowers. Harriet and Helena Scott*, Craftsman House, Roseville, 1988 p 19.
- 21 Robert Scott to Alexander Walker Scott, 3 Jan 1825, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, ML A2263.
- 22 Nancy Gray, 'Scott, Alexander Walker (1800–1883)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/scott-alexander-walker-4545/text7449>.
- 23 Chanin, *op cit* p 32.
- 24 Elizabeth Ellis, 'David Scott Mitchell. A Life and Bequest', *A Grand Obsession. The DS Mitchell Story*, State Library of NSW, Sydney, 2007 p 4.
- 25 Broadbent, *op cit* p 191.
- 26 Ord, *op cit* p 19. David Scott had become a Captain in the East India Company's service in 1824 and arrived at Sydney in 1835. Patrick Scott, a poet, came to Australia in 1840, the year of his mother's death. He returned to England where he died at Glendon, Surrey, in 1887.
- 27 Nancy Gray, 'Scott, Robert (1799–1844)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/scott-robert-2642/text3673>.
- 28 James Broadbent, *The Australian Colonial House. Architecture and Society in New South Wales 1788 – 1842*, Hordern House, Sydney, 1997, p 133–4. Extant images of Cumberland Place include two 1831 watercolours by Charles Rodius. 'Cumberland Place', Watercolours of Sydney, Mitchell Library, SSV*/Sp Coll/Rodius/1 and 14; Conrad Martens' 1842 watercolour reproduced here (Historic Houses Trust of NSW, Caroline Simpson Collection: L2005/1) and Martens' associated pencil sketch in the 'Album of cloud studies, mountain, bush and harbour scenes, ca. 1841–1850', folio 71, Mitchell Library, DI PX 28); a c. 1865 photograph of the house with two people on the verandah, believed to be James and Augusta Maria Mitchell, Mitchell Library, SPF / 388; a group of 1901 photographs by the NSW Department of Public Works in *The Old Rocks*. Mitchell Library, OXE 921 (vol.1–3); and a group of six 1912 pencil drawings by Lionel Lindsay: [*Cumberland Place*], Mitchell Library, DG SV1A/73–78).
- 29 An inventory of Merewether 'family treasures', ca. 1950. Photocopy in the author's collection.
- 30 Addenda to Robert Scott's will, 17 July 1844, ML A2263.
- 31 Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, R 545.
- 32 Helenus Scott, the Elder, 'Some Remarks on the Arts of India with Miscellaneous Observations on Various Subjects', *Journal of Science and Arts*, London, 1816.
- 33 Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, DSM/794/S.
- 34 Ellis *op cit* p 7.