The oil of the dugong

Towards a history of an Indigenous medicine

Veronika Folkmanova

This article explores the relationship between Indigenous knowledge and Australian settler perceptions of medicinal practice by examining the manufacture and use of dugong oil. From the mid-nineteenth century, Moreton Bay was the location of a dugong industry which manufactured oil for Brisbane and Sydney with ambitions to go worldwide. At this time, Australia was following Britain in the move to professionalise medicine. In order to be identified as professionals and to distance themselves from quacks, Australian medical practitioners were increasingly registering their names with the New South Wales Medical Board, established in 1838, to mirror British medical trends. At the same time, however, some were ‘discovering’ new medicinal remedies learned from the Indigenous inhabitants of Australia. This article tracks the growth of the dugong industry in the mid-nineteenth century, before analysing how dugong oil made its way through the hands of medical practitioners into newspaper advertisements and exhibitions from Australia to Europe.

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Walking through the many halls and exhibition centres of the 1855 Paris Exposition Universelle, visitors came across a curious exhibit: dugong oil. The oil had travelled for several months, traversing the Pacific Ocean from Australia to Paris, where it attracted interest and brought fame to its manufacturer. The journey began in Queensland’s Moreton Bay (Brisbane), where dugongs (a species of herbivorous marine mammal) were hunted by a group of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal fishermen. Once caught, the animals were processed at the boiling-down plants on St Helena Island or North Stradbroke Island (NSI), to extract the pure oil. From there the oil was ferried across the bay to Brisbane where it was packaged and sent to Paris.

The story is a fascinating part of Australia’s history of medicine in several ways. This article focuses on the journey of dugong oil from source to international markets. I argue that this journey provides an illustrative example of historical interaction between the knowledge of Aboriginal people, a settler colonial economy and the global currents of empire embodied in the exchange of goods from colonial locations to

metropolitan centres. It offers a case study in transnational history.¹ By examining both the production and the representation of dugong oil as a health-giving product, we can illuminate the early Aboriginal-settler context in which the oil's efficacy for treating a range of symptoms was first recognised and exploited by Europeans. In its long voyage from local Indigenous remedy to the Paris Exposition Universelle, the story of dugong oil's origins was almost entirely subsumed as its medical qualities were promoted locally and then internationally to a largely non-Aboriginal public.

The Aboriginal people of Moreton Bay had made use of dugong since time immemorial. To them, dugong was a staple food, a medicine and a source of material for various tools. Before the arrival of settlers, dugongs were caught by coastal and island people in Moreton Bay using nets made from the bark of the cotton tree, or the hibiscus tree as it was locally known.² First a net was set in the shallow waters off NSI where dugongs fed on sea grass. When a man on the lookout spotted a dugong, he gave a signal, and a group of men in a canoe chased the animal into the net where it became tangled and eventually drowned.³

Dugong fishing on NSI was an important part of life for the Aboriginal people because of the many uses of the animal. After a successful catch, Aboriginal men brought the dugong onto the beach and divided it up into pieces. Every piece of the dugong was used. The skin was dried, the meat cooked, the bones used as utensils, and the lard boiled to a liquid state – oil. This was taken regularly to improve general health, or specifically for flus and colds, aches and pains, and other more severe illnesses. Grace Baird, an Aboriginal woman of NSI interviewed during the Redland City Council Oral History Project in 2005, explained that dugong oil was used to 'rub you down. It was good for everything. People used to even drink it, have a teaspoon of it. It kept them healthy, no colds'.⁴

NSI was settled early by Europeans as they moved up the east coast of Australia. The first outpost was established with the construction of a pilot

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- 1 For a concise description and history of transnational history see Ian Tyrrell, 'Reflections on the Transnational Turn in United States History: Theory and Practice', *Journal of Global History* 4 (2009): 453–74.
 - 2 Bernice Fischer, et al., *Moongalba (Myora) Sitting Down Place* (Dunwich: North Stradbroke Island Historical Museum Association, 1997); Murray Johnson, 'A Modified Form of Whaling: The Moreton Bay Dugong Fishery 1846–1920', in *Brisbane: Moreton Bay Matters*, ed. Murray Johnson (Brisbane: Brisbane History Group, 2002).
 - 3 Oodgeroo Noonuccal, *Stradbroke Dreamtime* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1992); Johnson, 'A Modified Form of Whaling'.
 - 4 Redland City Council Oral History Project, interview with Grace Baird, 12 April 2005. The use of dugong oil is described by other participants of the Redland City Council Oral History Project such as Donna Ruska, Bruce Borey, Fred Campbell and others.

station at Amity Point in 1825.⁵ It is likely that these early settlers saw the capture and dividing-up of dugongs and the specific use of dugong oil by locals. It would no doubt have piqued their interest. The use of fish oils in medicine had a long history amongst Europeans. It had already been mentioned by Hippocrates and Pliny in the fourth century BCE and first century CE, respectively.⁶ Cod liver oil, in particular, had become widely used by fishermen in northern Europe by the nineteenth century.⁷ It had also, increasingly, attracted scientific interest. Its benefits had been the subject of a series of observations made by Dr Bardsley in the Manchester Infirmary, a prized essay from the Society of Science and Arts of Utrecht on the chemical and therapeutic properties of cod liver oil, published in 1822, in Christian Wilhelm Hufeland's journal, and a case history by D. Schütte in 1824 describing how rickets could be cured using the oil.⁸ This interest in cod liver oil signifies a resurgence in the use of traditional cures by the mid-nineteenth century. It also suggests an increasing globalisation of local remedies. Both are important to the history of dugong oil, because in this context it was perhaps only a matter of time before the settlers came to consider dugong oil as a possible substitute for other fish oils and hence as a medical and economic resource.

It is impossible to assign an exact date to the beginning of the European-run dugong industry. The timing of its development and the rate of its growth seem to have been a combination of chance, local need and entrepreneurialism. A dugong catch by a white man was first documented by the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 19 August 1846. It noted that a dugong became entangled in a turtle net in Moreton Bay.⁹ Within ten years an industry had been established. Before dugong oil came to circulate in the global market, it became an important product in the local one, particularly in the Moreton Bay area. The penal settlement of Brisbane was in need of a regular supply of European food and medicine, and these had to be imported. The local availability of dugong products provided a welcome supplement to an often sparse diet and thinly stocked medical cabinet. Yet a key role in the spread of dugong oil beyond this local base was played by one man, Dr William Hobbs, a rising figure in the medical establishment of the region. Hobbs arrived in Moreton Bay in 1849. He

5 Winifred Davenport, *Port and Harbour Development in Queensland from 1824–1985* (Brisbane: Department of Harbours and Marine, 1986), 18.

6 Ruth A. Guy, 'The History of Cod Liver Oil as a Remedy', *American Journal of the Diseases of Children* 26, no. 2 (1923): 112–16.

7 Ibid., 112.

8 Ibid., 113–14.

9 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 August 1846, 3.

had been working as a surgeon on the ship *Chaseley*, but he sought a new beginning in a country full of possibilities and potential. Hobbs was only a young man, just 21, with little experience in his profession, yet he rose rapidly to a respectable position as health officer in Brisbane. He went on to become a member of the Medical Board of Queensland, when it was appointed on 18 February 1860, and he remained in that position for most of the remainder of his life.¹⁰ The period during which Dr Hobbs rose in the colonial hierarchy coincided with the rise of the dugong industry in Moreton Bay. The man and the industry would become closely connected.

From the beginning the industry involved Aboriginal expertise. According to the newspaper reports of that first accidental catch in 1846, the white fisherman had several Aboriginal men – deckhands – on board his boat.¹¹ This event marks the beginning, in the historical record at least, of a kind of collaboration between the settlers and the Aboriginal people in the context of dugong fishing. In its early days the settlers were less skilled and efficient than Aboriginal people at catching the animal and procuring the oil, so they became dependent on Aboriginal knowledge and skills in order to access this resource. Settlers' dependence upon Indigenous knowledge and skills can also be seen in other industries during this phase of colonisation, such as whaling, the pastoral industry and *bêche-de-mer* fishing.¹²

This interdependence created an avenue for Aboriginal people to become an integral part of a white enterprise. The dugong industry required Indigenous know-how and Aboriginal labour was indispensable to the production of the oil. Perhaps as a consequence, the working conditions

10 Statistical Register of Queensland 1859–88. For more information on the Medical Board of Queensland see Ross Patrick and Heather Patrick, *The Medical Board of Queensland: One Hundred and Forty Years* (Brisbane: Medical Board of Queensland, 2002).

11 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 August 1846, 3.

12 For the whaling industry, see Lynette Russell, *Roving Mariners: Australian Aboriginal Whalers and Sealers in the Southern Oceans, 1790–1870* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012); Michael Nash, *The Bay Whalers: Tasmania's Shore-based Whaling Industry* (Woden: Navarine Publishing, 2003). For the pastoral industry, see Peggy Brock 'Pastoral Stations and Reserves in South and Central Australia, 1850s–1950s', in *Aboriginal Workers*, ed. Ann McGrath, Kay Saunders and Jackie Huggins (Sydney: The Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, 1995), 102–14; Mark Hannah, 'Aboriginal Workers in the Australian Agricultural Company, 1824–1857', *Labour History* 82 (2003): 17–33. For *bêche-de-mer* fishing see, Regina Ganter, *Mixed Relations: Asian–Aboriginal Contact in North Australia* (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2006); Anna Shnukal, Guy Ramsay and Yuriko Nagata, *Navigating Boundaries: The Asian Diaspora in Torres Strait* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2004). For reliance on Aboriginal knowledge and skills, see Regina Ganter, *The Pearl-shellers of Torres Strait: Resource Use, Development and Decline, 1860s–1960s* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1994); Dale Kerwin, *Aboriginal Dreaming Paths and Trading Routes: The Colonisation of the Australian Economic Landscape* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2010).

of the dugong industry eventually partially ameliorated the restrictive measures of the 1897 *Aboriginal Protection Act*. It gave Aboriginal people on NSI what historian Faith Walker has called 'a measure of financial independence as well as ... an interdependent relationship with a number of government agencies; an unprecedented position for Aboriginal people at the time'.¹³ Indigenous and non-Indigenous studies of NSI including Walker's study of the Myora mission, John Goodall's thesis on the Benevolent Asylum in Dunwich and Regina Ganter's work on the past and future of NSI reveal that conditions on the island differed significantly from the mainland, primarily because Aboriginal people found paid employment in the Benevolent Asylum, the Peel Island leprosarium, the dugong industry, oyster farming and mullet fishing. Due to their important status as indispensable workers and their understanding of government bureaucracy, these people and their descendants retained a certain degree of power and self-management compared with Indigenous people living on most mainland missions and stations.¹⁴

This does not mean that experiences for Indigenous people were always positive in the dugong industry. As it grew under European influence during the 1850s, the make-up of dugong fishing crews began to change from predominantly Aboriginal, with a white man in charge, to a more composite form. Problems arose between the crews perhaps due to racial issues. These were probably exacerbated by the demand for larger numbers of dugongs and competition for the catch.¹⁵ An article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1859 suggested a strained relationship among dugong fishermen when commenting on the death of a white dugong fisherman, presumed to have been killed by his Aboriginal crew. It was later found that the man's death was not connected to dugong fishing but was an act of revenge for his inappropriate behaviour towards Aboriginal

13 Faith Walker has written extensively about the situation on North Stradbroke Island in Faith Walker, 'Useful and Profitable: History and Race Relations at the Myora Aboriginal Mission, Stradbroke Island, Australia, 1892–1940', *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum, Cultural Heritage Series* 1, no. 1 (1998): 137–74.

14 For information about the restrictive measures on mainland missions and stations in Queensland, see Regina Ganter, 'The History and Development of the Keppel Islands' (PhD thesis, Griffith University, 1985). Rosalind Kidd, *The Way We Civilise: Aboriginal Affairs – The Untold Story* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1997). For other Australian States, see Peggy Brock, *Outback Ghettos: A History of Aboriginal Institutionalisation and Survival* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Felicity Jensz, 'Controlling Marriages: Friedrich Hagenauer and the Betrothal of Indigenous Western Australian Women in Colonial Victoria', *Aboriginal History* 34 (2010): 35–54; Christine Choo, 'The Role of the Catholic Missionaries at Beagle Bay in the Removal of Aboriginal Children from their Families in the Kimberley Region from the 1890s', *Aboriginal History* 21 (1997): 14–29.

15 Johnson, 'A Modified Form of Whaling', 31.

women.¹⁶ These inter-racial crews had to navigate relationships shaped by colonisation in which European men predominated and Aboriginal women were often seen as sexual objects targeted by settlers.¹⁷ Perhaps it was these ongoing feuds that eventually persuaded Hobbs to hire an 'all-white' crew for his St Helena boiling-down plant and led the press to report that development as a positive step.¹⁸

By 1854 dugongs were being caught in large numbers, dugong oil extracted in greater quantities than ever before, and Hobbs had emerged as a central player in the industry. Although educated as a medical practitioner, he had been an enthusiastic entrepreneur since arriving in Australia in 1849, trying his luck as a cotton grower before becoming a dugong oil producer while also working as a doctor in private practice and in key government institutions including the Brisbane Gaol, the Benevolent Asylum, Lock Hospital and the Lunatic Reception House.¹⁹ He combined his twin roles as medic and manufacturer to good effect. In 1857 Hobbs printed a substantial lecture on the qualities of dugong oil, *Elaiopathy: the Administration of the Oil of the Dugong (Halicore Australis), as a Curative Agent in Chronic Disease*. He attracted enough attention to have it reproduced in the *Argus*, *Moreton Bay Courier* and *Sydney Morning Herald*.²⁰ In his lecture, Hobbs was silent on the subject of where he obtained his knowledge about the health-giving properties of dugong oil. Instead, he discussed the use of similar oils by inhabitants of the Arctic regions and Northern Russia as well as Pampas and Terra-del-Fuego of South America. Yet despite this omission of the local history of his product, Hobbs must have learned about the use of dugong oil from fellow settlers, themselves educated by local people, and perhaps also directly from Aboriginal people on NSI with whom he had some degree of proximity. Aboriginal people worked at the Benevolent Asylum where Dr Hobbs was a visiting surgeon in the 1850s and 1860s. According to oral history, Aboriginal people at Myora Mission, a government settlement,

16 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 March 1859, 5.

17 For instance in later years Ann McGrath looks at the tensions and underlying role of Aboriginal women in the Wave Hill walk-off in Ann McGrath, 'Modern Stone-Age Slavery: Images of Aboriginal Labour and Sexuality', in *Aboriginal Workers*, 30–51; and Ann McGrath, *Born in the Cattle: Aborigines in Cattle Country* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987).

18 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 December 1858, 5.

19 *Statistical Register of Queensland*, 1859–88.

20 William Hobbs, *Elaiopathy; The Administration of the Oil of the Dugong (Halicore Australis), As a Curative Agent in Chronic Disease* (Melbourne: Fairfax, 1857). Hobbs explains the term as being derived from two Greek words, *elaion*, signifying oil, and *pathos*, 'morbid condition'. Printed in *Argus*, 18 September 1857; *Moreton Bay Courier*, 17 October 1857; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 September 1857. Excerpts from the lecture can be found in later editions – for instance, *Brisbane Courier*, 8 October 1869.

and One Mile, an Aboriginal settlement close to the asylum, used the oil both as an oral medicine taken in 'spoonfuls' or as a chest rub.²¹ Hobbs adopted this same practice when administering the oil to prisoners in the Brisbane Gaol during the 1850s.²²

Hobbs' silence on Indigenous uses of dugong oil in his lecture is made even more striking by his heavy use of testimonials from other sources. He provided four pages of these from his patients to support his claims about the benefits of the oil. In this sense his lecture was an advertisement for a product as much as a scientific article. Among the testimonials were the following claims:

The very first dose I took of it seemed to sweeten my stomach.

... I had recourse to the Dugong oil, and to the astonishment and delight of her anxious relatives, ere three months had elapsed she was in perfect health.

The oil was taken for about two months, and afterwards rubbed into the chest for two more. By this means his health became perfectly restored.

... and therefore [I] think in such cases a sweet unirritating [*sic*] oil, like that of the Dugong, to be decidedly superior to the cod liver.²³

Hobbs' promotion of the oil combined his commercial interests with his status as a scientist and doctor. In the first paragraph of his lecture, he presented his intentions as purely philanthropic:

to give the members of the School of Arts a brief sketch of some of the vital phenomena of the human frame when in health ... to introduce to their notice a remedy, obtainable in Moreton Bay, possessing the valuable properties for the renovation and restoration of the frame when worn out and exhausted by chronic disease.²⁴

The technical tone of the lecture lent it authority while providing a platform for Hobbs as a medical practitioner and a man of science to present his findings to the general public. It was designed to promote his

21 Redland City Council Oral History Project, interview with Ronald Tippo, 24 February 2006.

22 *Statistical Register of Queensland*, 1859–88.

23 Hobbs, *Elaiopathy*, 9–10.

24 The *Brisbane Courier* of 8 October 1869 states that Dr Hobbs prescribed dugong oil to his patients for many years 'before he took any steps to place the article before the public'.

reputation as an innovator in medicine while encouraging the public to try the products described therein.

The lecture presents dugong oil as a remarkable remedy for a range of ailments. Hobbs promoted it as a cure for all respiratory diseases, but especially for tuberculosis, a highly feared killer in nineteenth-century England and Australia.²⁵ Due to the high mortality rate of tuberculosis sufferers, claims of a cure could be sure to draw the attention of newspaper readers. Interestingly, archival sources show no mention was made of dugong oil among medical practitioners at meetings of either the Medical or Pharmacological Board of Queensland in the 1860s, despite Hobbs' membership in both. Perhaps this is because the boards were in their infancy and neither the practice of medicine nor the production and marketing of medicines were yet regulated in Brisbane. This no doubt helped to shield Dr Hobbs from criticism, allowing him to give dugong oil to his patients and then claim its efficacious results.²⁶

The majority of period newspapers point to Hobbs as the primary promoter and manufacturer of dugong oil, but they also mention dugong fishermen who were not working for Hobbs.²⁷ This suggests that dugong fishing produced enough oil for other entrepreneurs to seek entry to the industry. The machinery to procure dugong oil was simple: a large vat and a team of hunters sufficed to set up a small processing plant. Once caught, the dugong was cut up, and the pieces placed in the vat filled with water, which was then hung above a fire. When dissolved over the heat, the oil was scooped off the surface using a ladle or, alternatively, via a tap located at the top of the vat so that the oil could be drawn into a prepared container.²⁸ The process after capture was not particularly technical or labour intensive. Other entrepreneurs could, and apparently did, with relative ease, purchase a large vat and carry out the rendering themselves.²⁹ Nonetheless, it is clear that Dr Hobbs was the main promoter of dugong oil and it seems likely that he was also the greatest producer of the product. The combination allowed him to introduce the oil to an international market.

Hobbs' twin role as medic and manufacturer of 'medicine' is unusual today. It was less so in his time. Admitted to the Royal College of

25 For more information on tuberculosis, see Thomas Dormandy, *The White Death: A History of Tuberculosis* (London: Hambledon Press, 1999). For specific information about tuberculosis in Australia and the region, see A. J. Proust, *History of Tuberculosis in Australia, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea* (Canberra: Brolga Press, 1991).

26 Hobbs, *Elaiothy*.

27 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 December 1858, 5.

28 *Australian Home Companion and Band of Hope Journal*, 14 January 1860.

29 Johnson, 'A Modified Form of Whaling', 30.

Surgeons in London in May 1843, he acquired his qualification before the formal registration of medical practitioners was introduced. In that era the systematic testing of new remedies was not yet a part of a doctor's training or background. Experimentation with alternative medicines was quite common. Indeed, as Philippa Martyr has argued, significant numbers of medical practitioners in nineteenth-century Australia were, like Hobbs, inclined to adopt unorthodox treatments sourced from local surroundings, in an effort to overcome high mortality rates due to the lack of allopathic (Western) medicines, not to mention their frequent unreliability even when available.³⁰ Moreover, because the diagnosis of diseases was often incorrect, treatments were frequently wrong and unsuitable medicines were prescribed. As a result of routine misdiagnosis and mistreatment, patients could not rely on medical practitioners and often tried unorthodox treatments. In some cases, no treatment at all was better than a wrongly prescribed one. The death registers of the Dunwich Benevolent Asylum on NSI, where Hobbs worked in the 1850s and 1860s, reveal more patients died when there was a doctor present than when they had no medical care at all.³¹

More generally, as Roy Porter and others have noted, nineteenth-century medicine was a 'hit and miss' affair.³² The lines between 'quackery' and medical science were necessarily blurred through experimentation with new remedies. In this context it is not so surprising that someone with an inquisitive mind, like Dr Hobbs, should have been ready to experiment with new treatments. Indeed, Hobbs tried a second unorthodox treatment in his efforts to produce results: the use of mineral water, found in a spring on his property, which he claimed had healing properties.³³ Hobbs could easily have been considered a quack because 'for much of the nineteenth century, doctors introducing new diagnostic technology ... always ran the risk of being accused by old-guard senior brethren of stooping to quackery'. Unlike those routinely labelled quacks, however, Hobbs had 'been to university and undergone proper apprenticeship'.³⁴ This was an important component of his success. He was an orthodox

30 Philippa Martyr, *Paradise of Quacks: An Alternative History of Medicine in Australia* (Sydney: Macleay Press, 2002).

31 Queensland State Archives Agency ID861, Dunwich Benevolent Asylum.

32 Roy Porter, 'Before the Fringe: "Quackery" and the Eighteenth-century Medical Market', in *Studies in the History of Alternative Medicine*, ed. Roger Cooter (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1988), 1–26.

33 For more information on Dr Hobbs' living arrangements, see John Mackenzie-Smith, 'Dr William Hobbs and his Folly [Adelaide House in Brisbane]', *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland* 19, no. 7 (2006): 892–906.

34 Roy Porter, *Health for Sale: Quackery in England 1660–1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989) 2.

doctor working with unorthodox treatments in a shifting period of the history of medicine.

As the case of dugong oil illustrates, colonialism was part of that story. This trend in nineteenth-century Queensland, to combine alternative treatments with scientific ones, recalls another time of shifting ground in medicine that took place in the eighteenth century, when aristocrats and even doctors in England routinely called upon herbalists or local healers to aid in their treatment.³⁵ Despite the growing strength of campaigns against so-called 'quackery',³⁶ in the colonial setting there was limited access to medicines and these had to be imported. So the circulation of unorthodox medicines remained relatively prevalent in Australia throughout the nineteenth century, reflecting the continuing popularity of unorthodox medicines in England and mainland Europe and even perhaps increasing the rate of resort to them.³⁷ Looking beyond the history of dugong oil, other alternative remedies were tried and some were successfully incorporated into orthodox treatments by Australian doctors and patients. Goanna oil, for example, used primarily for skin problems such as rashes and eczemas, became particularly popular during the twentieth century but had already been widely used earlier.³⁸ But the success of goanna oil was eclipsed by emu oil which, after a period of largely unsuccessful promotion as a leather-softening product, became widely known for its healing value for arthritis. Advertising material for both these remedies can be found in numerous newspapers throughout the twentieth century, but it began to appear alongside dugong oil in the nineteenth.³⁹

The use of indigenous oils in the new colony had begun as early as 1789 when Sir Joseph Banks sent a sample of eucalyptus oil to Governor Phillip. The Eucalyptus plant was considered to be of greater quality than

35 Porter, 'Before the Fringe'.

36 Martyr, *Paradise of Quacks*.

37 For examples of traditional therapies and medicines in Europe, see Bernardo A. Merizalde, 'Hahnemann and Homeopathy: Pioneering Work in Psychiatry (Case Study)', *American Journal of Homeopathic Medicine* 101, no. 1 (2008): 39; James G. O'Brien, 'Nature Cure Pioneers: Benedict Lust & Father Sebastian Kneipp', *Total Health* 10, no. 2 (1988): 18.

38 Walter Froggat describes emu oil as a universal remedy for rheumatism among the bushmen in 'Mind of an Emu', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 December 1932, 3. He quotes Leichhardt: 'several times when suffering from excessive fatigue I rubbed it into the skin all over the body, and its slightly exciting properties proved very beneficial', confirming that emu oil was a common remedy among white settlers in Australia from the first half of the nineteenth century.

39 For goanna oil, see *Argus*, 10 May 1910, 9; *Daily News*, 8 October 1919, 5; *Western Mail*, 30 December 1926, 6. For emu oil, see *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 August 1918, 8; *Western Mail*, 25 January 1934, 34.

the English Peppermint (*Mentha piperita*).⁴⁰ Research into volatile oils in Australia was conducted in the 1850s by English pharmacist Joseph Bosisto in Victoria.⁴¹ The interest in plants and their uses from the very early period of Australian colonisation is also connected to the need to find alternative commodities, like Hobbs did with dugong oil. Philip A. Clarke addresses the role of ‘explorers and plant hunters’ and their ‘silent partners’ in *Aboriginal Plant Collectors* by ‘investigating the role of particular Aboriginal groups and individuals in the botanical discovery of Australia’.⁴² One plant, the *Duboisia myoporoides*, was used extensively in orthodox medicine as an ophthalmologic agent, sedative, treatment for Parkinsonism, anaesthetic and to manage sea-sickness. It has been harvested in Australia from the late-nineteenth century until this day.⁴³

The distinction between orthodox and unorthodox medicines was complicated further by the fact that dugong oil, which blurred the lines between European and Indigenous medicines, was authorised by an orthodox doctor and member of the Medical Board of Queensland. Its popularity rose steadily thanks to newspaper articles and privately printed advertisements.⁴⁴ Hobbs was clearly a driving force behind them: indeed, his name is mentioned in almost all of them. Through his promotion of the product, dugong oil entered the orthodox medical scene.

Advertisements that make reference to Aboriginal people in Australia, or to African people in Great Britain and North America, have historically contrasted the quality of the product with the ‘primitiveness’ of the depicted person. The primitive has thus been conducive to the promotion of consumer products – for example, soap in Australia, North America and Great Britain.⁴⁵ These advertisements played on skin colour, often

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- 40 Howard Hamlet Gordon McKern, ‘Research into the Volatile Oils of the Australian Flora, 1788–1967’, in *A Century of Scientific Progress: the Centenary Volume of the Royal Society of New South Wales*, ed. The Council of the Royal Society of New South Wales (Sydney: Royal Society of New South Wales, 1968), 310–11.
- 41 James Griffin, ‘Bosisto, Joseph (1824–1898)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, accessed 23 October 2014, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/bosisto-joseph-3027/text4439>.
- 42 Philip A. Clarke, *Aboriginal Plant Collectors: Botanists and Australian Aboriginal People in the Nineteenth Century* (Kenthurst: Rosenberg, 2008), 6–7.
- 43 Paul Foley, ‘Duboisia myoporoides: The Medical Career of a Native Australian Plant’, *Historical Records of Australian Science*, 17, no. 1 (2006): 31–69.
- 44 Emu and goanna oil followed a similar path, blurring the lines between Indigenous and Western medicines; however, neither was so openly promoted by a single medical practitioner as dugong oil.
- 45 Pear’s Soap, image 30530172, Pear’s, London, advertisement, 1890s, accessed 20 October 2013, [107](http://www.advertisingarchives.co.uk/en/asset/show_zoom_window_popup.html?asset=26510&location=grid&asset_list=26510&basket_item_id; It am de stuff: Dingman’s Electric Soap, system no. b16556847, Pugsley, Dingman & Co., Toronto, advertisement, 1880s, accessed 20 October 2013, http://catalogue.wellcomelibrary.org/record=b1655684; Light and shade, Dreydoppel Soap,</p></div><div data-bbox=)

suggesting that, by using the soap, even a dark-skinned person could become white. Racially inflected advertisements also appeared for white Pelaco shirts in Australia for many decades from the late-nineteenth century, depicting an Aboriginal man in a white cotton shirt.⁴⁶ In the case of dugong oil, however, it is notable that, despite its status as an Aboriginal remedy and the involvement of Aboriginal people in its production, these origins received no mention in contemporary advertising material. This silence about the Aboriginality of dugong oil is perhaps not surprising when we consider mid nineteenth-century Australia and the attempts to create a new British society in the colony. An advertisement connecting dugong oil to the skills and knowledge of Aboriginal people might have had a negative impact upon sales. Aboriginal people were coming to be seen as a dying race, as described by Darwin on his visit to Australia in 1836.⁴⁷ Connecting the 'primitive' (Aboriginal people) with the innovative (dugong oil) might at this stage in settler colonial history have been counter-productive to promotions. Despite the role of Aboriginal people in keeping the dugong industry functioning they were, in essence, 'silent partners' and they played little part in how the product was labelled and marketed. Ultimately, the product was aimed at a higher level of society. In order to appeal to a sophisticated clientele, the oil needed to be seen as civilised and appropriate for a white colony. Many goods settlers obtained from Aboriginal sources needed to be 'whitened' before they reached the intended consumer group.

The final steps in promoting dugong oil as a medicinal article took place at exhibitions in Sydney in 1854 and in Paris the following year. Kate Darian-Smith has described how 'exhibitions have been a marketing tool for colonial and national advancement in global trade, migration and tourism from the 1850s to the present'.⁴⁸ They were 'battlegrounds on which nations demonstrated their prowess and tested the strength of their

advertisement, 1892, accessed 20 October 2013, <http://superitch.com/?p=37015>; You dirty Boy!, image 30552978, Vinolia Soap, London, advertisement, 1895, accessed 20 October 2013, <http://www.advertisingarchives.co.uk/detail/48345/1/Magazine-Advert/Vinolia-Soap>.

46 Mine tink it they fit, Pelaco, Australia, advertisement, nineteenth and twentieth century, accessed 20 October 2013, <http://www.nma.gov.au/collections-search/display?irn=58405>.

47 Charles Darwin, *The Voyage of the Beagle: Journal of Researches into the Natural History and Geology of the Countries Visited During the Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle Round the World* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 462–4.

48 Kate Darian-Smith, 'Seize the Day: Exhibiting Australia', in *Seize the Day: Exhibitions, Australia and the World*, ed. Kate Darian-Smith (Melbourne: Monash University ePress, 2010), 1.

rivals'.⁴⁹ Two samples of dugong oil, one belonging to Hobbs, the other to Thomas Warry, were exhibited at the Sydney Exhibition. According to the *Brisbane Courier*, Hobbs had set up his St Helena plant in conjunction with Warry, a chemist from North Brisbane.⁵⁰ Both samples received positive reviews in the Australian press. On 30 November 1854 the *Empire* stated:

It is exhibited as a new therapeutic agent, and is a substitute for cod liver oil, having been used by the exhibitor, the Health Officer at Brisbane, for two and a half years with perfect success in the treatment of a variety of chronic disease. The distinction between this and the cod liver oil is that it contains no Iodine, but it possesses all the advantages of the latter without its nauseous taste and smell.⁵¹

The success of the Sydney Exhibition must have encouraged Hobbs in his plans to develop the oil as an imperial enterprise and he sought to launch the product in Europe. Having reached the necessary market in Australia, and having promoted the product by drawing attention to the riches of Moreton Bay, there were now no obstacles to hinder the introduction of dugong oil to a wider world.

The first great international display of dugong oil took place at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1855. It was a success, as the *Moreton Bay Courier* recorded:

A sample of the oil of the Dugong was sent to the Sydney Commissioners of the Paris Exhibition. It was exhibited at the Sydney Museum, along with the other products, and was afterwards forwarded to Paris. In acknowledgment, a medal has been received by Dr Hobbs from the Emperor of the French.⁵²

The Paris exhibition was divided into two divisions: products of industry and works of art. Dugong oil was exhibited in the products of industry division, most probably in the twelfth class – hygiene, pharmacy, medicine and surgery.⁵³ While the evidence is sparse concerning the majority of products exhibited at the Paris Exposition Universelle, based on accounts from later exhibitions at the turn of the twentieth century, it seems likely that the oil was exhibited as a medical curiosity from Australia.⁵⁴

49 Graeme Davison, 'Festivals of Nationhood: The International Exhibitions' in *Australian Cultural History*, ed. S. L. Goldberg and F. B. Smith (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 158.

50 *Brisbane Courier*, 8 October 1869, 2.

51 *Empire*, 30 November 1854, 6.

52 *Moreton Bay Courier*, 17 October 1857, 2.

53 *Argus*, 31 July 1854, 3.

54 Item ID 902807, 5 January 1905 – 22 March 1906, Batch file, agricultural, Queensland State Archives (QSA), Brisbane.

As suggested by Graeme Davison, the main Australian exhibitions, in Sydney and Melbourne, were all modelled on their famous counterparts – exhibitions in London, Paris, Vienna and Philadelphia.⁵⁵ As dugong oil was showcased as a new therapeutic agent at the Sydney Exhibition of 1854, we can probably assume that it was displayed similarly at the Paris Exhibition in 1855.

In a study of the mode of exhibiting indigenous industry at the Paris Exposition, Elizabeth Willis has noted that the New South Wales commissioners, who would have been responsible for promoting dugong oil, ‘made no special request for examples of Aboriginal work for display in Paris’.⁵⁶ According to Willis, the ‘fragmented items’ representing Aboriginal craftsmanship ‘seem to have been collected more as “curios” than as any systematic collection of Aboriginal industry’.⁵⁷ Items representing ‘Indigenous manufacture’ at the exhibition included native dillies, Aboriginal baskets, a boomerang, a ‘womera’ (sic), several native spears and waddies, and an opossum rug as well as items showing the ‘adaptability of Aboriginal people in the face of contact with Europeans’ such as Aboriginal knitting needles or gloves and cuffs from opossum fur.⁵⁸ Willis argues that the colonial exhibitors ‘wanted to prove to the world’ that ‘the Indigenous people were both still working in traditional ways and adopting new ways’.⁵⁹ Although there was a relatively strong presence of Aboriginal products at the exhibition, a significant and arguably crucial difference exists between these products and dugong oil. A pair of knitting needles could be made to stand as an example of the progress or assimilation of Aboriginal people, providing proof of Aboriginal people learning from white settlers. In contrast, however, dugong oil exemplified the precise opposite: if its Indigenous connections were highlighted it would have illustrated how white settlers learned from Aboriginal people.

Images of Aboriginal people were also represented at these early exhibitions.⁶⁰ The 1855 Paris Exposition Universelle included photographs taken by John Hunter Kerr – a Scottish station owner who had settled in Australia in 1839, objects relating to women’s work, items of ceremonial

55 Graeme Davison, ‘Festivals of Nationhood’, 158.

56 Elizabeth Willis, ‘The Production of Aboriginal States: Australian Aboriginal and Settler Exhibits at the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1855’, in *Seize the Day*, 02.4.

57 Ibid., 02.5.

58 Elizabeth Willis, ‘Exhibiting Aboriginal Industry: A Story Behind a “Re-discovered” Bark Drawing From Victoria’, *Aboriginal History* 27 (2003): 51.

59 Ibid., 48.

60 For the wider representation of Aboriginal people at international and national exhibitions see Darian-Smith, ed., *Seize the Day*.

significance, tools, weapons, skins and two native drawings on bark – the first showing a kangaroo and other animals being hunted, and the second depicting Aboriginal dancers wearing emu feather headdresses.⁶¹ This representation of Aboriginal people as savage and primitive coincides with the growing interest in showcasing Australia through the novelty of Aboriginal people and their culture as well as animal life and geography. In her study of the representation of Aboriginality, Lesley McCall suggests that ‘the fascination of 19th century Europeans with the primitive and savage created ... an image of Aboriginality in which the portrayal of a state of primitiveness was fundamental’.⁶² In this context, there was little incentive to present dugong oil as an Indigenous product: much better to present it as an exotic new article – both for medicine and for the kitchen, with the oil to be used for baking and the fat as an alternative to bacon.

All the surviving evidence suggests that, throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, dugong oil was not associated with Aboriginal people in the press, in exhibitions or in promotional literature. Rather it was used to reveal the industrial riches of the new colony. Indeed, the use of dugong oil to promote Australian industrial wealth is even more evident in later exhibitions. The oil was packaged with silk products *en route* to exhibitions in Philadelphia, London and Vienna.⁶³ And in the 1901 London Exhibition in Queensland House, the London headquarters of the Queensland government, it was used not only to promote the wealth of Australia but also to attract new immigrants. For the London exhibition, dugong oil was catalogued alongside turtle soup at the very end of an exhibited product list that included wines, cordial, brushware, dairy products and ground nuts.⁶⁴

It is our understanding today that both the dugong and turtle are connected with Saltwater People. But from the mid-nineteenth to the early-twentieth century, connections were not made between these products and their cultural origins. Instead they were shown as curiosities, alternative sources of nutrition and medicine in the tropics. They were shipped to Europe, not as a representation of Aboriginal products, but as riches of Australia – specifically Queensland.

Dugong oil made a remarkable journey from Brisbane to Sydney, then Paris and back. Yet without the knowledge and skills of Aboriginal people, the oil could not have made this transnational oceanic voyage. On its

61 Willis, ‘Exhibiting Aboriginal Industry’.

62 Lesley McCall quoted in Willis, ‘Exhibiting Aboriginal Industry’, 51.

63 *Brisbane Courier*, 6 October 1877, 3.

64 Item ID 902807, QSA.

journey, it carried with it the shadow of exchanges first made during the days of early contact, and later the connections between Aboriginal people and settlers working in the industry. Almost identical medical uses of dugong oil were made by these two populations. Thus, despite being brought to the public eye by a white entrepreneur and doctor, dugong oil retained something of the threads of its Aboriginality, in terms of both the dugong fishing skills and the medicinal knowledge of the Aboriginal people of NSI. These early exchanges of Aboriginal and settler knowledge and skills created the context for Hobbs' endeavours; a context that reflected the complexity of a product understood as Aboriginal by some and as white by others. The industrialised manufacturing of dugong oil can therefore be considered as a product of the 'contact zone', appropriated by settlers from the early era of contact with the Aboriginal people of Moreton Bay.⁶⁵ As we trace the dugong oil from its Aboriginal origins in Moreton Bay, through the hands of medical practitioners like Hobbs, to the Paris Exposition Universelle, we can see the complexity of the relationship between interdependent local and global histories.

About the author

Veronika Folkmanova is a PhD candidate at Griffith University and an affiliate of the Griffith Centre for Cultural Research. Her work focuses on the inter-racial relations in the Moreton Bay-based dugong industry from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. She further investigates the use of the product of the industry, dugong oil, as an Indigenous medicine in western medical practice and the environmental issues leading to the closure of the industry disregarding the cultural heritage of dugong fishing.

Correspondence to: veronika.folkmanova@griffithuni.edu.au

65 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).