



FEATURE

The Brisbane Museum's Collection of

By Bill Evans

Queensland Shields



Centered in Brisbane, the Queensland Museum holds one of Australia's major collections of Australian Aboriginal and Pacific art. It was founded on January 20, 1862, by the Queensland Philosophical Society and was initially located at The Windmill on Wickham Terrace (1862–1869), after which it moved to Parliament House (1869–1873), and then to the General Post Office (1873–1879). The Queensland government built a purpose-made home for the museum on William Street, which it occupied for two decades. That building later became the John Oxley State Library. In 1899, the museum moved again, this time into the Exhibition Hall (now called the Old Museum) in the Brisbane suburb of Bowen Hills, where it remained until it shifted again in 1986 to its current home at the Queensland Cultural Centre in the South Bank neighborhood, adjacent to the Queensland Art Gallery.

Divided into six campuses spread across four cities, the Queensland Museum features displays emphasizing natural history, cultural heritage, and science, as well as the ongoing history of the area. It houses and cares for one of the largest and most extensive collections of Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artifacts in the world. The main location in South Bank features a section called *Dandiiri Maiwar* (pronounced *dun-deeree-may-war*, from the local Aboriginal *dandiiri*, meaning “to meet,” and *maiwar*, the traditional reference for the waterway now known as the Brisbane River), a vibrant and living Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures center showcasing Australia's two distinct indigenous cultures through their stories, artifacts, photographs, art, and music. The center's Open Access Area displays over 1,000 ancient and modern Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artifacts, and is an extension of the museum's storage areas.

The Cultures and Histories program is responsible for research- and collection-related activities across all six campuses of the museum. The program has an extensive collection that includes artifacts, historical and contemporary photographs, documents, and oral histories. The Aboriginal Studies Section of this program holds a collection of 10,000 artifacts and more than 6,000 photographs. The majority of this collection relates to Queensland history, although some items come from other regions of Australia. A great deal of work has been carried out in recent years to make the collection items and all relevant documentation accessible to researchers and other interested individuals.

Sources

An important historical figure in the study and collecting of Queensland artifacts was Walter E. Roth (1861–1933), who came from England to Australia in 1887, where he worked first as a teacher and then as a medical doctor. He developed

Fig. 1 (facing page):
**North Queensland
Natives, Tally River. A.
A. White, Brisbane, ND.**

Vintage silver gelatine print.
Private collection.



Fig. 2 (right):
**Shield.
Northeastern
rainforest,
Queensland, Australia.
Probably collected
c. 1900.**

Wood, pigment. 95 x 45 cm.
Queensland Museum, QE 2504.
Register lists donor as Chief Protector
of Aborigines, who was most
probably Walter Roth.



Fig. 3: Map of Queensland, Australia. Italics show the collection locations of many of the shields illustrated in this article.

Cartography by Alex Copeland.

a strong interest in Aboriginal culture and by 1894 he was recording as much information about the cultures of north-west Queensland as the restrictions of his medical duties would allow. His interest took an official form in 1898 when he accepted an appointment as the first Northern Protector of Aborigines, and later as Chief Protector in 1904–06. In addition to eighteen ethnographic bulletins and numerous other papers he was to publish (which are counted as among the first systematic ethnologies to have ever been undertaken), Roth was commissioned to collect for the Queensland Museum. He formed an important and varied collection that the museum still holds. He also formed a substantial private collection, which, in a surprising move for which there is still lingering resentment in Queensland, he sold to the Australian Museum in Sydney, where he had developed strong academic ties. Roth's career in Queensland was cut short by an incident in which he photographed an

Aboriginal couple demonstrating a variety of sexual positions, for what he claimed were purely scientific reasons. The storm of controversy that resulted eventually led to his resignation and departure for British Guiana in 1906, where he again undertook anthropological studies.*

Another important contributor to the Queensland collection was Clement Wragge (1852–1922). While Roth is a more important figure in the history and study of Queensland aboriginal material, Wragge's contribution to the museum's shield collection was of greater substance. Of English birth, Wragge arrived in Australia in early 1887. Best known as a somewhat controversial meteorologist, Wragge was also fascinated by ethnography, geology, and natural history. Be-

* Walter Roth's brother, Henry Ling Roth, was also a notable anthropologist, who made significant early contributions to the study of the native cultures of Tasmania and Sarawak. His texts on the subjects remain standards today.

Queensland Shields

Fig. 5: Shield. Wright's Creek, Kamma, Calms District, northeastern rainforest, Queensland, Australia.

Wood, pigment. 93 x 28 cm.
Queensland Museum, QE 1130.
Purchased in 1916 from Joseph Campbell.

Fig. 6: Shield. Wright's Creek, Kamma, Calms District, northeastern rainforest, Queensland, Australia.

Wood, pigment. 95 x 33 cm.
Queensland Museum, QE 1089.
Purchased in 1916 from Joseph Campbell.



Fig. 4: Shield. Wright's Creek, Kamma, Calms District, northeastern rainforest, Queensland, Australia.

Wood, pigment. 90 x 29 cm.
Queensland Museum, QE 1092.
Purchased in 1916 from Joseph Campbell.





tween 1899 and 1902, Wragg sold artifacts to the Queensland Museum as well as the South Australia and Victoria Museums. The balance of his collection was donated to the city of Stafford in England.

Sources of other contributions to the collections include Archibald Meston (1851–1924), a Scottish-born immigrant who managed sugarcane plantations before becoming commissioned in police affairs and eventually being designated Protector of Aborigines for Southern Queensland from 1898–1903. Joseph Campbell (1856–1933), a native of New South Wales, also added a considerable number of important pieces. He was a colorful character, who, at various times, was described as a clergyman, scientist, mining expert, and planter. He served as archdeacon and rector at Cairns from 1904–1909 (which he resigned in 1909 upon marrying the eighteen-year-old Ellen Kate Male) and later founded a small

museum and laboratory. Combined with the Roth and Wragge Collections as well as material from other sources, these have provided the museum with one of the world's major collections of Aboriginal shields from across Queensland.

The present registration system at the Queensland Museum dates from 1911, so many of these early pieces have long been referred to in the institution's records simply as "Old Collection."

The Aboriginal Population of Queensland

It is not known with any certainty how long the Aboriginal population of northern Queensland has been living there. Early migration into Australia is thought to have come into the northwest. Southern Australian sites have been excavated that show occupation as far back as 40,000 BP. In Queensland, the oldest sites found thus far appear to range



Left to right:

Fig. 7: Shield. Northeastern rainforest, Queensland, Australia. Probably collected before 1900.

Wood, pigment. 72.5 x 29.5 cm.
Queensland Museum, QE 1900
(Old Collection).

Fig. 8: Shield. Hinchinbrook Island, northeastern rainforest, Queensland, Australia.

Wood, pigment. 90.3 x 39 cm.
Queensland Museum, QE 1572.
Purchased from Clement Wragge in 1900.

Fig. 9: Shield. Cardwell, northeastern rainforest, Queensland, Australia.

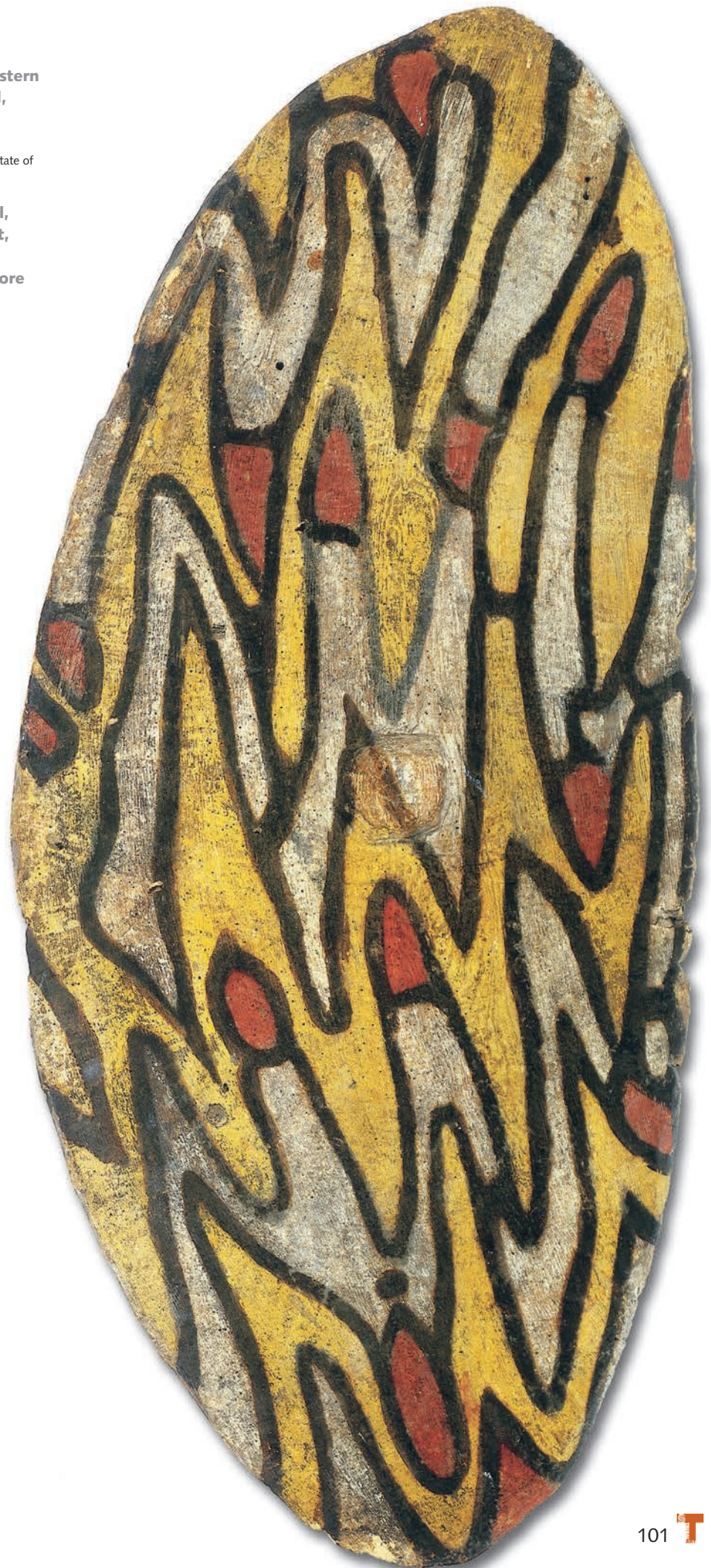
Wood, pigment. 93.1 x 35.3 cm.
Queensland Museum, QE 1579.
Purchased from Clement Wragge in 1900.

Fig. 10: Shield. Northeastern rainforest, Queensland, Australia.

Wood, pigment. H: 85 cm.
Queensland Museum, QE 3507. Estate of
Lt. G. Kenneth Jackson.

Fig. 11: Shield. Cardwell, northeastern rainforest, Queensland, Australia. Probably collected before 1900.

Wood, pigment. 92 x 41.4 cm.
Queensland Museum, QE 3626
(Old Collection).



around 15,000–30,000 BP. The Aboriginal population had been well settled for many thousands of years and it is estimated that more than ninety languages were in use in Queensland before European contact occurred. Trade between indigenous groups is believed to have been vigorous.

The designation of Queensland is obviously a modern one and the Aboriginal cultural groups that traditionally existed in this region were not subject to the boundaries drawn by the modern government. Both independent and intermingled groups traditionally existed across the vastness of Queensland, which includes some of the most tropical and lush regions of Australia. Among these peoples are the Bambaram, Ngatjan, Madjandji, Wanjuru, Mamu, Gulngai, Djiru, Kokopatun, Banjin, Wakaman, Nawagi, Warakamai, Wulgurukaba, and Djirubal, to name just some of the ones within a fifty kilometer radius of the coastal town of Tully,

Fig. 12 (below left):
Shield. Herbert River, Northeastern rainforest, Queensland, Australia. Probably collected before 1900.

Wood, pigment. 89.4 x 37.5 cm.
Queensland Museum, QE 1582
(Old Collection).

Fig. 13 (below):
Shield. Northeastern rainforest, Queensland, Australia.

Wood, pigment. W: 19 cm.
Queensland Museum, QE 4216.
Acquired from E. Light.

where a number of northeastern rainforest shields were collected. While early studies exist (including Roth's) that provide valuable and detailed information, this vast cultural diversity makes it very difficult to associate particular shield types with specific groups.

Queensland Shields

For the sake of simplicity, and with the dangers of generalization in mind, Queensland shields can be said to be individualized and painterly, as opposed to the examples of the Western Desert, which tend to be more canonical in their designs. Eric Rowlinson, former director of the National Gallery of Victoria, noted that “the designs on Queensland rainforest shields are associated with clan totems and were thought to possess protective qualities. these shields also played an important role in the initiation ceremonies of



young men” (*Aboriginal Australia*, the Australian Gallery Director’s Council, Sydney, 1981).

Queensland shields can be divided into four broad categories. The most widely recognized and one that is often used incorrectly as a generic reference for all shields from the area is the large, boldly painted type from the north-eastern coastal rainforest areas. There have been studies and Ph.D. theses on the designs of these rainforest shields. The rainforest “negrito” people tend to be smaller and darker in skin tone than the rest of the Aboriginal population of Queensland. This, combined with the unusual shape, design, and coloration of their shields, have led some to associate them with the people of Papua New Guinea.

Known in Djirubal (alt. Dyirbal) as *bigan*, Queensland rainforest shields tend to be about one meter tall—larger than those of the rest of Australia—and are made from the



Fig. 14 (facing page right):
Shield. Wright's Creek, Kamma, Calms District, northeastern rainforest, Queensland, Australia.

Wood, pigment. 102 x 36 cm.
Queensland Museum, QE 1129.
Purchased from Joseph Campbell in 1916.

Fig. 15 (left):
Shield. Trubanaman, Mitchell River, northeastern rainforest, Queensland, Australia.

Wood, pigment. H: 91 cm.
Queensland Museum, QE 755.
Donated by H. Mathews in 1911.

Fig. 16 (right):
Shield. Barron River, northeastern rainforest, Queensland, Australia. Probably collected before 1900.

Wood, pigment.
106.5 x 35.5 cm.
Queensland Museum, QE 1866
(Old Collection).
Although not an exact representation, this is almost certainly the example illustrated in James Edge-Partington's *Ethnographical Album of the Pacific Islands*, series 3, 1898, p. 122, no. 2.







Left to right:

Fig. 17:
Shield. Innisfail, northeastern rainforest, Queensland, Australia.

Wood, pigment. 100.5 x 39 cm.
Queensland Museum, QE 1864.
Purchased from Clement Wragge in 1900.

Fig. 18:
Shield. Stone River Station (west of Ingham), northeastern rainforest, Queensland, Australia. Collected between 1890 and 1910.

Wood, pigment. 100.2 x 28 cm.
Queensland Museum, QE 11825-0.
Acquired from the T. Newman Family, 1996.

Fig. 19:
Shield. Cairns, northeastern rainforest, Queensland, Australia.

Wood, pigment. 83.5 x 22.5 cm.
Queensland Museum, QE 426.
Donated by Dr. Breinl in 1914.
Because the boss is so close to the edge, it appears that this shield has been carved down due to battle damage.

Fig. 20:
Shield. Innisfail, northeastern rainforest, Queensland, Australia.

Wood, pigment. 100.4 x 29.3 cm.
Queensland Museum, QE 1865.
Purchased from Clement Wragge in 1900.

wood of the magurra (*Ficus variegata*—variegated fig) or gabi (*Ficus pleurocarpa*—banana fig) trees. Chipped from the buttress root of the living tree, the rough shield form was then separated and soaked in water for several days. The shape was refined to the characteristic oval or bean form, and the surface smoothed using the leaves of the gulagaa (*Ficus copiosa*—sandpaper-leaf fig) to prepare it for the application of the intricate and often optical geometric patterns that were painted on the surface. Generally only four colors were used: white kaolin, yellow and red (burnt) ochre, and black, usually blood or the sap of certain vines.

The painting on the shields of the northeastern coastal rainforest is unquestionably the most varied and sophisticated of those produced in Queensland. Using their lim-

Left to right
Fig. 21: Shield.
Thargomindah,
northwestern
Queensland, Australia.

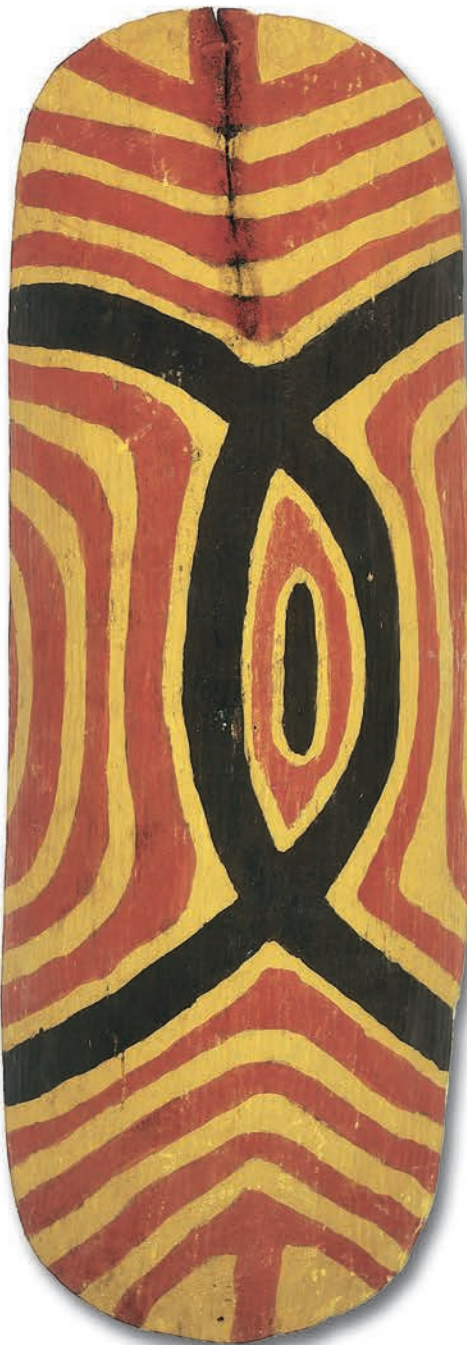
Wood, pigment. 73.7 x 21.9 cm.
 Queensland Museum, QE 2511.
 Purchased from Clement Wragge
 in 1900.

Fig. 22: Shield.
Kilkummin, western
Queensland, Australia.
Probably collected
before 1900.

Wood, pigment. 52.3 x 15.7 cm.
 Queensland Museum, QE 1868
 (Old Collection).

Fig. 23: Shield. **Torrens**
Creek, central southern
Queensland, Australia.

Wood, pigment. 61 x 18 cm.
 Queensland Museum, QE 1848.
 Purchased from Clement Wragge
 in 1900.



ited palette, these artists created a remarkable variety of imagery that runs from beautifully symmetrical to starkly linear to fractally complex. The most elaborate have a breathtaking beauty more typically associated with stained glass.

The second group, which are shields from southeastern and south-central Queensland, tend to be smaller and more basic in design. The southeastern style is often referred to as Goomeri, a term with obscure origins even among noted scholars in the field. The name probably derives from the small town of Goomeri in the South Burnett region of Queensland, which today is noted for its curiosity shops and pumpkin festival. The town's name is said to derive from an Aboriginal term for "broken shield," although this has not

Left to right
Fig. 24: Shield. Mackay, southwestern Queensland, Australia.

Wood, pigment. 53.8 x 23 cm.
 Queensland Museum, QE 1872.
 Purchased from Clement Wragge in 1900.

Fig. 25: Shield. Mary River, southwestern Queensland, Australia.

Wood, pigment. 60 x 19 cm.
 Queensland Museum, QE 2530.
 Acquired in 1908.

Fig. 26: Shield. Charleville, south-central Queensland, Australia. Probably collected before 1900.

Wood, pigment. 56.1 x 22.2 cm.
 Queensland Museum,
 QE 1585 (Old Collection).

been traced to a specific language. Unlike rainforest shields, this group is often incised and the surface is often carved at different levels rather than being a single plane.

Shields of western and northcentral Queensland show design influences of the painted shields of the eastern regions merging with the linear designs of the Central and Western Desert. The size and often the wood of these shields also frequently closely relate to those of the desert. The shields here tend to be smaller, thickly cut, and have rounded ends.

Painted shields from the far north, around Cape York, tend to be simpler and more vertically linear in their decoration. These represent a relatively small percentage of Queensland shields. They usually are rendered in a relatively limited palette, consisting primarily of red and white.





Fig. 27 (above left):
Shield. Marlborough District, southeastern Queensland, Australia. Probably collected before 1900.

Wood, pigment. 51 x 28.6 cm.
Queensland Museum, QE 1869
(Old Collection).

Fig. 28 (above center):
Shield. Musgrave, York Peninsula, Queensland, Australia. Probably collected before 1900.

Wood, pigment. 52 x 17 cm.
Queensland Museum, QE 2517
(Old Collection).



While the painting traditions of the Central and Western Desert, and the X-ray style of Arnhem Land cave and bark paintings are well known, Queensland shield design represents another highly developed and sophisticated movement that has yet to receive the recognition it deserves within the oeuvre of Australian Aboriginal art.

The author would like to thank Michael Aird, Olivia Robinson, and Michael Quinnell of the Queensland Museum for their help in securing photographs and catalogue information for this article.



Fig. 29 (above):
Shield. Charleville, south-central Queensland, Australia. Probably collected before 1900.

Wood, pigment. 61 x 18.9 cm.
Queensland Museum, QE 1573.
Though attributed to Charleville,
this shield appears to be a more northwestern style.

Fig. 30 (facing page):
Shield. Attributed to Fraser Island, southeastern Queensland, Australia.

Wood, pigment. 51.3 x 28.6 cm.
Queensland Museum, QE 1871.
Purchased from Archibald Meston in 1918.

