



ZOOMINAR

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THE EARLY MODERN CIRCLE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

HEATHER DALTON

**'CHILD WITH A COCKATOO': SHIFTING
UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE ORIGINS &
MEANINGS OF AUSTRALASIAN COCKATOOS
IN EARLY MODERN ARTWORKS**

Monday 16 May: 6.15pm

Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, Australasian cockatoos featured in English paintings, including portraits of prominent Stuart women. While the primary reason for including exotic fauna was to flag the wealth and discernment of sitters and patrons, artists drew on the symbolic repertoire of parrots in medieval and renaissance artworks to convey a variety of meanings. As Australasian parrots had been traded into Europe centuries earlier than parrots from the Americas (because their movement was not contingent on European trade routes, but on ancient sea and overland spice routes), contemporary viewers had a rough idea of where they came from. However, from the late 19th century, these cockatoos' Indonesian and New Guinean roots were overlooked and replaced by speculative imaginings of an Australian origin. Reviewing a selection of these artworks, this paper looks at how the responses of cataloguers, printmakers, poets and journalists shifted. It asks whether the misplacing of the cockatoos signals a lack of knowledge of the centuries-old trade networks operating to Australia's north, or a legacy of empire – a deep sense of unease related to belonging.



John Smith after Willem Wissing, Madam Elizabeth Brownlowe, 1685, mezzotint on paper (©Trustees of the British Museum).



Heather Dalton is an Honorary Fellow in History at the University of Melbourne. Her research focus is relationships in maritime trading networks (1450-1650), and early contacts between Australasia and Europe. In September 2022 Heather takes up a 3-month fellowship at the Academy of Finland Centre of Excellence in the History of Experiences (HEX), Tampere University. Her recent publications include: 'Relationships lost and found in the mid sixteenth-century Iberian Atlantic: an Englishman's "suffering rewarded"' in her edited book Keeping Family in an Age of Long Distance Trade, Imperial Expansion, and Exile, 1550-1850 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020).