“This book provides unique insights into one of the largest and most ambitious expeditions to Aboriginal lands—the 1948 American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land, Australia. The extraordinary ethnological collections from these expeditions, partially housed at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History, are still a subject of research, debate, and controversy. The lessons to be learned from this book are both local and global.”

—CLAIRE SMITH, president, World Archaeological Congress

In February 1948, a team of Australians and Americans embarked upon one of the largest scientific expeditions that had ever taken place in Australia. Seventeen men and women journeyed across northern Australia for nine months, investigating the people and environment of the remote region known as Arnhem Land. Today, the Arnhem Land Expedition remains one of the most significant, most ambitious, and least understood expeditions ever mounted.

Collecting Cultures draws together diverse strands of evidence to investigate the events and consequences of the 1948 Arnhem Land Expedition. In the wake of the expedition came volumes of scientific publications, miles of film, thousands of photographs, tens of thousands of scientific specimens, and a vast array of artifacts and artwork from across Arnhem Land. Collecting Cultures explores the complex and, at times, contentious legacy of this ethnographic fieldwork and artifact collection, revealing how cross-cultural encounters transformed and continue to transform our understanding of people and places.

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