

# Science, Energy, and Industrial Imperialism in the John Percy Collection, 1817–89

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## How can a mineralogy collection reveal new histories of industrial imperialism?

### John Percy Collection

John Percy FRS (1817-1889) was a metallurgist who accumulated a collection of over 3,700 minerals from all over the world, despite his never leaving Europe. His collecting network consisted of contacts in the **army, industry, geological sciences, and colonial administration**, including Roderick Murchison, David Livingstone, Francis Galton, and the Admiralty.

His analyses of these specimens in the laboratories of the Royal School of Mines formed the basis of his seminal four volume work, *Metallurgy: The Art of Extracting Metals from Their Ores*. In addition to Percy's assessment of different metals and fuels, this work includes economic information such as coal quality and prices and detailed descriptions of smelting methods across the British Empire.<sup>1</sup> His collection and accompanying volumes sit at the intersection of science, industry and colonialism – and can provide new perspectives on histories of industrial imperialism.

### Methodology & Case Study

Using specimens in John Percy's collection as a point of departure, we can trace interlaced global histories of industrial imperialism that may otherwise be obscured.

In nineteenth century Britain, collecting was a fundamental methodology of geology, and collecting specimens from countries outside of Europe often **relied on colonial infrastructure, funds, and commerce**.<sup>2,3</sup>

By using the **collecting context** and **provenance research** as methodology, new perspectives on imperial networks of expansion, extraction, labour, transportation, and the creation of knowledge can emerge.

**288. New Zealand coal. Bituminous non-caking coal from Brunner Mine, Nelson. From the exhibits of the Colonial Museum in the Vienna Exhibition, 1873.**

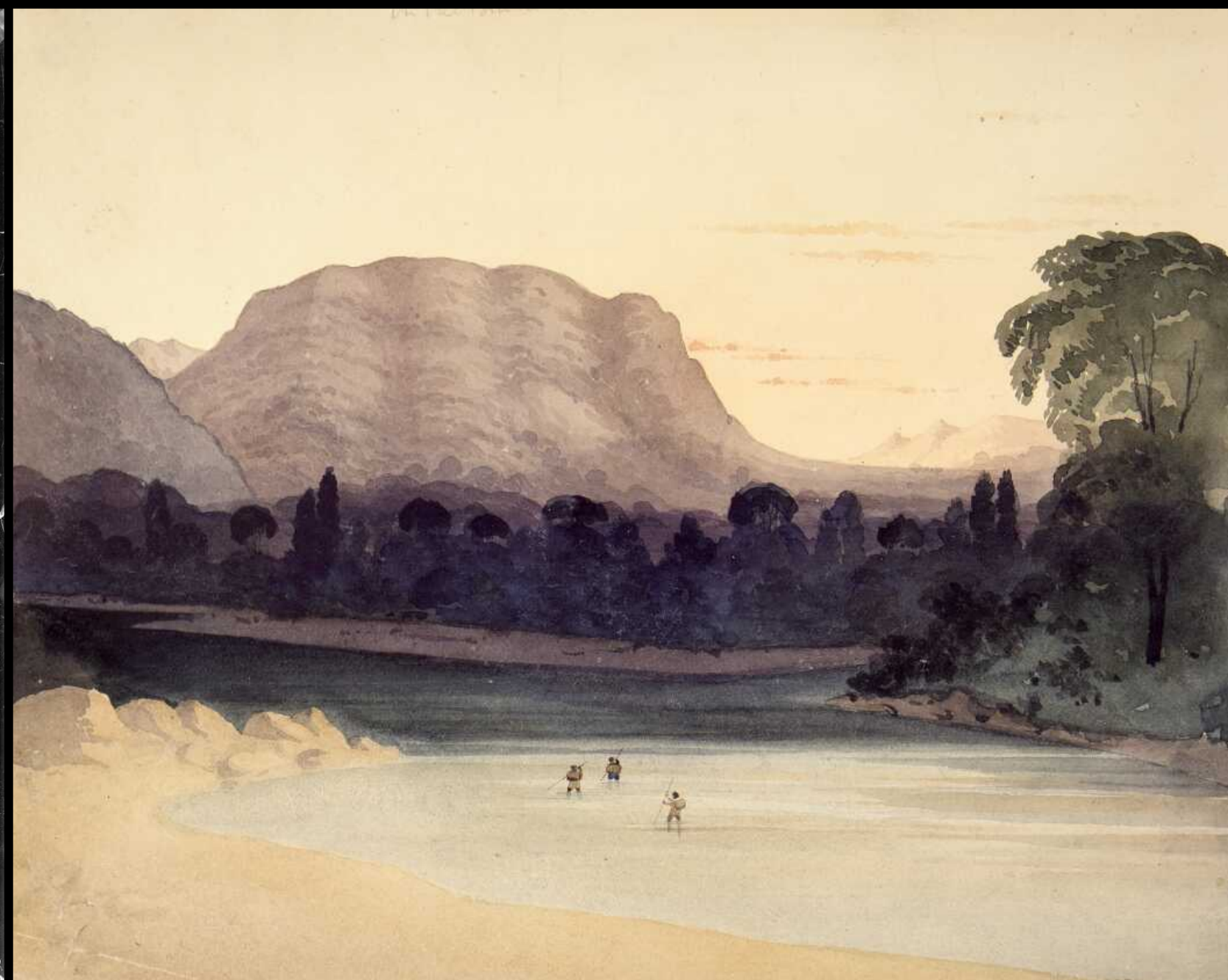
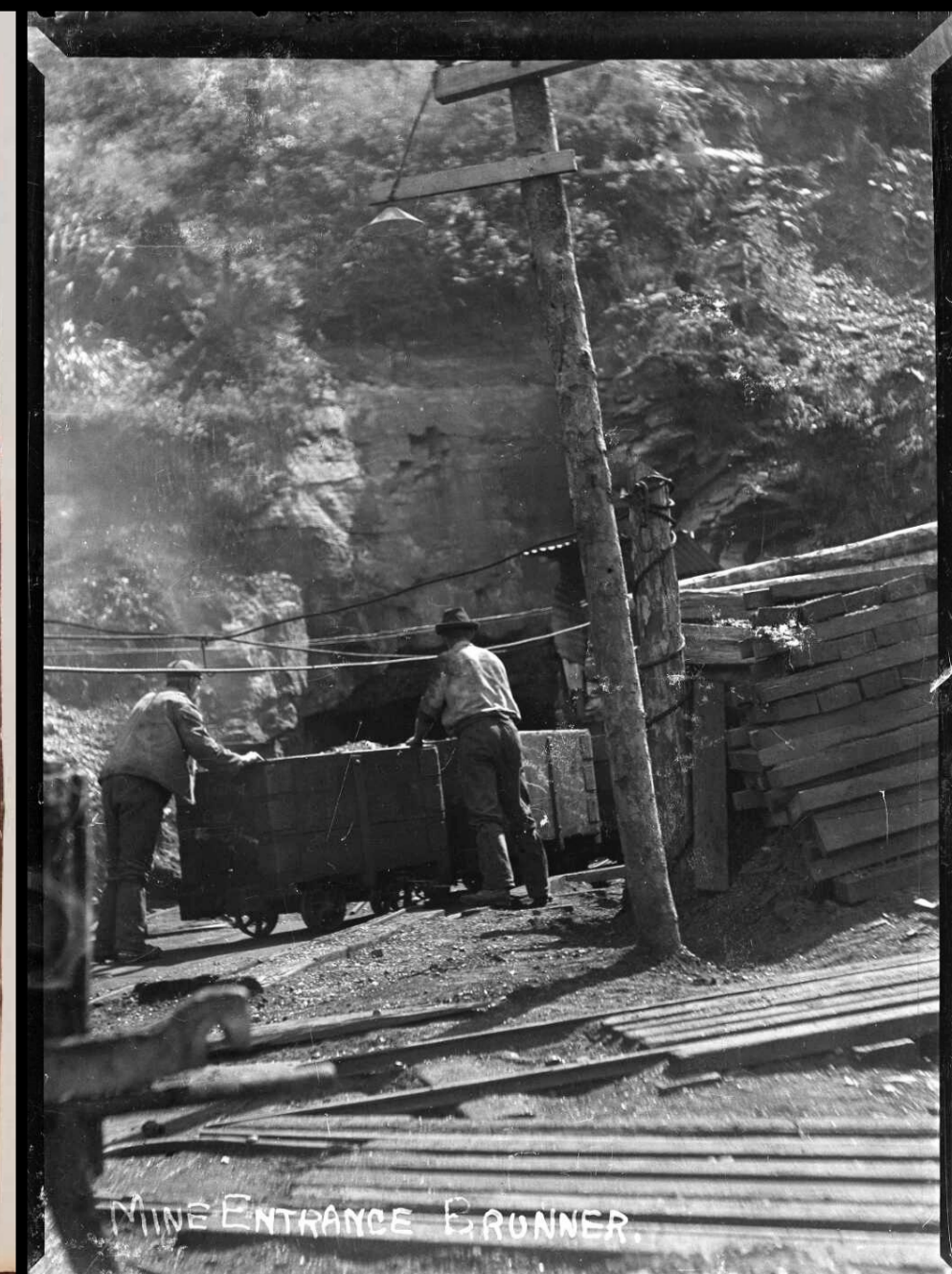
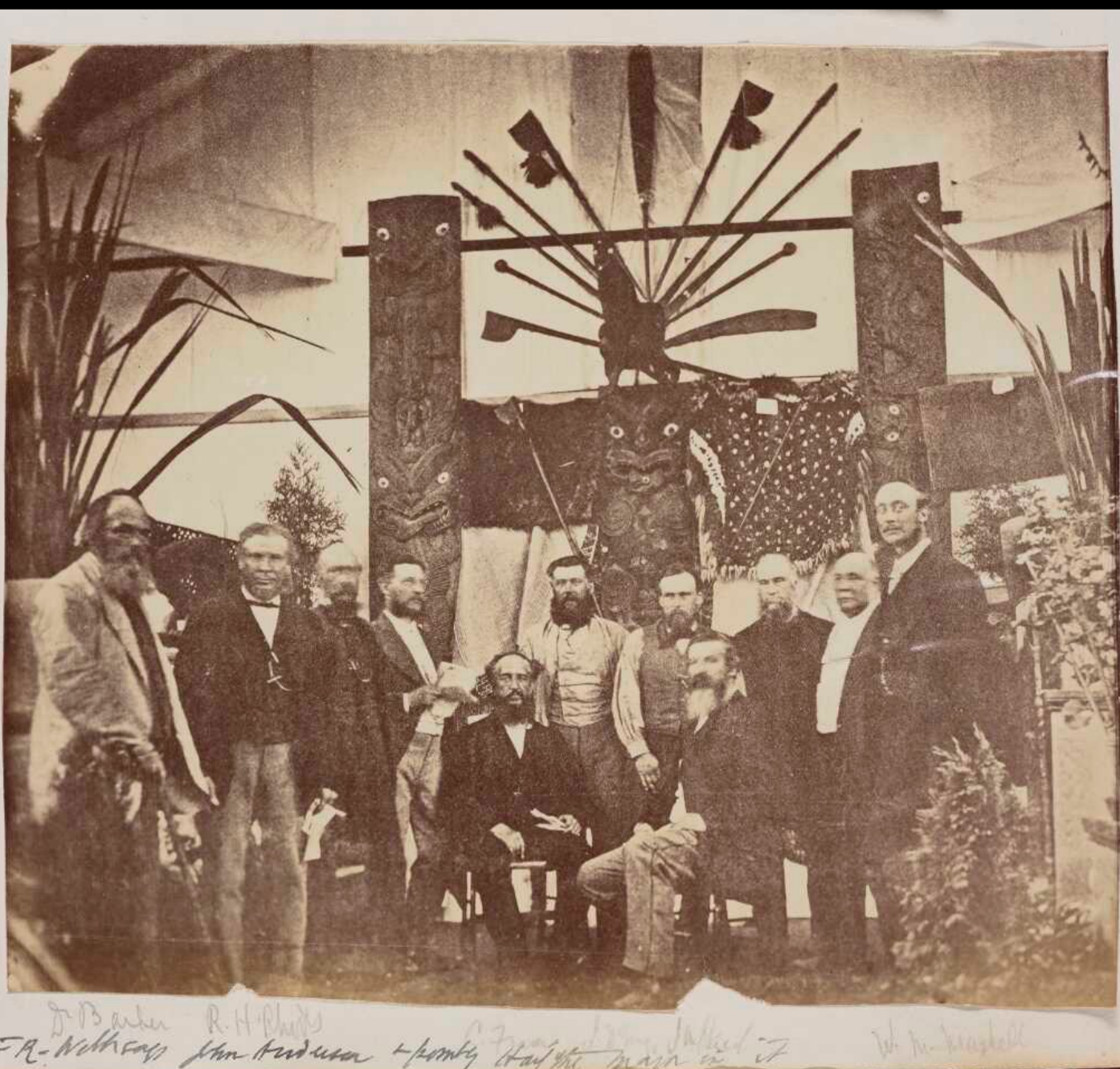
➔ At the 1873 Vienna Exhibition, the New Zealand Colonial Museum displayed photographs, seeds, food, furniture, minerals, a geological map of New Zealand, and Māori objects.<sup>4,5</sup> Presented alongside natural history specimens, Māori objects were portrayed as exoticified commercial objects.<sup>6</sup> (*delegation pictured below, left*).

➔ The **Brunner Mine** opened in 1864, and by the late 1880s it was producing one-third of New Zealand's coal. In 1896, an explosion at the site killed 65 miners. This remains the **deadliest industrial disaster** in the country's history. (*entrance to Brunner Mine pictured below, center*)

➔ Brunner mine was named after Thomas Brunner, an English surveyor. Travelling with **four Māori companions, including his guide, Kahu**, Brunner was credited with the discovery of the coalfield in 1848. Kahu saved Brunner's life, nursed him to health, and led the party to safety on multiple occasions.<sup>7</sup> (*painting of Kahu and Brunner's party, exploring the South Island's west coast, below, right*)

Tracing the history of this individual coal specimen reveals multiple stories and **questions for further research**:

1. What was the role of nineteenth century museums in promoting industrial imperialism at international exhibitions, and how did this intersect with the display and commodification of objects of indigenous origin?
2. What were the roles of non-European people in histories of British expansion and extraction?
3. How can we teach histories of violence – colonial, industrial, and both – in museum engagement?

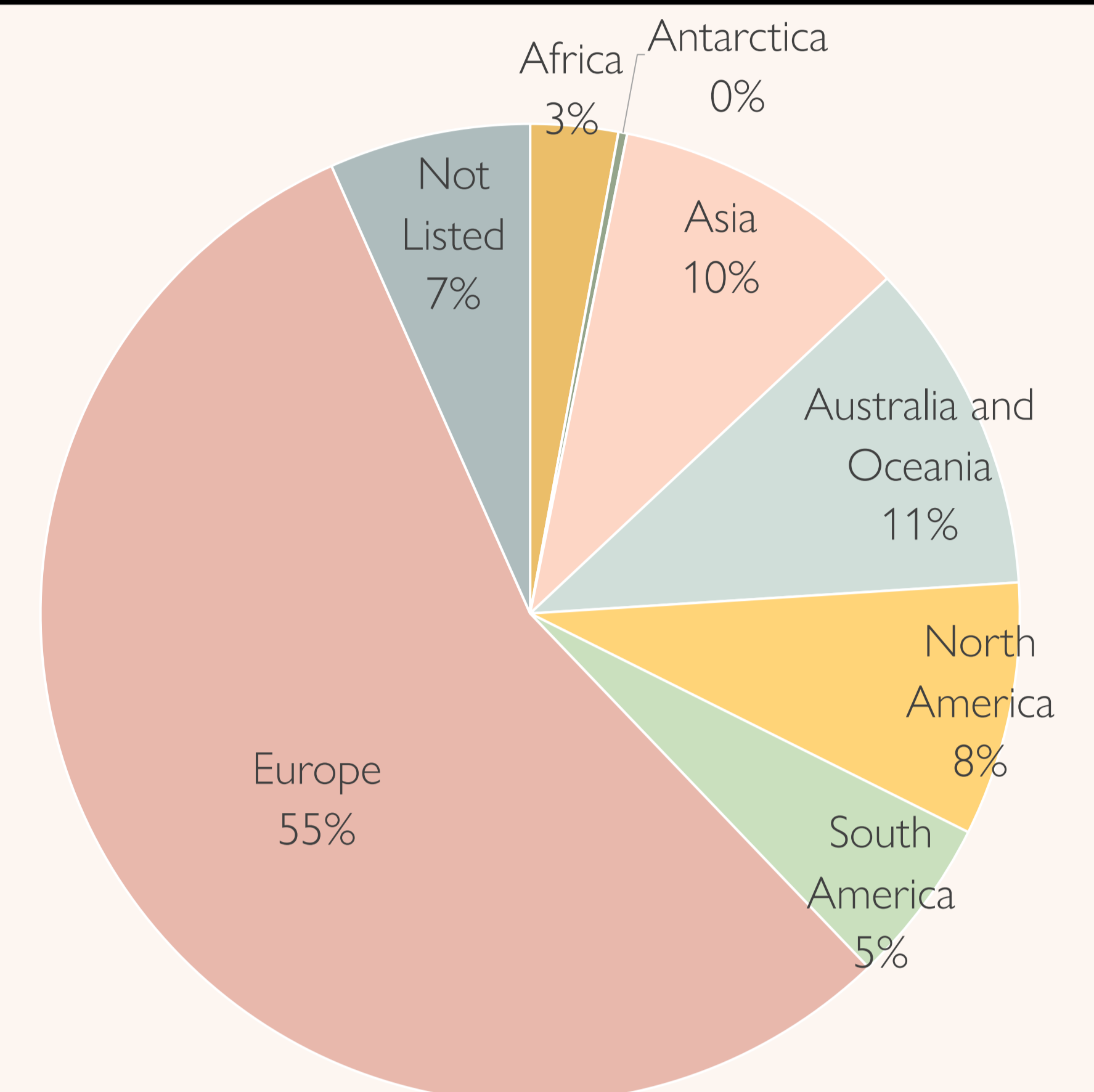


#### References

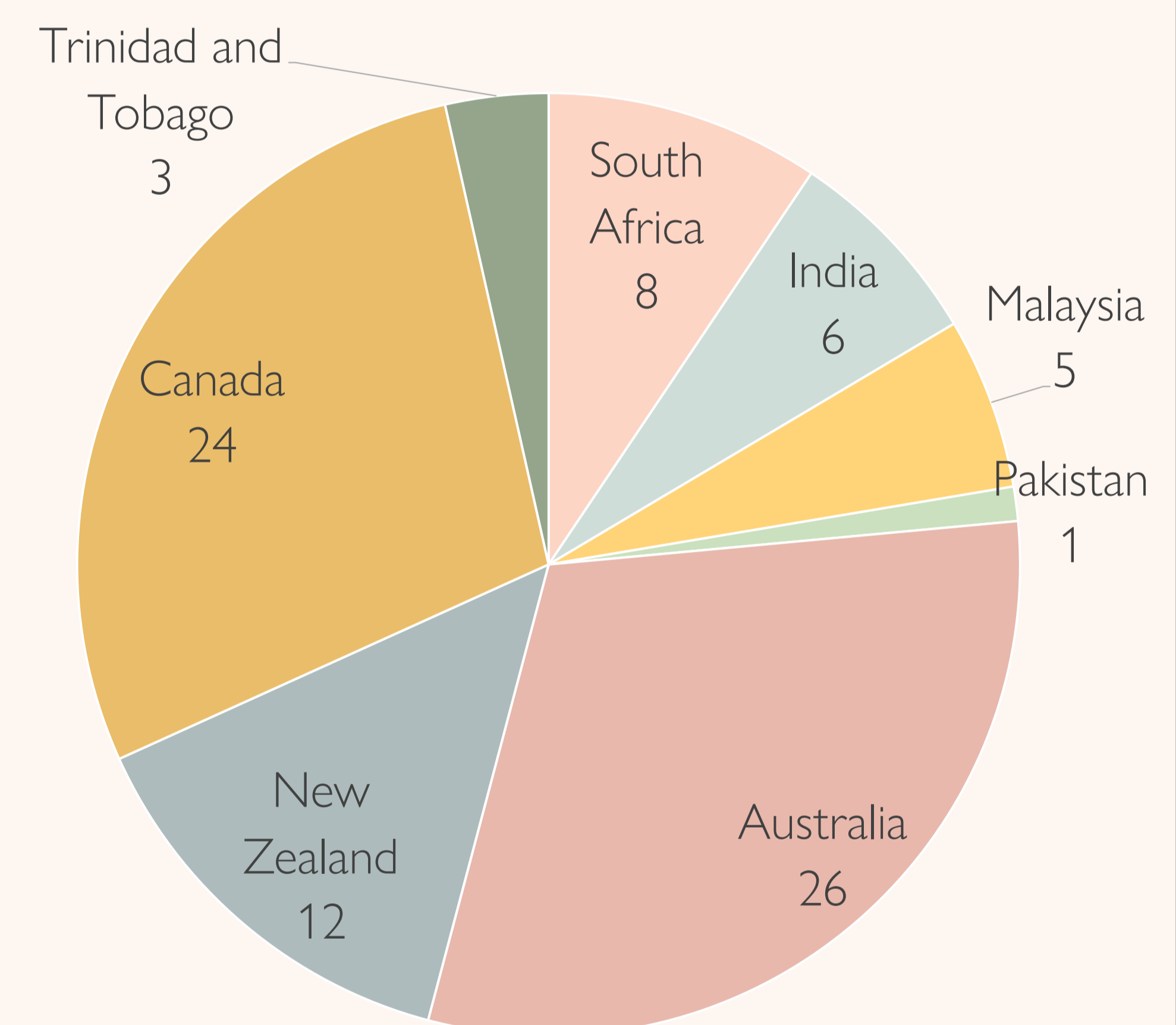
- <sup>1</sup> John Percy, *Metallurgy: The Art of Extracting Metals from Their Ores*. Vol. 1: Introduction, Refractory Materials, and Fuel. 4 vols. London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1875.
- <sup>2</sup> Kohler, Robert E. 'Finders, Keepers: Collecting Sciences and Collecting Practice'. *History of Science* 45, no. 4 (December 2007): 428–54.
- <sup>3</sup> Stafford, Robert A. 'Roderick Murchison and the Structure of Africa: A Geological Prediction and Its Consequences for British Expansion'. *Annals of Science* 45, no. 1 (January 1988): 1–40.
- <sup>4</sup> 'New Zealand at the Vienna Exhibition'. *Colonist* XVII, Issue 1661 (August 1873): 3.
- <sup>5</sup> 'Outward letter: Colonial Secretary, Page 18: Geological map for Vienna exhibition ready, 24 March 1873, by Sir James Hector. Te Papa (MU000013/002/0001/0046)
- <sup>6</sup> McCarthy, Conal. 'Objects of Empire? Displaying Maori at International Exhibitions, 1873-1924'. *Journal of New Zealand Literature* (JNZL), no. 23 (2005): 52–70.
- <sup>7</sup> Mitchell, Hilary and John. 'Kahu (Hone Mokehakeha): Biographical Notes'. *Nelson Historical Society Journal* 6, issue 1 (1996): 3-19.
- <sup>8</sup> J.F. Blake. *Catalogue of the Percy Collection of Metallurgy in the South Kensington Museum*. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1892.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

Images:  
Left: Group including Dr A.C. Barker, R.H. Rhodes and W.M. Maskell, alongside a display of Maori artifacts. Creator unknown; Museum album. Ref: PA1-q-166-052. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. /records/22643468  
Center: Mine entrance at the Brunner Mine. Godber, Albert Percy, 1875-1949. Collection of albums, prints and negatives. Ref: APG-1519-1/4-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. /records/22333715  
Right: Fox, William, 1812-1893. Fox, William 1812-1893: On the Buller River in the Aglionby or Matukituki Valley, looking west. 19th Feb. [1846]. Ref: B-113-012. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. /records/23173321

### Data



Of 346 specimens labelled as "fuels", 131 come from outside of Europe.<sup>8</sup>



86 fuel specimens were extracted in the British Empire.<sup>9</sup>

Early data analysis of catalogue entries provides information about the frontiers of mineral prospecting in the nineteenth century – metals and minerals were sent to John Percy to assess their quality and worth.

Further data analysis will focus on three goals:

1. Comparing Percy's communication with different stakeholders (geologists, government officials, mining companies, the Admiralty) to better understand his role in the creation of metallurgical knowledge.
2. Investigating Percy's network for inter-imperial networks of collecting.
3. Mapping specimens in Percy's collection onto sites of extraction.

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