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***AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL
PERSPECTIVE ON THE HISTORY OF
ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA***

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Abstract

To date all histories of Aboriginal Australia have been written by historians, by groups of Aboriginal people, or by anthropologists. Although archaeologists such as John Mulvaney have developed an interest in the history of Australian archaeology, and in the interpretation of sites of significant contact between Aboriginal people and others, the vast bulk of practising archaeologists have focused their attention on the deeper past, particularly the period before 5,000 years ago. This paper outlines what happens when an archaeologist writes Aboriginal history, a history which now extends for over 50,000 years.

The development of prehistoric archaeology in Australia is often thought to have had a major impact on the popular comprehension of Aboriginal people as the possessors of a long-lived and complex culture. This notion of a continuity between past and present is enshrined in rhetorical statements to the effect that Aboriginal culture is the world's oldest continuing culture. Recent archaeological research, especially that conducted after 1985, is forcing us to rethink this rhetoric in ways which still recognise elements of continuity but which reflect on the significance of a much more complex inheritance for contemporary Aboriginal people. The discussion will be illustrated by several case studies drawn from the prehistoric and historical archaeology of Tasmania, Cape York, Papua New Guinea and the Kimberleys.

Tim Murray
1992

An Archaeological Perspective on the History of Aboriginal Australia

Given that I will focus on relations between Aboriginal history and Aboriginal archaeology and by doing so briefly discuss some of the themes of the new book, it is worth recounting something of the history of my involvement in the Oxford History of Australia. The first volume, that which specifically deals with the history of Aboriginal Australia from 60,000 years ago until 1992, was to have been written by the late Dr Diane Barwick. A pioneer historian of Aboriginal Australia, and the foundation editor of the influential journal *Aboriginal History*, Dr Barwick died on the 4th April 1986. Volume 11 (1987) of *Aboriginal History* is dedicated to her memory and records the esteem of her colleagues and friends. Later in 1986 I was contacted by representatives of Oxford University Press and asked to submit an outline for a synthetic narrative history of Aboriginal Australia. It soon became clear that my task was not to see Dr Barwick's manuscript through to publication (a task which could have been done with greater insight and efficiency by her colleagues), but to work up something from scratch.

I still have no idea how Dr Barwick had planned her volume although I feel sure that her particular interests would have led to a different kind of Aboriginal history than the one I am producing. Indeed, it is the likelihood of that difference which I want to reflect on and towards the close of the paper move discussion onto the constitution of Aboriginality and of Aboriginal studies in general. I hope to persuade that the relationship between Aboriginal history and Aboriginal archaeology is more complex (and more interesting) than we have hitherto believed and that comprehending the nature and implications of this complex relationship is an important part of achieving an understanding of Aboriginal people and of the goals of Aboriginal studies in general.

This paper is organised in three sections. In the first I make some very general statements about the place of Aboriginal history and Aboriginal archaeology in Aboriginal studies since about 1938. I then present a brief account of my excavations at the site of Burghley in northwest Tasmania, as an example of archaeology and Aboriginal history working in a close (and relatively unambiguous) relationship. In closing I complicate matters by briefly reviewing recent advances in Australian prehistoric archaeology, especially as they affect links with Aboriginal history and Aboriginal anthropology and, perhaps more important, our comprehension of Aboriginality. But before I press on I have a couple of general statements to make.

It is very easy to hit a feedback loop in any discussion of Aboriginal studies as debates break out about whether Aboriginal people can be objectified and commodified as objects of study and whether non-Aboriginal people (particularly white middle class men such as myself) should write Aboriginal history or do Aboriginal archaeology. These are important debates, and I don't want to minimise their importance by observing that they are unlikely to be resolved by ceasing to do archaeology or to write history. Indeed, I think that it is only by exploring our mutual history and by reflecting on the history of Aboriginal life

80: An Archaeological Perspective of Aboriginal Australia

over the past 60,000 years, that we can produce a situation where the wholly legitimate claims for self-determination made by Aboriginal people can be satisfied in a long-lasting fashion.

In the Epilogue to Volume 6 of his *History of Australia* (1987) Manning Clark reflected on a great many things — from the fate of Curtin, Menzies, Chifley, 'The Big Fella', and Red Ted Theodore, to the collapse of authority and the death of God. Amongst statements on feminism and public nudity Clark observed:

Aborigines wrote their history, maintaining that their ancestors were not immigrants, but were always here, and that white man's history was a catalogue of 'white lies' . . . Accounts of the past became part of the struggle for power in Australia. In an age of doubt everything, even the past, lost its authority¹ (p. 499)

There is a tendency in much discourse about Aboriginal history to let matters rest there. One can think of a number of reasons why this might seem an appropriate thing to do, ranging from a genuine belief in the relativity of all historical knowledge and the collapse of epistemology in the face of claims for the social and cultural contingency of all knowledge, through to ill-understood doctrines of political correctness or of subordinating history to the greater goal of working towards Aboriginal self-determination. I do not think that we can afford to leap from a recognition that knowledge is contextual and not universal to a belief that this contextuality limits meaning and significance. Indeed, I think that such pasts, presents or futures are our collective responsibility and that the need to make defensible judgements about such matters requires us to be critically self-reflective about our practice but also to communicate the nuts and bolts of our viewpoints to other members of society. The difficulty of finding conventional meanings for much of Australian prehistoric archaeology informs my version of the history of Aboriginal Australia.

It is a commonplace that Aboriginal history is a late entrant into the field of Aboriginal studies and historians such as Markus, Biskup, Bob Reece and Henry Reynolds have devoted some time to developing an explanation for the 'Great Australian Silence' and of understanding how it came to be broken after 1968. In his Trevor Reece memorial lecture of 1984, Reynolds cited W.E.H. Stanner's second Boyer lecture about the twentieth century cult of forgetfulness as a turning-point in the development of Aboriginal history.² There is no doubt that Stanner used the occasion to reach a large and well-educated audience, but the fact remains that calls for more attention to be paid to the study of Aboriginal people had been made many times before then. Indeed in 1962, when the papers from the first conference on Aboriginal studies (held in 1961) were published, Stanner wrote that there had been 'a revolution of public interest' in the field. It is worth noting that in the 1961 conference all the anthropological disciplines

80: An Archaeological Perspective of Aboriginal Australia

were well represented but there was no historical contribution to the proceedings.

What made Stanner change his mind in such a short time or has Reynolds simply confused an interest in Aboriginal studies with an interest in Aboriginal history — particularly post-contact history? In my view it's a bit of both. Three interconnecting factors led to the change from indifference to developing comprehension and from timeless universals of general anthropology to the complexities of history. I can only note in passing that this process of historicising Aboriginal people and Aboriginality continues although it is meeting stiffer resistance. First, a gradual change of fashion in general anthropological theory from ahistorical functionalism to a more historically sensitive analysis of the structures of traditional Aboriginal society. Second, from 1961 Australian prehistoric archaeology rode a roller-coaster of foundational research which added tens of thousands of years to the antiquity of human occupation of the continent. Third, in 1970 the publication of C.D. Rowley's path-breaking study of the state of Aboriginal Australians past and present which triggered over a decade's worth of research in all disciplines involved in comprehending Aboriginal life. In my view this interaction gradually gave shape to the field of Aboriginal studies yet there are lags and tensions which have flowed from this difficult birth.

The history of Aboriginal studies reveals that the foundation discipline was general anthropology with its departmental specialisations of ethnography, ethnology, linguistics and physical anthropology. Prehistoric archaeology was nominally there throughout the nineteenth century, but it consisted primarily of antiquarian research into surface collections of Aboriginal artifacts or the occasional hole dug on spec. There was no teaching of anthropology until the 1920s and the primary research institutions were the various state museums. In the first half of the twentieth century the situation improved, marginally, for socio-cultural anthropology, but actually got worse for prehistoric archaeology. Radcliffe-Brown, the foundation professor of anthropology at the University of Sydney had no use for archaeology. Aboriginal people had no history, they were an unchanging people in an unchanging landscape, which was very much an echo of 19th century attitudes to Australian aboriginal people (particularly Tasmanians) as living fossils of a collective human palaeolithic. All that was interesting or significant about Aboriginal people could be gathered by ethnography and processed through the theoretical structures of ethnology and anthropology.

This ahistorical attitude, when combined with a growing need to find strategies for integrating Aboriginal people into Australian society (and the consequent need to study them before integration wiped away all vestiges of Aboriginality which were of anthropological interest) led, in 1938, to Elkin's famous justification for undertaking Aboriginal studies:

But on the whole the question of their relative cultural position is pointless. They have evolved a working adaptation to their geographical and social environment, and in applying or even

¹C.M.H. Clark, *History of Australia* Volume 6, (Melbourne 1987), p. 449

²Henry Reynold, *The Great Australian Silence*, (SRMCAS, London, 1984).

80: An Archaeological Perspective of Aboriginal Australia

modifying their plan of economic, social and spiritual life, they show as much intelligence as does the average European with regard to the cultural adaptation of his own group. *The problem is the extent to which the Aborigines are capable of working out a fresh adaptation to the changed conditions which have come upon them as the result of the settlement of their country by whites.* The change has been sudden and all pervading, going right to the roots of their religious and mental adjustment. The whites, officials and settlers, have not understood this, and neither governments, missionaries, nor educational authorities have yet planned and put into operation policies designed to help the Aborigines tackle the tremendous task of readjustment which confronts them. The reason for this is our lack of understanding.³

It is worth noting that Elkin saw understanding flowing from anthropology, and not from the history of contact (which would have been one of the best bases on which to consider behavioural flexibility and potentials for change). Furthermore, prehistoric archaeology, the other window onto variability, was only given very cursory treatment. What we see instead is the idea that anthropology had access to the 'essential Aborigine'. Through a comprehension of social and religious life (all as observed in the present) understanding would be achieved. It is tempting to remark that the simple fact that Aboriginal society had survived the first 150 years of European occupation should have been ample evidence of a capacity to adapt to changing situations but Elkin was looking for more and perhaps seeing less.

This kind of ahistorical thinking continued well into the 1960s, notwithstanding the fact that during the 1930s and 1940s first Tindale and then McCarthy had established the reality of cultural change in Aboriginal prehistory. There are several good reasons why this happened.

First, until 1961 when John Mulvaney was able to use radio-carbon dating to confirm a Pleistocene date for the settlement of Australia no one had any real idea of the antiquity of human beings in Australia. Therefore, notwithstanding the fact that both Tindale and McCarthy identified cultural change, and Birdsell produced a tri-hybrid theory of Australian populations which had Tasmanians as the original settlers displaced to the south in a series of race wars sparked by the subsequent invasion of their country by different racial groups, the tempo of change was lacking. Second, the purpose of what little prehistoric archaeology was actually being done in Australia was to explain the nature of Aboriginal societies as they were described at contact. This teleological framework of research made the lack of information about rates of change even more damaging. But above all there were powerful cultural reasons for continuing the ahistorical approach. In 1962 Manning Clark observed in the opening chapter of the first volume of his *History of Australia*:

³A.P. Elkin, *The Australian Aborigines: How To Understand Them* (Sydney, London: Angus and Robertson, 1938), pp. 20-21.

80: An Archaeological Perspective of Aboriginal Australia

For all writings on the Aborigines both on the mainland and in Tasmania, have mirrored the civilisation of their authors, of those driven by the hope of salvation or the fear of damnation, as well as those in pursuit of some secular millenium, or the advancement of knowledge. But whatever the reason may have been, the failure of the Aborigines to emerge from a state of barbarism deprived them of the material resources with which to resist an invader, and left them without the physical strength to protect their culture.

Other peoples have recovered from the destruction of their culture, but that of the Aborigines was to wither when in contact with other races, for the Aboriginal was also endowed with a tenacious, if not unique inability to detect meaning in any way of life other than his own, and by one of those ironies in human affairs it was this very inability to live outside the framework of his own culture that prevented any subsequent invaders from using the aborigine for their own purposes. This, in turn, relieved the European from the evil consequences of reducing an indigenous population to slavery or semi-slavery.⁴

The link between Elkin in 1938 and Manning Clark in 1962 is clear enough. The issue about whether there was something in the deep cultural programming of Aboriginal people which made them incapable of assimilation posed a serious problem for white Aboriginal policy. But there is an inconsistency here. On the one hand we have in 1961/1962 agitation for the formation of an Institute of Aboriginal Studies, which had the mission of collecting information about traditional Aboriginal society before it was lost. But even the participants in that process recognised that the major cause of loss was assimilation into white society, not just the bullet, disease or poisoned flour. Change was happening, so why all this questioning of the ability to change?

Here the interaction of prehistory, the historicising of anthropology, and the rise of contact history provides the basis of an answer, and it is this: For Manning Clark (and many others) change was *forced* on Aboriginal people, and the adaptations which resulted from challenge of change were either created or directly managed by Europeans. Given the image of the essential Aborigine, traditional Aboriginal society was characterised by rigid rules which *prevented* change. Thus Aboriginal people were seen as passive, as receptors rather than initiators. Such a view of Aboriginal people could not be sustained once prehistoric archaeology established beyond doubt that Aboriginal people were not unchanging people in an unchanging landscape. It was even less tenable when a clearer view of life on the frontier began to emerge in the 1980s.

On the face of it the idea of the essential Aborigine should have died in the 1970s but this is not the case. I will move towards an explanation of why an

⁴Clark, *op. cit.*, Volume 1, pp. 4-5.

ahistorical understanding of Aboriginality still has great power, paradoxically both within the community of archaeologists and anthropologists and among Aboriginal people themselves. Indeed, there is a growing fear that writing the history of Aboriginal people recorded at contact and of Aboriginal groups surviving over the last 200 years may well be at odds with the goal of making sense of 60,000 years of Aboriginal history.

Henry Reynolds in *The Other Side of the Frontier* (1982) began to change our perceptions of the Australian frontier, particularly of the complex role played by Aboriginal people in the European colonisation of their country. Using archaeology, ethnography and oral and written historical testimony, Reynolds not only showed that it was extremely dangerous to generalise about the nature of the frontier but he also gave a tremendous fillip to contact archaeology as well as to contact history. If we go back to the foundation conference on Australian Aboriginal Studies held in 1961 the prehistory committee did not even consider contact archaeology as a priority of field research and I have already dwelt on the lack of a program for research into Aboriginal history at the same conference.

In recent years contact archaeology, usually undertaken by historical archaeologists, has become something of a growth industry. In Victoria, excavations at Aboriginal mission stations such as Lake Condah and Corrandeerk and government institutions such as the Native Police Barracks in Dandenong have contributed to the contact history of the state and of particular tribes within it. Mission stations are probably not the best places to study that very brief behavioural flash when Aboriginal people take on white material culture and begin to adapt it to traditional lifestyles, only to shortly afterwards disappear from the archaeological record as identifiably Aboriginal. The fringes of country towns are better but by far and away the best locations are farm and station sites where Aboriginal people camped and were drawn into close relationship with a particular form of white society. Here we can see that far from being locked into a rigid and unchanging culture, Aboriginal people displayed great resilience and resourcefulness in taking the new social and cultural forms in their stride. A rather extreme example of this process has recently come to light in northwest Tasmania.

The site of Burghley in northwestern Tasmania was excavated over two seasons as part of the Van Diemen's Land Company project which has the dual goals of improving our understanding of the frontier in the first half of the nineteenth century and of providing a micro-scale analysis of the process of private colonisation in Australia. Established as a joint stock company in 1825 the VDL company is the most extreme of only two cases of private colonisation, the other being the Australian Agricultural Company which operated in northern N.S.W. I say extreme because the VDL settled an area of Tasmania that was, in official language, 'Beyond the ramparts of the unknown'.

The VDL began with a market capitalisation of 1 million pounds, excellent information management techniques, some highly-qualified managerial staff, lots of fine intentions of exporting fine wools to the English market, but absolutely no

idea about the climate or topography of the area they had been allotted. Needless to say, in the project study area (known as the Surrey Hills), the pastoral activities of the company proved to be costly failures. Burghley was the first of the stock camps established in the area and its abandonment by the Company around 1839 marks a dramatic change in land-use strategies as the VDL attempted to reduce the level of its involvement in the Surrey Hills.

This view was confirmed during the excavation of Burghley between 1988 and 1990. Two seasons of excavation revealed the outlines of a house attached to a more substantial chimney butt made up of mortared rock. Other important features were a midden, a drain and two cobbled areas. The analysis of the excavated remains is still in progress but the artifact load of ceramics, gun-flints, coins and bottle glass are standard for a house occupied during the first forty years of last century. Thus far the features recovered match pretty closely the scanty descriptions of the site which are found in George Augustus Robinson's papers. Lieutenant Governor Arthur also made some pithy observations about the place, no doubt because he picked up a dose of food poisoning there!

Over and above this information, excavation was able to establish that the house had been destroyed by fire and that it had been inhabited by Aboriginal people after its abandonment by the VDL. The most important evidence for the first claim lies in the charred remains of floor boards and roofing architecture which lies at the base of the chimney butt. These sections of the house survived the conflagration because the collapsing chimney butt snuffed out the flames. Further evidence that a single fire was responsible for the destruction comes from the charcoal hazes which are all that remains of the walls and the floor of the house.

The second claim, that of Aboriginal occupation is supported by three lines of evidence. The issue here is that each line of evidence when taken in isolation will fail to convince. It is the aggregation of them which is important. The first line is stratigraphic. Although there are large numbers of Aboriginal stone artefacts found on the site, in the main these tend to cluster around the house. At the base of the chimney a quartz manuport was found wedged between the fallen chimney and the charred floorboards. This piece of stone is found in close stratigraphic relationship with a broken clay pipe, the remains of a tin can, a spoon and a musket flint. Finally although we initially felt that the stone tools present on the site were the result of an earlier Aboriginal occupation (and a radio-carbon date of 3,370 +/- 90 BP lends support to that view), after the house was completely excavated we were able to establish that at least some refer to the European period. So we have evidence that Aboriginal people were present at Burghley.

The second line of evidence comes from written documentary sources. The VDL Company letter-books and statistical returns contain a wealth of information about relationships between Aboriginal people and the servants of the VDL. These relationships changed between the time of first contacts in 1826/1827 and the final capture at the head-waters of the Arthur River in 1842. It is hazardous to generalise, but it can be said that despite an explicit public policy of conciliation,

80: An Archaeological Perspective of Aboriginal Australia

company servants engaged in acts of intimidation, rape, and murder, such as the massacre at Cape Grim. Aboriginal groups responded by spearing sheep and company servants and by helping themselves to company property. Over time this frontier violence became institutionalised. Acts of unimaginable violence were committed as police actions. The settlement of Burghley was attacked on several occasions, with the Europeans being driven off.

Given this background of less than cordial relationships between the two parties, it is highly unlikely that Aboriginal people would have been in a position to occupy Burghley while the VDL servants still lived there. The presence of the Aboriginal stone tools can only be explained in one of three ways. First, that on the two occasions when the VDL servants were forcibly ejected from Burghley, Aboriginal people sat down to manufacture stone tools. Given that these attacks were, in effect, guerilla actions, it seems unlikely that the perpetrators would hang about waiting for the inevitable return of the Europeans. The large number and the great variety of stone tools further reduces the appeal of this explanation.

Second, that the complex stratigraphy of Burghley has fooled us and that pre-contact remains have simply been mixed with European artifacts. This mixing could have been brought about by digging foundation trenches for the house, and general excavation for levelling the site. Third, that Aboriginal people reoccupied Burghley after its abandonment by the VDL sometime between 1839 and 1842. The decision to wind down company operations in the Surrey Hills was largely taken for commercial reasons. Up to this time the primary object of the company was the raising of sheep to produce wool for export to English mills. The great proportion of the company's flock had died in the hills due to inclement weather. Sheep husbandry at that time required large numbers of shepherds living on runs spread over the Surrey Hills. After the disaster with the sheep the company moved to open range cattle grazing which required fewer employees and therefore fewer places to house them.

The third line of evidence comes from the presence of bone tools made on exotic animals, altered gun flints and from glass tools found on the site. Although it is notoriously difficult to establish whether glass has been fractured intentionally or simply by accident, we have at Burghley approximately 6 glass artefacts which can be best described as glass versions of typical Tasmanian stone tools. Better still, careful excavation of two areas outside the house has revealed the presence of chipping floors where artefacts and waste chips of bottle glass lie in direct association. On the same floors are to be found stone tools and tea cup fragments among other items of material culture. These artefacts clearly establish that Aboriginal people occupied Burghley after the Europeans had abandoned the site.

Now comes the interesting bit. Who were the Aboriginal people? Here things get a bit more tenuous but it's the best fit at the moment. The role played by George Augustus Robinson in the deportation of Aboriginal people to Flinders Island is well documented. By 1835 Robinson was claiming that the entire Aboriginal population had been removed but reports from VDL settlements of

80: An Archaeological Perspective of Aboriginal Australia

further violence and robbery during 1836 compelled Robinson to dispatch his last mission. Late in 1836 Robinson's sons found a family group (a man, a woman and four or five children) but could not persuade them to surrender. Violent clashes continued in the hills until 1842.

On the 10th December 1842 William Gibson, the newly appointed Superintendent of the Van Diemen's Land Company, wrote to the Court of Directors of the demise of traditional Tasmanian Aboriginal society:

The court will be glad to learn that the natives who had hitherto been so troublesome were captured upon the 4th instant near the River Arthur and forwarded them yesterday to Launceston, their party consisted of a middle-aged man and female, two males about 18 and 20 years of age, and three male children between 3 and 7 years old.

This very desirable object has been accomplished by two men who are in the habit of frequenting the coasts of this island for the purpose of catching seals and who accompanied by two women, natives of New Holland. It was principally through the instrumentality of the latter that they were successful and the moving cause of their exertions was the hope of getting a reward of 50 pounds which I had ventured to offer on behalf of the Company if the Aborigines were taken without violence and which I trust the Court will approve of my having paid them.

These were the only natives at large in this colony and I can scarcely express the satisfaction which their removal gives me as well as the comfort and security it affords to the Company's servants and property.

The records clearly state who these people were. The man was known as John Lanna, his wife was Nabruna, the five children were Banna, Pieti, Albert, William and Frank. Only William and Banna were to survive Flinders Island and William Lanney was to be the last full-blood Tasmanian aboriginal man to die on 4th March 1869.

Archaeology and written documents have been used here to greatly expand our understanding of the Tasmanian frontier during a time of great violence. But there is more to the story than this. The discoveries at Burghley chart the dying moments of traditional Tasmanian society which had begun 37,000 years before. Even though Tasmanian aboriginal people had been the victims of a holocaust which had begun barely 40 years before the abandonment of Burghley, Lanney and his family were still able to adapt and to recreate the substance of their culture at what had become an alien place and with alien materials. Thus at the time of its greatest test, greater even than the intense cold period around 20,000 years ago, or with the incursion of the rain-forests into the alpine grasslands about 10,000 years ago, Tasmanian society seemed not to be suffering the effects of a long slow strangulation of the mind brought about by 9,000 years of isolation.

80: An Archaeological Perspective of Aboriginal Australia

I remarked earlier that the image of Aboriginal people as having been locked into a rigid unchanging culture was directly called into question by the work of historians of Aboriginal Australia such as Henry Reynolds and by recent advances in contact archaeology. The significance of these changes has only slowly begun to filter through Aboriginal studies in general, and prehistoric archaeology and anthropology in particular. Perhaps the most important change has been the necessity to rethink how we use the perception of flexibility and variability in our understanding of Aboriginal history over the past 60,000 years. Fortunately the last decade of research into prehistoric archaeology, especially into the archaeology of the Pleistocene (that period between roughly 2 million years ago and roughly 10,000 years ago), has also demonstrated extraordinary levels of economic, technological and social variability in ancient Australian societies. But very difficult problems remain, not the least of which is how to write the history of such variation without seriously endangering the authority of contact Aboriginal ethnography and Aboriginal oral testimonies as reliable guides to the past.

After more than two decades of active research in prehistoric archaeology and in related earth and life sciences our perception of pre-contact Aboriginal society and our understanding of the history of our continent have been changed irrevocably. No longer can we see either the country or the people who lived on and with it as being static. In fact the complete opposite is true. We are now encouraged to perceive the ancestors of contemporary Aboriginal people as highly flexible inventive people who came to grips with a multitude of different environments and who created a rich, diverse and immensely strong culture which continues to this day. This change in view is slowly gaining ascendancy in Australian society but it is also fair to say that prehistoric archaeologists themselves have some hard thinking to do before they can begin to understand the significance of the first 30,000 years of the human history of Australia and to communicate it to the rest of society.

There are two major obstacles to easy understanding. The first stems from the staggering amounts of time involved and the kinds of information prehistoric archaeologists have to work with. Together these make it difficult to discuss the prehistory of Australia in the same fashion as we would discuss the period after 1788 when historians focus on a detailed analysis of events such as the Rum Rebellion or the dismissal of Whitlam's second administration in 1975. Archaeologists working on Pleistocene materials rarely deal with 'events' in the conventional sense. Rather they observe trajectories, tendencies or patterns, in time-slices frequently greater than 1,000 years.

The second obstacle has more to do with unconscious attitudes rather than with something overt like chronology. It is difficult for us to comprehend the minds of people in the remote past, especially people who lived lives so different to our own. Archaeologists have attempted to overcome this difficulty by carefully observing contemporary Aboriginal people who still live traditional lifestyles and by discussing issues of technology and subsistence strategy with

80: An Archaeological Perspective of Aboriginal Australia

those people. This has provided some valuable insights but we should not forget that today only a limited number of people, mostly in the tropics and the arid zone, live like this. Moreover these few contemporary examples are affected by the existence of Australian society with its rifles, tinned food, telephones, and off-road vehicles. Before 1788 everyone foraged. What we have today is a tiny sample of the variety of lifestyles practiced over the last 40,000 to 50,000 years. It needs to be used with a great deal of caution.

The difficulties of working from a small sample are compounded by the fact that Aboriginal societies appear not to have evolved in exactly the same way as those of other continents. We are predisposed to understand evolution in a vertical sense, of social systems or cultures moving from the simple to the complex over the course of history. Three of the central questions of archaeology have been to explain why people domesticated plants and animals, why they began to live in larger and larger population units and why complex political organisations such as the modern state came about. None of these seem particularly relevant to an understanding of the human history of Australia where societies appear to have evolved horizontally rather than vertically.

Yet because of the continued predominance of the vertical reading of social evolution many Australian archaeologists have chosen to see the first thirty thousand years as being populated by small groups of highly mobile foragers working with simple technologies and a fairly rudimentary understanding of their external environment. This is held to change during the last 10,000 years when technologies are presumed (by some at least) to become more 'sophisticated', where population units are thought to get larger and where human intervention in the environment through burning and the like is thought to intensify. There is no doubt that technologies did change, that some areas became quite densely populated and that Aboriginal people did burn country but the evidence that this is somehow a more complex, sophisticated response than that which occurred during the Pleistocene is tenuous indeed. We do, however, have excellent evidence for change and variation in just about every aspect of Aboriginal life during the Pleistocene. Indeed, recent archaeological work in the arid zone, in the tropics and in southern Tasmania indicates that the predominance of the vertical reading of social evolution, especially as it applies to Australian Aboriginal society, should now be brought to an end.

In the Pleistocene, Australia was still part of the super-continent of Sahul. Given the size of the land-mass and the fact that it stretched from just below the equator through 40 degrees of latitude there was a high level of environmental diversity. The period between 60,000 and 10,000 years ago (during which time human beings are first thought to have settled Sahul) was marked by intense glacial activity in the highlands of the continent, particularly in Tasmania and New Guinea. In these areas grasslands predominated and temperate rain-forest was confined to pockets at lower altitudes, a greatly different situation to today. 60,000 years ago the arid zone was much wetter than today, with a great deal of surface water lying in freshwater lakes such as at Mungo and flowing through

80: An Archaeological Perspective of Aboriginal Australia

river systems which today are sandy channels. Yet this regime changed dramatically around 17,000 years ago, when for a period of about 5,000 years, the core of the continent was even drier than today.

The story of fluctuating environmental fortunes during the Pleistocene holds true for the rest of the continent and provides a crucial backdrop to the changes which we can observe in Aboriginal settlement patterns, technology and subsistence practices over the period. These fluctuations, especially in the arid zone and in the glaciated areas, must have posed great challenges to the people of the Pleistocene, at least as great as those faced by the original settlers of the continent. Indeed, according to the current evidence, exploration and first settlement of large areas of the continent persisted down to about 20,000 years ago, perhaps about 30,000 years after first landfall. Thus it was not simply a matter of coming to grips with environments different to those experienced in the homeland of Sunda but of also comprehending the shifts and changes in what must have become familiar environments.

A wide variety of responses to these circumstances were developed. In the tropical north of Sahul archaeologists have noted the very early appearance of stone axes, both flaked and ground which appear to have a strong connection with forest clearance. In some cases, as in those from the Huon Terrace and from Sandy Creek, the axes look to have been hafted to a handle, a technique which was not used until much later in the south of the continent. Although it is an easy matter to say that these hafted axes are an adaptation to the more heavily forested areas of the tropical north, we still do not know whether large-scale forest clearance was practiced over 20,000 years ago, or whether the settlers were simply thinning out the forest canopy to promote the growth of new plants as has been widely suggested.

The notion that people came to grips with the distinctive rhythms and potentials of the different environmental zones of the continent can be further explored in the context of the early prehistory of the Bismarck Archipelago, just off the northeast shore of Sahul. Over thirty thousand years ago New Ireland was settled by people with a maritime technology that was sufficiently sophisticated to get them a much greater distance to the Solomon Islands shortly afterwards. Recent research indicates that as early as 18000 years ago the people of the Bismarcks routinely transported the volcanic glass obsidian over long distances, in some cases over 300 km. Obsidian produces very sharp cutting edges (small blades are sometimes used in open heart surgery) and the material is very easily worked. It does not require a great leap of faith to imagine that obsidian was a valuable item which might have been traded or exchanged for other goods or services, thus binding quite large areas into a bustling economic system. This view of Pleistocene society obviously is at odds with more traditional images of small isolated groups eking out an existence in an unplanned, *ad hoc* fashion.

This traditional image has come under even greater attack from archaeologists working with sites in the glaciated regions of southern Tasmania. Over the last

80: An Archaeological Perspective of Aboriginal Australia

six years intensive investigations have yielded rich dividends both in terms of the number of sites excavated and in the phenomenal richness of sites such as Nunamira and Warreen (see Nunamira story). Perhaps even more significant is the fact that while there are distinct differences between the sites there is an underlying similarity in crucial indicators of human behaviour. Moreover, just as the Pleistocene archaeology of New Ireland tends to reveal regional similarities in basic human behaviour, so these regional behaviours differ from those manifest in other regions. If the Pleistocene of island Melanesia is marked by the development of widespread systems of trade and exchange, the archaeology of the intensely cold, glaciated environment of southern Tasmania indicates that the settlers well understood the ecology of their major prey animal, in this case red necked wallaby and that they structured their behaviour to maximise their hunting success in what must have been a tough environment.

In the last decade just about every orthodoxy of Pleistocene human behaviour has been shaken. Archaeologists have amassed evidence of flexible, responsive behaviours in areas such as deserts and glacial regions which were previously thought to be too difficult for such people to survive in. Furthermore the old image of unplanned, *ad hoc* responses to the trials of life simply does not match clear evidence for purposive behaviours which are of the same order as those exhibited by Aboriginal people thousands of years later during the Holocene. Instead of a featureless landscape of befuddled human beings we are now confronted by a richness and variety of human behaviour which even a decade ago was simply undreamed of.

Yet it is becoming increasingly clear that this horizontal history requires an expansion of our ideas of Aboriginality and of the history of Aboriginal culture. Just as we now understand that Australia was not isolated from island south east Asia for 52,000 of the 60,000 years of human occupation, we now have to face the prospect that the historical forces which shaped Aboriginal society as observed by Europeans were far more complex than we have previously credited. Furthermore, both contact archaeology and the richness of the Pleistocene make it likely that there is no essential Aboriginal culture, no core which has remained unchanged through the aeons. Indeed, although more of Aboriginal history has to be written without the aid of written documents than the history of the west, Aboriginal culture has still emerged from the mists of prehistory as dynamic and flexible, but still Aboriginal.

In order to get this far I have had to make a number of outrageous generalisations, but there is a kernel of truth in them. If contact archaeology and Aboriginal history are about people and prehistoric archaeology is about writing the history of behavioural variability, perhaps the only thing which links them is the sense that this is all Aboriginal history. Some archaeologists and anthropologists (using a 1990s version of the unchanging Aborigine) have argued that Aboriginal culture is the world's oldest, presumably because it appears to have been subject to the greatest level of cultural isolation. Yet this is pure teleology and a damaging teleology at that. The problem remains, just what kind

80: An Archaeological Perspective of Aboriginal Australia

of history can we write for the greater part of the human history of the continent? A solution begins to suggest itself but it will require great changes in how we find meaning in Aboriginal history and in our expectations of Aboriginal studies.