

## *Introduction*

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William (Bill) Wentworth (1907–2003) played an important role in the establishment of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS) in 1961. He had a long-term and intense interest in the origins, society and culture of the continent's first pioneers and settlers, the Aborigines, and believed that the study of Aboriginal people would throw light on human origins. Dr Jacquie Lambert, in her excellent ANU doctoral dissertation on the history of the Institute, refers to Wentworth as its 'founding father' and, as you will note in the following compilation, every Wentworth lecturer pays homage to this great Australian. His was a major contribution to what has become the world's primary repository of knowledge concerning the cultures and achievements of Australia's two Indigenous groups: the Aboriginal people and the Torres Strait Islanders.

As the late Professor John Barnes, distinguished British anthropologist, noted at the first major gathering of scholars of Aboriginal Australia in 1961 (see Sheils, 1963) the predominant view of the participants was akin to a rescue mission, to make haste and 'get it all down before it is too late'. Their overriding perception was of a continuing and accelerating loss of 'traditional' Aboriginal culture in the face of assimilatory pressures wrought on a very small, encapsulated minority. However, by the time of the inaugural Wentworth Lecture, delivered in 1978 by eminent archaeologist, Dr Rhys Jones, the field of Aboriginal Studies was burgeoning. In the thirty-six years since, there have been eighteen Wentworth lecturers, whose diverse topics amply demonstrate the dynamism and resilience of Aboriginal culture.

The task of choosing Wentworth lecturers was (and still is) undertaken by the Institute's Council from an ever-increasing pool of people having special interests and expertise in one or more area of Indigenous Studies. The Council's choices provide an indicator of expanding disciplinary foci of the Institute, and, in some instances, of what was happening in Aboriginal Australia generally at the time. In some cases, the decision also reflected an acknowledgment by Council of the significant contribution of the nominee to the Institute. Beyond an expectation that the lecturers' particular field of experience and/or

scholarship will be reflected strongly in their presentations, all have invariably dealt to some extent with wider political, social, economic or religious factors or developments that bear on the chosen topic or theme of their lecture.

Appropriately for the inaugural Wentworth Lecture, *Calories and bytes: Towards a history of the Australian islands*, archaeologist Rhys Jones (1941–2001) set out to provide a big-picture overview of the state of our knowledge about the Aboriginal people, which had been exciting the world archaeological community with revelations emphasising the immense length of tenure of Aboriginal people on this continent. He quotes Lucretius and his imaginings of the earliest humans, and comments: ‘Such was the cultural memory with which to try and comprehend the vast forests of the New and Pacific worlds with their mirrors of mankind staring back from the edge of the trees’. He points out that the larger mass of Sahul, which included New Guinea and what is now the island of Tasmania, existed until relatively recent times, in terms of archaeological reckoning. Summarising what is known of Australia’s prehistory, Jones proposes that typology, the study of artefacts, is in fact the study of entropy. He then reviews some major excavations, such as those at Lake Mungo in New South Wales, noting that, despite the crude state of early archaeology of the Stone Age, it carried a profound message: that technology was changing in the direction of increased organisation, efficiency and miniaturisation. He suggests a modern-day equivalent in what happened to computers over a mere thirty-year period hence the ‘bytes’ in the title of his presentation. Jones goes on to discuss some provocative findings in both Tasmania and Arnhem Land, where he had led important digs. He also discusses exciting new data from the Wahgi Valley in Papua New Guinea, which revealed an ancient but well-developed horticultural system based on taro. He argues that this discovery in turn raises significant questions as to whether or not climatic or cultural factors prevented taro from spreading south. Jones ends with the insightful suggestion that one distinctive Aboriginal contribution to history is their success in increasing social intensification without a concomitant degradation of resources.

Margaret Valadian’s 1980 Lecture, *Aboriginal education by Aborigines for Aborigines* (which was unfortunately not available for inclusion in this collection), compares Aboriginal life-long education, delivered by the adult members of the community in a disciplined and caring environment, to conventional European systems. She notes that Australians have rarely appreciated the proficient nature of that system in producing mature, disciplined and assured adults who could participate in daily activities and contribute to the social, spiritual and cultural life of the community. She points out that the new settlers and policy makers did not recognise anything akin to a ‘system’ in the way Aboriginal children were socialised, and criticises anthropologists and others for this shortcoming. The result of European attempts to ‘educate’ Aboriginal people using European models was a failure. However, Valadian points to indications of change where