

'A SENSE OF MAKING HISTORY': AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL STUDIES

1961-1985

Exactly a quarter of a century ago, on 15 May 1961, 55 scholars assembled in University House to discuss the future of Aboriginal Studies. Stimulated by the prospects, Bill Stanner (Sheils1963:XIV) later remarked that the participants 'had a sense of making history'. As convener of the meeting, Stanner (Sheils1963:XII) enunciated the following criteria for attendance. 'Everyone should be invited who had authoritative knowledge of any relevant field of research; all appropriate academic disciplines should be represented; the sole concern should be with problems of fundamental study; and the approach should be truly national.' By 1964, the Act which created the Institute was operating and I was elected to its first Council. As I have served on Council for all but two years since that time, I decided to reflect upon the Institute, its achievements and its critics over its first quarter century, as the first major theme in this lecture. Then follows some consideration of archaeology, its achievements and some of its problems.

We're here, however, to honour Bill Wentworth, to whose energy and vision we owe so much. There must be few senior researchers who, over the years, have not been challenged by Bill Wentworth to develop some new line of research on the instant. Others have been visited by him in the field, with searching demands to explain or to justify their projects. This happened to me in 1966, when Bill and Mrs Wentworth arrived at the Ingal addi excavation, Northern Territory. That they were over thirty kilometres off the beaten track from Willeroo station did not deter them, despite the lack of a spare tyre and tools on their hired vehicle. We walked miles

around the bush, inspected the excavation, and over steak by the camp fire, defended the importance of archaeological research well into the night. If W.C. Wentworth IV has ranged widely over matters Aboriginal or scientific with unbounded enthusiasm, it is interesting to reflect that he has emulated the first of the W.C. Wentworth dynasty. His ancestor was one of the party which first crossed the Blue Mountains; in 1824 he published a 900 page book on Australia. His 1819 *Statistical, historical, and Political Description of the Colony of New South Wales* was shorter, but it anticipated one of the problems which was to concern 'our' W.C. Wentworth. He observed (Wentworth, 1819:5) that the Aborigines 'bear no resemblance to any of the inhabitants of the surrounding islands, except those of New Guinea, which is separated from New Holland by a narrow strait. One of these islands, therefore, has evidently been peopled by the other; but from whence the original stock was derived is one of those geographical problems, which in all probability will never be satisfactorily solved'.

It is appropriate at this chronological landmark to also acknowledge the contribution of Kim Beazley, in ensuring that the Institute was founded in a spirit of bi-partisan political co-operation. Let it be stated clearly that, despite fluctuating fortunes and funding, this has continued in large measure in Institute affairs. Before 1964, Professor John Barnes acted as chief executive officer and it is good to welcome him as another founding architect back to this biennial meeting. For his assistance in arranging the conference, Stanner acknowledged young Mr L.R. Hiatt. Les Hiatt went on to play a key role in Institute affairs and was the previous Wentworth lecturer. Diane Barwick was another major assistant at the 1961 conference. To the sadness of us all, and a serious loss to scholarship, Diane died suddenly a few weeks ago. I owe her a deep personal debt for her assistance. With

the passage of time, I note the forlorn statistic that one in every three of the persons present in 1961 is no longer living.

Over the years, the Institute has been subjected to periodic official review and frequent criticism by members, by the general academic world, and by Aboriginal communities. Much of this criticism was constructive, although unfortunately Institute staff have been at the receiving end of much misdirected, unjustified and personalised criticism and rudeness, which, if directed anywhere, should have been addressed to Council. Despite the fact that the Institute is under almost perpetual criticism from some quarter, it has been more open to new ideas and change, in my opinion, than are most academic or statutory institutions. Understandably, reformers are constitutionally impatient and they seldom set their immediate concerns within an historical context. In human affairs, however, a quarter of a century is a long time - time sufficient for seven Prime Ministers - and my first purpose is to sketch something of the context, in order to credit the Institute with its due.

In the years before 1926, when the teaching of anthropology commenced at the University of Sydney, virtually all research into Aboriginal society was performed in a voluntary, self-financed capacity, mainly by amateurs. A.W. Howitt, Spencer and Gillen, R.H. Mathews and John Mathew are notable examples. After 1926, the new Sydney Department of Anthropology provided some direction and theoretical shape to research. While much outstanding research had been reported by 1940, it is interesting to record the basis of funding for that fieldwork.

Before Radcliffe-Brown was appointed to the Sydney Chair of Anthropology, the Australian National Research Council, which sponsored it, estimated total departmental costs at £1800 (£1100 for the professor's salary and £350 for a lecture room assistant): Even in 1933, costs were estimated at only £2500. Half of this sum

was paid annually by the Commonwealth government, in return for training 'colonial' administrators, particularly for Papua New Guinea service. (In 1933, according to the Sydney Morning Herald 8 Feb 1933, there were 2126 applicants for 6 New Guinea cadetships.) The other half was met by some of the states, chiefly NSW and Victoria. There was no provision for any research component.

Until the outbreak of the Second World War, the universities of Sydney, Adelaide and Melbourne contributed small amounts to various research projects. However, the basic funding for all Australian and New Guinean research was the American Rockefeller Foundation. Between 1926 and 1949, the Rockefeller Foundation subsidised research through the Australian National Research Council to a total of £52,500, while the Carnegie Foundation provided £3000. (National Library, ANRC, MS 482, Box 32/99, Elkin 16 Oct. 1945). There was value for money here, for the 30 anthropologists or institutions involved in the 42 funded projects included Radcliffe-Brown, Elkin, Stanner, Lloyd Warner, Ralph Piddington, C.W.M. Hart, Ursula McConnel, Phyllis Kaberry, Donald Thomson, T.G.H. Strehlow, Reo Fortune, Raymond Firth and the notable series of South Australian expeditions, involving Tindale, Cleland and others. Their combined field terms amounted to more than seventy years. In addition, *Oceania*, an important journal, was subsidised heavily from these funds.

Fieldwork diminished upon the outbreak of war and funding sources dried up for long after its duration. Some research was supported by the ANRC, including that by our illustrious members, Ronald and Catherine Berndt, evidently using the residue of the Carnegie Grant. Typical of the late forties funding drought was Elkin's 1949 report to the ANRC as chairman of its Anthropology Committee (NL,ANRC MS482, BOX 35/538). `The Anthropology Research Committee is not active for the simple reason

that we have no money for research purposes and at present no problems have been referred to us.' At that time Sydney university provided Elkin's department with £1000 for research.

When the Australian Academy of Science was established, the Australian National Research Council went out of existence in 1955, at a period when Elkin was its chairman. Its Committee on Anthropological Research had ceased to function in 1951. The ANRC's administrative role was assumed by the Social Sciences Research Council of Australia, established in 1952. During that Council's first five years the Carnegie Corporation provided £40,000 to promote social science research, from which four projects by two anthropologists received a total of £1800 (S.S.R.C., 1956). Around this time the Nuffield Foundation also supported fieldwork, and both F.D. McCarthy and myself were recipients in the period preceding the 1961 meeting.

The decades following the 1926 Sydney chair, therefore, would have been bleak in the annals of field research without American Foundation funding, both in Australia and New Guinea. Although the results of much research became the stuff of classics, the number of projects was few. The contribution of governments appears minimal, although the establishment of anthropology at the ANU, with funding of posts from 1948, represented a major investment of commonwealth funds. As the first annual report of the A.I.A.S. (1964/65:8) observed, when the ANRC terminated its activities, 'the number of anthropologists making field studies decreased to a point where, at times, there were none in the field at all'.

Of course, until the early sixties, the number of anthropologists in academic employment was few in any case. Radcliffe-Brown had recognised the problem in

1930, when he wrote to the ANRC as follows (National Library, ANRC Ms482 Box 60./849, to Osborn, 4 Dec 1930).

'We must either find salaried appointments for the anthropologists we have trained, or they must abandon anthropology. If no salaried appointments are available we cannot, in fairness to them, permit any more students to devote themselves to anthropology as a career--- Hogbin and Hart will be returning from abroad well trained in anthropology They cannot depend for a livelihood on occasional research grants from the Australian National Research Council. Nor can we find room for them in the University. The Council must therefore recognise that if anthropological research in Australia is to proceed --- some provision must be made for salaried research appointments ---'

Wise words, but their author had clay feet. At this time, Radcliffe-Brown, the only tenured anthropologist in Australia, was negotiating for a post at Chicago.

The research funding drought broke around 1964, when the Social Sciences Research Council sponsored the 'Aborigines in Australian Society' project, under Charles Rowley's wise direction. Its scale of funding was unprecedented, as the Myer Foundation and the Myer Charity Trust contributed \$78,000, while the remaining quarter came from the Council's own resources. Public sector sponsorship also took an equally dramatic leap forward in that year, with the formal commitment to the AIAS. Funds available in the 1964/65 financial year were over \$135,000; by 1969/70 the grant was \$400,000. Much too little, many complained, but when seen in historical perspective, it constituted a brave new research world.

I have compiled a summary of Institute funded projects 1961-85. During the period 1926-61, it seems improbable that more than 75 research projects were undertaken from Australian institutions into Aboriginal society (around twenty-five per

cent of ANRC projects were centred in New Guinea). No matter how the statistics are counted over the Institute years, over 1300 Institute funded projects are numbered, presumably representing several hundred person years of research. Whether quantity has swamped quality is a question to ponder, but in most cases the answer is, I believe, in the negative. To this research must be added Australian Research Grants Scheme sponsored projects, those funded by government departments, such as Health or Education, or Commonwealth scholarship recipients. An accurate tally requires detailed research into all Institute research files. I used my thumb as a rule. Accounting procedures varied between annual reports; committee names and functions have changed; 1976-81 saw the category 'Aboriginal requested' cross many subject boundaries and range beyond them; special funds were earmarked 1972-75 for site recording; at times 'limited' or 'emergency' grants have varied in size and scope, and at times were not listed separately; the 1961-72 figures are adapted from the 1971-72 annual report. Taking my table as a general guide only, however, it makes the point. Participants at the 1961 conference were correct in their sense of 'making history'. The creation of the Institute was a watershed in developing a systematic corpus of information about Aboriginal society and, despite its critics, this data is not a non-Aboriginal monopoly. My summary table does not include all those other resources which make the Institute an archive of the Aboriginal heritage for all Australians: the sound and pictorial archives, the ongoing film programme, the bibliographical records and the library, with its 1206 theses and the world's best assemblage of written records.

Not everybody has been optimistic about the direction or nature of institute policies. Too often, it has been regarded as some monolithic and inflexible body. Let us return to the 1961 conference, and set it into its context.

Not surprisingly, this meeting reflected many perceptions of that period which appear unduly restrictive today. Hindsight may encourage criticism, but it must be tempered by praise for what it represented and what Wentworth and Stanner achieved during less enlightened times. Three aspects of that conference are relevant here. Although fifty-five scholars assembled, not a single Aboriginal person was present; twenty papers were discussed across diverse disciplines, but the detailed history of Aboriginal society since 1788 was not amongst them; policy formulation was dominated by a sense of urgency - it was a race against passing time, which, it was assumed, shortly would extinguish traditional culture - and 'salvage' was its ethos. This was a gathering of scholars to discuss scientific and cultural problem in a backwards looking manner; its problems virtually excluded current welfare or politics. The reason is not far to seek.

Listen to the future Prime Minister, Senator John Gorton, introducing the Bill into the Senate on 7 May 1964.

'I think it is important to clarify to the Senate the Government's concept of the role of a permanent institute of aboriginal studies. The permanent institute will *not* be concerned with current problems as they affect the Australian aborigine. Its work will be scientific and anthropological. This is *made clear* in the bill in the section dealing with the functions to be assigned to the institute; but I think it is important to stress the academic nature of the work of the institute. I should add that it is not the Government's intention that the institute should become a superdepartment of anthropology with a large research programme in its own right and conducted by its own professional staff. It is not intended that the new institute should rival existing institutions, or do work which properly and conveniently lies within the appropriate departments of universities and similar institutions. It will exist to complement the

work of these institutions, to work through them, and to strengthen them by its activity' (*italics mine*).

Although Gorton asserted that the Act 'made clear' that 'current problems' were excluded from its functions, the Act (Sect.6) does nothing of the sort. Yet, this was government policy and the Institute during its infant years felt constrained to keep within those limits, presumably under ministerial advice.

Even its twin proponents, Mr Beazley and Mr Wentworth specifically referred to these constraints in their speeches in the House of Representatives on 20 May 1964. In that political climate, not to have done so would have courted disaster. They both hinted, however, at the difficulty of keeping within those limits.

Mr Beazley: 'I hope that the respect for the aboriginal people that this legislation implies carries over into other items of policy. I know that it is not a function of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies to make any comments on aboriginal policy. It is not a policy-making body; it is a scientific body. But it is inevitable, if the government is enlightened, that what the institute does will affect policy, even though that is not its primary aim. Already the work of the institute has very clear implications for education. It has very clear implications for psychology. It has very clear implications in understanding the whole question of linguistics - that is, how languages came into being. It has very clear implications in health policy: All these studies, I hope, will affect policy, though the institute does nothing to set out to suggest policy.'

Mr Wentworth agreed 'entirely with the point made by the honorable member for Fremantle that, although the intentions of this institute are academic, it will help us to handle the problems, whether they be in regard to assimilation or anything else, of our relations with aborigines a little better than they have been handled.

Understanding of aborigines has been lacking in the past. I find myself in complete agreement with the statement by the honorable member for Fremantle that this institute will help in the administrative policy although the Institute itself will have, and should have, nothing to do with policy in the first degree. It is an academic organization which may provide instruments for other people to use, but in itself should have no part in policy.'

The Institute's brief, therefore, was defined more narrowly through its first decade. Its research and recording were of fundamental importance, but it focussed exclusively on traditionally oriented people, defined as 'tribal' and assumed to preserve pristine traditions or customs. The study of urban or fringe dwelling communities, or the history of Aboriginal people since 1788, or of cultural adaptations in the face of white domination, were excluded as subjects beyond its scope. This policy contrasts with the ANRC funding phase, when considerable research was attempted on such matters.

The sixties coincided with the terminal phase of the publicised but unsuccessful government assimilation policy, based on its paternalistic Eurocentric assumption that the amalgamation of the two races constituted a virtual one-way transformation which would convert 'them' to 'us'. Quite apart from the political expedient of urging action in a crisis situation, this ethos served to underline the 'salvage' emergency mentality, before ancient traditions were assumed to all perish with the present generation of elders. In retrospect, there was a strong covert element of sexism in this salvage programme, because there was little emphasis upon females as repositories of tradition. Anthropology remained a predominantly male preserve, and senior anthropologists stressed the role of 'the old men' as the fount of arcane knowledge.

During the sixties many members sought to expand the Institute's brief away from exclusive concern with traditionally oriented societies. Remember that the political and intellectual ferment of this period coincided with the Freedom Rides, Wattie Creek, the 1966 Pastoral Award and the 1967 referendum. Early in Peter Ucko's Principalship important changes took place. In the 1972/73 Annual Report (pp 7-8), the first of his administration, he noted that 'urban and semi-urban Aborigines' had been neglected and that 'Council has now agreed that the Institute should carry out research in the "contact" situation'. In the meantime, of course, the Whitlam government had assumed office. In a review of 1973 activities, published in the January 1974 *Newsletter* (p.14), Ucko observed that it was essential to 'convince those in power that research and Aboriginal indigenous activity are not separate activities but are intimately connected, and inextricably bound together'. This rethinking was therefore in place before the biennial meeting in May 1974, which witnessed successful demands for greater Aboriginal participation in Institute affairs.

It did *not* require any changes in the Act to bring these new research directions into operation, or to arrange for Aboriginal participation in decision making. Many consider that the adaptations over the past decade have been too slow or merely token. Again, however, they need to be set into their historical and political context. The comparison is best made between the 1961 conference and those themes and participants which today would constitute a comparable conference of assessment. Events during the past decade or so are too close to pursue here.

In Elkin's paper at the 1961 meeting, he referred to the needs of archaeology. 'The future is brightening', he observed (Sheils 1963:23). 'The University of Melbourne has a prehistorian on its History staff, and the Australian National University and the University of Sydney has each appointed an archaeologist ---

These specialists, the students whom they will train and the fellow workers whom they will attract, will be able to work on the numerous and varied sites which are there you the searching. The rewards will be great'.

Well, a quarter of century on, those rewards have added a new dimension not only to Australian history, but to world prehistory. Let us turn to the significance of these discoveries. I summed the matter up for European Australians in 1969, when I challenged conventional explanations of our history. The opening sentence of my *The Prehistory of Australia* asserted that, 'the discoverers, explorers, and colonists of ... Australia, were its Aborigines'.

This is not the place to attempt a critique of prehistoric research, but it is necessary to highlight some issues of significance. The first is the chronological revolution, which the Institute assisted by promoting the foundation of the radiocarbon laboratory at the ANU, and by funding the costs of sample dating at other laboratories. In 1961 there were chiefly three places where claims were made for human occupation earlier than ten thousand years ago, the conventional end of the Pleistocene epoch, or ice age. These were Kangaroo Island, where Norman B. Tindale worked; Keilor, under investigation by Edmund D. Gill; and Koonalda cave, where Dr Sandor Gallus claimed the presence of Pleistocene artefacts and mural art. Later research and radiocarbon ¹⁴C dating established the validity of their claims, but at that time stratigraphic evidence which included artefacts or other associated cultural material was lacking.

The dating of the Kenniff cave sequence during 1962 placed Australian settlement and recognisable artefacts within the context of Late Pleistocene times. Dating of Koonalda, Keilor and Alligator River sites by 1966, with artefacts associated in stratified context, pushed a human presence back to around twenty

thousand years ago. At this time sea level was at its lowest and New Guinea, Tasmania and Kangaroo Island all formed part of the continental mass. Within another five years dates from Lake Mungo pushed the human time range beyond 30,000 years. After excavations there during 1973, age estimates resulted in a possible 40,000 years occupation. Comparable antiquity was established subsequently for sites on the upper Swan River, WA, and on the Huon Peninsula, Papua New Guinea. With the development of more refined dating techniques, there are revisions likely which may render these dates too conservative. Ages of 50,000 years or more are possible. Two sites on the Hopkins River, Warrnambool, have been claimed by Edmund D. Gill as possessing even greater antiquity, but further research is necessary to establish positive human associations.

Even if the current minimal date of 40,000 years is taken as the established figure, consider the dramatic implications. Within only twelve years, archaeological research added thirty thousand years to Australia's human past. No parallel exists elsewhere for such an expanded time dimension for modern society. The further back into the past that a human presence is extended, the more remarkable becomes the sea crossing which enabled the first colonization. Whatever its motive or means, it ranks as the world's earliest major sea voyage.

Around 20,000 years ago, when Australian climate was at its coldest, people had entered widely diverse environments. These included the arid Mt Newman region of the Pilbara and the Arnhem Land escarpment, an area then far inland. The New Guinea highlands and remote caves in southwest Tasmania also were occupied, within sight of glaciers. Colonists evidently adapted to regionally diverse and unfamiliar flora and fauna, and they co-existed for thousands of years with the now extinct giant marsupial fauna, including diprotodon.

Further testimony to the adaptive and creative spirit of these ancestral Aborigines is indicated by a number of inventions. Across the cold southeast, bone tools resembling awls were manufactured, possibly used to sew pelts together for clothing during those cold times. The points were manufactured through rubbing on abrasive stone. A comparable grinding technique was applied to stone tools, because Arnhem Land hatchet blades are older than 20,000 years. Along with Japanese examples, these constitute the world's first evidence for shaping stone by grinding. Some specimens possess hammered or pecked grooves, a device for holding the handle firmly in place, again the earliest evidence for hammer dressing. Recently, even older examples have been recovered from a 40,000 years old context on a former shore line on the Huon Peninsula.

Another grinding technique was the employment of flat slabs, or mortars, for grinding dry grass seeds to flour. Dates of over 12,000 years have been claimed, although this antiquity is disputed by others. Whatever its origin, the technology of flour production was a vital strategy for survival in arid lands.

Wooden tools survive less frequently, but in a swamp near Mt Gambier fragments of boomerangs and barbed wooden spears have been excavated, indicating their use over 8 000 years ago. Paintings in different styles are superimposed upon rock walls in Arnhem Land. This visual evidence indicates that there were periods when spear-throwers were fashionable, sometimes boomerangs, and at other times, hand-held spears were carried. The analysis of stone tools from excavations also demonstrates that there were both regional differences in technology and chronological changes in the types of artefacts used.

Apart from such material evidence for change through time, Lake Mungo provided insight into the symbolic world. Red pigment fragments were carried there

and left at lakeside camps even before 32,000 years ago. The purpose of the ochre is unknown, but an extended male burial was interred about 30,000 years ago, with powdered ochre dusted over the corpse. Less than a kilometre away, but dating from some 4000 years later, was a cremated female. This is the world's oldest recorded cremation, and it was a complex ritual in which the burnt bones were smashed and the ashes buried. Archaeology demonstrates that the practice persisted throughout prehistoric times in southeastern Australia, including Tasmania.

The hints of body decoration implicit in the ochred burial are amplified by later finds. At Devil's Lair, WA, marsupial bone beads were recovered, dating prior to 12,000 years ago. Various burials in the Murray valley, including examples at Kow Swamp, were interred with ornaments or wearing necklaces or chaplets of marsupial bones or teeth. The most notable find was the necklace worn by the Nitchie male, buried in western New South Wales over 6000 years ago. It consisted of 178 pierced Tasmanian Devil teeth. Significantly, this man had lost his upper incisors during his lifetime. As a number of other burials in the Murray valley dating from the last few thousand years also show a similar condition, it is reasonable to infer that it resulted from ritual tooth avulsion. This was the most widespread Australian initiation rite in 1788, so its origins are remote.

Aboriginal people are sensitive to archaeological investigations involving human remains. Archaeologists, however, can derive vital clues to ancient ritual life and cognitive systems and so increase Aboriginal knowledge concerning their spiritual life and increase general community respect for Aboriginal society. Material proof of the continuity of spiritual values and ritual practices could become invaluable 'deeds' to land title. For the increasing number of Aboriginal children being educated in the general Australian community, and lacking direct contact with traditional

communities, such evidence provides invaluable documentation of their cultural heritage.

The art on rock surfaces offers another set of glimpses into ancient creativity and belief systems. Engravings at the Early Man shelter, near Laura, are positively older than 13,000 years. Wall markings in the darkness of Koonalda cave may have survived for 20,000 years. Astonishingly similar designs have been discovered in a number of caves near Mt Gambier through the enterprise of R.G. Bednarik and G. D. Aslin (1984-85). Research here may confirm this antiquity.

There are numerous paintings of thylacines (Tasmanian tiger) in Arnhem Land and engravings of the same species occur in the Pilbara. As thylacines were extinct everywhere but in Tasmania when Europeans arrived, these pictures must be ancient. The arrival of the dingo from Asia, possibly about 3500 years ago, may have caused their extinction. Tasmanian Devil species also were extinct on the mainland in European times. Remembering that Nitchie man had a necklace requiring almost fifty animals to produce the necessary teeth, it is a reminder that the combined onslaught of human hunters and predatory dogs may have affected the distribution of animal species during prehistoric times.

Even this selective sketch suffices to establish the importance of Australia as a focus for technological invention and for distinctive artistic and conceptual systems. Their origins are so remote in time that this continent ranks amongst the oldest and most significant creative regions of modern humanity. Ancient Australia is endowed with a dignity, therefore, and modern Aboriginal Australians are correct to be proud of their cultural inheritance. Despite contemporary tendencies towards claiming a unitary culture, however, the extent of distinctive regional variation in Aboriginal lifeways during recent centuries needs stressing. That there existed no single

Aboriginal Way is reflected in the regionally diverse archaeological remains and the technological and aesthetic variation reflected in material culture and art forms. The extent of linguistic differences is another striking indicator of diversity. Any assessment of Australia before the Europeans must take this into account, just as the extent of Aboriginal contact with Papuan and eastern Indonesian peoples is another factor fostering innovation and local variation.

Another complex reality in the pattern of human settlement was the extent of environmental fluctuation which communities faced. Seas retreated some 140 metres below present sea level and surged back again; freshwater lakes in the interior were transformed into saline or dry basins and massive rivers ceased to flow; volcanoes erupted and died; numerous animal species became extinct, especially larger forms; many landscapes changed because of the human practice of regularly firing vegetation; forests retreated and advanced following temperature and rainfall fluctuations. Research during the past twenty-five years, has documented these changes and demonstrated the contemporaneity of humans even with massive environmental changes. Consequently, just as Aboriginal societies were dynamic and regionally complex through time, environments and ecological niches were never static.

If the state of prehistory was in flux, so is the contemporary archaeological scene, no more so than in the relationship between archaeologists and Aborigines. I can claim to be the first of the few archaeologists in academic employment in 1961, so as an elder today I feel astonished by the rapid expansion in knowledge and numbers involved. I am deeply disturbed, however, by the loose useage of data by prehistorians, myself included, and by the reception of this knowledge by many

prominent Aboriginal leaders. At the risk of prompting criticism, I feel obliged to voice my problems. Note that they apply equally to practitioners and to Aboriginal people.

Prehistorians and historians must maintain their academic objectivity and standards, even in the face of unpopularity or criticism. They cannot maintain their academic integrity if they board the latest bandwagon and mouth popular sentiments simply to curry favour. I note that Diane Barwick, always an outspoken scholar, voiced similar worries concerning historians in one of her latest publications. Barwick (1985:221) remarked, that 'revisionist accounts of Aboriginal history are now fashionable, but their writers seem to commemorate examples of confrontation with more eagerness than they describe the process of accommodation. They commend Aborigines ... who returned violence for violence. They ignore, or else dismiss as turncoats, "trusties" and "Uncle Toms", those Aboriginal men and women who were apparently willing to negotiate with the invaders - and sufficiently wily to exploit them'.

Although the following comments also apply to my own writings, I am motivated by doubts similar to Barwick's, concerning archaeological explanation and Aboriginal interpretations of prehistoric data.

The 'ethnographic present' has become a useful resource for prehistorians as a model for the explication of archaeological data or situations. The literature is extensive and much benefit has been derived. Yet, given the cultural and environmental changes outlined previously, I suspect that the model derived from recent ethnographic situations is an oversimplification. Inherited human experience is another factor to be taken into account, making later situations more complex than earlier ones. I suspect that the use of ethnographic analogies serves to exaggerate the extent of general continuity, thereby minimising more detailed change. If this

applies to archaeological reconstruction, it relates even more emphatically to some Aboriginal conceptions of the past. My earlier outline of changes in salient cultural and environmental factors makes it obvious that conditions in some earlier Dreaming time cannot have persisted unchanged into the present. Neither the laws of nature nor the rules of Dreaming ancestors were immutable.

Accepting the conservative estimate of a human arrival in Australia at least 40,000 years ago, it is valid to claim that stone tools and the use of fire extends back to that period. Until older human remains, artefacts or other evidence for cultural activities are isolated and dated, claims for earlier occupation are unsubstantiated and best ignored. On the other hand, the first dated and published human bones comprise both the Mungo inhumation and the cremation, circa 30,000 and 26,000 years old respectively. No other human remains are dated earlier than 15,000 years ago. Allowing a generous 25 years per human generation, this means that there are no human bones for the first ten thousand years or more - possibly a minimum of 400 generations. Our sample from the following 600 generations consists of one male and one female. How reliable are inferences drawn from a sample size of two persons in 1000 generations? Is it an act of faith rather than scientific proof, to claim the first colonists as ancestral Aborigines?

There are claims in the media that *Homo sapiens* originated in Australia. This may prove to be correct, but it lacks foundation or logic at present. The earliest toolmakers in Afro-Asia are over two million years old, and fire was used some million years ago. *Homo erectus*, evidently an efficient hunter-gatherer, colonised widely and reached China and Java possibly 1.2 million to 800,000 years ago. Neanderthal people possessed a complex stone technology, comparable to the early Australian practice, and adopted complex burial rites almost 50,000 years ago in the

Middle East. Anatomically modern *Homo sapiens* remains occur in burials in France and in the Middle East at least as early as the Mungo burials. Present evidence from South Africa and Ethiopia suggests that *Homo sapiens* may belong to the period 60,000-120,000 years ago (Klasies River mouth; Border cave; Omo), supporting claims that modern people evolved in Africa.

In island southeast Asia (Palawan, Borneo, Java, Sulawesi) there is evidence for the presence of *Homo sapiens* during the period c.40,000-20,000 years ago, associated with a stone technology which bears comparison with that of the earliest Australian industries. Taking all this data into account, the most economical hypothesis is to assume that human society developed outside Australia and that the first colonists brought with them invisible baggage which included a stone technocomplex and a knowledge of fire.

Despite the vehemence of Aboriginal assertions to an origin within this continent, such inferences need not conflict with Aboriginal beliefs. This is a subject meriting joint Aboriginal and anthropological discussion. I note that there are numerous Dreaming creation-time stories in tropical Cape York and Arnhem Land, involving the arrival of beings from the sea, or from the north. On the other hand, creator-beings in the arid interior frequently moved along those Dreaming tracks which criss-cross the Centre. Many of these beings in the tropics or in the desert simply did not emerge in situ, but they travelled long distances to get there. It is interesting to reflect that the earliest radiocarbon dates available today are peripheral to the Australian heartland.

I am concerned that an undue emphasis upon a separate origin for the Australian race could produce unforeseen political consequences. Obviously, if scientific evolutionary theory is rejected by Aboriginal creationists; who also ignore

the archaeological evidence for human antiquity in southeast Asia, the claim is lodged for a separate human origin within Australia.

Multi-racial theories of creation are not new. Before the American Civil War the theory of polygenesis became popular for sinister reasons. In order to demonstrate that negro slavery was justified and not a violation of human rights, some theorists postulated that the negro race was created separately from the caucasian. The conclusion was obvious - the negro race was inferior and unconnected with 'normal' humans. The appeal of this doctrine is indicated by the popularity of a prominent American exposition of polygenesis. When Nott and Gliddon published *Types of Mankind* in 1854, it went through three editions by 1857. Human rights are universal to all people, races and creeds. If the separateness of the Aboriginal race from the rest of humankind were seized upon by opponents as a political or land rights issue, it could prove unfortunate.

A group of Aboriginal historians recently defended the proposition that 'Aboriginal history should be written by Aboriginal people', implying that nobody else may do so validly. (Atkinson et al 1985: 38-9.) From comments made to me by Aboriginal people, I deduce that some believe that this applies also to the study of prehistory, which they insist, should be termed history. I am willing to accept the latter redefinition and call that period prior to 1788 'Ancient Australian History'.

Naturally I urge Aboriginal people to write history of their people or to become archaeologists of their past. However, I reject emphatically the notion that learning can be a monopoly based solely upon racial grounds. In my opinion, these historians confuse the collection and custodianship of a corpus of source material (in their case, chiefly oral, but if it is to be used by others over time, necessarily material committed to paper), with its interpretation. They state 'that white people would not

tamper with the structure and form of the Illiad ... or Shakespeare'. Quite so, although I spent some years lecturing on Greek history, using the triad as a text for studying social and economic history, and its form and structure were irrelevant to my purpose. For example, I selected those sections which described burial rituals and, having explicated them, compared the data with archaeological evidence obtained from Bronze Age tombs, both in the Aegean area and in western Europe. My interpretation may have erred, but the scholarly apparatus used is international in character. My interpretation could be refuted if somebody disagreed, for the texts remained intact. Significantly, I did not have to be a Greek in order to study them, and I used prehistoric Greek evidence to interpret and explain western European cremation burial practices.

Along with the Aboriginal historians, I accept that Aboriginal people are the guardians and custodians of our history and culture, and it is our responsibility to pass onto future generations our set of truths. If, however, those guardians and custodians also act as gaolers, while claiming infallibility in interpreting their source material based upon race, totalitarianism is just down the road.

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