

Historical Archaeology in Australia: Historical or Hysterical? Crisis or Creative Awakening?

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This paper explores the current state and future prospects of historical archaeology in Australia and takes as its starting points issues raised in Graham Connah's 1998 paper 'Pattern and purpose in historical archaeology'. Connah presents a rather narrow version of historical archaeology as a fading 'scholarly discipline' anchored in academia. His assertion that 'a discipline consists very largely of its body of published material' fails to recognise the growing contribution of other forms of public archaeology in Australia in the late twentieth century. We show that recent developments – the dialogue emerging between history and archaeology, the new publications and other media, interest from the wider community and recent academic appointments in the discipline – provide a counter-viewpoint and cause for optimism. In revisiting Connah's main issues from these perspectives, some of the real problems and challenges facing the discipline and the profession are also explored.

As we peek from behind our piles of consultant reports, across the threshold of a new millenium, we see historical archaeology in Australia has at last become 'historical' through a new engagement with history, and has begun to deliver worthwhile and meaningful knowledge to an eager and interested community.

Some of the work appearing now is at last answering Graham Connah's clarion call that historical archaeology, rather than merely focusing on the 'collection of data', ought to be about 'increasing...our understanding of the human past' through 'problem-oriented research'.¹ The emergence of innovative, more integrated and cross-disciplinary approaches has meant that Brian Egloff's doubts over the usefulness of 'yet another heap of artefacts' may be allayed, for small things are indeed being 'focused upon matters that concern Australians'.²

In short, the discipline is not facing a crisis. On the contrary, it is entering a most exciting and fruitful phase. While commendable in its concern and urgent fluency, Connah's most recent paper provides a rather narrow viewpoint of the current state of historical archaeology.³ His perspective, we contend, looks backward, seeing a fading 'scholarly discipline' anchored solely in academia. His assertion that 'a discipline consists very largely of its body of published material' fails to recognise the growing contribution of other forms of public archaeology in Australia in the late twentieth century.⁴ The associated contention that 'unless [historical archaeology] can properly establish itself in university education it seems unlikely to achieve wide acceptance by the tax-paying public at large' ignores the reality of public participation and interest in private sector archaeological projects and the demand for delivery of 'archaeology' to interested tax payers in an accessible form.

Recent developments – the dialogue emerging between history and archaeology, the new publications and other media which have either appeared or are about to appear, interest from the wider community and recent academic appointments in the discipline – provide a counter-viewpoint and cause for optimism. We would like to revisit Connah's main issues, from the perspective of current approaches and work in historical archaeology. Some of the real problems and challenges facing the discipline and the profession can then also be explored.

A CRISIS IN THE ACADEMY?

One major concern is what Connah calls the 'failure of the university base' in historical archaeology, citing the cases of older departments at New England, Sydney and the Australian National University. But the news is not all bad. In spite of the fact that archaeology departments all over the country are shrinking, that the university sector as a whole is suffering from

massive downsizing, recent new appointments have been made in historical archaeology at La Trobe (Melbourne), Flinders (Adelaide), James Cook (Townsville), Western Australia (Perth) and Northern Territory University (Darwin). From this perspective, historical archaeology appears to be doing rather better than many other disciplines. It has not so much withered away as moved on. Student numbers at La Trobe are flourishing, with historical archaeology having the highest enrolments in the department, comprising considerable numbers of honours students and postgraduates. Numbers enrolled in the newly introduced Bachelor of Archaeology at Flinders University are also healthy.⁵ While it is true that a new appointment has not been made at Sydney University, this is reported to be because there were not enough students to justify a position.⁶ It might be more fruitful, then, for Connah to enquire after the *reasons* for poor student numbers, rather than to point the finger at archaeological consultants, along with prehistorians and historians, for the apparent demise of the discipline there.

In the latter part of the century the discipline has also moved rapidly in another important direction. Environmental and heritage legislation has stimulated private-sector demand for commercial archaeological work. The reality is that, now and in the foreseeable future, consultancy work in historical archaeology will receive greater resources and generate more new research than its academic counterpart, both in Australia and elsewhere.⁷ Good examples of collaborative work now underway between government agencies and universities are the projects in which the N.S.W. National Parks and Wildlife Service is involved, including a GIS study of the expansion of European settlement on the Cumberland Plain (with the University of Western Sydney) and a study of the archaeology of whaling in southern Australia and New Zealand (with La Trobe University).⁸

Here we come to Connah's argument that 'tensions between archaeological scholarship on one hand, and archaeological consulting and cultural resource management on the other...have been at least a contributing factor leading to the crisis situation'. But is this fair? Is it true? Is it, dare we ask, conducive to mutual understanding and support? This stance, voiced here and by some others, ignores the common ground: the fact that consultants are mostly the products of university education in the first place; and the goodwill and co-operation which does occur between the two arms of the discipline in the shape of editing, conferences, guest lectures, seminars, joint projects and so on.

In highlighting (and thus contributing to) tension and division, rather than common ground, Connah fails to recognise that the future of academic historical archaeology

may well lie in large part with cultural resource management. This, of course, will require something of a shift in mindset and an adjustment to the traditional culture within the profession. We need to move away from narrowly conceived ideas about what historical archaeology is, and how to go about it, away from the notion that it can only be properly practised within the academy, and towards a culture which reflects the inevitable interdependence of academia and consulting practice. Donald L. Hardesty offers a vision for historical archaeology in the next millennium:

Much of the rift between academe and CRM that continues to divide archaeology begins with a poorly developed culture, sense of professional responsibility, and loyalty to the larger archaeological community. Archaeologists properly instilled with a strong dose of professionalism and commitment to the archaeological community will conduct high quality research whether they are working in the halls of academe or in CRM and whether they are professors, principal investigators, crew chiefs, or entry-level archaeological technicians.⁹

The good news is that high levels of professionalism and commitment are well evident in consulting practice. To tour the many cases where this has occurred is beyond the space available here, so we offer our own work on the Cumberland Street/Gloucester Street project (1994-1996), in Sydney's Rocks area, as a case study in the successful collaboration and integration of academic and consultants' perspectives, research and skills.¹⁰ Although this project would seem to go to the heart of the issues Connah has raised about consultants, about publication and about 'important questions', the reports, papers and publications which document it were not cited in his paper.¹¹

PUBLICATION IN THE DISCIPLINE

This brings us to a closely related issue: the role of publications. Connah locates the so-called crisis in historical archaeology with the 'limited' body of published material which has largely 'failed to make an intellectual impact outside the discipline'. His implication is that consultants are the main culprits because many do not publish the findings from their projects.

A number of observations need to be made here. Connah will be pleased to learn that a number of the books and articles *have* recently been published, works which explore the past archaeologically, with flair and insight, and which ask and respond to important questions.¹² A volume of the US journal *Historical Archaeology* focusing on new Australian work is now in preparation. All of these have the potential to 'make an intellectual impact outside the discipline'.

The Cumberland Street/Gloucester Street project, managed and undertaken by consultants, has to date produced both substantial preparatory, theoretical/conceptual and historical reports (not as such suitable for publication, it is true, but publicly available nonetheless, from both the Mitchell Library and the N.S.W. Department of Planning Library).¹³ A complete set of site, artefact, specialist and interpretative reports, has been published by (and at considerable cost to) Godden Mackay Logan Pty Ltd. Five papers have been or are about to be published in scholarly journals and books. These deal with the innovative approach and methodology developed for the project, the new light archaeology throws on the Rocks' traditional reputation as a 'slum', and on the idea of the 'slum' itself; a reappraisal of the James Deetz' structuralist 'world view' approach and its implications for the study of colonies on a global scale through archaeology; and the problems and possibilities of interpreting archaeological material in museums. A book, *Inside the Rocks: The archaeology of a neighbourhood*, written for a general as well as a scholarly audience, merges the archaeology of the site with the family,

community and cultural experiences of its people. It demonstrates and explores the ways in which archaeology allows us the 'inside' view denied us by standard historical accounts of places like the Rocks, a view which is essential if we are to grasp the nature of our urban past.¹⁴

It may be argued that the amount of consultants' work which is published is a small proportion of what they produce. Yet a quick analysis of Volumes 1 to 15 of this Journal reveals that more than 70 percent of the papers are the work of consultants or derive from consulting work. There are also other publications in which consultants' work appears.¹⁵

But here we need to take a step back. If we think about the kind of work that consultants produce, it is not as simple as saying all of it should be published, and that consultants are duty-bound to do so for the 'sake of the discipline'. The vast bulk of this material is entirely unsuited for such a purpose. Reports are for the main part written in response to statutory requirements, in a formal style for clients who need to know something specific. Often, the documents and artefacts that result (Connah's 'stamps'), are of limited scope and interest; they are, in other words, a publishing nightmare. Lees rather unkindly calls them 'so what' reports, noting that they 'are unfortunate because they could be better, but they do have a *de facto* role in sallying forth data for others to use'.¹⁶ God forbid that forests should be decimated and our library shelves groan with tomes about watching briefs on drains and impact statements on electricity easements.

This is not to say that the material does not have its uses. Lees and others recognise that archaeologists have an obligation to collect this sort of data, to carefully record sites and features, as a permanent and accurate archive for the future.¹⁷ Use of regional research designs or frameworks can go some way to increasing the usefulness and relevance of this material. A system of retrieval such as a permanent and up-to-date bibliographical register, or even computer digitising of reports, would be very useful in keeping track of available data (and save consultants from having to re-invent the wheel every time they start a new project). But in many cases, even with well-devised research designs and exemplary archaeological practice, the possibilities for conveying this sort of information to either an academic or a wider audience are still limited. We need, therefore, to cease the self-recriminations over unpublished reports, and recognise that most serve a useful but narrow purpose.

Publication *is* important, however, where extensive and important sites are concerned, those places and artefacts which, in David Thomas' words, 'can tell us something we didn't already know';¹⁸ or, in Lees' qualifying terms '[something] that we or someone else wanted to know';¹⁹ or which, in Carmel Schrire's broader reflections, 'shift the emphasis' in our understandings about the past.²⁰ The real question is how to go about transforming the piles of reports, the 'heap of artefacts', the scraped-back site, into an essay or a book, or other media, which informs and enlightens not just our own colleagues, but those in other disciplines.

The issue here has to do with writing, and archaeologists are not alone. Judith Brett has wondered why so few Australian academics are good writers. Good writing, she says, requires 'a fully imagined audience, a sense of urgency, and something important or interesting to say'.²¹ To have the 'wider impact' which Connah regards as imperative, then, historical archaeology must address important questions and issues, and it has to approach and express them in accessible language. If publication alone were to be the measure of the discipline, it is the quality not the quantity of the material which should be the focus.

To provide material of quality, that is, of importance and relevance, historical archaeology must move outside itself,

away from the intensive search for itself, and look outwards. Not everyone is riveted by the 'difficulties facing archaeologists'; not every book or article should be focused on them.²² In some quarters, historical archaeology does have a tendency to be self-absorbed, to ignore and shut out wider perspectives and ideas, in a mistaken idea of 'scholarly rigour', or a vague notion of 'developing the discipline'. Scholarly rigour is, of course, essential, but if confused with closed-mindedness, and the obsessive patrolling of disciplinary 'boundaries', the effect is to paralyse the whole enterprise. Sadly, earnest and self-important statements which are too narrow in focus and which show no awareness of the world outside archaeology means that archaeologists not only will not be heard, but can become easy targets for lampooning.²³ It is time, too, to take Henry Glassie's 1975 advice for furthering the discipline and concentrate on 'actual studies' rather than prescriptive essays.²⁴

Finally, it should be observed that writing and publishing our work is, after all, only one half of the equation. The other half is reading. It is reading which allows ideas and information to be exchanged, passed on, mulled over, responded to and developed, all of which form the real scholarly underpinnings of the discipline, the means by which it moves forward. Publications and other important works must be read, and in a scholarly way, that is, thoroughly, with an open mind, patience and care. Conversely, little can be learned or exchanged if reading is narrow, cursory and dismissive.²⁵ Without scholarly reading, there is little point in writing and publishing.

REACHING OUT

Connah's final plea, and it is a most worthy one, is that historical archaeologists should reach out with their insights and findings to colleagues in other disciplines, and to the wider public.²⁶ For the latter he suggests popular books, videos, CDs, web sites and field participation.

Public participation was also taken seriously at the Cumberland/Gloucester Street site. In the great tradition of inviting the public to help excavate sites, many hundreds of volunteers participated both on site and in post-excavation activities. Thousands more attended regular site tours or read the project pamphlets, which were regularly updated by our client, the Sydney Cove Authority. Over the four month period of work on site, there was regular coverage by television, radio and print media. An education kit for school use is in preparation. The project was showcased at the 1995 'Foundation Day Lecture' sponsored by the Friends of First Government House and has been presented in various other seminars and lectures.²⁷ An illustrated book has recently been released, a number of the artefacts from the site are now on display at the Sydney Visitor's Centre and preparations are underway to open and interpret the site itself to the public. We might point out that the project has thus probably reached a larger, and certainly a far wider, audience than has *Australasian Historical Archaeology* over its sixteen years. Other consultants have similar success stories. The excavations at the site of First Government House in Sydney involved people of all ages, many of them unemployed, and from all walks of life. This project also produced an illustrated book for a general audience.²⁸ Archaeology is presented to the public in several Sydney museums, including Hyde Park Barracks and the Museum of Sydney. The challenge is to continue to improve the quality and depth of the information conveyed to the public in these many forms.

If 'to survive in a democracy [historical archaeology] must voluntarily gain public support', it follows that public programs are more than important – they are integral to the discipline.²⁹ The role of community, and the need to address a popular as well as an academic audience, are considerations essential to the future and health of historical archaeology in

Australia. So 'reaching out' itself means that the discipline involves a great deal more than just its scholarly published works.

The very act of consulting is, itself, an effective conduit between academia and the community. Consultant archaeologists must deal day-to-day with both interested and hostile clients and agencies; continually exploring what archaeology is about; convincing, arguing and always needing to justify the merits of a specific site or project. Many consultants regularly incorporate a public program into their work and have developed finely-tuned public relations, media and communication skills. The audience may not always be as receptive as students, but many of the messages are similar. The difference is that at university the preaching is to the converted. The consultant, by contrast, often works at the coalface, changing societal perceptions and understandings.

But perhaps the distinction between scholarly and public interest has been made too firmly. There is no real reason why the 'reading public' (in the argot of Australian publishers) would not be interested in the sorts of things archaeologists research and write about. Or would they? It depends partly on the language and style employed. Readers have to be able to read our work, so the unfortunate penchant for piling up big, complicated words to express simple ideas might be dispensed with here. More vital still are the 'important things' archaeologists have to say to others.

Here we return to the problem at the heart of all these issues: whether archaeology does indeed 'look outwards' from itself, and *how* it can go about making that 'intellectual contribution to issues of interest to our contemporary society'. To achieve this, we need important questions. It is so often simply stated that the questions we ask of archaeological evidence should be 'archaeological' rather than 'historical'. But what does this mean?

On one hand it means, quite rightly, that questions must be asked which archaeology can answer. The Cumberland/Gloucester Street project hinged partly on an awareness of this *at the outset*. Its research design evolved over some years, and in response to frequent calls for an integrated approach to urban archaeology in Sydney.³⁰ A new approach to using and presenting excavated data was developed, one based on context, interaction and imagination (in Greg Denning's terms).³¹ A context for the archaeology of the site was constructed by integrating recent historiography about eighteenth- and nineteenth-century social, cultural and material history, current debates about the nature of life in nineteenth-century Sydney and the intimate historical exploration of the Rocks' convict community presented in Karskens' *The Rocks: Life in early Sydney*.³² The historical and archaeological assessment reports prepared for the site are thus an extensive body of supporting research and thought for the research design, which, in its final, distilled form comprised five important, open-ended questions about our urban past to which the archaeology of this site could respond. There were, in addition, sets of middle-range and site-specific questions designed to make these larger enquiries more accessible. As Karskens has argued elsewhere, the project also moved forward through constant dialogue, a crossing over, between history and archaeology, something which is far more difficult, sometimes impossible, to achieve in the more customary system of separate stages (*viz.* assessment, history, excavation, analysis and, the ultimate desideratum, interpretation).³³

But as one colleague, reflecting on what 'archaeological questions' might mean, remarked dryly: 'I think...they will be about dirt'. By this he meant questions 'of archaeological practice', concerned with delving into the infinite intricacies of sites themselves, limited to stratigraphy or taphonomy, about methods of excavation.³⁴ As much recent research and publications have shown, the agenda is no longer limited in this

way. It is still worthwhile asking, though, why it had tended to be so circumscribed in the past. For example, Connah still asserted in 1993 that archaeologists confined themselves to 'wonder[ing] where the material evidence for the early years of Sydney has gone', and that they were, conversely, not concerned with the wider questions about 'the early years of Sydney and the origins of the colony of New South Wales'.³⁵

One explanation may lie with the 'handmaiden of history', a haunting spectre conjured up by Ivor Noël-Hume some 35 years ago now, which made regular appearances at conferences and seminars whenever the relationship between archaeology with history was raised.³⁶ The dread that archaeology might become merely ancillary to the discipline of history was a most disabling and unwarranted one. (The gendered implications of the metaphor also makes one pause!). In the first place, when Connah writes 'The historians are getting restless', he is overstating the case. Many historians know little about historical archaeology and care still less. We cannot think of any who actively conspire to annex and subjugate the discipline. Second, this fear appears to have played an inordinate role in limiting the scope of archaeological enquiry in the past. Archaeologists seemed shy of reaching out into 'wider questions' for fear that they might be 'historical'; or quite simply 'not what we do'.

Often apparent was a confusion of 'the past' with 'history', and 'history' (our accounts of the past) with 'history' (the discipline). Important questions are often by nature 'historical', because they are 'paths' into the past, attempts to deal with, to piece together what we can of the past, whether human, material or environmental. Questions about, for example, environmental history, Indigenous and European encounters and experience, and consumption are all 'historical' questions.³⁷ What makes them 'archaeological' is the sources used, the focus, the special skills archaeologists employ to access these sources and write from their distinctive perspective, just the same as anthropologists or sociologists use their special skills in writing their accounts of the past. This does not make *them* 'handpersons of history'.

Charles Joyner has observed that 'If any two disciplines share common ground and common challenges, they are history and historical archaeology'.³⁸ Despite assertions to the contrary, they both examine the flotsam and jetsam from the same past, they seek to weave accounts of the same past. They have so much of importance to tell one another.

In order to frame the important and relevant questions which will allow historical archaeology to be both seen and heard, we first need to study the material and documentary sources themselves. But, since 'archaeology does not provide the totality of the research agenda',³⁹ since we need to consider a variety of models and frameworks in developing research designs,⁴⁰ we must also reach across disciplinary and public/private sector boundaries and plunge into what others have already found out and thought about a place, a site, a process or an experience. We must continue to devise 'mid-range' questions and approaches - practical, workable ways to relate the small things to the large enquiries. The magic lies in the engagement, the dialogue, the shifting between the sources, the moment when one source or idea throws new light upon another, shows it in a startlingly new perspective.

There is much more to our discipline and profession than a rigid corpus of material published in a narrow range of journals, and an obligation to add to it. Historical archaeology in Australia will continue to work free of its restrictive cocoon to fulfil its bright potential.

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NOTES

- 1 Connah 1983:15.
- 2 Egloff 1994:3-4.
- 3 Connah 1998:3-7.
- 4 Connah 1998:5.
- 5 Pers. comm. Susan Lawrence, Department of Archaeology, La Trobe University; Mark Staniforth, Flinders University.
- 6 Pers. comm. Associate Professor Richard Waterhouse, Pro-Dean undergraduate matters, University of Sydney. Academic staff are appointed on the basis of student numbers. The decision not to make a new appointment was made by the Faculty of Arts.
- 7 See, for example, Mackay 1996:126; Gray 1999:60.
- 8 Pers. comm. Susan Lawrence, La Trobe University; Denis Byrne, N.S.W. National Parks and Wildlife Service. See Lawrence and Staniforth 1998.
- 9 Hardesty 1999:56.
- 10 The project was directed by Richard Mackay of Godden Mackay Pty Ltd (now Godden Mackay Logan Pty Ltd). Grace Karskens was the Project Historian.
- 11 Godden Mackay Pty Ltd and Karskens 1999. The unpublished reports on the project have been available since 1996; Karskens 1996-7. Papers have also been read at seminars and conferences, 1994-1999.
- 12 See for example Stuart 1992; Mackay 1996; Byrne 1996-7; Lydon 1999; Karskens 1996-97 and 1999b; Lawrence forthcoming.
- 13 Godden Mackay Pty Ltd and Karskens, 1994; Karskens 1994.
- 14 Mackay 1996; Karskens 1996-97, 1998, 1999a, b, in press a, b.
- 15 See for example *Public History Review*; *Australian Institute for Maritime Archaeology Bulletin*; Museum of Sydney 1996.
- 16 Lees 1999:63.
- 17 Raab and Klinger 1979:329.
- 18 Thomas 1978:236.
- 19 Lees 1999:63.
- 20 Schrire 1996:111.
- 21 Brett 1991:513-22.
- 22 Lydon 1998.
- 23 Joyner 1992; Flanagan 1990.
- 24 Glassie 1975:viii.
- 25 See for example Allison's brief reference to the Cumberland Street/Gloucester Street project, Allison 1998:21.
- 26 Of course in venturing towards a general audience one does run the appalling risk of being labelled 'populist'; see Allison 1998:21.
- 27 Godden Mackay Pty Ltd and Karskens 1999.
- 28 Proudfoot *et al.* 1991:11. See also Kelly 1997.
- 29 Schuyler 1999:69.
- 30 Karskens and Thorp 1992.

- 31 Denning 1998:208-9.
- 32 Karskens and Thorp 1992; Karskens 1994; Karskens 1997. *The Rocks. Life in early Sydney* was mostly researched and written between 1990 and 1994, before the Cumberland/Gloucester Street project. Although, in the interest of promoting historical archaeology, it showcased some of the preliminary findings from the site, it was not primarily about the site or the project, as Allison has assumed, Allison 1998:21.
- 33 Karskens 1996-97; 1999b.
- 34 Pers. comm. Iain Stuart to Grace Karskens August 1994.
- 35 Connah 1993:21
- 36 Noël-Hume 1964:215-225.
- 37 Allison 1998:21.
- 38 Joyner 1992:14.
- 39 Murray 1985.
- 40 Egloff 1994.

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