

Graham Connah: Writing Historical Archaeology in Australia

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Graham Connah's field research in rural Australia and his advocacy of the importance of publishing archaeological research is discussed. A link is drawn between Connah's earliest work in Australia, particularly his justification of the archaeological enterprise, and his continuing commitment to bringing the outcomes of that research to professional colleagues and the general public alike. In doing this he sets a significant challenge for the profession in Australia – one that we frequently struggle to meet.

Historical archaeologists in Australia have readily embraced the virtues of critical reflection about the state of their field since its inception late last century (see e.g. Bairstow 1984; Connah 1983a, 1998a, 2007a; Egloff 1994; Ireland 2001; Mackay and Karskens 1999; Murray 1985, 2002; Murray and Allen 1986; Patterson and Wilson 2000). Although practitioners seem not to require much excuse to burst into print, retirements among the founders of the field in Australia have prompted both backward and forward looking reflection (by retirees and by others contributing to festschriften and other surveys) (see e.g. Anderson and Murray 2000; Connah 2006; Patterson and Casey 2006). Generally such reflections have been positive, celebrating the fact that after a difficult birth and early childhood, historical archaeology in Australia is rapidly maturing, and is stronger and more diverse than ever before.

One major site of diversity has to do with changes in focus, from an early concentration on documenting the material historic heritage of Australia to an enterprise where other interests are also recognized. For some time now Australian historical archaeologists have been developing richer ties with colleagues in other disciplines (especially history), and in other countries, as the attention of practitioners is simultaneously drawn inward and outward, exploring both local and global frames of reference. From its inception Australian historical archaeology has been very strongly influenced by North American practice, but it is now possible – especially in subfields such as urban archaeology and indigenous historical archaeology, as well as in archaeological heritage management – to imagine a time when Australian work will come to play an important role in global historical archaeology (although this will require a simultaneous move away from the parochialism that infests the North American scene) (see e.g. Burke 1999; Harrison and Williamson 2002; Lawrence 2003; Lawrence and Karskens 2003; Lydon and Ireland 2005; Mayne and Murray 2001; Murray 2004; Silliman 2005; Torrence and Clarke 2000). There are also increasingly clear signs that practitioners are much more willing to take seriously the differences between the historical archaeology of Australia and that of North America, thereby avoiding some of the more obvious problems that flow from trying to shoe-horn disparate data into approaches built to explain other contexts.

Perhaps most important of all is that historical archaeology in Australia is becoming more visible both at home and abroad. Part of the reason for this increased visibility is the growth in the number of practitioners (especially those directly attached to one or other aspect of the heritage industry). Another part flows from a more sophisticated connection with the general public, be it through museum displays or public programs managed by State and Federal heritage authorities, consultants and developers which frequently focus on site-related activities that now seem to be

so much a feature of the development process – especially in urban areas (see e.g. Lydon and Ireland 2005).

Of course there continue to be serious differences of opinion among practitioners about both theoretical and methodological matters, but it is entirely healthy to debate these matters precisely because they are endlessly ponderable, and each generation of archaeologists has to sort out their positions in ways that seem meaningful (and practical) to them. But for all this discussion to be more than mannered vapouring it has to be built on firm foundations of research and publication. Creating and communicating knowledge about the historical archaeology of Australia whatever its context (local, regional, national or transnational) has to be our primary goal, no matter whether we work in academy, in the heritage industry, or are enthusiastic amateurs.

In this short paper I want to reflect on the contribution made by Graham Connah to the building of those foundations and the establishment of public discourse about historical archaeology in Australia. Part of that reflection will be a very brief appraisal of Connah's research in Australia, but the greater part will focus on his efforts to foster a culture of writing about the historical archaeology of Australia.

BEFORE AND AFTER THE AUSTRALASIAN JOURNAL OF HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

The 'knockers' will question, of course, whether this *particular* moment is really a good time to set out on such a new venture. After all, publication is expensive and there are so many journals already. In addition the apparently failing interest of Australian society in matters of scholarship and higher education means that at the moment even university libraries are cutting back on their purchases of journals in order to save money. In the face of such difficulties it would be easier to take the safe way out and do nothing. The plain fact is, however, that there never has been a journal of Australian historical archaeology, and those of us who research in or teach this subject, or try to extend public interest in the Australian heritage, feel that we need one. There is an increasing volume of historical archaeological work being done in Australia and we need to provide improved facilities for its publication (Connah 1983a:2)

While it is too much to claim that the historical archaeology of Australia would remain substantially unwritten without the work of Graham Connah, there is abundant evidence that it would have been very much poorer without him. At one level the facts speak for themselves. *Of the hut I build* (1988) remains the only book length treatment of the broad field some two decades after its publication (Connah

released a 2nd edition retitled *The Archaeology of Australia's History* in 1993) although new syntheses are in the offing. *Australasian Historical Archaeology*, the flagship journal in this part of the world had Connah as its foundation editor and, sometimes, its chief sustainer. Indeed on more than one occasion Connah used this journal to wage a campaign to encourage practitioners to publish their data (see e.g. Connah 1983a, 1998a, 2007a), sometimes prompting terse reactions (Mackay and Karskens 1999). But it is perhaps typical of Connah that arguing for the importance of publication came after actually demonstrating the value of 'materializing' his own research into publication. Here we can plainly see the problems Connah wished to explore, and the theoretical framework he adapted to help him do it.

His early work at Winterbourne (NSW) bears witness to the importance of finding a way of communicating the significance of historical archaeology in Australia through the analysis of the places and material culture occupied and created during the period when settlers were *becoming* Australian. For him historical archaeology was to be an important window onto that process.

Historical archaeology is a new field of interest in Australia and this book aims to demonstrate the varied paths of inquiry by which we can build up history on a subject for which no history exists. We have used archaeological field research, study in historical archives and libraries, oral traditions and comparative museum data to piece together a picture of early European settlement in a particular part of Australia. We hope that this 'study in historical archaeology' will demonstrate something of the nature of this fascinating new subject and also how such material history can throw light on the nature of cultural adaptation to a new environment. In short, this book is at least partly a case-study of how English people, and others, became Australians (Connah et al. 1978:vii).

The theme of cultural adaptation in a sense encapsulating the process of *becoming* Australian appears again and again in Connah's work, most recently in the monograph study of Lake Innes (NSW) (Connah 2007b, but see also 1998b, 2001). Connah's discussion of a world in transition, bolstered by cheap convict labour and doomed to failure when transportation ceased, is grounded in the language of adaptation. Innes' vaunting ambitions to become a gentleman (and their subsequent frustration) are materialized in the ceramics and the architecture of the Lake Innes Estate. Other sites, other places demonstrate the process of technological (as well as cultural) adaptation (see e.g. Connah 1994), but there is a clarity of exposition at Lake Innes that lifts the Major's story from being a sad cautionary tale of a bunyip aristocrat gone bust, to something that tells us much about aspiration and identity – both in the colony of New South Wales and at home. Perhaps most important is the simple fact that without Connah's work at Winterbourne or Lake Innes our understanding of the significance of such places would be slight indeed.

It is also true that these interventions in part were driven by preservationist agendum. In Connah's view places like Winterbourne and Lake Innes (like so many thousands of others) were under threat from human action (be it development or straightforward pillaging by bottle collectors and the like) or through natural processes of decay. The best way of conserving what could be preserved and salvaging what could not, was to *understand* them – by which of course he meant to document, research, and write about them. Publication had a vital role to play here as well.

To be of any use these things must tell us something, they must help us to understand – and they must help

us to understand something of significance. Yet, as I see it, there is a dilemma: in many places sites and artefacts do need urgent recording before they are wiped from the face of the earth. They will not wait for University academics to decide that they might (perhaps) be relevant to the latest research project. I do not pretend to know how to resolve this dilemma but the example of my own work that I have discussed show how I have attempted to find a solution. In the end, I suspect that we must all become efficient collectors of stamps but we must all endeavour to use those stamps to increase our understanding (and the understanding of society as a whole) of the history of Australia. (Connah 1983b:21).

Of course Connah's dilemma is a common one – documentation and recording cannot occur in a theoretical vacuum, no matter how vestigial or deeply buried the theory might be. But how do we gauge the value of our documentation – or indeed the value of the theories that either implicitly or explicitly underpin it? The answer is both simple and potentially disturbing. The best way to assess the value of theory (and the recording, research and understandings that it makes possible) is to *use* it, and to *regularly review* the outcomes of its use. While it might be possible to envisage a basic level of generic documentation that could be applied to the bulk of sites and contexts, it is not possible to record a site or a context in a way that will allow us to ask and to answer all possible questions, now and into the future. For some time now (certainly since the advent of the New Archaeology) archaeologists have been aware of the link between recording and theory, and the requirement that recording strategies be *explicit* expressions of theory, in essence that they should be clear and unambiguous statements about why some things were recorded and not others. It should be clear that this fundamental principle implies that both documentation and theory are in *dynamic*, rather than *static*, interaction.

These are basic propositions about the nature of knowledge that have been around since David Hume but they can still be very hard to live up to. The value of Connah's demonstration (leaving aside the intrinsic value of his discussions of the archaeology of adaptation, or indeed his documentation of those sites) is precisely the fact that he completed the circle from documentation to publication – we all now have the opportunity to explore whether his account of Lake Innes really does support his views about the reality of class distinctions at the place.

Back in 1986 Jim Allen and I spent some time discussing the use by practitioners of themes and checklists as a kind of substitute for theory, identifying a disturbing tendency to use, but not to regularly review our use of them (Murray and Allen 1986). In a subsequent discussion (Murray 2002) I observed that in the intervening years not much had changed, and that the business of theory building and evaluation (and the inherent uncertainties this brings) seemed to be at odds with the goals of documentation and management that lie at the heart of the heritage agendum. I also stressed that this 'difference' was entirely artificial and that anyone who uses theory (whatever the context) must embrace the reality that change should be inevitable (the limits of theory being tested, as it were, by coming to grips with new data or new problems). At the core of these observations was a plea for the recognition of the dynamic interaction between theory and recording and for openness and engagement, especially as the Exploring the Archaeology of the Modern City project was bringing home, very forcefully, the need for regular review of archaeological practice generally (see e.g. Murray et al. 2003).

WRITING THE FUTURE

This was (and remains) much easier said than done, but notwithstanding the exchanges between Connah and Mackay and Karskens (1999), a significant problem about information flow and public discussion and evaluation of the work of historical archaeologists in Australia really does exist. Like Connah I strongly believe that we need to do something about it.

So, what about the future? Do we wish to see our work contribute to a central core of scholarship that represents the discipline, or is it enough that we concentrate on the physical preservation of our heritage instead of materializing it in a literary form (Connah 2007a:106).

It has been a commonplace for some time now that the vast bulk of archaeological work takes place within heritage management contexts as distinct from pure academic research. This is a function of both money and personnel. Given the importance of heritage archaeology in Australia, it should follow that it is vitally important to us all that work undertaken in this context should be available to all who are interested, and that its findings and conclusions should be available for professional scrutiny. Further, given the fact that the heritage of Australia we bequeath to our successors will very much be shaped by the content of that work and the management decisions that are based on it, then it seems even more vital that this work reach the public domain. All historical archaeologists, no matter whether they work in pure or applied contexts (or even both), have a stake in the process of evaluation – of methods, theories, conclusions and understandings. In this context I enthusiastically applaud the recent publication by Heritage Victoria (in CD format) of literally thousands of reports submitted to that agency. It is a massive step forward in providing access to the historical archaeology of Victoria in a way which would simply not be possible if we were to rely solely on formal publication. Heritage Victoria has set a wonderful example that should be assiduously (and rapidly) followed by other agencies.

This is one aspect of publication and, as acknowledged by Connah, it does not need to take a purely literary form. But the information does need to get out there, and it is my firm belief that it is our *ethical* duty to ensure that it does. Documenting and managing the archaeological heritage of Australia has spawned a large industry that is a vital element of a growing Australian economy. However, acknowledging the centrality of heritage management to the development process does not absolve participants of their ethical duties as archaeologists. To go further, while in the present context I focus on the need to publish what we do, this is only the tip of a larger management iceberg. What of the greater problem of management of excavated assemblages and site documents (not just site reports)? Of course some Australian jurisdictions do this better than others, but we need a national solution to this most fundamental of archaeological heritage management issues – the management of the site and its records after salvage.

Again, while we might stress the need to communicate information to each other and to the general public about what we have been doing, failure to appropriately manage the future of our work makes the vital process of review and reassessment (leading to revisions of theory and method) just about impossible to achieve. Certainly our experience of the Casselden Place and the Exploring the Archaeology of the Modern City projects has stressed just how big a problem exists. It is one that we urgently need to confront, and I am happy to acknowledge that the Australian Research Council Linkage Scheme, through its support of our work at the Hyde

Park Barracks and now at Casselden Place, has helped to seriously advance this aspect of historical archaeology in Australia (see <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/amc/>; <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/archaeology/hyde-park-barracks/index.html>). But much more needs to be done and I think that it is vital that our Society (with assistance from the Academy of the Humanities, the various universities and those working in the field of archaeological heritage management) takes the lead by setting national standards for archiving and storage of excavated sites and their records, and the publication and dissemination of reports related to the management of archaeological heritage.

It is also important for practitioners, whatever context they work in, to explore opportunities for collaboration. At La Trobe we have gained immensely from collaborations with heritage agencies and consultancies that have been focused on management issues and primary archaeological research as well as on ‘excavations’ of site archives. Such collaborations help us all to appreciate that the supposedly real distinctions between the ‘pure’ and ‘applied’ contexts of archaeological research do not have much substance and that they do not absolve parties from our ethical duties as archaeologists. Such collaborations are also powerful reminders that for archaeology as a discipline and archaeological heritage management as an industry to be sustainable, they need (above all else) to protect and enhance both excavated and unexcavated archaeological heritage, to embrace and foster a dynamic interaction between archaeology and the public, and to recognize that writing the historical archaeology of Australia is fundamental to that objective.

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