In 1966 Jim Allen undertook the first professional excavation of a European site in Australia. The 1840s military settlement of Victoria was established at Port Essington, the northernmost part of the Northern Territory and was the end point of Ludwig Leichhardt’s epic journey in 1844-45. This settlement was the longest lived of three failed attempts by the British to establish a settlement on the northern coast of Australia before 1850. Its history reflects many of the dominant themes of wider colonial history - isolation, tropical disease, poorly equipped and inexperienced colonists, inept government bureaucracies and relations with the Indigenous population.

By looking at both the material evidence produced by archaeological excavation and the written sources, Allen sought to integrate both sorts of evidence to produce an eclectic history that was neither social nor political nor economic in its primary emphasis, but combined all three. When his research was presented as a doctoral dissertation at the Australian National University in 1969 its main theoretical thrust concerned the problems of this data integration and this remains a central issue in the discipline of historical archaeology in Australasia.

Some 40 years on, ASHA’s decision to launch its new monograph series by publishing this work has several purposes. At one level this monograph is of historical importance in establishing where the discipline began in this country. It explains both the theoretical and methodological problems Allen faced and how he sought to overcome them. At another level it provides the data from an important excavation that has not been previously published. On a third level it provides a particular sort of historical account of a small but important chapter of Australia’s European beginnings that could not have been written without the dual sources of written documents and archaeology. Together they reflect a poigniant episode in our past. In the decade following this work Port Essington became the subject of a four part ABC-TV drama, a musical composition by Peter Sculthorpe and paintings by Russell Drysdale.

*Port Essington* will appeal as a reference book to both students and practitioners of historical archaeology and to people interested in Australian colonial history.

After Port Essington, Jim Allen established an academic career in prehistoric archaeology in Australia and the Pacific. He is currently Emeritus Professor in the School of Historical and European Studies in La Trobe University.