

Archaeology and History in Central Australia

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The author discusses the relevance of historical archaeology to his multi-disciplinary work on history and the landscape in Central Australia. He notes the archaeologists' important contribution to analyses of Aboriginal-European conflict, pastoral expansion and gold mining but finds that the value of archaeological work has lain more in detailed studies than in general insights.

In 1991 the North Australia Research Unit of the Australian National University published my book *History and the Landscape in Central Australia: A Study of the Material Evidence of European Culture and Settlement*. It was concerned with a large yet very sparsely settled region in the Northern Territory which for over a century had a particularly clear physical, economic and cultural identity. I argued that the region's history of European occupation was of special fascination as it revealed contrasting human responses to the difficulties of life on one of the world's most remote frontiers.¹

The book adopted a multidisciplinary approach but could not have been written without the theories and findings of historical archaeologists. It explained how historic evidence was present in various sites, artefacts and structures throughout Central Australia which often provided as much information about and understanding of the past as written and oral sources. It maintained that such evidence required not just understanding but legislative protection. The book analysed links between the process of European settlement in Central Australia and the region's contemporary cultural landscape and how in the 1980s and early 1990s very different ideas emerged about the preservation and interpretation of that landscape. Topics covered included relations between Europeans and Aborigines, the role of communications, the place of pastoralism and mining in economic and social development and the characteristics of the one major urban centre.

Reviewers, while not being entirely uncritical, generally welcomed the book. W. Ross Johnston described it in *The Australian Journal of Politics and History* as 'being a valuable case study illustrating the value of material culture evidence. Also, it points to openings for historians who want to involve themselves in the heritage trail'.² 'In writing this book', Sandy Blair and Juliet Ramsay stated in *Australian Historical Studies*, 'Carment has issued a challenge to other historians (metaphorically speaking) to follow Sir Keith Hancock, in his stout walking boots, out of the library and into the historical landscape!'³ Peter Bell wrote in *Northern Perspective* that the book was a worthy celebration of a 'rather brutal sense of place, expressed as an analysis of how it has affected the historic environment we have inherited in the Centre today'.⁴

I did not become aware of the value of material culture until the early 1980s. Prior to then I was a fairly orthodox historian whose early research and publications were in the field of Australian federal political history. But in the late 1970s I developed an interest in both regional history and historic buildings. This grew rapidly when I spent two years between 1981 and 1983 as Director of the National Trust in the Northern Territory. During that period my work meant that I travelled extensively in Central Australia and I was much concerned with its history and cultural landscape. Though I returned to academia at the end of 1983 my concern with the region continued as did my continuing involvement with the

Territory National Trust, of which I was later President. I found that within Central Australia there were sometimes heated arguments over 'heritage', based on radically different ideas about the past. It was partly in the hope that such disputes could be better understood and the heritage conservation cause be promoted that I decided in the mid-1980s, although engaged in several other research tasks, to embark on a short book about Central Australia, using some of the perspectives I had acquired through my National Trust activities.

I was also in the mid-1980s involved in the Committee to Review Australian Studies in Tertiary Education's History and Cultural Resources Project. The project report contended that while most Australian historians were not used to analysing artefacts or historic sites, there were quite exciting opportunities for them to become involved in the study of objects and places. One of the other project participants, Graeme Davison, impressed me greatly with his efforts to interpret some of the contemporary uses of history in Australia which manifested themselves in visual rather than textual forms.⁵

An outcome of the project was my decision to introduce in 1988 an honours subject at the University College of the Northern Territory (after 1989 the Northern Territory University) on 'History and Cultural Resources in Australia'. I have taught this most years since then. The subject is first an assessment of the links between history and other academic disciplines concerned with historic and prehistoric places and objects and second a study of the conservation and understanding of these cultural resources in Australia. It is concerned with strategies through which cultural resources are identified, their significance is assessed and interpretations are constructed for their presentation. The subject also examines the orientation of history in the light of growing 'heritage awareness' in Australia since the 1970s and the role of professional historians in academic institutions, government agencies and community organisations.

Archaeology, I discovered through research and teaching, contributed much to my understanding of remote regions such as Central Australia. Kenneth Hudson influenced me early with his thesis that the international industrial revolution which commenced in Britain during the late nineteenth century had social and economic consequences which could only be properly appreciated when material evidence was considered in addition to documentary sources. His *World Industrial Archaeology* argued that processes associated with mining, food, beverages, construction, metal processing, transport and the generation of power spread all over the world, including sparsely populated and geographically isolated areas caught up in the process of European imperial expansion.⁶ The archaeological techniques he and some other writers described could obviously assist in the reconstruction of working conditions and ways of life for which, in the case of Central Australia, very few sources of written information survived. Another key

influence was Graham Connah's *'Of the hut I builded': The Archaeology of Australia's History*, which revealed how the inquiries of archaeologists had created new and direct images of public and private lives.⁷

Given Central Australia's climate and the enormous administrative disruption there during the Second World War, it is hardly surprising that the written records of the region's past are often fragmentary. There are gaps in government archival holdings due to heat, termites, bombs, storms, neglect, administrative inconsistency and deliberate destruction. Significant collections of private papers were sometimes also damaged or destroyed. In addition, most of those who lived in Central Australia, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, neither made nor kept written records. In a lot of instances the transitory nature of much of the population militated against the development of such records. Until the 1980s most oral history research in the region concentrated on the memories of its better-known white inhabitants.

Not unexpectedly, few professional historians wrote much about Central Australia and none before the 1990s had published a thorough history of the region. Those professional historians who had undertaken research on Central Australia, most of whom worked on aspects of race relations, generally used the normal historical sources, that is written materials and, to a lesser extent, oral testimonies.⁸ The one notable exception was the historian/archaeologist D. J. Mulvaney, whose *Encounters in Place: Outsiders and Aboriginal Australians, 1606-1985*, combined meticulous documentary research with field observation to examine several Central Australian Aboriginal-European 'contact' sites.⁹

It was largely left to researchers in other disciplines to offer the wider perspectives which came from a study of material evidence. Of special importance here, given that I lacked the technical skills to undertake my own archaeological fieldwork at the many places I visited, recorded and decided to include in my book, were those which professional archaeologists provided. Their studies, some of which are discussed below, unequivocally demonstrated ways in which some key historical forces which had an impact on Central Australia could be appreciated.

Of particular interest were analyses of the evidence of Aboriginal-European contacts. Central Australia has a variety of places which provide information on Aboriginal resistance and European attempts to deal with what was often labelled as 'the Aboriginal problem'. Mission stations were established to remove Aborigines from some of their traditional lands and to provide a means of assimilating them into the white economic structure. A fascinating example here is the Manga Manda, or Phillip Creek, mission near Tennant Creek. Its remains include adobe ruins, other building remnants, camp sites and areas where food was gathered and prepared. Patricia Davison of James Cook University prepared an archaeological report for the National Trust on Manga Manda which outlined how the settlement was founded in 1945 and abandoned in 1956, its original purpose being a ration depot for the Walpiri people following their flight after the Coniston massacre of 1928 and their dispossession as a consequence of gold discoveries at Tennant Creek during the 1930s. Davison demonstrated how the material evidence of Manga Manda's history provided valuable insights. While it might, for instance, have been assumed that the dispossessed Walpiri would have lost most of their traditional skills, artefacts discovered in and around the settlement indicated that this was not the case. She found, significantly, that the most rewarding oral accounts came when former inhabitants were recorded while visiting the site. The layout of the settlement's buildings and fences was anything but random and reflected the priorities and attitudes of those in charge, especially order and control. To most of the Aborigines, though, this environment was alien and inflexible.¹⁰

Another aspect of Central Australian history which benefited greatly from archaeological research was pastoral expansion,

which, as in other parts of the country, left clear marks on the landscape. Notable among these was the development of a network of stock routes, the most significant of which followed the route of the Overland Telegraph. Stock needed a lot of water while they were travelling and this posed a considerable problem in Central Australia's arid conditions. To overcome the difficulty numerous wells were constructed along the stock route and in many locations they provide the only human-made structures in otherwise 'empty' locations. A very early survival is Bonney Well. The site consists of a stone dump, the base of a tank stand and a tank. Constructed in 1879, the well continued to be used until the mid-1930s. Eleanor Crosby's archaeological investigation illuminated aspects of early white exploration, the techniques of nineteenth-century well construction and the processes through which the nearby stock route was transformed from a rough track to a public highway.¹¹

A further important economic activity in Central Australia was gold mining and, due to the outstanding and sustained archaeological work of Kate Holmes, Arltunga, located in rugged and dry country east of Alice Springs, has become one of the more comprehensively documented of Australia's remote goldfields. Active between 1887 and 1916, Arltunga at the time of my visits in 1982 and 1991 contained a variety of structures, principally buildings, which illustrated the struggle of miners to establish shelters and other facilities in a most difficult physical environment. These ranged from low semi-circular stone arrangements through to stone huts and more sophisticated structures in the area of a government battery. Holmes found that the documentary records included no direct references to buildings at miners' camps and even the more 'official' buildings were only mentioned when some problems, such as repairs being needed, arose. She contended, nevertheless, in her detailed analysis of a store site at White Range, that excavation and artefact collection at the site combined with archival research revealed quite a lot about the uses of various structures there. Among the excavated artefacts were objects manufactured in Paris, New York and London, supporting Hudson's views on how the baggage of the industrial revolution spread far and wide.¹²

Clearly, then, historical archaeologists provided me with most valuable perspectives. It would be misleading, however, to suggest that their work was always completely satisfying. Its value lay in its very detailed analyses of particular sites but this, perhaps inevitably, meant that it provided only limited general insights. None of the archaeological literature I encountered, including the fascinating, if contentious, arguments on the process of colonisation from Judy Birmingham and D.N. Jeans, really attempted to explain, as David Lowenthal did in *The Past is a Foreign Country*, how a 'cumulative body' of historical relics and recognitions revealed perceptions of the past moulded by selective erosion, oblivion and invention.¹³ Nor did archaeologists take me very far in my not always successful attempts to come to terms with what Tim Rowse saw as the two very different civilisations, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, in Central Australia based on land use and economic organisation.¹⁴ They certainly informed me of significant ways in which settlers, including the Aborigines, modified the landscape and how that process frequently reflected prevailing cultural beliefs. They were not nearly as competent, Johnston observed in his review, in assisting me to link the particular with the general, of assessing the 'full meaning and broader significance' of their work or, as Blair and Ramsay put it, of isolating 'the material evidence of the past from its human context by overly stressing the importance of construction or technology.'¹⁵

Bell's review stated that in the 1990s a work like *History and the Landscape in Central Australia* could 'no longer confine itself to dispassionate clinical description. The aim of this book is not to provide an objective account of these places, but to attribute cultural value to them and argue for their conserva-

tion.¹⁶ He is quite correct in his assertion that I did not attempt complete objectivity. Instead I tried, even if sometimes unconvincingly, to use the evidence and findings of archaeologists and appropriate practitioners in other disciplines to advance, in a partisan manner, the often highly political conservation cause. Without the archaeologists that would have been impossible. I can only repeat my admiration for their work. Yet as Darnaris Bairstow quite shrewdly suggested, while the historical archaeologist, 'because he or she is trained to deal with the particular rather than the broad spectrum', was in a unique position to formulate new hypotheses, 'he or she can make it only by inductive reasoning.'¹⁷ Such an approach did not always provide solutions to the broad historical problems with which I grappled.

NOTES

1. Carment 1991.
2. Johnston 1993.
3. Blair and Ramsay 1993.
4. Bell 1993.
5. Committee to Review Australian Studies in Tertiary Education 1986.
6. Hudson 1979.
7. Connah 1988.
8. See for examples Donovan 1988 and Hartwig 1965.
9. Mulvaney 1989.
10. Davison 1985.
11. Crosby 1979.
12. Forrest 1981; Holmes 1983 and Holmes 1989. Holmes' University of Sydney PhD thesis on Arltunga (Holmes 1990) was still in progress during the period of my research.
13. Birmingham and Jeans 1983; Lowenthal 1985.
14. Rowse 1983.
15. Johnston 1993:95-96; Blair and Ramsay 1993:671.
16. Bell 1993:123.
17. Bairstow 1984:5

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