Creating the canon: materializing Australian historical archaeology*

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The sort of canon with which I am concerned is neither a misspelled antiquated weapon nor a member of the Christian clergy. Instead I use the word in the sense of a generally recognized body of major publications which are central to a particular discipline and that represent a material expression of its scholarship. The matter with which I am concerned is that, after a gestation of over thirty years, historical archaeology in Australia still appears to lack such a canon. By now we might have expected to have major research publications about Port Arthur, Norfolk Island, Sydney's First Government House, Port Essington, and other notable sites, as well as published versions of major doctoral theses, but instead we are mainly restricted to necessarily brief journal papers, or generalizing books that publishers have considered commercially viable, or grey literature that is difficult of access. There are a number of reasons for this situation, of which the difficulty of publishing the major studies that we lack is perhaps the most important. However, we must ask whether we think it matters that such major studies are so rare. 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 preservation of our material heritage instead of materializing it in a literary form?

This session commemorates fifty years since the death of Gordon Childe, perhaps Australia's most famous archaeologist but one who never worked in Australia. Childe made an enormous contribution to archaeological scholarship. According to a bibliography compiled by his secretary Isobel Smith shortly before his death, between 1915 and 1956 he produced over 280 publications, of which some 18 were single-authored books, not counting subsequent editions and translations (Smith 1955). In an autobiographical note published posthumously in the British journal *Antiquity*, he had the following to say about his life's work:

> The most original and useful contributions that I may have made to prehistory are certainly not novel data rescued by brilliant excavation from the soil or by patient research from dusty museum cases, nor yet well founded chronological schemes nor freshly defined cultures, but rather interpretative concepts and methods of explanation (Childe 1958:69).

One might contrast such contributions with those of one of his contemporaries, the Egyptologist William Mathew Flinders Petrie, named after an ancestor familiar to most Australians. Petrie lived so long that he was able to call his autobiography *Seventy years of archaeology*. Unlike Childe, he was pre-eminently an excavator and one who revolu-tionized excavation techniques in the Nile Valley and adjacent areas. However, like Childe, he also produced a monumental amount of publications, in his case including some 90 books, although most of these were excavation and artefact studies (Silverberg 1985:47–48). The point that I am trying to make is that in their different ways both of these archaeologists made major contributions to what might be called the archaeological canon, the body of literature that comprises our discipline. The subject is progressed from generation to generation by this archaeological canon, that represents the material expression of archaeological scholarship. The question I wish to ask is: how are we doing in Australian historical archaeology in our construction of such a body of literature in our discipline area? Considering the role of such material in research, teaching, heritage management, and public awareness, this is a matter of importance to which we should give attention.

The practice of historical archaeology is hardly 40 years old in Australia, a shorter lifespan than that of Australian prehistoric archaeology. Nevertheless, during that time extensive surveys and excavations have been conducted at many locations of significance in colonial and later history. By now we might have expected to have available major detailed mono-graphic publications on Port Arthur, Sarah Island, Norfolk Island, Sydney's First Government House, Port Essington, Irrawang, and other notable sites. However, with rare exceptions this is not the case. Although more modest site-specific studies do exist, the bulk of relevant publication is in the form of necessarily brief journal papers, mostly in what is now called *Australasian Historical Archaeology* that I founded a quarter of a century ago (Connah 1983:2). Similarly, syntheses of Australian historical archaeology are rare, my *Archaeology of Australia's history* originally published almost 20 years ago, and now sadly out of date, is still in print although latterly only in an electronic format (Connah 1988, 1993). In this session dedicated to the past, present and future of our discipline in Australia, it is relevant to ask how this situation has come about. In so doing I have to emphasize that it is Australian historical archaeology with which I am here concerned. I do not intend to comment on the situation in prehistoric archaeology.

The first factor that must be considered is that the publication of archaeological monographs, either of research or of synthesis, remains difficult in this country. Although there is a somewhat ephemeral market for popular glossy heritage publications on such topics as old bridges, old pubs, gold mines, and the like, Australian publishers are disinclined to handle serious archaeological publications; the market is too small and possible overseas sales are limited. After all, commercial publishers are just that, they risk their money when publishing a book just as surely as a punter backing a horse at the races. In both cases, there are few winners and frequent tumbles. At one time university presses were willing to handle the more scholarly and less saleable books but those days have gone, along with such publishers who failed to adapt to the world of triumphant capitalism in which we now live. The answer in many other countries of the Western world has been subsidized publication by private foundations, universities, or government. In Australia, however, private organizations willing to fund scholarly publication are far

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fewer than in the United States or Britain and, although some universities have done what they can, governments have generally fought shy of such commitments. The Australian Research Council, for instance, are willing to fund archaeological research but not its publication nor even the costs incurred in the preparation of such publication. Excavations of mine in Uganda, for instance, were funded by the ARC but their monographic publication in 1996 was by a London-based research institute funded by the British government (Connah 1996). More recently, my ARC-funded work at Lake Innes near Port Macquarie was published by British Archaeological Reports in Oxford (Connah 2007). Curious is it not that the Australian Commonwealth government should be prepared to fund work that is then credited to this country's former colonial master. Perhaps, instead, one could expect that State governments might have become involved in such publication, and in some cases, such as Victoria a few years ago (for example Coutts 1984), this has happened but again the prospects for the aspiring archaeological author are generally not encouraging.

The second factor is the present makeup of the Australian historical archaeology profession. The greater number of such archaeologists are employed as public servants in heritage management or as private consultants working either alone or within environmental bodies. Academic historical archaeologists in Australia are in the minority and are constrained by the stranglehold that government has on Australian universities. Now whatever one thinks of this situation, and I was attacked by interested parties some years ago when I expressed my disquiet about it (Connah 1998; Mackay and Karskens 1999), nevertheless it inevitably limits the volume and character of archaeological publication. Government heritage managers are faced by a nearly impossible bureaucratic work-load and consultants do not get paid if they take time off to write a paper or a book, even if they are allowed by their contracts to make their investigations available in the public domain and, indeed, if such work justifies publication. The result is the growth of a huge volume of what Americans have christened 'grey literature'. Not only does most of this never result in publication but its very existence inhibits publication by others. In a lecture to the Society of Antiquaries of London last year, Richard Bradley called a similar situation in England 'quite disastrous' (Bradley 2006:3). In America Brian Fagan has recently complained about the difficulty of writing his book *Ancient North America*, 'the archaeology of a continent where most archaeology is now written in CRM reports'. He goes on to say:

> Our knowledge of North American archaeology would be considerably different if all CRM literature was freely accessible. But it is not, so we work with what we can find. I was criticized for stating in the preface to *Ancient North America* that "grey literature contributed relatively little to this book" and that "This book is written from published sources only". I am unrepentant, for the essence of general writing about any subject is that your book be accurate and based on accessible sources. Effectively, you are confined to published material, unless you have permission from someone with unpublished data to use it, or you control the information yourself. (Fagan 2006:101)

I was criticized in the same way almost 20 years ago, when I published my general synthesis of Australian historical archaeology (Ritchie 1988). Soon after that, its publishers, Cambridge University Press, suggested that I do another book, consisting of archaeological studies of a selection of Australia's more important historical sites. I had to decline because I realized that to undertake such a task I would have to travel to, and spend some time in, all the state capitals, in an attempt to access at least the grey literature in their heritage collections. This would have cost many thousands of dollars. Indeed, it is for the same reason that I have never attempted a second edition of my 1988 book, it is simply not possible given the prevailing situation. To a lesser extent, what applies to grey literature also applies to unpublished university theses, although they are usually more readily available.

However, some will question the necessity for continuing the scholarly publication of Australian historical archaeology. Given the commodification of archaeology, as a service industry to developers or conservationists, or even as a component in the so-called education industry, is such publication still relevant? Particularly, is it necessary to publish excavations or other researches in the mind-blowing detail that has been traditional in many other western countries? In the opinion of some archaeologists, such detailed evidence is now most efficiently and economically published on the Internet, and some members of the Australian profession are doing this in a highly effective manner (for example Casey & Lowe 2006). This is much appreciated by the rest of us but there is a worrying uncertainty about permanence that remains unresolved. In the days before personal computers became so common, at least one leading archaeological journal (PPS 1982–1989) took to providing detailed data on microfiche inserted loose in a pocket at the end of each volume. Now, years later, if these records have not been lost in whole or in part, is it likely that one can still find a microfiche reader to enable their use? Perhaps this should make us pause before relying too heavily on electronic publication. We can pick up a hardcopy archaeological publication from years ago and still be certain that we are reading just what was printed, but will our successors be able to read an old electronic publication? Will the necessary hardware or software still be available and if the material is still readable how confident will the reader be that what is read is exactly what was originally written? These are real issues; at this very time David Pearson of the National Archives of Australia is on secondment to the National Library investigating this question of electronic archiving. In no way do I question the value of electronic media in archaeological research; I can sit at my desk and gain rapid access to the full text of journal papers published many years ago on the other side of the world or browse the library catalogues of numerous countries. Indeed, electronic databases specifically devoted to archaeology, such as the Archaeology Data Service and the OASIS project in Britain (ADS; OASIS), are gradually developing powerful tools to aid us in our investigations. My concern is whether in the long term electronic publication can constitute permanent publication.

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?

I hesitate to suggest solutions to the issues that I have raised but, assuming that we are concerned to build up the canon of Australian historical archaeology, there are some things that we could do to improve our chances. For the present, hardcopy publication must remain the central strategy in this endeavour, particularly in the form of journal papers published in both Australia and overseas. However, both Commonwealth and state governments ought to be persuaded to support the publication of major monographs. This is literally in the national interest. In addition, it is hoped that the Australasian Society for Historical Archaeology and a number of Australian universities will continue to fund occasional specialist publications, augmenting their finances when possible from external sources. In so doing it is now time for us to rework some of the inadequately published projects of

the past, rather than inaugurating new excavations and fieldwork. Members of La Trobe University have recently demonstrated the potential for such studies in a series of nine publications on sites in Sydney (Crook et al. 2003, 2005; Crook and Murray 2006). However, financing such publications will remain a problem, although lobbying for funds could be made more effective by the creation of one large Australian archaeological organization to replace the number of smaller bodies that presently exist.

In addition, one can always look overseas. There are, for example, British Archaeological Reports, a publisher that has produced well over 1000 archaeological monographs in the last 30 odd years, featuring research from just about anywhere in the world and who, with only a couple of exceptions (Connah 2007; Davies 2006), seems to have escaped the notice of Australian historical archaeologists. The advantages of this publisher are that they will print highly specialized monographs with little market-potential, and your book appears in three to four months from submission, compared with eight to twelve months in the case of the big international commercial publishers, who will anyway only rarely produce such material. In addition, BAR, as they are known, give you world-wide distribution, which means that people in other countries might actually read what you have written.

Finally, whatever the attendant uncertainties, we must continue to develop our use of the Internet. For instance, we need a national database of consultants' reports, at the very least listing titles and abstracts and contact details for the consultant, and wherever possible providing full-text downloadable copy. It would be helpful if the Australian Association of Consulting Archaeologists supported such a project, by encouraging its members to participate. We also need a country-wide database of full-text university theses, particularly including the many BA honours theses that often go unnoticed. Possibly the beginnings of such sources already exist, in my inefficient surfing of the net I might have missed them, but if they do exist they should be made more widely known, perhaps through the agency of the Australian Academy of the Humanities who have otherwise done so little to assist Australian historical archaeology.

Whatever the case, we have come a long way since Gordon Childe walked over that cliff in the Blue Mountains. Very probably he suspected that archaeology in the late 1950s was on the brink of great changes and that much of his life's-work would inevitably be set aside. Certainly his friend Russell Ward, the noted Australian historian, remembered long afterwards how depressed Childe had been in the weeks before his death. Nevertheless, Childe left us a legacy of publications that will endure; we can constantly re-examine his voluminous contributions to the archaeological canon, whether we agree with his interpretations or not. Let us hope that our successors will say the same about us.

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