

A great man and a great loss.

John Mulvaney FSA, an Australian archaeologist who defined the 20th-century profession's agenda for the continent, died on 21 September, aged 90. 'Eminent archaeologist', his family posted in *The Canberra Times*, 'historian, heritage advocate and, above all, devoted family man', he was elected a Fellow of the Society in January 2010. His life will be celebrated at University House, Australian National University, at 2 pm on 5 October.

Obituaries and appreciations, among others, can be read online at the [Australian National University](#) (ANU), the [Australian Academy of the Humanities](#), the [National Museum of Australia](#), [Cricket Australia](#) (which 'acknowledges his life, and in particular his contribution to the history of cricket in Australia. He devoted a part of his life's work to a detailed account of Australia's first cricket tour of England'), the [University of Cambridge](#), and [The Times](#) (subscription). His autobiography, described by Tom Griffiths as a 'humble and compelling memoir' of 'Australia's most celebrated archaeologist', was published in 2011 as *Digging up a Past*. An earlier study, *Prehistory to Politics: John Mulvaney, the Humanities and the Public Intellectual*, edited by Tim Bonyhady and Tom Griffiths (1992), set out his contributions to public debate and policy about world heritage, archaeological and conservation practice, museums and the humanities, as an intellectual and campaigner.



In 2013 Mulvaney was [interviewed and filmed at ANU](#) by Kathleen Jackson, when he talked (aged 87) about his career, with his characteristic smile and in great detail, for 40 minutes. He described two fieldworking highlights.

The first was the morning in 1962 when his team obtained a Pleistocene ice age date at Kenniff Cave, Queensland, proving human occupation at the site nearly

20,000 years ago. He had taken the radiocarbon samples with him to England on study leave, he explained, and had them dated in Cambridge without charge, at a time when he was running a three-year project on a \$3000 grant. This pushed Aboriginal antiquity back far beyond anything then countenanced, and opened up the possibility, if not certainty, of a history of changing cultures, rather than a brief occupation with little to say for itself. This discovery began, in his words, with 'chance, linked with a hunch'. Soon Aboriginal history was taken further back; on the day Mulvaney died, the most comprehensive genomic study of Indigenous Australians to date claimed to support the arrival of modern humans on the continent some 50,000 years ago, with significant subsequent diversification. But dating Kenniff Cave was a landmark moment.

His second highlight was in 1965, in Arnhem Land, when he had gone out to look for Makassar sites. Early explorers talked about people visiting from Sulawesi, but they had not been much researched. His first find was a 'spindly little tamarind tree', and all around were broken ceramics that were not Australian, but Indonesian – 'a tremendously exciting voyage of discovery'.

[He left school aged 16](#), he told **Pamela Jane Smith FSA** in 2000, and during the war enlisted in the Royal Australian Air force 'to get away from it all'. He was trained in Canada as a navigator, and then in England, where the training was not quite complete before the war ended. 'I mention this', he says, 'because it is vital to my background'.

Back in Australia he studied British history and archaeology, returning to England for a postgraduate archaeology degree, working with Charles McBurney, **Grahame Clark FSA** and **Glyn Daniel FSA**. He became a Lecturer in Ancient History at the University of Melbourne. He joined ANU in 1965 and was Foundation Professor of Prehistory from 1971 until taking early retirement in 1985. He was a Visiting Professor at Cambridge 1976–77, and held the Chair of Australian studies at Harvard 1984–85. He was appointed CMG in 1982, fellow of the British Academy in 1983, and Officer of the Order of Australia in 1991. The British Academy awarded him the Grahame Clark Medal in 1999, and the Australian Archaeological Association the Rhys Jones Medal in 2004.



Salon asked Fellows and former colleagues who knew Mulvaney to add their own impressions of a remarkable man.

Robin Derricourt FSA says 'It is hard to over-estimate John's role as the founding father of professional and academic archaeology in Australia'. Derricourt signed up his autobiography shortly before leaving UNSW Press. 'While written with modesty', he says, 'it does serve as a reminder of John's role as "the first university-trained prehistorian to make Australia his subject" –

Gordon Childe FSA, of course, having been interested in other parts of the world only. Last year I passed John Mulvaney's photo hanging in the corridor of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra, of which Mulvaney was a former chairman (and for 18 years a council member), and a junior staff member mentioned she was often seeing him in the library – though I doubt she knew he was still working around the age of 90.'

'I visited John two weeks ago,' says **Matthew Spriggs FSA**. 'He was weak but still alert, and entertained me with stories about being lectured at Cambridge by **Dorothy Garrod FSA** in her last year as Disney Professor. In turn I told him about recent advances in radiocarbon dating that may allow dates to the single year, recalling John's own pioneering article about the then-new technique of radiocarbon, which he published I believe in 1952. Strangely paralleling Gordon Childe's publication career, John's first academic publication in 1949 was on the history of the Australian Labor Party. Childe's first book was of course titled *How Labour Governs* (1923).'

'I think two matters should be stressed about John's significance', says Peter Bellwood, 'apart from the obvious one of contribution to Australian archaeology. One is that he founded the Department of Prehistory in the former (and awfully named!) "School of General Studies" in ANU in 1972, in which I was a foundation appointment in 1973 with Wilfred Shawcross and Andrée Rosenfeld. John's original department took on Anthony Forge as Professor of Social Anthropology in 1974, together with Isabel McBryde in Archaeology and Colin Groves as Foundation Lecturer in Biological Anthropology in the same year. That original department is nowadays the more aptly named School of Archaeology and Anthropology in the College of Arts and Social Sciences in ANU.

'The second point to note is that John undertook research with R.P. Soejono in Sulawesi, Indonesia, in the late 1960s. This was very important for me, and no doubt led to my appointment in 1973. It thereby led to a regular presence of Southeast Asian archaeology in the university beyond the existing focus on Australian and Pacific archaeology. It also led to a steady stream of graduate students from Asian countries into the department led by John and his successors.

'John was always very supportive of his staff and had little time for unnecessary bureaucracy. He was a person who could always see the wood beyond the trees.'

'It was John', says Colin Groves, 'who decided that his new Department of Prehistory should become not only a Department of Prehistory and Anthropology, but should follow the British three-field model. To this end, he converted a new post in archaeology which he had been allocated into a lectureship in Biological Anthropology, to which I was appointed. He is therefore responsible for my presence here in ANU!

'When I was convalescing from a critical illness last year, I got a phone call from him. "I want to come to see you," he said. And he came, and we chatted for quite a while. At 89, he was healthy and chirpy – in fact, at that time I wondered whether he would outlive me! As an indication of what a popular lecturer he was, I like to quote something written on one of the student assessments a couple of years before he retired: MULVANEY MUST NOT BE PERMITTED TO RETIRE!'

'I do believe in the common humanity', [he told Pamela Jane Smith in 2000](#). He was concerned about Aboriginal assertions of being separate from the rest of the world. 'If, in fact, there were a totally separate creation, the whole thing about rules, about United Nations and how you treat... we are all one human race. Slavery is wrong. When the Southern States were defending slavery, they ran the line that Negroes were a separate creation. They had no relation to white society. They were subhuman, and we get back to that unless we accept the rule of a common humanity, and that the best way we can handle it is through the UN; and if you are an archaeologist or interested in history, the best way to do

that is through bodies such as UNESCO with its concept of world heritage.'

And finally, a reflection from **Mike Smith FSA**, whose *The Archaeology of Australia's Deserts* won the John Mulvaney Book Award in 2013.

'I first met John Mulvaney in 1971, as a schoolboy archaeologist working on the Roonka dig for the South Australian Museum. He visited our workroom in Adelaide one evening, neatly dressed in a conservative jacket and tie. At first, I took him for a civil servant or government official. However, within 18 months, I was writing to John at the Australian National University for career advice.

'In 1974, I made the long bus trip to Canberra, with a backpack, to study in his department. At that time, the ANU was the only Australian university to offer a major in prehistoric archaeology. John held the Foundation Chair in Prehistory at the ANU, and it was through his advocacy that prehistoric archaeology had become part of the tertiary curriculum. Arriving during O-Week, I called in to see Professor Mulvaney. "There's no future in archaeology you know," he warned, then added "but I suppose there's no point in telling you that." There were, in fact, few jobs for archaeologists in the 70s. John argued that archaeology was worth studying simply because it was "a good general education, probably the best you could get".

'Nevertheless, he trained a generation of Australian archaeologists, many of whom went on to have distinguished careers themselves. At the ANU, those who made it into the Honours stream did extra courses to equip them for research, with instruction in the analysis of stone tools, animal bone, human osteology, surveying, archaeological illustration and photography. The course on stone tool analysis was particularly daunting, as part of the final exam involved a one-on-one interview with the "god professor" in his office, where he would present you with a series of artefacts and ask, "What can you tell me about these?" To my cohort of students, he was known as "Mullers". I was 30 – and a professional archaeologist myself – before I could bring myself to call him "John". On the phone, I had the strong urge to click my heels and salute. But there was nothing imperious about John, he was just formal and socially reserved. As we both got older, respect broadened into friendship. I found him to be a man of absolute integrity. Never self-seeking, he rarely allowed himself any flamboyance, and he was careful in his judgements, never overegging his results or assessment of an issue. This invariably gave his statements extra weight.

'Although I worked on the Lake Mungo digs in the 1970s, I was too late to see John in action in the field. I came to know "John the field archaeologist" through his publications. He was a fine excavator, and his sites were masterpieces of analytical digging. Amongst his many other achievements, John fundamentally changed the way archaeological fieldwork was practiced in Australia, producing the first guide in 1968 (*Australian Archaeology: A Guide to Field and Laboratory Techniques*). This was a book I had pored over as a schoolboy enthusiast. His

digging had coincided with the development of radiocarbon dating, and he was quick to appreciate the new opportunities for exploring Australia's hunter-gatherer past.

'By the time I arrived at ANU, John was moving from 20 years as a pioneering field archaeologist to public administration and advocacy. This shift was accelerated by what he felt was the self-righteous attitude of the "new archaeology", and its dismissal of humanism. For John, archaeology was primarily a science-based humanity: the proper study was "prehistory", archaeology was the method but not the subject. He encouraged his students to roam widely in their studies, incorporating social anthropology, geomorphology, biogeography and historical linguistics.

'In his new role, John made fundamental contributions to The Australian Academy of the Humanities, The Australian Heritage Commission, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, and the National Museum of Australia. He didn't go in for loud lobbying in the press: his inclination was to write directly to the Minister. He had a wry sense of humour, and once said that his proudest achievement, given that he had a large family, was when he wrote to the newspapers and managed "to bring down the price of cornflakes in Canberra".

'As a curator at the National Museum I had to work on a broader canvas than archaeology alone – and I have come to a better understanding of how John's fieldwork, advocacy and writings, changed the historical imagination of a nation. His 1969 book *The Prehistory of Australia*, opened with a memorable statement: "The discoverers, explorers and colonists of the three million square miles which are Australia, were its Aborigines." After the Lake Mungo discoveries, the notion of an immensely long and vivid Indigenous past was generally acknowledged, and quickly became a fundamental part of the way Australian history is viewed. This seems so self-evident today that it is hard to imagine that it was not always so.'

Photos show Mulvaney (above, at right), in the early 1970s at a key archaeological site at Lake Mungo, where human remains were found dated to around 50,000 years ago ([National Archives of Australia](#)), and in 2013 (top, ANU).

Sir Neil Cossons