

The road to Burra: memories of an ancient traveller



John Mulvaney

Participants at Burra in 1979 each brought their own intellectual baggage, but shared the conviction that it was time for purposeful conservation action. This is my version of involvement in various relevant issues and causes across three decades along the road to Burra.

I obtained degrees in History at Melbourne University during the immediate post-war years, both Australian history and prehistoric European archaeology attracting my excited interest.¹ Between 1951 and 1953 I studied prehistoric archaeology at Cambridge, returning to a lectureship in Ancient World history at Melbourne, which I combined for ten years with archaeological fieldwork during vacations. In retrospect, my first steps towards the Burra mind-set were taken in 1954. In a public lecture I drew upon my European and Libyan field experience to demonstrate the chronological and contextual significance of evidence from stratified sites. Excavations, I stressed, were the preserve of trained archaeologists and sites would be discovered in Australia.

I was reacting already to the avid band of Victorian stone tool collectors whose philosophy was 'finders-keepers', even extending to mindless fossicking in archaeological sites. It opened what seems my 'holier-than-thou' campaign to preserve sites. Critics reasonably interpreted this as an elitist marking of archaeological territory for professionals only.² At that period in Victoria I admit to unawareness of Aboriginal interests in their past; indeed I had never met an Indigenous person.

When, in the late 1950s, I was elected secretary to the (then) Anthropological Society of Victoria, my attempts to ensure that all stone tool collections resulting from Society excursions were deposited in the museum proved a total failure. Back in 1938, F. D. McCarthy vainly urged State legislation to protect Aboriginal sites.³ In the fifties, except for an inadequate Northern Territory ordinance, no such legislation existed across the continent. In 1956 I set a precedent by informing the South Australian Museum that I proposed to dig and that all my finds from Fromm's Landing excavation would be given to the museum, although it would have been legal for me to have kept them. I was allocated a set of museum numbers so that finds could be recorded.

From the early 1960s I was joined in this legislative mission, particularly by Isabel McBryde in New South Wales and Robert Edwards in South Australia. This culminated in a major conference at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in 1968 on 'Aboriginal Antiquities in Australia: Their Nature and Preservation' – the proceedings edited by McCarthy.⁴ That same year Rhys Jones and I approached the relevant Tasmanian Minister in Hobart, concerning the need for legislation; although it was 1975 before Tasmania legislated. South Australia was the first State to legislate, with its 1965 statute including historical sites earlier than 1865. NSW soon followed with more appropriate legislation, but limited to Aboriginal places.

Meanwhile, at the request of the embryonic Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies I had visited Tasmania in 1962 and found

what I described as vandalism at archaeological and art sites, undertaken by officials in the name of science. The lack of control was alarming. Jack Golson and I were sent to the Top End in 1963, also by the AIAS, and were alerted to site destruction at several places. We urged the Darwin authorities to enforce their ordinance

In these efforts to control and preserve archaeological sites, obviously I was a white Australian urging the use of white laws to safeguard Indigenous sites; to some extent protecting Aboriginal sites from Aboriginal actions. Failure to consult with Indigenous people seems unduly paternalistic today, but forty years ago it occurred within a very different cultural and political context. But that is another story, and not as offensive as judged from hindsight.

My first attempt to alert government to its cultural obligations occurred around 1958, when I saw Tiwi graveposts, collected in 1912 by Baldwin Spencer, lying in an open, unprotected space at Melbourne's museum. I wrote to Attorney-General Rylah expressing my concern, but my letter was unanswered. I soon was confronted with conservation problems of my own, while excavating in 1960 at Fromm's Landing, South Australia. The dry calcareous sands preserved fragile plant and animal skin remains, together with the skeleton of a dingo (dated later to some 3000 years ago). The latter was so important that I was advised to encase it as a block in paraffin wax for transport to, and excavation at, a Sydney laboratory. Even without a biting reprimand from N.W.G. Macintosh,⁵ who laboriously analysed the cemented mass, I knew that conservation techniques were an essential archaeological requirement and that this was inappropriate treatment.

Australian institutions then gave no priority to conservation. Even in 1974 art galleries and museums employed only 25 'conservators', 15 of these at the Western Australian Museum, working on shipwrecks.⁶ In 1960 the number possibly was three. Following the award of a Nuffield Foundation Dominion Fellowship, I spent much of 1961 working at the conservation training laboratory at the London Institute of Archaeology, then one of the few conservation facilities in the world. However, my new-found knowledge had little application upon my return to Melbourne. Most of my subsequent fieldwork was conducted across northern acidic soils which did not preserve organic remains, so my conservation chemicals went unused. My sole contribution was to take latex peels of the stratigraphic profile, a technique which became fashionable through the sixties but is forgotten today (except for my 1963 stratigraphic peel from Fromm's Landing exhibited at the National Museum of Australia).

Conservation awareness proved relevant, however, when I was appointed to the 1974-75 (Pigott) Inquiry on Museums and National Collections, largely, I suspect, because I protested to government officials about the appalling conservation facilities at the War Memorial. The Inquiry gave priority to probing the condition of collections. I claim some credit for the report's emphasis upon conservation facilities, and for the establishment of the Materials Conservation Course at the

Canberra College of Advanced Education.⁷ Under Colin Pearson's positive guidance this ushered in a new era of national awareness of material conservation requirements for moveable cultural heritage. The state-of-the-art laboratories for the War Memorial opened at Mitchell, ACT, by 1979.

It is interesting that there were stirrings in Australian cultural life around the time overseas interests drew up the 1964 Venice Charter. They resulted from diverse community interests, but impinged upon national objectives a decade later. I was directly associated with one of these developments, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, created in 1964 as a statutory authority. Amongst other issues, members lobbied for legislation to protect Aboriginal places, sacred and profane. All States so legislated by 1975, but the laws concerned Indigenous sites, while non-Indigenous historical places were ignored in most statutes. They also varied in their provisions, effective staffing and implementation, largely inefficient when administering sites of a prehistoric world without restrictive colonial boundaries.

The National Trust movement was established throughout Australia between 1945 and 1963. It directed its efforts to preserve and restore (rather than to conserve) historical structures, with a bias towards homes of the great and the good. Coordination between Trusts culminated in 1965 with the establishment of the National Council of National Trusts. The independent intellectual contribution by Robin Boyd was significant. His classic *Australia's Home* (1952) and *The Great Australian Ugliness* (1960) included the common people, while Boyd's literary vision combined the essence of landscape and the built heritage.

Environmental problems also demanded a coordinated national approach, recognised in 1965 with the formation of the Australian Conservation Foundation. Although restrained in its early activities, the ACF remains a landmark in Australia's environmental awakening. Physical intervention to preserve urban amenities eventuated in Sydney from 1970 with the Green Bans, imposed by the Builders' Labourers' Federation.⁸ Throughout the sixties I was involved in fieldwork, so the National Trust, the ACF and the Green Bans largely passed me by. During that decade, however, I became aware of the pressing relevance of historical archaeology and preservation. (This proved embarrassing, because my employment duties related to the pre-European past).

During 1965 I occupied several weeks locating Macassan trepanning sites in coastal Arnhem Land. A wealth of evidence existed, including stone hearths, broken potsherds and bottle glass, even two coins. Campbell Macknight subsequently made this the subject of his doctoral research.⁹ With another research scholar, Jim Allen, I spent 17 days in 1966 exploring and surveying the remote, overgrown ruins of Victoria, the abortive settlement at Port Essington, NT, 1838-1849.¹⁰ These places were historical and much evidence lay below ground, yet they also related closely to interaction with the Aboriginal past, and this cultural influence upon Aboriginal life continued with ceremonies and oral traditions into the present. It seems likely that three decades before the vogue for cross-cultural studies, we archaeologists were so involved. Not only that, but this research was cross-disciplinary, because disciplines involved included history, archaeology, anthropology and various medical and environmental specialisms.

I was in Timor during August 1967, and I was unaware of an Australian National University seminar then held jointly with the

Australian Council of National Trusts. I regret my absence, because the mimeographed proceedings influenced me. I suspect that 'Historic Preservation in Australia' was a crucial barometer for the incipient heritage movement. The conference attracted 117 participants Australia-wide, of whom several became names familiar in Heritage affairs. They included Anne Bickford, Ken Charlton, Phillip Cox, Robert Irving, Clive Lucas, David Saunders, Peter Staughton and Reg Walker. That little has changed since then is suggested by Robin Boyd's enthusiastic address, 'the future of our past'. Boyd observed that society divides on the question of preservation: 'Those who believe in it and those who do, not are quite incompatible and irreconcilable. There is no changing them'.¹¹ As an example, he offered the vandalism to Burley Griffin's Capitol Theatre, Swanston Street, Melbourne. This was the first historic 'heritage' battle with which I fully identified.

This conference brought together architects who debated 'restoration'. They accepted the necessity for historical, engineering and architectural research in order to determine the 'base period' for a building's restoration. Significantly, there was no acknowledgement that a building was the totality of its life; 'conservation' was not a term used. Production of a handbook 'on the Do and Don't lines' was mooted.¹² Burra remained a distant place, but these 1967 reflections indicated that well-intentioned architects needed to find the right 'restoration' track.

Allen's Port Essington project demonstrated that, despite its remoteness, people past and present interfered destructively, while lush vegetation caused damage to structures. Protection and conservation were urgent. As a legacy from its settlement by British marines, this area of the Cobourg Peninsula then remained a military reserve. A co-operative neighbour of mine was Lieutenant-General Sir Thomas Daly, Chief of the General Staff, who proved sympathetic to my urging. Consequently in 1968, Allen returned to Port Essington with a contingent of troops, whom he supervised in tree clearance and maintenance activities at taxpayer expense.

I was appointed to the 1972-73 Scientific and Technical Evaluation Committee of the Alligator Rivers Fact Finding Study. Funded jointly by Government and the Mining Industry Council, its bywords were objectivity and fact-collecting. Archaeology and rock art sites were high on the agenda, but social and economic aspects of Indigenous society were excluded. Fourteen useful volumes of data resulted. Yet the horse had bolted before the stable door closed. Uranium leases had been granted *before* the project began and its 'facts' assembled. Subsequent history demonstrated the errors of decision-making before Indigenous sacred sites and heritage were considered. Expert surveys should precede planning development, but unfortunately this lesson was learned neither by government nor industry. Careful reading of the general report indicates that I inserted some non-'factual' content.¹³

The Hope Inquiry into the National Estate was appointed by the Whitlam government in May 1973. On behalf of the AIAS, the Deputy-Principal, Robert Edwards, and myself gave evidence to the Inquiry on Aboriginal sites protection and the problems of making public the location of sacred sites. We stressed that State legislations diverged unsatisfactorily. The Inquiry recommended uniform legislation.¹⁴ I also urged, outside my brief, the need to protect ruins and below-ground historical remains, rather than concentrating upon utilised buildings.

The Hope report referred approvingly to the Venice Charter,

momentously concluding that 'a monument is inseparable from history to which it bears witness and from the setting in which it occurs'. It also recommended that Australia ratify the 1972 World Heritage Convention, and this was achieved by August 1974. The Convention came into force late in 1975.¹⁵

The Pigott Inquiry on Museums and National Collections overlapped with the National Estate Inquiry. As a member of the Pigott Committee I visited Melbourne during September 1974. On a personal social occasion there, I unexpectedly met David Yencken. I was unaware that he was newly appointed Chair of the Interim Committee of the National Estate. Once I knew this, I launched into lobbying mode, emphasising the neglect of buried historical archaeology, while intact buildings attracted National Trust and other support. The Hope report only made passing reference to these matters.¹⁶

David Yencken not only accepted my point, but he was in a position to act upon it. This proved a happy chance meeting. To my surprise he offered to fund a conference if I arranged it. Back in Canberra, I soon recruited my secretary, Doreen Bowdery, Isabel McBryde and Jim Allen, to assist in convening the meeting. Thirty-four persons assembled at Bruce Hall, ANU, on 7-9 December 1974. Each was invited to 'Historical Archaeology and the National Estate' for their personal expertise and dedication known to us, rather than as institutional representatives. Prehistorians possibly outnumbered historical archaeologists, not surprising, perhaps, because the small Australian Society for Historical Archaeology only produced its first mimeographed *Newsletter* in 1970.

This was only one of many occasions when my direct approach and blunt speech have offended, but it is the cause that matters, rather than bureaucratic niceties and conference freeloading. The conference succeeded because organisational vested interests were minimal. Participants were enthusiastic and held high expectations for the future of the brave new conceptual world of Whittlamsque Heritage, National Estate, Natural and Built Environments, in which culture mattered. My invitation explained the meeting's purpose:

Although a non-expert in historical or industrial archaeology, the destruction of sites, particularly rural ones, has long concerned me. Sites which have archaeological significance do not always attract the attention of local societies or the National Trust, for little may be observable above ground...My aim in writing is...to participate in a Workshop, where...a list of important sites, and other suggestions, which could be submitted to the National Estate Committee...I am envisaging sites...whose significance only persons such as those at this meeting are likely to comprehend. I believe that it is urgent.¹⁷

Jim Allen compiled the conference report,¹⁸ but it was delayed because, following this ANU meeting, the Interim Committee of the National Estate appointed a Project Coordination Committee from persons who attended the workshop. Before its report was presented in February 1978, the Australian Heritage Commission (AHC) had been established.

During the interval the committee communicated frequently and met on four occasions in 1975 and 1976 (dedicated work without sitting fees). The report presented the AHC with ideas, including themes and inventory check lists for site identification, registration and representativeness. Unfortunately this bulky

report was never published, so it is largely unknown. (Following 1993 an AHC consultancy repeated much of the thematic work already attempted). Members of the Project Coordination Committee became familiar names in subsequent cultural heritage matters.¹⁹ Jane Lennon is distinguished by serving both on the AHC and on the new Australian Heritage Council.

The mid-1970s were heady days for cultural heritage. There were meetings which played an essential background role for Burra. Of great relevance was the Hobart Workshop on Building Materials Conservation, 18-21 April 1975. This was the first Australian occasion upon which specialists involved in all aspects of conservation or restoration of building materials and archaeological sites approached the problems in a multi-disciplinary manner.²⁰ It proved vital for more than the data presented. Delegates were briefed on international developments in conservation training, and the extent to which Australians needed such experience. Colin Pearson recommended that Australia should join ICOMOS and establish a national committee.²¹

Presentations were made by attendees on proposed 'restoration' work at Port Arthur and Norfolk Island. It was evident that such plans posed danger because of their adverse impact upon the fabric or surroundings of buildings. One architect expressed the objective that 'restoration is an attempt to faithfully re-create the overall external appearance,' while allowing internal adaptation.²² The external appearance was an arbitrary decision, which decreed the removal of all accretions subsequent to the style decided upon. The report of the Workshop has Mulvaney intervening with the stricture that Norfolk Island restoration architects

should consult with archaeologists as a large amount of historically valuable data could be included in the deposit... no major monument should be touched without careful consideration of the more appropriate aesthetics...it might be better to conserve a ruin than to reconstruct a building.²³

As proposals even considered the demolition and 'restoration' of Port Arthur's huge penitentiary, it became evident that co-ordinated planning must have priority before such far-reaching and destructive decisions were made. These considerations provided the essential background to the later massive Commonwealth funding at Port Arthur. It also made the Burra Charter necessary and urgent.

During May 1975, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Tourism began a major task of evaluating the needs of tourism, including issues of National Estate relevance. From 1976 to 1978 this transformed into a Select Committee, presenting a final report in October 1978.²⁴ This was one of several positive Heritage forums which promoted ideas and actions. As Burra approached, they intensified. At Goulburn during February 1978, the National Trust (NSW) sponsored the timely conference, published as *Industrial and Historical Archaeology*, to which I contributed. In June, the Institution of Engineers, Australia, conference considered 'The Status of the National Environment', which I attended.

I was appointed to the AHC in 1976, shortly before I left for a year at Cambridge. I busied myself there learning facets of cultural heritage management in Britain and undertook tasks for the Commission. These included my most positive contribution to the Burra Charter, when, in London, I interviewed and warmly recommended the appointment of Jim Kerr to the Commission staff. I also performed the same

function for the late Patricia Vinnicombe, for the NSW Parks and Wildlife Service.

Australia was elected a member of the World Heritage executive committee in November 1976. In June 1977 members assembled in Paris to frame the criteria for World Heritage registration. This was a period when funding and government intentions were limited, so Australian representation seemed doubtful. As a compromise, I offered to attend from Cambridge at my personal expense. Eventually I was appointed officially, though due to bureaucratic bungles nobody at UNESCO knew more than that a 'Professor Mulvaney' was attending. Delegates assumed that I represented the Natural Environment until I assured them I spoke for both Natural and Cultural Heritage interests. The experience proved rewarding and exciting. The eagerness of USA and Canadian delegates and their co-operation with the Australian and Iranian teams, contrasts with the later national self-interest and legalism which impedes that body today.

I visited Norfolk Island late in 1977, following my return home, together with AHC Commissioner Vincent Serventy. I was appalled to find that the destructive proposals raised at the 1975 Hobart workshop were being implemented. Only a few days previously, a back-hoe dug deeply around the Kingston crank-mill walls, destroying any stratigraphic and contextual evidence. The ruined building which had served successively as a store, a mill and a whaleboat shelter, was intended as a museum. Other 'restoration' projects included a ruin to be transformed into a 'Georgian' house residence for a staff member. This pragmatic restoration programme lacked any of the conservation philosophy mooted at Hobart. My photographs and heated report to the Department in Canberra sufficed to fly Norfolk Island's Administrator to a stormy Canberra meeting. The project was terminated. Jim Allen and Jane Lennon subsequently made field investigations at Kingston and presented thoughtful recommendations for future implementation.²⁵ The necessity for a 'Burra' protocol was obvious and urgent.

Australia became a signatory to ICOMOS in 1973, so the guidelines laid down in the Venice Charter could be expected to apply to the restoration of structures. However, Australia ICOMOS was not constituted until 1977 and its first Newsletter appeared early in 1978. It contained a piece from me on 'the philosophy of restoration,' which featured the fate of the crank-mill.²⁶ I appealed to architects to meet and discuss the principles and objectives of restoration, together with landscape architects, engineers and archaeologists. That conference, I wrote, should 'consider the historic, aesthetic and emotional values to be gained from preserving a ruin as compared with the advantages or otherwise of large scale restoration'.

At the inaugural Beechworth meeting of Australia ICOMOS in April 1978, Port Arthur and Norfolk Island provided the essential intellectual background to my lecture. AHC colleagues encouraged me to broach the restoration theme, because there were misgivings about other restoration projects, also, which had been supported by public funds. These included projects at Hill End (visited by the AHC during 1978), and Wybalenna, Flinders Island. My forthright comments displeased most architects present and provoked a stinging attack in a later Australia ICOMOS Newsletter. Doubtless I came across as an emotional amateur, a stirrer, to this well intentioned audience. Yet my appeal was for co-ordinated planning in which historical archives and archaeology

were as important as architectural perception. That is, cooperative research and planning should precede demolition or reconstruction adapted to an idealistic architectural style.

The AHC played a key role in the campaign to improve conservation standards nationally. It was Jim Kerr who persevered to draft the initial Burra Charter. Despite the many grumbles and dissenters at Burra and beyond, with amendments it is now the accepted ethical code of practice across Australia.

In no way has the passage of years made me resile from my forthright Beechworth opinions. They constituted my assurance that I was firmly on the road to Burra. I am proud that I was present at Burra in 1979 for that landmark cultural event in Australia's heritage.

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