

A Voice from the Margin? Archaeology, the Sea and Australian History

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This paper is based on the opening address at 'Soundings', the combined annual conference of the Australian Institute of Maritime Archaeology and the Australasian Society for Historical Archaeology held in Hobart, 23–25 October, 1995. It challenges some conventional ideas on the nature and role of historical and maritime archaeology with particular reference to the Australian past and suggests some characteristics that work in these fields might display in today's intellectual climate.

The widespread study of Australian history both in universities and by a wider public goes back to the 1960s. The same decade saw the beginning of all forms of archaeological work in Australia on any scale. In this paper, I reflect on the place of historical and maritime archaeology within the general enterprise of thinking about the Australian past. My approach to this is, as it were, somewhat from the side; my voice is perhaps somewhat marginal. Although I have long been fascinated by the interpretation of archaeological evidence and my work on Macassan sites thirty years ago formed part of that first wave of excavations, in recent years my concerns have chiefly lain elsewhere. My intention here is not to offer a general survey or review of the state of the art in historical and maritime archaeology, for others have done that more expertly than my patchy reading would allow, but rather to look at the relationship between these areas of research in recent years and to suggest some characteristics of work in historical and maritime archaeology which may be looked for in the immediate future.

My approach requires a little biographical explanation. For 24 years I was a member of the Department of History in the Faculty of Arts at the Australian National University. This is not the place to review a varied teaching and research career, but one reason for staying so long in that department was that my colleagues took History seriously. That is not to say that we all took History to be the same thing, for there were some fairly vigorous debates, but there was a general acceptance that Honours students at least should be exposed to a unit simply called 'History and Theory'. In all of this there was scant attention paid, especially by those of us teaching Australian history, to archaeology, or for that matter to the sea.

I do not wish to suggest that these themes were completely ignored and, looking around other departments of History in Australian universities, one can point to some notable and some not-so-notable exceptions, but in general 'Australian history' as it is commonly taught includes little consideration of archaeological evidence or discussion of maritime matters. The complaint by the reviewers of both historical archaeology and of maritime archaeology in *Australian Archaeology* 39 that the core appointments in History departments are not there is fully justified.¹ In the end, it is people who count. Moreover, there is presently a good deal of grey hair among those in and around History departments who count for this purpose.

Let me try to substantiate that claim of lack of interest by referring to some historical writing clearly in the category of 'Australian history'. One of the many initiatives of the Australian Bicentennial Authority was to commission the Manning Clark Professor of Australian History at the Australian National University, John Molony, to write *The Penguin History of Australia*, first published in 1987. It is a book with many strengths: it is well-informed in its materials, balanced and humane in its judgements, attractively

illustrated and distinguished by a clear and lively prose style. In its index, the entry on 'land' refers to 15 pages; there is no entry for 'sea'. 'Whaling' and 'sealing' get the same three text pages, while 'wheat' gets 18 and 'wool industry' 27 page references. In a hundred illustrations, which go far beyond conventional portraits and large public buildings in their subjects, there is not one which shows any result of archaeological work.²

To take another example, the publisher's note in the several volumes of *The Oxford History of Australia* declares that 'colonial Australia begins with the establishment of tiny settlements at different times and with different purposes on widely separated points on the Australian coastline ... As the colonists spread over the continent and imposed their material culture on its resources, so the old world notions of class, status and gender were reworked'.³ Whatever the particular virtues of these volumes, the emphasis on the history of the land and the lack of archaeological data are shared with Molony's book.⁴

At this point in the argument, it is tempting to berate Australian historians for their shortcomings and exhort them to pay more attention to the themes and materials we at this conference happen to find congenial. Archaeologists could ask for their marginal concerns to be drawn into the centre. Returning to the title of this paper in a rather different understanding, we might even assert that archaeology and the sea are not marginal in Australian history, that the voice or voices representing archaeology and the sea should indeed be heard at the centre of the discourse of Australian history, and not from its margin. That seems to be roughly the line taken, with impressive detail, in a series of articles in volume 11 of *Australasian Historical Archaeology*.⁵

There is every reason to expect a welcome of sorts. Stuart Macintyre in the preface to his volume of *The Oxford History of Australia*, which deals with the twentieth century up to 1942, discusses the role of the general historian.

Different forms of historical inquiry proliferate, employing particular techniques and embodying particular points of view. Women's history, labour history, Aboriginal, economic, social, urban, demographic, educational, administrative and military history — the list is far from exhaustive. It is not just that these subdisciplines are practised as increasingly autonomous enterprises, their practitioners speaking to fellow enthusiasts all too often at the expense of a larger audience. More than this, the threatened fragmentation of the discipline calls into question the project of a holistic representation of the past ... On the other hand, there was and is an Australian past.⁶

Undoubtedly there is something to be said for seeing the place of archaeology and the sea in this way; these 'sub-disciplines' are parts of a larger whole. In response to our

protestations of significance, we might be allowed to add our particular interests to the many mansions of Australian history, but certainly not on prime locations.

Let us return, however, to the question mark in the title of this paper. Is there an alternative to accepting our place somewhere around the margin of Australian history, even if we could have our voice heard on suitable occasions?

Before we can get far with that question, however, a major problem arises in our path. The very notions of centre and periphery, of middle and margin, of whole and part, may only be metaphors, but they imply some kind of differential valuation for various bodies of knowledge; they suggest some sort of canon, a hierarchy of significance based on some agreed criteria. The fact of the matter in modern Australia is that there is no agreement on criteria; there is no canon of common knowledge; no core of concern. Previous relationships of domination and subordination — it is hard to escape from the metaphors — are attacked or scorned.

This is not just a matter of the proper content or approach in Australian history, but whether Australian history, or even history, is a useful category. One reason for taking some time above with the long quotation from Stuart Macintyre was to make clear that the uncertainty goes far deeper than the issue of specialisation which he raises; this problem cuts to the heart of the matter, to our purpose in study and research. We come across this pervasive sense of 'de-centredness' in many ways. It is no longer possible in teaching or public discourse to assume the most basic competency in the European cultural tradition, or any agreement on the place of that tradition in Australian culture, or even the desirability of some coherent view of past experience and present cultural reality. Margaret Kiddle, the great social historian of Victoria's Western District in the nineteenth century, records how, reading Ecclesiastes and Isaiah, 'a lightning flash came to me through the thunder of the great verses, for I realised as never before how much the Old Testament meant to those men of passion and power, the Scottish squatters ... There are snatches of biblical rhythm in [their] letters'.⁷ Many undergraduates today have never heard 'the thunder of the great verses' and so stand no chance of recognising its rhythm — even if they could be interested in the thoughts of white patriarchs. The proliferation of undergraduate units and courses, usually in the name of choice and the satisfaction of demand, allows the passing by of as much, or more, as it includes; as James McAuley observes in a deadly aside: 'What we omit, we teach will not be missed.'⁸

That point is as apt for museum curators as for curriculum designers. What should be shown, or even preserved, as well as taught? Michael Pearson and Sharon Sullivan have recently observed that 'general agreement in the community that heritage places have value is a prerequisite for their effective conservation'.⁹

I have taken these examples from the worlds that we here at this conference inhabit, the worlds of higher education, curatorial institutions and cultural resource management, but the collapse of any shared perspective is a much wider phenomenon. Whatever my personal views and life experience, the purpose in noticing here this characteristic of our age is neither to commend it nor to deplore it, but simply to observe it. In terms of our earlier discussion of marginality, we can now see that the absence of a centre also removes the margins. Does that mean, however, that anything goes?

That is a big question, but I will be brief in my answer, so that we can move on to some practical outcomes. I think two points remain valid despite our loss of a common education and the lack of 'general agreement in the community' on values. Firstly, there is the matter of technical skills required to do the work; we may need to understand the principles of palaeography or stratigraphy, we may need to read other languages or master the latest software package. I do not

suggest that these skills are easily acquired and there are several examples in the articles in *Australasian Historical Archaeology* 11 of the problems for historians and archaeologists in appreciating each others' particular skills. Secondly, we cannot avoid the political impact of whatever we choose to do — or not to do. We cannot study class, race or gender in the past — or omit them from our account — without saying something to our contemporaries about our vision of society. Our words deal in power — as do our exhibitions, films and any other form of expression.

My third and final pass, as it were, at this title 'A Voice from the Margin?' is then to deny the concept of the margin, but I certainly do not deny the possibility of having a voice. One of Manning Clark's great phrases — and virtues — was 'having something to say'. What are some characteristics of what people with our interests and skills might say about the past? What will distinguish the history that archaeologists and those who love the sea might write today? It is not for me to prescribe what others might do, but let me suggest a few possibilities and invite you to think about some recent and forthcoming work in the light of these suggestions.

The first thing we might notice is that there are some changes in the shape or map of the past. Molony begins his account of the white peopling of Australia very precisely — and aptly for his sponsor — on 26 January 1788 when 'high summer saw a fleet of eleven ships take up moorings at a small cove in a noble and extensive harbour on the eastern coastline of the southern continent'.¹⁰ The voyage itself receives only brief attention a few pages later. More significant are the assumption that settlement marks the beginning of white history — the Aboriginal past is another matter — and the by-passing of the white, maritime history of the continent since 1606. An outline of much of the Australian coast and the crucial fact of the continent's separation from any Great South Land have been very publicly available since the results of Tasman's voyages were laid down in the floor of the Burgerzaal of Amsterdam's Town Hall in the middle of the seventeenth century.¹¹ Then there are the matters of the saga of the wreck of the *Batavia* — why isn't there a great opera yet on this? — or the structure and nature of trade in the early modern period which determined that 'no good [was] to be done' by Europeans on this coast. Yet as Bill Eisler has shown so well in the great *Terra Australis* exhibition in 1988, trade or its absence was not the limit of European concern.¹²

To suggest such shifts and changes in what we might call the Bicentennial view of the Australian past is only part of a more general approach which sees the north coast of the continent as, in a sense, the southern limit of the maritime world of Southeast Asia. I once got into trouble with a silly reviewer for making that point in my book on the Macassan trepang industry in Arnhem Land; he thought I was being disloyal. The matter is, I believe, easily understood in today's Darwin, which feels increasingly like a Southeast Asian city.

The separation of the Australian colonies in the nineteenth century is hard to overlook, but few historians have thought through the implications of sea travel. The site of Launceston owes its advantage to navigation up the Tamar and those passing down the river in the 1830s could easily cross over to settle 'the northern island'. Melbourne, in turn, had easy connection with Dunedin. From the very beginning of the nineteenth century, Sydney has served, in effect, as the capital of the southwest Pacific, a feature of the city's history more readily understood by those who arrive by sea than those who come by road or rail. For air travellers, it depends on whether they come from east or west, and this example reminds us of the impact of the aeroplane. One can debate the extent to which Western Australians felt their society to be 'insular' before the coming of the railway and the growth of air travel,

or whether Bass Strait serves as a real, as opposed to a psychological, divide for modern Tasmanians.

Thus the map is shaped and reshaped by the technology of the age. We should not be afraid to notice the political point that differences in the past suggest, at least, the possibility of subverting the certainties of the present by imagining a different future.

A second possibility for a history informed by archaeology and an interest in the sea is diversity in both theme and evidence. It is easy to give particular examples of this, but more difficult to generalise. For the sake of consistency, let us start again from Molony who notes the production in 1803 of New South Wales' first newspaper, the *Sydney Gazette*, edited by George Howe.¹³ With the publication in 1991 of the monograph on *Australia's First Government House*, we now know where the printing was done and even have some of the type from the press. The probable location of the printery in the southern outbuilding, right in the middle of the complex of buildings which made up the governor's base, brings home very directly the degree of control under which Howe worked.¹⁴ Of course there is more space to expand on the origins of printing in a detailed monograph than in Molony's general history — indeed, the inclusion of such a detail shows his breadth of reference — but the archaeology, in conjunction with many other documentary sources, usefully confirms much that we otherwise know and adds significantly to our understanding of the technology and circumstances of production.

There is more to this than archaeology showing merely 'how people lived' and providing illustrations of the technology of the day, though both these matters are important. Archaeological evidence can contribute to issues such as class, status and gender, the ideology of various forms of institutionalisation, economic development, and so on. In my study of Macassan trepanning, it would certainly have been impossible to reach a full understanding of the industrial processes involved or the scale of the industry without archaeological survey and excavation. The evidence for the extent and nature of relations between Macassans and Aborigines, while somewhat equivocal on Macassan processing sites, has been very subtly revealed by Scott Mitchell on Aboriginal midden sites.¹⁵

It would be easy to multiply these examples of diversity in theme and evidence. I would particularly like to mention David Denholm's book *The Colonial Australians*. It begins defiantly, 'This is not a general short history book', and the chapters are clearly thematic rather than chronological: war, building, travelling, religion, and so on.¹⁶ The most remarkable feature of the argument, however, is the diversity and originality of the sources used, including much archaeology, though that is not a word which Denholm uses much. The discussion has an admirable liteness about it which is, alas, too often lacking in much academic writing.

A third possible characteristic we might look for in our present intellectual circumstances is a concern with heritage. Notice the way I put this; not *for* heritage, but *with* heritage. Archaeology is essentially concerned with irreplaceable artefacts and their associations. While there may have been many Spanish silver coins in the Dutch wrecks in Western Australia, significance lies in their totality and this requires that the collection remain together for the archaeologist to tally the total, or at least it should be capable, in theory, of reassembly. The first government house site could be, and has been, conserved at great cost; to move and recreate it would be to destroy much of its meaning and its value. These two examples would, no doubt, feature in any overall list of Australian heritage.¹⁷ They, and much else, define who we think we are, though as discussed above, including Dutch maritime enterprise in the picture of Australia's past is

something of an innovation and I had to ponder, when visiting the remarkable replica of the *Batavia* just launched in The Netherlands, in what sense this might be Australian heritage.

Heritage is very often associated with place, as with these examples, and it is no accident that Pearson and Sullivan entitle their book *Looking after Heritage Places*. So it commonly follows that those who live in a place identify with the heritage of that place; I well know that as a recent arrival and shameless convert to Tasmania.

Yet there is a problem here of a rather complex kind. The pervasive 'decentredness' of the age we noticed above also allows us to stand back and choose a perspective on the world, or perhaps choose several. The fact of that choice can disturb our sense of identity — and hence our understanding of what our heritage comprises. It is all too easy to become the slightly aloof, dispassionate academic expert, protected by an assumption of technical expertise as one delivers cynical put-downs of those outside some magic ring of influence.

The best discussion I have seen of this problem of the conflict between engagement and critical distance relates to the situation of an art museum; there are many analogies with our forms of presentation, both in museums and in publication.

The question confronting the Postmodern museum is whether it can avoid being a place in which a lot of narcissistically satisfying art is exhibited — art which seems to reify a particular society's good opinion of itself, the self-satisfaction which makes it think it is the ideal form of humanity — or whether it can present art which threatens the spectator's self-esteem without driving him or her away? The Postmodern museum's quandary is that it must become an empathic space for an art that does not lend itself to an empathic response. It must facilitate the spectator's engagement with an art that invites him or her to disengage with himself or herself — an art that forces the spectator to question his or her assumptions, and as such creates a certain sense of existential groundlessness. As Rilke said, spiritual art invites us to change ourselves — to change the spirit in which we live. What he did not mention is that it does not tell us how we should and in what way we should.¹⁸

To put the point directly, how can we commit ourselves to a heritage which, if we think about it to any degree, may prove to be unattractive at best and perhaps downright objectionable? How can we maintain a professional integrity in the light of personal choice of perspective? Take the case of the Tasmanian bay whaling industry the archaeology of which has been recently well surveyed by Paris Kostoglou for the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service; I very much hope that there is no chance of a heritage revival of the industry and, I suspect, subject to correction, that the whalers endured a life which was far from enviable and were sadly deficient in their morals. Who really wants to identify with all that except in a mood of Tasmanian Gothic romanticism? There is always a dilemma in visiting the stately home — should one identify with the servants below stairs, or the distinctly more comfortable world of those who gave orders from the drawing room?

My own answer to this problem of heritage and the critical spirit is to draw a distinction between my choice of identity and heritage on the one hand, and my professional responsibility for preserving the artefactual or other record on the other. The latter means, in practice, publication of site reports and the proper curation of museum collections. In the jargon, that is part, at least, of cultural resource management.

Though perhaps unfashionable today, R. C. Collingwood made the very useful point that it was important to ask

questions before digging, since it was rather harder to answer questions asked afterwards.¹⁹ Perhaps that insight can be adapted a little to stress the need to think about the place of particular projects within some of the issues I have raised. In particular, how does a project change the shape of the past and subvert our present understandings? How can it draw from and feed out to the widest diversity of themes and approaches? How might it relate to anyone's heritage, whether or not one claims that heritage for one's own identity? Each of these questions brings the archaeologist on any project deep into questions of real importance and, if well prepared, there is no cause for the archaeologist even to *seem* to be a voice from the margin. This is the way to answer Brian Egloff's recent complaint that historical archaeology 'may have failed to make a sufficient intellectual contribution to issues of interest to our contemporaries'.²⁰

NOTES

- 1 Egloff 1994:2-3; Hosty and Stuart 1994:13.
- 2 Molony 1987.
- 3 Macintyre 1986:vii, for example.
- 4 The first volume on Aboriginal prehistory and history has not yet appeared, I think; it will no doubt make use of the results of prehistoric archaeology. Just in case it might be objected that the two examples chosen are now a little old, I did check in some recent numbers of *Australian Historical Studies*, but interesting as the themes to be found there may be, there is no sign that I could see of archaeology or maritime interests as such. It may well be no coincidence, given this conference, that *The Great Circle*, the journal of the Australian Association for Maritime History, contains a good deal of archaeology.
- 5 See especially S. Jack 1993; R.I. Jack 1993; Carment 1993; and Marsden 1993.
- 6 Macintyre 1986:ix-x.
- 7 Kiddle 1961:xi.
- 8 McAuley 1971:87.
- 9 Pearson and Sullivan 1995:16-17.
- 10 Molony 1987:1.
- 11 Schilder 1976:374.
- 12 Eisler and Smith 1988.
- 13 Molony 1987:26.
- 14 Proudfoot and others 1991:72-90.
- 15 Mitchell 1994.
- 16 Denholm 1979:xi.
- 17 After writing this, I noticed that Pearson and Sullivan (1995:33) have also chosen these two cases as obvious examples of historical sites for public presentation.
- 18 Kuspit 1993:3.
- 19 Collingwood 1939:122.
- 20 Egloff 1994:4.

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