

## Twenty years on...

GRAHAM CONNAH

*School of Archaeology and Anthropology, Australian National University, Canberra*

It cannot be often that the founding editor of a scholarly journal gets an opportunity to review its performance many years later. For this reason I am greatly honoured by the request from the present editors that I comment on the occasion of the publication of the twentieth volume of this journal. Its birth in the early 1980s and its subsequent career reflect the changing condition of historical archaeology in Australia and New Zealand over the last two decades. From a small group of enthusiasts in the late 1970s, the subject has grown in both professional status and public interest and would appear to have an assured future.

Indeed, it is impossible to consider the life-story of the journal without remembering the circumstances that gave rise to it and which have kept it alive to this point in time. Its history is very much a part of the history of the Australasian Society for Historical Archaeology, or the Australian Society for Historical Archaeology as it was known before 1994. The trouble is that, like many societies of its type worldwide, it is difficult to find reliable documentary sources for its earlier years and so one craves forgiveness for drawing on personal memory rather than on probably non-existent archival material. As an aside, it would be most interesting and valuable if one of the founding members of the Society would write a detailed account of its origins and earliest years for publication in a future volume of this journal.

In my own case I only became aware of the Society's existence in the mid 1970s, as my own Australian interests turned away from prehistoric shell middens to nineteenth-century colonial settlement. Having worked for a decade on West African material that on some sites was up to three thousand years old but on others dated only to the last few hundred years, this seemed quite a natural change to me. Checking my bookshelves I find that the earliest Society publication that I have is Graeme Henderson's *The wreck of the 'Elizabeth'*, published in 1973. This was Number 1 of 'Studies in historical archaeology', a series of publications that was to run for some years. Perhaps of more general importance, however, was the *Newsletter* that the Society produced from the time of its foundation in 1970, although the earliest copy that I have is Volume 6, Number 1, of April 1976. That particular issue consists of sixteen sides of foolscap paper duplicated from a type-written stencil; it is difficult to believe that such a modest production was the origin of the journal that we now enjoy but so in a sense it was. The *Newsletter* became a major vehicle for a variety of information about historical archaeology and was the main service that the Society provided for its membership. Although in 1987 a selection of its articles was reprinted by the Society (with the title *Papers in Australian historical archaeology*), I doubt if anyone now has a complete set of this highly significant publication, which sadly most librarians would have treated as ephemera.

In the 1970s the membership of the Society was very much drawn from the University of Sydney's Department of Archaeology, Department of History, and Department of Geography, and included staff, students, ex-students and interested members of the public. I think that it was in 1979 that I decided to get involved in the Society and took to travelling specially from Armidale, New South Wales, where I worked at the University of New England, to Sydney to attend its com-

mittee meetings. These took place regularly in the University of Sydney's Staff Club, there being no other meetings of the Society as such, except for the Annual General Meetings which were conducted around one large table at the same venue. Although others, such as Ian Jack, had contributed substantially to the Society in earlier years, by that time its main stalwarts were Judy Birmingham, Rosemary Annable and the late Ilma Powell. From what I saw on my visits to Sydney, we all of us in the Society owe a great debt of gratitude to that tough trio. It was the committee led by them that sometime in 1981 (the year that also saw the first of the Society's annual conferences) decided to launch a journal and to run it in addition to the popular *Newsletter*. Considering the financial situation of the Society at that time, it was a courageous decision indeed.

Ten years previously I had been involved as an assistant editor with the launch of the *West African Journal of Archaeology* (which still runs albeit in a somewhat hiccupping fashion), and in 1981 I had just survived the protracted agony of editing the book *Australian field archaeology* for what was then called the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. I should have known better but in a rare spasm of philanthropy I offered to edit the new journal and, predictably, nobody objected. As every editor knows, general opinion is divided between those who think that editing is a mug's game involving endless uninteresting labour and those who think that there is nothing to it because all editors do is send whatever the authors give them to a kind printer who sorts out all the problems. Those of us who have been both author and editor and, on occasion, publisher, know that the truth is considerably more complex than either of these opinions and that editing can also be an exciting and stimulating activity. In taking on the journal I was not being the masochist that some might have thought.

Thus it was that the journal came into being. Throughout 1982 I collected papers, hunted for them might be a more accurate description, and sent the first volume to press in time for it to appear in early 1983 with that year's date on it. I got a far larger number of copies printed than there were members of the Society at that time and the committee of the day complained about this extravagance. As I knew from experience elsewhere, however, the first issue of a new journal often becomes unobtainable quite quickly, for several reasons, and the passage of time was to prove me right.

In the editorial of that first volume I wrote as follows:

It is also the editor's intention that this journal should attempt to attract a very wide selection of historical archaeological writings from throughout all parts of Australia and also at times from overseas: it is for the latter reason that this journal is called *The Australian Journal of Historical Archaeology*, not *The Journal of Australian Historical Archaeology*. The editor hopes that colleagues in New Zealand, in America, in Europe or in South-East Asia, will send him papers that either in content or in theoretical or methodological approach might have relevance to our Australian endeavours. The editor also hopes that they will buy and read this journal!

As might have been expected at that time, one reviewer of the first volume remarked, in so many words, that there was a fat chance that this would ever happen. True enough, it has taken a long time but steadily over the years the journal has been lifted to an international level, publishing material from New Zealand and sometimes other countries (see below), and certainly being read in other parts of the world. Indeed, of the two editors of Volume 19, one was an American who had done field research in Australia and was working in a British university.

Looking back at that first volume, I think that I had two main motives in acting as editor. First I was (and remain) convinced, as I said in the editorial of the second volume, that 'a discipline consists very largely of its body of published material'. For publication to occur regularly it was obvious that authors must have the opportunity as well as the wish to publish. If the journal could provide such an opportunity, in a refereed production of high quality, then this would materially help in the development of the discipline. My second motive concerned the Society itself. I believed that it was essential for the organization to grow beyond its University of Sydney cradle. In my opinion it needed to be a national society, indeed an international society, and the journal was one way of moving in this direction. If its content could be of sufficient geographical extent and its subject matter sufficiently varied, surely people from beyond Sydney and beyond New South Wales would join the Society?

Such were the main motives; so how have we done? In twenty years we have produced twenty volumes, of which the nineteen extant at the time of writing collectively weigh over 6.5 kilograms. That mass of paper in those nineteen volumes has provided a quality publication outlet for 166 papers, and 140 books have been reviewed. My editorial responsibilities (much aided on the graphics side by Douglas Hobbs) were limited to Volumes 1-6 and Volume 12 because field research and writing on African archaeology reclaimed my attention. Therefore the bulk of this achievement has resulted from the work of a long list of other people, principal amongst whom have been a succession of editors. The honour board includes the names: Judy Birmingham, Brian Egloff, Neville Ritchie, Aedeon Cremin, Susan Lawrence, Tony Lowe, Mary Casey, Sarah Colley, Iain Stuart, Eleanor Conlin Casella, Clayton Fredericksen, and Penny Crook. There have also been others: reviews editors, editorial committee and editorial board members, referees, publishers, printers, and of course a large number of patient and dedicated authors, unpaid and often out-of-pocket as a result of their contributions. Everyone involved deserves the reader's gratitude for the journal's achievement. Perhaps the most important part of that achievement has been the extension of the journal's coverage to include New Zealand and the consequent increase in the number of New Zealand members of the Society, which currently has New Zealander Neville Ritchie as its President and has twice held its annual conference in New Zealand. It should be remembered, however, that even the very first volume of the journal included a paper on a New Zealand subject.

A particularly pleasing aspect of the journal's output has been the number of first-time authors that it has published over the years. In this way it has performed a vital service, for although any editor will be grateful for material from well-established and known authors, it is of primary importance that archaeologists in the early stages of their careers are encouraged to publish and are assisted in doing so. This is especially the case in the present situation in Australia and New Zealand, in which consultancy work and heritage management dwarf academic activity, so that it is very difficult for many professionals to find the time to publish. In my opinion, Australia and New Zealand have long needed an equivalent to the well-known *British Archaeological Reports* (or *BAR*, as they are often called), that could quickly and as cheaply as

possible publish the more important work by consultants and the best postgraduate theses coming out of our universities. This remains one of my many pipe-dreams, after all who has the money? Nevertheless, in the meantime we do have the journal and it has been serving us well, within the limits of its capability.

Naturally, the twenty years of the journal have not been without their problems. In the early 1990s, for instance, publication was so delayed, for a variety of reasons, that for a while the volumes were two years behind. For example, although Volume 10 of 1992 was the first to carry the title *Australasian Historical Archaeology*, it was actually published in 1994, so that this and some other volumes became a citation minefield for the unwary bibliographer, editor or author. More seriously perhaps, such delays also ran the risk of librarians and private subscribers withdrawing their support. In addition, for some readers the content of the journal gave rise to occasional concern. There were those who thought that documentary sources were getting more attention than the physical evidence, or that sites and structures were dominating to the detriment of artefact studies or theoretical considerations. Overall, however, a perusal of the nineteen volumes demonstrates that coverage has been wide and varied.

For instance, of the 166 papers, 129 have been concerned with Australian topics and 32 with non-Australian topics, made up of 20 papers on New Zealand subjects, 4.5 on European ones (some papers cover more than one geographical area), 3.5 on American ones, 2 on Antarctica, and 2 on South-East Asia. Another 5 papers are too general to assign to any particular area. Thus the journal can hardly be accused of being parochial, although there is obviously still a necessity to extend our coverage, particularly in the direction of South-East Asia and the Pacific. In addition, it is hoped that historical archaeologists in New Zealand will increasingly view the journal as the most appropriate place to publish their work.

Assessing subject coverage is much more difficult; indeed the allocation of some papers to a subject area is so subjective as to make the attempt of doubtful value. Nevertheless, in trying to do this I took thirteen broad categories between which I divided the 166 papers. The results were as follows: Mining, 24 papers; Other industries, 22; Domestic/Settlement, 20; Convicts, 15; Methodology (including cultural resource management and applied archaeology), 15; Rural, 12; Artefacts, 8; Maritime, 7; Theory, 5; Urban, 5; Transport 4; Bibliographies, 4. Another 25 papers defeated me and were placed in a Miscellaneous category. Readers should perhaps attempt this assessment for themselves and will no doubt come up with different results. The problem that many papers could be allocated to more than one category and even the choice of the categories themselves make it a difficult task. Perhaps the only conclusion possible is that in general the journal has covered a wide selection of subject areas but that there are nevertheless some that have had surprisingly little attention. For instance, the paucity of papers that could, even broadly, be classified as Theory, Urban, or Transport might give us cause to reflect.

As to the quality of the journal's content, it is impossible and unwise to make specific comments. Like any journal, there has been a range of paper quality, from the near-brilliant to the poorly conceived and indifferently written. As I once heard or read somewhere, a journal is like a train standing in a station: it leaves at a set time and must fill its seats with whatever passengers are available. More than one editor over the years has complained about the difficulty of finding sufficient papers, of a quality that could survive independent refereeing, with which to fill the journal. This has been in spite of the fact that many papers have been published by consultants who, unlike authors in academic or government heritage posts, did

not have the security of a salaried position during the time that they expended on writing for publication. Sadly, even those professionals who did have such security have in recent years found themselves with less and less time to write for publication, as their time was eroded by understaffing and sterile bureaucratic process.

All things considered, we should be grateful for what the journal *has* published. As a research and teaching resource it is invaluable. From the university student preparing for an Honours project to interested members of the general public, there are a variety of readers who find that the many volumes of this journal provide a rich and often stimulating body of data. We are most fortunate to have it, and in a hundred years time readers will still be able to see what we were up to in the late twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. They will have much more difficulty in seeing that from the mass of unpublished work in historical archaeology that is scattered through multiple locations and still impedes the progress of the discipline.

At the beginning of my editorial in the first volume I wrote that 'The launching of a new journal, particularly in a new field, is an important moment'. So, one can now add, is its completion of twenty years of service. May it long continue to serve us, in Australia, in New Zealand, and in other parts of the world, and to encourage us to do even better in the future. So the message is clear: keep writing!