



There From the Start: Aboriginal Involvement in the Early Development of Australian Archaeology

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RESEARCH NOTE

ubiquity press

ABSTRACT

While it is certainly the case that Indigenous Australians have suffered the consequences of being treated in an objectifying and derogatory fashion during the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries by archaeologists and others, they were not mere observers of the creation of a 65,000-year narrative of their history that has become important in the modern story of Australia. Rather, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians were involved in illuminating knowledge of Australia's deep history from at least as early as the 1830s. This story has not been told up to now. By examining the extent of early Indigenous involvement in the development of Australian archaeology, this paper demonstrates that far from archaeological research having been something simply imposed upon Aboriginal people, their intellectual property has been critical in all stages of its development. At a time when serious gaps are being identified in the ways the history of Australian archaeology has been presented, it is an urgent task to insert this hidden history of Indigenous involvement in Australia's archaeology. Reading 'against the grain', we seek to bring to the fore the role of Aboriginal interlocutors whose opinions and expertise were constantly sought by early archaeologists grappling with establishing archaeological frameworks to understand the deep history of a continent. Deconstructing the current master narratives of the history of Australian archaeology will have significant ramifications for how the discipline is taught and practiced, and for the general public's appreciation of the role of Indigenous Australians in shaping the nation's history.

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KEYWORDS:

History of Archaeology;
Australia; Indigenous
contribution; nineteenth
century; megafauna;
stone artefacts

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Spriggs, Matthew, and
Lynette Russell. 2023. There
From the Start: Aboriginal
Involvement in the Early
Development of Australian
Archaeology. *Bulletin of the
History of Archaeology*, 33(1):
6, pp. 1–10. DOI: [https://doi.
org/10.5334/bha-672](https://doi.org/10.5334/bha-672)

Some progress has been made in the deconstruction of the master narrative of the history of Australian archaeology as generally received and reproduced, but there is much more to do. McNiven and Russell (2005) pointed to the complicity of archaeology in appropriating Indigenous peoples' pasts in a study of the 'colonial culture' of Australian archaeology. They pointed the way towards a postcolonial archaeological practice involving collaborative partnership with Indigenous Australians in understanding their past. Spriggs has attempted to connect the recent history of Australian archaeology back to its past, pointing out that the supposed 'rupture' from earlier practices through emphasis on the professionalization of archaeology in the 1960s produces a false dichotomy with earlier research (Spriggs 2020; cf. Urwin and Spriggs 2021). Paradoxically, by forgetting such earlier research, archaeological histories have marginalized the foundational role of Indigenous Australians in the wider development of Australian archaeology over the last 200 or so years, not least in its earliest days. This significant gap is precisely what our current Australian Research Council-funded project addresses.¹ We are approaching Australian antiquarian and archaeological literature, site reports and surveys, as archival sources, reading them against the grain of the usual descriptions, examining their gaps and contradictions, and identifying the presence of Indigenous knowledge and agency. We aim to examine the archaeological literature explicitly in this way, and then delve back into the context of the knowledge exchanges involved in its generation.

In undertaking this research, we are embracing decolonising methodologies, and therefore it is useful to offer some reflections on how we define these. Decolonialism is not the same as postcolonialism, though they are related. For our purposes, decolonisation is both a commitment and action to acknowledge the marginalisation of Indigenous knowledge and people as has occurred in the writing of the history of Australian archaeology. It is our intention not merely to insert Indigenous knowledge(s) into a history of archaeology but rather to transform the way that history is perceived and considered. As we attempt to reorient our understanding of how Australian archaeology developed, we are embracing the concepts of sovereignty and in-depth knowledge and involvement of Indigenous people. In contrast, conventional histories of Australian archaeology often state that there was minimal Indigenous Australian involvement until the growth of Aboriginal activism in relation to the emergence of land and cultural rights particularly from the late 1970s onwards (Griffiths 1996; collected papers in Mulvaney 1990; White and O'Connell 1982). In the book *Deep Time Dreaming: Uncovering Ancient Australia*, Billy Griffiths (2018) maps out the development of Australian archaeology and the parallel emergence of Aboriginal activism and powerful Indigenous identity politics since the mid-1950s. In many ways, this focus on the second half of the twentieth century confirms the position that the late Professor John Mulvaney asserted when he famously stated that he had never knowingly met an Aboriginal person until in his mid-30s during fieldwork in Queensland in 1960 (Mulvaney 2011: 109). According to Mulvaney very few Australian archaeological projects until that time had had any involvement with Aboriginal people unless it be as labourers on excavations in remote areas of the country (Mulvaney 1971). As with much of the history that has been constructed around the development of archaeology in Australia, even a superficial engagement with the pre-1956 literature of archaeology reveals that the supposed lack of Aboriginal involvement in early archaeology is simply incorrect. This erasure of Aboriginal participation requires to be revised, and a new history of Australian archaeology written.

The importance of challenging previous histories is not merely to offer a corrective but rather to show the complexity of the relationships between Indigenous people and archaeology over a period of nearly 200 years. Australia is a settler colonial state (Wolfe 2006; Veracini 2011; Carey and Silverstein 2020), and Indigenous academics have written about how settler colonialism permeates our society and seems to be both unavoidable and endless (Birch 1996, 2020; Byrd 2011). This premise needs to be front and centre in our minds as we discuss disciplinary and intellectual histories. In working with decolonial theories, we are committed to eliminating more abstracted, less obvious, but no less significant, colonial processes that are ingrained in how we understand archaeological histories. By not merely engaging with an awareness of colonialism but also considering how Indigenous participants have been depicted we

¹ Grant number SR200200155, awarded 2020 for the project 'Aboriginal involvement in the early development of Australian archaeology', project to run 2021–2024.

interrogate who these archaeological histories serve. These matters are far more than merely academic as they are enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (adopted 2007). According to the Declaration:

Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development. (<https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>).

Article 11 specifically notes that:

Indigenous peoples have the right to practice and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artefacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature.

We propose that the project, ‘Aboriginal involvement in the early development of Australian archaeology’, which we are undertaking, is in accordance with Article 11.

MEGAFaUNA AND STONE TOOLS

The research project is still in its early stages and has, of course, been affected by the COVID pandemic and travel bans. Our discussion is therefore preliminary and open to revision; it is very much a work in progress but has managed to reveal many gaps and erasures in disciplinary history.

Already we can establish that from at least 1830 when megafaunal bones, thought at the time to be contemporary with human occupation and deposited by the Biblical Flood, were first being discovered, there is evidence of Indigenous Australian involvement in identification as to whether the bones found were of extant or extinct species, as reported in a letter of Surveyor-General Thomas Mitchell’s (although authorship was ‘appropriated’ by J.D. Lang) in the *Sydney Gazette and NSW Advertiser* (25 May 1830, p. 3) reporting the first collection of bones from the Caves by George Ranken:

It is quite evident that the greater number of the bones in question [at Wellington Caves] are not those of animals of the species at present inhabiting this territory. The aborigines are very good authority on this point in the absence of such men such as M. le Baron Ouvier [sic — Cuvier], Professor Jamieson [sic — Robert Jameson], or Professor [William] Buckland, for when shown several of the bones, and asked if they belonged to any of the species at present inhabiting the territory, they uniformly replied, *Bail that belongit to kangaroo, Bail that belongit to emu, &c. &c.* (quoted in Minard 2018: 94, passage expanded and spelling corrected with reference to <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article2195206>, accessed 13 September 2019).

In this context the NSW Pidgin quotation means ‘They are not from a kangaroo, they are not from an emu’, implying certainty by using the negative ‘bail’ (David Nash and Harold Koch, pers. comm., March 2019). Further, the use of such pidgin phrases attests to an expectation that Sydney newspaper readers of 1830 would be familiar enough with Aboriginal Pidgin to understand the meaning without the need for translation, a very different context to research than would have been the case later in that century. Given the background of the first European knowledge of the Wellington Caves being in the 1820s (Lane and Richards 1963), it is most likely that they were guided there by local Aboriginal inhabitants, whose name for the Caves, was ‘Welbang’ (John Rogers, 1830, quoted in Dunkley 2016: 26). The Caves were recorded as being the abode of cave spirit Koppa by Mitchell (‘Koppa sit down there’) from information doubtless imparted to Ranken by Indigenous interlocutors. Thomas Mitchell in June 1830 was told of another prospective cave area across the Macquarie River by an Indigenous resident who took him to the spot while sitting ‘on horseback behind another man’ (Dunkley 2016: 31).

The debate as to whether megafauna and First Australian settlement overlapped continues today (See [Hocknull et al. 2020](#) and references therein)² but was informed from at least the 1840s by Aboriginal accounts of knowledge of the habits of particular extinct animals.

Dugan (1980) quotes an 1845 letter from F.N. Isaac to palaeontologist Richard Owen concerning megafaunal bones found on the Darling Downs:

The natives throughout these Northern Districts have a tradition relative to a very large animal having at one time existed in the large Creeks and Rivers & by many it is said that such animals now exist & several of the Fossil bones which I have at various times shown to them they have ascribed to then, Whether such animals as those to which they refer be yet living is a matter of doubt, but their fear of them is certainly not the less & their dread of bathing in the very large waterholes is well known (1980: 266).

Some 25 years later, following on from a fossil-hunting expedition to Queensland, the naturalist George Bennett reported that he received a letter dated 'Gowrie, December 1, 1871' from an unnamed informant discussing further megafaunal finds. Having described them it continues:

I have had a long conversation with "Charlie Pearce," an aboriginal, relative to these fossils and he avers that they are those of an animal long extinct, known to the natives by the name of "Gyedarra." Tradition among them has handed down the appearance and habits of this animal for generations; but Charlie says he never paid much attention to the descriptions that have been given to him, but imagines the animal was as large as a heavy draught-horse, walked on four legs, the same as any other four-footed beast, eating grass, never went any distance back from the creeks to feed, and spent most of its time in the water, chiefly in enormous holes excavated in the banks. I told him he must mean some other animal; but he spoke most positively, and asserted that the bones we have been finding are those of the animal of which he was speaking, and at one time the bones were very numerous around the Gowrie water-holes, where his forefathers had seen the animals themselves sporting about (quoted in [Bennett 1872:315](#)).

It is thus scarcely surprising that Owen in his major work *Researches on the Fossil Remains of the Extinct Mammals of Australia* (1877) would conclude that the extinctions were caused by 'the combined assaults of a tribe of Australoid wielders of clubs and throwing-sticks' (1877:I:ix) while acknowledging that there was as yet no evidence of any direct association of humans and megafauna in Australia, unless it be the supposed presence of the commensal dingo in the Cave deposits (see below). One feels that not much has changed in the intervening 145 years!

The letter published by Bennett was quoted approvingly by Charles Anderson, the then-director of the Australian Museum, Sydney, in a 1926 paper on the Wellington Caves where a supposed human tooth (later it turned out to be non-human) and dingo bones (later shown to be much more recent)³ were still being claimed to be associated with megafaunal remains at the time ([Anderson 1926](#)). Thus, the construction of the entire megafauna debate was based on Aboriginal knowledge and opinion from 1830 onwards, something rarely if ever acknowledged in papers on the subject.

We could similarly look at Aboriginal involvement in the study and understanding of stone tools. In the 1840s, the artist George French Angas described a form of stone axe from the Adelaide area: 'Mokani or ngarunde – a native stone tomahawk or axe fastened between two pieces of wood; this is very similar to the mogo or stone axe of New South Wales' (1847, quoted in [Tindale 1950:271](#)). The Indigenous names attest directly to the interest of Aboriginal groups in explaining and presenting their material culture. In 1878 Brough Smyth gave a detailed account of a distinctive Western Australian 'kodj' stone axe, with details on methods of hafting obtained from Kaneang and/or Juat Aboriginal informants ([Smyth 1878](#), cited by [Tindale 1950](#)). Several

² Significantly Hocknull et al. report that the new megafaunal site they report on resulted from 'The discovery of fossil bones by Barada Barna Traditional Owners at South Walker Creek', Queensland (2020: 2). The Indigenous contribution to the megafauna debate continues!

³ The identification of the tooth as marsupial was definitively sorted out in 1949 ([Lane and Richards 1963: 27-30](#)) and the age of the dingo teeth only in 1973 ([Gill and Sinott 1973](#)).

other Aboriginal names for common artefact types have been adopted by archaeologists, among them the 'tula' adze, first described in detail from Wonkonguru people of the Lake Eyre region by Horne and Aiston (1924) as 'tuhla'. The Indigenous name was adopted to describe archaeological materials only six years later (Hale and Tindale 1930, cited in McNiven 1993).

As a typical example of pertinent settler information obtained from Indigenous Australians of their acquaintance and passed on to museum professionals is this quotation in a letter to W.W. Thorpe, the ethnologist at the Australian Museum from the 1st August 1931 concerning stone files found in archaeological contexts from at least 1889: 'The information as to the use of this implement came from the head man named 'Tony', who was king of the Kutthung (Port Stephens district)...when he gave me the information thirty-two years ago, he was a very old man. He informed me that the implement was used for sharpening shell fish hooks' (Thorpe 1932: 308).

There is clearly enough here from a relatively superficial reading of old sources to demonstrate that there is an important story to be told of the foundational importance of Aboriginal knowledge in the development of archaeology. The task of bringing it to light is an urgent one, not least because our understanding of this early period of Australian archaeology is distorted and inaccurate (cf. Spriggs 2020). There is a clear and present need to rewrite the history of the discipline and to give credit where it is due.

AREAS OF INVESTIGATION

There are several areas of investigation where it is hypothesised that Indigenous knowledge has been critical to the development of archaeological ideas:

1. The manufacturing techniques and functions of stone tools and other artefacts.
Indigenous knowledge has been critical for the development of lithic-based archaeology in Australia. Initially, by providing information on the names of artefacts such as the kobj axe (Tindale 1950) and pirri point (Horne and Aiston 1924), Indigenous knowledges were embedded in the discipline almost unconsciously. In addition, Aboriginal experts demonstrated manufacturing techniques for individual artefact types and provided information on their functions. In some cases, Aboriginal knowledge was regarded as insecure because of the length of time since such objects had been made and used. This has led to a high degree of scepticism among archaeologists about the value of such research. Such scepticism was justified on occasion. For instance, some of T. Dick's photographs were clearly staged and stage-managed to reflect his own ideas of how artefacts may have been manufactured in the past (McCarthy 1947: 426–7). However, such general scepticism was decisively rejected by Tindale on the basis of his own research with Indigenous groups across Australia on stone artefact production from the 1920s to the 1960s (Tindale 1965). He lamented that archaeologists had missed many opportunities to learn from Aboriginal interlocutors about stone tool manufacturing techniques: 'It is high time that at least a few archaeologists should take note of Australian and New Guinea stone knappers and temporarily at least emerge from their cave holes to study at first hand the data provided by living peoples' (1965: 162).
2. Identification of sites during survey and discussion of site function and place within networks of sites. An example of this form of collaboration is provided by Tindale's Aboriginal friend Milerum (1869?–1941), frequently called upon to provide an opinion on site layout (see for example Tindale 1982: 96, referring to work at Pedler Creek, Moana, South Australia in the mid-1920s).
3. Assistance and advice during archaeological excavations. Mulvaney (1971) claimed that prior to 1960, there was only published evidence of four examples of 'Aboriginal-aided' excavations, citing Warner (1937), Davidson (1935), Macintosh (1951) and McCarthy and Setzler (1960). But his listing of excavations is a very partial one, and preliminary study indicates more evidence will certainly be found with detailed archival research.
4. Interpretation of Aboriginal practices with material manifestations, such as food procurement and identification of traditionally useful plants, animals (including megafauna – see the Thomas Mitchell quotation above as an example), hunting and

gathering methods, and ceremonial activities such as carried out at extant stone arrangements (for the latter see [Campbell and Mountford 1939](#)).

5. Investigation of ceremonial and economic exchange networks. It is very clear that reconstructions of traditional exchange networks such as those attempted in several papers in Peterson (1976) would have been almost completely impossible without the mainly 19th-century informants of early anthropologists such as Brough Smyth, Curr, Dawson, Howitt, W.E. Roth, and Spencer and Gillen. Mulvaney admitted as much in his contribution to that volume, although he tended to give the credit to the recorders of Aboriginal knowledge rather than to its originators ([Mulvaney 1976](#)).
6. The interpretation of rock art. This is a field of study in itself and the history of rock art studies is the subject of considerable recent interest and research (see most recently [Taçon et al. 2022](#), the proceedings of a 2019 conference). Our current project will therefore not address the topic in any detail, except tangentially within the context of wider-ranging studies.

Specific research questions flow from examination of the above hypothesized areas of Indigenous Australian involvement that encompass topics such as:

- a. **Timing:** Is 1830 really the start of Aboriginal involvement in what later became recognizably archaeological research? Are there phases where Aboriginal involvement was particularly important and other times when Aboriginal contributions were misunderstood, marginalized, or ignored? Can we separate out meaningful phases in Aboriginal involvement in archaeology?
- b. **Agency:** Investigating the agency of Indigenous Australians in passing on their knowledge. Are we talking of casual conversations in which non-Indigenous scholars sought to 'pump' Indigenous Australians for information, or are there examples where more equal exchanges of knowledge and resources may have taken place? What was in it for the First Australians who shared their knowledge? What was the context in which such knowledge exchange took place? Was supposed 'ignorance' of the answers to questions as reported by non-Indigenous scholars in fact a form of resistance? What areas of knowledge may have been kept from such scholars?
- c. **Significance:** How significant was the knowledge gained in informing the discipline's theoretical and methodological evolution? The timing of Indigenous knowledge inputs relative to perceived advances in disciplinary development will need to be looked at, with a view to examining critically such perceived advances as to their reality. To what extent will our views of the discipline's development change radically once we understand the role of Aboriginal knowledge in it?

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

This three-year project involves archival research to bring together the sources that will allow interrogation of the early involvement of First Australians in the development of archaeology. We will engage with Indigenous stakeholders and cultural specialists to discuss their own interests, and examine the potential for collaborative research, for instance on family members whose stories may have been identified by the project as key interlocutors. There has been Indigenous input from the start of the project, and this will continue during the research, as budgeted for in the grant. Our preliminary overview, building upon earlier efforts such as McNiven and Russell (2005), has identified key groups of individuals whose archives can be expected to yield evidence of Indigenous involvement in archaeological findings and interpretations in Australia. The first of these are the explorers, particularly of the interior of the continent. Second are the early missionaries whose writings are known to contain evidence of Indigenous knowledge pertinent to early theories about the origins and culture of Aboriginal Australians. As Alan Lester (2001, 2006) has shown for South Africa and other colonial outposts, missionaries were linked through imperial networks, missionary, and intellectual societies. Third are the early ethnologists/anthropologists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Their writings had a key influence on Metropolitan developments in museum practice and archaeology and anthropology more generally, most notably mediated through the syntheses of scholars such as E.B. Tylor, John Lubbock and J.G. Frazer.

Missionaries and early anthropologists also furnished Aboriginal material culture to European and American museums and the archives of these institutions should prove fertile ground for further information on Aboriginal knowledge that was passed on by these and by other collectors. The succeeding generations of archaeologists/ethnologists working in Australia from the second quarter of the twentieth century onwards are particularly key players in framing the discourses about Aboriginal Deep History which are still with us, often unanalyzed as to their sources and history. Prominent among them are the figures of Donald Sutherland Davidson (1900–1952) from the University of Pennsylvania, Frederick David McCarthy (1905–1997) of the Australian Museum, and Norman Tindale (1900–1993) of the South Australian Museum, as well as lesser-known figures such as Thomas Draper Campbell (1893–1967), Charles Percy Mountford (1890–1976) and Herbert Vander Vord Noone (1880–1955). See Clarke et al. (2022) for a lively account of relations between McCarthy, Mountford and Tindale, and Spriggs (2020) for bibliographical references for the others.

State Libraries and Museums, the AIATSIS and National Libraries in Canberra, and key overseas archives such as those of the British Museum in London, Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (CUMAA), the Peabody Museum of Harvard University, the Pitt-Rivers Museum and Bodleian library of Oxford University, and the University of Pennsylvania Museum will be visited for archival research. This will complement a detailed examination of Australian and major European and American anthropological journals.

The field of archaeology and Indigenous peoples globally have had a very tense connection. As Yui scholar Zac Roberts (2022: 5) notes, this is because Indigenous people are marginalised in studies on their own cultures due to colonial ideas of imagined European superiority. Building research capacity and attempting to spark interest among First Australians in the history of their involvement is anticipated to further empower First Nations storytelling. The benefit to Indigenous Australians will come from developing a novel perspective on the development of archaeology, one that puts their contribution centre stage, and one that has the potential to recast how archaeology is taught and practised in Australia. Many Australians, including many practising archaeologists, will be surprised to learn that the growth of archaeological knowledge of Australia's distant past has depended, from the beginning, on Aboriginal knowledge and research collaboration, whether informal or as part of long-term intellectual engagements. Correcting and refocusing the history of how archaeology developed in our country so that credit may be given where it is due but where it has previously been minimised or neglected will have significant social and cultural benefits for Australia. Informing the complicated and frequently disputed sectors of heritage, cultural significance, custodianship, museum interpretations, and tourism are also anticipated benefits.

CONCLUSIONS

A very significant audience for this project is among Indigenous Australians, particularly the descendants of key interlocutors of the scholars whose work is being interrogated for Aboriginal knowledge and influence upon ideas. We intend to travel directly to Indigenous communities as needed to consult with them on the progress of the research and, later, of its results, and to present results within Indigenous fora. The second audience is that of professional archaeologists and students. To capture the interest of the wider Australian society, we also plan to produce a commercially available book at the conclusion of the project which will provide a more popular overview of the place of Aboriginal people in the development of the discipline of archaeology in Australia. We will also seek to interest the ABC or other organisations in a documentary that summarises the project's results and engages with Indigenous perspectives on their meaning in Australia today. These outputs will allow the ramifications of the results to be more clearly seen for heritage management and Museum practice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the Australian Research Council and our respective universities, ANU and Monash, for their support of this project, and Shayne Bates-Gilby for research assistance during its opening year. We thank the audiences at both conferences mentioned below for their useful comments, and CBAP members, particularly Eve Haddow, for *Histories*

of Archaeology conference organisation. Matthew Spriggs would like to acknowledge the interest and support of his ANU colleague, Dave Johnston, Chair of the Australian Indigenous Archaeologists Association. Lynette Russell acknowledges the ongoing conversations, support, and engagement of Ian J. McNiven.

FUNDING INFORMATION

The paper was first delivered at the *Histories of Archaeology Conference*, organised at ANU but held as an online event in November 2021, and funded by Matthew Spriggs' ARC Laureate Project, *The Collective Biography of Archaeology in the Pacific* (CBAP), grant no: FL140100218. A somewhat different version was delivered as a keynote at the *Australian Archaeological Association Annual Conference*, in December 2021, again held as an online event.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors contributed to the research and writing of this paper.

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Spriggs and Russell
Bulletin of the History of Archaeology
DOI: 10.5334/bha-672

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Spriggs, Matthew, and Lynette Russell. 2023. There From the Start: Aboriginal Involvement in the Early Development of Australian Archaeology. *Bulletin of the History of Archaeology*, 33(1): 6, pp. 1–10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/bha-672>

Submitted: 26 September 2022

Accepted: 04 April 2023

Published: 28 December 2023

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