

What's Wrong with the Twentieth Century? Why Has it Been Ignored by Archaeologists?

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This paper was presented at the 1993 Australasian Society for Historical Archaeology conference in Adelaide. It intends to provoke discussion on historical archaeologists' roles in investigating the twentieth century. The author draws attention to an over-emphasis on Australia's colonial heritage and then suggests several themes in Australian history which would benefit from investigation by historical archaeologists. These include how we have become Australian, the development of distinctive regional character, the lives of women, children and other people considered marginal to important events, urbanisation, the development of mass-production manufacturing industry and mass-consumption.

I should like to draw your attention to the fact that the twentieth century is now history. We are well into its last decade. Why has so little attention been paid to the archaeology of the twentieth century until so near its end? In preparation for this conference, I checked all issues of the *Australian Journal of Historical Archaeology* since the first was produced in 1983. I also looked through the bibliographies published in the journal and read some of the studies which were listed. There seems to have been an unspoken agreement that between 100 and 150 years should elapse between an event and its archaeological investigation. Why else would historical archaeologists have ignored the most interesting period in Australian history, from the late nineteenth century through the twentieth century?

Graham Connah, the admirably long-standing editor of the *Australian Journal of Historical Archaeology*, opened the first issue with the observation: 'Properly presented, the material culture of the 200 years of Australia's colonial settlement is a fascinating subject for the general public'.¹ As State Historian, one whose primary purpose has been to interest and involve the South Australian people in their own history, I fully support the argument that historical archaeologists should seek to inform and arouse the interest of Australians in general in their work.

But why Connah's emphasis on *colonial* settlement alone? Australia can no longer be considered simply a European colonial 'aftermath'. Now that we are nearing the centenary of Federation, that is, 100 years of Australian nationhood, the notion that there has been 200 years of *colonial* settlement is a distortion of our history. Our twentieth-century experience in a confederation of States and territories within an independent nation is greater than the years spent within a disparate group of semi-independent British colonies. For example, most of northern Australia was not settled until the 1860s. Therefore, except for the districts centred on Sydney and Hobart this country has been *Australian* for much longer than it was colonial.

One of the fascinating themes of twentieth-century history, and one which would well repay close attention from historical archaeologists, is that of immigration. By the turn of the century, for the first time, the Australian-born outnumbered the British-born, that is the emigrant, colonial population in Australia. From then on it could be argued that historians and archaeologists are dealing with new, hybrid, Australian societies rather than merely transported and partly-adapted British/Irish or German societies. Succeeding periods of immigration later in this century, particularly as they have brought in large numbers of non-British

settlers, have added to the mix and so further reinforced the distinctions between Australia and the countries of origin.

Another aspect of Australian-ness which does not seem to have been well-represented in historical archaeology studies is the development of distinctive regional character (in the twentieth century or otherwise). Connah expressed the same concern in the 1987 journal, noting that 15 of the 41 papers published were on New South Wales and only one or two were published on each of the other States, except Victoria.² As well, regionalism is an ongoing process, not simply one which was developed only for short periods of time in remote, pioneering communities. Indeed, it could be said that the founding Anglo-Celtic societies in Australia and New Zealand were more homogeneous than the communities which developed subsequently. Compare those entirely twentieth-century settlements of Canberra and Coober Pedy!

There are strong and persisting differences between the States which find physical expression. The landscape itself alters radically as you cross the border from South Australia into Victoria. This reflects 150 years of different land administration policy between the two State governments.³ See how differently that significant twentieth-century phenomenon, the public housing authority, has built in the different States. Many thousands of brick, semi-detached (double unit) rental houses were built by the South Australian Housing Trust in the mid-twentieth century in South Australia and nowhere else.⁴

Australian historians do not deal very well with persisting regional difference, tending either to concentrate on our own States or to assume that the histories of regions beyond New South Wales and Victoria are merely pale copies of the histories of those States. How interesting it would be to combine documentary and material evidence to construct a history of State differences.

Difference in other forms is being increasingly recognised by historians. Even Manning Clark admitted guilt for virtually omitting women and Aborigines from *A History of Australia*. Women, as members of Australian society, let alone as contributors to Australian life, were routinely ignored until the new feminism of the late 1960s. As a result, the lives of women, children and other people considered marginal to important events are often just as 'invisible' in the twentieth-century historical record as they were in the nineteenth century, and historical archaeology can play just as important a role in rescuing those histories. I believe that one of the defining characteristics of the late twentieth century is the growing strength of

previously ignored or even suppressed groups and the increasing recognition within society at large of their rights, including their right to be different. How will this show up in the archaeological record? Will it show up at all if it is not pursued soon?

Another issue of relevance to the question of investigating the twentieth century is that history is an ongoing process: and archaeology should not be concerned solely with closed-off histories but also with the continuing uses of places. By exploring and helping to interpret sites in continuous use, historical archaeology offers contemporary Australians a reminder of historical continuities as well as change. Such interpretation can help Australians to link the bewildering and complex social and economical changes of the twentieth century to particular places, and teach them to recognise their part in history.⁵

This work will also help to reinstate different cultural groups in the historical record. As we all know, there are places in Australia, such as along the River Murray, where human occupation has been continuous for tens of thousands of years. But this fact has only recently been formally recognised in law and the implications of rescinding the doctrine of *terra nullius* has caused violent debate. Archaeology has a public reputation for great dignity and objectivity. Historical archaeology can make a significant contribution to this debate, by providing evidence of Aboriginal occupation, continuing traditions and adaptation at particular sites, before and after first contact with British settlers.

Historical archaeologists could work more closely with prehistorians. Both disciplines have a lot to gain from such collaboration, including learning to consult closely with Aboriginal communities. A good example is the South Australian Museum's work with the Ngarrindjeri.⁶ Their traditional country lies along the Coorong and the lower reaches and lakes of the River Murray in South Australia, where many still live, especially in the towns of Meningie and Murray Bridge and at Raukkan, the former mission. Since the 1840s Ngarrindjeri people have maintained their connections to this magical landscape while readily adopting European practices such as farming, shearing, building and preaching.

Although this is often forgotten, Aboriginal residence has also been continuous in coastal areas where European settlement has been concentrated since a series of cities was established, from Sydney in 1788 to Darwin in 1869.⁷ These capital cities also represented the founding and evolution of British-Australian government, the introduction and transformation of capitalist economies and technologies, the mixing of cultures, and the well-spring of profound social, cultural and economic changes for the entire continent. These are continuing historical processes of great significance, to which archaeological investigation can make an important contribution.

It is not entirely the fault of historical archaeologists that there seems to be a preference for abandoned sites or remote places. I am often disconcerted by a general tendency to describe such left-behind places as 'historic' rather than the really historic places where important things have happened and *continue* to happen. Governments also designate particular places as 'historic towns' or precincts.⁸ Quite often the historical character of those places has survived because further change has passed them by. In South Australia many country towns fit that description, such as Robe, Blinman and Mannum. Central Adelaide is more 'historic' than Sydney and Melbourne because major economic changes, and therefore, radical redevelopment have been focused on those eastern cities rather than on Adelaide during the twentieth century. The process of rapid replacement of the older urban fabric is now happening in Brisbane, and that's where the hard but crucial decisions must now be made concerning heritage designation, archaeological investigation, destruction or preservation.

Let us imagine a conference on twentieth-century archaeology 100 years from now. How will those future archaeologists judge your work? What insights will have been provided about a major phenomenon such as urbanisation? Urbanisation was a significant feature of the nineteenth century and it has assumed even greater importance during the twentieth century. By 1970 up to 70% of the population of States such as Victoria and South Australia lived in the capital cities and there was also a growing tendency for rural people to move from farms to large country towns.⁹ Even higher percentages of post-war European and post-1960s Asian settlers than the Australian-born have concentrated in the capital cities. Also since the 1960s increasing numbers of Aboriginal people have moved to town. All of these urban-based demographic events have had physical consequences in terms of artefacts, architecture and the adaptive use of existing places.

Some other major themes of the twentieth century have major archaeological aspects. Perhaps one of the most important lies within the established field of industrial archaeology.¹⁰ That is 'Fordist' (from Henry Ford) mass-production manufacturing industry and its attendant development of mass-consumption. Apart from the pervasive economic and cultural effects of Fordism, it has been characterised by rapid change and there are even premature arguments for its demise. Built-in obsolescence became a marked feature of manufactured items, whether cars or toys. The most commonly-used items are not made to last or else their frequent re-design ensures that they will be quickly replaced. Our twenty-first-century historical archaeologists may fiercely regret that their twentieth-century counterparts did not seize the opportunity to study such artefacts as they were produced, or soon afterwards, while they were still numerous and easily-documented.

Archaeological investigation is important because the pace of change in general during the twentieth century has been so great that particular objects, manufacturing processes, buildings and structures, have been rapidly superseded and abandoned, altered or destroyed. Much documentary evidence has also been destroyed. Archaeology may help rescue the disposable society from itself.

There are other significant twentieth-century themes. World war and depression have attracted the attention of some archaeologists, partly as a reflection of the impact of those events on society and probably also because of the fascination those events hold for historians. There are two presentations on the Second World War in the 1993 ASHA conference. Justin McCarthy's study of the Loveday Internment Camp in the upper Murray region in South Australia is also a useful reminder of the value of integrating historical research, heritage surveys and archaeological work. The site was first studied and recommended for the Register of State Heritage Items by John Dallwitz and myself in our heritage survey of the River Murray in the mid-1980s.¹¹

It is also worth pointing out that Loveday is one of many examples of a place of national significance where there is little surviving on the site other than concrete footings because most of the structures were temporary and they were removed and sold soon after the war. As it happens, many of those buildings are now placed on irrigation blocks and in towns elsewhere in the region but this fact underlines the importance of investigating sites and relics much closer to the event than after 100 years. How much else of the ubiquitous but impermanent architecture of Australia has been lost and hence poorly represented in the historical record?

The twentieth century offers opportunities as well as obligations: in particular, it offers a wealth of other historical evidence to enrich and help interpret the archaeological evidence. One of my great pleasures as an historian concerned with South Australian and twentieth-century history is how

much I can learn from simply observing everyday life and surroundings and how often I can ask questions of the people actually involved in particular events.

Historical archaeologists would bring their particular skills in documenting material culture to such encounters and greatly improve the understanding of future researchers. Twentieth-century investigation offers to archaeologists examples of work practices, household organisation or play which may be dying out in most places. Investigation would throw light on older sites and artefacts as well as preserve evidence of persisting traditions. There are also some old family businesses which use machinery and techniques which have been superseded in the industry generally. Even manufacturers on a national scale may demonstrate obsolete practices. The Mitsubishi car plant at Tonsley Park in Adelaide retains the machinery, and hence, some of the work practices of its construction period, in the late 1950s. This has been recently videotaped by Rick Whitehead of the History Trust's National Motor Museum at Birdwood.

Those other sources for archaeologists include oral history, film and photographs and a profusion of documentary records. Many documents are classed as 'ephemera', such as leaflets, advertising material and posters, and only a very small proportion of it is collected, *unless* someone has a specific historical project in mind. This could be an historical archaeologist. Nor is there any guarantee of the preservation of more formal records, including government (public) records. Their very profusion is a threat to their continued existence.

Archivists — overwhelmed by paper — are now referring ominously to a 'post-custodial' age and alarmed historians are voicing concern about the disposal practices of agencies such as Australian Archives.¹² Records are being returned to agencies for sentencing which often ends up with their destruction, especially if agencies are told review or storage by archives will cost thousands of dollars. This method has been adopted by State Records of South Australia, and probably elsewhere. At national level, there is protest at the 1993 Australian Historical Association conference from historians and the National Trust about the destruction of records relating to the twentieth century work of the former Architect-in-chief's department. This means that historians are *already* dependent on site-based architectural and archaeological investigation for major twentieth-century public buildings.

Archaeologists should consider their part in how we might document the twentieth century in its last decade. You have the opportunity to be involved in the process of historical assessment (including the appraisal of records) from the beginning, rather than from years behind, as has been the case with research on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. You might consider doing so in ways which incorporate a variety of sources of information and also involve the people who used or have inherited the buildings and objects under investigation. I believe that this involvement of other people, and the integration of the work of amateur and professional and across disciplines, provides great opportunities to historical archaeologists in the investigation of the material culture of the twentieth century.

NOTES

1. Connah 1983.
2. Connah 1987.
3. Williams 1974
4. Marsden 1986
5. Marsden 1994
6. Hemming and Jones 1989
7. Statham 1989
8. Walker 1986
9. Burnley 1974
10. Marsden 1993
11. Heritage Investigations 1985
12. York 1993; Stuckey 1993

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