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DISCOVERING THE PAST FROM CURIOSITY VALUE TO LIGHT ON ANCIENT WORLDS

Liz Tynan

Four years toil in the coal mines as a wartime conscript only temporarily stalled the academic career of Jack Golson, who was to become one of the Australian region's foremost archaeologists and foundation Professor of Prehistory in the ANU's Research School of Pacific Studies.

For the boy born in 1926 in the northern English town of Rochdale, and who as a child could see 45 cotton mill chimneys from his bedroom window, the island of Papua New Guinea - if he knew of it at all - must have formed part of the landscape of fantasy. But that was where he ended up, blazing trails of archaeological enquiry and bringing to light for the first time many of the secrets of early human activity in that area.

Jack Golson, a self-effacing and softly-spoken man with more than a hint of northern English accent, even after many years in the southern hemisphere, speaks with warmth and humour about his early days in Rochdale, which is tucked into the western side of the Pennines, and famous for "the Co-operative movement of 1844 - and Gracie Fields".

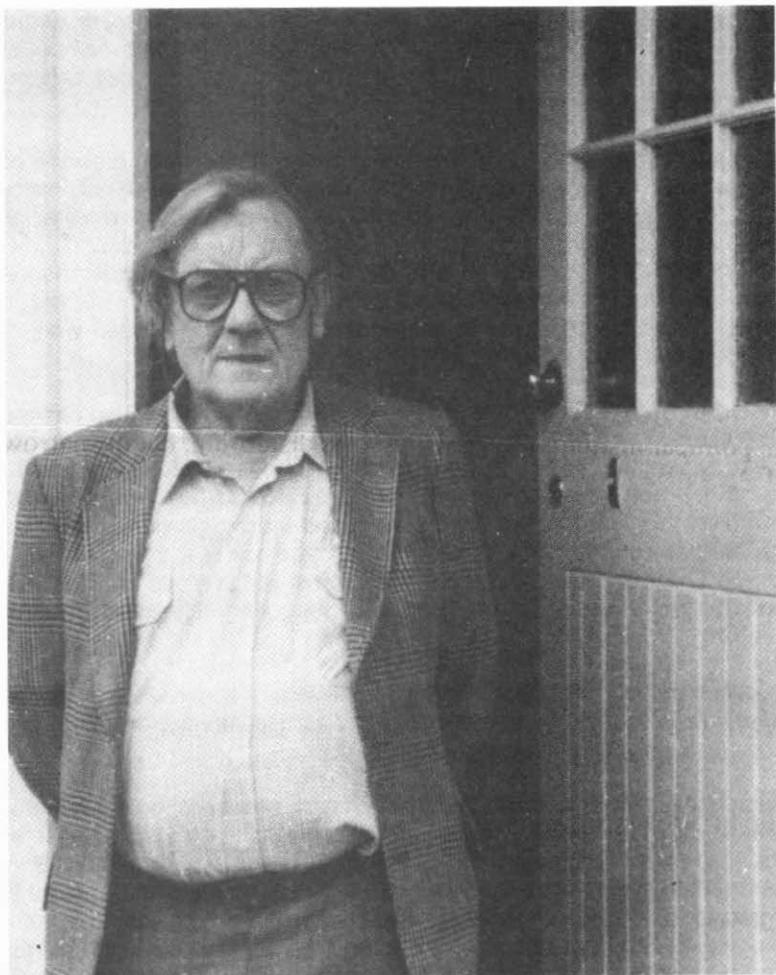
Both his parents had been involved with the cotton industry, although at the end of World War I his father didn't return to the mills but started his own joinery shop, making cartons and other items used by the cotton industry for transporting. His mother left the mill when she married. After a time, his parents started a "front room shop" which operated throughout his early life and helped to support young Jack's education.

Although most children in that place and time were expected to get a job at the end of the fourth year of high school, Jack Golson was encouraged by his school principal, and supported by his parents, to undertake the higher school certificate. At that stage, there was no thought of university. Then a remarkable thing happened - World War II.

"A lot of teachers with whom I had started at school in 1937 were called up, and they were replaced by a very odd collection of people", Jack Golson said.

"The new English Master had taught at Charles University in Prague, but had to leave because of the German takeover, and he eventually came to our very ordinary boy's school. The Latin Master had taught at the Sorbonne. The History Master, who was probably the biggest influence on me, had taught at a private school which had been disbanded during the war."

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Jack Golson

Photo: Liz Tynan

These three people introduced the idea of university education - something which most of the boys would never have even considered. In fact, few people in the town of 90,000 people had a university education.

Having done well in the higher school certificate exams, Jack Golson managed to secure three scholarships, making it possible to go to Cambridge, a place to which he was directed "because of the influence of this remarkable group of teachers, who said 'if you are good enough, why not try for the top!'"

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In October 1943, at the age of 17, he went to Peterhouse, a strongly history-oriented college at Cambridge. The war was raging and call up was imminent, but Jack opted to get a year of academia under his belt before he had to do his national service.

When his number came up in the call-up ballot, Jack Golson drew the coal mines. He was one of the so-called "Bevin Boys", a band of national servicemen established by the then Minister of Labour to help dig the coal needed for wartime industry. He didn't emerge from this until 1948. During those years, he worked in a coal mining pit on the border between Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. He lived in a national service hostel with the other conscripts and didn't read or even think about his academic work. "It was an experience I will never regret," he said.

Finally he made it back to Cambridge, in 1948. Many things had changed, and with the return of tutors who had fought in the war, the academic program was much expanded. Although he had enjoyed medieval history back in 1943/44, he had not "been seized by it". Now a returned boffin called Michael Postan was teaching the subject, and "he gripped the imagination of the class, he was a brilliant lecturer," Jack Golson said. The times of the Roman Empire, the so-called barbarian invasions, the establishment of the feudal system: these subjects sprang to life and the next phase of the young scholar's life was set in place.

In order to study the history of the "barbarians" - about whom there was little documentary evidence - it was necessary to find archaeological sources. "I became absolutely fascinated by it," he said.

Archaeology displaced history as his primary academic pursuit. Europe has a wealth of archaeological treasure, ranging from the hunter-gatherer era, to the Vikings, to the settlements of the Middle Ages. Jack Golson delved into many of these treasures, and in doing so came into contact with one of the world's greatest prehistorians, Grahame Clark, who was to become Professor of Archaeology at Cambridge. Golson worked under Clark at the famous Star Carr dig in Yorkshire, a well-preserved mesolithic site which brought to light the early millenia after the end of the ice age 10,000 years ago, well before agriculture appeared.

Professor Clark's influence was to be crucial to young Jack Golson. Clark encouraged him to put aside his PhD research on the medieval settlement of Lincolnshire, and travel to New Zealand to a lectureship position. It was at a sherry party at Professor Clark's home that Golson first heard about the New Zealand job. "Clark thrust this advertisement into my hand," Jack Golson said. "I gave it back to him and said I wasn't interested. After all, I was halfway through a PhD in medieval history, a very European subject. But he said 'you

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only do a PhD if you haven't got a job'."

Golson was persuaded, and aged 27 set off to the other side of the world, taking his PhD research materials with him. Within six months of arriving he knew that he would never finish his PhD and sent the materials back to England. He has in fact never completed a PhD, although he received an honorary one last year from the University of Papua New Guinea.

New Zealand was "a very liberating experience" for the young man. It wasn't just the work, which was new and refreshing for someone steeped in European tradition, but also the way of life.

"Within a month of arriving, I was out yachting on Auckland Harbour. I would never aspire to do more than row a boat on the local lake in England," he said. "I suppose it was the greater egalitarianism of the society that really appealed to me."

The University of Auckland "seemed like a night school". Most students were part-time and classes didn't start until 4 p.m. Archaeology as an academic subject was very new, and Anthropology, of which it was part, was seen by many of the students pursuing three year pass degrees in Arts as a bit of a "soft option" to fill out the required number of units.

Jack Golson saw many possibilities for the expansion and integration of New Zealand's archaeological effort. The largely museum tradition was a strong basis on which to build a greater academic effort, and a tour early in his NZ stay of the museums and universities throughout the country convinced Jack Golson of the need for a focus of activity.

He was a prime mover in establishing the New Zealand Archaeological Association in 1955, and is a Life Member.

His research interest in Polynesian archaeology developed during his lectureship at Auckland University. He stayed there until 1961, when he came to the ANU, initially as a Fellow in the Anthropology Department of the Research School of Pacific Studies.

"One of the things I was very keen on doing as soon as I arrived was to get John Mulvaney into the Department," he said. Mulvaney was the foremost Australian archaeologist, and was a student at Cambridge on an ANU scholarship when Jack Golson first met him. Between them they established ANU as a centre of Australian archaeology, from which other centres of archaeological research have grown. Until then, virtually no archaeological research had been done in PNG, although there had been a major social anthropological effort. With his now well-established reputation in Polynesian

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archaeology, Jack Golson rose to the challenge offered in PNG.

"We established from 1965 a continuity of staff and student research in PNG which persists to the present," he said. He has been there every year since 1965, and his own personal research was fixed in the 1970s in the Highlands region, where he has worked with a number of colleagues and students, the last of whom is just finishing.

Professor Golson became foundation Professor of Prehistory in 1970, when there was a reorganisation and expansion of activities at RSPacS. His Department came to encompass Australia, Island Melanesia, Western Polynesia and other locations in the Asia-Pacific region. He retired in 1991 and is now a Visiting Fellow in the Biogeography and Geomorphology Department. He is president of the World Archaeological Congress, which has its next major international conference in New Delhi in 1994.

He has seen archaeology grow from a minor academic subject with some curiosity value, to one which is undertaken in nearly all countries in the world and which sheds ever-brighter light on ancient worlds. Professor Golson's contribution to that enlightenment has been considerable.

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