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FROM COLLECTIONS TO COLLECTING

Linden Cowell
Broad Bay

In 1962 a Dunedin newspaper headed an item “Englishman Carves Maori Posts.” The item was about myself—“red-bearded Mr Linden Cowell”—starting work at the Otago Museum, with my first task being the fabrication of a palisade to surround the Mataatua house, was then then to be central to the museum marae.

My training had been at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London as a conservator/restorer working on the Gothic and Renaissance collections; Polynesia was a totally new field for me. Dave Simmons, the museum’s anthropologist at that time, wisely introduced me to the Hocken Library, which was then in a wing of the museum. My researches there were not only for the marae, but for what was subsequently named the Skinner Hall of Polynesia. I was soon to meet with the great man himself, Dr Henry Devenish Skinner, known to us with respect and affection as “H.D.” As emeritus director Skinner had an office space provided, was a regular visitor to the museum, and could be frequently encountered in the storerooms as well as the galleries.

I was privileged to have a long association with H.D. which culminated as illustrations editor for his *Comparatively Speaking* published in 1974. He never considered himself to be a field archaeologist but his ability to inspire students and recruit fossickers by converting them to a proper appreciation of archaeology was unsurpassed. My lasting impression of him is typically approaching an array of artefacts like a concert pianist; touching some, caressing others, in a manner which I flippantly describe as “taxonomy by osmosis.” In the process of drawing the artefacts he considered important I discovered for myself the validity of the connections he made. On a visit to Japan in the 1970s I went to the National Museum in Tokyo to view Jomon pieces and found out just how much I had absorbed of H.D.’s belief in a link between the Archaic Murihiku phase and the circumpolar culture of the North Pacific. If Skinner was still with us I am sure he would greatly regret, as I do, the disappearance from many of our museums of taxonomic displays in the change to vacuous infotainment displays, where style triumphs over content.

Another great privilege archaeology was instrumental in giving me has been my association with Peter Gathercole, whose instruction and friendship I have come to value so highly. On meeting him in the museum common room in 1962 he helped to lessen my ignorance of fieldwork by conscripting me for the Pleasant River dig. I soon acquired the attributes of a veteran: a simian crouch, my own Tysack trowel (customized to my left-handedness) and a midden-charcoal coating that probably served as a highly efficient sun-block.

When the Otago Museum could no longer afford to renew my contract it was Peter who came to my rescue by offering me the post of technician in the Anthropology Department he was setting up. It was a half-time position, with the other half being with the Classics Department. However, very soon both halves of me were on the way to Pitcairn Island as a member of the 1964 expedition, led by Peter. Having crossed the Pacific twice before by sea I was prepared for its vast emptiness, but I was excited as anyone on board when we at last sighted Pitcairn seeming so improbable in its isolation. The island's remoteness was soon made real to me when we unpacked the expedition crates and had to carefully straighten each removed nail for re-use. For Murihiku diggers tropical archaeology presented some novel problems; one I remember was the burrowing habits of land crabs producing what was apparently a posthole with a right-angled bend!

When the expedition members had to return to work commitments in NZ I was able to remain behind to tie up loose ends. Peter had arranged for Garth Rogers to join me to provide vital support. A fond memory I have of Garth is of us taking a break from the sun when we were joined in the shade by a panting island dog with a long matted coat. Garth picked up the large scissors used for trimming back small roots before a section was photographed and, holding the dog in the classic shearing position, cut away the matted hair. The released dog gambolled round us like a puppy and for the rest of our time on the island followed Garth with canine devotion. Those who knew Garth will know this incident was typical of his practical compassion, which was part of an admirable character that enabled him to make such a valuable contribution to Pacific ethnohistory.

It was during my solitary period on Pitcairn that I made my way one night to a cliff top lookout. As I sat under the stars gazing out to sea I had the naive expectation of perhaps a Maslow "peak experience", or at the very least enhanced cognition, as I meditated on the prehistoric settlement of the island. Alas, all I got for my efforts was a metaphysical angst and a feeling of futility in trying to arrive at a teleological understanding of the past.

Three years later I was a little more successful in my cogitations when I found myself again in solitude on an island. This time it was the Lake Hauroko

burial and I was a member of a small party led by Dave Simmons to record the burial, which is on Mary Island. While the rest of the party went to look for occupation evidence I remained in the burial cave to draw and photograph. I felt perfectly at ease observing tapu with the corpse as I sat beside her to record her post-mortem treatment. A cloak wrapped around her as she would have worn it in life, and she was placed in a sitting position on a backed structure of manuka stakes covered in fern fronds. This simple respect given to her by her people made it natural for me to empathise with them in our common mortality.

In my museum career it was never a burden to me to have to deal with many different cultures despite my interests being in mainly two areas. It gave me great satisfaction to discover what I believed to be universals in human artefacts. It follows that I admire and respect the NZ Archaeological Association for what it does and my gratitude and congratulations go to the members on the occasion of its 50th Anniversary.