



NEW ZEALAND
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ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND



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MUSEUMS AND THE NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Janet Davidson
Ngakuta Bay

When Jack Golson arrived in New Zealand in 1954 museums had dominated archaeology in this country for more than 80 years. In those days the data of archaeology were artefacts and the remains of extinct birds, which were held in museums and studied by museum staff. Archaeology in New Zealand had always been spearheaded by the Canterbury and Otago Museums but throughout the country museums large and small were widely regarded by the public as the first source of information about Maori artefacts and sites. Moreover, museum ethnologists maintained close contact with the other main group of potential members of an Archaeological Association: collectors of artefacts, particularly those who, even if their excavation methods left much to be desired, were interested in what these things meant.

It is not surprising, then, that the founding committee of the Association was dominated by museum people. Although Jack Golson was secretary/treasurer, H.D. Skinner (Otago Museum) was president and the committee members were Roger Duff (Canterbury Museum), Vic Fisher (Auckland Museum) and Les Lockerbie (Otago Museum). Skinner retired from active involvement after that initial founding year but the other three continued as officers or council members for a number of years and were joined by Ron Scarlett (Canterbury Museum) and by people such as Bruce Palmer and Jim Eyles, who were not then working in museums but would later do so.

The dominance of museums was symbolically broken in 1962, when Les Lockerbie and Roger Green both stood for the presidency of the Association. Roger Green was elected, but there was a long pause in the Annual General Meeting, during which it was assumed that the unfortunate scrutineers were counting and recounting the votes in a closely fought contest. During the ensuing year there was dissension within the Council over the constitution and direction of the Association.

The focus of New Zealand archaeology was shifting away from portable artefacts to pits, postholes and settlement patterns, while the new economic

prehistory would soon take its exponents far beyond moa bones. An active student archaeological society replaced the old Anthropology and Maori Race section of the Auckland Institute and Museum; the Otago Anthropological Society served the interests of university-based archaeologists. In Canterbury and Wellington however, without academic archaeology in the universities, archaeological societies remained centred on museums. Museums still offered an important, if limited source of employment, with both Auckland and Canterbury creating positions for archaeologists in the mid-1960s, and Otago and Wellington continuing to permit, or even encourage, their ethnologists to undertake archaeological projects. The 1970s saw a number of archaeology graduates taking jobs in provincial museums such as Waikato, Taranaki, Hawke's Bay, Nelson and Invercargill, where they often found their opportunities to practise archaeology severely limited. A museum archaeologists group flourished briefly, but a proposed half day session to discuss the role of museums and museum archaeologists at the Association's 1980 conference apparently did not eventuate.

My own introduction to archaeology took place at the Dominion Museum. During my last year at secondary school I went to what was then called vocational guidance and was given a standard interest test. Puzzled as to why someone studying five languages and still learning the piano should score highly on science and outdoor activities, my advisor probed further. When I said I was interested in archaeology and Maori culture she arranged an appointment for me with Dr Falla at the Dominion Museum. The museum was where one went to enquire about archaeology.

Thus it was that in January 1959 I found myself in the bowels of the museum, working as a "vacation assistant" with Susan Davis, Assistant Ethnologist, while my friends earned less money in shops or at Griffins Biscuit Factory. Sue had been one of the earliest members of what Ron Scarlett used to call "Golson's Gang." She had been on Jack's brief foray to Oruarangi, and regaled me with tales of the dead cow that floated up and down the drain beside the excavation as the tide rose and fell. She had been at Taylor's Hill where, according to Peter Gordon, another participant in those legendary excavations, she had scabbled in the scoria with long red fingernails and found a greenstone chisel. And it was Sue who found a hog back adze on the beach at Sarah's Gully during Jack's initial reconnaissance, influencing his decision to excavate there, rather than at Opito. Sue was also the first, and for a long time the only, woman to serve a term on the council of the young NZAA.

During her student days in Auckland Sue had worked (I believe as a volunteer) for Vic Fisher at the Auckland Museum, and she passed on to me, and to others who worked for her, much of what she had learned from him. She insisted that I spend some time each lunch hour, armed with "The Maori as He

Was” studying one display case at a time in the old Maori hall, which was laid out very much in accordance with Best’s writings. In the basement we laboured to describe and measure (and often even register) the more durable parts of the Maori collection, puzzling over why so few of the adzes could be readily classified according to Duff’s typology.

My introduction to fieldwork was in 1959 as a member of the Dominion Museum Field Group, the informal forerunner of the Wellington Archaeological Society, recording middens around the Porirua Harbour. Other members of the group included Win Mumford, one of Sue’s flatmates and the Association’s first central filekeeper; John Daniels, the second central filekeeper; and the late Ian Keyes, long time Wellington filekeeper.

Excavation was limited to a clean up of the Paremata barracks, during the course of which we encountered remnants of pre-European occupation in the sandy floor of the barracks. At Sue’s suggestion I had joined the Association, but lacked the courage to go to the Rotorua conference. However, during the summer of 1959–1960 my friend Mary Oliver and I took the plunge and went to Sarah’s Gully for a week. To get there we took the overnight train from Wellington second class, got off at Frankton very early in the morning, took a bus to Paeroa and then another to Whitianga, where Helen Birks met us and drove us over the hills to Sarah’s Gully. The journey took 24 hours.

My first Association conference was in 1960 in Wellington. I remember arriving for the first session to find someone I soon discovered to be Roger Duff standing at the entrance to the lecture hall welcoming all comers. Conferences have always provided a great venue for meeting both the famous and the infamous. Two years later, during the conference in Christchurch, Pat Murdock introduced me, in the public area of the Canterbury Museum, to the already legendary fossicker Sonny Hovell, who obliged by treating me to one of his famous stories: how he dug up an elderly relative’s coffin from a swamp to retrieve the taonga that had been buried with her.

I worked at the Dominion Museum for three summers and was bitten by two bugs: archaeology, and museum curation. I liked the friendly atmosphere of the old Dominion Museum, the opportunities to talk to people from other disciplines, the visiting scholars; my first encounter with Ralph and Sue Bulmer was when I was working there and Sue was studying greenstone artefacts. It was not surprising that I leapt at the opportunity to apply for a job as the first E.E. Vaile Archaeologist at the Auckland Museum in 1965. I greatly enjoyed being able to carry out research, but also to publicise archaeology at a popular level and talk to all manner of people, from school children to the Rotary Club circuit, about it.

With the passing of the Historic Places Amendment Act (1975), the involvement of museums in site protection diminished. Now, when a concerned citizen saw a bulldozer on Hamlin's Hill, he or she would ring the Historic Places Trust, not the Auckland Museum. But museum-based archaeologists have continued to carry out research, and museums have continued to provide one of the few publication outlets for excavation reports. To this day museum archaeologists have been very active in the affairs of the Association as secretaries, presidents and council members, as well as filekeepers and editors.

What has been lacking is any formal relationship between museums and the Association over the extremely important matter of long term storage of archaeological collections. Archaeologists have sometimes been hurt and dismayed at the refusal of museums to accept large collections, when these may have been offered in an untidy assortment of crumbling cartons of diverse size and shape. Students of archaeology are seldom taught how to catalogue and curate assemblages properly. There is often little or no liaison between an archaeologist planning an excavation and the museum that may ultimately be the repository for whatever is to be kept for the future. And the Historic Places Trust has shown little interest in enforcing the provisions relating to the long term future of finds as part of the authority process. Whether a collection is destined for an iwi repository or a public museum, it must be well curated when it is handed over by the archaeologist.

At that first Association conference I attended in Wellington in 1960 Vic Fisher gave a paper on "Museums as repositories of archaeological material" which was summarised by Ron Scarlett in the *Newsletter* as follows:

Museums provided comparative material for archaeologists, their function being to house and take adequate care of collections on behalf of the community. The fieldworker could also use the natural history collections and library. This required constant work by a trained staff, with suitable storage, and laboratory facilities. Archaeological groups would naturally hold all their finds and records until publication, but thereafter it was preferable for them to go to a Museum. In this way Museums could continue to provide comparative source material for the needs of the fieldworker in future.

The revival of interest in material culture and the recent publication of several major monographs on sites with large assemblages that have been in museums for decades show that Fisher's remarks still hold true. Indeed, as resources in the field and in the ground diminish, museum collections will become even more important.

A new event in the development of museum facilities for archaeological collections was the establishment of the archaeozoology collection and laboratory

at the National Museum by Foss Leach in 1987. This provides capacious facilities for long term storage of analysed and well curated faunal material which can be used in a wide range of new studies. Yet there has not been a rush of archaeologists interested in either donating material or drawing on it for further study. Its future will be secure only if it is valued by those whose interests it is intended to serve.

As it celebrates 50 years of achievement the Association could well give some serious thought to its relationships with museums, and to the vital importance of proper curation of archaeological assemblages and their associated documentation for the benefit of future generations.