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“PROFESSIONAL” ARCHAEOLOGY —THE NEXT FRONTIER

Mary O’Keefe
Wellington

Archaeology in New Zealand is a very different animal from what it was in the pioneering days of the 1940s and 50s. While our enthusiasm remains the same our governance and practice have not kept up. It could be said that professional archaeology in New Zealand began with the appointment of H. D. Skinner to the position of Lecturer in Ethnology at Otago University and Curator of Anthropology at the Otago Museum, with the ensuing new standards of field techniques and methodologies (Davidson 1984: 6). The university basis for archaeology and fieldwork continued through to the 1980s. In this decade the emphasis on archaeological research and fieldwork then moved to an institutional basis, with the Historic Places Trust, NZ Forest Service and others taking the lead role.

In 1975 the Historic Places Act introduced the important register of archaeological sites (with the emphasis in the register today of predominantly built European heritage, it is important to remember that the first register was just for archaeological sites). The HPA was revised again in 1980, and introduced the provisions relating to the protection of archaeological sites, and the processes required to modify, damage or destroy sites.

The landmark Resource Management Act in 1991 and the revised Historic Places Act in 1993 moved the lead role to fieldwork once more. The processes in the RMA required independent archaeologists to undertake assessments, and the bulk of fieldwork and some (but not enough) associated research moved into the domain of the consultants where it has since remained.

The increased role of consultants undertaking fieldwork, and the work required of us, has resulted in a need for standardised and regulated methods of practice. The New Zealand Institute of Archaeologists was established in 1984, and was disestablished in 1997. I consider it was regrettably only a few years ahead of

its time, and there is now a need to re-establish a body to guide and regulate the work of all field archaeologists.

Such a guiding body would, among other things

- Guide professional practice
It is neither possible nor desirable to make archaeological practice too prescriptive—obviously different sites and contexts require different and specific approaches and techniques. However it is desirable to develop best practice guidelines, setting out which approaches and techniques will and will not be most appropriate for particular situations.
- Disseminate information
The body could provide industry-wide information on overseas practice and advice on inappropriate or outmoded techniques. The body could also promulgate information or advice on techniques and professional approaches utilised by professionals in New Zealand in particular contexts which may be of use to other colleagues, so as to standardise practice as and where appropriate.
- Regulate professionals
We currently operate within our Code of Ethics, but there is no formal means to regulate this, or to censure professionals who may act outside or contrary to the code. The guiding body would both set standards of expected practice, and would have formalised means of regulating practice.
- Standardise assessments
Colleagues outside the archaeological field are constantly surprised that the industry has no standardised assessment criteria. While various and robust criteria are in use by various archaeologists (for example, the HPA S.23 criteria; Walton 1999), a professional body could be charged with developing uniform criteria specifically applicable to archaeological sites and landscapes.
- Increase professional perception and performance
Many other professional bodies have institutes or governing bodies. The creation of a professional body for archaeology will raise performance, and provide a perception of a standardised professional industry. However simply because “everybody else does” is not reason enough to establish a guiding body. It would have to be focussed, efficient, productive and most importantly, supported by the industry.

Ideally membership of the guiding body would not be automatic: a set of pre-determined criteria would be met, including academic qualifications, and levels

of experience. As a number of professional archaeologists without academic qualifications are currently operating in the public domain a sunset clause would be desirable. I consider that such a regulating body would oversee the work of any archaeologists working in the field, including institutional archaeologists, not just consultants.

The archaeological industry has a need to determine the level of performance and professional conduct by archaeologists operating in the public domain. Clearly the existing Code of Ethics is relevant, but the further step of a means of regulating archaeologists will give clients greater surety and give archaeologists the confidence that the archaeological resource is being managed in the best possible way.

The creation of a guiding body would provide surety for clients on a number of levels:

- That the archaeologist is competent and has met a minimum standard of competence and training
- That the methodology and strategy used by the archaeologist meets a best practice standard
- That the assessment undertaken and recommendations made have been undertaken in the context of a uniform best practice standard and code of ethics
- That they have a means of recourse if they are unhappy with any aspect of work undertaken

I envisage such an organisation would work with, but be separate to, the NZAA and HPT. The NZAA has a unique and important role as an advocate for archaeology as an important part of New Zealand’s cultural heritage. It must remain unfettered from professional constraints and responsibilities in order to do this. Further, NZAA is an advocate for all archaeologists and those interested in archaeology, and must continue to represent the whole sector without emphasis on one segment.

HPT is and remains the statutory agent and decision maker. As the statutory decision maker they arguably should not also be the managing body, which could place them in a potential position of conflict. Clearly the relationship of a guiding body to HPT and the relative roles of HPT would be a critical issue to consider and develop.

The steady increase in consulting work for professional archaeologists has not been accompanied in a rise in positive perception and status. Unlike the “warm fuzzies” often associated with the natural heritage sector, historic heritage is generally not perceived to add value to a project. In most cases archaeological work under the RMA or HPA is seen by clients as a necessary bureaucratic hurdle.

A major challenge for all archaeologists is to work to change this public perception, not least of all through increased access to information. A guiding body can assist with this, in helping disseminate information gained from archaeological work to professional associates as well as schools, the public, media and other key information repositories

In summary I consider there is a need to formalise and standardise professional archaeology in New Zealand—its standard, its execution, and those who engage in it. The creation of a guiding body is the means to achieve this. Clearly the creation and development of such a body will be a rocky road, but this is not a reason not to do it.

This short thinkpiece is quite obviously my own personal opinion. Clearly none of the issues expressed in this piece are new, as these issues have been discussed in public archaeology for some time. However, I express them to continue to stimulate the ongoing discussion. Members of NZAA may violently agree or disagree with this. I would welcome responses to this in the next issue of AINZ. I also hope this issue will be scoped at the forthcoming NZAA conference.

References

- Davidson, J., 1984. *The Prehistory of New Zealand*. Longman Paul, Auckland,
- Walton, A., 1999. Assessing the archaeological values of historic places: procedures, methods and field techniques. Department of Conservation Science and Research internal report no. 167, Wellington.