



NEW ZEALAND  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
ASSOCIATION

## ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND



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# REFRACTIONS FROM NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGY DURING THE SECOND DECADE OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive  
But to be young was very heaven!

*The French Revolution as it Appeared to Enthusiasts*, Wordsworth, 1809<sup>1</sup>

## The preparation of an archaeologist

Some have discovered their intellectual purpose in life at a monastery or in the desert. I had spent two years in the British Army between school and Cambridge, where I went to study for a liberal profession. The teachers were experts but ignored what perplexed me; about how one knows. Serendipitously I found the Faculty of Archaeology and Anthropology and chose as my special topic for Honours the Palaeolithic Period, which was abstract, with, even then, a dizzying time scale for one with a foundation in ancient history.

Most of my teachers belonged to a cohort of pre-Second World War graduates who were influenced by Mortimer Wheeler and Cyril Fox but traced their academic lineage through Dorothy Garrod to the Abbé Breuil and the French school which, before absolute dating, constructed prehistory from stratified sequences and cross dating. My professor, Grahame Clark (Fagan 2001), was also influenced by the Scandinavians who had developed pollen analysis and varve dating, and he had directed the classic excavation of the waterlogged site

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<sup>1</sup> I have chosen to modify the usual metaphor of reflection in my title. Viewing 1960s New Zealand from the perspective of later Australian experience is refractive. Wordsworth has been criticised over generations for having second thoughts about his youthful enthusiasm, which he expressed so well in these lines.

of Star Carr while I worked on another of his sites in the Fens. I learned to excavate rock shelters and study stone tools with Charles McBurney and was research assistant to Eric Higgs who was analysing the huge bone assemblage excavated by McBurney in Libya. I found my vocation in this research. Glyn Daniel taught me that archaeologists worked in a social context and introduced me to heritage protection issues, directing me to problems experienced by the pioneer British heritage legislator, Lord Avebury. Glyn also opened my eyes to the dark side of research; fraud and forgery. The implications of Piltdown had by no means all been resolved by its exposure.

The department had a network of colleagues overseas, notably Louis Leakey, Desmond Clark and Bernard Fagg in African museums, and I suspect it was the latter who was responsible for my generation being inspired by the idea that we had the task of rediscovering the past for the new nations of the post-colonial era.

### **Rescue archaeology**

My senior colleague-to-be at Auckland, Roger Green, asked me to take up my appointment quickly in late 1961. I was to direct the salvage excavation, which he was negotiating, for Mt Roskill, one of the Auckland volcanic cones, the timing of which conflicted with his own major research programme on Mo'orea in the Society Islands.

I worked with a small team of Auckland graduates of whom Les Groube, one of the Department's first Honours students in archaeology, was the foreman and my mentor, along with Sue Bulmer, on the archaeology of my new homeland. My assimilation was not without its upsets. One morning I found painted on the door of the equipment shed "GO HOME POMMIE IMPERIALIST"—a shock for one who thought himself an enthusiastic European.

The results of the Mt Roskill investigation did not fit comfortably with the suggested regional sequence from previous Auckland excavations, so its principal achievement was Roger's, pioneering a prototype in New Zealand for how archaeology for heritage management could be made to work, on the principle of the developer/destroyer pays.

### **Conferences**

After Mt Roskill Les Groube taught at the Te Kaha Maori School, so he asked me to read a paper which he had prepared for the 1962 NZAA conference in Christchurch. I stumbled over some of the Maori words (and still squirm in recollection) and, on every occasion, was corrected in beautifully spoken Maori by Roger Duff, who was the chairman. It was a lesson in the sociology of knowledge; I was intruding upon established intellectual territories.

## The Newsletter

Wal Ambrose, who had been Jack Golson's research assistant, edited the Auckland issue of the *Newsletter* in 1962 and published an interim report of the trail-blazing Kauri Point Pa excavation. This showed that it could serve as a journal of record, something that was needed. The next stage in publication was for the idiosyncratically regional format, in which I must include my own efforts, to be replaced by a single editor, Dr Alastair Buist of Hawera, to whom I express long overdue gratitude.

## Research

Roger Green and I inherited a remarkable research organisation, the Auckland University Archaeological Society, which focussed on Christmas holiday excavations with convivial camp life, enlivened by the music of Pat and Rudi Sunde. Another member was Ham Parker who was a brilliant open-site excavator, using the approach that Jack Golson had learned from Axel Steensberg in Denmark. In my turn I learned from Ham at the Taranaki pa site of Kumara Kaiamo.

### *Kauri Point*

Wal Ambrose, a little mischievously, invited me to investigate the swamp at Kauri Point because I had "been taught by the excavator of Star Carr." I located a waterlogged feature, formed over a period of time, which contained carved woodwork and thousands of obsidian flakes. The flakes caused me to set out upon a quantitative lithic analysis, combining my teacher McBurney's statistical approach with my own replicative stone knapping. The woodwork first required stabilisation and conservation, which Wal and I tackled, being unimpressed by the current use of tractor sump oil. Wal subsequently made significant developments in freeze drying but in the meantime a visiting Danish archaeologist, Jan Hjarne, introduced me to carbowax which was developed in Scandinavia.

The carved combs initiated another research project. The shapes seemed so varied, as did the motifs—though some were identifiably Classic Maori most were obscure. I had a number of enlarged photographs made. One morning I suddenly saw the underlying pattern and was able to carry out a seriation, as pioneered by North American pottery analysts. I was later gratified to discover that it had been spotted by my Cambridge peer, and pioneer of the New Archaeology, David Clarke (1968: 204). What did the waterlogged site represent in Maori Culture? I had been interviewed by the *New Zealand Herald* and had answered that question noncommittally, only to see the headline "University Lecturer Does Not Know What He Is Doing." A great deal of research later I

gave my answer in the *festschrift* presented to Grahame Clark (Shawcross 1976: 277).

### *Galatea Bay*

1965 started with a small Easter training excavation for the Archaeological Society. John Terrell had come from Harvard on a Fulbright Scholarship and had spotted a shell midden on a beach platform at Galatea Bay on Ponui Island in the Hauraki Gulf. The site seemed ideal for combining teaching with research and, in the latter aspect, to investigate Grahame Clark's prehistoric economics through marine zooarchaeology. I was stimulated by a mixture of irritation with, yet respect for, the Californian midden analyses of Gifford and Cook, who emphasised methodology. Advanced archaeology in the early 1960s seemed narrowly empirical to critics such as Mortimer Wheeler, who castigated my generation for forgetting that we "studied people."

Following Star Carr I set up an inferential chain, transforming the chaos of bones into a minimum number of individuals, and thence into a quantity of food. John worked on the invertebrate remains in parallel. Food, illuminated by ethnography led back to people. We had the good luck to make friends with the zoologists Pat Bergquist, a marine biologist, and Cath Tizard, who was then a demonstrator and who introduced us to the stimulating field of marine science, epitomised by Morton and Miller's *New Zealand Sea Shore* (Terrell 1967: 31, Shawcross 1967: 107).

### *Houhora*

Later in 1965 Noel Roe, who was on the staff of the Auckland War Memorial Museum, proposed a masters degree project for the rescue excavation of an early site exposed by quarrying at Houhora in the Far North (Furey 2002). This was an opportunity to compare both settlement and subsistence with Galatea Bay. We had helpers from everywhere: from the University of Otago; Annie Bickford and Harry Lourandos from Sydney; Ron Scarlett from the Canterbury Museum; and now our own students wanting to do research.

The strange case of the digestive biscuit fishhook has been considered elsewhere in this volume. At the time I had forgotten what Glyn Daniel had told me about the Piltdown forgery; how Teilhard de Chardin, the palaeontologist and author of an influential synthesis of evolutionary science and Catholic doctrine, had been a well-known practical joker when young, and had assisted in the excavations at Piltdown. Was I presiding over my own Piltdown, and cast in the role of Professor Elliot Smith?

The investigations that started in 1965 took various periods to gestate. The underlying approach in much of this work was based on thermodynamics

(Shawcross 1972: 577), but I had reservations about Leslie White's causal attribution of cultural evolution to the harnessing of energy, written at a time of high expectations for nuclear power (White 1959). However, the implication of physical reductionism was not likely to appeal to the post-modernism of the 1970s. Nonetheless, the more strictly ecological inferences of the 1965 work revealed ways of tracing the impact of prehistoric humans on their biota (Shawcross 1975: 39).

The previous paragraph condenses two decades of conflict in archaeological theory and practice, which makes it appropriate to record that I was influenced by a wider intellectual context. Quantification drew me to the burgeoning field of historical demography and thence to Malthus and his application of "carrying capacity" to the human condition. Coincidentally, environmentalism was emerging polyphyletically. In 1968 the Club of Rome was formed, which focussed on such problems as carrying capacity, environmental degradation and uncontrolled urban growth, through global modelling by System Dynamics. In the same year Garrett Hardin published "The Tragedy of the Commons" in *Science*. With such doom-laden projections it was optimistic to discover the relative richness of the New Zealand littoral.

## Teaching

Entry to British higher education was relatively restricted in the 1950s, whereas New Zealand universities were already much more open, if not necessarily supportive to school leavers and, thanks to the influence of the distinguished anthropologist Raymond Firth, there was an Anthropology Department at Auckland. Its founding professor, Ralph Piddington, built his department on the American model in which prehistoric archaeology had a role.

When I arrived at Auckland I found a university as big as Cambridge and indeed with far more first year students (about 200 against 50) in my department. The teaching in arts consisted only of lectures, while assessment was by end of year examinations, which was educationally hit or miss, as reflected in high failure rates. Marking scripts was a misery, occasionally lightened by strange distortions of the lectures, such as the "Abbé Gruyere", the great authority on Palaeolithic cave art. The solution was to introduce small group tutorials on the Oxbridge pattern, harmonised, more or less, with the lectures.

Members of the public used to offer me sympathy that I couldn't work where there was "real archaeology." Indeed, when first introduced, archaeology teaching had necessarily been based on Gordon Childe's account of prehistory from the Palaeolithic to the Old World civilisations. However, the pioneering archaeology in the 1950s in New Zealand and the Pacific by Jack Golson, and in Australia by John Mulvaney, caught a wave of renewed nationalism. According

to Ken Inglis, Mulvaney introduced the first regional course on Pacific prehistory to have been taught anywhere (Inglis 1996: 31). But Golson must have taught a Pacific course at much the same time and each would have referred to their radiocarbon dates, which fixed their respective regions in world prehistory. So by the mid-1960s it was possible for Les Groube at Otago and myself at Auckland to offer courses devoted specifically to New Zealand, while John Mulvaney published his *Prehistory of Australia* in 1969. It was very exciting to teach subjects with such novelty and immediacy for the students.

By 1971 we had a first year enrolment of 700 students and teaching resources were once more stretched beyond the limits, aggravated by the aftermath of student riots, spreading from Berkeley and Paris. I may say that universities everywhere seemed institutionally incapable of anticipating most of the problems. I felt that communicating with such big, charged groups converged with theatre, so I experimented with performance. I had made a spear thrower to illustrate its appearance during the Upper Palaeolithic. On the appropriate day I hid John Terrell in the wings and made a tentative cast, then flicked another spear with much more force into the wings. With a cry my colleague staggered onto the stage and collapsed with a groan. It was so unexpected that the class seemed to draw a single deep breath and fled. The event became myth, as retailed to me a few years later by a historian, in which a lecturer quelled a riot with a spear.

Archaeology was evidently seen as a lively member of the community because I was asked to give an account of "The teaching of Archaeology" in the *University of Auckland Gazette* (Shawcross 1971: 4). There was rumour of a backlash against the uncontrolled expansion of 'soft' social sciences and I made a case with, I hope, a faint echo of Matthew Arnold. Actually the backlash was delayed, but manifested itself following the election victory in Britain of Margaret Thatcher in 1979.

## Conclusion

The Archaeological Association very successfully fulfilled its roles of bringing coherence and purpose to the emergent field and lobbying for heritage legislation. The Cambridge instilled motivation to discover the past for new nations was much more complex for nations like New Zealand and Australia. Archaeology can be traced back to the 19th Century, so what were we adding? Denis Byrne, an Auckland graduate, has pointed out that, for Australia, the success of professional archaeology "appropriated" the Aboriginal past for the nation (Byrne, 1996). I suggest that the argument is powerful because it can also explain anomalies such as the initial omission of the indigenous peoples from the legislation. I also sense that there was a watershed in the mid-1960s, when what

some political scientists call the “civic republicanism” of interested citizens and amateurs started to be replaced by academic professionalism and qualifications. Purely personally, I mourn the earlier state, despite my role in establishing the latter, which brings me back to my epigraph from Wordsworth.

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