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SOME MUSINGS ON GENERATIONAL CHANGE AND ARCHAEOLOGY'S FUTURE¹

Professor Brian Fagan
Santa Barbara, California

Like the generations of leaves, the lives of mortal humans...
Now the wind scatters the old leaves across the earth,
Now the living timber bursts with the new buds
And spring comes round again. And so with people: as one generation
comes to life, another dies away.

As with leaves, so with archaeology. The longer one remains an archaeologist, the more one becomes aware of the passing of the generations, of new challenges that you will not live to face, but challenges based on one's own work. In many parts of the world, including Australia, we are at a moment of the changing of the guard—when many archaeologists who lived through the intellectual hurly-burly of the 1960s are retiring. New generations march behind them—but what does the future hold?

In 1939, *The Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* published a paper on the seasonal round of the Wik Monken people of Cape York in northern Queensland by Australian anthropologist Donald Thomson. This remarkable article combined archaeology and ethnography, using studies of living societies to interpret sites abandoned by ancient hunter-gatherers. The Editor who commissioned this paper was the young Grahame Clark, who went on to become Disney Professor of Prehistoric Archaeology at Cambridge. He admitted that Thomson's study influenced his thinking for the rest of his distinguished career. The Wik Monken research vindicated his perception that stone tools were a totally inadequate archaeological signature for understanding the past.

¹ Keynote Address at the combined Australian Archaeological Association (AAA), Australasian Society for Historical Archaeology (ASHA) and Australasian Institute for Maritime Archaeology (AIMA) Conference in Townsville, Australia, in November 2002.

Australia exercised a strong influence on Grahame Clark's thinking almost from the beginning. His fascination with Australian archaeology strengthened during and after a visit in 1964, three years after he published *World Prehistory*—the first such book ever written. In 1960 Clark was probably the only scholar in the world capable of writing a human prehistory. Apart from his extraordinary gift for grasping the larger issues Clark was trained by eclectic thinkers, had rubbed shoulders with scientists from many disciplines and with economic historians. From the beginning he was a multidisciplinary thinker and fieldworker, with very broad interests. Few people have ever rivaled his passionate interest in every aspect of the past, in archaeology as world prehistory. But, at the same time, he believed that archaeologists, whatever their predilections, were part of an international family. It is as such a family, a community that we meet here today.

This is the first conference of the three major archaeological organisations in Australia. This offers an unusual chance for an all-encompassing look at Australian archaeology. It marks, also, the beginning of a new era, when, hopefully, some of the infighting and segmentation of earlier archaeology will cease. I fervently hope that this will be the first of many, even annual, joint meetings.

Until now, all archaeologists have been pioneers, expanding a discipline, writing the barebones of the human past. Grahame Clark never forgot that he had been a pioneer. He remarked once: "I grew up in a climate where there was absolutely nothing. We had to improvise everything for ourselves. I was lucky to live at such a time." Clark expected his students to show initiative, to go into the field far from the provincial confines of Britain to work with almost nothing. He encouraged generations of young archaeologists to work far from Cambridge—in Australia and New Zealand, in Africa, on the Pacific Islands, and in Canada. Grahame Clark not only wrote the first single volume work on human prehistory—he trained people to fill in the gaps in an archaeological diaspora that has attained near-mythic status.

Without question, one of his greatest legacies is the flourishing state of Australian archaeology. One of the reasons he came here in 1964 was to visit many of his former students, among them Jack Golson, John Mulvaney, Isabel MacBryde and Richard Wright—to mention only a few. Nearly forty years have passed since Grahame Clark visited Fromm's Landing and Keilor. Many archaeologists working today have never heard of him.

Today, many of his protégés are themselves retiring, leaving behind them a remarkable chronicle of successful fieldwork. Thanks to these researches we now know that humans settled in Australia at least 45,000 years ago, perhaps much earlier, that hunter-gatherers flourished in southwestern Tasmania as early as 34,000 years ago. Thanks to Australian scholars, we also know much more about the late Ice Age societies of Sunda and Sahul. We know of human settlement in East Timor at least 30,000 years ago, and in the Bismarck Archipelago region and on the Solomon Islands by 35,000 years ago or even earlier. Australian fieldworkers have done much to redefine the Lapita complex of the southwestern Pacific, a crucible of innovation and long distance trade between Southeast Asia and the frontiers of Polynesia in later millennia. You have made staggering advances in contact, historical and maritime archaeology, with a quality that rivals the best in the world.

But, with the dawning of the new millennium, we are entering a new archaeological world. The past half century has seen archaeology come of age, become a sophisticated science. Fifty years ago a mere handful of archaeologists worked in Australia and Africa. Now there are hundreds, while the numbers in Europe and the Americas are in the thousands. Maritime and historical archaeology have burgeoned to become serious academic endeavours in Australia. What a ride it has been! Over five decades we have lived through the radiocarbon and computer revolutions, through the ferment and rhetoric of processualism and post-processualism, and seen cultural heritage management become a dominant paradigm in many parts of the world. Whereas Grahame Clark's *World Prehistory* was a mere skeletal outline, today's world prehistories tell a much more complete story. We are beginning to understand the human past at a fine-grained level unimaginable even a generation ago—but at a price.

The price of many of the staggering advances of the past half-century is an archaeology that has become more and more specialised—also more and more myopic and dehumanised. We have become a dysfunctional family, fractured into many non-communicative parts. This myopia and over-specialisation affects archaeology everywhere, a product not only of increasingly high technology science, but also of the explosion of archaeologists. The inward looking goes hand-in-hand with gross overproduction of PhDs, and a proliferation of jargon and in-group writing about the past, which threatens to marginalise archaeology as it becomes ever more inaccessible to the public. At the same time, we have often compartmentalised ourselves, to the point that many specialists are lamentably ignorant of the enormous contributions made by colleagues working with remote sensing, or underwater, or even less than 200 kilometres away.

If there is one message from this address, it is that we are a family, and face an uncertain future *together*, not as a fractured, contentious community. Much of archaeology has become so obscure, so specialised, and so inward looking that it is hardly surprising that both governments and an often-unsympathetic public sometimes question its significance in a complex and troubled world. At the same time, indigenous peoples in many parts of the world are rejecting archaeology as a legitimate way of reconstructing their history. At times, too, we are possessive of a past that is not solely ours. We have no right to act like this.

I am reminded of the cynical words of Samuel Johnson in 1751: “Life is surely given to us for higher purposes than to gather what our ancestors have wisely thrown away, and to learn what is of no value.” Let me be blunt. An increasing number of people out there think he may be right. Grahame Clark remarked somewhat tartly of a new generation of theoreticians thirty years ago that “each little cock seems to crow in its own territory without realizing how restricted it is.” We do not necessarily crow theory at one another, but, all too often, we chatter happily, almost totally divorced from the realities of the wider world. The more global reality is a simple one: we are a discipline threatened with partial extinction and certainly chronic shrinking. How long will it be before the best minds no longer enter archaeology, for they see no future in it and consider it intellectually marginal? I suspect it may already be happening in the United States—perhaps also elsewhere. At the risk of sounding apocalyptic, I believe that we are close to a defining moment in archaeology, when the research that we undertake in the next generation may ensure archaeology’s survival, or its slow strangulation, or, at minimum, its marginalisation.

Many of us forget that archaeology is under attack—from looters and treasure hunters, from politicians, developers and the insatiable maws of industrial agriculture and urban development—from the sheer pressure of rising population. And, in some parts of Australia, you are hampered by a lack of sound heritage legislation. Thousands of archaeological sites vanish without study every year—with most of the damage having been done in the past thirty years. Yes, there has been legislation, and valiant efforts at cultural heritage management, but there has been little change in the traditional values of archaeology—which is part of the problem. These values are easily stated—original research, discovery and excavation, then more discovery and excavation. We have written new chapters in human prehistory as a result, but at a high price.

We have often forgotten what Mortimer Wheeler stressed as long ago as 1954. “Excavation is destruction,” he remarked forcibly—and he was right. The

stemming of this destruction rates low on the totem pole of our value system. Why? Because academics are not rewarded for it. They are rewarded for ... publication. All too often conservation takes a back seat, when it should be our first priority. Discovery and excavation, followed by publication ... Yes, publication, but not the definitive monographs we need, which place all details of a site or region on permanent record, but hectare upon hectare of preliminary reports, also essays in edited volumes, often of dubious quality and marginal value. We learn of tantalising new dates, of remarkably well-preserved food remains described cursorily, often as brief conference papers. Then one looks in vain for the final report, which never appears—because the authors are out in the field again. The problem is not a lack of publication, but *what* people publish—all too often superficial things rather than deeper works that take far more time. Publication is archaeology's greatest scandal—in a real sense we are as guilty of site destruction as looters.

All this happens because of the convoluted values of an academic culture that worships publication like an Aztec god. "Public or perish" is a pernicious deity that often seems to value the number of papers produced and conferences attended more highly than solid, long-term fieldwork that pays careful attention to the preservation of the archaeological record. That governments, bureaucrats, and university administrators dare to assess the quality of an academic program by the number of publications rather than the quality of the research behind them beggars the imagination. But it happens more and more—to the detriment of disciplines like archaeology where we interact with a finite and perishable archaeological record and research moves ahead much slower than it does in, say, astronomy. The misdirected value system of academia means that we tend to ignore longer-term, vital goals of conservation and site preservation. Few people, let alone archaeologists, place conservation, the preservation of the priceless archaeological record of past human achievement, at the very forefront of all archaeological and academic values. Many institutions cavalierly dismiss archaeological conservation and heritage as "inappropriate research." What asinine arrogance! It should be our highest pedagogical priority.

History may judge us as the generations that destroyed the past rather than saved it. Archaeologists of the future will have to lead a fight to reassess our value system and the ways in which outside authorities judge our work. Astounding although it may seem, the literature on archaeological conservation lags far behind that of original (and often destructive) research. Almost no research proposals that I see contain specific provisions for conservation and preservation of a site after excavation or public interpretation—except for the bare minimum required

by law or permit. This is scandalous. In the future our values and priorities are going to have to shift substantially—simply because the archaeological record is vanishing before our eyes.

I believe that the main thrust of archaeology during the next century will revolve not around arcane theory or basic research, although, obviously, this will always be of importance, but around saving what is left for the future, and publishing what has been dug up and never adequately placed on record. Our basic ethics as professional archaeologists require this. More and more we are asked to justify our work, the importance of archaeology. In a world driven more and more by instant gratification, and by the need for everything, including academia, to make a profit and bring in funding, archaeology is in danger of becoming a target for savage cutbacks on the grounds that it is a marginal, luxury science. In the harsh public world of government priorities and shrinking university budgets it is all too easy to downsize expensive, seemingly obscure and little understood disciplines like archaeology. This is going to happen whether we like it or not, partly because archaeology is now too large, and beyond the capacity of many national economies to support on a large scale. But how much of a cutback we suffer is very much in our hands—we have to justify our existence.

Let's ask the question. Is archaeology important in the contemporary world? Yes, of course it is, because it offers a unique way of understanding the roots of human biological and cultural diversity, as well as chronicling the unwritten history of humankind. Have we proclaimed this loudly enough? No, we have not, and we are going to regret it. This may not be a career-enhancing activity, especially in the present academic environment, but the survival of archaeology as we know it depends on active engagement with the wider audience, with the taxpayer, and contemporary society.

Again, I stress that we are all in this together, whether prehistorian, maritime archaeologist, resource manager or heritage expert. We must face the future of the past as a *family*, not as individuals—which is why this meeting is an important and unique opportunity. Special interest pleading, for support of a segment of archaeology, is an anachronism simply because there is a finite limit to the amount of resources this, or any other, nation, can put into archaeology. Today it's not enough to fall back on the romance of archaeology or on the understanding of human diversity as a justification for archaeological research. This is old hat and is, at best, an abstract validation in a world that demands concrete rationalisations for everything. Remember just how unique archaeology is as a way of understanding relationships between humans and their environments

through time—and for addressing problems of broad sustainability of our own society. This is an area where I believe archaeology has a tremendous amount to offer.

Archaeologists have long engaged in multidisciplinary research, especially with the natural sciences. We are unique among scientific disciplines in that we can study changes in human societies over long periods of time in the past. It's a truism to say that there is no future for us without a past. Our dealings with the future are predominantly determined by experience and through perceptions acquired in the past. So to bridge the gap between the two is all-important, and a task that awaits archaeologists of the future. We have an enormous contribution to make to studies of human/environmental relationships. The advances of the past half-century have made us increasingly adept at teasing often startlingly precise data about past socio-natural dynamics from the archaeological record. We have begun to explore cultural landscapes, even the ways in which different societies conceive of their relationships with the environment. And increasing numbers of ecologists have begun to work more closely with social scientists and now pay closer attention to lessons from the past. I believe that there is an open-ended future for an “engaged” archaeology that functions not in isolation, but as an active participant in multidisciplinary projects that encompass the present, past, and future.

This is the moment for archaeologists to abandon their often-isolated perspectives and to assume a more central role in projects that address fundamental issues revolving around the sustainability of our own society and the future. This future will require unheard-of levels of cooperation and communication within our family—a strong argument for continued joint meetings. These future projects will involve work with earth and life scientists, with similar concerns to our own. This will involve challenging new models, complex methodological problems, and creative thinking to bridge disciplinary divides. An archaeology actively engaged in the addressing of problems deemed relevant to our contemporary society will reinvigorate our discipline—and also advance our understanding of human prehistory in new ways. It will also attract bright young minds to our discipline, people who seek not to work with mere trivia, but with the most challenging of basic problems.

Archaeologists will be leaders in this new research arena. Why? Because our data offers unique contributions from a wide variety of case studies that cover long-term dynamics and potential broad geographical canvass. Furthermore, we are experienced with widely differing time scales, and are accustomed to a

flexibility of approach essential for studying social and natural systems. We also have a vast experience of multidisciplinary research and teamwork in the field, because we know that we cannot solve all the significant problems about the human past by ourselves.

Will we be asked to assume these leadership roles? Not unless we actively seek them. The future of archaeology lies in *our* hands, in *our* original thinking and bold initiatives. The moment we sit back comfortably and let the forces of time carry us forward, we are doomed. Where should we start, you may ask? My answer is that it is up to you—the future generations. The only limit is your imaginations.

The challenge for the older generations in archaeology is to allow bold thinking and innovation, aggressive research outside the conventional box. We have to encourage original thinkers with jobs and long-term commitments, not with reminders that they are “too young” to have such thoughts. In other words, we need to let go. Remember the famous words of Norman Tindale to Rhys Jones over the Rocky Cave site: “I bow to the younger generation.” In the final analysis, if you do not want to bow, move on—or retire.

I believe that the archaeology of the future will have to be deeply engaged in contemporary society, and will have to adopt radically new values. We will have to divorce ourselves from the publish-or-perish culture, which is totally inappropriate for archaeology, and make conservation our highest value of all. The next generation has fascinating challenges

- in multidisciplinary research projects that have a deep relevance to the long-term sustainability of 21st century human society
- in public education and in every aspect of conserving the archaeological record for the future. How many archaeologists are in tourism and engaged with the day-to-day issues of heritage and archaeological site management? Not nearly enough, and such careers are still seen (wrongly) as second tier employment in the field
- in basic research that is non-intrusive, uses technology to obviate excavation, and focuses more on survey and landscape and only very selectively on digging up the past
- in intensive research on existing collections, many of them excavated generations ago. One of our primary objectives must be to reduce the backlog of unpublished material. Rich insights await those who are prepared to spend their careers in air-conditioned laboratories.

- in collaborative projects with indigenous peoples, whose concerns about preserving their culture and their past often coincide with our own. How often do you ask indigenous people what they want, or others of the many stakeholders in the past for that matter?

If we don't change direction, what will happen? Archaeologists, whatever their specialties, will sit on the margins of the scientific world and of society, their research being considered increasingly irrelevant and perhaps vaguely eccentric and amusing, like the pith-helmeted professor of yesteryear. We will be marginalised, indeed are already becoming so. Of course archaeology will never disappear, but, if marginalised, it will never play a leading role in perhaps the most important task facing modern global society—understanding ourselves—humanity, helping in such contemporary issues as land claims, and making intelligent decisions about the future.

Are we up to this task? Without question we are. But we need to proclaim the importance of the past for the future from the rooftops—all of us, whatever our specialties, whatever our ambitions, whatever our interests. We are a *family*, something we must never forget, and a reality that Grahame Clark and his contemporaries of a half-century ago knew only too well—in less affluent times.

Finally, I end with a passionate plea, which is almost platitudinous, yet something that bears restating again and again. We are in danger of becoming a dehumanised science, more concerned with objects, food remains, and arcane environmental trivia. Let us never forget that archaeology is about people, who lived, loved, hated, interacted, and eventually died.

Let us revel in the life of the past, as Homer does in the *Iliad* with his account of the shield of Achilles:

And the crippled Smith brought all his art to bear
 On a dancing circle...
 Here young boys and girls, beauties courted
 With costly gifts of oxen, danced and danced, linking their arms,
 gripping each other's wrists...
 And then they would run in rings on their skilled feet,
 Nimble, quickly, quick as a crouching potter spins his wheel,
 Palming it smoothly, giving it practice twirls
 To see it run, and now they would run in rows,
 In rows criss-crossing rows—rapturous dancing.

Ladies and gentlemen—archaeology is about people. And with this platitude, I bow to the younger generation.

Endnote:

Professor Brian Fagan recently stepped down from the Department of Anthropology, University of California Santa Barbara after more than 30 years as Professor and gifted teacher.

Brian Fagan has accepted an invitation to attend the NZAA 50th Anniversary Conference in New Plymouth in 2004 as the keynote speaker and guest of NZAA.