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THE 1960S IN OTAGO

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The New Zealand Archaeological Association is fifty years old and has launched a memory recording scheme, as I have been asked to contribute to its anniversary publication. I have been a member of NZAA for about forty-five years but apart from having attended a few conferences have not been active since the 1970s. Thus it was interesting to note that I have had a passing acquaintance with nearly all of the 48 potential contributors on the list that I saw. Just under half of them have a strong Otago connection and about 60% have been or are practising archaeologists. When the association was established there were no university majors in archaeology, and I doubt whether 60% of its members were “professionals.” Field archaeology was either a subsidiary activity of museum staff or in the hands of amateur antiquarians and fossickers, and in the case of the latter the main object was the retrieval of artefacts. Dr H.D. Skinner had been teaching a one year course at Otago since the 1920s and in the mid-50s Jack Golson had just been appointed to a lectureship in prehistoric archaeology at Auckland. It was a major accomplishment of the new body to weld these elements together in a very short time and to promulgate a code of ethics binding on its members.

In 1943–44 I was a pupil at Macandrew Intermediate School in Dunedin. One of the teachers was a quietly-spoken, pale-complexioned man with a rather battered face. He did not make a great impression on the boys until one sports day he wore his New Zealand boxing blues blazer. His stocks rose immediately. This master was the late Les Lockerbie, one of Skinner’s protégés. His excavations were technically advanced for the time. Les chanced upon me when I was at Pounaweia holidaying with my parents. Les knew that Gordon Griffiths was our family friend. He was one of the more responsible fossickers best known for having retrieved an intact pierced moa egg at Shag River Mouth in 1941. Les said that, as I had seen Griff in action, I should come to his site and see what archaeology was really about. As an eleven-year old I was kept well back from the baulks but the depth of the section and the meticulous dissection of the stratigraphy made a lasting impression and initiated my continuing interest in New Zealand archaeology.

Archaeology went on the back burner while I completed a science degree and moved into medical research. Then Peter Gathercole came to Otago in 1958. We met soon after his arrival, how or when I don't recall, but, as others will agree, becoming involved with Peter just occurs. Our firm friendship has lasted to the present day. Peter has recently documented his time in Otago (Gathercole 2000). What is not emphasised in these articles is the enormous expenditure of physical and mental energy he put into public education over and above his museum and university duties. Series of evening adult education classes were organised. The activities of the Otago Anthropological Society and in the digs organised by Peter at Tai Rua, Pleasant River and the pa at Huriawa in the 1960s created a trained body of amateurs (for there were no local anthropology graduates till the late sixties) who knew that what mattered was the interpretation of sites not the frantic search for artefacts. Peter preached the methods of General Pitt-Rivers and his modern (at the time) counterpart, Brigadier Sir Mortimer Wheeler. It was odd to hear such establishment figures praised by a committed Marxist. What was so enjoyable at that time was the mix of people at the digs, which included hairdressers from Balclutha, local farmers, odd-bod students from all faculties and emeritus professors. The present day legal constraints on the conduct of excavations and the professional expertise now required makes such public participation almost impossible. We received good coverage in the press and local TV, which probably helped in the campaign to establish a full degree course at Otago University. Ron Scarlett thought we had the best teams in the country at the time.

Dave Simmons and Les Groube had by this time shifted to Dunedin and joined in the excavations. At Huriawa Dave seemed to find postholes visible to no ordinary mortal. I thought his interest in Celtic mythology had granted him second sight. Our equipment was pitiful by today's standards. Plane table, dumpy level, compass and tape measure were our normal lot, unless Hardwicke Knight produced theodolites and sextants from his collection of magnificent antique instruments.

At Tai Rua (North Otago) in 1962 Pauline Mahalski remembers Les making stratigraphic measurements using a twelve-inch ruler and transferring the results to graph paper divided in tenths. A worried and confused air was natural to Les and maths was not his strongest subject. Converting imperial to decimal left him distraught. By the next year at Huriawa we converted completely to decimal.

Hardwicke Knight was an invaluable member of our team. A medical photographer at that time, he acted as our photographer and surveyor. Hardwicke is a polymath, seeming to have been everywhere and done everything at some time in his life. Now in his nineties he is still actively working and publishing.

At Pleasant River he raised a towering photographic platform from driftwood, which I refused to climb, and which would send present-day OSH officials insane. His tent had a raised fur-covered dais on which he reclined like a Mongol khan eating “yoghurt” prepared by the simple method of leaving glass bottles of milk in the sun for several days.

The North Otago Historical Society, inspired by Michael Trotter, also had an archaeological programme. Among the activities was the recording of rock drawings. I once travelled to Duntroon to help with this but lasted less than twenty minutes. The overhang I was allocated to investigate was converted into a tunnel by limestone slabs fallen from higher up the slope. I entered this and within a few metres crawled through, not over, a bloated dead sheep. In bad odour and alone I returned to Dunedin. Of course Tony Fomison and Owen Wilkes also conducted a survey of the North Otago drawings and I recalled this many years later when I was on a sabbatical in Gothenburg in a context far removed from archaeology. Owen Wilkes had become a peace campaigner and was notorious in Sweden for having recently released documents on the movements of Soviet submarines in Swedish waters. In midsummer everybody in Gothenburg retreats from the shore to their holiday homes on the islands which lie in a closed defence area, and foreigners must have permission to go there. Normally this is a formality but when I applied to stay on an island for three days with one of my hosts I was, as a New Zealander, classed as a potential subversive, and permission was refused. I was required to file a new application and before permission was grudgingly granted I had to have an interview with a military officer, to which I was accompanied by the professor of physiology as my personal guarantor. I was accompanied to and from the nominated ferry boats by a police officer. Owen has now returned to archaeology in New Zealand, but step warily in his presence.

After the Pitcairn expedition of 1963–64, covered by Linden Cowell elsewhere in this publication, my involvement in NZAA activities diminished and practically ceased by 1970 as my family and career responsibilities increased. However, I am heartened that I am still recognised when I attend the NZAA conferences.

References

- Gathercole, P., 2000. Otago 1958–1968. *Archaeology in New Zealand*, 43: 206–219, 283–296.