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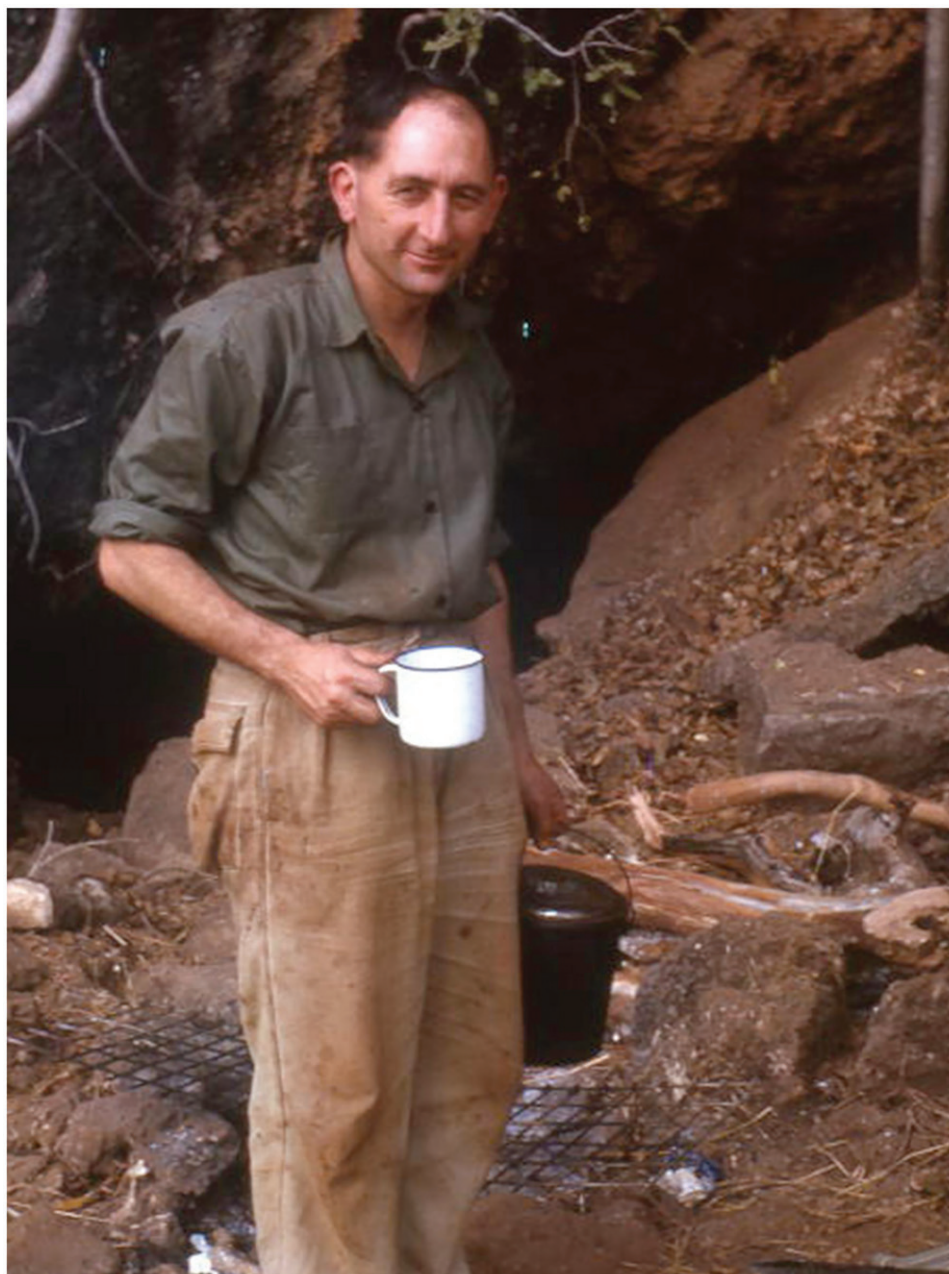


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OBITUARY

The Archaeologist as tribal elder: John Mulvaney 1925–2016*¹

David Frankel



Photographer unknown; photo provided with thanks by Ken Mulvaney

John Mulvaney played a key role in the development of Australian archaeology. This article is a brief appreciation of his contributions, taking as a starting point his fieldwork in South Australia, Victoria and

Queensland, and placing these and related activities in their social and academic context.

No readers of *AA* will be unaware of his contributions to Australian archaeology, history, heritage

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*Derek John Mulvaney died in Canberra on 21 September 2016 at the age of 90.

¹John Mulvaney's life and contributions are summarised in the citation for the AAA Rhys Jones Medal awarded in 2004. Retrieved from <<https://www.australianarchaeologicalassociation.com.au/awards/rhys-jones-medal/john-mulvaney/>>

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and scholarship. Few archaeologists have had so much written about them as John, certainly no other Australian archaeologists apart from Vere Gordon Childe. Like Childe, John's contributions lie not so much in the theatre of excavation as in their wider vision of society, which in John's case took the form of action rather than theory. His career and his engagement as a public intellectual have been so well dealt with that there is little need for another iteration, even at this time. In this brief note – a tribute rather than an obituary – I would therefore like to take a slightly different approach, and to look again at some of his early, more specifically archaeological, work, and its place in the development of our discipline. And also, perhaps, to remind ourselves of how much changed during his lifetime and what we can learn from him.

The Australia that John Mulvaney grew up in, and in which he studied and began his academic career, was a very different Australia from that of today, in some ways barely recognisable. It was a smaller and simpler world, with more certainties and more rigid structures. It was not a world in which Aboriginal archaeology and heritage had any place. John saw, and oversaw, the development of both, always a participant, commentator and advocate.

Once he determined to be led away 'from History, through Protohistory to Prehistory' John recognised that he needed the formal training in the subject and its techniques that, in the early 1950s, was nowhere to be found in Australia. Cambridge provided both, so that when he returned to a lectureship in History at Melbourne University he was better equipped than anyone had ever been in this country to undertake fieldwork, beginning with excavations at Tungawa (Fromms Landing) in 1956 and 1958, following the work of Hale and Tindale at Ngaut Ngaut (Devon Downs). Here, incidentally, we may note how much the change to Aboriginal names for sites encapsulates so much of the difference in the social context of archaeology between last century and this one.

Chance, as much as a broader research design, led John to Tungawa. With Ngaut Ngaut as a guide, it had the potential to directly confront some fundamental issues, especially the prevailing paradigm which blinkered historians and anthropologists from accepting change in the Aboriginal past. While Hale and Tindale had exposed a deep stratified sequence at Ngaut Ngaut 25 years earlier, archaeological sites in Australia were, in the mid-1950s, still dismissed as shallow both in depth and time. Tungawa, John hoped, would build on their results with the potential to demonstrate the value of excavation to address directly the question of time depth for people on the continent that had concerned researchers for a century.

John's overseas experience, in Britain and especially at the Haua Fteah cave in North Africa, equipped him for excavating deep sites, employing similar techniques of sieving and sampling. He was also able to make use of radiocarbon dating, still a new and expensive technique both locally and globally. This provided extrinsic and absolute dates for the site and its contents: an early plank in the chronological scaffolding which we now take so much for granted.

Both the site report on Tungawa (Mulvaney et al. 1964) and the broad review of Australian archaeology which John published in the *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* in 1961 appear today overly concerned with sequence and with cultures. As so often in his writing, John's own analyses were set off against a history of ideas, especially the way in which Aboriginal society, if not history, had been framed. Concepts of 'cultures', now either redundant or dismissed, were central at the time. The sequence at Tungawa demonstrated that Tindale's initial and later more developed cultural succession was far from universal. Alternative ways of understanding stone tools and their distribution in time and space were needed and suggested. But, we can also see that another tension was just beginning to emerge – one which we might now see as a question of scale: of continent-wide models, regional systems and local practices.

Alongside his work at Tungawa, John was paying more attention to his home state and those locally engaged in Aboriginal studies. Among them was Italian born Aldo Massola, then significant in exposing European Victorians to Aboriginal culture, but now an almost forgotten and shadowy figure. Then, of course, local Aboriginal people were very much in the shadows, invisible, as John was later to recognise, to most of European society and scholarship – a fault he later worked hard to repair, notably during his time as Chairman of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (now the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies) when he 'hit the most painful exposed nerve of the whole Institute membership' (Langton 1996:139) – the lack of Aboriginal representation.

In 1957 John and his colleagues undertook a survey of the Glenelg River, again with a prime focus on stratified cave deposits. It was also intended to counter long-held assumptions of minimal archaeological potential and to demonstrate the value of – indeed the necessity for – systematic fieldwork and standardised reporting. It formed part of a developing campaign to change, or bring an end to, the widespread depredations of artefact collectors, which to John already suggested '... that legislation concerning the conservation of Aboriginal antiquities within Victoria is long overdue. It has taken

centuries for these antiquities to accumulate; a few decades have sufficed to disperse them' (Mulvaney 1957:43). This was the start of his political activism which was later to become ever more important in his life and to Australian society.

The need to develop a better understanding of Victorian sites took John to the small shelters at Glen Aire on the Otway coast (Mulvaney 1962). While the deposits in Shelter 1 had been almost entirely removed, Shelter 2 was more productive. But, it is clear that John found little to excite him, partly because the site was of recent date and also because the formal approach then current was unable to unlock the potential of the stone tools. I am sure that John must later have regretted his final dismissive words in the site report, even though they were belied by his more positive view of archaeological potential of the basalt plains of western Victoria (Mulvaney 1964). In the upper deposits of the Glen Aire shelter lay the body of a young Aboriginal man. It may not be too fanciful to see the seeds of John's much later engagement with sites of culture contact developed in *Encounters in Place* (Mulvaney 1989) in his belief that these were the remains of a young Gundbanud man shot during reprisals for the murder of a surveyor in the 1840s.

Culture contact (seen in his early research on Romano-British protohistory) was certainly a subject that John was keen to investigate, as is clear from his brief rationale for excavating at Mount Moffatt Station in Queensland: 'One of the essential requirements for an objective prehistory was the excavation of stratified sequences in other regions. At that time [1960], neither financial resources nor leave conditions were adequate to work in those intriguing regions of culture contact, around the northern coastline of the continent; any field campaign had to be centred within reasonable reach of Melbourne' (Mulvaney and Joyce 1964: 149).

While later encouraging Jim Allen and Campbell McKnight to work on these issues in northern Australia, John set his interests in culture contact aside in favour of stratigraphic sequences. In 1960 he began work at The Tombs and later at Kenniff Cave, ably assisted, as so often, by Dermot Casey. Here deep deposits were well suited to the issues of the time. The story John loved to tell was of his incredulity on first receiving news, while eating his breakfast of porridge and golden syrup, via the morning's Flying Doctor Service radio contact, of radiocarbon dates of 16,000 years. This serves as a reminder – should we need one – of the expectations of the time and of the recalcitrant nature of Australian tools, which refuse to fall into neat chronological types. Equally, by confirming a great – if unexpected – temporal depth, Australian archaeology was confronted with a new set of challenges. Now, of course we have

three times that length of time to deal with. But we still, I think, have not fully come to terms with appropriate ways in which we should divide up time or explain developments over varied, sometimes almost unimaginably long, periods.

Crucially, the time-depth and large quantities of artefacts from Kenniff allowed John to free himself from the shackles of typology, to admit the fallacies of his earlier approach, and to introduce '... a new approach to cultural definition, that of metrical analysis. In this report, cultural synthesis is minimal, and no new terminology is proposed' (Mulvaney and Joyce 1964:172). In its place the environment was introduced as a key to understanding – an approach which became the focus of the milestone *Aboriginal Man and Environment* in Australia (Mulvaney and Golson 1971). In the Mount Moffatt report, Australian archaeology began to look significantly different. It was different too in its rapid expansion as a discipline. Even as John was working on his Queensland research, the number of archaeologists increased exponentially and Australia became less 'the dark continent of prehistory' (Mulvaney 1961:56; Mulvaney 1969:12).

John's major response to these new developments was his *Prehistory of Australia* (1969), written for Glyn Daniel's Ancient Peoples and Places Series. While constrained by the format of the series, this brought his view of Australian research to a far broader readership both at home and abroad. But, while providing an essential base-line, the rate of archaeological research meant that the second edition needed much revision, and, like any good review, structured ideas as much as it summarised them (Mulvaney 1975). John was now moving into the role of tribal elder, affecting and directing, even while observing, just as one of his anthropological heroes, Alfred Howitt, had done with the ceremonies he promoted (Mulvaney 1970). The third edition (Mulvaney and Kamminga 1999), more substantial again, addressed the new data and approaches that are continually reshaping our discipline – a testament to John's continued concern with his primary professional field, although his energies had for many years been directed more toward politics than prehistory, a realm in which his influence on specific issues as well as broader policies will have lasting significance.

Not unrelated to these non-academic activities there was always a concern to bring the meaning and significance of archaeology and of heritage to a wider audience, an example we might all do well to follow. A member of the Australian Heritage Commission, John was not content to leave places as entries in registers or catalogues. Instead, he made the significance of many heritage-listed sites clear in his *Encounters in Place*. Similarly, in the

edited volume *Australians to 1788*, he ensured that Aboriginal societies, past and present, were well represented in a major history project marking the bicentennial of European Australia (Mulvaney and White 1987).

His contributions in the public sphere, even more than the narrower field of archaeological research which I have mainly focussed on here, coupled with his clarity of purpose and commitment to ideas and ideals, mean that John Mulvaney will be among the 'righteous' who, in the words of the 3rd century sage Rabbi Hama bar Hanina 'are more powerful after their death than during their life' (*Babylonian Talmud*, Hulin 7b).

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