



Ronald John Lampert
(1927–2008)

Ronald John Lampert
(1927–2008)



R on Lampert, one of the foundation figures in the development of Australian archaeology in the 1960s and 1970s, did not discover his *métier* until his thirty-fourth year, when he returned to England with his Australian wife, Judy, after twelve years in the country and was intrigued by an archaeological excavation that was taking place on Plymouth Ho. He volunteered his services and was converted. He spent the next two years in the field with the Ancient Monuments Branch of the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works, the forerunner of English Heritage. His return to Australia in 1963 was heralded by a flurry of letters to me from former English colleagues with whom he had worked, recommending him in the highest terms for employment in Australia as field archaeologist and excavator and asking me to meet with him. This I did in Canberra in 1964.

At the time the future Department of Prehistory in the Research School of Pacific Studies at the Australian National University was a small archaeological unit of two, set up three years earlier in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology. Our prescribed field of activity, for which we were to recruit staff and postgraduate students, was Australia and the nearer Pacific islands, in particular the Australian-administered Territories of Papua and New Guinea, where the first sustained archaeological fieldwork had taken place as recently as 1959. As a result we were much engaged in assessing areas in New Guinea that looked archaeologically promising on the basis of information collected from a wide range of sources – the historical and geographical literature, museum collections and old and new New Guinea hands.

Lampert returned to Australia at an appropriate time and with the appropriate experience to be hired to help in such work, not only in New Guinea but Australia as well. In 1966 he undertook a marathon reconnaissance of some months' duration in New Guinea from the Oriomo Plateau north of Cape York Peninsula in the west to the northern Solomon Islands in the east that allowed the identification of areas for future attention and served us well in our forward planning. It also confirmed his membership of our archaeological team.

Lampert did not have the normal qualifications for such employment. He had left high school at the School Certificate level and subsequently trained as a motor mechanic and, during two years of national service, as an automotive electrician. He then worked for two years at Morris Motors in Oxford before coming to Australia in 1949 in a spirit of adventure. With his mechanical and electrical skills he had no difficulty finding work as he moved far and wide across the continent. In Sydney, in his twenty-seventh year, he decided to complete the education that he had abandoned. He registered for a NSW Leaving Certificate, which he completed in six months, enrolled at Wagga Teachers College and began a teaching career. He showed the same focus after he joined the archaeological unit at ANU.

In Australia, Lampert conducted local and regional research, with labour for his excavations provided by, amongst others, members of the Canberra Archaeological Society, formed in 1963. The regional work took place along the New South Wales South Coast and its hinterland from Batemans Bay to the Shoalhaven and he worked in close collaboration with amateur archaeologists and historians in the area like Percy Woolley of Nowra and George Turnbull of Milton, as well as with members of local Aboriginal communities like Dave Carpenter of Orient Point. Over this period he expanded his skills to the analysis of the initially unfamiliar materials that he was excavating, particularly flaked stone artefacts, and began the production of excavation reports. In 1971, he published a monograph on his South Coast work, relating it to other research on the prehistory of the region and to the wider Australian picture. *Burrill Lake and Currarong: coastal sites in southern New South Wales* was the first in a monograph series called Terra Australis, launched by the now independent Department of Prehistory. It marked his full arrival as a prehistorian on the Australian academic scene and he made it clear that the next time there was an academic vacancy in the department he would be a candidate for it.

This decision was related to a happy coincidence of interests in his life. After a few years of widowerhood he had married Kristin, who had an aunt and uncle with a property on Kangaroo Island off the South Australian coast. Kangaroo Island was a place long famous as an archaeological enigma, uninhabited when seen by Matthew Flinders in 1802 but productive of abundant evidence of earlier occupation known to archaeologists as the Kartan Culture. Ron was appointed to a Senior Research Fellowship in his department in 1975 on the basis of his detailed proposal for addressing the Kangaroo Island problem and at the same time he registered as a staff candidate for the PhD degree. His dissertation, *The Great Kartan Mystery*, won him his ANU doctorate in 1979, and a revised version was published under the same title as number 5 in the Terra Australis series two years later. In 1978, however, he had already left his academic home of fourteen years at ANU for the post of Curator of Anthropology at the Australian Museum in Sydney. His colleagues there, through Jim Specht, who was one of them, take up the story.

Traditionally museums had acted as gatekeepers to material objects that constituted the cultural heritage of other peoples. Lampert joined the Australian Museum at a

time of far-reaching changes that were redefining the relationship between museums and indigenous peoples within and beyond Australia, as well as the role of museums in society at large. He chaired a committee that made the appointment of Philip Gordon as the first Aboriginal person to be involved in managing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collections at the Museum. It soon became clear that more direct connections with communities were essential and over time collection management came to function as a heritage unit linking the Museum to a network of community cultural centres and keeping places across New South Wales.

Lampert became the main subject specialist for a new Aboriginal gallery at the Museum, planning for which began in 1979. He introduced the concept of community consultation in the process for the first time in the Museum's history, with the direct involvement of Aboriginal people in providing content and information. *Aboriginal Australia*, which opened in 1985, broke new ground by exploring the depth and variety of Aboriginal culture through a regional approach that treated Aboriginal people as persons living in contemporary Australia, not as objects of historical interest locked into a timeless 'ethnographic present'. This linked neatly with the outreach aspects of the heritage unit. It also opened the way for Lampert to develop collections with a more rounded perspective on Aboriginal life through extended collecting trips to communities throughout Australia.

Under the National Parks and Wildlife Act of New South Wales, the Australian Museum had a custodial role over Aboriginal skeletal remains found within the state. From the 1970s into the 1980s there were increasing demands from Aboriginal people for the return of such remains for reburial, which conflicted with the Museum's statutory responsibility to retain them for scientific study. Lampert set up an advisory committee of Richard Wright and Alan Thorne with himself as convener to review present and future human remains at the Museum for their potential scientific importance. This led to the return to communities of remains of low significance, with carefully argued reasons for the Museum's retention of others.

Lampert played a similar role on the Aboriginal Relics, later Aboriginal Sites Committee of the National Parks and Wildlife Service of New South Wales. Sharon Sullivan, who was to become Deputy Director of the Service, writes of the support that Lampert as a member of the committee gave her in the 1970s when she, a young and inexperienced archaeologist and the Service's first archaeologist/historian, was trying to implement pioneering legislation for the protection of archaeological sites from vandalism, development and artefact collecting. This was completely new ground for everyone, including archaeologists, who had now to seek permits for their fieldwork where this involved site disturbance. Initially, there was no provision for Aboriginal consultation, but this was rectified, in policy if not in legislation, by the Service requiring archaeologists and developers to get agreement for their proposed activities from the relevant Aboriginal communities. The Service also moved to include Aboriginal members on the Relics Committee and by the end of the 1970s, by which time it had become the Sites Committee, they constituted a majority of

those involved in its decision-making procedures. Lampert played a very important role on the committee by virtue of his professional skills and easy manner, which helped in the harmonious achievement of positive outcomes during the difficult pioneering period of its work.

Under NSW Public Service regulations of the time, Lampert retired in 1988, but remained active. He had been elected Fellow of the Academy in 1984 but resigned in 1997, ahead of a six-year residence in Brittany. He had made a career for himself in Australia, during which he played a part in founding his discipline here and in negotiating adjustments in its practice that were necessary in the later twentieth century. His archaeology took him to a wide range of places and communities and I saw him at work in some of them. What struck me was how at home he was in these situations; how interested he was in the people with whom he was living and working. He was one of those visitors from the outside world who is remembered for a long time by those whom they visit. He will be remembered in the same way by the people with whom and for whom he worked in his various professional capacities.

*Jack Golson,
with contributions from Jim Specht and Sharon Sullivan*