

## ALAN GORDON THORNE

### 1939-2012



Photo: Courtesy of Maggie Brady

ALAN Thorne was born in Neutral Bay, Sydney, on 1 March 1939, and was educated at North Sydney Boys High. He started his working life as a cadet journalist for the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1957, and here he gained a reputation for an enquiring mind. He was assigned to write an article about the 1942 Japanese bombing; not being inclined to rely purely on official government sources, he did a little investigation of his own and found that the official sources were inaccurate. The Australian government, presumably wishing to avoid spreading panic, had claimed at the time that seventeen people had died in the bombings; what Alan discovered, and published, was that the true number killed was well over two hundred. An indiscretion, but his career certainly did not suffer from it.

It was common in those days for the *Sydney Morning Herald* to send its young cadets to get Arts degrees at Sydney University, and this they did in Alan's case (in 1960). He majored in Zoology and Anthropology, and became especially interested in reptiles, in which he thought he would probably specialise, but then he discovered the Department of Anatomy and its indomitable Professor N.W.G. Macintosh, known as Black Mac, who was passionately interested in human origins and evolution and transmitted this passion to Alan. Alan went on to take a Master's degree and then went on to study for a PhD; at the same time Alan took up a lectureship in the Anatomy Department, which he held until 1969 when he obtained a Research Fellowship (free of teaching responsibilities) in what was then called the Archaeology Department in the Institute of Advanced Studies (now the Department of Archaeology and Natural History, in the College of Asia and the Pacific) at the Australian National University (ANU), where he remained, as a Senior Fellow, until his retirement. His Sydney University PhD was awarded in 1975, early in his tenure at the ANU.

It was in 1967, while still at Sydney University, that Alan scored his first academic coup, a result of the same Sherlock Holmes qualities that he had displayed at the *Herald*. He was invited by the Director and Trustees of the National Museum of Victoria to go through their human skeletal material collection and produce an annotated card index. While doing this, he discovered a box of unregistered bones, including some apparently mineralised skull fragments of unusual form and thickness; in the box was a small black-edged card bearing the words 'Bendigo Police' in black felt-pen. His enquiries found that such black-edged cards had been issued to the Bendigo police after the death of King George VI in 1952, and had run out in 1962, while felt-tipped pens had first been issued to police officers in 1957. Alan accordingly carefully studied all the records of skeletal finds between 1957 and 1962 in the Bendigo police district, and discovered that the skull fragments in the box had been found by a bulldozer digging an irrigation channel on a property at Kow Swamp, in northern Victoria, on 1 May 1962. In early February 1968, Alan visited Kow Swamp

together with the Director of the National Museum of Victoria, and here they were shown by the former owner of the property the place where the bones had been found. Digging a little at the same place they found a few more fragments, and there were indications that this had been quite a large burial ground. In May of that year Alan carried out a further excavation, and excavations continued, with teams working under his direction, sporadically up until 1972, during which they retrieved not only the remainder of the original skeleton, but found the skeletons of many more individuals.

In the context of a general treatment of Australian Aboriginal origins, Alan included a brief description of the first skeleton (Kow Swamp 1) in a chapter in the important, in some respects groundbreaking, book *Aboriginal Man and Environment in Australia*, edited by John Mulvaney and Jack Golson in 1971. He noted the large brow ridges, extremely receding forehead, and very large palate and mandible of Kow Swamp 1, contrasting with much more modern-looking (but older) skulls found elsewhere in southern Australia, and mentioned the recent discovery of further skeletons. A description and assessment of the remains to date was published by Alan in the prestigious journal *Nature* in August 1972, co-authored with his geological colleague Philip Macumber. The Kow Swamp remains proved to be between 8,000 and 10,000 years old (in uncalibrated radiocarbon years), yet their apparently archaic features (seen in all of the well enough preserved individuals) in some respects recalled *Homo erectus*, the early human species that had existed in Java from at least one million until perhaps 100,000 years ago. As some commentators have carelessly read him as saying that the Kow Swamp remains were actually those of *Homo erectus*, it is worthwhile quoting the paper directly: ‘Although much more recent than equivalent material from other parts of the world, the morphological complex indicates long-term preservation of early *sapiens* characteristics in southern Australia [...] The frontal bones are particularly archaic, preserving an almost unmodified eastern *erectus* form’—that is to say, the Kow Swamp people had archaic characteristics but certainly they were *Homo sapiens*.

A couple of years before, in 1970, Jim Bowler had discovered a woman’s cremation in Late Pleistocene deposits at (dry) Lake Mungo, in south-western New South Wales, and alerted Alan. The cremated bones had been smashed and re-burned and Alan, in a triumph of the jigsaw-solver’s art, reconstructed the skull. Though, at an estimated 26,000 BP, clearly older than the Kow Swamp remains, Mungo Lady seemed more modern, almost ultra-modern, with only small brow ridges, a rounded forehead, and a generally ‘gracile’ appearance. In papers in 1971 and 1972, Alan considered this conundrum, proposing that the best explanation might be that two separate populations, one ‘gracile’ and the other ‘robust’ and more archaic, had entered Australia at different times

and finally merged to form the present-day Aboriginal population. This model seemed triumphantly vindicated by the discovery in 1974 of a man’s skeleton, buried with scattered ochre at a similar level in the same Mungo lunette, as gracile as Mungo Lady.

From then on, Alan worked on his two-populations model and refined it. He discussed his findings with the American palaeoanthropologist Milford Wolpoff, who became a close colleague, and together they proposed the Multiregional Hypothesis of human evolution, whereby modern humans in each part of the world had largely descended from local premodern populations (*Homo erectus* or whatever), while being subject to sufficient gene flow from their contemporaries elsewhere to keep them all evolving towards *Homo sapiens*. As far as Australia was concerned, the closest of these premodern populations lived in Java, and of course Alan had long maintained that Kow Swamp showed similarities to Javanese *Homo erectus*. Yet the evidence from Mungo seemed to indicate that not one but two separate populations had lived in Australia in the Late Pleistocene, giving rise to a new dilemma: the ‘robust’ people may have carried the mark of ancient Java (as Black Mac himself had put it), but whose mark did the ‘gracile’ people bear? Alan’s proposal was that they bore the mark of eastern Asia, perhaps China. And, in one of those coincidences that impinge on so many careers, it was more or less at that time that Alan was picked as part of the first team of Australian scientists to visit the People’s Republic, still slowly and painfully emerging from the Cultural Revolution. His contacts with Chinese colleagues continued for the rest of his working life, and it was in 1986 that, with Wolpoff and a like-minded Chinese colleague, Wu Xinzhi, he published a classic paper setting out in detail the requirements of the multiregional model and the evidence for it. Because of his Chinese contributions, he was asked to give the Morrison Memorial Lecture at the ANU in 1982.

But archaeology in China was taking another, more public turn. A vast terracotta army, guarding the tomb of China’s first Emperor, had been discovered at Xian and was gradually being fully excavated. A few pieces were sent for exhibition in Sydney in 1982 and Film Australia set out to make a short feature on them, travelling to China to visit the excavation. They needed to find an Australian who was both knowledgeable and at the same time sufficiently personable to act as the film’s presenter. Who should happen to be in China at the time but Alan Thorne. This film, *The Entombed Warriors*, was followed a year later by *Out of Time, Out of Place* (also Film Australia), on human evolution research in Australia, Indonesia and China; both films, and especially Alan’s charismatic presenter role in them, caught the eye of TV filmmaker Robert Raymond, and together they made an eleven-part series *Man on the Rim: The Peopling of the Pacific* which was screened nationally in 1988. For this series, which dealt with the people and cultures of the whole of the

Pacific region, Alan travelled through eastern Asia, Polynesia and the western coast of the Americas, as well as Australia. His genial personality and lucid explanatory style caught the public imagination, and the popular series was widely sold internationally, and has been reissued on DVD by Ronin Films. It was followed in 1989 by *Man on the Rim* the book (Angus and Robertson), co-authored by Alan Thorne and Robert Raymond.

Academically, Alan encountered debate and differences of opinion about his hypotheses and interpretations of anatomy. In time-honoured fashion, one of his PhD students, Peter Brown, made known his conclusion that the flat receding foreheads of some of the Kow Swamp remains was not a natural morphology after all, but the result of artificial head deformation in infancy (still today a surprisingly common practice worldwide). This had the effect of considerably reducing the difference between 'gracile' and 'robust' Pleistocene Australians. Alan never published his assessment of this interpretation, but he did continue to maintain a distinction between the two types. In the meantime, it became known that some of his colleagues did not agree with multiregionalism. One such, I must admit, was myself. But this potential setback became in its own way another triumph: the media discovered that two friends, colleagues in the same university, were disagreeing on human origins, and tapped the intense public interest in the subject. Together the two of us entertained the public in different Australian cities, and on TV, in the early 1990s with debates on the origin of modern humans. I particularly remember a lively, jovial talkfest on radio in Perth, with public phone-in questions, compered by the former leader of the Australian Democrats, Janine Haines. In the late 1990s we were awarded an Australian Research Council grant, enabling us to travel to see various collections of early fossil human remains in museums in South Africa, Germany, France, the UK and the USA, and a number of publications resulted, although it is fair to say that—expectedly, perhaps!—we failed to crack the problem of human origins. But our travels together were a real delight. I have many memories of measuring skulls together, when Alan would lay down his calipers or tape and muse aloud about some evolutionary point, or sometimes share some entertaining gossip about one of our colleagues. Sometimes he would talk about reptiles, in which he retained his interest from his Sydney University days, and told me of his successes in interbreeding some of the different species of Australian pythons which he was at that time keeping in the basement of his home. One weekend, the museum repositories being closed, we strode the streets of Paris together, discovering restaurants, and visiting art collections—the Louvre, of course, and later the Centre Pompidou, where he tried, not entirely successfully, to give me some glimmer of appreciation for the modern art to which his first wife Judy (who had died in 1993 in a traffic accident in the United States) had introduced him.

Alan's first excavation in effect rescued the Kow Swamp 1 skeleton from destruction by the 1968 irrigation channel, but later he, like all of his contemporaries, simply excavated burials without a second thought. This was standard archaeological practice all over the world at the time, although even by the early 1970s it seems that Alan was quite conscious that what he was excavating were not just skeletons, they were the remains of human beings. I recall him asking for a moment's silence 'in honour of the first Australian' after we had excavated the Mungo Man skeleton in 1974. The unthinking cavalier attitude of Australian archaeologists, and particularly the lack of consultation with local Aboriginal communities, changed through the 1970s and 1980s. Initially, there were angry confrontations between Aboriginal people and archaeologists, which gradually settled into earnest dialogue: the Aboriginal communities were interested in knowing what the study of the skeletal remains could tell them about the relationships and lifeways of their forebears, but continued to be disturbed that the remains were out of their control, and away from the land in which they had been carefully and respectfully interred thousands of years earlier. The turning point occurred in 1992 when the three communities surrounding the Willandra Lakes (of which Mungo is one) successfully petitioned that the remains of Mungo Lady should be returned to their care, and it was Alan himself who helped to arrange the handover, and officiated at the ceremony. There is no doubt that this act not only earned Alan the undying respect of the Willandra Lakes people, but was the catalyst for a new relationship between Aboriginal people and archaeologists in general.

The tragedy of the death of his wife Judy had hit Alan very hard, and after that event his working life slowed a good deal, although he was boosted by being asked to give the Robert Broom Memorial Lecture in Johannesburg in 1994, and by being awarded the inaugural Riversleigh Medal for contributions to Australian Palaeoanthropology. And it was in that year that he was made a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. So it was to his friends' surprise and delight that in November 1999 he married the noted epidemiologist and social anthropologist Maggie Brady. This gave him a new lease on life, and he regained his sense of humour and happiness in life, became again gregarious and involved, attending lectures and seminars by his colleagues and discussing points of interest with them, and in 2007 he even made a trip to Antarctica. Tragically, however, Alan was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 2009, but even as late as December 2010 he was able to attend and appreciate a short symposium given in his honour at the annual Australian Archaeological Association conference.

He is survived by his second wife Maggie Brady, his two children Nicholas and Rachel, and five grandchildren.

• COLIN GROVES