

2001 HANCOCK LECTURE

***Representations of their Lives:
Archaeology and the Tangibility of the Past***

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Representations of Their Lives: Archaeology and the Tangibility of the Past

When I was invited to give this address, I was told the theme of the symposium, *Visualising Australia's Past*; that the lecture is an annual one in honour of Sir Keith Hancock; and that it was intended to be a means of presenting the research of 'young scholars'. Accordingly, I will attempt to address all of these areas in my talk this evening, and to consider Hancock's contribution to history and the symposium theme of visual remembrance as they relate to my own work.¹

I'll begin with the symposium theme, that of the visual media of remembrance and historical understanding. The program has emphasised 'visual images and written documents' and I have taken it upon myself to extend the theme to include objects, buildings and places from an archaeological perspective. All of these are visual, but they are more than visible, because they are the physical expression of visual: they are tangible as well, having weight, and volume, and form. They can be held, or even occupied, as well as seen. They can be felt, tasted, smelt, and heard. Hence the title of my talk, which is drawn from a quote by African American novelist Maya Angelou, and which points to the power of a tangible past. The full text of Angelou's quote goes like this:

To find, 200 years later, the veritable bones, that is not romance, that is practical, that is tangible, and that puts us in touch with the people who were slaves 200 years ago. That is real. The tangible evidence of their lives resides in their deaths, so their bones then are representations of their lives.²

Angelou was responding to the discovery of a cemetery in New York City that had been the burial ground of African American slaves in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The site had long been abandoned and forgotten. Indeed, the presence of slaves in New York, and the northern states more generally, had also been largely forgotten, certainly in public memory. It was only due to the planned construction of a multi-storey office tower that archaeologists re-discovered the burial ground in the early 1990s. The discovery of forgotten places in this way is not an uncommon occurrence, even here in Australia.³ I mention this particular case today because of what followed. The discovery and excavation of this site prompted an unprecedented outpouring of emotion among African Americans in New York and around the country.⁴ It provided a focus for community identity and strength. The burial ground revived memories of

not only those buried there, predominantly children and young adults, but more widely of the African community in the north, slave and free. The intensity of the emotions invoked was such that Federal congress halted the development and the site was turned into a memorial park. A sense of the full import of that decision, and the strength of community response that produced it, can be realised when we recall that this land is prime Manhattan real estate.

Ironically, the location chosen for the Burial Ground's temporary interpretive centre was the World Trade Centre. The past and the present of New Yorkers have now been inextricably linked, and the significance of place and memory will only grow stronger.

In one sense it is not surprising that the site of the Burial Ground was deemed important. It was and is unquestionably a place of deep emotional significance to the community. In another sense, it is perplexing: the burial ground had been forgotten for 200 years, none of the names of those buried there even known. What then made it so important to modern New Yorkers? It was not the documentary record that made it so. The burial ground was marked on a number of historical maps and other documents, and in that sense it was not 'discovered' by the archaeologists at all. Scholars have also written about the African American presence in colonial New York. Yet this academic knowledge has had little impact on the public consciousness of New York. What was different about the burial ground now? I think the difference was the archaeological evidence.

The public activity of the excavation was the first element of this. Unlike historical research, conducted alone and in private in the seclusion of archives and libraries, this excavation, like all excavations, was of necessity conducted on the street, as a piece of theatre for public consumption. It was immediately noticeable to passers-by and to the media, who gave it extensive coverage. This 'public' element was further enhanced by the use of community volunteers as part of the dig team. Archaeology is labour-intensive, and frequently draws on the public in this way. Participation is a process of mutual benefit however. Volunteers derive great satisfaction from their insider's perspective and involvement, and become more aware of the history of the place. So, the archaeology enabled the burial ground to be made public in a way that was not possible before, and this is always true of excavations. However, there was more than that in this case.

The other contribution made by the archaeology was the revelation of physical objects, the bones of the dead, in a tangible space, the place of their interment. It was this combination that was so emotionally and intellectually powerful. For the first time, African Americans from a variety of backgrounds were able to come together around a place of significance to

them, and were able to approach the remains of their predecessors. The very anonymity of the dead facilitated this process, because it enabled them to be elevated to the status of common, shared ancestors. The remains of the dead, and the life histories physical anthropologists have been able to reconstruct from the skeletons, have made the past accessible. In this symposium, where we have been considering the power of the visual, it is worth pondering the impact of these physical remains. To return to the words of Maya Angelou, 'To find ... the veritable bones, that is not romance, that is practical, that is tangible, and that puts us in touch with the people who were slaves 200 years ago'.

It is the links between objects and memory, and the power of tangible things to so strongly represent the lives of others, that make archaeology so interesting. Accidents of preservation mean that sites and objects survive in unexpected ways. The kind of evidence about the 'big picture' that historians might seek is frequently not left to us archaeologically. In fact, by its very nature, evidence of the mainstream is more likely to be obliterated by 'progress' and the new. What is more commonly left to archaeologists are the marginal, the failures, the less known: indeed, those who have not been part of mainstream histories. The stories have been forgotten but the tangible is still there and demands explanation. Providing the explanations frequently sheds new light on conventional understandings, adding complexity to what we know of our pasts.

My own research over the past decade and more has involved me in three such projects of discovery. I want to talk briefly about each of these in order to illustrate my argument about the power of the tangible to excite and inform. The project with which I am most actively engaged at present is a study of the colonial whaling industry in Australia and New Zealand. Archaeological evidence of this once-significant industry is abundant along the coastlines of New Zealand and southern Australia, and it was this that prompted my interest and that of my collaborators in the ARC SPIRT-funded AWSANZ project.⁵

The more widely known history of whaling is the deep-sea whaling industry, and the entrepreneurs, men like Robert Campbell and Archibald Mosman who profited from it. Our project, necessarily grounded in archaeological evidence, has focused on the lesser-known shore-based industry that has left abundant archaeological remains around the coastline. Our themes are the polyglot mix of men who worked in this industry, their living and working conditions on the stations, the women, both white and aboriginal, who shared the stations with them, and the violent and non-violent relationships with Indigenous peoples that developed around whaling.

Already you may begin to glimpse the potential of archaeology to contribute to alternative stories of Australian history.

Whaling marks the first point of connection with the work of Sir Keith Hancock. Directly, because Benjamin Boyd, prominent in the whaling industry around Twofold Bay, used the capital from that enterprise to finance his activities on the Monaro Tablelands, about which Hancock wrote so evocatively.⁶ The indirect connection with Monaro is perhaps deeper however, and this is in the role of environment. *Discovering Monaro* was the only one of Hancock's works that was known to me until a short while ago, I'm ashamed to say, and I will attribute that to my Canadian origins. Nevertheless, it is a book I know well and admire greatly. Hancock was one of the first Australian historians to direct attention to landscape in a meaningful way, and to consider environment as a significant player in the drama of white colonisation. Influenced by Hancock, and by those who influenced him, such as the great English geographer W. G. Hoskins, and those whom Hancock influenced, such as Tom Griffiths, landscape, environment and place have been themes throughout my research.⁷ In *Discovering Monaro* Hancock drew attention to the changes wrought in the landscape by Europeans, but he also drew attention to the continuities. The relationship between settlers and land has always existed, and has been a reciprocal one. The environment both constrained and facilitated activities, but could also be changed to suit colonial purposes. Changes thus set in train further changes and more constraints, locking Australians into an ongoing cycle of intervention far beyond that known to Aboriginal people before Europeans arrived.

Most environmental histories have focused on the land, but both Aboriginal people and Europeans have always extended their activities to the seas. It has been part of my intellectual project to probe the similar relationships that have existed in coastal environments. There too, the cycle has been one of intervention and change that continues to the present. When Lt. David Collins and his party arrived in what became Hobart in 1804, the Rev. Knopwood wrote of one trip across the Derwent 'We passed so many whales that it was dangerous for the boat to go up the river, unless you kept very near the shore'.⁸ Needless to say, it is no longer like that. Well before European intervention had had a widespread or dramatic impact on the environment of inland Australia, whalers and sealers had irrevocably altered the environment of the sea by virtually wiping out the most prominent creatures there. This was truly the last great megafaunal extinction in Australasia, and there is no doubt about the smoking gun. Today Australians are much enamoured of whales, and whale-watching is one of the most popular forms of eco-tourism. We are delighted when a handful of whales reach our

shores each winter, but have little appreciation of how numerous they once were. There is a convenient amnesia about our own role in their demise. There is also an inability to learn the lessons of environmental management and resource use that the colonial whaling industry has to offer.

This is where the tangibility of archaeological remains is an asset. Most surviving archaeological evidence of whaling stations is in fairly remote areas. There are few surviving station sites in Victoria or New South Wales, where they have largely been destroyed by later coastal development. There are many more in South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania and New Zealand. Many of these stations are in areas now thought of as wilderness of one form or another, and their most frequent visitors are those there to pursue the wilderness experience. As we know, the construct of wilderness is culturally specific and perpetuates *Terra Nullius*. Nevertheless it remains powerful among many of those who revere and use the bush. Reinserting any element of previous human presence in 'natural' areas has been resisted. For those with the ability to see, there is already abundant evidence of human use. Archaeological perspectives, which draw attention to the evidence of trackways, fireplaces, and industrial remains, have a role to play in reminding us that these places have always been part of cultural landscapes, and Europeans, as well as Aboriginal people, have lived there.

One example of this is at Adventure Bay, on Bruny Island, Tasmania. There, along a popular coastal walking track, lie the remains of four whaling stations. At the request of the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Department, we excavated the remains of a station that had been owned by Captain James Kelly of Hobart, and his associate Thomas Lucas. The station was occupied over the winter months by about 30 men in the years from 1829 to 1841. We excavated the remains of the quarters occupied by the headman, or manager, the crew barracks, and the tryworks where the blubber was processed into oil.⁹

One of the reasons for our work was that because of the increased visitation to the area, the site was thought to be under some threat. A second was to assist Parks with their interpretive program. While we were onsite we had first-hand experience of the potential for archaeology to challenge and disturb preconceived beliefs of wilderness. We ran site tours for passers-by, and found that while many had an interest in history, had come deliberately to visit the site and were fascinated, others were visiting the site accidentally. They were bushwalkers with no special interest or knowledge of the human history of the area, and no expectation of seeing us there. Some of these walkers were greatly upset by our presence and activities in what to them was a pristine natural environment. With us there it was impossible to ignore the physical evidence of both European and Aboriginal activities

there going back thousands of years. It was also impossible to ignore the fact that much of that European presence had been highly detrimental. I cannot say whether those individuals have revised their understanding of wilderness, or whether they are still able to deny its implications. However, I do know that Parks has installed a series of interpretive signs along the track so that even though we are no longer excavating, the physical evidence remains visible.

My most long-standing research interest has been in the gold rush, a project I began at Dolly's Creek, near Ballarat, in 1990, and which is now continuing with the Mt. Alexander Diggings Heritage Project, also an ARC SPIRT sponsored collaborative project.¹⁰ The gold rush is also partly a story of environmental degradation, a story powerfully told by the physical evidence of many bush areas even today. However, paradoxically, the gold rush has also facilitated the survival and continuity of bush environments. Not wanting to surrender control of a valuable resource, land known to be auriferous was reserved by the Crown, and kept back from selection when the pastoral leases were being broken up in the 1860s. As small-scale alluvial mining ceased, the land gradually regenerated and today is known to most people in southeastern Australia simply as state forest. Whether they are there for bushwalking, camping, timber-getting or trail-bike riding, most bush users today see the amenity of the bush, without knowing why those pockets have survived.

In my own research, surviving archaeological evidence has again directed attention away from the metanarratives of progress, development, industrialisation, and a few wealthy men. The physical evidence of those big stories is either buried beneath the streets of cities like Ballarat and Bendigo, or incorporated in their landscapes and architecture. The archaeological evidence that has survived best is in more marginal bush settings, and it is evidence of gold-seeking that persisted after the rush had ended. This evidence demonstrates the presence of women and children and of Chinese men, of gardens and homes amidst machines, mud, and dust. Alongside what we already know about large company mines and prosperous towns, archaeological evidence tells the story of the survival of small, independent miners on their own claims, a system of subsistence mining facilitated by the Miner's Right and by the cooperative labour of family units in which women and children were integral parts.

This is best exemplified by my work at Dolly's Creek. A small alluvial field that was occupied between 1857 and 1888, it does not loom large in any documentary sources, but has a rich archaeological record of mine sites, fireplaces, and bottle dumps. We excavated four households there and found the remains of simple one-room structures of bark or canvas with

fireplaces at one end. The cottages were supplied with a rich array of goods however, from cheap but decorative tablewares to ornate gilded mantel clocks and floral wallpaper. The cottages were surrounded by gardens with beds outlined in quartz cobbles, in which they probably grew flowers as well as potatoes, onions, lettuce, radishes, and other vegetables. The foods eaten included beef, pork, mutton, goat, chicken and rabbit. Goats and chickens were probably kept by the families on their miner's right allotments, and would have meant eggs and milk as well as meat, foods that could be sold or bartered as well as eaten.

The final research project I would like to discuss is that on which I am just beginning, and it is one which again returns me to the work of Keith Hancock. Long before his work on Monaro, Hancock had of course written extensively on the British Empire and particularly on South Africa.¹¹ By coincidence, because as I say I was unaware of his other work until recently, this is an area which I too am developing. While there is an abundant imperial historiography, both of the traditional political-economic variety and with a newer postcolonial flavour, this is something about which archaeologists have been peculiarly blind. It is not because of a lack of evidence: all of Britain's former colonies, and Britain itself, are littered with archaeological sites that are embedded in the imperial project. Rather, I think it is a product of the social and political context of our time. While earlier generations of Australians saw themselves as international citizens, members of a global empire as well as Australians, today the world is seeing a return to more narrowly-defined national and ethnic identities, and Australia is no different. Australians by birth cannot hold two passports, presumably because it is no longer possible to be two things at once, and ethnicity is now mutually exclusive. It was not always so, as I am sure Hancock, who spent long periods of his life overseas, yet returned to Australia, knew well.

In turning my own attention to the archaeology of empire, I am attempting to understand the social context in which sites in Australia and other British colonies were settled.¹² We acknowledge that until very recently Britain was still referred to as 'home', yet we do not interrogate what this actually meant. Our tendency today is to look upon sites as narrowly 'Australian', and their occupants as burgeoning nationalists. That was not necessarily the case at all however. As their writings and family experiences make clear, most colonists maintained an identification with their place of origin, and passed that identification on to their children. Moreover, they also remained acutely aware of other British colonies. Some migrants to Australia had already lived in other colonies, as had many colonial administrators and military personnel, while others had relatives scattered through-

out the empire. This makes for quite exciting archaeology, because it makes it possible to meaningfully compare the residue of settlement in the Eastern Cape, Upper Canada, Otago, and New South Wales, to see in what ways they are different, shaped by climate, economy and social structure, and in what ways they are the same, shaped by a shared culture of Greater Britain.

One of the things I have found in looking at the ceramic tablewares in all these places is that they are very unlike what Americans were using at the same time. From the 1850s onwards, Americans used tableware that was almost exclusively white, the only decoration being subtle mouldings in the dishes themselves. Hardly any of these dishes appear on sites of the former Empire. Instead, from Toronto to Cape Town, the British were using colourful transfer-prints in blues, greens, mauves, pinks, browns, and black. All the dishes, whether white or colourful, were being made in the same British factories. It is theoretically possible that the Australians could have had white, and the Americans mauve dishes, but that is not the case. Or the Canadians might have favoured blue while the South Africans favoured green. Again, that is not the case. Almost without exception, the colonials wanted a combination of colours while the Americans wanted only white. This may seem a small point in world history, and I don't really know what it means. However, I think it is important. People buy crockery, set their tables with it, and eat their meals from it every day. It is far more a part of daily life than larger political and economic structures: it is the archaeology of the event and the everyday. We know that laws, administrative structures, and trade networks were shared among the colonies. Styles of tableware are partly the result of trade, but also the result of consumer choice. British colonists, wherever they were, were making different choices than were their American cousins, and the same choices as their colonial siblings.

As well as providing new insights into colonial archaeology, imperial perspectives shed new light on British archaeology. It is hard to know whether patterns seen in the colonies are truly 'British' or not, and indeed what that might mean, unless we have something in Britain with which to compare them. At the moment the problem is that we do not. Despite the rich tradition of British archaeology, and an equally rich tradition of historical study of the nineteenth century, there is nothing that can tell us whether the dishes on the table in the working districts of Manchester were similar to the dishes on the table here, in the Rocks, Sydney, or 'Little Lon', Melbourne. British archaeologists have documented the machines of the Industrial Revolution, but they have simply ignored the people. The archaeological sites left by the working people of Britain have not been excavated or studied. And since those people were the ones who moved to Australia, for us this is a problem.

It is also a problem for the British I think. Taking a long-term view of British history, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries must surely be the period at which they were at their wealthiest and most powerful. This would seem to be a peculiar time to stop studying the British, and yet that is exactly what archaeologists do.¹³ Archaeologists would hardly choose to ignore the remains of Imperial Rome, or of the Classic Maya heartland, while studying all other periods of their rise and fall. Yet, that is currently the case in Great Britain.

Again however, I would point to the power of the tangible to redirect attention. In years to come, archaeologists will find that the most dominant features of the British archaeological record are in fact those of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Traditionalists say the Industrial Revolution was not kind to the British landscape. Perhaps, but it has certainly transformed it, and left behind physical evidence that cannot be ignored. And despite its apparent ubiquity, it is also a fragile heritage that can be erased. Today in the northeast of England — for centuries the centre of the British coal industry — the only place to see physical evidence of that activity is in a museum: the industrial heritage (and the industry) has been all but destroyed.

Conclusion

I began by talking about the way that the archaeology of a colonial cemetery in New York resonated among the African American community there. That place, as a physical embodiment of the past, was able to generate interest in the African American history of that city that far exceeded interest in other forms of history making. The colliery in the historical theme park at Beamish is likewise a place of memory for the coalmining families of northeast England.

In my own work, I am attempting to explore some of the ways in which this place-centred-ness can stimulate new ways of thinking about our histories. Initially, a concern with place necessarily focuses attention in unthought-of directions. The survival of objects and ruins in out-of-the-way locations demands explanation. It raises questions about what went on there, why, and when and by whom was it used? These questions can lead to new and different perspectives on seemingly well-known stories. We encounter in them the representations of past lives.

It also raises questions about why those tangible things have survived, when their contemporaries have not. What processes of destruction, selection, and neglect have taken place in the intervening years? The answers to these questions can shed light on ourselves and our changing ways of valuing what went before, and on the directions taken by 'progress'.

Finally, these survivals can challenge public perceptions as well, taking these past lives out of narrow disciplinary journals and museums and into public spaces like city streets and national parks. History finds a new audience in these places, an audience which hasn't gone looking for history. Perhaps it can create new memories as well, so that next winter when the whales come people might remember that they were once here before; or next time 'wilderness' areas are being fought over, people might remember that the wilderness has been created. There are past lives in all these places, and physical evidence makes them tangible and memorable.

Notes

1. I would like to thank the members of Academy for giving me the opportunity to speak; Lawrence Warner, Tim Rowse, Beverly Ricketts and Jane Castles, for facilitating it, and David Frankel and Elizabeth Pemberton for suggesting that I do it.
2. Maya Angelou in *The African Burial Ground: An American Discovery* (Kutz Television and the United States General Services Administration, 1994).
3. Similar inner-city discoveries have been the site of First Government House, Sydney (H. Proudfoot et al., *Australia's First Government House* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin and Department of Planning, 1991); various sites in the Rocks (G. Karskens, 'Crossing Over: Archaeology and History at the Cumberland/ Gloucester Street Site, the Rocks, 1994–1996,' *Public History Review* 5/6 1997); and Little Lon in Melbourne (Alan Mayne, Tim Murray, and Susan Lawrence, 'Historic Sites: Melbourne's "Little Lon"', *Australian Historical Studies* 31, no. 114, 2000).
4. Spencer Harrington, 'Bones and Bureaucrats: New York's Great Cemetery Imbroglio' *Archaeology* 46 (no. 2: 1993); Cheryl La Roche and Michael Blakey, 'Seizing Intellectual Power: The Dialogue at the New York African Burial Ground' *Historical Archaeology* 31 (no. 3: 1997).
5. S. Lawrence, 'An Integrated Approach to the Archaeology of Whaling' in *The Archaeology of Whaling in Southern Australia and New Zealand*, ed. S. Lawrence and M. Staniforth (Canberra: Brolga Press, for the Australian Institute for Maritime Archaeology and the Australasian Society for Historical Archaeology, 1998).
6. Marion Diamond, *Ben Boyd of Boydtown* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1995). Hancock, *Discovering Monaro: A Study of Man's Impact on His Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).
7. W. G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (first published 1955,

- London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1965); Tom Griffiths, *Secrets of the Forest: Discovering History in Melbourne's Ash Range* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992); Tom Griffiths and Libby Robin, eds., *Ecology and Empire: Environmental History of Settler Societies* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997).
8. *The Diary of Rev. Knopwood 1803–1838*, ed. M. Nicholls (Hobart: Tasmanian Historical Research Association, 1977).
9. Susan Lawrence, "Foodways on Two Colonial Whaling Stations: Archaeological and Historical Evidence for Diet in Nineteenth Century Tasmania," *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 87, no. 2 (2001).
10. Susan Lawrence, *Dolly's Creek: An Archaeology of a Victorian Gold Rush Community* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000); Susan Lawrence, 'Women, Gardens, and the Miner's Right', in *Bendigo, Nothing but Gold: 150 Years of Gold Mining*, ed. Jan Penney (Bendigo: North Central Goldfields Regional Library Corporation, in prep.); Barry McGowan, 'Mullock Heaps and Tailing Mounds: Environmental Effects of Alluvial Goldmining,' in *Gold: Forgotten Histories and Lost Objects of Australia*, ed. Iain McCalman, Alexander Cook, and Andrew Reeves (Cambridge and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
11. Keith Hancock, *Smuts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962); Keith Hancock, *Argument of Empire* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1943).
12. Susan Lawrence, 'Introduction' in *Archaeologies of the British*, ed. Susan Lawrence; in *One World Archaeology* (London: Routledge, nd); Susan Lawrence, 'Archaeology and the Nineteenth Century British Empire' in *Recent Archaeology in Australia and New Zealand: Historical Archaeology* (37 no. 1 in press).
13. *The Familiar Past? Archaeologies of Later Historical Britain*, ed. Sarah Tarlow and Susie West, (London: Routledge, 1999).