

# JOHN MULVANEY AO CMG FBA FSA FRAI FAHA

1925–2016

FELLOW · ELECTED 1969



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John Mulvaney was a foundation pillar in the study of Australian prehistory and a passionate defender of Australia's heritage and the rights of its indigenous peoples. He was an outstanding researcher, communicator, teacher and colleague.

Born 26 October 1925 in rural Victoria, John graduated in 1948 with a BA Honours degree in History from the University of Melbourne, after brief service as an RAAF Flying Officer at the end of World War II. During his war service, mercifully without direct engagement with the enemy, John was posted to Canada and England. The history of Britain, and the archaeological remains that he visited there, including Kenilworth Castle and the Rollright Stones, stimulated John towards a career devoted to the study of human prehistory and archaeology.

After the war, as a Tutor at the University of Melbourne (1949–51), John taught Ancient and British history, but eventually moved away from the Classics owing in part to his lack of a background in Ancient Greek and Latin. The archaeology of Iron Age and Roman Britain was initially more attractive, and in 1951 he submitted his MA thesis to Melbourne University on the Belgae,

a people of the British Iron Age just prior to the Roman conquest in AD 43. By this time, John had decided firmly on a career in archaeology, and left Melbourne in 1951 to undertake a two-year undergraduate degree (Part II of the Archaeology Tripos) at Cambridge University, with a travelling research scholarship from the Australian National University (ANU) and an Archbishop Mannix Travelling Scholarship. John's express purpose was to learn how to do archaeology in the field, as such training was not available in Australia at that time. In Cambridge, he resided in Clare College and studied under the capable mentorship of Grahame Clark, Charles McBurney and Glyn Daniel, working with McBurney in 1952 in the important Middle and Upper Palaeolithic cave of Haua Fteah in Cyrenaica. While in North Africa he fuelled his interest in Roman archaeology with visits to the remarkable ruins at El Djem, Sabratha and Leptis Magna. John also met his future wife Jean Campbell in the United Kingdom, and they married in Australia in 1954, after their return.

In 1953, John took up a Lectureship in History at the University of Melbourne, achieving promotion to a Senior Lectureship before his move to the Australian National University in 1965. As far as his archaeological teaching was concerned he focused mainly on the Pacific in the early days, given the relative lack of information at that time about Australian prehistory *per se*. Indeed, in those early days, John was the only archaeologist with a professional university qualification in that discipline undertaking excavations in Australia. In 1956, he commenced his excavation career with volunteer helpers (in the days before Australian Research Council grants) in the rock shelter of Fromm's Landing on the Murray River, in South Australia. His excavation activities continued at Kenniff Cave in southern Queensland during the 1960s, after an academic year (1961–62) spent on a Nuffield Foundation Fellowship at the Institute of Archaeology in London, where he learnt about the conservation of archaeological materials and how to take latex rubber 'peels' as records of trench sections. One such peel, taken in 1973 by John from a trench wall at Lake Mungo, is still kept in the School of Archaeology and Anthropology at ANU.

The 1960s were boom years for archaeology in Australia. New university departments with archaeological teaching and research were being founded, as was the

Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. Public interest in the Aboriginal past was, in my view at least, much higher than now, possibly because of the sequence of newsworthy finds and the rapidly increasing post-war level of education of the Australian population at large. During that decade, as John notes, 'I felt isolated no longer.' Other professional archaeologists moved into Australian university departments, including Jack Golson at ANU, Richard Wright and Vincent Megaw at the University of Sydney, and Isabel McBryde at the University of New England. After joining Golson at ANU in 1965 as a Senior Fellow in Prehistory, John's archaeological forays included working with PhD students, commencing with Campbell Macknight on Macassan archaeology, Jim Allen on the British settlement at Port Essington, and Ian Glover in what was then Portuguese Timor (now Timor-Leste).

After Fromm's Landing and Kenniff Cave, John's twenty-year archaeological excavation career in Australia included another rock shelter at Ingaladdi in the Northern Territory, and later the major Pleistocene site complex on the sand lunette of now-dry Lake Mungo in western New South Wales, where he undertook research with Jim Bowler and Wilfred Shawcross in 1972–74. I travelled to Mungo with John and a group of students in 1973 to lay out a grid for surface collection, which I understand is still used today. Mungo, of course, was the jewel in the crown of Australian archaeology. In John's words, commenting on the 26,000 year old cremated Mungo Woman,

...this find is surely in the same league of significance as the evidence for earlier evolutionary human behaviour that was located by Louis Leakey at Olduvai Gorge. I feel honoured to have been present for its discovery.

In 1969, John also excavated beyond Australian shores, with R.P. Soejono and Campbell Macknight in the rock shelters of Leang Burung and Ulu Leang in the Maros District of South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Here, he uncovered important evidence related to the Toalian backed blade and microlith industry of Holocene Sulawesi, which many have compared with the late Holocene 'Bondi Point' (or small tool) industries of much of Australia.

After 1974, John ceased active archaeological excavation, but his legacy in this area was highly significant. Fromm's Landing, Kenniff Cave and Lake Mungo established dates for first human settlement in Australia at respectively 5000, 16000, and then over 30000 years ago. John was able to build on the achievements of predecessors such as Norman Tindale, Fred McCarthy and Edmund Gill, none trained archaeologists, to establish a sequence for Australian lithic industries that is still in use today. This commenced on first human settlement at least 50,000 years ago with a core tool and scraper tradition, followed

around 3500 years ago across much of the continent (except for some monsoonal northern regions, and Tasmania) by the florescence of a small tool tradition with backed flakes and geometric microliths. The latter was associated with the introduction of the Eurasian domestic dog (the Australian dingo), of which a skeleton dating to 3000 years ago was excavated at Fromm's Landing. John's findings provided a framework for his seminal work *The Prehistory of Australia*, which ran through 3 editions (1969, 1975 and 1999, the last co-written with Johan Kamminga and published by Allen and Unwin).

One reason for John's eventual move away from active fieldwork archaeology in his later career was his disillusionment with the rather self-righteous archaeological 'theory' that was being perpetuated during the late 1960s and 1970s, known at the time as 'New Archaeology'. John regarded the practitioners of New Archaeology as 'humourless', with an anti-humanist stance that 'is not the story of humanity'. In his 1986 Retrospect in the journal *Antiquity*, John also noted that the attitudes of some of his younger peers were a factor in his decision to retire in 1985 at the relatively young age of 60. He was concerned that 'modern students consulting my early reports may deplore their lack of sophistication.' Perhaps he need not have worried quite so much. In hindsight, modern science-based archaeology has long since moved on from the unproductive conundrums of logic that tortured the New Archaeologists thirty years ago, and John's techniques of excavation, interpretation, and presentation still leave very little to be desired. Facts, real facts demonstrated by scientific methodology, are back in fashion. John would have appreciated this.

John began to return increasingly after his Lake Mungo research to his previous interests in historical research. An early example was the widely-read book on the Aboriginal cricket tour to England in 1868, published through three editions of *Cricket Walkabout* (1967, 1988 and 2005). By 1969, John had started his biographical research on the famous Melbourne biologist and anthropologist Walter Baldwin Spencer, which led to a full biography of Spencer co-written with biologist John Calaby and published as *So Much That Is New* by Melbourne University Press in 1985. John later went on to edit three volumes of letters written between Spencer and his regional collaborators on Aboriginal matters.

By 1975, John was also actively involved in the protection of Australia's Aboriginal and European heritage, as a member of the Australian Government Committee of Enquiry on Museums and National Collections (1974–75), as Chairman of the Planning Committee for the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia (1975), as Deputy Chairman of the Canberra Division of the Museums Association (1975–76), and as an Australian Heritage Commissioner (1976–82). In 1977, he visited Paris to serve on a committee

to frame the criteria for admission to the UNESCO World Heritage List.

John's involvement in lobbying for protection of Australia's cultural and natural heritage developed most rapidly between 1981 and 1983, when he was involved with many others in the campaign against the Franklin dam in Tasmania and its threat to a number of cave sites, including Kutikina (Fraser Cave). The eventual success of this intervention saved from drowning several sites with last glacial (c. 20,000 years ago) human occupation, close to the southern edge of the inhabited world. Other archaeological locations that attracted John's attention were the building foundations of the first Government House in Sydney, and the remarkable rock engravings of the Burrup Peninsula, the latter today under the careful protection of John's archaeologist son Kenneth (Principal Cultural Heritage Officer with Rio Tinto Iron Ore in the Pilbara). Much later, John became deeply involved in the protection of Kakadu in the Northern Territory from mining operations, and successfully nominated the Willandra Lakes in western New South Wales for World Heritage status. In 1989 he published *Encounters in Place*, a book on significant meetings between Aboriginal Australians and outsiders from 1606 to 1985, a project which also involved him in visits across the continent over a period of two years to the places where such contacts had occurred.

In 1969, John was made a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, and a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy in 1983. He also received his PhD from Cambridge in 1970, having submitted publications under a special regulation of that university. I did the same 10 years later, and we both remembered well our examinations (verbal, of course, lubricated by a cup of tea) by Grahame Clark in the Peterhouse Master's Lodge. John was made a Companion of the Order of Saint Michael and Saint George (CMG) in 1982, and an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in 1991.

Between 1989 and 1996, John served as Secretary of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. This was a time before the establishment of a substantial Secretariat to support the work of the Academy. In many ways over these seven years John served the Academy full-time in the combined roles of Executive Director, Publications Officer, Project Officer and Fellows' Secretary. The Academy owes John a large debt of gratitude for his tireless and generous dedication of his time and energy over this long period. It is said that he never missed a meeting, and one of his successes was to obtain funds from the Australian Research Council to support the publication of the *Academy Editions of Australian Literature*, a publication series that commenced in 1992 and resulted in the publication by University of Queensland Press of several scholarly editions of Australian literary classics.

From my own perspective on John's life, I have left one of his most important achievements to last. In 1971, he was appointed Professor of Prehistory in what was then termed, rather dismissively, the 'School of General Studies' in ANU, later to become the more sensibly named Faculty of Arts. John served in this post until his retirement in 1985. In 1973, the new Department of Prehistory appointed its first three permanent staff under John's headship; Wilfred Shawcross, Andrée Rosenfeld, and me. John was an excellent head, although readers of his autobiography will realise that he did not always see eye to eye with some of his colleagues. Today, that department, now the School of Archaeology and Anthropology, has world status. Those of us who remember the early days have now all retired, and a new generation of staff in archaeology, social anthropology and biological anthropology carry the flag.

Unlike John, not many of us were ever given the opportunity to found a brand new university department, certainly not nowadays, and especially not in the humanities. John succeeded because he was a master in managing the demands of the bureaucracy, even if that bureaucracy was beginning to wear him down towards the end of his professorial tenure at ANU. He was always immensely supportive of his staff, and popular with all students. The year 1973, my own year of migration to Australia, was in the middle of a golden age for university archaeology departments, a time when the growing ANU still had so many open air car parks that, in John's words, 'you can pick your own tree' (for shade!). That observation was followed by his characteristic laugh.

John Mulvaney's contributions to Australian archaeology and heritage, both Aboriginal and European, and to the University of Melbourne and ANU, are well described in his autobiography *Digging up a Past* (2011) and in his 1986 'Retrospect' in *Antiquity* (vol. 60). In addition the journal *Archaeology in Oceania* (vol. 21) ran a series of articles in John's honour in 1986, and an ANU Emeritus Faculty interview with John by Peter Stewart in 2010 can be found on the internet ([http://www.anu.edu.au/emeritus/ohp/interviews/john\\_mulvaney.html](http://www.anu.edu.au/emeritus/ohp/interviews/john_mulvaney.html)). The chapters of the book edited by Tim Bonyhady and Tom Griffiths, *Prehistory to Politics: John Mulvaney, the Humanities and the Public Intellectual* (1996) detail much about John's heritage and public activities, and in the words of the editors:

'Public intellectual' is still not part of his self-definition, most likely because of his modesty as much as the term's relatively recent origin. Instead, he thinks of himself as a 'stirrer' or campaigner. He relishes a good battle and is a great believer in the 'citizen pen'.

John's legacy lives on through public understanding and admiration of the deep Australian Aboriginal past,

through the School of Archaeology and Anthropology that he founded at ANU, with its biennial Mulvaney Lecture series, through his many historical books and essays, and through his timely activities in heritage conservation and museums. He is survived by his second wife, Elizabeth Morrison, whom he married in 2006 after Jean's death in 2004, and by his six children – Clare (born in 1955), married and living in Melbourne; Richard (1957), a museum and art gallery director in Launceston; Kenneth (1959), an archaeologist and rock art specialist in Western Australia, Michael (1960), a botanist and environmental biologist based in Canberra; Gregory (1963), a school teacher in Canberra; and Anne (1965), a landscape architect living near Armidale, New South Wales.

John Mulvaney was a great Australian.

PETER BELLWOOD FAHA FBA

With assistance from Elizabeth Morrison, Kenneth Mulvaney and Graeme Clarke.