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# Jack Golson AO FAHA

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1926 – 2023

Emeritus Professor Jack Golson, FAHA (13 September 1926 - 2 September 2023) was a true pioneer in the study of Pacific archaeology, whose legacy through teaching, mentoring and research is immense and ongoing. Jack was elected to the Academy in 1975.

In 1954 Jack was appointed to the first full-time academic position in Australasia dedicated to the archaeology of Pacific peoples, at what was to become the University of Auckland. He hit the ground running, teaching courses and directing excavations of Maori sites, and founding local and national archaeological associations. He realized that New Zealand's past could only be understood by extending his archaeological brief to the wider Pacific, with the first modern surveys and excavations in Samoa and Tonga in 1957. He then followed up in 1959-1960 with excavations of an important pottery site, originally discovered in 1948, on the Ile de Pins in New Caledonia. It turned out to be associated with the foundational Lapita Culture, the earliest culture in Island Melanesia and Polynesia beyond the main Solomon Islands.

But Jack's archaeological career could have gone in an equally pioneering but very different direction had he not accepted that job offer in Auckland. He was, until that moment, one of the instigators of interest in the Deserted Medieval Villages (DMVs) of England, and had commenced a PhD project on this topic which had to be abandoned when he headed for New Zealand.

Jack was born in Rochdale, Lancashire in the United Kingdom. His father was employed in the administration of one of the local coal mines. At secondary school Jack was inspired by a brilliant history teacher to pursue an academic career. He took up a scholarship to Peterhouse College, Cambridge University, to engage with Preliminary year History in 1943, aged 17. At 18 he was conscripted by lot to labour in the coal mines of Nottinghamshire as a conscript

miner, a ‘Bevin Boy’ as they were called. He returned to Cambridge in 1948 to complete his degree, along with many others whose education was interrupted by World War II.

Jack completed Part I of the History Tripos in 1949 and went on to take Part II Archaeology and Anthropology in 1951. His shift to archaeology was greatly influenced by the Professor of Economic History, Michael Postan, as was his early interest in the Medieval period.

Jack was a staunch member of the Cambridge branch of the Communist Party and selling the *Daily Worker* was a regular Saturday morning duty. Jack was eventually to leave the Party in 1956 over the Soviet Invasion of Hungary, although his past membership prevented him from entering the United States until after the 1980s, and initially prevented him from working in what was to become Papua New Guinea. Clearly the intelligence services of more than one country were keeping tabs on him over many years.

Jack commenced a PhD in 1951 and took up various forms of employment to fund his research, including working at the Public Record Office in London and its equivalent in Lincoln. In 1953, however, the recently appointed Disney Professor of Archaeology at Cambridge, Grahame Clark, strongarmed Jack into applying for the Lectureship in Archaeology at Auckland University College (as it was then known). Jack’s solid fieldwork experience was surely a large part of the Clark’s calculation, although one cannot avoid the suspicion that the patrician Clark also wanted to be rid of a dangerous communist influence in British archaeology and to place Jack as far away as possible.

Jack was in New Zealand from 1954 to 1960, with a few subsequent research visits. He managed through persuasion rather than legislation to curb the enthusiasm of the many amateur curio-hunters who were busily ransacking Maori archaeological sites in search of artefacts for their private collections. Through the various fieldschools organised in Auckland and later through the New Zealand Archaeological Association in 1957 and 1959 he did much to promote high standards in excavation and recording. He was also critical in shifting the emphasis of archaeology there from an almost exclusive focus on artefacts to a concern with sites, and sites within their wider landscape. This led to the development of a national site recording scheme. Before leaving for Canberra in 1961 Golson had transformed New Zealand archaeology, both in its professionalism and its public profile.

John Barnes, then Professor of Anthropology in the Research School of Pacific Studies at ANU saw the need to include Prehistory in that institution, and

consulted, among others, the late John Mulvaney, FAHA, another Cambridge-trained archaeologist but at the time predominantly employed to teach history at Melbourne University. John, in mid-1959 was emphatic that Golson was “the key man to approach”.

In starting his Pacific research program in 1961, Jack saw the value in re-targeting previously investigated sites and placing research students at them. Early archaeology PhD projects in what was initially just a one-man section within the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at ANU included those following up earlier work in the then-Territories of Papua and New Guinea, and in Tonga and New Caledonia.

Jack began a significant collaboration with John Mulvaney in Australia’s Northern Territory, which produced several notable PhDs. The 1970s saw a broadening of Australian interest in the by-then-independent Department of Prehistory at ANU, Jack having successfully argued from the start that Australia should be seen within the ambit of ‘Pacific Studies’. Jack expanded the archaeology section of Anthropology and Sociology in the Research School of Pacific Studies to the point where it became a separate Department of Prehistory in 1969 with Jack as Foundation Professor, becoming Australia’s first Chair of Prehistory. Jack retired in December 1991 after a 30-year career at the ANU and a first Festschrift was presented to him in 1993, with a second in 2003.

Jack’s own research at the ANU very largely concerned what was to become Papua New Guinea. From 1967 most of Jack’s publications were on New Guinea topics, particularly the emerging evidence for 10,000-year-old agriculture in the New Guinea Highlands that culminated with final publication of the results of excavations by himself and others at the Kuk Swamp near Mount Hagen in 2017, when he was 91. Jack was crucial in establishing Kuk as one of the earliest sites of agriculture anywhere in the world, necessitating rewriting of every general introductory text on archaeology. The long-term agricultural history at Kuk required a global rethink of conceptual frameworks that had previously linked the early emergence of agriculture to the development of socio-political complexity, neo-evolutionary ideas of ‘progress’ and the rise of ‘civilisations’. Kuk is now listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site, based on his research and that of his students and colleagues.

Jack also played a significant role in the organisation of the Department’s Kakadu Project in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory in the early 1980s. He

also provided crucial institutional backing and encouragement to the ANU-National Geographic Society Lapita Homeland Project (1984-7), investigating the origins of what was the foundational culture for the settlement of Remote Oceania, the entirety of the Pacific beyond the main Solomons chain, about 3000 years ago. The project set the agenda for Lapita studies for much of the next 40 years.

Jack was a regular speaker at international conferences and brought Pacific archaeology to a much wider audience. Many of his non-specialist published papers were broad syntheses of Pacific archaeology, and it is for these he is particularly remembered among the international archaeological community. These did much to spark worldwide interest in the Pacific as well as instilling a very justified national pride among Papua New Guineans in their past. This particular contribution was recognised in 1992 when Jack was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the University of Papua New Guinea.

Jack had an advisory role in the establishment of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in the early 1960s and served on its committees. He started the Canberra Archaeological Society and was also closely involved with the establishment of the Australian Archaeological Association. He was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London, the world's oldest archaeological society, in 1987. Further recognition came with his appointment as an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in 1997 and Life Membership of the Australian Archaeological Association in 2002.

In 1990 he was elected President of the World Archaeological Congress (WAC) for a four-year term and continued to be a regular participant in WAC Congresses for many years, always accompanied by his wife Clare. In 2009 they were jointly awarded the inaugural WAC Lifetime Achievement Award.

Throughout his career Jack was very much an ideas man, always open to interdisciplinary contributions, particularly from various science fields. His theoretical position was marked by a gentle and understated Marxism inherited from his Cambridge days although rarely identified explicitly as such. He was a charismatic leader of research teams, unselfish and generous with his time and encouragement. He always came across as a very modest, almost diffident, person and very rarely got angry, even when much provoked by a situation or person. His serene calmness is something that sticks in one's memories of him.

His wife Clare predeceased him in 2022, and he is survived by his children Kate and Toby, 3 grandchildren and 1 great-grandchild.

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