– ARTICLE –

'The Dawn' of Australian Archaeology: John Mulvaney at Fromm's Landing

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ABSTRACT

When Vere Gordon Childe returned to Australia in 1957 after thirty-six years abroad, he despaired at the lack of research into Australia's Aboriginal past. Australian archaeology was the domain of curators and stone tool collectors whose work was embedded in evolutionary assumptions and questionable practices. In the final weeks of his life, on 16 September 1957, Childe met and befriended the historian and archaeologist John Mulvaney. This paper draws on their brief encounters to reflect on the state of archaeology in Australia in the 1950s, immediately before the boom in archaeological research in the 1960s that revolutionised the conventional narrative of Australian history. Through a close reading of the early years of Mulvaney's career it argues that the excavations at Fromm's Landing from 1956 to 1963 acted as a catalyst for research and marked the dawn of a new era for Australian Aboriginal archaeology. The excavation involved women and men, historians and archaeologists, teachers and students, and it produced the artefacts that underpinned Mulvaney's landmark 1961 article, where he reviewed existing research and posed the large, continental questions that would dominate the next decade of archaeological investigation.

Keywords: Mulvaney, Childe, 1950s, origins, Australian history

INTRODUCTION

Archaeologist David Horton (1981, 1991) has argued for the history of Australian Aboriginal archaeology to be understood as a gradual and continuous development, starting in 1788 when Governor Arthur Phillip and his successor John Hunter opened an Aboriginal gravesite and listed its contents. Other scholars look to earlier origins, suggesting that the first Australians have been practising something like archaeology for millennia, long before the arrival of the British (Smith & Burke 2007:5). Disciplinary origins are saturated with meaning: they define the shape, scope and trajectory of a field. This paper makes the case for a later beginning, anchored in an historical approach to the past. Whilst acknowledging the legacy of early archaeological field work, including many of the expeditions canvassed in this special issue of *JPA*, the article distinguishes between the activities of early curator-anthropologists and stone tool collectors, and the discipline of archaeology that is practised in Australia today.

John Mulvaney's excavation at Fromm's Landing on lower Murray River, now known as Tungawa, marked the dawn of a new era of research in Australia. It was where the first university-trained archaeologist sank his trowel in Australia in order to investigate the Aboriginal past from an historical, rather than an evolutionary perspective. It provided a model for excavation and acted as a catalyst for research. Within a decade of that dig, archaeological investigations were being carried out in every Australian state and prehistoric archaeology was being taught as a university subject in Canberra, Melbourne, Armidale, Sydney and Brisbane (Moser 1995). Richard Gould (1973:3) compared the developments following 'the work at Fromm's Landing … to the increase of archaeological research in North America generated by the discovery in 1926 of fluted stone projectile points in direct association with the fossilised remains of extinct bison at Folsom, New Mexico.'

This article also makes a distinction between the histories of archaeology in Australia, New Guinea, New Zealand and the Pacific. Although many of the same Australian-based scholars have played pioneering roles in these fields, each region is environmentally and ecologically distinct, with very different human histories. Each context has given rise to different archaeological methods and traditions, and different syntheses, which demand separate analysis. This article addresses the origins of the distinct field of Australian Aboriginal archaeology.

In their influential 1981 article 'Cambridge in the Bush?', Tim Murray and Peter White reviewed the field of Australian archaeology and divided its history into three phases: Antiquity and racial origins (1788–1910); Classification and culture change (1911–59); and Professionalisation (1960–80). The final phase, they argued, saw the discipline move from 'the hands of untrained amateurs' into the realm of professional archaeologists. The phrase

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'Cambridge in the Bush' – a popular nickname at the time for The Australian National University – has endured as a shorthand description of this era. While broadly agreeing with their proposed phases of development, and the need to differentiate modern archaeology from earlier practices, Murray and White's survey overplays the importance of Cambridge trained archaeologists arriving in the 1960s. The intellectual influence of Cambridge University on Australian research is immense (Clark 1989; Mulvaney 2010), but the characterisation of the field as 'Cambridge in the Bush' denies the hybridisation that occurred from the 1950s. The experiences of two Australian historians, Isabel McBryde and John Mulvaney, who laid the foundations of the modern discipline, complicate the conclusion that 'Australian archaeology was and is archaeology first and Australian second' (Murray & White 1981: 262). Both McBryde and Mulvaney studied at the University of Melbourne, actively sought archaeological degrees from Cambridge University, and returned to develop integrated archaeological programs from within History Departments that were supportive of archaeology. They advocated different archaeological practices – Mulvaney (1963) favoured excavation, while McBryde (1962) demonstrated the benefits of field survey – but they shared a historical vision of their discipline. They were both keenly aware that their activities were deepening and enlarging Australian history.

Murray and White (1981) identify 1960 as the pivotal year for the establishment of academic and professional archaeology in Australia, though, as Nicholas Thomas (1982: 2) notes, 'there is no consideration of why this phase began when it did.' The most widely used date for the dawn of the modern era of archaeological research is 1961. This was 'the Dreamtime year for Prehistory' (Mulvaney 1990a: 149), 'the *annus mirabilis* of Australian archaeology' (Megaw 1966: 306). It was the year in which Jack Golson transferred from Auckland to take up the first archaeological post at The Australian National University; Richard Wright and Vincent Megaw became the first prehistorians at the University of Sydney; and an Interim Council for the proposed Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies, the main funding and organising body for early archaeological research, was created in Canberra (Lampert 1975; McCarthy 1970; Mulvaney 2008; Stanner 1963). It was also the year Mulvaney published his landmark review of the field in *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* and put Australian archaeology on the world map. As Rhys Jones (1971: 52) wrote:

> Mulvaney's 1961 paper, steeped as it was in the concepts and controversies of the previous forty years, can in some ways be seen as the last major contribution of the older style, and yet in terms of its critical approach … it heralded a new tradition in Australian studies, which it itself did much to stimulate.

This article focuses on the activities that immediately preceded – and enabled – the transformations in archaeology in the 1960s. It does not seek to engage with the debate created by Murray and White's overview, which has largely revolved around the rise of a distinctively Australian tradition of archaeology in the 1960s and 70s (Davidson 1983; Murray & White 1982; Thomas 1982). Rather, by offering an exploration of John Mulvaney's early career, it highlights the intellectual shift that made these transformations possible. There are, of course, deeply rooted underlying causes for the rapid development of the field, such as the discovery of radiocarbon dating in 1949 (Jones 1998) and the expansion of universities in the early 1960s (Du Cros 2002: 22). But at the heart of this new wave of research is a change in perspective in the study of ancient Australia. In the wake of the Second World War, anthropologists and archaeologists turned away from questions of race and difference to adopt a language of unity and universality (Griffiths 1996). It was a shift away from evolutionary assumptions that had long informed ideas about Aboriginal society and towards complex questions about populations and processes, social organisation and diets, hunting and mobility. It was driven by a sense that the first Australians were neither timeless, nor static; they had their own unique history, and this history could be recovered through archaeological techniques.

The excavation of Fromm's Landing, extending over several field seasons, encapsulates this broader shift in perception and practices more than an arbitrary year in a decade of rapid change. It was an endeavour explicitly undertaken to investigate the human history of ancient Australia. The excavation involved women and men, historians and archaeologists, teachers and students, and in later field seasons Fromm's Landing became a training ground for aspiring archaeologists to learn the rudiments of the discipline (Mulvaney *et al.* 1964). It also produced the artefacts that underpinned Mulvaney's landmark 1961 article in which he drew a line under the existing research into Aboriginal Australia and posed the large, continental questions that would dominate the next decade of archaeological investigation.

All archaeology, as Phillip Barker wrote in 1993, is local: 'However widespread the ramifications of an excavation may ultimately prove to be, initially it is a piece of local history, embedded in the immediate landscape, and relating to the area around it' (Barker 1993: 254). It is fitting, in a discipline bound to fieldwork and place, for an archaeological site to be at the heart of a new era of research. This article offers a close reading of Mulvaney's excavation at Fromm's Landing and the context in which it was undertaken and received.

GORDON CHILDE AND THE STATE OF AUSTRALIAN ARCHAEOLOGY

In the final week of his life, Vere Gordon Childe offered

a blistering assessment of the state of Australian society. He liked it no better in 1957 than when he had left thirty-six years earlier, frustrated and disenchanted, to make his name in Britain. He saw twentieth-century Australia as a cultural backwater, comparing it on more than one occasion to tenth-century Iceland. On Sunday 13 October 1957, in a public 'Guest of Honour' broadcast with the ABC, he urged the Australian public to turn their minds to 'the section of history … still labelled pre-history – rather absurdly,' he added, 'for it is not a sort of prelude to history but an integral part of history itself.' In this historical frame of mind, he wondered 'what a systematic investigation of archaeological documents might do for Australian history' (Childe 1990: 26–27).

Writing to one colleague, O.G.S. Crawford, on 6 August 1957 he described Australian archaeology as 'all horribly boring unless you're a flint fan', 'I could not possibly get interested' (cited in Jones 1998: 39). But with others, such as Laila Haglund, a young Classics student he befriended in his final days, he was full of plans. Haglund remembers sitting across from his distinctive figure, with thick circular glasses, slicked-back hair and walrus moustache, talking about what had been done in Australian archaeology, who was doing it and the sorts of problems he felt should be tackled. 'There was so much he wished to see done in Australian prehistory,' she recalled, 'some of this he wanted to do himself. But it was all part of a large co-ordinated scheme' (Haglund 1979: 86). These conversations persuaded Haglund to 'switch over to prehistory'; she went on to become one of the field's first consultant archaeologists (Haglund 1990: 34). 'Listening to him,' she later wrote, 'at times was rather like hovering over the continent and looking down in a godlike manner' (Haglund 1979: 87).

Childe had left Australia in 1921, having been denied academic appointments at the Universities of Sydney and of Queensland on grounds of his socialist politics. He returned to Sydney on 14 April 1957: his sixty-fifth birthday. In the intervening years, this reclusive, awkward character rose to world fame (Green 1981). He became the 'great synthesiser' of archaeology, capable of weaving a grand narrative from the disparate material remains of a region or a continent. He championed the role of humanism in a discipline that straddles the border between the arts and the sciences, and he was a firm believer that archaeology was, above all, about people. Mulvaney (1957) compared his 1925 book *The Dawn of European Civilization* – or simply *The Dawn* – with *The Origin of Species* for the impact it had on his field.

In the summer of 1956, Childe retired as Director of the Institute of Archaeology in London, packed up his affairs and set sail for Australia. He yearned to return to the country of his youth, to see his sisters, and to absorb the sounds and smells of his childhood in the Blue Mountains. He was feeling weary. In the last letter he wrote to his friend W.F. Grimes, he stated, simply:

> For myself I don't believe I can make further useful contributions to prehistory. I am beginning to forget what I laboriously learned.… New ideas very rarely come my way. I see no prospect of settling the problems that interest me most … on the available data (Childe 1980: 2).

On Saturday 19 October 1957, a hot spring morning in the Blue Mountains, Childe flagged down his regular taxi and made the short journey to Govetts Leap, Blackheath. 'He did not seem to want to talk,' his driver Harry Newstead remembered (cited in Thomas 2003: 224). Childe instead puffed away at his pipe. On arrival, he pulled his gangling frame out of the car, looked at his watch, and then, picking up some papers and a compass, walked off into the bush.

Newstead waited for Childe's return until midday, then became worried and followed his footsteps along the track to Evans Lookout. He found the coat first: a 'blue-green sports coat' on a tree beside the path. Two hundred yards further along, at a point called Luchetti Lookout, he spotted a familiar brown felt hat. Nearby lay Childe's distinctive spectacles, lugs open, and, less than a foot from the cliff edge, his compass. No amount of shouting could muster a reply (Thomas 2003).

The police view was that 'mislaid spectacles' caused Childe to accidentally slip and fall 900 feet to his death at Govetts Leap. The truth, however, is more sombre. His suicide – like his homecoming – was a meticulously planned act. For the world-renowned archaeologist, it was his last performance. Two weeks before his death he wrote to his friend Grahame Clark and described in detail the entrancing sandstone cliffs of the Blue Mountains. He enclosed in the same envelope a personal reflection of his career to be used for obituary purposes at some future stage (Childe n.d.c). In his letter to Grimes, marked the day after he died, Childe addressed his public from beyond the grave:

> Now I have seen the Australian spring; I have smelt the boronia, watched snakes and lizards, listened to the 'locusts'. There is nothing more I want to do here; nothing I feel I ought and could do. I hate the prospect of the summer, but I hate still more the fogs and snows of a British winter. Life ends best when one is strong and happy (Childe 1980: 3).

'Had he lived,' one obituarist mused, 'perhaps Australia would have benefited by a synthesis of Australian prehistory.' In death, the baton passed to the author of those words: John Mulvaney (1957: 94).

Mulvaney was teaching Australia's only university course in Australian and Pacific prehistory when Childe returned in 1957. The two men met briefly in Childe's final month, with Mulvaney somehow managing to convince him to speak to his students at the University of Melbourne, not once but twice (Childe n.d.b). Childe

favoured Mulvaney's company over that of his socialist hosts in Melbourne. He was glad to find someone with whom he could *talk prehistory*, and he offered 'welcome encouragement' when Mulvaney showed him the finds from the first season at Fromm's Landing (Childe n.d.a; Mulvaney 1990b: 31). Their time together was short, but it left an impression. As Childe wrote to Peter Gathercole on 7 October 1957:

> There is an urgent need out here for someone with up to date techniques and notions to make a serious study of South Pacific archaeology. There is much material here some of it rapidly deteriorating but Mulvaney is the only man with first class techniques to tackle it seriously (cited in Murray 1992: 4).

Both men shared the sense that Australian history was about to undergo a radical transformation.

THE 'NEW MAN'

John Mulvaney was born in the year *The Dawn* first hit the shelves, 1925. He grew up in small towns in Gippsland and the Mallee, wherever his father, a teacher and former Catholic seminarian from Ireland, was posted. It was a 'contented but isolated existence' (Mulvaney 2011: 13). He sought escape in historical novels, explorers' journals and boys' weeklies, and eventually in the war brewing half a world away. In 1943, in the week following his eighteenth birthday, and after a 'soul destroying' two years as a student teacher, Mulvaney received a call up to the Air Training Corps (Mulvaney 2011: 20).

The war changed Mulvaney. He joined the RAAF a sheltered country lad and returned two years later an adult: mature, determined and alert to his passions. It was not the violence and brutality of the war that influenced him so deeply – the conflict was over before he was needed – it was his time spent in England: a land of cathedrals, castles and megaliths (Griffiths 2016: 61–73). 'My wartime-as-tourist experiences,' Mulvaney recalled, 'immersed me in a romantic historical mist' (Mulvaney 2011: 40).

On his return to Australia, with the aid of the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme, Mulvaney enrolled in History at the University of Melbourne, specialising in Ancient World themes. He was enchanted by the 'majestic' performances of Kathleen Fitzpatrick in British history and Manning Clark's 'breathless' lectures in Australian history, under whose spell 'even banal material sounded profound' (Mulvaney 2002). He was especially intrigued by the mention, however cursory, of Aboriginal people in Clark's continental narrative. But it was John O'Brien's deep and subtle teachings on Roman Britain that gave him 'a realization of the nature of historical method, and a sense of active participation in its study' (Mulvaney 1966: 330). The exciting intellectual environment in History at the University of Melbourne, under the charismatic head of school Max Crawford, played a lasting role in shaping Mulvaney's scholarship (Inglis 1996). Although much is made of Mulvaney's time at Cambridge, Isabel McBryde (1986: 17) stresses that the influence of the Melbourne History department 'must not be discounted, as it was then a centre of vigorous and rigorous historical research and teaching.'

By 1950 Mulvaney knew he wanted to be an archaeologist, and he was becoming increasingly curious about the prospect of doing *Australian* archaeology. He had experienced a few 'so-called' archaeological excavations at the University of Melbourne, which consisted of combing the surface of Phillip Island, 'randomly picking up artefacts' and presenting them to the instigator of the expedition, Leonard Adam, to adjudicate their worth (Mulvaney 2011: 53–54). He enjoyed this 'daytime indiscipline', but it was O'Brien's 'unadulterated scholarship' on Roman Britain that stirred his archaeological imagination. In 1951 he won a travelling research scholarship and pursued archaeology at Cambridge University under Grahame Clark, Glyn Daniel and Charles McBurney. Clark's concern for writing *world* prehistory made Cambridge especially attractive (Mulvaney 2010: 29). His desire to fill in the gaps of global knowledge – to gain an outline of the diverse 'cultural endowment of mankind' – led him to encourage and facilitate research abroad and to equip his students with the archaeological expertise necessary to pioneer a new field (Clark 1961: 260). Mulvaney learnt the tradecraft of archaeology on McBurney's excavations in Libya and throughout Britain and Europe, and it was with the Cambridge model of field archaeology impressed firmly on his mind that he returned to Australia in 1953, eager to apply his newly acquired skills to the Australian continent (Figure 1).

His fellow Cambridge graduate, Jack Golson, who established the modern field of New Zealand archaeology in 1954, later reflected on the 'striking similarity of approach we took in our separate situations' (Golson 1986: 4). Both scholars followed similar trajectories in the 1950s before coming together in 1965 to help shape the Research School of Pacific Studies at The Australian National University (Gathercole 1993; Groube 1993). Indeed, Clark initially tried to secure what became Golson's position in Auckland for Mulvaney; he declined because he had already arranged a lectureship at the University of Melbourne (Mulvaney 2011: 90). 'In both countries,' Golson wrote in 1986, 'we were faced with a situation where there were few well authenticated archaeological data in the terms we understood, and a fair ignorance of the methods required to get them' (Golson 1986: 3). In New Zealand, Golson used his fieldwork campaigns to promote high excavation standards and to excite students about the possibilities of New Zealand and Pacific archaeology. Within a year of his arrival, he had helped found the New Zealand Archaeological Association and reviewed the possibilities for dating New Zealand's human past (Golson 1955a, 1955b,

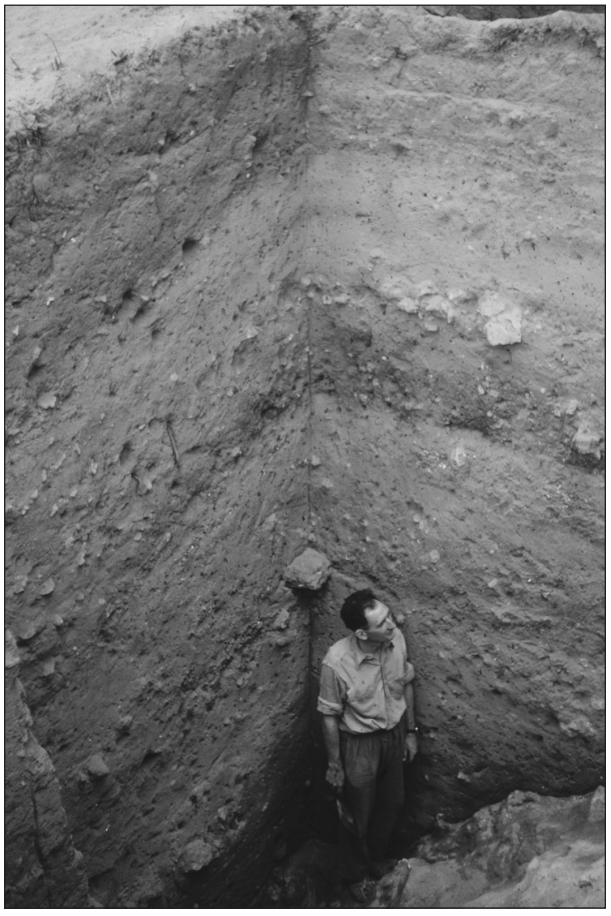

Figure 1. John Mulvaney at Fromm's Landing, South Australia, 1958 (Dermot Casey, National Library of Australia PIC P11128/10).

2004). By the end of the decade, he had published a theory-oriented survey of New Zealand prehistory (Golson 1959) and helped recruit 'another renegade historian from Cambridge', Peter Gathercole, to the University of Otago in 1958 (Golson 1986: 4). Like Mulvaney, he approached his archaeological work from a historical framework, whilst highlighting, in the vein of Clark, the value of interdisciplinary expertise (Golson 1956; Mulvaney & Golson 1971).

'I was slower off the mark,' Mulvaney (2010: 32) later wrote. In 1959 he recommended Golson be appointed to help establish what eventually became the Department of Prehistory in the Research School of Pacific Studies at The Australian National University (Mulvaney 1993). Golson accepted the position in 1961 and embarked on a regional study of Australia, Melanesia and the Pacific (Ucko 1993). He based the Australian component of his research development plan on the priorities outlined in Mulvaney's 1961 overview, while he focused on his interests in New Guinea (Golson n.d.; Mulvaney 1961). 'All the main cultural traditions that initiated in Australian and Melanesian prehistory,' he argued in the research development plan he submitted to AIAS in 1962, 'are likely to be represented in the New Guinea archaeological record' (Golson n.d.: 2). When Mulvaney joined him at the Research School of Pacific Studies in 1965 – on Golson's encouragement – they divided the region between them, with Mulvaney leading and supervising much of the research in Australia and Golson managing archaeological investigations in the South Pacific and New Guinea.

Mulvaney's interest in the Aboriginal history of Australia grew on his return from Cambridge. He read deeply on the topic throughout the 1950s and was shocked to find that the only significant archaeological work on the continent had been conducted by three museum curators – Norman Tindale, Frederick McCarthy and Edmund Gill – none of whom had any formal training (Mulvaney 1961). Otherwise, it seemed, the study of Aboriginal Australia was the domain of stone tool collectors – amateur scientists and humanists like Adam who confounded Aboriginal culture with the stone artefacts they left behind. As historian Tom Griffiths (1996) argues, stone tools defined – and confined – Indigenous Australia in the mid-twentieth century. He writes of collection as a form of hunting, with stone tool enthusiasts scouring 'collecting grounds' in search of their prey and triumphantly displaying their 'pickings' in home 'cabinets of curiosities' (Griffiths 1996: 19–20). Aboriginal people, though regarded as 'primitive', were considered to be relatively recent arrivals, so collection was restricted to surface artefacts. The prevailing assumption remained, as famously expressed by Robert Pulleine (1928: 310), 'that excavation would be in vain as everything points to the conclusion that [Indigenous Australians] were an unchanging people, living in an unchanging environment.' In the 'stone gossip' of the 1950s, collectors began to refer to Mulvaney, with his new techniques and interest in stratified sites, as 'the new man' (Griffiths 1996: 89).

Mulvaney published a review of the existing literature in a seminal two-part article in *Historical Studies*, 'The Australian Aborigines 1606–1929: Opinion and Fieldwork' (1958), which ranged from the observations of seventeenth-century Dutch voyagers through to the work of early twentieth-century anthropologists. Historian Greg Dening, one of Mulvaney's field assistants from the 1958 season at Fromm's Landing, described the articles as 'being about the marginal space between prehistory and history', or, as he later named it, 'the ethnographic moment': 'that moment in which confrontation with otherness leads to depiction not only of the other but of self' (Dening 1996: 88). For Mulvaney, however, there was another purpose to his historical review: he was sifting through the archives in search of sediment in which to sink his trowel. Where better to apply new field techniques than a site with established archaeological potential? He hoped to find a site that could yield long sequences and a wide range of cultural and biological materials (McBryde 1986: 17; Mulvaney n.d.b). He found what he was looking for at Devon Downs and Tartanga on the Murray River.

In a pioneering archaeological excavation conducted in 1929 Herbert Hale and Norman Tindale of the South Australian Museum had uncovered Aboriginal artefacts twenty feet below the surface at Devon Downs and the nearby island of Tartanga. Their report on the excavation documented rich layers of cultural and environmental change on the river bank at both sites, and the depth intimated a substantial antiquity (Hale & Tindale 1930). Perhaps this was another dawn for Australian archaeology? Mulvaney certainly believed so, describing Hale and Tindale as 'the founding fathers of Aboriginal prehistory' (Mulvaney 1961: 22). It was the first stratigraphic excavation on the continent. Australian naturalist Charles Barrett was one of the few that enthused about the finds at Devon Downs and Tartanga. 'This is the opening chapter of the Romance of Excavation in Australia,' he declared in the *Herald*, 'It should stimulate research and may lead to a series of expeditions [in] the quest of prehistoric man in our country' (Barrett 1930). Yet, with the exception of the work done by Frederick McCarthy of the Australian Museum at Lapstone Creek (McCarthy 1948) and in Arnhem Land (McCarthy & Setzler 1960), 'the quest for prehistoric man' stalled. The results of these early stratified excavations were easily forgotten or ignored. Surface collecting prevailed.

It is worth probing the assumptions of these pioneering curators-turned-excavators. Tindale believed that the Devon Downs excavation 'directly contradicted' the contemporary consensus 'that no cultural changes were evident, and that the residence of the Australian Aborigines had not extended far enough back to have affected the ecology of the land' (Tindale 1982: 93). But despite the emphasis he placed on cultural change in Aboriginal society, his views remained tangled in the same racial thinking of the collectors. He used the artefacts from Devon Downs to help devise a five-stage cultural sequence for Aboriginal Australia, in which each 'culture' (recognisable by artefact-types) was of a different racial origin, and in which the succession of 'cultures' – or cultural change – was due to the arrival of the next ethnic group (Tindale 1957). In other words, Tindale's cultural sequence – like McCarthy's similar scheme – still considered Aboriginal culture to be essentially static; but instead of one static 'culture', he proposed a series of static 'cultures', with change coming only from the succession or intermixture of these cultures. It was a cultural perspective that remained embedded in the prevailing evolutionary framework. Mulvaney, on the other hand, adopted an historical approach. He believed cultural change to be the result of the diffusion of ideas and local adaptations, not racial characteristics. Equipped with the new tool of radiocarbon dating, he hoped to find a site that would help clarify these differences (Mulvaney 1960).

In early 1955, a chance encounter with the amateur anthropologist Charles Mountford brought Mulvaney news of a promising rock shelter only ten kilometres from Devon Downs, with a flat, sandy floor beneath tall limestone cliffs. It was known as Fromm's Landing, after the European landholders, the Fromms, who once used the river bank as a port for the local paddle steamer (Figure 2). Although Mountford had combed the surface of the site for artefacts in 1951 and geographer Archibald Grenfell Price had led a student 'dig' in one of the shelters in 1952, the deposit remained largely intact (Mulvaney 2000; Price 1952). Mulvaney visited Fromm's Landing at the earliest opportunity and was struck by the similarities it shared with Haua Fteah in Libya, where he had learnt the tradecraft of archaeology from McBurney. The site presented a rare opportunity: he relished the possibility of comparing his archaeological findings with Hale and Tindale's 1929 excavation. In the early days of 1956, with piecemeal equipment and a motley crew of field assistants, Mulvaney bundled himself into a friend's overcrowded car and drove overland from Melbourne to the site of Fromm's Landing (Mulvaney 2000).

THE EXCAVATION OF FROMM'S LANDING

Just shy of his thirtieth birthday, Mulvaney found himself in 'a daunting and lonely position' at Fromm's Landing in 1956 (Mulvaney 2011: 96). The sole university trained prehistoric archaeologist in the country, with few funds, little field experience, and very few people to consult for advice, he faced challenges every way he went. He understood the importance of uncovering the environmental story of the river banks, not just the cultural materials, so he tried to persuade an earth scientist and specialists in shell, bone and pollen to join him. He was rebuffed by all but botanist and pollen analyst, Sue Duigan, who had been a fellow student at Cambridge. As for field assistants, he recruited an eclectic team of historians, classicists, scientists and adventurers – five women, nine men – most of whom were affiliated with the History and English departments at the University of Melbourne, where he taught Greek and Roman history. The team included Dermot Casey, a skilled photographer and surveyor who had excavated with Mortimer Wheeler on sites in Britain, Vivienne Rae-Ellis, who went on to write the controversial 1976 book *Trucanini: Queen or Traitor?*, and the historians Geoffrey Blainey and Ray Ericksen (Mulvaney n.d.a). Mulvaney's wife, Jean, was one of the few members of the field team who had any personal experience of Aboriginal culture: before marriage she had spent time in the Northern Territory with Aboriginal people, shooting crocodiles from a paperbark raft on the Daly River and hunting buffalo from horseback (Mulvaney 2011: 56).

In 1956 there was no legislation in place that defined the legal status and ownership of artefacts once excavated, no protocols for arranging land access, and very few specialist labs to test samples. Mulvaney even faced difficulties publishing the results of his excavation – there were so few journals interested in Australian material. He jumped

Figure 2. Fromm's Landing, South Australia, 1956 (John Mulvaney, National Library of Australia PIC P11128/2).

these hurdles one at a time. He was granted £200 from Max Crawford, who was an important champion of his 'unorthodox' archaeological activities. He borrowed cars from friends and charged his field assistants ten shillings for every day on site for their keep (Mulvaney 1960: 83–4). He arranged for all excavated materials to go to the South Australian Museum (Mulvaney n.d.c). He also formed a relationship with the European landholders in order to access the site. It never occurred to him to seek permission from the Traditional Owners of the land – after all, the Fromms had not encountered any Aboriginal people in the lower Murray since they arrived in 1906 (Mulvaney n.d.a). As Mulvaney reflected in 2010, 'I was imbued with the European concept of a dead-and-gone past, quite unaware of the vibrant [contemporary] Aboriginal society' (Mulvaney 2010: 32).

The modern era of archaeological investigation in Australia began on Friday 13 January 1956. It was an inauspicious start, with Mulvaney recording in his field journal long delays due to 'Instruction in trowelling, sieving and sorting' (Mulvaney n.d.a). The slow progress was frustrating, but necessary. Mulvaney insisted on teaching 'Cambridge' excavation methods and he was dismayed on the third day of the dig when an 'unskilled excavator' found a large grinding stone and removed it from position (Mulvaney n.d.a). The field team camped on the top of the colourful eroded limestone cliffs, each day clambering down to the shelter below on a track cut into the cliff. A grid was laid down over the shelter, and two or three 'excavators' worked slowly on one square at a time, purposefully scraping the sand with their trowels. A little distance away, and further along the production line, the sievers tipped buckets of earth through a quarter-inch steel mesh, shaking the dust out and squatting over the residue, separating bones from stones, shell from charcoal. All finds were recorded according to their location and then packed in white paper bags and labelled. At calculated intervals, Mulvaney would halt proceedings to collect a radiocarbon sample, using a silver spoon to avoid contamination (Mulvaney n.d.a). At night they returned, tired and dirty, to a fire of chopped Mallee roots, a typically unexciting meal, and the latest chapter of Howard Spring's novel *Fame is the Spur*, which Blainey read aloud in serial form (Mulvaney 2011: 99).

They had frequent visitors in that first field season. On 23 January 1956, Tindale came to the site. He stayed for three days, helping excavate during the day and at night sharing his views on the Devon Downs site and his proposed model of cultural succession in Australia. Mulvaney listened attentively, but cautiously (Mulvaney n.d.a). Since his return to Australia in late 1953, he had been navigating challenging disciplinary terrain. As the sole university trained archaeologist working on Australia, his peers

became the handful of Museum ethnologists interested in Australian prehistory, and the notorious stone tool collectors. Mulvaney was often as dismayed by practices of the so-called 'professionals' as he was by the amateur enthusiasts. One curator 'sieved' his sites by shovelling excavated material onto the metal mesh of a bedstead; another discarded everything except 'finished' stone tools, ignoring food debris, shells and 'waste flakes' (White 1967b). Many of the stone tool collectors considered themselves 'gatekeepers' of Aboriginal sites, refusing to disclose a site's location until they had plundered its contents (Griffiths 1996). But since these were the individuals who claimed possession of Aboriginal sites, Mulvaney actively worked with them, seeking to learn what he could while educating them about new techniques. He tried to disrupt the 'finders-keepers' mentality of the collectors and drew their attention to the science of stratigraphy. He paid tribute to the more rigorous of his predecessors, and although he disagreed with much of what McCarthy and Tindale had done, he was a friend to both, and acted as a broker in their professional rivalry (Mulvaney n.d.d). Tindale left Fromm's Landing in 1956 feeling impressed by the 'keenness and attention to detail' of the field team. 'The equipment they are using is new and good and several ideas on excavation aids which they have put into practice should be incorporated into any new equipment we may obtain ourselves,' he reported to the South Australian Museum (cited in Mulvaney 2000: 4). He also offered plenty of advice, much of which Mulvaney later 'decided against' (Mulvaney n.d.a).

It took four weeks for them to reach bedrock. In the final days, Mulvaney stood at the base of the five-metre pit and drew the stratigraphy of the finely layered sand surrounding him on three sides: an archive of cultural and environmental change. After the relentless 'century heat' of the last four weeks, he mused that perhaps the site had been used 'as a shelter from sun, rather than from rain' (Mulvaney n.d.a). Looking at the shells scattered in the lowest layers, he wondered whether the site marked a 'former shoreline?' Sue Duigan tried to collect pollen samples from the trench wall – to no avail – while others recorded the art and engravings on the rockshelter. In late 1956 the biggest flood in recorded history inundated the lower Murray, bringing water to the edge of the trench and causing Mulvaney to postpone the next field season. But he returned in 1958, and again in 1960 and 1963, drawing field assistants from the nearby University of Adelaide and the Royal Society of South Australia, as well as the University of Melbourne (Mulvaney *et al.* 1964). Geomorphologists Rowley Twidale and G.H. Lawton, who co-authored the 1964 report on Fromm's Landing with Mulvaney, were instrumental in establishing the connection with the University of Adelaide and helping to turn the site into an archaeological training ground.

Like most archaeological sites, the story of Fromm's Landing emerged slowly, in the aftermath of the dig, through the laborious processes of counting, categorising, and testing. It is not the one exciting find that defines a site, but the endless hours of routine recording. Since there was no radiocarbon laboratory functioning in Australia at the time to date the site, Mulvaney drew on the family connections of a member of his field team, Dermot Casey. It is a little known fact that Minister for External Affairs R.G. Casey (Dermot's brother) helped obtain the first Australian dates from a stratified Aboriginal site. When he next flew to New York for a meeting at the United Nations, he travelled with four radiocarbon samples from Fromm's Landing in his luggage (Mulvaney 2011: 101). These precious samples were passed on to a Harvard archaeologist, Hallam Movius, who sent the results back in 1959, proving the site had been occupied since the time of the Pyramids, almost 5000 years ago (Mulvaney 1960).

The Fromm's Landing excavations yielded a jaw of a Tasmanian devil and a tooth of a Tasmania tiger, both of which must have been living on mainland Australia between 3900 and 3300 years ago. The skeleton of a dingo – an introduced species – was found at the 3000 year level at Fromm's Landing, leading Mulvaney to wonder if the arrival of the dingo caused the mainland extinction of these native carnivores. In later seasons, Twidale uncovered evidence of an enormous flood around 3000 years ago, in which the river swelled a metre higher than the record-breaking 1956 flood (Mulvaney *et al.* 1964). 'After I delivered a public lecture disclosing this evidence,' Mulvaney later wrote, 'I was deluged (for that is the appropriate term) by people asking if this was Noah's Flood!' (Mulvaney 2011: 114).

Mulvaney's simple culture-historical questions about the deposit were fundamental at that stage of the field and provided the foundations for more specialised interpretation (Roberts *et al.* 1999). The methods pioneered at Fromm's Landing (Mulvaney 1960; Mulvaney *et al.* 1964), which combined environmental data about river levels with archaeological information, history and ethnography, have become standard research methodology in Australian archaeology. Mulvaney drew upon documents and material evidence to reconstruct a picture of how people lived on the Murray River over the past five thousand years, what they ate, what technology they used, and how they adapted to the changing environment. It marked the dawn of a new phase of archaeological research in Australia: 'an approach,' McBryde (1964: 5) wrote, 'based on controlled stratigraphic excavation and systematic survey work, rather than random digging and collecting.' Australian archaeology was beginning to emerge, in Mulvaney's words, 'from the byways of antiquarianism and the haphazard fringes of lunacy, into a vigorous and exciting discipline' (Mulvaney 1971: 229).

CONCLUSION

The next major excavations Mulvaney led were in the

Carnarvon Ranges in western Queensland in the early 1960s, almost two thousand kilometres north of Fromm's Landing, but part of the same great river system (Mulvaney & Joyce 1965). At Kenniff Cave he secured the first Pleistocene date for human occupation in Australia: 12,600 years BP (Callow n.d.). By the end of the decade, as other archaeologists applied their skills to the Australian continent, that date had climbed to 20,000, then 30,000 years BP (White 1967a; Bowler *et al.* 1970). It was also on his first fieldtrip to Queensland, in 1960, that Mulvaney finally (knowingly) met an Aboriginal person: an incidental encounter in a pub in the remote Queensland town of Mitchell. He did not work closely with Aboriginal people until three years later at Yirrkala in Arnhem Land on an archaeological survey of the Northern Territory with Golson.

In 1965, Mulvaney joined Golson in the Research School of Pacific Studies at The Australian National University and found himself for the first time surrounded by archaeologists and scientists, such as geologists, geomorphologists and biologists, not just historians and anthropologists. In this environment he could finally write *The Prehistory of Australia*. Within a decade of declaring Australia to be the 'dark continent of prehistory' (Mulvaney 1961: 56), he was able to bring together its first grand narrative. 'In few areas of the world,' Gould (1973: 3) reflected, 'have new problems and broad syntheses emerged so rapidly.'

Like Childe, Mulvaney's great contributions to archaeology were as a synthesiser and provocateur. His breakthroughs came with the pen as much as the trowel. 'For each such scientific paper,' Golson reflected in a volume of *Archaeology in Oceania* published in Mulvaney's honour,

> there has been another directed to a more general audience. John Mulvaney has always seen his professional work in this wider context, increasingly so as the outside world has thrown up challenges to the humanist ideas which have always informed his studies (Golson 1986: 11).

When *The Prehistory of Australia* was published in 1969, it revolutionised the conventional narrative of Australian history. It painted a rich picture of Aboriginal occupation in Australia prior to European settlement and asserted in its triumphant opening sentence that: 'The discoverers, explorers and colonists of the three million square miles which are Australia, were its Aborigines' (Mulvaney 1969: 12). Historian Bain Attwood argues that Mulvaney further displaced Europeans in his narrative by considering the 'proto-history' of earlier 'non-European landfalls on the continent', such as the Macassans who visited and traded with Aboriginal societies along Australia's northern coast for generations (Attwood 1996: 99). Mulvaney's work opened the door to a new field of scholarship on Indigenous history and the deep past (Blainey 1975; Attwood 2012). In the opening to his bestselling history *Triumph of the Nomads*, Blainey acknowledges the dramatic shift in perspective Mulvaney inspired:

> I used to begin a course on Australian economic history in the accepted manner with the European explorations of the eighteenth century until one day the archaeologist, John Mulvaney, enquired what I said about the earlier 99 per cent of time embraced by the human history of Australia (Blainey 1975: viii).

In *The Dawn of European Civilisation*, Childe (1925: xiii) described the history of Europe as 'a peculiar and individual manifestation of the human spirit'. But Europe, he stressed, was not the whole story. In his search for 'the material and spiritual context of modern life' he argued that 'Europeans share with the Chinese and even the Aborigines of Australia a part of this cultural heritage'. Mulvaney helped trigger a wave of research that has moved Aboriginal Australia from an afterthought in the history of humanity to near the centre of a global story. After a decade pioneering field archaeology in Australia, Mulvaney shifted his attention to the institutions and legislation that had formed around him. He became a champion of cultural heritage, and sought to protect and preserve sites like Fromm's Landing and Kenniff Cave. He brought rigorous excavation techniques, scientific objectivity and an historical framework to a field that was languishing in the hands of amateurs and at the mercy of archaic evolutionary assumptions. Like Childe, he sought to understand the human drama of the deep past, using 'imaginative insight' to bring past societies to life, and drawing their stories together into a powerful – and empowering – continental narrative. 'I think in my career I've regarded that I'm a means of getting things organised,' Mulvaney reflected in his eighties. 'But once they are organised, I leave things to the experts, not being an expert myself' (Mulvaney 2012). It was this earnest, practical style that defined the excavation of Fromm's Landing and allowed him to lay the foundations of the modern field of Australian archaeology. It was his role, he believed, 'to emphasise the dignity and individuality of the society which colonised the sixth continent, to document its diversity through time and across regions, and to preserve its monuments through time' (Mulvaney 1979: 218).

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'L'Aube' de l'archéologie australienne: John Mulvaney à Fromm's Landing.

RÉSUMÉ :

Quand Vere Gordon Childe revint en Australie en 1957, après trente-six ans à l'étranger, il se désespéra du manque de recherche sur le passé indigène du pays. L'archéologie australienne était alors le domaine de conservateurs et de collectionneurs d'outils lithiques dont le travail était ancré dans des hypothèses évolutionnistes et des pratiques douteuses. Dans les dernières semaines de sa vie, le 16 septembre 1957, Childe rencontra l'historien et archéologue John Mulvaney et se lia d'amitié avec celui-ci. Cet article s'appuie sur leurs brèves entrevues pour offrir une réflexion sur l'état de l'archéologie en Australie dans les années 1950, immédiatement avant le boom de la recherche archéologique des années 1960 qui révolutionna le récit conventionnel de l'histoire australienne. Grâce à une lecture attentive des premières années de la carrière de Mulvaney, il fait valoir que les fouilles de Fromm's Landing de 1956 à 1963 servirent de catalyseur à la recherche et marquèrent l'aube d'une ère nouvelle pour l'archéologie indigène australienne. La fouille impliqua des femmes et des hommes, des historiens et des archéologues, des enseignants et des étudiants. Elle produit aussi les objets archéologiques qui vinrent étayer l'article phare de Mulvaney en 1966, dans lequel il passa en revue les recherches existantes et posa les questions majeures qui allaient dominer la prochaine décennie de recherche archéologique au niveau continental.