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Graham Connah
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THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF AUSTRALIA'S HISTORY

GRAHAM CONNAH

University of New England

Drawings by Douglas Hobbs



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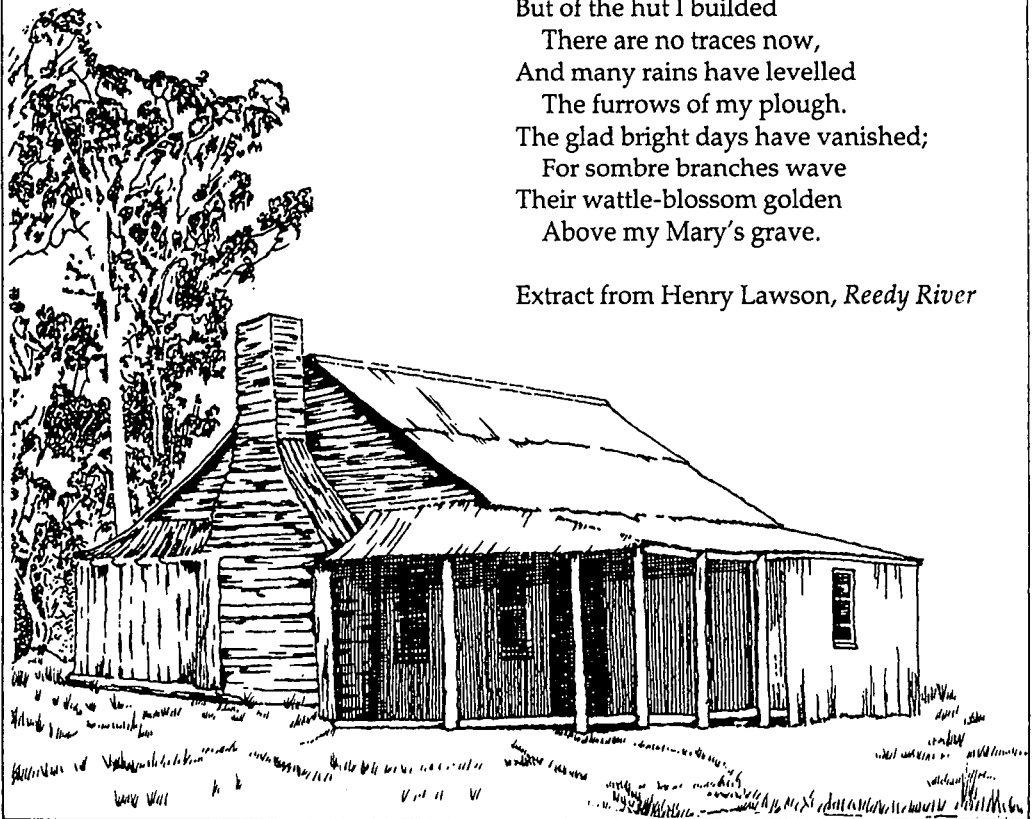
To Alan, Sarah and Ian

Ten miles from Ryan's Crossing
And five below the peak,
I built a little homestead
On the banks of Rocky Creek;
I cleared the land and fenced it
And ploughed the rich red loam;
And my first crop was golden
When I brought Mary home.

Now still down Reedy River
The grassy sheoaks sigh;
The waterholes still mirror
The pictures in the sky;
The golden sand is drifting
Across the rocky bars;
And over all for ever
Go sun and moon and stars.

But of the hut I buildied
There are no traces now,
And many rains have levelled
The furrows of my plough.
The glad bright days have vanished;
For sombre branches wave
Their wattle-blossom golden
Above my Mary's grave.

Extract from Henry Lawson, *Reedy River*



Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	xi
<i>Foreword by John Mulvaney</i>	xiii
<i>Preface</i>	xv
1 <i>'There are no traces now'</i> THE MATERIAL HERITAGE OF AUSTRALIAN HISTORY	1
2 <i>They came by sea</i> THE HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY OF PRECOLONIAL CONTACT	7
3 <i>The birth of a nation</i> SEEKING THE REMAINS OF EARLY SYDNEY	21
4 <i>It didn't always work</i> INVESTIGATING THE SITES OF FAILED SETTLEMENTS	37
5 <i>The convict contribution</i> VESTIGES OF THE PENAL SYSTEM	50
6 <i>'I built a little homestead'</i> EXTRACTING HISTORY FROM HOUSES	63
7 <i>'I cleared the land and fenced it'</i> READING THE RURAL LANDSCAPE	84
8 <i>'Out of the ground came wealth'</i> THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FOR MINING	105
9 <i>Made in Australia</i> INFORMATION FROM INDUSTRIAL RELICS	126
10 <i>'The glad bright days have vanished'</i> THE POTENTIAL OF AUSTRALIAN HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY	148
<i>Suggested activities</i>	159
<i>Suggested reading</i>	164
<i>Index</i>	169

Illustrations

2.1	Map of trepang-processing sites	8
2.2	Trepangers at Port Essington in 1845	9
2.3	Anuru Bay trepang site	10
2.4	Yaranya Island trepang site	12
2.5	Map of early shipwrecks in Australian waters	13
2.6	Wreck site of the <i>Batavia</i>	15
2.7	Sandstone portico from the <i>Batavia</i>	16
2.8	Elephant tusk from the <i>Vergulde Draeck</i>	17
2.9	Excavating the wreck of H.M.S. <i>Pandora</i>	18
2.10	Glass bottles from the <i>Pandora</i>	19
3.1	Map of Sydney 1802-1809	24
3.2	Map of the centre of modern Sydney	25
3.3	Plan of the Gateway Site, Sydney	26
3.4	Plan of First Government House, Sydney, in 1845	27
3.5	Plan of First Government House in 1789	28
3.6	Foundation plate from First Government House	29
3.7	Parramatta in the 1790s	31
3.8	Excavation of early buildings at Parramatta	32
3.9	Plan of traces of early buildings at Parramatta	33
4.1	Map of failed early settlements in Australia	38
4.2	The Risdon Cove settlement	39
4.3	Bone carving from Risdon Cove	40
4.4	Map showing Sullivans Bay and Western Port settlements	42
4.5	The Fort Dundas settlement	44
4.6	The Victoria settlement, Port Essington	46
4.7	The Reeves Point settlement, Kangaroo Island	48
5.1	The convict system	51
5.2	Ross Bridge, Tasmania	53
5.3	Storehouse in Braidwood district, N.S.W.	54
5.4	Brick barrel-drain at Parramatta	55
5.5	Convict gang in Sydney	56
5.6	Convict road station at Wisemans Ferry, N.S.W.	56
5.7	Norfolk Island New Jail	58
5.8	Map of Tasman and Forestier Peninsulas, Tasmania	60
5.9	The Commandants' House, Port Arthur, Tasmania	61
6.1	Map of building materials, New South Wales	65
6.2	Building techniques in stone and brick	66
6.3	Building techniques in wood	68
6.4	Model of slab cottage, pre-1857	69
6.5	Building techniques in earth	70
6.6	Pisé building, Arding, N.S.W.	71
6.7	Plan types of houses	73
6.8	(a) Houses: Georgian Primitive and Colonial Georgian	74
	(b) Houses: Gothic Revival and Italianate	74

(c) Houses: Boom Style and Queen Anne	75
(d) Houses: Californian Bungalow and Spanish Mission	75
(e) Houses: Waterfall Front and Austerity	76
6.9 Structural sequence, Commandants' House, Port Arthur, Tasmania	78
6.10 Excavations at Regentville, Penrith, N.S.W.	80
6.11 Plan of Regentville	81
6.12 Plan of O'Neil's house, White Range, N.T.	82
7.1 Agricultural land at Blanche Town, S.A.	86
7.2 Principal types of rural fences	89
7.3 'Lands' near Armidale, N.S.W.	92
7.4 The first stump-jump ploughs	95
7.5 Woolshed at Clayton Farm, Bordertown, S.A.	97
7.6 Woolshed at Tubbo Station, near Narrandera, N.S.W.	98
7.7 Gostwyck woolshed, near Uralla, N.S.W.	99
7.8 Mount Wood woolscour, Tibooburra, N.S.W.	101
8.1 Underground at Hillgrove mine, N.S.W., about 1895	106
8.2 Map of mining sites	108
8.3 Mining at Mount Browne, near Tibooburra, N.S.W.	110
8.4 North British Mine, Maldon, Victoria	112
8.5 Part of the Rocky River Goldfield, N.S.W.	113
8.6 Deserted mining town at Mount Cuthbert, Qld.	114
8.7 Alluvial goldmining near Walcha, N.S.W.	115
8.8 Sections of King's mine, Tottle, Qld.	117
8.9 Mount Beef, Uralla, N.S.W., tunnel as discovered	118
8.10 Inside the Mount Beef tunnel	119
8.11 Rock fall inside the Mount Beef tunnel	119
8.12 Pick-marks inside the Mount Beef tunnel	120
8.13 Inside a coal-mine near Ipswich, Qld.	121
8.14 Distribution of glass fragments, Imarlkba, N.T.	123
9.1 Tryworks excavation at Bathers Bay, W.A.	129
9.2 Artist's reconstruction of Bathers Bay whaling station	130
9.3 Section through Thorpe watermill, Tasmania	132
9.4 Boiler uncovered at McCrossin's Mill, Uralla, N.S.W.	134
9.5 Plan of ground floor, McCrossin's Mill	135
9.6 Castlemaine Brewery, Newcastle, N.S.W., in 1878	137
9.7 Castlemaine Brewery in 1988	137
9.8 Foster brick press, Glen Innes Brickworks, N.S.W.	138
9.9 Maker's plate, Glen Innes Brickworks	139
9.10 Loading limestone into a Wanneroo limekiln, W.A.	141
9.11 Waterwheel at Yallingup, W.A.	142
9.12 Wreck of a 'drogher', Nambucca River, N.S.W.	143
9.13 Engine house at Lithgow, N.S.W.	145
10.1 Unfinished railway line, near Guyra, N.S.W.	150
10.2 A cemetery survey	151
10.3 St Nicholas' Church, Saumarez Ponds, N.S.W.	152
10.4 World War I tank, Queensland Museum	153
10.5 Chinese bottle from northern Queensland	155

Foreword

More than sixty years ago, an English economic historian attempted to divert reluctant historians away from their documents into utilizing the material evidence available for enriching medieval history. 'It is the greatest error to suppose that history must needs be something written down', Eileen Power urged readers of her *Medieval people* in 1924, 'for it may just as well be something built up, and churches, houses, bridges, or amphitheatres can tell their story as plainly as print for those who have eyes to read.'

That is precisely the message of this timely book about the sources of Australian historical archaeology, written in popular terms for lay readers, but of particular relevance to historians or to prospective university students. Graham Connah succeeds in explaining the purpose of historical archaeology and in synthesizing discoveries during the past twenty years. Not attempting an exhaustive coverage of places or publications, he selects illuminating examples of sites, structures or objects. His philosophy is humanistic, so the people and their particular societies, rather than mere material relics, are the focus of attention.

The scope of historical archaeology in Australia is broad, for it includes shipwrecks ('maritime archaeology'), the investigation of past industries ('industrial archaeology', as it is termed in Britain), excavations on British frontier posts ('colonial archaeology', in the United States) and the traces of human activities in urban or rural landscapes ('landscape archaeology'). 'It is the business of the archaeologist . . . to extract information from things that were made by human beings in the past', Connah explains (p. 64). 'Surely it would be foolish to limit such studies merely to the remnants that have survived beneath the ground while ignoring complete structures that are still standing? Houses are artefacts . . . why confine oneself to broken or buried examples when there are complete ones around?'

His survey includes some of the grand places and structures, including bridges, and the excavated foundations of Australia's first important house, Governor Arthur Phillip's residence which was commenced in May 1788. Most of the book concerns more humble people, living or working in bush shacks, isolated settlements, convict barracks, or mines, brickworks and shearing sheds. It also examines the evidence from Dutch and British shipwrecks around the coast, and the beach encampments of Indonesian trepang fishermen, involved in Australia's oldest export industry.

Some Australian archaeologists and historians question the worth of historical archaeological data, or its merits as a discipline. Connah faces these doubts squarely. He poses the question, and answers affirmatively (p.105), 'What can the material evidence possibly tell us that we cannot learn more easily from the amazingly rich documentary sources of information that exist?' Mining history is a relevant case. Despite voluminous records, 'they are . . . notable for what they do not tell us. So remote or so small-scale were some mining operations that they never got into the written records at all' (p.106).

A reading of this book makes it obvious that historical archaeology offers more than a supplementary footnote to documentary records, or a source of pictorial illustration. A less satisfying inference is, however, that Australian practitioners have proved tardy in publishing detailed reports on their field investigations. Information about significant places therefore remains inaccessible. The quality of the flourishing *Australian Journal of Historical Archaeology* indicates, however, that much is being achieved.

It is worth reflecting that academic research and teaching of Australian prehistoric archaeology commenced only about thirty years ago, while systematic historical archaeology is of even more recent origin. This book indicates that much has been achieved. While all states now have protective legislation for Aboriginal sites and artefacts (although the will to implement these laws varies), however, many states ignore the protection of post-1788 places, structures or movable relics. This book should assist a better understanding of, and the need for, positive legislative action.

The pioneering mentality survives strongly in Australia. In the environment, woodchippers have succeeded ringbarkers as agents of progress, based upon criteria of present economic need. Private enterprise exploitation of single resources still produces fleeting settlements which soon become archaeological. The large Mary Kathleen uranium mining town in Queensland was established in the mid-1950s. It was abandoned some years ago, when all the buildings and structures were removed bodily. Today, its paved streets, tree plantings and building footings are as ghostly as any abandoned gold-mining era township.

Some introspection is desirable at this time of bicentennial retrospection. There surely is a logical contradiction inherent in those developers who see Australia as a 'new' society, yet who promote the demolition of buildings or townscapes because they are 'old' and uneconomic. This wholesale demolition for the sake of presumed economic progress, contrasts oddly with European cultural traditions. The patina of age in Europe is an economic asset, a source of community pride and a cultural benefit. In addition to legislation on historic places, therefore, Australia needs forms of economic diversification which consider the long-term future employment of the many, instead of the immediate enrichment of the few.

It must be inferred from this study, that the intelligent conservation of the past, informed by historical archaeological research, could assist both the cause of regional tourism and a greater community maturity in the perception of its built environment. Graham Connah correctly observes (p.109), that 'Sometimes imagination is more important to society than practicality'.

D.J. Mulvaney

Preface

The aim of this book is to provide an introduction to the archaeology of the last two centuries in Australia. An increasing number of people are interested in the material evidence for the European colonization of this continent, but historical archaeologists have been somewhat reluctant to explain to the general reading public how such evidence can be studied. Although there have been some notable exceptions, there is a general lack of introductory books on this subject. There seem to be two possible reasons for this situation. First, the idea of studying the archaeology of the recent past is very new, being virtually unknown in Australia prior to the late 1960s. Second, in recent years the most pressing need in Australian historical archaeology has been conservation, so that far more effort has gone into descriptive recording than into research publication. As a consequence of these two factors, we do not yet have a large body of published material for the synthesizing author to draw on. To some extent, therefore, it can be argued that any general book on this subject is premature at the present time. I do not fully believe this, but I would ask readers to regard this book as an 'essay', in the original sense of that word, as used by the sixteenth-century French writer, Montaigne. It is intended as a trial, a test, an attempt, meanings that the French word *essai* has retained. In a few years time it may be possible to write a more comprehensive and a more definitive account of Australian historical archaeology. Until that time comes we can only make progress by making the best attempt possible.

This book was written on the suggestion of Dr Robin Derricourt of Cambridge University Press, and I am grateful to him for his encouragement and help throughout its preparation. I am also grateful to the following, who provided helpful advice and information during the course of writing: Dr Michael Pearson of the Australian Heritage Commission, Canberra; Associate Professor Ian Jack of the Department of History, University of Sydney; Associate Professor Dennis Jeans of the Department of Geography, University of Sydney; and Dr Aedeon Cremin of the Department of History, University of Sydney. In addition, I would like to thank Professor John Mulvaney of the Australian National University, Canberra, for consenting to write the Foreword.

As with most books, there are many other people whose help has been essential. Douglas Hobbs of the Department of Archaeology and Palaeoanthropology, University of New England, prepared most of the line drawings, and Rudi Boskovic and Steve Clarke of the Department of Geography of the same university did the photography of those drawings. Graham Macdonald of Armidale drew the illustration on p. vii. Noelene Kachel and Di Watson, also of the University of New England, looked after the word processing of the text, and the Department of Photography at the same university solved a variety of photographic problems.

The line illustrations come from many different places, most of them having been redrawn specially for this book. Their sources are indicated in the individual captions,

usually in an abbreviated form that can be understood by examining the notes at the end of each chapter. Similarly, the photographs have a variety of origins, and acknowledgements will be found in the individual captions. I am most grateful to all the individuals and institutions who have supplied this illustration material, in some cases putting themselves to considerable inconvenience to be helpful. Without their goodwill, the book would have been very much the poorer.

Finally, this book was written whilst attempting to run a university department, meet my obligations to undergraduate and postgraduate students and cope with the multifarious other demands made on one's time in a modern university. It is a tribute to the forbearance of my colleagues and students that I was able to complete a book during such a busy period. It is also a tribute to the stoic patience of my family, to the younger members of which I have dedicated the result. To my wife Beryl I have merely promised that I will not write another book — for a little while.