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Section B: Review

Prehistory of Australia

John Mulvaney and Johan Kamminga

Published by Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1999, xii + 480 pp, pb, \$39.95

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Prehistory of Australia is the third edition of a book which originally appeared under John Mulvaney's sole authorship in 1969, and in a revised form in 1975. The book joins a growing number of syntheses of pre-European Aboriginal history based largely on archaeological and ethnographic data, including four editions of Josephine Flood's popular *Archaeology of the Dreamtime: The Story of Prehistoric Australia and its People* (1983, 1989, 1995, 1999), White and O'Connell's classic *A Prehistory of Australia, New Guinea and Sahul* (1982) and Harry Lourandos' recent *Continent of Hunter-Gatherers: New Perspectives in Australian Prehistory* (1997).

The book begins with a discussion of the political persuasion of the authors. Mulvaney's very public universalistic views on ownership of Indigenous cultural heritage are present throughout the book. For example, it is suggested that:

[t]he unconditional repatriation of remains hundreds of generations old raises conflicting issues for Aboriginal people, such as concepts of common humanity and the obligation this imposes, and also the needs of future indigenous generations to know their remote past (pp. 8-9, my emphasis).

I suggest that the main conflicting issues raised are not for Aboriginal people, but rather for archaeological practitioners such as Mulvaney (and Kamminga?) who do not

acknowledge Aboriginal control and ownership of cultural heritage. These issues and the emphasis on the apparent sanctity of science are recurring themes throughout the book (see pp. 8, 10, 158, 162, 356) cited mainly in relation to a 1995 dispute between the Tasmanian Aboriginal Land Council and some researchers from La Trobe University over control of excavated archaeological materials:

An unfortunate outcome to a significant archaeological project in southwestern Tasmania, when the law was used to recover prematurely archaeological materials under investigation, represents an incalculable cultural catastrophe, leaving both archaeologists and Aboriginal people the losers (p. 8).

Unfortunately, such comments only serve acrimonious debate, as Mulvaney and Kamminga fail to adequately detail the context of the events or the complexity of issues involved or cite any of the (now) large body of literature which might provide a more balanced view of the issues to the reader. Indeed, Mulvaney and Kamminga do not acknowledge that archaeologists from La Trobe continue to work actively with various Aboriginal groups in Tasmania.

Political issues aside, as one would expect in a popularist work, Mulvaney and Kamminga concentrate on the major themes that have dominated archaeological enquiry in Australia since the professionalisation of the discipline in the 1960s: the antiquity of Aboriginal

occupation of the continent; Aboriginal impact on the environment; megafaunal extinctions; and, the interpretation of changes in the Holocene archaeological record.

Chapter 2 provides a useful introduction to the diversity of Aboriginal archaeological site types commonly found in Australia. Over half of the following chapter ('Dating the Past') is devoted to a discussion of typological approaches to dating sites and assemblages which are largely irrelevant in contemporary Australian archaeological studies which are dominated by use of radiocarbon dating. Chapter 4 presents a discussion of environmental factors which may have influenced Aboriginal occupation of the continent. The following two chapters present 'the ethnographic present', focussing on language, material culture and trade. These introductory chapters establish an environmental and social context for the subsequent discussion of archaeological data.

Chapter 7 begins the conventional 'prehistory' of Australia with a discussion of initial colonisation routes, followed by a brief overview of early environments before focussing on the topical debate concerning megafaunal extinctions. Continental colonisation models are briefly discussed in Chapter 9, prefacing a series of cautionary tales on the Holy Grail of Australian archaeology – the search for the earliest archaeological site. Chapter 10 summarises evidence from physical (or biological) anthropology, although much of the discussion here is anachronistic and of little relevance to contemporary approaches to biological studies. Chapters 11-13 discuss aspects of Pleistocene (before 10,000 years ago) lifeways, with an overt focus on the well-known southwest Tasmanian and Willandra Lakes regions and a largely speculative and profoundly typological review of Pleistocene stone-working technologies.

The Holocene (the last 10,000 years) is introduced in Chapter 14 with a typological

review of 'stone tool innovations'. These last two chapters on stone artefacts are problematic in that they employ generally disused typological categories to describe stone artefacts which technological analyses of stone reduction sequences have generally shown to lack validity. The following chapter introduces explanations for change in the archaeological record of the last 10,000 years, but this sits somewhat uncomfortably between the summary of stone technology and a chapter on coastal occupation. Chapters 16-19 present regional summaries of Holocene archaeology under the headings of 'People of the Coast', 'Regional Challenges and Responses' (non-coastal regions); 'Island Settlement'; and, 'Tasmania'. In Chapter 18 Mulvaney and Kamminga suggest that island exploitation and settlement can not be considered in a pan-Australian context, but rather based on regional and local adaptations. Given this position, it is difficult to understand why island occupation is discussed in a separate chapter and not in Chapter 16, where regional coastal occupation sequences are summarised.

Perhaps not surprisingly for a book aimed at a general audience, three chapters (20-22) are devoted to the description and discussion of regional rock art provinces, but again the placement of these chapters towards the end of the book (including discussions of Pleistocene art) sits uncomfortably with the otherwise chronologically-structured order of the rest of the book. This is followed by a final chapter which is at odds with Mulvaney and Kamminga's own definition of 'prehistory' as 'before records were written down' (p. xvii), with an account of the Macassan trepang industry and fleeting European contact which draws chiefly on the historical record. At the end of this chapter, a seven line conclusion provides an unsatisfying ending to the work. The book includes a short glossary of terms and a useful index.

Many chapters are usefully prefaced by a general discussion of climate and environment for the period under review, which helps

contextualise the archaeological data and highlight the significant changes in the Australian landscape in the period of human occupation which may not be common knowledge to the general reader.

In the preface the authors note that the majority of the book was written between 1995 and 1997. This is clear in the bibliography, with very little post-1995 work appearing. While the thematically-arranged endnotes are a useful resource in their own right, the absence of in-text citations or footnotes limits the utility of the book for research and, frustratingly, the themes chosen to structure the endnotes often do not match section headings in the text. In addition, several publications referred to directly in the text do not appear in the bibliography.

Although the book is generally well-illustrated, drawing heavily on Mulvaney's personal

collection, I found myself wishing for more regular maps to provide some geographical signposts. Additionally, key sites discussed in the text, such as Ngarrabullgan Cave in Cape York Peninsula, are not illustrated in maps (see pp. 157, 225).

Inevitably, the accelerating pace of archaeological research in Australia means that texts such as *Prehistory of Australia* have a limited currency. Although *Prehistory of Australia* provides an accessible overview of the major themes which dominate contemporary Indigenous Australian archaeology, other works such as Flood's *Archaeology of the Dreamtime* offer a generally more accurate, if more superficial, reflection of the state of archaeological knowledge about Aboriginal pasts. That said, *Prehistory of Australia* fulfils an important role in communicating the results of archaeological research to the general public. □

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