

## Frederick David McCarthy: an Appreciation

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**ABSTRACT.** During his long scholarly career, Frederick David McCarthy published more than 300 articles, monographs and books. Most people know McCarthy as a scholar of Aboriginal studies, but few know the man who began his career as a 14 year old boy as a library assistant, and later became one of the most influential scholars in the study of Aboriginal prehistory and anthropology.

KHAN, K., 1993. Frederick David McCarthy: an appreciation. Records of the Australian Museum, Supplement 17: 1-5.

Frederick David McCarthy was born one of identical twins on 13 August, 1906 in Crystal Street, Petersham, NSW. His father came from Liverpool, England, and through his Glasgow-born mother he traces his ancestry to the Isle of Man. The McCarthy family soon moved from Petersham to 29 North Avenue, Leichhardt, NSW, where he lived with his family until he married Elsie Bramell in 1940.

At the age of 14 the young Master F. McCarthy was told by his next door neighbour, Mr Lucas, a carpenter at the Australian Museum, that a vacancy existed in the Museum Library. McCarthy promptly applied for the position (Australian Museum Archive M15/1920). Charles Hedley, Acting Curator following the death of Robert Etheridge Jr, replied on 23 March 1920 offering him the position of Library Clerk (Australian Museum Archive M15/1920). The Museum Staff Records Book shows that F.D. McCarthy signed on to work in the Library on 23 March 1920 (Fig.1). In 1930 he transferred to the Department of Birds and Reptiles for 18 months, adding the skills of taxonomy to those of cataloguing he had learned in the Library during the previous ten years. This fundamental training in organising information has

remained with him throughout his career.

In 1932 he was offered the position of Assistant Curator of Ethnology to W.W. Thorpe, who had been appointed Ethnologist in 1906. Thorpe had little education and no formal training in Ethnology or anything else. McCarthy remembers Thorpe as being a gentle but stubborn man who refused to catalogue anything, claiming he could recognise any object on sight and knew where everything was kept. Fred tried to change this, but was not prepared to argue as Thorpe was not only an older man, but also a weight-lifter. McCarthy's period as assistant to Thorpe was limited in time and scope, as Thorpe died a few months after McCarthy's appointment. Thorpe's sudden demise left the newly-appointed McCarthy with an enormous backlog of uncatalogued objects to put into some sort of systematic order.

Fred's sporting career is probably not as well known as his academic pursuits. In 1932, as a member of the Leichhardt Rowing Club, he rowed bow in the State Lightweight Fours Rowing Championship on the old Greater Public Schools' course. Nine crews competed and as McCarthy's boat, leading by a length, swept past Cabarita wharf, a water-police launch came out from Hen

and Chicken Bay and hit the boat. The swamped crew demanded a re-run of the race, but lost the appeal. It is still a sore point with Fred, so close to winning the championship and losing through no fault of one's own!

His sporting interests extended over a wide field. He was a keen soccer player and still has a great affection for the game. He was a member of the Marrickville Lawn Tennis Club, the Western Suburbs Athletics Club and the Leichhardt Swimming Club. He played golf for 12 years, and in later life was a keen lawn bowler, winning ten championships. He was also a keen bushwalker, with many trips in the Burrigorang Valley before the dam was built, and in the Blue Mountains. This love of exercise has been a life-long dedication, and even today, at the age of 86 years, he regularly walks three miles daily around his leafy Northbridge streets.

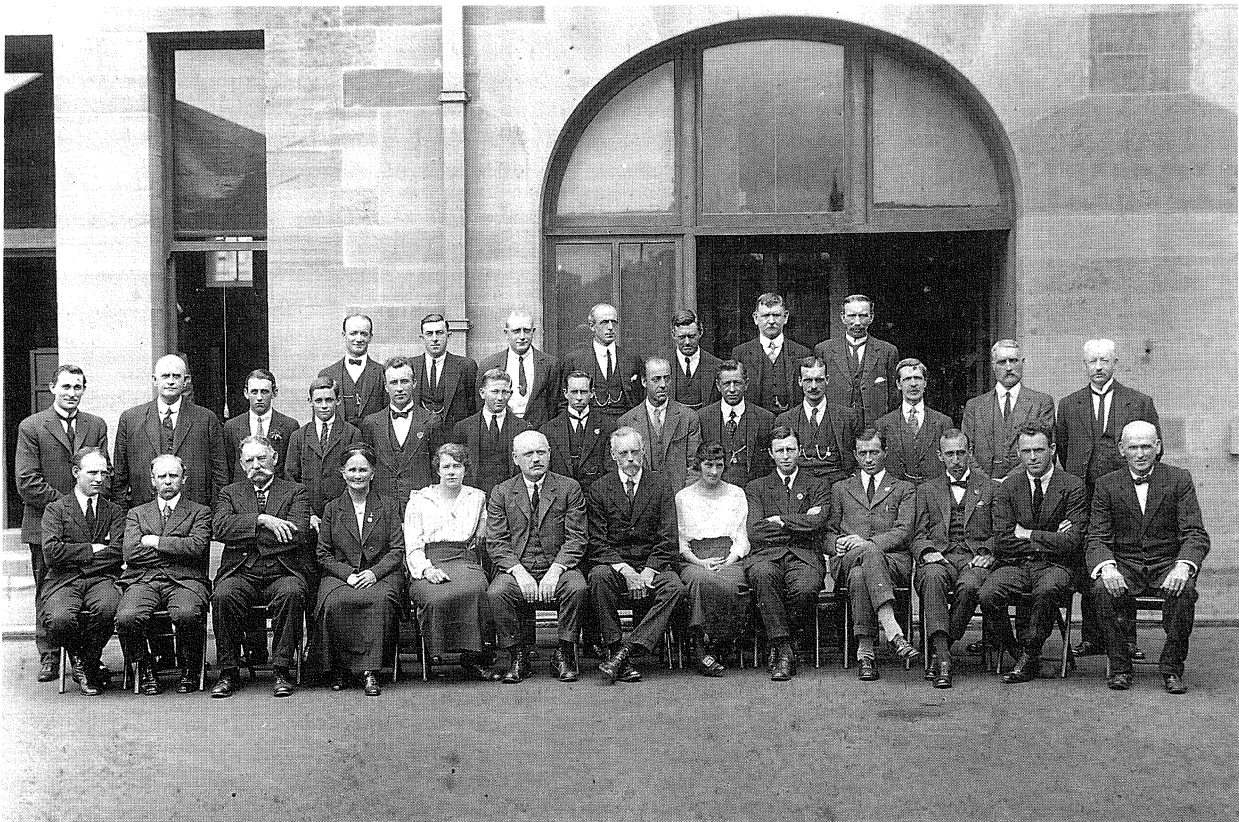
McCarthy's first research paper 'Lake Burrill and how our coastal lakes were formed' was published in *The Australian Museum Magazine* in 1931. In January 1930 young McCarthy had unearthed some stone artefacts in a rockshelter near Lake Burrill on the south coast of New South Wales, and gave these to the Australian Museum. Thorpe examined them and excavated the site in 1931 (Thorpe, 1931:53). The site was later re-excavated by Lampert (1971), who was able to use the radiocarbon-

dating technique to show that the first human use of the shelter occurred about 26,000 years ago.

In 1933 McCarthy enrolled at Sydney University to undertake a Diploma of Anthropology under the guidance of Professor A.P. Elkin. His thesis, *The material culture of eastern Australia, a study of factors entering into its composition*, was accepted by the University in 1935.

Fred McCarthy and Miss Elsie Bramell (who later became McCarthy's wife) were the first University-trained anthropologists to take charge of the anthropological collections in the oldest State Museum in Australia. They married in 1940, and started building their home at 10 Tycannah Road, Northbridge, on Sydney's north shore. They moved into the house in March 1941 and lived there for all their married life, bringing up a family and creating a beautiful garden, one of Fred's abiding passions that reflects his long-standing attachment to the natural environment.

The Public Service Board regulations of 1940 prohibited a married couple from working in the same organisation. This led to the enforced resignation of Elsie, and the staff of the Anthropology Department was again reduced to one. Wartime restrictions did not ease the load that was placed on McCarthy's shoulders. As he was to say in a later publication (McCarthy, 1958:264):



**Fig.1.** Australian Museum staff group photograph taken in December, 1920. McCarthy, recently turned 15 years of age, is fourth from the left in the middle row. (Australian Museum Photography Section: negative V11193). Back row (standing): J.H. Wright, H. Jackson, H.S. Grant, T.A. Murphy, J.A. Trimble, J. Watson, T. Johnston. Middle row (standing): G.C. Clutton, R. Long, A.A. Livingstone, F.D. McCarthy, J. Kingsley, H.O. Fletcher, R.W. Brettnall, T.A. Henson, A. Barnes, E.T. Hill, D. Massey, A.B. Welsh, T. Rochford. Front row (sitting): W.A. Rainbow, J.W. Woodhead, B.S. Lucas, Mrs Fraser, Miss Clarke, C. Anderson, C. Hedley, Miss Allan, A. Musgrave, J.R. Kinghorn, E. Le G. Troughton, F.A. McNeill, J. Cronin.

...the mass of routine work is more than enough for one officer to cope with, and makes it extremely difficult for him to carry out a planned programme of field study...

After the forced resignation of his wife, Fred remembers receiving no assistance until 1946 when a typist was employed to help him. He also recalls what a great sense of relief it was when the coin collection went to the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences. It was not until 1958 that he received a full-time Museum Assistant, Miss Jan Bailey, to help with the many tasks that he undertook and, in 1963, Douglas Miles was appointed Assistant Curator of Anthropology. It is no wonder that in later years, Elsie Bramell (Mrs McCarthy) used to visit the Division of Anthropology, with its staff of Senior Research Scientists, Research Scientists, Project Officers, Collection Managers and Aboriginal Liaison Officer (not to mention a Secretary), and say with amazement 'What do you all do?'

As well as a life-long interest in Australian archaeology, McCarthy has had another strand of interest running through his life, even to the present day – his fascination with art in all its aspects. He still visits the Art Gallery of NSW at least once a month to enjoy the riches of that institution and to keep abreast of current trends.

Much of McCarthy's early fieldwork in Australia, along the banks of the Hawkesbury River, around Cowan, Berowra, Mangrove Creek, Georges River and other regions was done with the help of his (subsequent) wife and friends on weekends because the Australian Museum had no vehicles. In 1932 the Harvard University Museum of Comparative Zoology expedition offered the Museum its first motor vehicle as a gift. This offer was rejected by the Museum Secretary on the grounds that the Museum could not afford to run the truck (Strahan, 1979:62).

McCarthy's first published excavation was on a rock shelter site near Emu Plains in 1934. The Lapstone Creek site was excavated two years later by McCarthy and the amateur C.C. Towle, but was not published until 1948. It was the first site in NSW in which culture periods were recognised and reported on the basis of stratigraphy.

McCarthy's overseas experience in 1937-1938 provided a catalyst for the 1946 monograph. Professor J.L. Shellshear, retired from the Chair of Anatomy, Hong Kong University and then appointed as Research Assistant in the Department of Anatomy at Sydney University, was a close colleague of McCarthy. Shellshear helped McCarthy arrange his attendance at the 3rd Congress of Prehistorians of the Far East in Singapore in January 1938, and to visit Indonesia. While in Singapore, McCarthy visited the Raffles Museum and met the son of his friend, H.V.V. Noone (a retired English anthropologist), who was Curator of Anthropology there studying the Sakai and Semang tribal people of the then Malaya. McCarthy also took the opportunity to work with archaeologists in Indonesia. Not all of his memories were good ones. He was particularly horrified at the fieldwork methods of van

Stein Callenfels, who never visited his sites, preferring to stay in a hut and have his Sumatran foreman run the excavations and report to him at intervals.

The trip to South-east Asia and the Conference, however, was a great chance for the young archaeologist to broaden his ideas and experiences. One of the central issues discussed with delegates to the conference was McCarthy's use of Australian Aboriginal terms applied to stone tools as opposed to following accepted European terminology. His ideas and approach were supported, one reason being the uncertainty of Australian dating at that time which made European analogues irrelevant (Shepherd, 1982:44).

In 1946 McCarthy co-authored what is probably his best known work, *The stone implements of Australia* (McCarthy, Bramell & Noone, 1946). As John Mulvaney has written (1980:99):

No student of Aboriginal stone tools can neglect Fred McCarthy's memoir, *The Stone Implements of Australia*... McCarthy's memoir will remain a classic because he first attempted a systematic decoding, conceived within the limits of knowledge and technology of the day.

This seminal work was later an important source-book for popular work (McCarthy, 1967).

In 1948, at the age of 42, McCarthy joined the prestigious American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land led by C.P. Mountford. His archaeological work with Frank Setzler (his American counterpart) and his work with Margaret McArthur on the time factor in the food quest of the Australian Aborigines were major contributions; that with McArthur remains a classic reference today.

As far back as 1938 Fred was aware of the dangers of vandalism and neglect of Aboriginal rock art and engravings. With his friend, Professor Shellshear, he pressed for drafting of legislation to protect and preserve Aboriginal relics in NSW. However, government concern was dominated by jingoistic sesquicentenary celebrations and impending war. Although the proposal was submitted to government in 1939 and 1945, nothing was achieved (McCarthy, 1938:120-126).

In 1958 McCarthy spent many months in north-west Australia studying Aboriginal art on a Wenner-Gren Foundation grant. Subsequently, on a Nuffield (Australia) Foundation grant he carried out a similar study in central western NSW. In 1961 he studied totemic clan dances at Aurukun, Cape York, Queensland and described 43 dance dramas. This large manuscript, in two volumes, is deposited in the AIATSIS library in Canberra.

In 1964 he was appointed Foundation Principal of what was then called the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, and now known as the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIAS Newsletter, 1965:1). The Interim Council of the new Institute felt that the choice of the first Principal would be a matter of the highest importance for the success of the Institute, and for anthropological studies generally in Australia. The field was widely canvassed and on the unanimous recommendation of the Interim

Council, Mr F.D. McCarthy was appointed to the position.

McCarthy served as Principal of the Institute until his retirement in 1971. He was a Member of the Interim Council of the Institute for three years, and Convenor of the Advisory Panel on Prehistory and Material Culture. He has held every position on the Council of the Anthropological Society of NSW, and is an Honorary Life Member. He was on the Council of the Royal Society of NSW for nine years, President in 1956 and is an Honorary Life Member. McCarthy was President of the Anthropology Section of ANZAAS in 1957; Australian Member of the Council of the Far Eastern Prehistory Association, and of the Permanent Council of the Union of Prehistoric and Protohistoric Sciences; and Corresponding Member of the Historic Monuments Committee of Unesco. On 18 April 1980 he received an Honorary Doctorate of Sciences from the Australian National University, Canberra, in recognition of his valuable work undertaken in anthropological research. In 1990 he was made a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in recognition of his services to anthropology.

This distinguished, sprightly 86 year old can still raise a chuckle at memories evoked over the decades as he reminisced one wet, cold Thursday in July 1991 in his home of 51 years in Northbridge, as he again methodically reorganised his life. All his detailed and extensive diaries have been deposited in the AIATSIS library, Canberra; his letters are now in the Mitchell Library, Sydney (except for one held by this Museum, written when he was 14 years old). His library of books has gone to the National Museum of Australia, Canberra (an institution he supported from its inception), though he still retains many volumes on soccer, art and other subjects that are for his family's enjoyment. His reprint collection can be consulted in the Division of Anthropology of the Australian Museum, Sydney, where his illustrious career began, and where he is a valued Associate of the Museum.

McCarthy's bibliography lists 307 publications; 11 items have not been sighted and have been omitted from the list. More than one-third were published through the various outlets provided by the Australian Museum, and another 46 were published in *Mankind*, the journal of the society that he has supported so strongly for more than half a century. He has published on the archaeology of Australia, of Melanesia and Norfolk Island, on the recent ethnography of Aboriginal Australia, on cultural heritage preservation and on museology, as well as popular articles in the field of Aboriginal studies. His final major work is a manuscript, *Artists of the sandstone*, consisting of about 900 typed folio sheets and approximately 70 pages of illustrations, describing the contact ethnography of the Sydney region in 1788. This has been deposited in the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra.

Many of those publications were aimed at a public audience. He has not sought kudos through becoming

a personality on television or radio, but has remained an unassuming man who has eschewed the trappings of a jargon-ridden literary style in favour of communicating in writing with people on the widest scale. This outpouring of work over the years across such a wide range of fields has been most extraordinary, particularly in view of the lack of assistance and the host of obligations he accepted in organisations to which he belonged and in which he held high office.

I can do no better than quote from Professor Mulvaney's citation when two famous Australian prehistorians, F.D. McCarthy and N.B. Tindale, his long-standing scholarly adversary and colleague, were admitted, *honoris causa*, to the degree of Honorary Doctor of Science at the Australian National University (Mulvaney, 1980:96):

That Australia today is a major force in world prehistory, that Aboriginal people draw freely upon evidence of their past achievements in their present search for identity and their struggle for justice, and that of any university ANU attempts the most comprehensive research and teaching into Aboriginal society, are landmarks in Australian culture which owe much to the stimulus provided by the initiative, industry and persistence of McCarthy and Tindale in the face of the apathy of earlier generations.

Few of us are privileged to be persons of such influence. Fred McCarthy is one of those few.

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# F.D. McCarthy, Commemorative Papers (Archaeology, Anthropology, Rock Art)

Edited by  
**Jim Specht**

Frederick David McCarthy: an appreciation .....	Kate Khan	1
Frederick David McCarthy: a bibliography .....	Kate Khan	7
Sesqui-centenary to bicentenary: reflections on a museologist .....	D.J. Mulvaney	17
Something old, something new: further notes on the aborigines of the Sydney district as represented by their surviving artefacts, and as depicted in some early European representations .....	J.V.S. Megaw	25
Ethnographic artefacts: the iceberg's tip .....	Tania Konecny	45
Archaeological studies at Bomaderry Creek, New South Wales .....	R.J. Lampert & D. Steele	55
The Terramungamine incident: a double burial with grave goods near Dubbo, New South Wales .....	Dan Witter, Richard Fullagar & Colin Pardoe	77
Pictures, jargon and theory – our own ethnography and roadside rock art .....	John Clegg	91
The depiction of species in macropod track engravings at an Aboriginal art site in western New South Wales .....	Josephine McDonald	105
F.D. McCarthy's string figures from Yirrkala: a Museum perspective .....	Stan Florek	117
The status of the horsehoof core .....	Kim Akerman	125
'...lost in the <i>Sirius</i> ...'? – Consideration of the provenance of the hatchet head recovered from the <i>Sirius</i> wreck site, Norfolk Island .....	Isabel McBryde & Alan Watchman	129
Additional evidence for pre-1788 visits by Pacific islanders to Norfolk Island, South-west Pacific .....	Jim Specht	145
Six pots from South Sulawesi .....	C.C. Macknight	159

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