

Approaching the Prehistory of Norfolk Island

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ABSTRACT. Norfolk Island, on the northeast edge of the Tasman Sea, is of volcanic origin and moderate height. A humid, forested subtropical landmass, it had a diverse range of natural resources, including some food plants such as *Cyathea*, forest birds such as pigeon and parrot species and substantial colonies of seabirds, notably boobies and procellariids. Its shoreline had few shellfish, but the coastal waters were rich in fish, of which Lethrinids were especially abundant.

The island had no inhabitants when discovered by Europeans in A.D. 1774. It was settled by them in A.D. 1788. From the eighteenth century discovery of feral bananas and then of stone adzes, knowledge of the prehistory of Norfolk Island has developed over a very long period. Collections of stone tools seemed predominantly East Polynesian in orientation, but Melanesian sources could not be ruled out. Research on fossil bone deposits established the antiquity of the human commensal *Rattus exulans* as about 800 B.P. but no prehistoric settlement site was known until one was discovered in 1995 at Emily Bay during the Norfolk Island Prehistory Project.

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The primary aim of the Norfolk Island Prehistory Project (NIPP), which began in 1995, was to determine the fact, extent and nature of pre-European settlement in the Norfolk Island archipelago, within the context of some wider questions of regional prehistory. Norfolk Island was of particular interest because of its status as one of the Polynesian “mystery” islands, its very isolated situation at the western extremity of Polynesian colonization, yet its proximity to Melanesia, and because of its history of tantalising evidence indicating former settlement.

That was not immediately apparent at European discovery. Ten days out from New Caledonia, on the 10th October 1774, HMS *Resolution* came upon a new island. A brief exploration suggested that it was uninhabited and Captain James Cook “took possession of this Isle... and

named it *Norfolk Isle*, in honour of that noble family.” (Beaglehole, 1961: 565). An absence of indigenous people was confirmed when extensive exploration and European settlement began in 1788, but at the same time evidence began to emerge of former habitation (below) and Norfolk Island became one of those “isolated, mystery islands” of Polynesia, “which have traces of prehistoric settlement, but which had no inhabitants at European contact.” (Bellwood 1978: 352).

These islands occur in two main groups, equatorial atolls and sub-tropical high islands, of which Norfolk Island is the most westerly and was before our research perhaps the most enigmatic. Located almost equidistant between New Caledonia and New Zealand, it was open to settlement from either or both sources (if not others). New Caledonia and New Zealand represent the extremes of culture history in