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Changing Perspectives in Australian Archaeology

edited by

Jim Specht and Robin Torrence



Papers in Honour of Val Attenbrow

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Changing Perspectives in Australian Archaeology

Preface

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SPECHT, JIM, & ROBIN TORRENCE, 2011. Changing perspectives in Australian archaeology. Preface. *Technical Reports of the Australian Museum, Online* 23: 1–2.

This volume showcases recent research that makes significant contributions toward changing perspectives and methods in Australian archaeology. The detailed case studies present innovative approaches to the interpretation of site formation processes, stone tools, land-use, as well as plant and fish remains that lead to important new interpretations of Aboriginal history.

The Australian Museum has been involved in the study of the history of the Aboriginal people of New South Wales for over 150 years, since George French Angas (1858) recorded rock art in the Sydney area. Most recently, Principal Research Scientist Valerie Attenbrow has made substantial contributions to understanding Aboriginal history in the Sydney basin (Attenbrow, 2002, 2004). This collection of papers is dedicated to this highly innovative Australian Museum researcher because she has had a major impact in all the areas of Australian archaeology that are highlighted in the papers included here.

Prior to her appointment to the Australian Museum in 1989, Val Attenbrow gained valuable experience as a private archaeological consultant, and within the public sector in the former National Parks and Wildlife Service of NSW. Her high standing in the discipline is reflected in her appointment as a life-member of The Australian Archaeological Association in 2002, and her election to The Australian Academy of the Humanities in 2009.

In putting together a volume of papers to recognize her contributions to both the Australian Museum and to

Australian archaeology, the editors have sought to cover some of the diverse range of themes that have engaged and informed her research over the last 30 or so years. The title of the volume echoes that of the outstanding monograph on her work in the Upper Mangrove Creek area to the north of Sydney: *What's Changing: Population Size or Land-use Patterns?* (Attenbrow, 2004). The papers, however, reach far beyond the Sydney basin to embrace much of mainland Australia, and the authors include several of her co-workers across the continent. The paper by White discusses one of the key characteristics of her work—the regional approach that is so well exemplified in her major synthesis of Aboriginal archaeology and historical records of the Sydney basin (Attenbrow, 2002), and her collaborative work with Hiscock on the “Eastern Regional Sequence” (Hiscock & Attenbrow, 2005). The next two papers by Sullivan, Hughes and Barham, and by Irish, are by consultant archaeologists dealing with issues relating to the definition of archaeological sites, a topic that has figured prominently in Attenbrow’s work for several decades (e.g., Attenbrow, 1992, 2004: 49–50). The Sullivan *et al.* paper addresses the perennial problem of separating naturally formed shell deposits from those of Aboriginal middens. Irish extends Attenbrow’s work in the Sydney area to locate and research sites of historical Aboriginal significance and interest. The following three papers by Douglass and Holdaway, Frankel and Stern, and Hiscock focus on aspects of site and artefact interpretation in western New South

Wales, southern Victoria and the Northern Territory. These papers emphasize stone artefacts in particular, a field in which Attenbrow has collaborated extensively with Hiscock in recent years (Hiscock and Attenbrow, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005). Ross and Tomkins explore some of the problems of reconciling archaeological data and Aboriginal oral testimony through the analysis of fish bones from a Queensland site. This reflects Attenbrow's long-standing interest in the marine economy of the Aboriginal people of the NSW coast (Attenbrow, 1976; Attenbrow and Steele, 1995). Asmussen's paper explores Aboriginal processing of toxic plant foods across Australia in a wide-ranging review using botanical and historical sources. Macroscopic plant remains are frequently elusive in archaeological deposits, and their recognition often depends on application of microscope techniques. Robertson's paper picks up this theme in relation to the classic site of Lapstone Creek in the lower reaches of the Blue Mountains to the west of Sydney. The original excavation of this site was in 1936. Fred McCarthy, former curator of Anthropology at the Australian Museum, took part in the excavation and prepared two reports on the work (McCarthy, 1948, 1978). Robertson employs use-wear and residue analyses to explore stone tool use at this site, thus extending her earlier collaborative work on the stone assemblage from Mussel shelter in Attenbrow's Mangrove Creek study (Attenbrow *et al.*, 2009). This theme of microscopic study of tool function is further explored by Fullagar in his study of Aire shelter 2 in Victoria, which was originally excavated by Professor John Mulvaney in 1962. The final paper by Taçon, Brennan and Lamilami discusses rock art depictions of the extinct thylacine (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*) in the Blue Mountains to the west of Sydney, and in the Northern Territory. These widely separated locales have both featured in Attenbrow's career. Soon after joining the Australian Museum, she conducted surveys in the Blue Mountains (Attenbrow, 1991) and later worked at a painted rock shelter in the Northern Territory. This latter work resulted in a major paper that won the inaugural Antiquity Prize for the year's best paper in the UK journal *Antiquity* (David *et al.*, 1994), as well as a paper on stone point production (Attenbrow *et al.*, 1995).

One of the features of Attenbrow's work over the last three and a half decades has been her willingness to undertake long-term projects that do not yield immediate results, but with meticulous attention to detail and resolution of methodological and theoretical issues, she has brought them all to fruition. Her career is far from over, and she has recently begun a new project—again focused on NSW—dealing with Aboriginal hatchet heads. But that is a chapter for the future.

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