

## Rhys Maengwyn Jones (1941–2001)

Rhys Jones, Australian archaeologist, was born in north Wales into a Welsh-speaking family. Among his immediate forebears he numbered teachers, scholars and orators, representing a range of talents that he was brilliantly to combine in his own career. At Cambridge University he read for Part II of the Tripos in the Faculty of Archaeology and Anthropology, where he specialised in the study of the economies and technologies of Old Stone Age hunter-gatherers. The Cambridge department of the time attracted students from all over the Commonwealth, including Australia, for the new perspectives that it lent to such studies. This 'new archaeology' was brought to Australia in the 1960s by young scholars recruited to fill the first university positions explicitly established for Australian archaeology at Australian universities. Jones was one of the new recruits, taking up a Teaching Fellowship in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney in 1963. In 1969 he moved to the Research School of Pacific Studies at the Australian National University, where shortly afterwards the archaeologists came to constitute an independent Department of Prehistory.

These years belonged to the heroic age of Australian archaeology. There was an explosion of knowledge about the past of the continent's indigenous inhabitants, most dramatically reflected in the escalating antiquity established for their occupation by radiocarbon dating, from less than 10,000 years ago at the beginning, to at least 40,000 years after little more than a decade of research. More importantly there was a transformation in the understanding of that past, in which Jones played the leading part. He identified a number of themes as constituting the essential character of the Australian Aboriginal past. They included: the date of people's entry into Australia, important for comparisons with the outside world; the chronology of their occupation of the continent's wide range of new environments; and the matter of the impact of human activities on those environments, which required consideration of the use of fire as a tool of land management and the question of people's involvement in the extinction of the giant marsupials. His discussion of such themes was informed by a belief in the importance of ethnography as a source of models about the past.

These and related issues continued to occupy Jones during his years at ANU and he lent his active support to interdisciplinary initiatives between archaeologists and field and laboratory scientists to address them. There were two particular projects in which he played a leading role.

One was the search for alternative methods of dating to radiocarbon, whose effective limit around 40,000 years ago was proving an obstacle to establishing the antiquity of the human colonisation of the Australian continent and thus of its place in the appearance and expansion of *Homo sapiens*. The luminescence techniques with whose application he was associated have led to claims for human arrival dating back to 60,000 years ago.

The second project was in the field of rock art, of which the potential for making a unique contribution to knowledge of the ideational realm of the indigenous Australian past had been largely inaccessible because of the difficulty of dating it. Recognition of mineral skins with minute organic inclusions across decorated rock surfaces, of fossil mud-wasp nests on top of them and of organic residues preserved in pigments has provided opportunities for dating, but claims of an antiquity for some rock art equal to that of the Ice Age art of western Europe have yet to be validated. Seeking this validation was a focus of research for Jones in the last years of his life.

These two projects reflect one of Jones' preoccupations in his work in Australian archaeology. This was his determination to make the discourse of Australian prehistory an integral part of the discourse of world prehistory and he achieved success in this through regular contributions at international conferences and in international journals. Another was his conviction of the importance of keeping the interested public abreast of archaeological discoveries and their implications. More than most, he was conscious of how archaeology both contributed to and benefited from the heightened public awareness of Aboriginal issues in the 1960s.

Jones had two major areas of field-based research, Tasmania and Arnhem Land. His Tasmanian involvement began earlier and was more complex. It started as an archaeological project, the results of which put beyond reasonable doubt that the settlement of the island was a chapter in the settlement of the continent as a whole, achieved when it was an extension of the mainland at a time of low late glacial sea level. Jones became fascinated by the encounters between European culture as represented by the French exploring expeditions of d'Entrecasteaux in 1792 and Baudin in 1802 and the hunter-gatherers of Tasmania, who for the savants of the Age of Enlightenment on board represented the first stage of human society. Jones' exposition to film maker Tom Haydon of 'the dramatic counterpoint' of a hunter-gatherer society (which the archaeological evidence showed to have existed for 10,000 years in total isolation beyond Bass Strait) and its brutal destruction within a few decades by the 'juggernaut' of European expansion beginning with the British settlement at Risdon Cove in 1803 was, as described by Jim Allen, who took part in it, the genesis of the film *The Last Tasmanian*. Subtitled *A Story of Genocide: How British Colonists Exterminated a Whole Race in One Generation*, the film had a powerful impact in Australia and internationally, but its main title, an allusion to Truganini, aroused hostility among the people whose story it set out to tell.

Jones initiated the discovery of glacial age occupation of cave sites in the wilderness area of southwest Tasmania in the early 1980s and was prominent in the campaign to prevent their drowning beneath the waters of the proposed Gordon-Franklin dam. Though he continued fieldwork in southwest Tasmania for a time, his direct engagement in the island's archaeology ended with the 1980s.

Jones' early Tasmanian involvement prepared the way for the second major fieldwork commitment of his career, in Arnhem land. Through the work of his

student of the mid-1960s, Betty Meehan, subsequently his collaborator and wife, he was introduced to the wealth of ethnographic material about the indigenous Tasmanians in the 1829–34 journals of George Augustus Robinson, the ‘conciliator’ of Aborigines. Stimulated by this material, he began to formulate ideas about hunter-gatherer society which he was able to pursue in Arnhem Land from his full-time research post at ANU.

He did this in the context of a collaborative program of ethnographic and archaeological research with Betty Meehan at the mouth of the Blyth River in central coastal Arnhem Land with people who had recently re-established themselves on their traditional land. These were the Anbarra, whom Meehan had previously known when resident at the government station of Maningrida. The association with the Anbarra was to be long and close and involved others besides Meehan and Jones. Together with Les Hiatt and Margaret Clunies Ross, they played an important role in facilitating the performance by Anbarra of the Rom ceremony, an Arnhem Land ritual of diplomacy, at the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra in 1982 and 1992. They supplied detailed material to a CD-ROM about the Anbarra compiled by Kim McKenzie and Les Hiatt, which will soon be issued by the National Museum of Australia.

Jones’ experience at the mouth of the Blyth river with the Anbarra and with other groups in other parts of Arnhem Land contributed to his growing conviction of the similarity of hunter-gatherer communities throughout the continent in social and territorial organisation and of the fundamental stability of the system to which they belonged. For him the key was the system’s responsiveness to the challenges posed by environmental variability.

This proposition he saw as supported by the results of a large interdisciplinary project which he directed in Kakadu National Park in western Arnhem Land from 1979 to 1982 under a consultancy for the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service. The project provided evidence of a long history of human settlement in the area, with adaptations to environmental changes directly or indirectly resulting from the glacial fall and post-glacial rise in sea level. Jones envisaged population density as having been low until the appearance of the freshwater swamps now characteristic of the region in the last thousand years or so, which saw a dramatic increase based on the rich and varied resources provided by the new ecosystem.

As early as 1968 Jones had said of Australian archaeologists that with an entire continent as their field, inhabited by hunter-gatherers who had maintained aspects of their traditional ways of life into the historically recorded past and in places into the ethnographically observable present, they should be ‘in the van of archaeological theory about such societies, instead of uncritically following the lead of others’. In some of his later writings Jones seemed to be positioning himself for this role.

The reach and importance of Jones’ contribution were acknowledged at ANU by his appointment to a personal chair in 1993, in the country of his adoption by

his election as Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 1982 and in the country of his birth by his election in the same year to the Gorsedd of the National Eisteddfod of Wales. He was elected Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London in 1987 and held the Visiting Chair of Australian Studies at Harvard in 1996.

His closest institutional association beyond his University was with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal (and Torres Strait Islander) Studies, of which he was elected a Member in 1966 and on whose Council he served without a break from 1978 to 1990. He was chosen to give the Institute's inaugural Wentworth Lecture in 1976.

His last few years were darkened not only by the leukemia that took his life but also by decisions within his Research School that marginalised the study of Australian prehistory and, as he put it, made him academically redundant. His retirement at the end of June 2001 was marked by a dinner at University House where he was presented with a large volume of essays by colleagues and friends celebrating his life and achievements. He died on September 19.

*Jack Golson*