

COLIN PETER GROVES FAHA

1942–2017

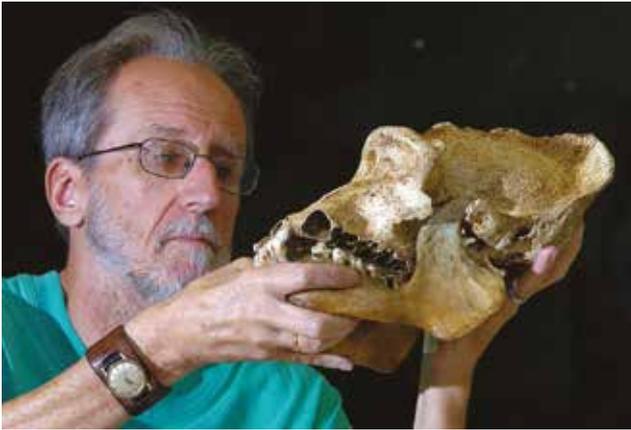


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Colin Groves – a distinguished primatologist and palaeoanthropologist, prominent mammal taxonomist, and the first professor of biological anthropology at the Australian National University – died peacefully on 30 November 2017, aged 75, at Clare Holland House, Canberra, with family at his side.

Canberra had been home to Colin and his partner Phyll since they arrived in the city from the UK in February 1974. That was the year when John Mulvaney's original Department of Prehistory, in the Faculty of Arts of the Australian National University, became Prehistory and Anthropology; and when Anthony Forge, Alfred Gell and Isabel McBryde also joined it. From that time until illness forced his retirement in 2015, Colin built the greater part of his quietly extraordinary academic career from his base there. He began as a lecturer and rose through the ranks, becoming a professor in 2000 in essentially the same department, by then re-named the School of Archaeology and Anthropology. In his retirement, as emeritus professor, he no longer lectured, but continued to research, publish and supervise much as he had always done – or even more prolifically.

In the late 1970s, the Department of Prehistory and Anthropology was a fairly large, sometimes unconventional, but successful and broadly harmonious department, led alternately by the leading prehistorian and archaeologist John Mulvaney ('father of Australian archaeology', public intellectual and Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities) and the remarkable, sociable and charismatic social anthropologist Anthony Forge. Under the umbrella provided by that heterodox structure, it was Colin's role to

establish a third stream: biological anthropology. This was to be both a stream in its own right and a contribution to the work of the department as a whole – especially archaeology, in the context of the rapid expansion at the time of research and public interest in Australia's deep past. The stream's staffing consisted initially of just himself; so, in a busy undergraduate teaching department, this required both breadth and diligence; neither was in short supply. Largely a primate and general mammal taxonomist to that point, Colin quickly became an expert on the human skeleton and indeed the skeleton of any animal an archaeologist might excavate in Australia, as well as on human evolution. Biological anthropology attracted students, and in due course the stream grew, so that now part of his legacy was a flourishing stream of five staff. He was a quite wonderful colleague: ever calm, equable, knowledgeable and rational, ever willing to put in time, work and a critical approach that was never ungenerous, able to respond with a speed that was quite astonishing, and ever ready to share a laugh.

Quietly spoken though he was, Colin was a prolific and willing lecturer; he liked 'holding forth', he once said. His lectures were clear, orderly, detailed, beautifully illustrated and full of interest, never simply catalogues, but structured around a theme or concept. He had a gift for presenting potentially dense or difficult material in accessible ways. Though his actual lectures were carefully prepared, he could do much the same off the cuff, plucking facts as profusely as needed from his stunningly well stocked and well pigeonholed mind. His class tests pinpointed detail in ways that could inspire awe in students. From their essays he expected cogent argument, telling evidence, clarity, and diligence; and if they were less than succinct, or misused 'however', he would let them know – though never unkindly. On the contrary, he was a welcoming, engaging, encouraging teacher, with an open door policy rather than any sense of hierarchy, and inclined to informality on all occasions – including graduations, when he could be persuaded to attend them. Not surprisingly, he attracted a large and devoted student following, undergraduate and postgraduate.

Colin travelled widely for his work, whether for conferences, fieldwork or (especially) museum research; and was widely known and highly respected internationally, within and beyond his network of fellow specialists. When on ANU campus, however, he kept his head down: except when in a classroom, he was usually

to be found in his office, just efficiently getting on, undeflected, with analysis and writing, if not preparing lectures. With some nine books to his credit, and over 330 other publications – some long, some short; some single-authored, some co-authored, with a wide variety of collaborators; some obscurely and some prominently published – his productivity was astounding. Whether for a small audience or a large one, he always wrote with a clear thoughtful intelligence and an admirably pithy style.

Everything about the non-human primates, but above all their evolution and classification, interested Colin. Taxonomy was an unfashionable discipline when he started out. But he was one of those who saw that primate classification was not all resolved; and that all other work in primatology – not least, primate conservation, which he supported passionately – depended on a solid grounding in a good classification which would reflect, as well as the evidence would allow, the evolutionary interrelationships of primate species. He thought deeply about species concepts, and favoured, but only to the extent rationally justified, a ‘splitting’ approach. The culmination of decades of work, though not his last word, was his book *Primate Taxonomy* (2001), a key reference for specialists; just as his *Ungulate Taxonomy* (with Peter Grubb, 2011) is in that field. His deliciously named *Ancestors for the Pigs* (1981) further illustrates his mammalogical range. Probably the best continuous reading for the non-specialist is his *Extended Family: Long Lost Cousins – A Personal Look at the History of Primatology* (2008). His productivity never tailed off: his contribution to the identification of a third orangutan species was the highest-profile but not the only paper to emerge in the months before and following his death.

In human evolutionary studies, Colin’s work was distinguished by a similarly orderly approach, informed by evolutionary theory, to classifying variation and tracing interrelationships. Special high points included the recognition in 1975 with Wratislav Mazak of the species *Homo ergaster*, and more recently his work with ANU colleagues including Debbie Argue on the debate over *Homo floresiensis*. His book, *A Theory of Human and Primate Evolution* made a substantial contribution to shifting perceptions of human evolution. He saw the process, not as a linear succession from one species to another, but as a complexly branching phylogeny with many extinctions: more like a bush than a tree or a ladder.

Within the department, Colin took a broad and sociable interest in those around him and their research. At lunch time he would emerge from his basement office and chat, while opening his mail, with whoever was in the

tea room; though I cannot personally confirm the fable that his favoured lunch in earlier days was beer and ice cream. He never held a major administrative role in the university, but had informal networks that extended right across campus, especially to biology departments, and he attended the ‘Coopers and Cladistics’ evolutionary biology discussion group at University House. He held different views on the ‘Out of Africa’ hypothesis from his Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies colleague Alan Thorne, resulting in a friendly rivalry, a joint grant, and a debate re-staged in several fora which became known as the ‘Groves and Thorne Show’.

Colin was born on 24 June 1942, and grew up as an only child in Enfield, North London. His father was a travel agent. As a child he was always keen on animals. His schooling was at Lancing College, Sussex. He was at University College London for his first and second degrees, the University of California Berkeley for his postdoctoral work (from which he returned with longish hair, a full dark beard, and a psychedelic taste in shirts and ties), and the University of Cambridge for his first teaching position, before his ANU appointment.

Colin and Phyll were a strong and mutually supportive couple, also hospitable to colleagues, students and their families; and never solely academic. Colin’s enthusiasms included Indian cuisine, themed t-shirts, the BBC’s *Goon Show* as well as the ABC’s *Science Show*, classical mythology, and the Australian Skeptics.

Colin received many honours, including Fellowship of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, Life Membership of the American Society of Mammalogists, and the Conservation International award for primate conservation. Alison Behie and Marc Oxenham edited a Festschrift (*Taxonomic Tapestries*, 2015) in his honour. Five species including two primates have now been named for him. He was awarded a special posthumous life time achievement award at the International Primatological Society Congress in Nairobi in August 2018, which will include a symposium in his honour.

Many people joined in celebrating Colin’s life at a moving outdoor funeral on 7 December 2017, in Canberra’s early summer sunshine: the opening music, Beethoven and Mozart; the closing music, Buddy Holly. Afterwards, a gathering in the Great Hall of University House continued the reminiscence and celebration.

ROBERT ATTENBOROUGH

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