

# SYLVIA JOY HALLAM FAHA

1927–2019



PHOTO: COURTESY OF DAVID HALLAM

Professor Sylvia Hallam was a pioneer and tireless advocate for the study of archaeology in Western Australia. She was the first archaeologist appointed as a lecturer at the University of Western Australia (UWA). She made a formidable contribution to undergraduate training and professional development in archaeology in the 1970s and succeeded in establishing an independent department of archaeology at UWA in 1983. Her research interests were wide-ranging from the local to the global. Her seminal research into the Aboriginal use of fire in the south-west of Western Australia was published by the (then) Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in 1975 as *Fire and Hearth: a Study of Aboriginal Usage and European Usurpation in South-Western Australia*. This remains perhaps the most detailed and meticulous exploration of how Aboriginal people transformed and constructed their environment. Following her retirement in 1989, Sylvia continued to promote archaeology, most recently as a campaigner for the recognition of the outstanding international significance of Murujuga and its remarkable rock art-rich cultural landscape. In 1984, she was elected Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities.

Sylvia Joy Maycock was born in 1927 in the small English town of Kettering in the east Midlands, where her father ran the local chemist's shop. She attended local State schools, in her home town of Kettering, at Brigg in the Lincolnshire countryside, and Saltley in the suburbs of Birmingham.

In 1945, Sylvia won a State Scholarship to study Natural Sciences at Newnham College Cambridge. However, in her second year Sylvia became interested in human origins and in her third year moved to Archaeology. She graduated in 1948 – one of the first cohort of women to be awarded Cambridge degrees. She remained at Newnham with a college Studentship to investigate Romano-British settlement patterns on the Lincolnshire fens around the Wash. This massive field survey remains one of the most extensive individual archaeological surveys carried out in Britain and the analysis revised the accepted picture of rural settlement in Roman times. It was published as part of a Royal Geographical Society Memoir in 1970. In 2004, Sylvia obtained her PhD in recognition of the originality of the published work.

Meanwhile in 1948, Sylvia had married Herbert Hallam. They had met as students at Cambridge, where Herbert had studied history at Jesus College with a Miners' Scholarship. Following Cambridge, Herbert taught in various east Midlands schools, and lectured at Loughborough Teacher Training College, while Sylvia juggled the demands of a growing family with her own research. In 1961, the family came to Perth where Herbert Hallam had been appointed as Senior Lecturer in Medieval History in the University of Western Australia. He eventually occupied the Chair of History at UWA.

There was no archaeology department at UWA at the time, but Sylvia was busy balancing the needs of her young family with lecturing in several UWA departments – on Roman Britain in the Department of Classics and Ancient History; in the Department of Geography on human/ environmental interactions over the long time-scale of millions of years of prehistory; and in Anthropology on world prehistory. At the same time she managed to find time to write up her work on Romano-British fenland settlement – her children remember the clutter of maps and manuscripts in the house. In 1970, she was appointed to a part-time Lectureship, and in 1973 to a full Lectureship in Prehistoric Archaeology, within the Department

of Anthropology. She founded and developed the systematic teaching of archaeology at UWA and was a tireless advocate for the discipline. Many undergraduates trained by Sylvia went on to become leading researchers, curators and cultural heritage managers. Her efforts culminated in the creation of an independent department of Prehistory in 1983. In 1984, Sylvia Hallam was promoted to Associate Professor.

On arriving in Western Australia, Sylvia switched her research interests to Aboriginal archaeology – ‘Romans’, as she recalled later, ‘being rather thin on the ground’. However, she retained her emphasis on landscape archaeology and the long-term interactions between people and environment, following the British field tradition, exemplified by Cyril Fox, W.G. Hoskins and O.G.S. Crawford. Sylvia’s approach to archaeology was inter-disciplinary, drawing on data and interpretations from a range of disciplines, including the natural sciences, anthropology and history. *Fire and Hearth* was first written in 1971 and published in 1975 with relatively minor revision and updating. It epitomises Sylvia’s interests in the long-term interactions between people and landscape and her interdisciplinary focus. It began as an investigation into the nature of the environment, as background to her attempts to define the archaeological landscape of the Swan-Avon region in time and space. But in its detailed analysis of historical sources, Sylvia showed how the Noongar people of the South-west used fire to create a landscape that ironically would later be easily penetrated and usurped by European settlers. In Sylvia’s words ‘the land the English settled was not as God made it. It was as the Aborigines had made it’. Rhys Jones had already coined the phrase ‘firestick farming’ to characterise the emerging view of Aboriginal people as active managers of their environment. However, the contribution of the detailed regional investigation developed in *Fire and Hearth* to our current understanding of Aboriginal people as land managers cannot be underestimated. In recognition of its scholarly significance and continuing relevance, in 2014 UWA Publishing issued a facsimile edition of *Fire and Hearth* with a substantial afterword by Sylvia.

Sylvia’s subsequent detailed investigation of the cultivation of yams and the role of Aboriginal women in south-western Australia picked up the themes of long-term interaction with the environment and the transformation of the landscape that were evident in *Fire and Hearth*. This work is less well-known, but provided another ground-breaking analysis of long-term transformative interaction between people and resources.

In tandem with exploring the historical archives, Sylvia developed an active field program focused on the Swan-Avon region, and particularly on a systematic survey of the Perth Metropolitan area. She conducted excavations at Orchestra Shell Cave, near Wanneroo, and Frieze Cave,

near York, and published the enigmatic wall-markings at Orchestra Shell Cave. But it was the systematic regional field survey of the region, and particularly the detailed analysis of the distribution in time and space of archaeological sites in the Perth Area Transect, which provided a foundation for understanding the archaeology of the Swan Coastal Plain. She compiled an invaluable record of the archaeology of the Swan Coastal Plain, now largely lost to urban development. This long-running project also provided field training to a generation of UWA students, many of whom incorporated Sylvia’s landscape and regional perspectives into their own projects in Western Australia and beyond. Sylvia strongly believed and promoted the view that detailed regional field programs were fundamental to archaeology. At the time, however, regional field surveys were generally unfashionable in Australian archaeology and thus her field research has perhaps not received the credit that it deserves.

In 1983 Sylvia fell seriously ill with diphtheria and partly as a consequence, she shifted her research focus from active archaeological fieldwork to a return to the archives. This led to an active collaboration with historian Lois Tilbrook and a significant contribution to the Aboriginal volumes of the *Bicentennial Dictionary of Western Australians*.

Sylvia’s research interests were wide-ranging. By the time she retired in 1989, she had published three books (two co-authored), including *Fire and Hearth*, and many papers on such diverse topics as topographic archaeology, the colonisation of new continents, microliths worldwide, syntheses of archaeology in Western Australia, Aboriginal yam cultivation and its implications for the origin of agriculture, Aboriginal use of fire as a tool of land management, Aboriginal demography, the role of women in pre-European economy and society in Western Australia.

Sylvia was an advocate for Australian archaeology and promoted Aboriginal heritage in other areas too. She became a member of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in 1974, was an Associate of the Western Australian Museum, acted on the Prehistory Committee of the then (Western Australian) Sites Department, and was actively involved in ANZAAS. She was also a member of the Royal Society of Western Australia and became its first female president in 1985–1986. In 1984 she played a significant part in preparing a submission to the Seaman Inquiry, supporting the land rights aspirations of the Noongar people. She also found time for involvement in the university Staff Association.

Sylvia and Herbert Hallam retired in 1989 to rural York, in Western Australia, where Herbert died in 1993. Sylvia however continued to update and publish further work on the Aboriginal use of fire, and its relevance to problems of

forest management and the maintenance of biodiversity. She also took on the cause of the outstanding rock art of Murujuga and vigorously campaigned for the recognition of the world heritage significance of the area. She was particularly outspoken in her criticism of both industry and government with respect to the risk of industrial emissions and expansion on the rock art. While the area was mooted for World Heritage in 1980, it has taken almost 40 years and indeed the year of Sylvia's passing, to progress to Tentative Listing.

Professor Sylvia Hallam died peacefully in Perth on 3 June 2019. She is survived by three sons and a daughter and numerous grandchildren.

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