

# Sydney B.J. Skertchly and the Early History of Pleistocene Archaeology at the Queensland Museum

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In 2012 the Queensland Museum (QM) will be one hundred and fifty years old, the third oldest museum in Australia. Interestingly, the QM was probably the first museum in the country to begin to support, but not the first to ignore (or even suppress?), what we would consider today as something approaching prehistoric scientific archaeological research.

There was sporadic interest in local Indigenous material culture in the nineteenth century at the QM, and by 1874 the museum had collected some 171 objects, representative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. The QM was more focussed on collecting material culture from Papua New Guinea and the Pacific. QM staff played a minimal role in actually collecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander material culture in the field, and relied on donations of local Indigenous artefacts to the museum, by prominent Queensland residents (Quinnell, 1986). The best known of these benefactors was Walter E. Roth, who was professionally trained in anthropology at Oxford University, and undertook significant ethnographic research that reconstructed the complexity and broad reach of Aboriginal trade and exchange routes, linguistics, ceremonies, social relations etc. (see various studies in McDougall and Davidson, 2008).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, without reliable dating methods, many believed that the Aboriginal occupation of Australia was recent, perhaps in the order of several hundred years, rather than tens of thousands of years (Horton, 1991). Generally, in the days before Mulvaney's significant excavation at Kenniff Cave (Mulvaney and Joyce, 1965) many believed that the collecting of contemporary Aboriginal material culture would be enough to record Australian Aboriginal occupation, as there was no deep geological past to Aboriginal culture. The techniques of archaeology that were developing in Europe and the Americas out of the antiquarian and earth science traditions had little impact on scientists in Australia. Historian Tom Griffiths provides a detailed account of what he has described as "the stone circle", amateur collectors of Aboriginal stone tools, in the southern states of New South Wales and Victoria, who played a significant role in the early twentieth century, in suppressing any interest in investigating Australia's more ancient past (Griffiths, 1996).

In Queensland, things might have been different for the development of Australian prehistory, because of the work of Sydney B.J. Skertchly, who was probably the first to successfully apply stratigraphic principles to try and establish the antiquity of the Aboriginal occupation of Aus-

tralia. An English educated geologist, Skertchly arrived in Queensland in 1891.

In the U.K. Skertchly had worked for the Geological Survey, and become interested in the later Quaternary gravel deposits of England, and more specifically, in the Pleistocene gravels of East Anglia. He published his discovery of Palaeolithic artefacts within interglacial units in a letter to *Nature* in 1876, and soon after became embroiled in debates over the antiquity of archaic humans in England. While his work initially received a certain degree of interest from members of the Victorian scientific establishment (e.g. Lubbock, 1878), it very soon became the subject of considerable criticism (Hughes, 1893, 1912). It was not until 1921 that Skertchly received confirmation that his interpretation of the interglacial stratigraphic positioning of Palaeolithic artefacts was correct (Marr, 1921).

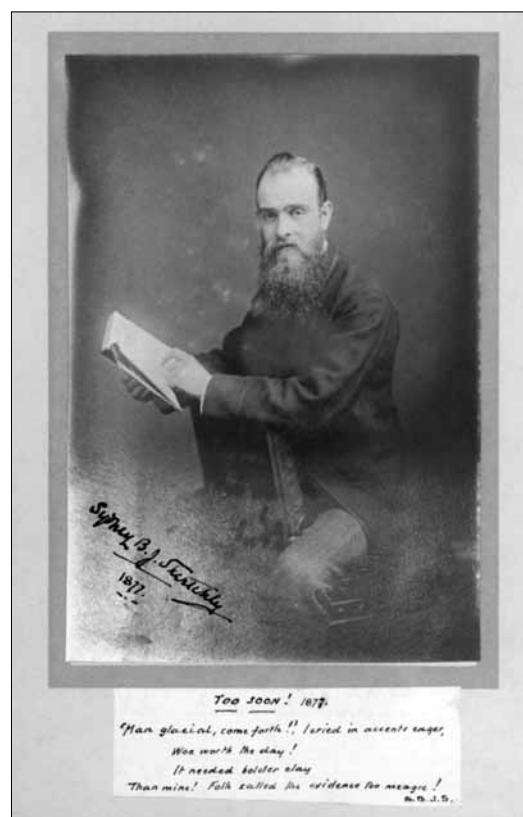
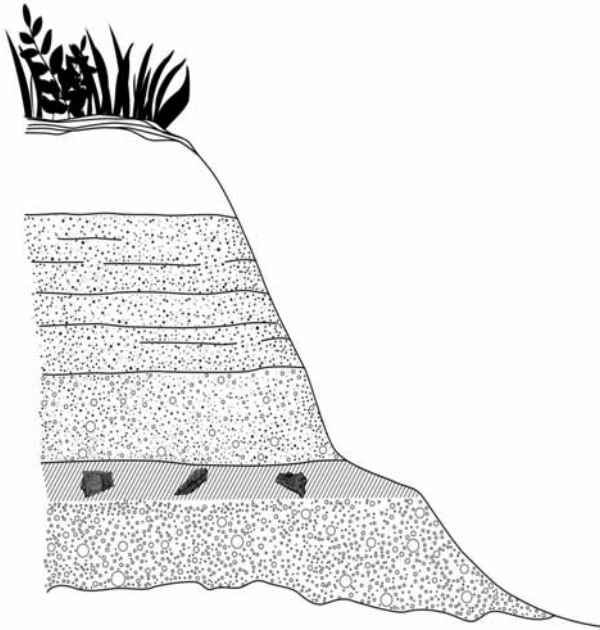


Fig. 1: Sydney B.J. Skertchly in 1877.

Skertchly left England in the 1880s and spent time in the U.S.A. and in Asia, in various official capacities, but following the Chinese Civil War of 1891, he migrated from Hong Kong to the Colony of Queensland to become Assistant State Geologist. In his retirement, between 1913 until the time of his death in 1926, Skertchly undertook field survey work in the vicinity of Nerang, investigating

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**Fig. 2:** Generalised section for Nerang. Number 4 indicates the artefact bearing black soil unit. (Hamlyn-Harris, 1917: 23)

the nature of the Aboriginal occupation of the region. Skertchly focused much of his investigation at his son-in-law's property at Coong, today the site of the Carrara Football Stadium. Coong is a Yumbah word meaning "water" (Patricia O'Conner pers. com). Part of his investigations included inspecting a canal that was excavated in 1917 to drain the Great Merrimac Swamp for agricultural purposes. From the exposed geological sections Skertchly collected a number of artefacts that he loosely referred to as choppers and hammer stones. In addition he observed two hearth sites, and he was convinced that these were hearths and not natural features.

With reference to the stratigraphy of Nerang he provided the following observations:

"Speaking broadly the succession of beds in the lower valley of the Nerang River is as follows:

1. Modern blown (dune) sand, and river alluvium
2. Old sand dunes
3. Marine sands and clays
4. Black soil (old land surface)
5. Old Freshwater clays (late Tertiary)

It is in bed 4, an old surface soil from a few inches to a foot in thickness that I have obtained stone implements in three widely separated areas." (Hamlyn-Harris, 1917: 23-24).

In 1917, in an overview of the Aboriginal ethnography of Queensland, the then Director of the QM, Ronald Hamlyn-Harris thought Skertchly's finds of enough significance to mention them. However, it seems that while Skertchly was a well-respected scholar within the Queensland professional community (which included such groups as the Queensland Naturalists and the Royal Society of Queensland), there was little interest in, and support of, his re-

search into the antiquity of the occupation of Australia by the First Australians.

In 1922, during his annual presidential address to the Royal Society of Queensland, Skertchly announced, in frustration, that:

"Gravel has yielded me my choicest quarry in each of the globe's four quarters, and as the sands of life run out, to gravel I still turn unsated, for Australia's river-banks are yielding me treasures valuable as those of Europe and America, and equally as despised, for, though I have been telling you about them for five years, not a single one of you has had the curiosity to take a three hours' journey to see the evidence. It may please you to know the Nerang River is sick with waiting and is rapidly erasing the writing on the wall you would not read." (Skertchly, 1922).

In 1922 Sydney Skertchly's archaeological collection (including his Old World archaeological collections and objects bequeathed to him by the Tylor brothers) were loaned to the QM. After Skertchly's death in 1927 the collections were purchased by the QM, with the money going to his daughter. Fortunately, in 1922, Skertchly had made a catalogue for the collection and had given this to the QM at the time of the loan. It appears that this catalogue was intended for publication.

Fourteen years after Skertchly's death, his observations, as recorded by Hamlyn-Harris (1917) aroused the curiosity of the South Australian Museum (SAM) anthropologist Norman Tindale, who corresponded with the QM about them. In a letter from Hale, Director of the SAM, to Hamlyn-Harris' successor, Heber Longman, reference is made to the original paper:

"Hamlyn Harris states that this implement was found below a marine horizon and refers also to a second specimen in a succeeding paragraph in this paper". (Hale to Longman, 17 February 1941).

In response, Director Longman wrote that although he held considerable respect for the work of Skertchly, he was not entirely convinced of the significance of the record at Nerang:

"Prof SBJ Skertchly was a very old friend of mine and I greatly admired him as a clever old savant. But I suggest between ourselves that some of his later work has not the same significance as his earlier records. Unfortunately no field geologists were able to work on his Nerang River sites. The actual implements mentioned by Hamlyn-Harris cannot now be traced here, as many of these were apparently not registered. I regret that we cannot help you in this matter." (Longman to Hale, 4 March 1941).

Despite this, the SAM continued to express an interest in Skertchly's work in the vicinity of Nerang and encouraged

the QM to investigate the sections and associated artefacts observed by him:

“Tindale is interested in your account of Skertchly and we are sorry that it is not now possible to link up his work with modern findings. In the circumstances we can only hope that your Queensland geologists will take an opportunity to re-examine the Nerang River sites and gravels and see whether anything can be learned about the occurrence of stone axes there.” (Hale to Longman, 12 March 1941).

At the time Norman Tindale was involved in developing a cultural succession for Australian archaeology, modelled loosely on archaeological typological sequences (Horton, 1991), as had emerged through the archaeological excavations of the European Palaeolithic. He had begun to work with the Harvard trained physical anthropologist Joseph Birdsell, who was to develop the Tri-Hybrid model of Aboriginal origins through his documentation of variation within 1930s Aboriginal populations. It was thought at the time, that evidence of different populations (or “races” to use 1930s terminology) migrating into Australia, might reveal quite distinct archaeological signatures. In South Australia Tindale had complemented Birdsell’s model by documenting artefact typologies that correlated with each of the supposed different Aboriginal migrations.

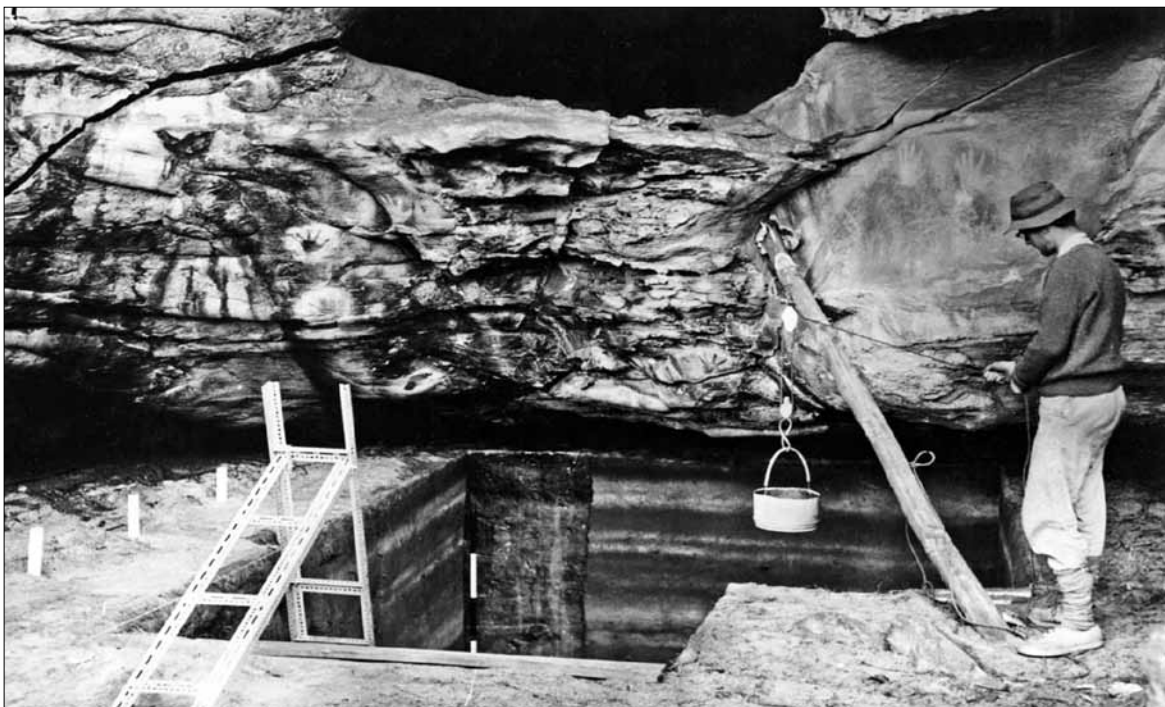
In 1937 the QM continued to support archaeological fieldwork with the appointment of Ken Jackson, as a cadet

ethnologist. Jackson had collected numerous artefacts as a youth and had a strong interest in Aboriginal culture (Mather and Agnew, 1986). He had participated in fieldwork with members of the Queensland Field Naturalists Club, which often encountered Aboriginal sites in the field. Jackson began corresponding with Norman Tindale at the SAM about stone artefacts. He was particularly interested in the accounts by Tom Petrie, of a tool type referred to as “the Bungwal Basher”, which was used for processing the root of the Bungwal fern (*Blechnum indicum*):

“I am glad that you were able to figure out the so-called-bungwall choppers, and I would have liked to have heard further of them, particularly if the identification is based on information derived from the natives themselves, for every word of first hand information regarding stone implements and their use is invaluable to us.” (Tindale to Jackson, 6 May 1939).

Tindale emphasised that Jackson had to establish the stratigraphic integrity of the archaeological record:

“... it would be as well to remember in surveying further sites that all camps are not of equal age and that in various parts of Australia we are now getting very definite evidences of stratification and cultural successions, and I hope you will look out for evidence of such in your district.” (Tindale to Jackson, 6 May 1939).



**Fig. 3:** Kenniff Cave represents one of the most significant sites and assemblages represented in the QM archaeological collection. The site confirmed that Aboriginal occupation in Australia extended at least back to the Last Glacial Maximum and not only provided scientific support for the Aboriginal case that they had been in occupancy of Australia for a great period of time but it also highlighted that there were significant changes in technology over time, undermining the belief that Aboriginal culture had been largely stagnant and unchanging.

Tindale had integrated this approach into his field studies, the most significant being his pioneering excavations at Devon Downs (Hale and Tindale, 1930). However, the potential of Jackson's work in archaeology was never realised. He signed up for the Australian Imperial Force in 1939, served in North Africa, returned to Australia to fight the Japanese, and was killed in action in Papua New Guinea in 1943 at Sanananda (Quinnell, 1986).

This period of the history of archaeology at the QM deserves more research. It seems that early in the twentieth century the QM had the capacity and the expertise to investigate elementary questions about Australia's prehistory, as evidenced by Skertchly's finds around Nerang. Sadly, and curiously, both scholarly and public audiences do not seem to have been interested in such questions once Hamlyn-Harris was no longer the QM director.

Not unlike Skertchly's work on the antiquity of humankind in England, his investigations into the antiquity of Aboriginal occupation of Australia were largely dismissed, or perhaps, even worse, ignored. Even former and respected colleagues such as Director Longman, seemed to have little interest in the significance of Skertchly's work on Australian prehistory. Although, in his eulogy for Skertchly, it is obvious that Longman held him in great esteem:

"Here was a man who had corresponded with Darwin, whose work and ability had been praised by Darwin, and who assisted in the compilation of such notable books as James Geike's 'Great Ice Age' and Alfred Wallace's 'Island Life'. Here was a man who has sat at the feet of Lyell, who had been taught by Huxley, who heard Bates tell tales of the Amazon before his book made that wonderland known to the public, who had helped the Tylors of geographical and anthropological fame, and who stood in that rich stream of intellectual life which even now raises the Victorian period above the mediocrity of history." (Longman, 1927).

The tragic death of Jackson in World War Two meant that unlike the other main state museums, that had curators such as Frederick McCarthy, Edmund Gill and Norman Tindale<sup>1</sup>, the QM did not have a curator active in this field. The QM lagged behind all other museums, and it was not until the 1960s, with the significant archaeological investigations at Kenniff Cave, that a formal archaeological research program was once again developed.

In 2008, responding sixty-seven years after the SAM's request for more information on the Skertchly sites, the QM participated in preliminary surveys around Nerang to relocate the stratigraphic sequence described by Skertchly between 1913 and 1926. This was due to a collaboration between Mr Hague Best, Aboriginal Cultural Officer with the Gold Coast City Council, and Ms Eleanor Crosby of the QM, and Ngarang-Wal man, Mr Tony Dillon. Further areas of the sequence have been identified, and palynological and sedimentological samples acquired to assess whether there was any signature that supported the early antiquity for the stratigraphic sequence described by Skertchly.

In 2010 these samples were analysed as part of Tamara Daus' Honours thesis. Extinct species of pollen were identified that indicated that the sites were of late Pleistocene antiquity. Further sampling for sediments relative to Skertchly's main site at Coong was undertaken with Drs Patrick Moss (UQ) and Craig Sloss (QUT) to obtain a more detailed sequence. It seems that a detailed palynological sequence is present at this site, extending back to the Oxygen Isotope 5 Interglacial. Work with these samples continues but it seems the signature does support Skertchly's identification made in the early twentieth century.

Another interesting component of this project is to now try and establish if the artefacts described as bevelled pounders for processing Bungwal root, date back to the Late Pleistocene. One of the satisfying aspects of this project is that it combines both the research interests of Skertchly and Jackson.

### Acknowledgements

This is part of a paper given at the conference: *Caring for Our Collections: Developing Sustainable, Strategic Collection Management Approaches for Archaeological Assemblages*, held at Museum Victoria, in 2011. Tim Murray suggested this section on the background of the Queensland Museum's archaeology collection be published in *BHA*.

Thank you to workshop organisers for inviting me to be part of this important meeting. I also extend my thanks to the QM for funding my involvement. I thank Richard Robbins for drawing my attention to the Skertchly collection at the QM. It sent me off in many exciting tangents when I was working as the QM's curator of archaeology. I am also indebted to Jeff Hopkins-Weise for locating correspondence relating to Skertchly and Jackson during his own research and kindly allowing me to use this.

### Notes

- 1 While none of these curators were formally trained in archaeology they did pursue individual research interests, McCarthy in stone tool typology, Gill in geomorphology and relative chronology, and Tindale in cultural sequences (Mulvaney, 2011).

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