



Mr Miles, Mr Oldfield and Professor Huxley: Early Thoughts on the Origins of the Australians

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ABSTRACT

This essay very briefly surveys the complex history of thinking about the human history of the continent that evolved from the very late 18th century through to the foundation of Australia in 1901. This 'long' 19th century saw the rise of the new disciplines of anthropology, ethnology, physical anthropology, geology, palaeontology and archaeology that either, in whole or in part, provided the framework for an inquiry into the origins of the Australians. It also saw the transformation of Australia from a collection of colonies into a single nation.

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Speculation about the origins of Indigenous Australians began with the earliest contacts between European (primarily English and French) explorers and the indigenous peoples of Tasmania and continental Australia (see e.g. [Gascoigne 2014](#); [Hiatt 1996](#); [Jones 1992](#); [Murray 1992](#); [Stocking 1987](#); [Urry 1978](#)). This essay very briefly surveys the complex history of thinking about the human history of the continent that evolved from the very late 18th century through to the period shortly after the foundation of Australia in 1901. This ‘long’ 19th century saw the rise of the new disciplines of anthropology, ethnology, physical anthropology, geology, palaeontology and archaeology that either, in whole or in part, provided the framework for an inquiry into the origins of the Australians which, by the late 1960s, effectively replaced antiquarianism as its primary intellectual context. It also saw the transformation of Australia from a collection of colonies into a single nation.

Significantly, thought about origins also supported deeper inquiries into the meanings of that history, especially the critical question of the relationship between Indigenous Australians and the rest of global humanity. The question whether human beings had single or multiple biological origins (monogenism or polygenism) was the subject of serious debate for much of this period, and the purported answers were widely understood to have clear political and religious implications, especially in terms of justifications for slavery in the Americas. A large literature has developed exploring the complexities of that debate (see e.g. [Keel 2013](#); [Gould 1996](#); [Stocking 1968](#)).

Of course, over the same ‘long’ century the rise of European colonialism and imperialism firmly anchored these inquiries in the political present, and ensured that their social and cultural relevance to the Anglophone settler societies which had been created in Australia, North America, South Africa and New Zealand. One of the most important political outcomes of the formation of such settler societies was their eventual transformation into nations – a process that began with the foundation of the United States of America in 1776 and ended with the declaration of the Union of South Africa in 1934.

This trajectory from colony to nation occurred elsewhere in the colonial world – most obviously in the case of rival European powers such as France and Germany – but my focus here is on the Australian case, which was very much a product of British colonialism and imperialism. Nonetheless one of the most striking aspects of this history of antiquarianism in Australia is the fact of its global reach and context with significant input of scholars from France, Germany and Russia – especially Paul Topinard (1830–1911), Hermann Klaatsch (1860–1916), Ernest Haeckel (1834–1919) and of course Nicholas Miklouho-Maclay (1846–1888). A more complete account of the history of Australian archaeology and anthropology would require a detailed global consideration of the rise of all these new disciplines from the seedbed of natural history.

These transformations from colonies to nations directly influenced the nature and importance of the histories being written, changing from a major focus on the quasi *global* and *universal* human histories of the Enlightenment, to the more *local* histories of colony and nation (see e.g. [Janssen 2017](#); [Loughlin and Johnson 2020](#)). The new histories created in the context of colonial nationalism necessarily came to be more tightly focused on the particular histories of places and peoples, rather than the generalities of global human history (see e.g. [Eddy and Schreuder 1988](#); [Jebb 1905](#)). For [Jebb \(1905\)](#) these new histories underwrote the creation of new national identities, where the loyalties of European settlers began to shift away from the ‘motherland’.

In Australia this change in the context of history writing exposed significant tensions among the practitioners of the new disciplines that collectively created the Indigenous history of the continent by the end of the ‘long’ 19th century. Perhaps the most obvious tension flowed from disagreements about whether there was much point in exploring the history of pre-European Australia. What was to be learned from such inquiries, it was asked, as Indigenous societies were supposed to be doomed to extinction? (see e.g. [McGregor 1997](#)). But there were other tensions arising from the consequences of comparison, whether between technologies, physical forms, economies, religions or the impacts of colonisation. Put simply, how could the nature of Indigenous Australia be properly understood without comparing it to other human societies? From this comparison flowed another key understanding – that during that period the history of Indigenous Australia had no intrinsic interest apart from providing an exemplar of the earliest stages of human evolution, once the monogenist account of human evolution had become widely accepted. Further, if that were the case, then the specifics of that history

might matter to those interested in writing the history of Australia, but not to those seeking an understanding of the human story on a global scale.

Even though the question of whether Indigenous Australians had the same biological origins as other human beings was the subject of serious debate throughout the 'long' 19th century, this did not in any way obviate the need to explain the history of similarity or divergence. The consequences of comparison and generalisation were even more pronounced in the evolving disciplines of geology, palaeontology and physical anthropology, where the development of standardised definitions and descriptions of processes acknowledged the critical importance of global perspectives to underwrite attempts to understand the tempo and direction of the evolution of life on earth.

In this essay I explore some of the ways in which changing social, cultural and political contexts in Australia were manifested in changing understandings of the role of antiquarian inquiries in shaping contemporary understandings of Indigenous histories. This is an extraordinarily broad inquiry into the changing shape of discourse about the human history of the continent. In the present context I have had to limit discussion to the roles played by antiquarianism, ethnology, studies of human anatomy and philology in defining the how and why of Indigenous history. Nonetheless, it is important to anchor discussions about the evolving engagement of Indigenous and European Australians during the 'long' 19th century by observing that this evolution changed radically during the 20th century, not least because of the development of the discipline of archaeology from broader antiquarian inquiries.

Therefore while we might easily identify the foundational importance of core questions and concerns, we also need to understand the ways in which they changed during and after the 19th century. I will conclude this essay with a very brief sketch of the period after the late 1880s when the terms of the inquiry about the origins of the Australians were transformed by the introduction of the perspectives of archaeology, geology and palaeontology that had been developed in Europe after the 1850s, beginning an effective engagement with time and change in the history of Indigenous Australia that was to become such a defining feature of 20th century archaeological discourse.

Questions about human origins imply questions about processes such as migration and diversification. They also imply questions about the purposes of such knowledge, for example what are its consequences, and whose interests are being served? Understanding the context of inquiry is vital to all of these questions. Even though the *present* of Indigenous Australia was appropriated into broader inquiries into the *macrohistory* of European civilization (see e.g. Kuper 1988; Harris 1968; Lubbock 1865; Stocking 1968, 1987; Schnapp 1997a; Trigger 1984, 1989; Tylor 1871), the context of it being created by a settler society still actively colonising Indigenous Australia, supports an inquiry into the significance of antiquarianism in building *microhistories* of colonialism in Australia and elsewhere (see e.g. Murray 2013). The fact that the past and present of Indigenous Australians was conflated into an idealized 'savage' past, that could be readily 'plugged into' a global macrohistory of humanity, was effectively underwritten by the perception that whatever history had happened in Australia it would not challenge the essence of that macrohistory.

Accordingly, I will emphasise the importance of the following observations that together made a significant contribution to global human history during the 'long' 19th century:

- The fact that Australian antiquaries (including ethnologists) considered Aboriginal people to be contemporary representatives of the social and cultural evolutionary changes European had passed through. In this sense Aboriginal 'presents' not pasts were appropriated to write European history;
- that whatever social and cultural variations existed within Indigenous Australia, the master narrative of a single origin of humanity (monogenism) shaped the importance of race, language and culture as the primary vectors of *subsequent* variations, and
- this historiographic context (where chronology was much less important than the *relative direction* of history) fostered a concentration of ethnological rather than archaeological activities.

This essay is a contribution to the history of antiquarianism in Australia, and relies on a detailed engagement with the publications of key scientific societies in Britain and Australia, as well as major monographs written during the 'long' 19th century.¹ It also rests on the arguments about the importance of the history of archaeology I made in a recent contribution to *Academia Letters*:

I have argued that writing histories of archaeology will have significant benefits for the discipline, and for the societies that nurture it and consume its varied products... the goal... should be to produce knowledgeable producers as well as consumers. Knowledge here refers specifically to the nature of claims, the strengths and weaknesses of theories, and the extent to which such things can be scrutinized and informed judgments made. Given that the history of archaeology amply demonstrates the very great significance of the social and cultural contexts of its practice (and the very real evidence of the use of archaeological information and perspectives to support nationalism, colonialism and other ideologies), then the great challenge for us all is to find plausible ways of using a knowledge of the history of archaeology to defend society against archaeology and (just as important) vice-versa (Murray 2021: 6).

Some aspects of what follows touch on very sensitive matters related to race and identity, particularly the issues that are raised by what Reginald Horsman (1981) described as racial Anglo-Saxonism. Even the most superficial engagement with mid-to-late 19th century European discourse about the nature of human history clearly reveals patterns of thinking about the meaning of racial diversity that are simply repellent by the standards of today. But this does not mean that we should not try to understand that thinking in its own terms – especially as it is also clear that quite a bit of it lurks in the shadows of contemporary discussion about ethnicity and identity.

However, in acknowledging this challenge it is also worth remembering that part of the task of historiography is to attempt to avoid teleology, that is to refrain from writing the history of contemporary archaeology as if it were predestined to take its current form. It also needs to be stressed that the avoidance of teleology is not the same as an attack on presentism, rather it is a recognition of the very creative tensions that arise within the practice of historiography itself. Lynn Hunt has captured that tension (and its historical possibilities) effectively:

But it is possible to remind ourselves of the virtues of maintaining a fruitful tension between present concerns and respect for the past. Both are essential ingredients in good history. The emergence of new concerns in the present invariably reveals aspects of historical experience that have been occluded or forgotten. Respect for the past, with its concomitant humility, curiosity, and even wonder...enables us to see beyond our present-day concerns backward and forward at the same time. We are all caught up in the ripples of time, and we have no idea of where they are headed (2002).

Recently there has been a spike in publications related to the history of archaeology in Australia. Much trawling of the publications and activities of local societies and institutions and those located in the metropolitan archives, has revealed that this history is (unsurprisingly) somewhat more complex than the pretty general and rudimentary accounts offered by Mulvaney (1958), Murray and White (1981), Horton (1991), T. Griffiths (1996) and B. Griffiths (2018), over the past 60 or so years. This is as it should be. Change in the objectives and perspectives of such histories is surely yet another demonstration of the truth that new times require new histories that connect the history of our discipline to the prevailing cultural zeitgeist. The recent survey published by Hilary Howes (2021) has explored that historiography a bit more deeply, seeking to do more than to review and to possibly change the historical batting order. I observe that while it is always important to get a clearer picture of *who did what* first (and to *whom*), it is also important to explore the somewhat thornier question of *why* they did it. Spriggs (2020)

1 In the United Kingdom, primarily The Aborigines Protection Society, the Ethnological Society of London, the Anthropological Society of London, the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, the British Association for the Advancement of Science, and the Geological Society of London. In Australia, primarily the Linnean Society of New South Wales, the Royal Society of New South Wales, the Geological Survey of New South Wales, the Australian Museum, the Royal Society of Victoria and the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science. Other sources include the British Archaeological Association and the Royal Archaeological Institute, as well as the proceedings of other State Museums and Royal Societies in Australia, and the journal *Science of Man*.

has also directly challenged what might be described as the master narrative of the history of archaeology in Australia, pointing out that significant changes to core issues of approach and purpose happened before the genesis of ‘Cambridge in the Bush’ (see [Murray and White 1981](#)).

Patricia Levine (1986) and Rosemary Sweet (2004) have carefully charted the evolution of the antiquarian and the archaeologist after the 18th century. In 2013 Schnapp edited a global perspective on Antiquarianism that greatly expanded our understanding of its varieties, particularly in Europe and China ([Schnapp et al. 2013](#), but see also [Schnapp 1997a, 1997b](#)). In 2007 the tercentenary of the Society of Antiquaries of London provided another opportunity to further explore disciplinary formation and professionalisation. This was powerfully taken up in the contributions to Susan Pearce’s *Visions of Antiquity* ([Pearce 2007](#)). It was hardly surprising to hear that for the vast bulk of those 300 years there were vanishingly few professional antiquarians. Most British antiquarians were people of means, or those with sufficient leisure from their professional activities to pursue their amateur interests. We are left with an image of churchmen, medical doctors, lawyers, landowners, soldiers, managers and bankers bitten by the antiquarian bug, wandering the English countryside in search of churches, barrows, ancient technologies, and standing stones (see e.g. [Brown and Munghaile 2018](#); [Crawford and Ligota 1995](#); [Myrone and Peltz 1999](#)). These were not unprofessional people, just antiquarians with a day job – obviously with the exception of ‘professional’ excavators who did most of the heavy work! The history of antiquarianism in Australia during the ‘long’ 19th century amply demonstrates that this was a global phenomenon. Nonetheless, the perspectives of British antiquarianism provided the baseline for the practice of antiquarianism in Australia.

ETHNOLOGY, ANTIQUARIANISM AND ARCHAEOLOGY IN 19TH CENTURY AUSTRALIA

In 1910 physician and physical anthropologist W. Ramsay Smith (1859–1937) wrote the entry on the Aborigines of Australia for the third volume of the Commonwealth of Australia Yearbook. Although only 18 pages long it represented a massive expansion on the information presented in earlier volumes, where the history of Australia began in 1788 with the settlement of New South Wales, and Indigenous Australia barely rated a mention. Smith’s entry was an effective summary of some 70 years of writing about Indigenous Australians by explorers (see e.g. [Eyre 1845](#); [Grey 1841](#)), ethnologists (see e.g. [Mathew 1889, 1899](#)) and philologists. However, given his research interests Smith was also keen to focus attention on what was then known about the role physical anthropology might play in shedding light on the origins of Indigenous Australians, not least because of the importance of the recent identification of *Pithecanthropus* in Java by Dubois. In doing so, Smith’s account stressed the close inter-connections between information about society and culture, language and human physical form that lay at the heart of ethnology, most closely associated with the work of James Cowles Prichard (1786–1848) whose *Researches into the Physical History of Man* (first edition 1813) became the ur-text of British ethnology (see [Stocking 1973](#)). Significantly, even though Smith’s account included a long discussion about the origins of the Australians, it was primarily based on the approach developed by Prichard – where the perspectives of archaeology, geology and palaeontology remained largely unexplored:

The question now arises: Where did the Australian race come from? To this various and varied answers have been given. Topinard and others had concluded that Australia was originally inhabited by a race of the Tasmanian type that disappeared before a taller race that came from—somewhere. Flower and Lydekker, in 1891, thought the Australians were a cross between two already-formed stocks. Keene still holds that they are a blend of two, or at the most three, different elements in extremely remote times. Huxley held that the Australians were a homogeneous group. Finsch, from extensive observations, concluded in 1884 that they were all of one race. Alfred Russell Wallace, in 1893, pointed out the aboriginal’s resemblance to certain Asiatic races, the Veddas, Todas, and Ainus, and concluded that the Australian aboriginals were really a low Caucasian type. Dr. Semon, in his work “In the Australian Bush,” 1899, adopts the theory, giving the reasons that lead him to do so, that the Australians and the Dravidians, primitive inhabitants of India, have sprung from a common branch of the human race, and that the Caucasians have undoubtedly sprung from the Dravidians. This makes the Australian aboriginal more

nearly allied to us than the comparatively civilised Malays, Mongols, or Negroes. Speaking popularly, according to this view the Australian aboriginal, racially, would be the uncle of the Caucasian. Lydekker, in 1898, abandoned the two-race theory, and reached independently the same conclusion as Wallace. Most anthropologists now accept the one-race theory.... This view certainly enhances our interest in the aboriginal, and brings the subject of the anthropology of the black nearer home to us: Some writers give the Australian even greater importance. Stratz has taken him as a central unit, a prototype, around which he groups all the rest of the races of men; and another writer, Schoetensack, holds that all the races of men were evolved in the Australian continent (Smith 1910: 159).

By 1910 this kind of account had become mainstream. While there might still be some debate about whether humanity began in Australia (or elsewhere), the balance of opinion saw the origins of the Australians being elsewhere. Again, there might be quite serious differences of opinion and emphasis depending on whether you believed that the original Australians had access to watercraft (which, in some accounts potentially rendered them less ‘savage’ and thus more problematic as exemplars of ‘savagery’), or that they had to have walked to Australia – either via Gondwana, or sunken continents such as Lemuria (see e.g. Haeckel 1876; Prentis 1995; Ramaswamy 2004).

It is significant that accepting the *possibility* (or perhaps even the *probability*) that the human occupation of Australia had occurred on a geological timescale was less of a challenge than acknowledging possible evidence of seafaring, potentially so early in human history. For the bulk of the ‘long’ 19th century the possibility of there being a high antiquity for the occupation of Australia posed much less of a problem than the possibility that the ancient Australians had a different origin than the rest of humanity. In this sense an inability to measure time was of little consequence compared to supporting a recognition that humanity (as a whole) had evolved – both physically and culturally (see e.g. Lubbock 1865; Prichard 1813; Tylor 1871). In this sense the incapacity to measure time mattered less than being able to chart its *direction*.

The unity of humanity was the core tenet of monogenism, and from this flowed the notion that *physical* unity did not necessarily require *cultural* unity to provide a convincing account of human history. Indeed, the very opposite was the case as ethnologists and others sought explanations for human diversity in differences of climate, isolation and connection. Thus explorers such as Edward John Eyre (1815–1901) could readily explain cultural variation among Indigenous Australians as the consequence of climatic variation across the continent (Eyre 1845). It is worth noting that all of this became a common intellectual currency before Darwin (see e.g. Gould 1996).

Similarly, Thomas Henry Huxley (1863, 1870) and a host of others (see e.g. Bonwick 1870) explained the purported *physical* differences between the Tasmanians and the rest of the Australians as being the outcome of isolation and migration. Again, it is worth stressing the importance of the process of migration to establish the reality of connection and transformation in human culture. Here language became a vital marker of both, becoming a foundation of Ethnology as well as Anthropology. As Prichard was to observe:

Ethnology is, in fact, more nearly allied to history than to natural science. Ethnology professes to give an account, not of what nature produces in the present day, but of what she has produced in times long since past. It is an attempt to trace the history of tribes and races of men from the remote periods which are within reach of investigation, to discover their mutual relations, and to arrive at conclusions, either certain or probable as to their affinity or diversity of origin. All this belongs rather to *archaeology* than to the science of nature (1848: 231).

In this account tracing the genealogies of languages, customs, forms of material culture and human physical form, a goal so clearly expressed in the work of William Augustus Miles (1798–1851) (1854), Augustus Oldfield (1821–1887) (1865), and Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–1895) became core business for ethnology for the bulk of the ‘long’ 19th century. At one stroke the Enlightenment goal of creating a global human history also provided the intellectual justification for local histories as exemplars of the processes of human social and cultural evolution. Thus for the entire ‘long’ 19th century the importance of Australian ethnological data became highly significant in the development of British ethnology and, later, anthropology (see e.g. Harris 1968; Stocking 1968, 1971, 1987). The same did not apply to the data derived from the study of geology, palaeontology and archaeology in Australia.

I have mentioned that the focus of this essay has been on the importance of the development of the integrative discipline of ethnology in framing answers to questions about the origins of the Australians during the ‘long’ 19th century. Critical elements of this evolving discourse deriving from other disciplines (particularly geology and palaeontology) have not been included, but are the subjects of later publications. Importantly, their exclusion from discussion in this essay does not invalidate the observations I have made about antiquarianism during this period, primarily because serious inquiries into the geology and palaeontology of Australia really gained prominence after the 1890s, especially with the work of Edgeworth David and Robert Etheridge Jr (see e.g. [David and Etheridge 1889](#); [Etheridge 1890a, b](#); [Etheridge, David and Grimshaw 1896](#)).

Nonetheless, it is abundantly clear that from that time onwards ethnology began to cede ground to natural science (to paraphrase Prichard) in the search for an understanding of the history of Indigenous Australia. In this period Australian geologists and palaeontologists began to create an intellectual environment that could make effective use of antiquarian studies of Indigenous material culture that had been undertaken throughout the ‘long’ 19th century and continued into the 20th. Much of the impetus for this new approach to comprehending human antiquity came from the great success achieved by European geologists, palaeontologists and archaeologists – especially in the period after the discoveries at Brixham Cave in England (see e.g. [de Vis 1890](#); [Gruber 1965](#); [Howchin 1912](#); [Vallance 1975](#); [von Lendefeld 1885](#)).

Indeed the great series of *Palaeontological Memoirs* published by the Geological Survey of New South Wales between 1888 and 1908 exemplify two important observations. First, the coming impact of archaeology on the transformation of ethnology, and second, the importance of Etheridge’s scholarship spanning antiquarian and palaeontological inquiries, which bore all the hallmarks of his training under Thomas Henry Huxley at the Royal School of Mines, and his father Robert Etheridge (1819–1903), who was palaeontologist to the Geological Survey of England, and the British Museum. The importance of Etheridge’s scholarship was recognised at the time by William Anderson in his ‘Letter of Transmittal’ for Part II of the great catalogue of works related to Australian and Tasmanian Aborigines:

It is peculiarly fitting that, under the circumstances, a Catalogue like the present should be issued under official auspices as a Memoir of the Geological Survey, because, in the absence of Ethnological and Archaeological Societies, pure and simple in these Colonies, the study of Recent Geology in its relations to the Geological History of Australian Aborigines, would almost be a dead letter were it not for the extension of Geological Science into the domain of Archaeology, as exhibited by the production of such Memoirs as the present ([Etheridge 1891: v](#)).

It is not stretching the significance of Etheridge’s encyclopaedic studies of Indigenous material culture, geology and palaeontology too far to argue that in them were sown the seeds of a new approach to the history of Indigenous Australia – an approach that was not to bear fruit for some decades to come. Indeed, at the end of the first decade of the 20th century the dominance of the trope of cultural stasis continued to see the uncomfortable juxtaposition of time and timelessness with respect to Indigenous Australia:

From what we at present know, the position of man in the geological record, as far as Australia is concerned, is “recent”; but with wider research it may probably be shown that, like the characteristic flora and fauna of Australia, which are survivals of geological periods long passed away in other lands, the Stone Age in Australia may be, as it were, an “arrested development”, and may be found to have existed contemporaneously with that of the older lands as far back as the Pleistocene period ([Daley 1909: 502](#)).

For our present purpose it is important to understand the great differences in the material manifestation of cultural complexity and the reality of historical progress as it was understood by Victorians. In the absence of pyramids, cities and a whole host of markers of complexity, the history of Indigenous Australia – prior to the interventions of palaeontologists such as Etheridge or geologists such as David – seemed to be an ethnological problem, rather than an archaeological one.

Felipe Rojas has recently observed that:

If a truly comparative history of archaeological and antiquarian thought is worth undertaking at all, then it should attend to ideas radically different than our own. We owe these ideas our attention not simply out of encyclopedic duty, but rather because our own archaeological and antiquarian traditions came to be as they are in tension with many others that we have sidelined, silenced, or banished into obscurity (2017: 25).

In this essay I have argued that for the bulk of the 'long' 19th century Australian antiquarians focused more intently on ethnological observations, particularly those related to language, material culture and human physical forms. Nonetheless by the end of the 19th century the application of geological and palaeontological perspectives began to support a more 'modern' archaeological inflection to antiquarian practice in Australia that, once again, mirrored what had been evolving in Britain since the mid 1850s.

This sense of continuity within a context of diversity and disciplinary divergence, is well exemplified in Evans' detailed discussion of the 'conflict' between archaeology and antiquarianism in 19th century Britain:

This also coincides with the attitude struck by most histories of the subject, which are suffused by an implicit belief that archaeology grew out of, and eventually superseded, antiquarian practice. Yet, far from dying out, many local societies even today essentially practice an antiquarian agenda. Reflective of the eclectic interests of their broad membership, and with their own socio-intellectual connections and different interest groups, within them medieval building or historic garden studies still feature alongside (and often prevail over) more strictly archaeological researches (2007: 298).

Much more work remains to be done on the histories of antiquarian societies, and of the many archaeological, anthropological and historical societies and organizations that grew up alongside them. There is considerable diversity here as well, both within societies founded in Europe, as well as those founded in the colonial world. But there is also a similar pattern of transformation, as the interests of antiquaries changed to take account of new methods and new possibilities for making sense of history. However in all of this diversity there is a commonality – many antiquarian societies (both provincial and metropolitan) continued to function, and often to share members with, societies that had been founded to service the new disciplines growing out of antiquarianism.

Acknowledging this allows us to explore the continuity of questions about origins, antiquity and the purported presence or absence of major transformations in the history of Indigenous Australia. We can also chart the transformations in what antiquarians and archaeologists might have considered to be significant sources of information that would aid in answering those questions.

The meanings of the history of humanity had become the core business of first ethnology and later anthropology, where the data from a very broadly-based inquiry into human antiquity, and the causes of racial variety, were knitted together to create a narrative linking the past to an imperial present (see eg Elkin 1963). Historiographers of Australian archaeology need to reflect on the continuity of those big questions of origins and history, while acknowledging the creation of new sources of data and the impact of new cultural and scientific regimes (for example the eclipse of colonialism, and the difference between the precepts of physical anthropology and the search for genomic histories). But the question of what those histories might mean, and who will find meaning in them is as important now as it was for Oldfield, or indeed Etheridge.

If ultimately we are all from somewhere else, does antiquity confer a special status on indigenous people, or might we view this as an aspect of a kind of coming to terms with the moral challenges of dispossession? Put simply, is the importance of the connection between Indigenous people and the Australian continent established by the *priority of their occupation* rather than by its length? Given the emphasis of the '40,000 years on my mind' trope popular

since the 1970s, it would certainly seem that this is not the case. However, this sits oddly with the generations of Indigenous protest occurring before the advent of radiometric dating to Australian contexts, where *priority* and the fact that lands were never ceded to the European invaders provided the core of the moral justification for resistance.

It is now very common for observers (drawn from right across Australian society) to refer to contemporary Indigenous people as being the inheritors of the 'world's oldest continuous culture'. Each of the qualifiers (oldest and continuous) is hardly content free, neither are they free from problematic interpretations. In the 'long' 19th century that status was as modern representatives of social and cultural evolutionary stages that Europeans had passed through. A century later archaeologists and anthropologists have largely dispensed with unilinear evolutionary thinking, but this does not erase the question altogether.

In recent years it has been customary to dissolve what were once thought to be sharp distinctions between evolutionary stages – the most obvious being discussions about 'complex' hunter gatherers and evaporating distinctions between 'pre-agricultural' and agricultural societies. As a result a great deal of attention has been focused on the explanation of these observable variations. During the 'long' 19th century it was widely understood that the history of Europe included waves of migrations and resulting race wars ending with the triumph of the Anglo-Saxon and the German. As the anatomist Robert Knox never tired of observing: 'Race is everything' (Knox 1850). The inevitability of racial conflict either in Europe or in the Empire underwrote much of the Ethnology and Anthropology of the 19th century in Australia. During that period culture change and variation was explained by migration and by changing climatic circumstances.

Contemporary Australian practitioners have instead chosen to explore autochthonous sources of variation, no matter whether they are driven by ecological or social processes. This focus tends to reduce the importance of external causes of change – whatever their origin. Such an approach is also not without its problems, notwithstanding the freedom afforded by dissolving the boundaries between 'evolutionary' stages, and stressing the importance of internally-driven change.

The 'timelessness' of pre-radiocarbon Australian history made it possible to connect the history of pre-European Australia unproblematically with global human history. This no longer obtains, most especially because the connections between past and present Indigenous societies in Australia are no longer self-evident. Significantly, this change in circumstances exists within an Australian society that is transforming as a result of serious discussions about the legacies of colonialism and the importance of Indigenous Australians establishing the grounds of self-determination in history and culture, and their relationship with broader Australian society. Much is in flux, especially the implications of antiquity and continuity for both local and global human histories.

The 'long' 19th century was a time when very few saw archaeology as being important in resolving such questions. I have written about my grandfather Hubert Murray, a pastoralist who collected rather than excavated (Murray 2019). Indeed I doubt whether he ever gave that possibility much thought. For him, and so many others like him, the key material data lay on the surface. Certainly he embraced the possibility of Indigenous Australians having histories, because the evidence of cultural, linguistic and anatomical change and variation was impossible to ignore. But change and variation did not alter the fundamentals of the master narrative – Indigenous Australians came from somewhere else and were connected to the total human story – in his mind one that was built on reconstructions of links between Indo-European languages and those of contemporary Aborigines. It is somewhat startling to see Murray, and many like him, promote the inevitability of the white *physically* as well as *politically* absorbing the black. But they did.

Unsurprisingly, the history of Australian archaeology is an amalgam of *micro* and *macro* disciplinary histories. It is also true that things properly archaeological have changed over time from the broad concerns of the antiquarian to increasingly specific concerns of the archaeologist. This has gone back and forth over time as the pursuit of the past has also turned into a pursuit of the present. Again, there is a great deal more writing to be done about the historiography of the 'long' 19th century beyond the influential work of John Mulvaney (see especially Mulvaney 1958), with a great many surprises still in store. The need to write local histories and to make sense of local landscapes is very much a feature of the postcolonial world. It also serves to highlight why we need to be much more cautious about proclaiming the end of antiquarianism.

My focus has been to very briefly and to quite partially explore some of the issues that in Australia gave rise to core questions of antiquarianism, and then to archaeology, during the 'long' 19th century. It was a time when very few saw archaeology as important in resolving such questions. Clearly that does not obtain today, but it seems to be equally clear that a core task of our historiographical efforts should be to understand how the questions and methods of Australian archaeology intersect with the ways in which we understand the meanings of the human history of the continent. That quest is very much in the antiquarian tradition.

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