

PERSONAL REVIEW

Benefit of foresight

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The editors know I am old and (misguidedly?) think wise enough to relive my academic life. Would I have lived it differently? Yes and no. So much of it has depended on chance or decisions taken not for academic reasons. I wouldn't have become a prehistoric archaeologist at all if I hadn't scraped into a First in history at Melbourne which got me to Cambridge. I work in Sydney and not in Perth largely as a result of trying to save a relationship. And so on. One constant is that I have (nearly always) wanted to live in Australia, work in this part of the world, so I haven't tried to move elsewhere. These details of life result in going for what seems important at the time. That's the first thing worth realising: our scientific lives are rarely the result of scientific decisions, even if we like to rationalise them subsequently.

What would I do starting out now? Well, the days of cowboy archaeology are pretty much over and traipsing through theory somewhat dull. That leaves the tropics and for me, the development of tropical agriculture. Plants. Detecting agriculture and plants in the tropics requires new sciences such as those of phytoliths and starches. It also requires us to stop thinking the world of agriculture is one of seeds alone and that there are sharp divisions between 'agriculturalists' and 'hunter-gatherers'. Many of the world's societies are not and have not been either one or the other. Further, many ways that plants and animals interact with people don't allow us confidently to distinguish between wild and domestic. Tropical agriculture occurs in all major continents, including Australia: there is the opportunity here to develop a whole new world perspective.

Similar approaches can be made to early human history. 'Man the hunter' has major appeal to archaeologists because bones survive. But our ancestors did not live by meat alone, whether hunted or scavenged. Indeed, plants, especially tubers and fruits and maybe seeds at times when they were not too energetically expensive, were probably the major portion of the diet. Researchers are already starting to get at this part of history through a variety of techniques

— tooth wear, residues on tools, ethnography of energetics, perhaps even starches and phytoliths (again!). In this area, too, I think plants are where it's at. Not easy to get at, going to require new areas of expertise, long hours of hard work but with promise of real advances in our understanding of the human past.

Would I take up plants if I were starting over? That would probably depend on other variables, many not at all scientific. But I would certainly look into it.

References

The editors have asked for some idea of changes in my focus since the early 1960s. When I started research in New Guinea it was still possible to work with people who grew up using stone tools. I now realise, as people ask me questions, I didn't do all I should have with them but I made some records, including a couple of movies.

Examples:

(1967) Ethnoarchaeology in New Guinea: two examples. *Mankind* 6: 409-14.

(1968) Ston naip bilong tumbuna. In *La Prehistoire: problemes et tendances*, Sonnevile-Bordes, D de, (ed). Paris. CNRS: 511-6.

(1972) (with DH Thomas). What Mean These Stones? In *Models in Archaeology*, Clarke, DL (ed). London: Methuen:275-308.

(1978) (with N Modjeska). Acquirers, users, finders, losers: the use axe blades make of the Duna. *Mankind* 11:276-87

The 1980s were more a period of synthesis, working in both Australia and the Pacific:

(1987) *Australians to 1788*, with Mulvaney DJ (eds). Sydney: Fairfax, Syme and Weldon.

(1985) (with JJ Flenniken). Australian flaked stone tools: a technological perspective. *Rec Aust Mus* 36:131-151

(1982) (with JF O'Connell). *Prehistory of Australia, New Guinea and Sahul*. Sydney: Academic Press.

In the last 15 years or so I have been researching in the Bismarck Archipelago of Papua New Guinea, stimulated by the major transformation of the Lapita Homeland Project, and also returned to my first real excitement, instilled by Eric Higgs in 1961-2, fauna:

(1991) (with T Flannery). Animal translocation. The zoogeography of New Ireland mammals. *National Geographic Research and Exploration* 7:96-113

(1991) (with TF Flannery, R O'Brien, RV Hancock and L Pavlish). The Balof shelters, New Ireland. In Allen, J and Gosden, C (eds). Report of the Lapita Homeland Project: 46-58. Dept Prehistory, RSPacS, ANU, *Occasional Paper in Prehistory* 20.

(2000) (with G Clark and S Bedford). Distribution, past and present, of *Rattus praetor* in the Pacific and its implications. *Pacific Science* 54:105-117

(2000) (With Jo-Ann Thomson). The localism of Lapita pottery in the Bismarck Archipelago. In Anderson, A and Murray, T (eds). *Australian Archaeologist*:308-323. Canberra: Coombs Academic Publishing.