ABORIGINAL BURIAL CONSERVATION
IN THE MURRAY-DARLING BASIN

Jeannette Hope

The unknown soldier
- a shared heritage

As I write this, on 11th November 1993, the remains of an unknown Australian soldier from the battlefields of western France are being reinterred in the War Memorial in Canberra. His is only the second body to be reinterred to Australia from the many thousands of dead of the First World War (the other is General Graves, buried at Duntroon, Canberra).

The unknown soldier’s grave will be the symbolic focus of the Hall of Memory at the War Museum. His anonymity is significant - he could be related to any Australian, he could be white - he could be black - but because we will never know exactly who he is, he is symbolically related to all of us.

Aboriginal repatriation

Over the last few years many other Australian dead have been repatriated, from the museums of Europe and America back to Australia, and from the museums of Australia back to their original burial places. These are the remains of Aboriginal Australians. We know the names of some of these people, individuals who died in the last century and whose remains were removed soon after burial (or were preserved as museum specimens without any burial). Others are as anonymous as the unknown soldier, removed individually or in large numbers from burial grounds that had been used for this purpose for hundreds or thousands of years.

Hundreds of human skeletons from the large cemeteries along the central Murray were dug up through the 1930s and 40s, and subsequently stored in museums and university departments. Following recent Aboriginal heritage legislation by the federal government, most of these remains have been returned to Aboriginal communities and reinterred as close as possible to their original resting places.

The remains of many thousands more Aboriginal people still lie in the ground, but these too are being disturbed by natural erosion or by the effects of development - water regulation and irrigation works, road-building, urban development, sand mining or agriculture.

Under environmental protection laws, most developments need an environmental impact assessment (EIA) before they are approved, and this includes a survey for Aboriginal sites. Such surveys however can usually only identify what is visible on the ground surface. Burials are a problem for EIA studies because their subsurface presence is difficult to predict, and they are often disturbed after all the proper legal steps have been taken, leading to conflict between developers and Aboriginal groups.

To some extent this is inevitable. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people along the rivers have had a common perception of what makes a good place in the landscape - near the river, but above flood level and on sand if possible. As a result, those sites chosen for modern developments are often exactly where Aboriginal sites would be expected. In particular, the places preferred for burial grounds - sandy sediments near water, but above flood level - are exactly those desirable today for many kinds of land use or are affected by land and water use.

Whose responsibility?

Traditional Aboriginal concern for the proper treatment of the dead continues to this day. The digging up of burial grounds and even graves of known historic individuals to provide skeletons for museum collections or for scientific research is especially distasteful. Disturbance by erosion or development is also a concern, even if most of it is accidental.

Aboriginal burial places are clearly the heritage of Aboriginal people, for whom human burials are significant as people, as relatives and as ancestors, whether the actual relationship is known or not. Archaeologists have argued for the importance of Aboriginal remains for research, while Aborigines have remained generally cynical about this. Non-Aboriginal claims for research significance have to encompass this in a global frame - the importance to all humankind, to world heritage. While these values are not necessarily incompatible, anthropological research on skeletons - excavation, handling, measurement and so on - is by its nature intrusive.

With respect to Aboriginal heritage, especially human remains, the archaeological community has basically conceded that Aboriginal values take priority, and heritage agencies now require archaeologists to seek permission from Aboriginal communities for the research they propose. Even access to existing written records in Site Registers (mostly made by archaeologists) now requires Aboriginal permission.

The outcome of this debate has been to radically change the relationship between archaeologists and Aborigines. ‘Conceding ownership of remains, accountability to Aboriginal groups, seeking permission for research, assisting with reburials and working with Aboriginal people involved in archaeology (have) become a natural and necessary part of the discipline’ (Pardoe, 1990b:222).
Joint projects are becoming commoner, and as a result of increasing contact with archaeologists, Aborigines are increasingly interested in the results of research and are initiating projects themselves.

Recognising Symbolism and Sharing management

The unknown Aboriginal dead as symbolic of Aboriginal cultural continuity, survival, fortitude and sacrifice is something that should be recognised and appreciated by all Australians. Such broader appreciation is necessary, because while it is debatable whether this heritage can genuinely be shared by all Australians, the preservation of these burials - the managing of this heritage - has to be a shared responsibility.

The responsibility must be shared because most of the burial places are not in Aboriginal hands. They are found on freehold and leasehold land, unclaimable under Mabo, only a small fraction of which is likely to come into Aboriginal ownership. Very many are on public lands - national parks, state forests, river side reserves - because of the coincidence of burials and reserve lands along river frontages. Those responsible for heritage and conservation in these lands are the state land management and heritage conservation agencies, and Aboriginal wishes must be mediated through the structures of these bureaucracies.

Aboriginal burials in the Murray-Darling Basin

The protection and conservation of Aboriginal burial sites is of special importance for the Murray-Darling Basin. Human burials are extremely common along the rivers, either as individual graves or large cemeteries. This is partly due to the long human history of the region, but also to the special characteristics of the landscape.

Aboriginal people have lived in the Murray-Darling Basin for at least 40,000 years. This means that 1600 generations of humans have been born, have lived out their lives, and have died and been buried along this river system. Burial sites preserved in the sand dunes along the rivers provide a tangible reminder of this long human association with the land, and of all the traces of the past these sites are the most important to Aboriginal people who live in the region today.

The Murray and its tributaries rise in the high rainfall areas of the uplands of eastern Australia and flow westward, across the alluvial riverine plains and through the semi-arid sand plain and dunefields. Because of the low relief, river channels have shifted through time; the modern channels now run parallel to or crisscross abandoned channels that carried much more water during the Pleistocene ice ages. These ancestral channels fed the large, now naturally dry, lake basins, such as the Willandra and Menindee Lakes.

Two things have led to the good preservation of human remains in the region: the high carbonate content of the soils, and the landscape and climate. The carbonate soils are a legacy of the old marine sediments that underlie the lower Murray-Darling Basin, and provide the right chemistry to preserve bones once they are buried.

The meandering rivers left the story of their history etched into the landscape: in the old river channels, lake beds, and river and lake-side dunes. The windy dry climate first created the sand dunes and sand plains, then preserved them, and finally eroded them to expose their contents - burials included. As a result, it is possible today to walk across eroded surfaces that are thousands of years old.

Some of the oldest archaeological sites in Australia have been found in the dunes (lunettes) that built up on the eastern shores of these lakes when they held water, but old sites have been found elsewhere along the river system, on river banks and in riverside dunes.

In 1969 the burial of a young woman who died about 26,000 years ago was discovered at Lake Mungo, in what is now the Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area, about 120 km north of Mildura. Many sites between 20,000 and 40,000 years are now known from the Willandra, and also from Lake Tandou, near the Menindee Lakes on the Darling River. Less well known but even more numerous are Late Pleistocene sites, between 10,000 and 20,000 years old, and recent sites of less than 10,000 years, along the central and lower Murray and the lower Darling River.

Many, if not most, of the Aboriginal dead excavated in the past and now reinterred come from burial grounds along the rivers of the Murray-Darling river system, particularly from the central Murray.

Aboriginal Burial Site Conservation

All Aboriginal sites, whether camp-sites, scatters of stone tools, shell middens or human burials, are technically protected by state and federal legislation. The major damage to these sites is from ground disturbance - whether due to natural erosion or accelerated erosion due to modern activities - and to changes in the land surface such as the building of towns, roads and bridges, and agriculture.

Aboriginal burials are a special problem for site protection, especially in the Murray-Darling Basin. Culturally, Aboriginal people are highly sensitive about how the remains of the dead are treated. Complex funeral practices were performed in most parts of Australia. In the Murray-Darling Basin, the deceased were buried in the ground, sometimes with their personal possessions, such as stone tools, tooth necklaces, coolamon and sewing kits (Pardoe, 1992). Graves could be marked by earthen monuments, as along the Lachlan, or by carved trees, notably along the upper tributaries of the Darling River.

While individual graves may occur anywhere, the Murray River is distinguished by the presence of large cemeteries (Pardoe, 1988). Cemeteries are more commonly associated
with sedentary, agricultural societies, and are usually marked by some form of monument, such as headstones, mounds or megaliths. But there are some consistent features of cemeteries everywhere that also apply to those along the Murray.

Cemeteries are places where a large number of burials occur, close together, in an area which has a distinct boundary, and is not used for any other purpose. Burial grounds along the Murray, such as those at Swanport and Roona in South Australia, and Lindsay Creek, Robinvale and Kow Swamp in Victoria fit well with this definition of a cemetery.

The existence of cemeteries along the Murray has important implications for the social relations of the people who lived there. This is an area where the food resources vary greatly over a very short distance, from the rich and concentrated products of the river to the sparse and lesser resources of the plains. Resident groups living along the river would control access to the water and its resources. Pardoe (1988, 1990a) has suggested that legitimisation of control of the river may have lain in the right of ownership as handed down from ancestors - the cemetery would be proof of the lineal ties, validating corporate ownership of that area.

**The Murray-Darling Basin**

The Murray-Darling Basin is central to Australia's economy. It covers one-seventh of the continent and nearly two million people live in it. Its primary and secondary production accounts for between 30 and 40 per cent of the total production from Australia's natural resource-based industries. Wool, wheat, sheep, cattle, dairy goods, cotton, rice, oil seed, wine, and fruit and vegetables are all produced in the Basin. Half of Australia's cropland, half the sheep, and a quarter of the beef and dairy cattle are in the Basin. It holds three-quarters of the irrigated farmland, which produces 90% of the nation's irrigated field crops, 80% of pasture and lucerne, 70% of fruit and 25% of vegetables.

Land-use conflicts are inevitable in such a situation, especially given the large number of Aboriginal sites in the Basin. There are several serious current issues involving the disturbance of Aboriginal burial grounds. Around Lakes Menindee, Cawndilla and Victoria on the Darling and Murray Rivers, higher than natural lake levels resulting from water regulation and storage are eroding banks and exposing burials. At Barmah Forest on the Murray, cattle agisted in the forest are illegally moved on to burial grounds at flood times, and burials are regularly exposed in sand quarries.

Four states are responsible for the Murray-Darling Basin: New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Queensland, and each has several separate government departments responsible for land, water and environmental management. While all the departments are supposed to regulate land and water use for the benefit of the community, their own activities are often part of the problem for site conservation, for example the water agencies who wish to maximise water storage in the lakes.

Heritage conservation departments in each state, such as NSW National Parks and Wildlife, or Aboriginal Affairs in Victoria, can attempt to influence the activities of the land and water departments but they are not always successful against economic pressures, and they will never have enough resources themselves to fix all the sites that need conservation works.

Because what happens to the river catchment in one state affects people in other states, the Murray-Darling Basin Commission was set up to coordinate the activities of the land and water departments across state borders. The Commission is a joint agency made up of the federal and state departments of land, water and environment. It is answerable to a Ministerial Council consisting of the Ministers responsible for those departments.

Technically the Commission is not responsible for Aboriginal heritage conservation, but it has recognised the impact of land and water management on sites, especially burial grounds, and has provided funding for site surveys and conservation works.

**Local Aboriginal Initiatives**

In the long run what is needed to ensure that the government departments take the conservation of Aboriginal sites seriously is public will and commitment, and this will only be developed as a result of Aboriginal people in the Basin taking the initiative at both a local and regional level.

Aboriginal people are playing an increasing role in site protection work. In New South Wales, for example, local and regional Aboriginal Land Councils employ cultural officers, and Aboriginal people work in the National Parks and Wildlife Service as Rangers and Aboriginal Site Officers.

In Victoria the regional Aboriginal community councils and co-operatives employ cultural officers, who as Aboriginal Cultural Inspectors, have a range of powers to identify, maintain and protect significant Aboriginal sites (Anon, no date). The state government agency, the Aboriginal Heritage Unit of the department of Aboriginal Affairs (previously part of the Victoria Archaeological Survey), employs Aboriginal Site Officers as well as archaeologists and historians (Anon, 1990a). Aboriginal people are also employed in land management departments, notably the Victorian Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, or the South Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service.

However Aboriginal cultural officers often face problems. They are often junior staff in large organisations with broad responsibilities, and can be frustrated when Aboriginal heritage is given a low priority. In NSW, Aboriginal cultural officers working outside the government departments, for example, employed by land councils, have no formal powers.
Even so, it is possible for Aboriginal people to be effective outside the formal system. At Hay, on the Murrumbidgee River in New South Wales, the Local Land Council has taken the initiative with Aboriginal burial conservation. They approached all the local land-holders with a proposal for a program of joint responsibility for the protection of sites on freehold and leasehold land.

The Land Council has emphasised public education and community involvement - the whole community, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. At a recent Aboriginal reburial on a pastoral station, the local school and media were present, and a formal ceremony was held, involving both the land-holders and the Aboriginal community. The response from land-holders has generally been very positive, perhaps because, in the words of Terry Baulch of the Hay LALC: "We're being half smart. We don't say 'you've got to do this', but 'how can you help us'."

This example is a sign of what is possible in building a sense of joint responsibility for heritage conservation. It is a step in the right direction, but it's not the whole answer because there is a limit to what small local groups can do on a voluntary basis without any funding.

There are in fact a limited range of sources of funding for Aboriginal heritage, and for a variety of reasons less money reaches it than environmental and European heritage, at least in the Murray-Darling Basin region. Heritage conservation grants from programs such as the National Estate are for small amounts, do not provide desperately needed employment, and are often tangled with excessive red tape.

Currently, the Murray-Darling Basin Commission is supporting a variety of cultural heritage projects through its Natural Resources Management Strategy. As well as the maritime archaeology project on shipwrecks along the lower Murray River, there have been several projects on Aboriginal Heritage, including regional site surveys; the preparation of site databases; a study of the effect on Aboriginal sites of erosion related to increased water levels in the water storage lakes of the Murray and Darling, and burial site conservation works along the Murray River.

I am coordinating a major project targeted directly at Aboriginal burial site protection. It aims at getting an overview of the needs for Aboriginal burial protection in the whole Murray-Darling Basin: what is known about them; how big is the problem; what is now being done (or not done), and what can be done in the future. A valid criticism levelled at the project is that it doesn't result in any actual site conservation. The problem is that in the current situation you could target money at individual site works for ever and still never catch up. In any case there are simply not enough resources to tackle all the problems on a piece-meal basis. The aim of the project is to look at ways of changing the process.

As part of the project a group of Aboriginal people from all over the Murray-Darling Basin met at Warrakoo Station in western New South Wales at the end of September 1993. The purpose of the Warrakoo workshop was to network, to get together and compare notes on common problems and experiences as well as ideas and success stories. The meeting generated so much interest that a follow up meeting is being held in Dubbo in late November.

Subsequent meetings through 1994 have led to the formation of an Aboriginal organisation to further Aboriginal heritage conservation in the Murray-Darling Basin. This is an Aboriginal initiative, and like that in Hay, shows the way to the future, to a genuine sharing of heritage management between Aboriginal communities, non-Aboriginal land-holders and government departments. For this to be successful Aboriginal people have to lead the way, and not remain as junior partners or token committee members. And for non-Aboriginals, we need to respect the unknown Aboriginal dead and recognise their importance to Aboriginal people and to the heritage of this land.

Jeanette Hope works as a consultant in the Aboriginal, historic and natural heritage of the Murray-Darling Basin.

Bibliography
Anon no date, 'Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Inspectors appointed'. Site (Victoria Archaeological Society Newsletter) 12:4-5, 1990a.

Anon, 'Trainee site officers', VAS News (Victoria Archaeological Survey Newsletter) 7:4-5, 1990b.


Pardoe, C, 'Sharing the past: Aboriginal influence on archaeological practice, a case study from New South Wales'. Aboriginal History 14: 208-222, 1990b.
