The Burra Charter and historical archaeology: reflections on the legacy of Port Arthur

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Introduction

As Port Arthur must be the best known heritage place to all Australia ICOMOS members, I perhaps risk opening a can of worms by reflecting on the 1979-1986 Port Arthur Conservation and Development Project (PACDP) and the Burra Charter before this expert audience. Apart from conducting some doctoral research on the site and in the Port Arthur archive in 2000, I have never worked at Port Arthur; in fact I think I'm one of the only archaeologists of my generation who hasn't! Nevertheless, as I began practicing in archaeological heritage management in the mid-1980s, the PACDP was a key influence on the way historical archaeology was being thought about and done in the context of heritage management. It is probably because I never worked at Port Arthur that I have been fascinated to better understand the ways in which the newly made Burra Charter, and its earliest implementation by archaeological heritage managers at Port Arthur, influenced later archaeological heritage management in Australia. So it is in this spirit that I ask you to consider these retrospective musings of a Port Arthur 'outsider'.

It is crucial that we constantly reflect on why we do things the way we do in heritage, and how our practices have been shaped. Sometimes the original rationales behind practices become obscured or forgotten and procedures are accepted as simply the normal, natural or only way to do the job. It is to the enduring credit of Australia ICOMOS that the Burra Charter has indeed been a living document, which has changed interpretations at all stages, not only when conveying the cultural significance to the public. However the interpretative nature of these processes is often under-acknowledged. Far from being resolved, the tensions between documentation and interpretation remain a feature of heritage management today - not simply in terms of the never-ending difficulties in completing meaningful analyses following excavations, surveys etc - but more deeply, in terms of creating a narrowed role for archaeology in heritage management. Too often archaeology is confined to a technical role, authenticating the material evidence, rather than intervening in popular understandings of the past. This is a role that archaeologists have perhaps created for themselves, but I will suggest that 25 successful years of the Burra Charter mean that historical archaeologists need now to re-assert their intellectual role in the heritage arena and in the processes of conservation and interpretation.

Defining professional practice

Port Arthur has a dense and contested history as a prison, as an early tourist attraction and pleasure garden, and as a historic site embraced within the vocabulary of national heritage. Its layered meanings and contradictions have been comprehensively explored in two recent volumes of Historic Environment (16.3 and 17.1). The 1970s and 1980s saw the bureaucratisation of heritage all over Australia and the Tasmanian Government's heritage tourism development plans were assisted by the emphasis and resources accorded to heritage conservation by the Whitlam government (1972-1975). During the years 1979–1986 the PACDP was funded by a $9 million grant based on two parts Federal to one part State funding, making it a very large-scale conservation initiative in the Australian context (Egloff 1986: 5). It is significant that an archaeologist, Brian Egloff, was appointed as project manager and that two or more historical archaeologists were amongst the key specialist staff.

In the wake of the creation and endorsement of the Burra Charter in 1979, it is clear that defining professional methods for historical archaeology was a primary concern for the PACDP. Project manager Brian Egloff saw the project, with its scale of funding and resources, as a great opportunity for archaeologists to 'stake their claim' in conservation practices.

As this country's most ambitious heritage conservation project, it proved to be an ideal testing ground for Australian historical archaeology... In Australia the comprehensive management of historical resources had yet to develop and so no local models were available... Similarly, heritage conservation in Tasmania was not well developed at the time of the Project's inception (Egloff 1987: 1).

Of key importance to the definition of the archaeologists' role at Port Arthur was the decision that all fabric, from all periods of use of the site, was the responsibility of the archaeologist. This
meant that, following the tenets of the Burra Charter, the archaeologists were responsible for recording and documenting in a formal way, all changes made to the fabric of the place under the aegis of the conservation project. As Egloff pointed out, this made the archaeological program of the Project difficult to maintain, as archaeologists supported and documented all interventions performed by architects and engineers (Egloff 1987: 2-3).

To assist in carrying out larger-scale archaeological excavations, Summer Archaeological Programs were developed to attract student volunteers. These were very successful, attracting hundreds of students from all over Australia (Egloff 1986: 12). A 1982 outline of objectives for the Summer excavation programs shows that they were regarded as detailed investigations prior to restoration, to fulfil Burra Charter Article 24, rather than pursuing any particular research focus (PACP File TM2/66/263/1)).

Historical archaeologists at Port Arthur set about creating the systems to maintain the desired level of control over conservation works on the site, as well as systematising recording and management of the archive created. An emphasis was placed on recording and on the creation of an archive documenting all fabric and all conservation decisions, as required by the Burra Charter. This resulted in an Archaeological Procedures Manual published in 1987, the first manual of its kind to be published for historical archaeology in Australia (Davies and Buckley 1987).

While archaeologist Martin Davies seems to have revelled in the detail of building recording, really making the field his own (Davies and Buckley 1987; Davies 1987), another staff archaeologist, Richard Morrison, relayed some frustration at the fact that research and interpretation were continually stifled by the stress of ‘keeping up’ with day-to-day project work (pers.comm.). Several very promising research designs for archaeological projects were developed over the years; however these could not be fully developed as archaeologists were kept busy recording and documenting the restoration work (Davies and Egloff 1984, PACP File NO M2/66/277 (2)).

The ‘conscience’ of conservation

We are fortunate that John Mulvaney has published several accounts of his involvement and activism in heritage conservation in the 1960s and 1970s, recording thoughts and actions that might otherwise be inaccessible to the researcher. During the 1970s, Mulvaney reports, architectural restoration projects were becoming more and more popular in Australia, while some historical archaeologists were becoming more and more concerned about the results of, and philosophy behind, this practice (Mulvaney 1996: 6). A particular focus for these concerns was planned restoration work on the ruined buildings of Port Arthur. The 1975 Draft Port Arthur Management Plan (National Parks and Wildlife Service) stated that: ‘the basic approach to the restoration and site design of Port Arthur will be to give the site a mood of tranquility and quiet relaxation, matching the more serious aspects of its historical background’ (Tasmanian National Parks and Wildlife Service 1975: 19.2).

Mulvaney felt the need to comment on the restoration proposals for Port Arthur and for Norfolk Island at a 1975 meeting in Hobart, Tasmania, and then throughout the later 1970s in his role as a Commissioner for the Australian Heritage Commission. He described his involvement in these issues as ‘unexpected and traumatic’ because of the confrontational nature of this debate between archaeologists and architects (Mulvaney 1996: 6). Archaeologists argued that restoration decisions were being based on judgements of taste, or aesthetics, rather than on historical evidence, including the evidence of the buildings’ fabric and the associated archaeological deposits:

As historical archaeologists working in this field we must take an active part in interpretation and make sure the historical significance is brought out to the public to counteract this tendency simply to entertain and to sink into unhistorical romanticism... we have a responsibility to our profession to examine the history of the sites we are working on and to influence the restorers and managers to reflect this past as accurately as possible (Bickford 1981: 4).

It is clear that some archaeologists had developed a mistrust of conservation, or restoration architects, in the years leading up to the PACDP. With the support of prominent archaeologists like John Mulvaney, Rhys Jones and Jim Allen, archaeology took on a dominant role in the PACDP. However it is clear that conflict between the architectural approach to the fabric of Port Arthur’s buildings, and the architects’ plans to restore them, continued throughout the project. For instance, in a minute written by project archaeologist Martin Davies in 1984, he detailed his opposition to many aspects of the proposed restoration of the Commandant’s Residence. In this document Davies defined his archaeological approach to the fabric as ‘rigorous’, based on a ‘multi-period approach’, ‘stressing great attention to fabric’ and specifically arguing against judgments based on ‘aesthetics’ (Davies 1984).

Interpretation vs documentation

In a 1978 paper the prolific Mulvaney set out an envisaged role for historical archaeologists in conservation practice, citing the example of Ivor Noel Hume’s work at Colonial Williamsburg, where Hume was not only integral to documenting evidence used in building restoration projects, but where his analyses were also central to interpreting the place and bringing it alive for visitors (reprinted in Mulvaney 1991: 264).

Richard Morrison recalls that archaeologists Rhys Jones and Jim Allen, who were also involved in advising on conservation work at Port Arthur in the late 1970s, were most concerned to demonstrate that archaeology could contribute to the interpretation of Port Arthur and that archaeological research should have a central role in any work on the place (pers.comm.). Jim Allen had been jointly supervising the research of Sydney University PhD student, Maureen Byrne, who excavated at Port Arthur in 1976. Funds from a National Estate Grant to the Co-ordination Committee on Historical Archaeology were made available for Byrne’s research specifically as a kind of test case to demonstrate ‘the intrinsic and academic importance of excavation on historic sites’ (Allen 1978: 20). In 1977 Maureen Byrne tragically died, leaving her research unfinished. While some analysis of her excavations was later undertaken at the Australian National University (Dane and Morrison 1979), with the creation of the PACDP her research was absorbed into that project, which obviously moved into more conservation-oriented directions. It is interesting to speculate whether archaeological interpretations at Port Arthur might have developed in different directions had Maureen Byrne lived, completed her doctoral research and maintained an academic involvement in the project.
The implications of heritage for the theoretical development and institutional support of historical archaeology were discussed by Murray and Allen in 1986. They claimed that conservation philosophy not only formed the greater part of historical archaeology's theoretical foundations, but was also responsible for its failure to develop an internally logical theoretical framework beyond the requirements of a conservation ethic (Murray and Allen 1986: 86). They also cogently argued that archaeological epistemologies underpinned contemporary notions of cultural conservation:

... the value of archaeology as a discipline, and the value of the material remains of past human action from the point of view of the cultural preservationist, have been inextricably linked for over a century, not just the last twenty years in Australia (Murray and Allen 1986: 85-86).

The concept that archaeologists could produce history from material things was a promise that was central to the values ascribed to material heritage. What concerned Murray and Allen was that because the conservation ethic of the heritage movement had become the central theoretical underpinning of historical archaeology, this had led to the development of methodologies designed to enable preservation, but not to fulfill the promise of its research potential. Research potential was, and is, seen as the central defining characteristic of archaeological heritage. But research potential must be theorized in some way in order to be expressed more fully. Murray and Allen's analysis drew out a crucial problematic in historical archaeological thought and provided an insightful characterization of how the conservation ethic had shaped historical archaeological thinking and reasoning. The conservation of scientifically significant fabric is based on the concept that it is a moral responsibility not to foreclose on the possibilities for research in the future. This concept was then embodied in Article 4 (now Article 28) of the Burra Charter:

Study of a place by any intervention in the fabric or by archaeological excavation should be undertaken where necessary to provide the data essential for decisions on the conservation of the place and/or to secure evidence about to be lost or made inaccessible through necessary conservation action. Investigation of a place for any other reason which requires physical disturbance and which adds substantively to a scientific body of knowledge may be permitted, provided that it is consistent with the conservation policy for the place (Burra Charter 1988).

The implication of the fabric-based heritage approach was that it tended to discourage the development of a research or interpretative focus because this was conceptually in conflict with the need to objectively record fabric, the future research potential of which should not be predetermined. In the 1970s and 1980s the view was expressed that not enough was known about Australian historic sites to predetermine their research significance and that because of this, inventory and recording must be the main focus of research (Allen 1978: A22; Temple 1981; Pearson 1984). In a 1974 conference on historical archaeology, Rhys Jones argued against this over-concentration on inventory at the expense of developing ideas about historical archaeological research potential; however he is recorded as a lone voice (quoted in Allen 1978: A22). Therefore, although the definition of research potential which was broadly promoted in Australian heritage management archaeology was "the ability to answer timely and specific research questions" (Schiffer and Gunneman 1977; see also papers in Sullivan and Bowdler 1984), this definition conflicted with perceptions of a limited knowledge of the 'data universe' and of unknown future research potential. To link this back to contemporary work at Port Arthur, we can see how it caused a conflict between the interpretation and documentation roles, one hand preserving future research potential, while the other attempted to realize its promise.

The backlash?

The public presentation of Port Arthur, its promotion as a tourist venue, and site of national heritage value, has been critiqued by many historians, archaeologists and cultural commentators over the years (see for instance Allen 1976; Bickford 1981; Daniels 1983; Bennett 1995). In discussing these critiques, I want to acknowledge the very important and early work done by the PACDP in presenting Port Arthur to the public, especially the 'Port Arthur Alive' and other programs developed by Elspeth Wishart, Peter Boyer, Kristal Buckley and others. The critiques quoted below react to some isolated aspects of Port Arthur's presentation, but particularly to the visibility of archaeological intervention in the place. Perhaps the most vivid critic of the archaeology at Port Arthur has been Tasmanian writer and historian, Richard Flanagan (1990; 1996). Drawing on the example of the Commandant's cottage, Flanagan found the results of its archaeological investigation, as it is presented to visitors, highly bizarre:

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like a dead formaldehyde-stained rat whose flesh is peeled and held back by surgical instruments to reveal its internal organs, the building has been clinically and scientifically vivisected... There are no people here, certainly none of the convicts who originally built the building then were set to work cleaning the floors and carrying the firewood and cooking the food. They are exiled from their past. In their place we have the archaeologists, the new high priests of the past, for whom this building seems to have been reconstructed as a shrine. Pictures in the displays in this building are not as you might expect of the commandants or even of the convicts, but of specialist staff, particularly archaeologists (Flanagan 1996: 186).

Sydney museum curator Peter Emmett also appears to have been influenced by the 'fragmentary' nature of the archaeological interpretations at Port Arthur when he later developed the Hyde Park Barracks and Museum of Sydney, where he was determined not to let archaeology dominate the interpretation! One of the issues Flanagan and Emmett reacted so strongly against was the visibility of archaeologists in the way these places were presented to the public. They saw this as a heroising and aggrandising of the role of the archaeologists at the expense of what everybody was really interested in: the past, or in the case of Port Arthur, the convicts. Emmett accused archaeologists of ceasing to 'think' and 'wonder' about archaeological material after the dig was over: 'But when the dig is done - covered up - they [archaeologists] stop wondering .... they become boring, myopic. They sift and sort fragments into taxonomies of types and declare each significant. Clusters and assemblages ... become nestled in earthly graves' (Emmett 1996: 110).

Emmett endorsed Flanagan's characterization of archaeologists as practitioners of 'crowbar history, smashing the mirror of the past into a thousand unrecognizable fragments, ready to be catalogued and displayed as historical objects devoid of a soul' (Emmett 1992: 28).
The archaeologists at Port Arthur had in fact achieved the aim looked forward to by historical archaeologist Anne Bickford, who was so outspoken about 'romantic' conservation projects in the 1970s: 'I know of no restoration project in Australia where original parts of the structure have been left exposed, so that one can see what the original paint colours, and structural details looked like' (Bickford 1977 quoted in Mulvaney 1996: 6).

Dealing with concerns like those voiced by Bickford, the Port Arthur archaeologists were striving towards authenticity and rigour — but the impetus seems to derive not so much from notions about science, as from ethics and politics. A dominant theme in historical archaeological approaches in Australia and America from the 1970s to the present has been that archaeological evidence can challenge conservative, elitist interpretations of the past, which simply acted to uphold the myths of the powerful in contemporary society. These concerns were also anti-elitist in that they wished to make the processes of conservation transparent and open to interpretation. However, the focus that this threw onto the processes and techniques of archaeology, rather than onto people in the past, seems to have caused a backlash against this kind of archaeological interpretation. This backlash undoubtedly has had an impact on later public, interpretative projects involving archaeological sites, in New South Wales at least; at the Museum of Sydney, for instance, where archaeological artefacts and remains tended to be decontextualised and treated as evocative or aesthetic relics.

The PACDP was terminated in 1986, not because the project was complete, but because funding dried up in the context of a fraught political atmosphere. The federal Minister for the Arts, Heritage and Environment, Barry Cohen, declared that the site was a 'bottomless pit' for government monies (Young 1996: 150). Egloff records that this left 'a backlog of unreported archaeological work, mounds of uncatalogued artefacts' to be left on site as professional staff departed. Archaeologists have of course continued to be employed on the site, but their work is outside the limited scope of this paper. Greg Jackman, the present archaeologist for the site, reported the methods developed by the PACDP were still generally followed at Port Arthur, and that he still admires the careful and insightful approaches to building fabric that were developed by the PACDP (pers.comm. 2000).

Conclusions

The archaeological practices developed for the PACDP had strong ideological motivations, underlain by the concept that material, archaeological evidence and its proper documentation, were an objective constraint on bad restoration and ideologically biased interpretation. Work focused on turning these ideas into a coherent methodology of practice that was authorised through the Burra Charter. Steps were also taken to link method and theory through research designs such as Davies and Egloff's analysis of the Commandants' Cottage (1984). The published manual of archaeological procedures has been an influential document for Australian consulting historical archaeologists, many of whom 'learnt the ropes' as volunteers on the Summer Archaeological Programs. Martin Davies published his approach to the archaeology of standing buildings in 1987 and carried out archaeological analyses of many other buildings in Tasmania and NSW for clients such as the NSW National Trust and the Historic Houses Trust. Both Brian Egloff and Richard Morrison continue to build upon and to publish reviews and reappraisals of work commenced under the PACDP.

However, many perceive that the role of historical archaeologists in conservation projects has tended to narrow since this dominant early role in the PACDP (Ireland 2001: 122). This may be the result of the development and promotion of the 'fabric technician' role as we have seen it at Port Arthur, with an overwhelming focus on comprehensive recording and data management rather than interpretation. Others suggest that it is simply that archaeologists have failed to produce the goods that were promised by archaeological research (Connah 1983; Murray and Allen 1986; Birmingham 1990; Egloff 1994). This view was prevalent in the mid-1990s, but is less so now (see for instance Karskens and Mackay 1999).

Recent research on archaeology, heritage and Australian society quite clearly shows that archaeological interpretations of the past, interpretations which often challenge stereotypes or 'received wisdoms', have often had a limited impact on popular debates about sites, artefacts and their meanings. For example Mary Casey has shown how at the Conservatorium of Music site in Sydney, the interpretation of the archaeological evidence for a complex past landscape of imperial power and social control, made little impact on the public debate about the significance of individual roads and drains discovered on the site (Casey, in press). While Tim Murray records that despite the fascinating re-interpretations of life in Melbourne's Little Lon that were developed from archaeological evidence, popular histories and the media continue to reproduce stereotypical representations of the red-light district and its seedy history. Nevertheless, Murray concludes, this diversity and contestation demonstrates the power of such places in popular history making (Murray, in press). My research into the relationship between historical archaeology, heritage and nationalism showed that modes of practice had tended to limit archaeologists' participation in interpretations of material culture, places and landscapes which are key sites for contested mythologies of identity and nation (Ireland 2001: 266).

The Port Arthur case study highlights the deployment of archaeological discourses — discourses which underpinned the philosophy and approach embodied in the Burra Charter — to exert control over materiality and fabric in the heritage management context. Historical archaeology was perceived by some as the 'conscience of heritage management', using its focus on material evidence, respect for authenticity and prudent scientific reasoning as a corrective to less rigorous architectural restoration. This empirical foundation for historical archaeology's role in conservation has been enormously important in establishing a commitment to authenticity in Australian heritage management. It was a commitment that, as we have seen, was founded upon ethical and political imperatives concerning a 'democratic' and inclusive approach to both the evidence of the past and its interpretation in the present. On the other hand this stewardship role has had some unintended consequences in terms of limiting the interpretative role of archaeology, and perhaps also in clouding the interpretative nature of many of our conservation decisions. Recent amendments to the Burra Charter go a long way towards further acknowledgement of the cultural and social construction of concepts of heritage value. The scene is therefore set for archaeologists to creatively build on this solid legacy to explore new techniques for balancing their roles in conservation and interpretation.
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