

## The Power of the Past

### *Environment, Aborigines, Archaeology, and a Sustainable Australian Society*

Tim Murray\*

The fates of both indigenous and settler Australians loom large in both of Jared Diamond's books *Guns, Germs, and Steel* and *Collapse*, either as victims of Eurasian "civilization" transplanted to Australia, or as potential victims of a twenty-first-century form of the "ecocide" that Diamond considers to be the prime cause of the collapse of civilizations. This is big history at its most dramatic, the meaning of history divined from its grand sweep since the end of the last glacial maximum, with the lessons for us all to learn identified and forcefully expounded. This is history in which the fates of Aboriginal societies in Australia were either sealed by the arrival of Europeans, or by a combination of isolation and invasion (in the case of Tasmania). As the descendant of settler Australians and one who studies the long-term and recent history of Aboriginal Australians, I believe that Diamond fails to grasp the significance the roles Aboriginal people have come to play in contemporary Australia, roles that are crucial for the development of a sustainable society in my country.

The importance of sustainable ecologies (and the societies in which they are embedded) is widely understood in Australia, but sustainable societies are created from more than compacts about greenhouse gas reductions and the development of regimes of sustainable resource exploitation. Sustainable societies also require members to enter an open and honest discourse about their histories, not just those of the mainstream, but also those "hidden" histories of the marginalized and oppressed. Particularly vital in Australia is the ways

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in which indigenous and settler populations identify and deal with the consequences of the conquest and appropriation of Aboriginal Australia, a process that began slightly over 200 years ago. The fates of Aboriginal societies since the invasion of Australia in the late eighteenth century may be of little concern to Diamond (indeed, they barely rate a mention in *Collapse*), but they are a matter of prime importance to contemporary Australians, whatever their ethnicity, and whenever they have arrived in the country.

In this chapter I discuss some of the roles that archaeology and history have come to play in the complex process of dealing with the consequences of history, indeed, of considering the fates of indigenous societies in contemporary Australia. Significantly, there is no single story here, more a multitude of interactions and negotiations that occur at all scales – local, regional, national, and global. The human history of the continent has been mobilized by both indigenous and nonindigenous Australians to support separatist, integrationist, and multicultural agendas. I will exemplify this using the example of Tasmania. The bulk of what I have to say turns on a simple question: If the answer to Yali's question in *Guns, Germs, and Steel* ("Why is it that you white people developed so much cargo and brought it to New Guinea, but we black people had so little cargo of our own?") is, according to Diamond, something like "It's mostly explained by the extent to which ecology constrains human creativity," then what is the point of exploring the archaeology and history of Australia, either before or after occupation by Europeans? Is there anything else worth knowing about the *human* history of Australia? And, if so, who is this knowledge for? I argue that a knowledge and understanding of the past is a prerequisite for building a sustainable future.

Central to my approach in this chapter is the contrast between the abstract and crypto-scientific "big history" questions asked by Diamond (through Yali) and the much more direct and very important "small history" questions, such as What led to the destruction of traditional Tasmanian Aboriginal society? How have indigenous communities survived and maintained Aboriginality in a society seemingly totally dominated by non-Aboriginal culture? Here the focus switches from interesting discussions of the constraints of ecology and opportunity to a different, human scale: How can history be mobilized for the creation of a more just society in Australia?

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Obviously these explorations are highly charged politically. History, archaeology, and heritage have consequences for us now and into the future.

#### ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE CREATION OF HERITAGE IN AUSTRALIA

In Australia archaeology is playing a significant role in the reconfiguration of national politics in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, providing the material elements of *both* ancient and modern cultural identities. In Australia identity politics plays out in a number of fields of public discourse, including "Republicanism," "Multiculturalism," and "Relationships with Asia," but the discussion that has had the most impact on cultural heritage (and on the moral legitimacy of the nation) is that of reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the indigenous inhabitants of the continent. This discussion is made more significant when we recognize that this is both a discourse and a process without end. On the surface it makes good sense to be clear about process and outcomes, but this clarity is illusory because it tends to ignore the fact that although the pattern of the mutual destinies of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia might be changed, our mutuality will continue. Of course, not everyone (even archaeologists) agree about mutuality, with some preferring a notion of separate identities free from the appropriations of colonialism. In this view the descendants of white settlers create new identities "stolen" from the identities and histories of indigenous people.<sup>1</sup> For me this is an unnecessarily negative interpretation of cultural exchange that portrays indigenous people as only passive victims of a "culture grab," rather than as active players appropriating cultural elements as diverse as art, music, dance, sport, and literature from nonindigenous Australians.

The growing recognition that a shared past, present, and future exists within the process of reconciliation has resulted in a profound shift in the popular understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal Australia. One of the most tangible signs of that interest is that Australian governments (both state and federal) have introduced legislation protecting Aboriginal heritage. The history of heritage legislation in Australia is still in its infancy and remains

a highly contested field, but it is possible to make some worthwhile generalizations about it.<sup>2</sup>

The first round of state legislation occurred between 1965 and 1975, but apart from the Australian Heritage Commission Act of 1975, effective federal legislation in this area had to wait until 1984. Aboriginal sites and contexts were protected before colonial European ones, and we still search for convincing explanations for why this happened and what the difference in timing might mean for the relative significance of the two types of cultural heritage for Australia.<sup>3</sup>

Until the 1960s archaeology was focused on fundamentally antiquarian pursuits, such as collecting material culture such as tools, baskets, and utensils, but there was a long-standing interest in unraveling the pre-European history of Australia. However, analysis of this way of "possessing" Australia has rarely progressed beyond the observation that there was a big gulf separating such "stamp collecting" from serious (although amateur) explorations into continental archaeology undertaken between 1930s and the 1960s by Fred McCarthy, Norman Tindale, or D. S. Davidson.<sup>4</sup>

Generations of energetic antiquarians such as Robert Etheridge could not persuade governments to preserve archaeological sites in Australia. Indeed, when legislation was first proposed in the states of South Australia and New South Wales in the mid-1960s, the activities of amateurs and collectors were seen as being one of the great *threats* to the integrity of archaeological sites. With the exception of people like Fred McCarthy, many antiquarians simply separated the "Aborigine from the artifact."<sup>5</sup> They regarded artifacts as the relics of societies either now passed from the earth, or well and truly on their way to extinction or assimilation. Although many investigators were keen to understand traditional methods for manufacturing material culture such as stone tools, it is clear that these studies were not presented as contributions to Aboriginal history, but to something much more abstract. Artifacts were, rather, seen as steps toward the solution of a puzzle of the antiquity and origins of Aboriginal people. This was a game played by, and for the benefit of, non-Aboriginal people either as part of the great imperial project of writing the history of human evolution or as part of a more ambiguous process of "understanding the history of the country."<sup>6</sup>

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The theme of this early legislation was the preservation of "relics" rather than the "heritage" of living societies. When we search for explanations for the sudden significance of such relics, the records of parliamentary debates reveal politicians speaking of "nation" and "heritage." Politicians also celebrated archaeological discoveries as playing their role in an awakening interest in Aboriginal people, who were to achieve full rights of Australian citizenship only in 1967 and were beginning to occupy a cultural space somewhere between extinction and multiculturalism. Parliamentarians were happy to embrace the idea that "relics" were to become important in the definition of national "self."<sup>7</sup>

By the end of the 1970s a "national heritage" had been described and defined by non-Aboriginal people in a way that essentially reflected a separation of a scientific past from an Aboriginal present. This "colonization of the past" was more than just the state assuming legal control of physical relics, it was an appropriation of the entire human history of the continent into the heritage of Australia, an appropriation that endorsed the science of archaeology as the vehicle through which the meanings of that heritage would become manifest. At the end of this period, the Australian Heritage Commission could speak confidently of a "National Estate," the preservation of which was a collective responsibility.<sup>8</sup>

But this notion of a National Heritage, based on the appropriation of the "relics" of Aboriginal Australia, has been remarkably short lived. During the last twenty-five years Aboriginal organizations around the country have successfully fought to gain control over what had previously been understood as "relics" and have now been publicly redefined as "Aboriginal heritage," thus putting the interests of a living culture ahead of a scientific interest in one that was passed or passing. Much of the conflict was directed by indigenous people toward archaeologists and the heritage organizations run by state and federal bodies. These peoples stressed that the legislation of the 1960s and early 1970s might have ensured the conservation of archaeological sites, but it also excluded the owners of the heritage from its management.

As a result of this intense political action all state and federal governments have either produced new legislation or have radically changed the way they administer existing acts. In each case a central

question has been the moral legitimacy of the state to pass legislation on matters related to the heritage of indigenous groups, which might specifically limit their rights of control, or to argue for the legitimacy of other rights and interests in such heritage. Today making policy about indigenous heritage in Australia is firmly based on the notion that it should be an expression of the interests of Aboriginal people.<sup>9</sup>

Whereas these significant changes have made it possible for Aboriginal people to regain control over heritage, governments and Aboriginal organizations also have to manage a non-Aboriginal interest in the human history of Australia, which retains much of the original focus on sites and artifacts. Government and nongovernment organizations have also struggled to find ways that allow non-Aboriginal people to make meanings about and to confer values on these things, be they "relics" or "cultural heritage," if only to ensure that heritage can survive into the future. This has proved to be difficult because it is self-evident that such heritage policies (if they are to be successful) cannot simply be an expression of the interests of Aboriginal people, given that the society that presents the greatest threat to that heritage, and that has to live with and make sense of such policies, is predominantly non-Aboriginal.<sup>10</sup>

To be effective, policies concerned with the management of indigenous heritage cannot only arise from the interests of indigenous people, but must also engage the perspectives and interests of the broader society in which such policies are expected to be effective. In this sense effective policies have to be meaningful to Aboriginal *and* non-Aboriginal people, an increasingly tall order if policy is developed on the assumption that the interests of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal society cannot be coincident, and that they should be kept hermetically sealed one from the other. It is also made more difficult when ways of establishing the cultural significance of Aboriginal heritage for non-Aboriginal people (such as archaeological study) are marginalized as "colonialist" or denigrated as being slightly more subtle attempts at appropriating Aboriginal Australia into a manufactured Australian identity.<sup>11</sup>

In Australia governments have rightly sought to correct gross imbalances in the administration of Aboriginal heritage by recognizing the paramount importance of an Aboriginal interest in Aboriginal

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heritage, and by parlaying that recognition into an increasing control of that heritage by Aboriginal people. This empowerment of Aboriginal people, which is commonly expressed as an ownership of that heritage, has led to a lessening of freedoms for archaeologists and to much greater regulation of archaeological activity by governments and Aboriginal heritage organizations.

After more than two decades of this regime, instances of effective collaboration between archaeologists and Aboriginal communities are common, if not as frequently celebrated in the literature as the inevitable conflicts.<sup>12</sup> Reconciliation does not (and should not) require that the places, contexts, and artifacts that together make up the heritage of Aboriginal Australia must have the same meanings and values for everybody. It should also not require that only one strategy for establishing the meanings of places or things be mandated, be it the views of Aboriginal people, "scientists," adherents of postcolonialist perspectives, or New Age crystal gazers. What reconciliation should mean is that all Australians come to value the cultural heritage of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia so that it can be conserved for future generations and become an active principle in the process of experiencing, describing, and understanding Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia as they continue to unfold. In this way heritage can be transformed into cultural capital that can play a vital role in creating a just and sustainable society in the country. This is a goal far beyond the horizons either of *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, or *Collapse*. The fact that indigenous societies survived in Australia, and that their fates have become so inextricably linked with the futures of nonindigenous Australians, makes their near invisibility in *Collapse* all the more surprising.

There was history in Australia before the arrival of Europeans, and much more to the heritage and archaeology of Aboriginal Australia than the limited role assigned by Diamond of 40,000 years of "noble savages" keeping economies in balance with continental ecologies. Although conveniently ignored by Diamond, there is every possibility that human beings were an active principle in the extinction of megafauna in Australia.<sup>13</sup> There is also ample evidence of cultural diversity and change over a long continental history that did not cease with invasion in the late eighteenth century. Coming to grips with this history is a vital part of the story of modern Australia.



FIGURE 11.1 Pleistocene archaeological sites in greater Australia (Sahul).

#### SURVIVAL, "HIDDEN" HISTORY, AND CHANGING THE FOCUS OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN AUSTRALIA

Until recently, for most Australian archaeologists research into the archaeology of Aboriginal Australia has focused on the very earliest periods of colonization and settlement, from about 45,000 to 10,000 before present<sup>14</sup> – a result of a desire to establish continental chronology and to contribute to answering some of the “big” questions

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of global prehistory. However, over the past twenty years the focus has begun to change from a concern with "deeper" prehistory to the archaeology of Aboriginal people since 1788, when the English began to colonize Australia. There are many reasons for this change of focus, but for me the crucial explanation flows from the requirements of heritage legislation (which I have just discussed). Chief among these is the need for archaeologists to gain the informed consent of communities in order to conduct archaeological research (and the fact that the vast bulk of that research is undertaken in heritage or "applied" settings) has fostered the evolution of collaborative research projects that serve a broader range of interests (both indigenous and archaeological).<sup>15</sup>

Two of the most important indigenous interests are in the revival and maintenance of traditional culture and community, and (directly connected to the first) regaining ownership of lands appropriated by the government at the time of colonization. Legislation has made it clear that archaeological data from remote antiquity in Australia are not considered to be of much use in defining tribal or clan affiliations from the distant past. For more recent times information derived from ethnography and ethnohistories is thought to be much more useful.

It is increasingly common for indigenous communities to regard the period immediately before European colonization, and the roughly 200 years of dispossession and occupation that followed, to be of the greatest cultural, hence political, significance. Over the last decade the historical archaeology of Aboriginal Australia (or contact archaeology as it is more commonly known) has sought to reconstruct the trajectories of Aboriginal societies from "prehistory" to history and to dissolve the artificial divide between the two. Here the content and form of history matters very much indeed, and the goal is to write original histories with very little assistance from written historical sources.<sup>16</sup>

Another significant issue has to do with how archaeologists can identify the forces that changed indigenous societies over the last 200 years, helping us toward a better understanding of the way things changed. Significantly, archaeological research allows us to chart the active roles played by indigenous societies since colonization. Here we can demonstrate that indigenous societies were not



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just passive receptors of alien cultures, but are actively combating the effects of exotic diseases and subsequent population collapse, and developing strategies in an attempt to ensure social and cultural survival.

An indigenous interest in “contact” archaeology revolves around the need to comprehend the experience of dispossession and cultural survival. For Aboriginal people, exploring a historical archaeology of Aboriginal life over the past 200 years can enhance understanding about the histories of separation and sharing that are so much a feature of community life, while at the same time they provide a rich store of information from which such communities can renegotiate or reshape their identities within modern Australian society.



FIGURE 11.2 Archaeologist Mark Grist. (Courtesy of Mark Grist)

#### MARK DUGAY GRIST<sup>17</sup>

“For me archaeology has immense significance in writing the recent history of indigenous Australia. When linked with oral histories, archaeology has the capacity to teach us something new,

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or (because of the impact of colonization) something that our people might not have known." (Interview, 31 January 2008)

"What I have tried to express is the need for our people to have the basic toolbox (both mentally and physically) to ensure our involvement in heritage management for the future. How and where Aboriginal oral history and cultural practices enhance the archaeology and cultural heritage management within Australia is a matter for each individual Aboriginal community. Science should be seen and used as a tool to enhance Aboriginal people's lives and not seen as something that is still strongly related to colonialism." (Dugay-Grist 2006: 378).

The creation of new archaeological perspectives on the history of Aboriginal Australia also takes into account the impact of a widespread desire for reconciliation between black and white Australians, but it has had a price. Significantly the cultural landscapes of reconciliation created through this research are the product of a series of revelations (profoundly shocking to many) of contact with Europeans and its consequences.<sup>18</sup> The cultural landscapes of reconciliation often flow from the difficult and confronting process of making the invisible – a product of ignorance, fear, or a desire to suppress or forget – visible, and of discovering how much of the history of such landscapes is shared among their populations. Nowhere in Australia is this more apparent than in Tasmania, where stories of frontier violence and wholesale extirpation can now link with the product of thirty years of archaeological research to produce an account that has real political significance in contemporary Australia. Here issues of heritage, of the importance of the local story over the global "big" picture, come to the fore, allowing us to "see" the Tasmanians as something more than the product of 10,000 years of isolation (which began when sea waters rose at the end of Pleistocene about 10,000 years ago). It also reinforces the point that postcolonial societies can



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#### WHAT CAUSED THE DESTRUCTION OF TRADITIONAL TASMANIAN ABORIGINAL SOCIETY?

Beginning in the early 1990s and gathering much greater momentum after the election of a conservative government in 1996, the nature of the settlement of Australia by the British became the subject of intense national debate. Was it a generally humane appropriation of essentially virgin lands by colonists seeking a better life, or was it something less noble, less praiseworthy? Up to this point the national story had been one of courage, will to win, innovation, and egalitarianism, but it came to be understood that this worked only if you managed not to mention the original owners of the land and what had happened to them in the 200 years since first settlement.<sup>19</sup> Aboriginal history was born in the late 1960s, and in the thirty years that followed, research unfolded a complex and troubling story that is widely understood to have bolstered moves toward granting self-determination and land rights to indigenous groups. Although there was widespread public approval of attempts to seek reconciliation with indigenous Australians, some historians and politicians on the Right firmly believed that their opponents had, to all intents and purposes, fabricated evidence of conflict on the frontier, and subsequent transgressions of the rights and liberties of Aboriginal people. Chief among these is Keith Windshuttle, whose *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* was published in 2002. The back cover blurb states its purpose loud and clear. His intention was to reappraise: "The now widely accepted story about conflict between colonists and Aborigines in Australian history.... Windshuttle concludes that much of their case is poorly founded, other parts are seriously mistaken, and some of it is outright fabrication.... the author finds the British colonization of Australia was the least violent of all Europe's encounters with the New World."

*Fabrication* is a work of historical revision, seeking to undermine the accounts of life on the frontier (and afterwards) that have driven much of the drive toward reconciliation. It is an attempt to counter what is called "black armband history" and to restore national pride

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in the achievements of European pioneers. *Fabrication* is an excellent example of why the archaeology of Aboriginal Australia is a site of cultural and political debate.<sup>20</sup>

In *Fabrication* Windschuttle writes about the history of Van Diemen's Land (the original name of Tasmania) between 1803 and 1847 and makes several claims about traditional Tasmanian Aboriginal society that he regards as being supported by available archaeological and ethno-historical evidence. Most memorably when summarizing the fate of the Tasmanians, he writes:

They had survived for millennia, it is true, but it seems clear that this owed more to good fortune than to good management. The 'slow strangulation of the mind' was true not only of their technical abilities but also of their social relationships. Hence it was not surprising that when the British arrived, this small, precarious society quickly collapsed under the dual weight of the susceptibility of its members to disease and the abuse and neglect of its women.<sup>21</sup>

In essence the destruction of traditional society was the fault of the Tasmanians themselves, not the British: "the real tragedy of the Aborigines was not British colonization per se but that their society was, on the one hand, so internally dysfunctional and, on the other, so incompatible with the looming presence of the rest of the world."<sup>22</sup>

Archaeological and historical research conducted over the last thirty years allows us to evaluate Windschuttle's account of traditional Tasmanian society (particularly such aspects as population size, the treatment of women, the incidence of warfare, and technology) and to reflect on why he seemed so keen to effectively blame the Tasmanians for their own fate. For Windschuttle, Tasmanian society before the arrival of the Europeans was internally maladapted, precariously balanced, and dysfunctional.

Tasmanian archaeological data do not support his claim that this was a society poised on the brink of extinction because of the consequences of long-term isolation (incidentally an argument in part supported by Diamond in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*). Windschuttle's account is based on a very partial and narrow understanding of the results of more than thirty years of archaeological research into the history of Tasmanian Aboriginal society.<sup>23</sup> For these reasons

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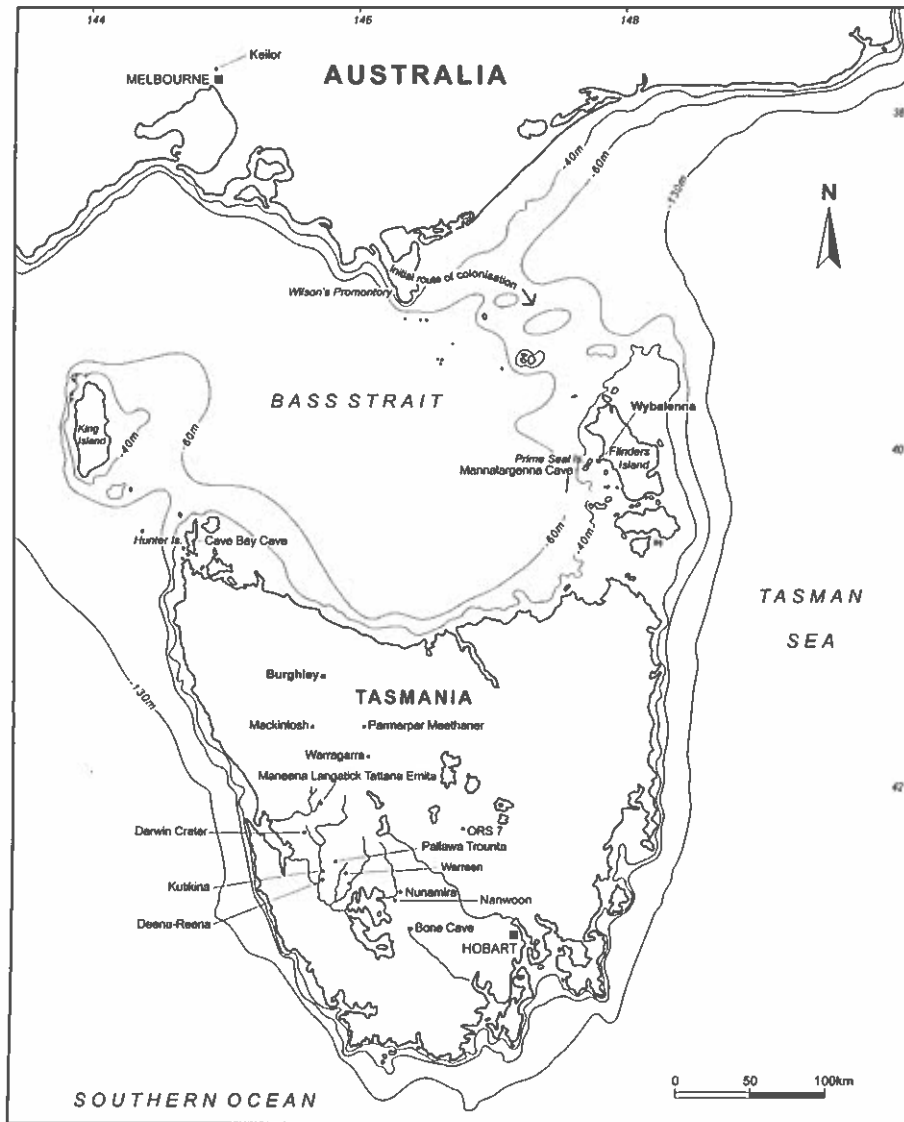


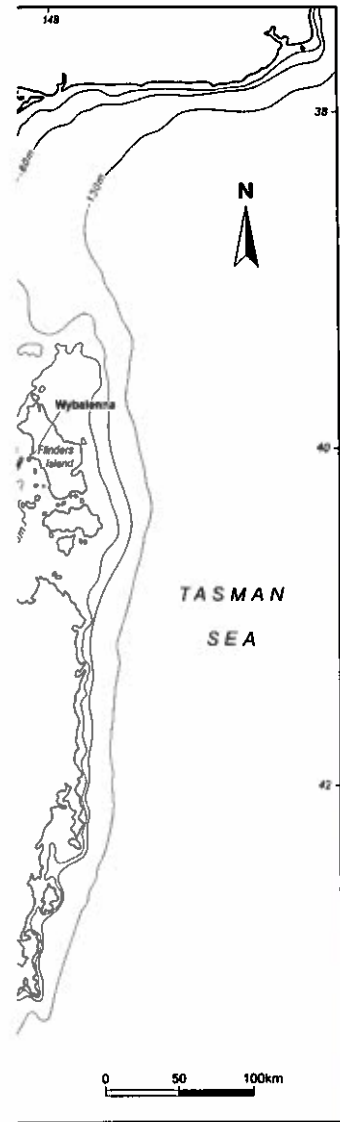
FIGURE 11.3 Key archaeological sites of Tasmania.

the implication that his “counter-history” in some way or another mitigates the culpability of European dispossession as the primary cause of the destruction of traditional Tasmanian society should be firmly rejected.

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In 1978 Tom Haydon produced a documentary film, *The Last Tasmanian*, that skillfully integrated archaeological and historical information to present a history of Tasmanian Aborigines from earliest times until the vicious conflicts with white settlers during the early nineteenth century. Haydon (along with Rhys Jones and Jim Allen, two archaeologists who appeared in the film) did not shrink from describing those conflicts as genocide, but *The Last Tasmanian* gained its greatest notoriety from two highly contentious assertions: first, that the death of the woman Truganini marked the extinction of the Tasmanian aboriginal people, and second, that Tasmanian Aboriginal society was doomed to extinction *before* the arrival of Europeans. Given that there was a substantial population in Tasmania identifying themselves as Aboriginal (they were the descendants of unions between Aboriginal and European men and women), Haydon's claims for extinction were hotly disputed and seen to support opposition to land rights for those people. But it was the claim of there being strong archaeological evidence that traditional Aboriginal society had been suffering the effects of cultural isolation since the separation of Tasmania from the mainland of Australia that created the most conflict.

The arguments and counterarguments about estimates of the pre-European population of Tasmania, the reliability of early explorers' accounts of relations between men and women in traditional society, and the "regressive" nature of Tasmanian technology are very technical and detailed, but it is worth observing that the commonly held view that the Tasmanians were suffering cultural regression as the result of 10,000 years of isolation from Australia (because of rising sea levels that created the island of Tasmania) is highly debatable. Of course, archaeological data are often equivocal and require the use of inferential reasoning to be developed to the point where

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they may count critically as historical or anthropological evidence. However, this does not mean that they must be either inherently insecure or mute.

Fortunately our stock of both archaeological and historical evidence about the first forty-five years of European occupation of Tasmania further strengthens the argument against regression, which was a provocative idea about the consequences of isolation that had flowed from early research in the 1970s. These ideas have now been comprehensively refuted or at the very least seriously questioned. There is clear evidence that during this period Aboriginal people rapidly adopted new animals (dogs) and material culture (guns and blankets), sometimes modifying them to traditional uses (glass for tools and rust as a substitute for red ochre, which was used in ritual). Clearly the descendants of those who had coped with an Ice Age and the separation of Tasmania from Sahul (the prehistoric land mass including Australia and New Guinea) had not lost their desire (or indeed their capacity) to cope with change. The picture that is slowly emerging from recent archaeological research is one of cultural dynamism and adaptation. Sadly this was cut short by belief of the colonists that the Tasmanians were subhuman, a belief that led to policies of genocide that brought traditional society in Tasmania to the brink of extinction.

#### THE SITE OF BURGHLEY

Much work remains to be done in gathering evidence of the impact of colonialism on the indigenous Tasmanians, but sites such as Burghley, a partially excavated stratified site in the northwest, demonstrates the potential of archaeology to contribute to our understanding of the Aboriginal experience of contact, while at the same time emphasizing the resilience and adaptability of traditional Tasmanian society and culture.

Located between the Medway and Leven Rivers and established in 1825 as one of the sheep stations established in northwest Tasmania by the Van Diemen's Land Company (VDLC), Burghley was excavated in the early 1990s.<sup>25</sup> During the excavation an assemblage of Aboriginal artifacts was recovered – among which were items, such as flaked glass tools, clearly dating to the postcontact period. The

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history of the VDLC has been discussed in detail by others,<sup>26</sup> but it should be noted that it was then common practice in the Australian colonies that sheep would be extensively grazed under the care of shepherds, who lived for long periods at "stations" (ranches) such as Burghley.

During the ten or so years that Burghley was occupied, relations between the men living there and the Aboriginal population of the region were anything but friendly, again a state of relations that is widely acknowledged.<sup>27</sup> Violence began almost as soon as the Company arrived in the region as they rapidly placed their settlements and sheep runs on Aboriginal hunting grounds, made use of native paths and roads, and generally disrupted the movements of Aboriginal people through the area.

By 1835 George Augustus Robinson, the person employed by the Van Diemen's Land government to facilitate the removal of all Aboriginal people from Tasmania, was reporting successful completion of his task.<sup>28</sup> However, the VDLC continued to report attacks on their stations, and in November 1836 Robinson sent out one of his sons to round up the stragglers, for whom a £50 reward had been offered.<sup>29</sup> The party encountered a family of six near Cradle Mountain but could not convince them to make the trip back to Launceston.<sup>30</sup> Until recently it was thought that from 1835 onwards these people were the only free Tasmanians left on the island, and those most likely to have been responsible for continuing attacks on Company servants.<sup>31</sup> The family, a middle-aged man, Lanna (John Lanna), and woman, Nabunya/Nabruna, two young men aged between eighteen and twenty, Banna/Manney (Barnaby Rudge) and Pleti, and three children under ten, Albert (Charley), William, and Francis (Frank), were captured in 1842 and sent to Flinders Island off the coast of Tasmania.<sup>32</sup>

When the site of Burghley was relocated the only surface evidence remaining was a pile of collapsed rocks indicating the position of a chimney. Two seasons of excavation uncovered a total of 145 square meters of materials. Initial excavation focused around the collapsed chimney butt and attempted to delineate the boundaries of the associated hut structure. At the end of excavation the outlines of a hut measuring ten by four meters, a stone chimney and hearth with flagstones, a cobbled outside area where it was thought that a doorway



FIGURE 11.4 Excavated remains of house at Burghley, Tasmania. (Courtesy of author)

had been located, another cobbled area further from the house that led into a drain structure, and a dump zone had been revealed.

During the excavation it became apparent that the hut had burnt down – probably when the chimney caught fire. Although the flaked glass implements identified at the site are clearly the result of a post-contact Aboriginal presence, it also became apparent that much of the Aboriginal flaked stone assemblage overlay this destruction layer and therefore also dated to the postcontact period. Aboriginal artifacts were located in the uppermost deposits and also found lying on the cobble surface near the doorway, indicating that they were deposited before destruction of the hut.<sup>33</sup>

It is clear from the historical records that Aboriginal and European people did not coexist at Burghley. At no time during the station's period of European occupation would it have been left unattended, so there would not have been opportunities for Aboriginal people to make sporadic use of the site in the absence of Company servants. Any postcontact Aboriginal occupation of the site must have occurred after the Company abandoned it in the late 1830s – probably around 1836 or 1837. The family group captured in 1842 is the most likely candidate for occupying the colonial encampment.

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Burghley offers a unique opportunity to investigate the Aboriginal experience of contact through the archaeological record. It also provides the basis of a secure and detailed archaeological refutation of Windschuttle's claims concerning the nature of traditional Tasmanian society. However, the analysis of the recovered assemblage by Williamson indicates that the Aboriginal occupants of the hut were adapting European goods such as bottle glass, ceramics, and musket flints to produce traditional implements such as points and scrapers. Williamson's analysis of the Burghley stone and glass assemblages has opened a window into the Tasmanian experience of contact with Europeans.<sup>31</sup> At the very least it provides a significant body of site-specific evidence to weigh against the accounts of settlers, explorers, or conciliators such as Robinson.

Windschuttle's attempt to ignore such strong contradictory evidence speaks to the power of long-held notions of the cultural poverty of traditional Tasmanian indigenous society, notions adopted by Diamond from the work of Rhys Jones. But it also relates to an unwillingness to confront the realities of the European settlement of Australia that, as I have already remarked, can be profoundly shocking. True reconciliation between black and white Australia can flow only from a frank acknowledgement of that history – its good as well as its bad bits, and there is every reason to believe that through research, criticism, and debate, progress can be made, and we can reach a clearer understanding of the richness and strength of Tasmanian society and the impact of dispossession on it.<sup>35</sup> But above all we need to be clear that there is no evidence that Aboriginal society in Tasmania was on the brink of extinction before the European invasion. Indeed, both the proximate and ultimate causes of the extinction of traditional Tasmanian Aboriginal society flowed from European settlement, and the frequently violent contest for control over land that dispossession entailed.

#### SETTLER "ECOCIDE"?

I have already remarked on the absence of Aboriginal Australians from Jared Diamond's *Collapse* and explained this as being the outcome of Diamond's desire to portray contemporary indigenous Australians only as the victims of colonial slaughter or as bit-part

players in the pastoral and whaling industries.<sup>36</sup> This is in contrast to the rosier picture he paints of Aboriginal life prior to European invasion: "When that European settlement of Australia began in 1788, Australia had of course been settled for over 40,000 years by Aborigines, who had worked out successful sustainable solutions to the continent's daunting environmental problems."<sup>37</sup>

Leaving aside the fact that this assertion is based on circular logic (how would we know whether such "solutions" were "worked out" or happened by chance, or indeed whether an archaeological record comprised of tiny and random samples of over 40,000 years of human history allows us to assess claims about choice); it sits oddly with Diamond's explanation for the extinction of Australian megafauna during the early phases of human occupation. In *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Diamond concluded that the "most likely" cause was human action, "both directly (by being killed for food) and indirectly (as the result of fires and habitat modification caused by humans)."<sup>38</sup> Was this an "unsustainable" solution that was incorrectly "worked out" by ancestral Aborigines, presumably because they did not have enough information about the ecology of the megafauna? Diamond's account glosses over the fierce debates about whether megafauna were all made extinct early, allowing readers to assume falsely that after early bloodletting the descendants of these early settlers decided to live sustainably in Australia. But this also contrasts with another of his conclusions: "Those extinctions eliminated all the large wild animals that might otherwise have been candidates for domestication, and left native Australians and New Guineans without a single native domestic animal."<sup>39</sup> Are we to assume that sustainable solutions incorporating the domestication of animals (if not plants) in Australia may have developed if the early slaughter had not occurred?

It is not entirely clear what Diamond is searching for here, but it may well have more to do with his desire to strengthen a contrast between the "sustainable Eden" of hunter-gatherer Australia with the consequences of settler colonialism for the broader environment of the continent. Here the tale is one of near unrelenting horror, of a poor environment made poorer by introduced agricultural practices, of wholesale "mining" of both renewable and nonrenewable resources to the point where the Australian economy (and by extension Australian society) may well become unsustainable. Diamond

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paints a picture of an Australia enmired in British culture, teetering on the brink of destruction, literally consuming its future.<sup>10</sup> For Diamond, Australia is exemplary:

Australia illustrates in extreme form the exponentially accelerating horse race, in which the world now finds itself. ... On the one hand, the development of environmental problems in Australia, as in the whole world, is accelerating exponentially. On the other hand, the development of public environmental concern, and of private and governmental countermeasures, is also accelerating exponentially. Which horse will win the race?<sup>11</sup>

Diamond powerfully creates a sense of crisis, if only to support an argument that the best thing Australia could do for itself, and the world, is to get rid of its cattle and to "voluntarily phase out much of its agricultural enterprise."<sup>12</sup> But how much of the claimed "facts" of Diamond's analysis can be confirmed, and are there accounts of the immediate past and future of the continent alternative to those Diamond presents? It is significant to note that the chapter "Mining" Australia "contains no data, no tables or figures showing past or current trends with respect to particular indicators, and Diamond makes no reference to particular studies."<sup>13</sup> This makes for compelling reading, but it is bad science.

A close reading of "Mining" Australia reveals a highly colored interpretation, which has been created to serve clear political ends. Here we need to be very careful. An attack on the factual basis of Diamond's arguments does not necessarily imply complete disagreement with his message that all societies should strive to achieve sustainability and to rein in consumption that requires us to overuse nonrenewable resources. Diamond's discussion of the impact of mining nonrenewable resources such as coal, uranium, and iron ore has much merit, especially when we consider the impact of coal burning on the emission of greenhouse gases.

Indeed, many of the points made in *Collapse* about the possibility of Australian "ecocide" were already made in the 1970s and have been a spur to action since. But in his arguments concerning the "mining" of renewable resources such as water and soil fertility, Diamond's zeal to rid Australia of agriculture, and to conserve remaining forests, water, and fishing grounds, leads him to excess. Diamond regards low crop yields (and low soil fertility) as supporting his arguments for phasing out agriculture in Australia.

These Draconian recommendations about the future of Australia do not constitute a practical basis for action by Australians. For example, Australian rice and cotton farmers produce yields of double the world average. Australia exports sugar and, directly contrary to Diamond's assertion, it exports almost three times the quantity of citrus it imports.<sup>44</sup> Again, it is worth stressing that these facts do not in anyway justify using scarce water to grow crops such as rice and cotton in Australia. Turning to soil fertility we find that Australian farmers have been using manure and other fertilizers since the eighteenth century (as have farmers everywhere) and that developments in tillage technologies have dramatically reduced soil degradation. Salinization of soils is not only understood but regarded as a major challenge that is being met.

Much the same story applies to his observations about forestry, fisheries, the future of the Great Barrier Reef, and climate change in Australia. Notwithstanding Diamond's carefully cultivated sense of impending doom, Australian governments (and farmers, fishers, and foresters) are acutely aware of the challenges posed by sustainability and by climate change. Much has been done by choice that has not involved anything like the radical solutions (such as the end of agriculture on the continent) proposed by Diamond. The situation in Australia does not involve a choice between extremes (unsustainable levels of production and consumption versus drastic reductions) because *neither* option provides a basis for social sustainability. It is interesting that Diamond does not advocate the cessation of intensive irrigation and fertilization practices in the Imperial Valley of California, his home state.

The simple point here is that (to follow Diamond himself) good choices must be based on good information, and Diamond has provided very little with respect to Australia. Indeed, it would be an act of the grossest folly if Australians were to choose such a course of action when much less radical, but no less effective, means of improving sustainability are already available. Of course, much remains to be done, and there is still a very long way to go persuading governments and the people who elect them to take a longer-term view of the issues involved. However, huge steps have been taken in raising consciousness of the challenges posed by sustainability. But surely the recognition of the need for change and for the development of policies that

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emphasize sustainability and the understanding that the fate of the planet is a global rather than simply a national or regional concern demonstrates the power of knowledge and understanding as the best bases for making choices. Perhaps it is in this way, as an exemplar of a sustainable future, rather than as a participant in Diamond's horse race to extinction, that Australia might serve as a beacon to the rest of the world.

But this is still to see sustainability in a simplistic way. If we broaden our focus to consider the creation of sustainable societies that foster innovation, clear-sighted inquiry, and a commitment to social justice, then we have the chance to imagine different kinds of communities. In Australia one of the major outcomes of the reconciliation process between Aboriginal and settler Australians has been the recognition of a deep Aboriginal interest in land both as a symbol of identity as well as a resource for sustaining societies through economic and cultural action. Here the recognition of the rich human history of Australia, and the understanding that sustainable communities cannot be created by marginalizing and excluding nonmainstream interests, articulates powerfully with the drive to develop sustainable land use practices.

For the last decade Australian governments at all levels have begun to create policies that explicitly recognize that the values placed on land, culture, and heritage by Aboriginal people are vital resources in the battle against salinity, the exhaustion of soils, and the destruction of forests.<sup>15</sup> In this way, far from being written out of the picture as victims of the grand sweep of "big" history, the "small" history of Australia over the past 200 years has played out in a way in which Aboriginal people have come to play key roles in developing a sustainable future for Australia.

#### CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have stressed how archaeology and history have been and continue to be mobilized to ensure a reconciliation between black and white Australia. This is a complex and politically sensitive process. It is also dynamic, especially in terms of the ways in which identities (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) are created from the raw materials of historical data and contemporary experience. One of the most

significant aspects of such dynamism is the sense in which societies and identities have changed, will continue to change, and are open to influences from both the past and the present. Aboriginal societies were not completely destroyed as a result of the European invasion of the continent. Indeed, the survival of indigenous Australians, the richness of their cultures, and the diversity of their experiences over the last 200 years have become indispensable components in the cultural and social makeup of contemporary Australia. I have also discussed the importance of recognizing the vital role that Aboriginal communities can play in managing land in Australia, thereby supporting attempts to develop both ecologically and culturally sustainable land use practices in mining, forestry, and agriculture. In this sense the process of reconciliation has begun to develop in ways not originally envisaged when it was begun some fifty years ago.

A curiosity about the past, a desire to understand the histories of the places we inhabit, and a search for meaning in human history are things to treasure. They are also resources for building better societies. That there is diversity and difference does not imply chaos and disorder. Indeed, understanding the genesis and histories of such perspectives might help people to come to grips with the idea that, although their interests may not be coincident, they have a greater interest in terms of ensuring some form of global (as well as local) conversation that everyone can participate in.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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#### Notes

- \* I am a professor of archaeology and head of the School of Historical and European Studies at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia. I have also taught archaeology in Beijing and in several European universities. I have published thirty books, among the most recent *Keeping Up with the Macnamaras* (2005), a case study in the archaeology of nineteenth-century immigration to Australia, and a single-volume history of archaeology, *Milestones in Archaeology* (2007).

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My current field research is focused on two major projects – The Origins of the Tongan Maritime Empire, which explores the immediate precontact archaeology of this Pacific island kingdom, and Building Transnational Archaeologies of the Modern World 1750–1950, which compares domestic assemblages from sites in Melbourne, Sydney, and London to write new social histories of migrant populations.

I was raised in outback Australia and have worked on the archaeology of indigenous Australia with members of local Aboriginal communities in Tasmania and elsewhere in Australia. The core of my approach to the complex issues that arise in this kind of archaeology are discussed in my edited book, *The Archaeology of Contact in Settler Societies* (2004).

1. See especially McNiven and Russell 2005.
2. For example, Boer and Wiffen 2005; Chanock and Simpson 1996; Davis 2007; Langton 1994; Murray 1996a; Meyers and Field 1998; Smith 2004.
3. Some examples of this inquiry are, e.g., Colley 2003; DuCros 2002; Murray 1992, 1998; McNiven and Russell 2005.
4. A notable exception to histories such as White and O'Connell 1982 and Horton 1991 is that of Griffiths 1996, which has fostered a rethinking of the history of antiquarianism in Australian archaeology and anthropology.
5. Specht 1993.
6. These matters are usefully discussed in Ireland 1996, 2002, and Murray 1992.
7. See, e.g., Elder 2007.
8. See, e.g., Purdie 1997.
9. Colley 2003; McNiven and Russell 2005; Murray 1992, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c; and Smith 2004 canvass a range of opinions on this aspect of heritage history.
10. Murray 1993a, 1996d.
11. DuCros 2002; Colley 2003; McNiven and Russell 2005; Smith 2004.
12. There is a considerable literature devoted to the impact of changing relations between archaeologists and indigenous people in Australia. There have been conflicts, most notably related to Tasmania, which have been used to advance both separatist and postcolonial agendas; see Colley 2003; DuCros 2002; McNiven and Russell 2005; and Smith 2004 for both inaccurate and one-sided accounts. For alternative images see Murray 1996b, 1996c; Murray and Allen 1995. More positive accounts of collaborations exist, see, e.g., Davidson et al. 1995.
13. The causes of the extinction of the giant fauna (megafauna) of Australia have been hotly debated since the nineteenth century, when the first specimens came to light. Crucial elements of debate are the timing of extinctions – did all megafauna become extinct at the same time everywhere in Australia? – and agents – was it human over-predation or climate change, or a combination of the two? Useful discussions of the issues (in Australia and elsewhere are Barnosky et al. 2004; Johnson 2002; O'Connell and Allen 2004; Trueman et al. 2005).

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14. bp = before the present, which has been established by scientific convention as 1950.
15. See Murray 2004a for examples.
16. See Murray 2004b and Silliman 2005 for reviews of the extensive literature in this field.
17. Mark is an Aboriginal man from the Werigia, Nyeri Nyeri, and Wamba Wamba peoples of northwest Victoria, Australia. He has an honours degree from the Australian National University and is Manager of State-wide Heritage Programs and Heritage Services, Aboriginal Affairs Victoria. Interviewed 31 January 2008.
18. Murray 2004a.
19. Over the last decade there has been significant debate in Australian society about the nature and purpose of Australian history. These debates have come to be known as the "history wars" and revolved around the ways in which the history of black and white relations in Australia should be written. Flashpoints have been arguments about the reality of massacres on the frontier and the actions of state governments in removing Aboriginal children from their families (especially during the twentieth century) creating what have become known as the "stolen generations." Useful surveys of the debates include Atwood and Foster 2003; Macintyre and Clark 2003.
20. A version of this discussion appears in Murray and Williamson 2003.
21. Windschuttle 2002: 386.
22. Ibid.
23. Derived mostly from Jones 1977.
24. The great controversy sparked by *The Last Tasmanian* can be explored by reference to Onsmann 2004 and O'Regan 1984.
25. Murray 1993b.
26. For the history of the VDL Company see Meston 1958; Lennox 1990; and Murray 1993b.
27. Lennox 1990; McFarlane 2002; Murray 1993b; Plomley 1966: 196, 1992.
28. Plomley 1966: 926.
29. Davies 1973: 153.
30. Plomley 1966: 926.
31. McFarlane 2002.
32. Murray 1993b.
33. Ibid.: 509.
34. Williamson 2002.
35. After many years of debate and advocacy, on 13 February 2008, the Labour government of Kevin Rudd issued a formal apology in the Federal Parliament to the "stolen generations" of Australia. For further information see [http://www.dfat.gov.au/indigenous\\_background/index.html](http://www.dfat.gov.au/indigenous_background/index.html).
36. Diamond 2005: 389-390.
37. Ibid.: 389.
38. Diamond 1997: 44.

39. Ibid.
40. Flannery 1994.
41. Diamond 2005.
42. Ibid.: 415.
43. Marohasy 2005.
44. See, e.g., ibid.
45. See, e.g., Australian Industries 2005.

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39. Ibid.
40. Flannery 1994.
41. Diamond 2005: 415–416.
42. Ibid.: 415.
43. Marohasy 2005: 457.
44. See, e.g., *ibid.*: 459.
45. See, e.g., Australian Heritage Commission 2002; Department of Primary Industries 2006; English and Gay 2005; Parks Victoria 2005.

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