

BACKFILL

OBITUARIES

MIKE MORWOOD (1950–2013)

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Professor Michael John Morwood (Mike) passed away on 23 July 2013 at the age of just 62. The international interest in this sad event is, we think, probably unprecedented for an archaeologist and a reflection that one aspect of his extraordinary career truly captured the world's attention. How often is it that a new species of hominin is discovered: one so amazing and different from us, and yet living when we, *Homo sapiens*, were around as well? Many would be happy to hang their whole career on such a discovery, and fair enough. But to define Mike's life just in these terms alone would be to miss the whole—not just the archaeologist, but also the person we knew as a friend. As we look back we can, of course, see the profound impact of his discoveries and innovative approaches; however, we also like to remember just sitting and chewing the fat with him, as he would listen, muse and then offer a different way of looking at the matter. This was not always related to archaeology—Mike's interests were not circumscribed by his profession. In his younger days, for instance, he was a more-than-handy rugby player in Auckland and in later years studied aikido. But first, Mike, the archaeologist.

After an outstanding record as an undergraduate at the University of Auckland, taking the Anthropology Prize in 1972, Mike cast his eyes further afield. He jumped across the ditch to Australia and took a job in Queensland (Qld) with the (then) Department of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs as the State Archaeologist. He travelled tirelessly, resulting in there being very few places in Qld an archaeologist can go today where Mike had not already documented sites of all descriptions. In this he had a chance that will probably not be available again in the public service. Mike did not waste it: he was looking for particular opportunities and logging places for future research reference.

In 1976 he enrolled in a PhD at The Australian National University (ANU), with Professor John Mulvaney as one of his supervisors. No doubt influenced by Mulvaney, he chose to explore the relationship between rock art and other aspects of the archaeological record in the central Qld highlands, the scene of Mulvaney's own seminal Pleistocene research a decade or so before. Even in the mid-1970s, the highlands were not an easy area in which to work: remote, bad roads, poor communications. But this did not deter Mike, and his willingness to work in logistically challenging areas remained a hallmark of his career. He pursued his objective with zeal and dedication. His research, involving the recording of more than 90 rock art sites, the excavation of several of these, and the analysis of all the finds, along with one of the first multivariate analyses in Australia (in a period when computers were far from user-friendly), was completed in just three years. Mike's PhD thesis, entitled 'Art and Stone: Towards a Prehistory of Central Western Queensland', was one of the first undertaken in Australia that established an absolute chronology for the art in this, or any, region; he also integrated



Figure 1 Mike Morwood at a rock art site in the Kimberley (photograph courtesy of June Ross).

his results with the other archaeological data he analysed. This led him to argue convincingly that there were three distinct phases in the art dating from the terminal Pleistocene, and that the development of stencilled art in the region coincided with the introduction of what he referred to as the 'Small Tool Industry' in the mid-Holocene. Mike's work with the dating of art, its correlation to other archaeological materials, and the linking of changes in art styles to changes in ritual behaviour and the development of regionalism, became standard fare in discussions of intensification that were just then coming to the fore in Australian archaeology.

His examiners described his thesis as a fine and innovative piece of work. On the basis of this he secured a position at the University of New England (UNE) in 1981, where he remained for over 26 years. As a first step, he prepared a series of papers summarising the results of his work in the highlands. These were highly regarded and are still regularly cited. Following this he initiated a programme of regional projects around Qld, undertaken through the 1980s, with Maidenwell rockshelter and the Gatton rock art site his particular focus. After this he turned his attention to the White Mountains near Hughenden, an area he had tagged as being of interest from his earlier public service career. Here, too, he was meticulous: all his work was published in appropriate detail and his material was catalogued such that others who wanted to consider aspects of his work again could do so—surely the mark of a quality researcher.

It may not always have been obvious, but Mike was focused, determined and suitably ambitious. One paper relating to his southeast Qld research was rejected by an Australian journal. Mike's response: he offered it unchanged to *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, where it was immediately accepted for publication. Sometimes he betrayed a thin skin to the work of others when it challenged or critiqued his own findings or

interpretations. He missed that this was really something of a back-handed compliment: as Oscar Wilde observed, there is only one thing worse than being talked about. He was also yet to learn that a big tree can take a few chops without too much damage. And Mike was becoming a big tree.

After wrapping up the north Qld project he looked towards the Quinkan rock art region in southeast Cape York Peninsula. Here, the multidisciplinary work that was becoming a dominant feature of his research came to the fore. Eschewing the view that a site once dug had probably yielded whatever it had to tell, he re-excavated Mushroom Rock, first dug by Richard Wright in the early 1960s. His instincts that there was more to it were right, and this too became a feature of Mike's approach, ultimately leading to his career-defining discoveries in Indonesia. He also saw the value of novel dating techniques, such as thermoluminescence (TL) and optically stimulated luminescence (OSL), which were then in their early stages of application in Australia. The results were noteworthy, with dates now amongst the earliest for the occupation of Australia. The Quinkan project resulted in the publication in 1995 of *Quinkan Prehistory*, a fine monograph documenting the results of the programme in immaculate detail. This would have been a fitting coat hanger for many a career, but not for Mike.

In the early 1990s Mike's eye was turning elsewhere and to other issues which, at this time, involved questions of the initial colonisation of Australia. To examine this, he turned first to the Kimberley region in Western Australia. This work would also continue his pursuit of the relationship of rock art, his great love, to other aspects of the archaeological record. Again, we find him working in challenging circumstances while maintaining the highest standards of practice. And again, we see his research results suitably captured and catalogued. At the same time he was also preparing for publication in 2002 the results of all his work on rock art in the much admired volume, *Visions from the Past*, a text that represented the distillation of an aspect of his career which had spanned more than 20 years.

Mike felt, however, that it was time to follow the trail of colonisation back a geographical step and so he looked to eastern Indonesia, and Flores in particular. The demands of this project have been touched on in his writings. He accepted these, political, social and cultural challenges, and developed a close relationship with outstanding Indonesian scholars to advance the project—a mark of the sophistication and sensitivity he possessed.

He immersed himself in the older literature. Sure, various Dutch archaeologists had been active way back when, but it was time to bring a new eye to things. And what did the team he led find? They uncovered sensational evidence that placed *Homo erectus* east of the Wallace Line. With sites dating back to 1 MYA, he fundamentally challenged our understanding of models of colonisation and the capacities of our early ancestors in terms of water crossings and their general intellectual development. All of this was undertaken with the strong multidisciplinary approach that was now standard in Mike's research programmes.

Then to the excavations at Liang Bua and the discovery that changed everything for Mike: the 'Hobbit' (*H. floresiensis*). Mike's team were excavating there because, with that intuition borne of deep knowledge and experience, Mike sensed that there was more to the site than earlier excavations had revealed. The discovery of the Hobbit's remains, leading to the identification of

a new species, sparked massive interest world-wide, as it should have. Highly cited papers were published in *Nature* in 2004 describing the remains and their context, and numerous other publications followed. The discovery also provoked a backlash, intellectually and politically. As Professor Iain Davidson has observed elsewhere, it opened something of a Pandora's box in physical anthropology, exposing certain weaknesses in the discipline. The sillier suggestions regarding the Hobbit have now been disposed of and there is general agreement that we are dealing with something new and exciting in human evolution, perhaps the 'scientific discovery of the century', as some have called it.

All of this Mike described in some detail in his award winning book, co-authored with Penny van Oosterzee, *The Discovery of the Hobbit*. With lovely irony, AAA chose in 2007 to award this the Mulvaney book prize, named after Mike's old mentor and doyen of Australian archaeology. The fame attendant on the discovery of the Hobbit and the demands this placed on him affected Mike little: he faced all this with equanimity and resolve and that same down-to-earth attitude that characterised him as a person. He was finally—belatedly in the opinion of some—accorded professorial status. While all swirled around him, Mike chose not to rise to the bait of either fame or intellectual attack, but continued on, with his team and co-researchers, pursuing the objectives of the larger Indonesian research programme. The data that have been collected and published by Mike and his colleagues is voluminous and impressive. Some has been captured in the edited volume, *Faunal and Floral Migration and Evolution in SE Asia-Australia*.

In the last phase of his career, Mike moved from UNE to the University of Wollongong in 2007. We are confident that the motives and tides surrounding this break with his home of 26 years were complicated. Mike continued with his Indonesian work, but, characteristically of him (and at a time in life when many field researchers would be hanging up their boots), he also looked to a new project to run in tandem with that in Indonesia. He returned to the Kimberley to follow through on what, for him, was unfinished business, working with new colleagues, some of whom had been his students or been mentored by him early in their careers. Despite knowing he was terminally ill he remained determined, and right to the end was planning his next campaign of fieldwork.

A strong feature of Mike's approach was ensuring that students had the chance to participate in fieldwork, learning all manner of lessons and techniques that would stand them in good stead when they undertook work of their own. He was enormously approachable and generous with his time and would readily lend materials and share data to assist others whenever he could. At the same time, through his teaching he stirred the imagination of a body of young and enthusiastic students interested in a more scientific, archaeologically-informed approach to the study of rock art. Many of these people have now gone on in their own right to establish substantial professional reputations in this area.

He engaged with Aboriginal groups throughout his career, even in the earliest stages when it was not common practice. His notes of interviews with Aboriginal elders from early work in the central Qld highlands are still of great value. His Indonesian programme had a heavy emphasis on engagement with the local residents and he, and his team, made strong friends with the communities within which they were operating.

In 2012 AAA awarded Mike its highest prize, the Rhys Jones Medal, in recognition of the massive contribution he had made in so many areas of the discipline. When we were drafting the nomination Professor Bert Roberts pointed out that the conditions of the nomination called for it to be a single page. We duly complied but also included the rather lengthy original statement that we had written as ‘background information’: it was easy to write more, rather than less, about what Mike had achieved.

Mike published over 130 papers and four monographs, and had four edited monographs to his name. In 2003 he was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. He was the convener and chairman of the ‘Pleistocene Colonisations Symposium’ at the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association Conference in Hanoi in November 2009. He also stepped up to support professional associations, being elected President of the Australian Rock Art Research Association from 1992 to 2000. Mike was a Professorial Fellow (Archaeology) in the School of Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Wollongong. He held Adjunct Professorial Fellowships at the University of Western Australia, UNE, Charles Darwin University and Padjadrang University, Bandung.

But none of this sums up Mike. Like everyone, Mike’s personal life had its complications, his perhaps more so than others. Mike was married twice. He had two children, one of whom pre-deceased him, and two grandchildren. To all his family, our deepest sympathies.

We, his friends and colleagues, all have many stories of Mike and his endearing lack of attention to things that others might see as important. We recall Professor Mike Smith telling of pushing past Mrs Davidson, a squatter’s wife in the central Qld highlands, and rushing in to wolf down tea and freshly baked fruit cake after having endured eating only porridge for a week. He and Mike had been trapped by rain at a site and rations had run perilously low. One of us (LG) remembers feeling in need of a blood transfusion after being nearly carted off by mosquitos while sleeping in the open on the Dawson River, all because Mike refused to allow a 10 kg tent to be packed in a two tonne 4WD. For the remainder of the trip we slept with Mike’s six foot plus frame coiled across the front seat, while the other team member occupied the back—Mike accepted this with good grace—our singlets taped over the windows to keep the mozzies at bay. Logistics were not Mike’s strong suit, as we are sure his long-

time field collaborator, Doug Hobbs, could attest. He knew his limitations in this regard and made sure others, usually Doug, had these things under control. Who can forget his quirky take on the food groups and what should be combined with what to ensure a balanced and nutritious diet? Or that it was perfectly natural to eat both main course and dessert concurrently? What about the office with its chaos of boxes, books, papers and collected tid-bits? Mike seemed to know just where to lay his hands on anything that was being sought. How about chain smoking 50 cigarettes to finish the packet quickly? He wanted to give up, but was equally determined not to throw them out. A newspaper was never the same once Mike had his way with it.

We also remember him in contemplation at the end of a field day, looking about and seeing who was putting in. This would result in an invitation to participate in the next year’s field season. And sometimes there was a little unexpected gift that lifted morale just when it was needed—a bottle of rum, perhaps, for a few quiet drinks by the fire when others had gone to bed, one of the small pleasures of fieldwork. The company and chat were as much a reward as the drink.

Most of all we remember him sitting back, letting the conversation waft around him, taking it in, not saying too much. Then there would be that little twinkle in his eye, a light grin and chuckle as he amused himself, and out would come some sly witticism or a story to be shared about work in some interesting location and the insights he had drawn from that.

Mate, you were a great archaeologist. Not many were stamped from your mould, more’s the pity. It is unfortunate we did not have more time to tell you this and for you to sit back and enjoy the plaudits you earned.

Mike Morwood’s achievements will stand tall for a long time. Mike deserved his widespread academic acclaim. He is justly known throughout the world for his important discoveries and he has a well-earned reputation in Australia for the quality of his work. Mike had a clear vision, boundless energy to pursue a goal, enthusiasm for the subject, intellectual capacity and rigour, an ability to inspire, a well-informed and well-directed curiosity, and a desire to add to our knowledge and understanding of the discipline. The fruits of his work will continue to ripen as those scholars he nurtured and encouraged make their own contributions. He assumes a place at the pinnacle of Australian and world archaeology.