Messages from Mungo

Forty years ago the remains of a man were found at Lake Mungo in NSW. This discovery would forever change our understanding of the Aboriginal history of Australia.

Story by John Pickrell
Photography by Michael Amendolia

Past pages. Hundreds of 20,000-year-old fossil footprints were discovered near Mungo in 2004.
It’s almost silent, but all around me shift the sands of time. I am sitting on a dune 50m above the saltbush plains at Mungo National Park, in south-western NSW. A cool breeze carries with it fine grains of silica, and the soft glow of first light is beginning to illuminate a series of emu tracks that trail past me and disappear over the crest of the dune. Just a little while earlier, the Milky Way had been a clear streak across the sky, and Venus, Mars and Saturn were all bright points of light. There was even the brief and exciting flare of a shooting star – a distant traveller met with a fiery demise.

Aboriginal people have camped here on this very dune and on others like it in the Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Area (WHA) for more than 50 millennia, beginning long before modern humans had even arrived in Western Europe. On countless occasions, they have looked out at the rising sun and seen the same night sky awash with twinkling stars. Beneath me in the dune are their stone tools, the baked hearths of their cooking fires, and their carefully buried or cremated human remains. Here, perhaps more than anywhere else in Australia, you can feel a connection to the first people who arrived more than 60,000 years ago. They were at the front of a wave of migration that carried small bands of travellers on an almost implausible journey, by foot and over many generations, from Africa and along the coasts of Asia. Eventually – via an ocean crossing from Indonesia that was shorter than it would be today due to lower sea levels – they made their way to northern Australia.

The first occupation sites in Australia are below today’s sea level, so we’re unlikely to ever find traces of them. Perhaps the earliest evidence of these migrants is a rock shelter, known as Malakunanja II, located about 50km inland from the Arnhem Land coast. Here, alongside rock art, the remains of stone tools, grinding stones, ochre and charcoal have been found, the oldest of which are about 53,000 years old.

The next evidence we have of people living in Australia comes from Mungo National Park and the wider Willandra Lakes area – and here it is abundant. In geological layers dated as far back as 50,000 years, there are stone tools and hearths, shellfish middens and butchered animal bones.

Australia’s Aboriginal people have the oldest continuous culture on the planet and today we take its great antiquity for granted, but this wasn’t always so. When now-retired professor Jim Bowler stumbled upon the cremated remains that came to be known as Mungo Lady, in 1969, it suggested Aboriginal people had been here far longer than scientists suspected. But it was his 1974 discovery of Mungo Man that really startled the world.

In 1974 Jim was working as a geologist with the Australian National University (ANU), in Canberra, looking at rocks in the south-western corner of NSW to find clues about ancient climate changes.
change; he wasn’t an archaeologist and he hadn’t set out to find human remains. “I wanted to unravel the story of the climatic legacy written in the Australian landscape.” Jim tells me when I meet him at Mungo on a warm autumn day, the air thick with flies. “My agenda was to explore the dry inland country, the dune systems and salt lakes. I was reconstructing the impact of Ice Age climatic change.”

Few people had explored the now-dry ancient lakebeds that spanned the sheep stations in this remote spot. Jim was mapping them for the first time: “I was able to identify the shorelines of the lakes, and in them, find stone tools and shells and evidence of human remains. That completely changed the importance of the system,” says Jim, now in his 80s and living in Melbourne. Here, five years earlier, he had found Mungo Lady – hundreds of fragments of bone, now known to be the world’s earliest recorded cremation. Although the true age of this find was not realised until later, it was clear it was a globally significant discovery. At this time, scientists believed Aboriginal people had arrived in Australia some 15–20,000 years ago, but this figure was about to be corrected dramatically. “I spotted the tip of a white bone. I brushed away and it was clearly a skull… and I thought, ‘Holy shit!’ This is the companion to Mungo Lady.” Jim was mapping the nearest shearing station and got on the telephone to Canberra… I thought, ‘I'm not going to touch this; this is a specialist job.’"

It was another day before archaeological heavyweights Professor Alan Thorne arrived from ANU with a truckload of assistants and the excavation began. They had only to strip off 10–15cm of topsoil. Rarely are excavations this simple. A deeper trench was dug to reveal sediments above and below the skeleton, which could later be used to help date it. It wasn’t until much later (and after significant scientific debate) that a series of studies confirmed that both Mungo Man and Mungo Lady were about 40–42,000 years old, but Jim’s knowledge of geological layers already told him the remains were older than any others in Australia.

As the excavations proceeded, the researchers found red pellets and staining in the grave. It began to dawn on Jim that this was a kind of ochre used as body paint by Aboriginal people today. “There’s no ochre for miles around here – you have to transport it in. Then you have the ritual of grinding the ochre. There was a fire alongside the burial… so perhaps a smoking ceremony. The ochre was ground up and painted or sprinkled on. Either way, it demonstrates the sort of ceremony and ritual that does justice to any church service today.” These were among the world’s earliest recorded funerary rites.

T he Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Area covers 2400sq.km of semi-arid saltbush plains, dunes and sparse woodlands in the Murray Basin of south-western NSW. It consists of 19 dry saline lakes (see map, opposite) that were once filled with glacial meltwater flowing east along the Willandra Creek from the Great Dividing Range. These Pleistocene-era lakes, which were full from about 50,000 years...
ago, vary in size from 6 to 510 sq.km; all have crescent-moon-shaped dunes called lunettes on their eastern sides, formed by prevailing winds. Mungo NP itself covers about 70 per cent of Lake Mungo, including the striking Walls of China, which are part of the lake’s 26km-long lunette.

As the last ice age (which ran from about 110,000 to about 12,000 years ago) waned, the glacial ice dwindled and water no longer flowed from the highlands to replenish the lakes, the last of which dried up 17,500 years ago. Despite their age, the flat expanses of the lake floors and the dune systems that surrounded them are still obvious today.

While the lakes were full, the lush wetland system teemed with life. People would have camped along the shores, hunting and foraging for freshwater mussels, yabbies, golden perch and Murray cod, as well as emus, kangaroos and other large species. The fossils of more than 55 animals have been found in the lunettes – snakes and wombats, but also extinct species such as Procoptodon and Genyornis (see box, right). Alongside the animal fossils are stone tools and ancient fireplaces that reveal extensive human occupation. Most significant, though, are the human remains scattered throughout the eroding dunes. “Some of the very earliest modern human remains in the world are here at Mungo,” says Harvey Johnston, a NSW Office of Environment and Heritage archaeologist, who’s been involved with Willandra since the late 1980s. “You have this record of human occupation going back 40,000 years and burials and ceremonies associated with that: cremations, burials with ochre, multiple individuals and burials with unusual features.”

**ANCIENT LAND**

Despite being far inland, the landscape here is just 60–100m above sea level. It was once home to a great system of lakes fed by glacial meltwater. Today the lakes are dry saltbush plains; surrounding dunes have spectacular features such as the Walls of China.

**GETTING THERE**

Mungo is 110km north-east of Mildura and 165km north-west of Balranald via Box Creek Road.

**WHERE TO STAY**

You can camp just inside the entrance at Main Camp or at the more remote Belah Camp. There’s also basic accommodation at the Shearers Quarters and just outside the park is the four-star Mungo Lodge.

**MORE INFORMATION**

www.visitmungo.com.au  
www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/Mungo-National-Park  
www.mungolodge.com.au

**POINTS OF INTEREST**

1. Zanci Homestead  
2. Visitor centre  
3. Mungo Woolshed  
4. Mungo Lodge  
5. Walls of China  
6. Belah Camp

**WILLANDRA MEGAFAUNA**

**Procoptodon goliah**

This ‘short-faced’ kangaroo was more than 2m tall and weighed up to 200kg. It had long arms and claws for reaching vegetation in trees. It survived in parts of Australia until 30,000 years ago.

**Genyornis newtoni**

A giant flightless ‘thunderbird’, common until about 45,000 years ago. Often mistaken for a relative of the emu, this 2m-tall, 240kg bird was really a giant duck or goose. Pieces of eggshell are common at Willandra.
A number of other scientifically significant remains have been discovered at Willandra but never disturbed or studied, in line with the wishes of the area’s Aboriginal custodians ‘Mungo Child’, as it has become known to scientists, was discovered in 1987 and may be of similar antiquity to Mungo Man. “There are no other juvenile skeletons in this 40,000-year age range in the entire Australian and Asian region,” says Dr Michael Westaway, from Griffith University, in Brisbane. “The remains of Homo sapiens of this antiquity are very, very rare globally.”

When the top of the juvenile skull was discovered, just a few centimetres of sand were brushed off it before it was reburied. “It was never fully excavated,” Harvey says. “Some years later, the whole skeleton was dug up again and the remains of the lower jaw (mandible) became exposed through natural erosion. People have to hunt and gather over larger areas to survive. Footprints left by some of these people in the muddy foreshores of the dwindling lakes become fossilised.”

Alice Kelly (see AG 44), led the fight to have Mungo Lady returned to the park in the 1990s (the remains have since been kept in a locked vault on site). “Every time I’m out there I know I’m walking with my mob. With my elders, my past and my present,” Mary says. “It’s just something that you feel and it makes you proud to know you belong to a race of people that survived in a landscape for many thousands of years without destroying it.”

Along with the Paakantyi and the Ngiyampaa, the Mutthi Mutthi are custodians of Willandra as part of the Mungo Child. “Every time I’m out there I know I’m walking with my mob. With my elders, my past and my present,” Mary says. “It’s just something that you feel and it makes you proud to know you belong to a race of people that survived in a landscape for many thousands of years without destroying it.”

“History repeating. The eroding Willandra Lakes lunettes are littered with fossils and archaeological artefacts such as this skeleton from a locally extinct northern hairy-nosed wombat (Bilby), as well as right, from top: Genyornis eggshell, Aboriginal stone tools and the baked remains of fireplaces up to 50,000 years old.

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“It’s incredible to think this place was a freshwater lake filled with fish and mussels and people fishing – and it just dried up. Nature has its own way of doing things,” says Munthi Mutthi elder Mary Pappin. Mary is one of a number of passionate and outspoken Aboriginal women who’ve pushed hard for the rights of their people here. Her late mother, Mary says, “It’s just something that you feel and it makes you proud to know you belong to a race of people that survived in a landscape for many thousands of years without destroying it.”

Along with the Paakantyi and the Ngiyampaa, the Mutthi Mutthi are custodians of Willandra today. Mutthi Mutthi country lies east and south of Willandra; it encompasses sections of the Murray, Murrumbidgee and Lachlan rivers. Paakantyi land stretches north from the Victoria border, to Broken Hill and Wilcannia. It includes sections of the Darling River and its tributaries. The Ngiyampaa once inhabited the plains and hills east of the Darling River and north of Willandra Creek. People of these three groups now live largely in local towns such as Ivanhoe, Poonoorina, Mildura, Balranald, Hay and Wilcannia.

The issues surrounding the unearthing and...
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What Mary had found was remarkable. It was the first of 530, 20,000-year-old human footprints hidden beneath a shallow layer of sand. These were the oldest human footprints found in Australia and the largest collection of Ice Age prints in the world. There were so many prints that they doubled the number of known fossilized human footprints worldwide.

Later study – and insights from Pitjantjatjara trackers invited from the Central Deserts to help – revealed the footprints had been made by men, women and children in 26 separate trackways left in the mud of a low layer of sand. These were the oldest human footprints found in Australia and the largest collection of Ice Age prints in the world.

It was modern science confirming what Aboriginal people knew all along, says Harvey. Nevertheless, the discovery was profoundly significant and its implications for our understanding of the world today are enormous.

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NIGYAMPAA ELDERS, MUNGO MAN AND MUNGO LADY

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Forty-two thousand years ago, people at Willandra lived a relatively easy life. Game was abundant and fish were easy to catch. Aged about 50, the man whose remains came to be buried in the Mungo lunette was coming to the end of his life. He had watched his final sunrise and sunset over the dune. Four decades of throwing spears had given him an arthritic elbow, and on his last night, he sat by the fire rubbing it for the last time. His teeth were similarly worn from a lifetime stripping water reeds to make twine.

Ritual was important to his people, and in his youth his canine teeth had been knocked out in an initiation ceremony. After he died that night, ritual played its part when his family gathered in mourning to bury him in the dune. As pungent smoke from smouldering branches of emu bush filled the air, they placed him on his back, hands crossed in his lap, and sprinkled him with precious red ochre. Much of this we know from clues in his grave.

Forty millennia, Mungo Man’s people found a way to survive by sustainably managing the landscape. As the Ice Age waxed and waned, and waters came and went, they adapted and thrived. Many years and countless generations later, Mary Pappin thinks back to the lives of her ancestors. She points out that Europeans have been here for just 200 years, less than 1 per cent of that time, yet have already wrought irreparable damage. You can see this on a small scale at Mungo, in the way grazing pressure has caused the dunes to collapse.

“Aboriginal people have an intense commitment to country even today. Europeans have lost that connection. Country to us is something you dig up and export to China,” Jim says. “Mungo Man’s return now is essential, because it’s only when he comes back to his country that his message will really come to life and be heard across Australia. That message is about what have we done to his land and what have we done to his people.”

When AG went to press in October a meeting of the Three Traditional Tribal Groups Elders Council was planned, but there was still no clear timeline for the repatriation of Mungo Man. Find more images of Mungo National Park online at www.australiangeographic.com.au/issue123

The fossils are fragmentary, they can still tell us a great deal.” Working with Professors David Lambert at Griffith University and Eske Willerslev at the University of Copenhagen, in Denmark, Michael has attempted to sequence DNA from Mungo Man, and plans to compare it with the DNA of living members of the three tribal groups. The results will be published in coming months. He says he’s hoping for more time to use new ANU facilities before the remains are returned. Then, with luck if they end up in a Keeping Place at Mungo, researchers would still have access, but the elders would have more control. “The fossils will be back in the landscape…and hopefully from that there will be more willingness on the part of the elders for research.”