

Jim Bowler

Mungo Man returns home

The return home of Mungo Man to the shores of Lake Mungo marks a special day in Australian history. After 43 years in custody in Canberra he returns to his country and to his people. This is an event the nation is watching.

It is both very human and very Australian to have a treasure before us and not know what to do with it, or not even know it's a treasure ... Mungo Man's return ... gives our entire community, black and non-black, a new bond and a national glory.

Tom Keneally, *The Age*, 26 April 2016

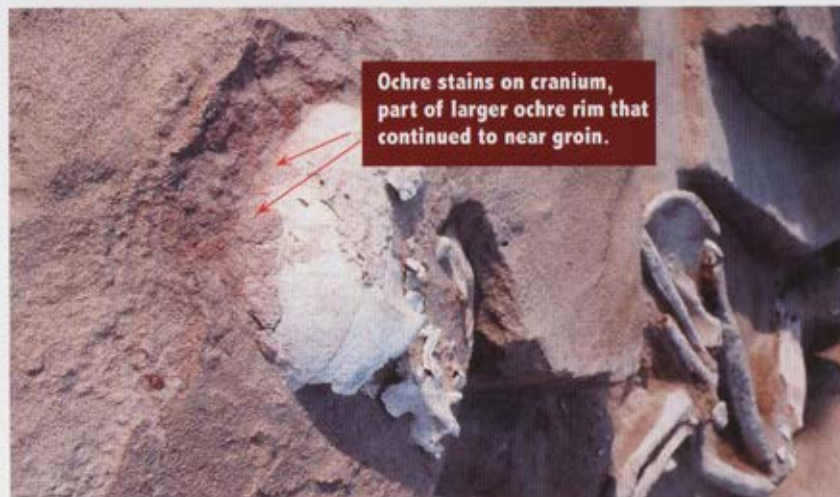
Discovery

Forty-three years ago I was mapping ancient shorelines of Lake Mungo. I found evidence of past Ice Age climates and ancient shorelines, but no water. Instead I saw stone tools, ancient fireplaces and food remains, but no people! Clearly I was walking in the footsteps of ancient people!

The 1969 discovery of cremated human bones, now known as Mungo Lady 40 000 years old, the earliest example of cremation burial anywhere in the world, changed the way we thought of ancient occupation.

In 1974 a complex burial emerged nearby, containing Mungo Man. Its special nature indicated that he was an important community leader.

He had been buried with extraordinary ritual. Materials of blood red ochre had anointed the body. Simultaneously, smoke from a nearby fireplace had swept through grieving mourners. Equivalent to a requiem in any cathedral today, this ritual was enacted here on the cathedral shores of Lake Mungo 40 000 years ago.



Ochre stains on cranium, part of larger ochre rim that continued to near groin.

Righting an injustice

Removal of the bones in 1974 without permission has long caused great pain to local Indigenous people. The actions of my colleague, Dr Alan Thorne, and myself were seen to be part of the injustice that science had inflicted on Aboriginal burial sites in the previous century. In recognition of traditional owners' wishes, Mungo Man is returning home to Lake Mungo shores for this reburial process. We are witnessing here the return to the grave with important implications for wider Australia.

Below left: Mungo Man in grave beside blackened sands, remnants of major fire associated with burial.

Below right: Archeologists remove thin sand cover revealing articulated remains of ancient burial.



Tribute to Traditional Owners

For four decades, the Willandra Lakes indigenous people, the Barkantji, Mutthi Mutthi, and Ngiyampaa tribal groups, bonded by culture and place to their ancestral Mungo people, have generously assisted scientists in joint collaboration.

Dialogue between scientists and traditional owners has seen a move from an initial stage of verbal conflict to something new, a genuine collaborative enterprise. Elders and scientists worked together, each respecting and learning from the other. Together with my scientific colleagues, I owe a great debt to those Elders.

We rejoice as one in the contribution of Mungo Lady and Mungo Man. Their iconic status led to the 1981 international recognition by UNESCO of Lake Mungo and adjacent basins as the Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area. The return home of Mungo Man cements that status.



Messages

Although I cannot speak for the Aboriginal people, (they will speak for themselves), I can report what I see. The Return of Mungo Man restores an ancient voice of great dignity to the land. His burial rites of passage symbolise a highly sophisticated communal response, via ochre and fire, defining a spirit-based connection with the earth. That legacy is retained today in Aboriginal Australia's Connection to Country, a deeply held connection to Nature.

This occasion, with its acknowledgement of that special dignity, comes after years of verbal and physical assault, violence, and massacre of Indigenous peoples. Now, a growing concern through wider Australian society seeks recognition of two centuries of such injustice.

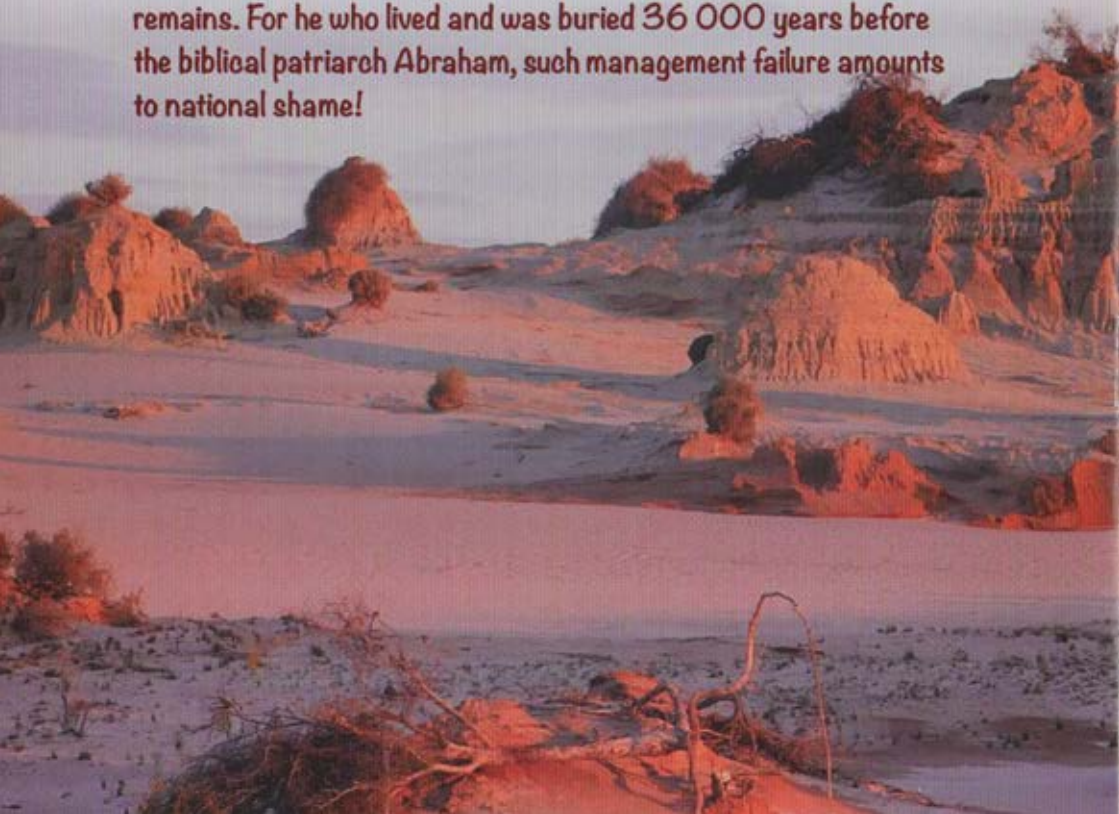
On his journey home, Mungo Man may well ask, 'What have you done to my lands?' and 'What have you done to my people?'



The response

How are we to respond? The challenge of indigenous spiritual connections calls for a new model for Australia's heritage future, one in which we work with Aboriginal colleagues in empathy with, rather than as masters of the land. That challenge extends to the highest levels of governance, leadership and management. Sadly management at both State and Federal government levels has not always delivered on these expectations. The treatment of Mungo Man is more than symbolic of such failure.

For 43 years the remains of Mungo Man have lain in a cardboard box awaiting this moment of return. Attempts to find an appropriate resting place have failed. Successive government bureaucracies have simply failed to meet the needs of these sacred remains. For he who lived and was buried 36 000 years before the biblical patriarch Abraham, such management failure amounts to national shame!



In 2013, the NSW Government disbanded the Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Area Community Management Council and the Technical and Scientific Advisory Committee. For four years, this World Heritage area and its precious human components have remained without a voice. Letters to UNESCO World Heritage Committee from the late Prof John Mulvaney and myself, plus one from the former chair of the disbanded management committee, Mr Mike Ockwell, expressed concern for the Willandra's Endangered Heritage Status. Despite complaints referred to both Commonwealth and State Ministers, there is still no new management committee in place. The Willandra World Heritage area and its foundational figures in Mungo Man and Mungo Lady have remained off the radar of successive governments.



Call to action

That entirely new dialogue that began here at Lake Mungo between Aboriginal and White Australia has opened a new future. This special event of Mungo Man's Return remains a defining moment in the nation's history. Mungo Man's Return unites land and culture in defining 'what it means to be Australian'. Where the concepts of land help define the concepts of people, we join in national celebration! But continuation of that dialogue requires both State and Commonwealth commitment. It requires philanthropic support consistent with the precious legacies preserved for all Australians.

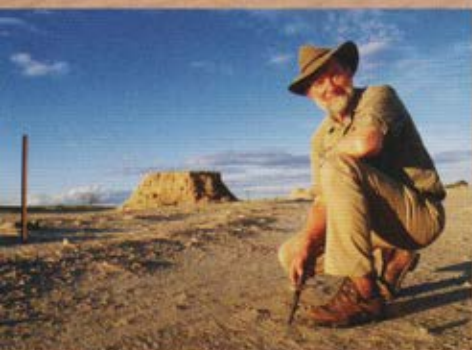
The time has come for drastic change. How frequently do we hear politicians taking pride 'in sharing this country with the world's oldest culture', then failing to act. The urgency to move from words to action is long overdue. Failure to respond would be a blight on the nation's conscience.

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JIM BOWLER is a geologist with special interest in Australia's climatic history. It was his study of Ice Age climatic changes that led to the discovery of people in the Willandra Lakes area. He named the previously un-named basin, Lake Mungo. He lives in retirement with his wife of 57 years, Joan, in Gardenvale.

Left: Jim near site of Mungo Lady's discovery