

Port Essington

The historical archaeology of a north Australian
nineteenth century military outpost

Jim Allen

Studies in Australasian Historical Archaeology
Volume 1

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1. Blockhouse and breastworks on Adam Head. Note magazine to the left of the structure. Watercolour by Owen Stanley, entitled The Fortress at Port Essington. Mitchell Library PXC 281 f.119. Published with permission of the Mitchell Library.
2. Royal Marines officer's shako plate from officers' mess excavations.

Frontispiece. Victoria settlement 1839. The town square is in the middle distance, right of centre. The white building with the bell-tower is the church and to its left through the trees is Government house. The house on piles, centre left, is the first hospital, later a store room. Water colour by John McArthur. National Library of Australia nla.pic-an 5863766. Published with permission of the National Library of Australia.

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For John Mulvaney

By mid-century the British had not yet solved the problem of settlement on the northern coast but they had securely established a pattern of failure that was to stand as a model for some years to come.

C. Hartley Grattan *The Southwest Pacific to 1900*

About the Series

The *Studies in Australasian Historical Archaeology* series is designed to make the results of high-quality research in historical archaeology available to researchers and the public. Volume 1 presents Jim Allen's *Port Essington* as the first PhD dissertation in Australasian historical archaeology. As Jim's study was the seminal analysis for the discipline, in this instance we have chosen to retain the original content and discussion intact, both out of historical interest and as a benchmark for future researchers. Of particular significance is the extent to which the themes Jim explored in the 1960s, such as the nature of settlement and cross-cultural contact on the frontier, as well as the strong analytical structures he developed to address these, continue to resonate with current research.

Future releases in the series will include edited and revised versions of Australasian higher-degree theses, major pieces of consultancy and academic research, and commissioned

studies on other topics of interest to ASHA members. Volume 2, to be published shortly, will present Judy Birmingham's research on the Irrawang Pottery, recognized as the first HA excavation in Australia in the 1960s. In this completely new work Judy will not only report on the investigation of James King's 1833–1855 pottery and its products, but also provide an interpretation which draws on 40 years of experience and reflection.

A particular aim of the series is to ensure that the data sets from these studies are also made available, either within the volumes or in associated websites, to facilitate opportunities for inter-site comparison and critical evaluation of analytical methods and interpretations.

MARTIN GIBBS

Series Editor

President's Introduction

This new publishing initiative is a welcome one for ASHA and for historical archaeology in Australasia, coming as it does at a time when the quantity and quality of major research is higher than ever before. For ASHA, making the commitment to publishing monographs on a regular basis complements the ongoing publication of short reports in the newsletter and longer refereed articles in the journal. For the field of historical archaeology in the region, the series fills a gap that has been evident for some time, as it will make the results of large projects available to a wider audience than has previously been possible. ASHA has always seemed the logical host for such a monograph series, but until now it has not been possible to bring together the various elements required to make this happen and I congratulate Martin Gibbs for having the vision and dedication to make this project a reality. I am grateful to Mary Casey, as General Editor, for her guidance and generosity in assisting with the process and

I would also like to thank Wei Ming and Peter Saad of the La Trobe University Archaeology Program for their technical assistance.

On behalf of ASHA I would particularly like to thank Professor Jim Allen for allowing us to reproduce his thesis on Port Essington as the first volume of the series, and for graciously suffering the trials and tribulations that come with being a pioneer. The work is itself pioneering, as the first PhD thesis on a historical archaeology topic in Australia, and has more than stood the test of time to become a classic in the field. It is an appropriate study with which to launch this new series, and I am sure that it will be well received.

SUSAN LAWRENCE

President

ASHA

Foreword

I warmly welcome the publication of *Port Essington: the historical archaeology of a north Australian nineteenth century military outpost* and congratulate Jim Allen for having the intellectual interest (and the courage) to return to work undertaken some forty years ago. I also congratulate ASHA for having the wisdom to bring this important unpublished work into wider circulation. Its been said more than once, but its worth saying again, that to really grow and prosper, historical archaeology in Australia needs to develop a strong sense of its history. Improving access to foundational work such as *Port Essington* can only help this process.

Historians love foundation and origin narratives, and *Port Essington* provides a splendid opportunity to indulge in a little reflection about why this dissertation was (and is) so important. Any review of the history of historical archaeology in Australia (see for example Egloff 1994; Lawrence 2001; Murray 2000, 2002a; Murray and Allen 1986) identifies the critical origin points. *Port Essington* was the first doctoral dissertation on historical archaeology in Australia, and the first to actively explore what might now be seen as the themes of 'imperial archaeology', 'military archaeology' and 'contact archaeology' in Australia.

Jim's excavation of the site of Port Essington and Judy Birmingham's work at Irawang (begun in 1967) mark the beginning of a whole new kind of archaeology on the continent of Australia – one that dealt with the recent past, with European colonisation and settlement, and with contact between the settlers and local indigenous people. As in North America, the archaeology of Australia's recent past provided alternative social and local histories to those written by mainstream historians, demonstrating the value of this perspective to younger nations whose European past may have been short, but whose need to understand and value it was just as strong as it was with older nations. Both projects also clearly demonstrated that from the very first historical archaeology in Australia derived strong theoretical and methodological influence from North America, while at the same time engaging in the discussion of issues that were firmly global (or as we might now say *transnational*). This was (and is) entirely appropriate. But Jim was never a slavish follower of North American fashion, and *Port Essington* resonates with a strong sense of the local and of grappling with issues that were to become so significant in Australia over the coming decades. Understanding the history of places such as Port Essington required an understanding of matters as grand as British imperial policy. It also demanded an appreciation of how and why European settlements failed in tropical Australia, the consequences of contact with local indigenous communities, and of course of the ways in which material culture derived from archaeological excavation could enhance a reading of a rich documentary archive.

I have long used *Port Essington* as an exemplar of how to do historical archaeology – in particular how to properly analyse and report the analysis of excavated assemblages, and how to sensitively and imaginatively integrate these data with written documents to enhance understanding. *Port Essington* aptly demonstrates how the historical archaeological sum can be greater than either of its historical or archaeological *parts*. The fact that it reads so freshly today is testimony to the quality of what Jim achieved. It is also a testimony to the enduring nature of the issues that lay at its heart.

In celebrating Jim's achievement and extolling the many virtues of *Port Essington* we are reminded of several important matters. Perhaps foremost among these is that Jim undertook his research around the same time as Australian

society really began to address the nature of its relationships with indigenous Australia. In *Port Essington* indigenous people are not silent, disempowered observers, but neither are they 'colonised' or 'pacified'. Creating an understanding of the historical archaeology of indigenous Australia has proved to be a significant challenge to Australian archaeologists (see for example Murray 2002b, 2004), but I, for one, have always been struck by the subtle sense of indigenous presence in *Port Essington*.

Some years ago I discussed Jim's departure from historical archaeology to prehistoric archaeology (Murray 2000), and reflected on his views that the former lacked the intellectual challenge of the latter. In that context I sought to demonstrate that Jim's departure from the field was never total – indeed he published his Port Essington work very widely while at the same time doing important work in the development of heritage policy (see for example Allen 1967a, 1967b, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1976, 1980). Nonetheless it was difficult to demonstrate that historical archaeology in Australia for much of the next 20 or so years had managed to live up to the great promise he had demonstrated in *Port Essington*. Indeed it is probably closer to the truth that, with a few notable exceptions, the field did not regain intellectual momentum until the mid 1980s. Jim's important role in that revival has also been documented, notwithstanding his protestations to the contrary (see Murray 2000)!

The currently strong state of historical archaeology provides real justification for the publication of *Port Essington*. The issues Jim first addressed are well and truly on the research agenda and a new generation of historical archaeologists are there to build on his achievements.

TIM MURRAY

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