SECTION I

Introduction

1. The Nature of Historical Archaeology

As a relatively new discipline, historical archaeology has been, since the early twentieth century, the subject of numerous attempts to define its parameters. Several of its characteristics have been established and discussed, and the emphasis and attention given to these aspects appear to have varied with the background of the writer. Thus an anthropologist has a different perspective on historical archaeology from an historian, an architectural historian, a traditional archaeologist or an antiquarian. Diverse and at times contradictory definitions have emerged as a result of the interest which historical archaeology has aroused in several different disciplines.

Many discussions of historical archaeology are limited to the usefulness of recent material remains as sources of information, and are concerned with their justification as such. Harrington writes of material objects: "... their contributions to historical data are considerable ... to history, relatively little ...", but concedes that if historians formulate "research problems" in the light of material evidence "... the bones take on flesh" (1), and archaeology can provide an insight into the human mind and human activity. In other words, as in most disciplines, the correct questions must be asked if the raw material is to yield information. Cotter describes the role of material evidence in a similar fashion:

> This is really the crux of the matter; namely the ability of the archaeological evidence to add a third dimension to historical research which will bring into clearer focus the familiar everyday life of the past (2)

That material evidence can play a role in our study of the past is thus unquestioned. That role, however, has been seen by some as rather passive - small details merely to fill in a larger picture. Deetz, in In Small Things Forgotten attaches far more significance to physical remains. It is, in fact, humble objects which interest historical archaeologists:

> An appreciation for the simple details of past existence which escape historical mention, and for simple artefacts not deemed significant in art-historical terms, viewed from the perspective of a broad social-scientific base characterises historical archaeology (3)

The study of such artefacts can reveal:

> ... aspects of a past people such as the way in which they perceive their environment, the world view that underlay the organisation of their physical universe, and the way ideology shaped their lives ... (4)

The subsequent chapters show how the study of furniture, pottery, houses and gravestones do not merely "flesh out" a pre-existing picture of earlier times, but can actually be the means of recreating it, sometimes the only means. Two related reasons are given for the special value of physical evidence. First, written records used alone can be distorting, since "total objectivity is not to be expected of common judgement." (5) Documents inevitably carry the conscious and unconscious biasses of their writers, they can be inacurate as a result of poor observation, and they are limited by the fact that they are usually the product of the literate and powerful sections of society only. In material evidence, however, Deetz finds what "... may be the most objective source of information we have concerning America's past", since it not only reflects the lives of all classes comprising society but also directly encapsulates the rules by which their world was organised. (6)

The meaning of these valuable material sources is often not self-evident, however. Taken on their own, they are merely unconnected objects - their intrinsic meaning is inaccessible without their historical context. As Harrington points out, the correct questions must be asked of the evidence. In order to formulate such questions, historical archaeology must comprise a contextual analysis of the sources, and thus the simultaneous study of both written and material records is necessary. Dymond maintains that:

> The importance of studying the archaeology of more recently documented periods is partly that co-ordination with historical statements gives a far more detailed, truly absolute timescale than pre-history will ever achieve in its text-free innocence. (7)

This "co-ordination" is vital, since it will also provide a "far more detailed" context in which to view the material evidence. A synthesis if the two sources allows the material evidence, in turn, contribute to or even, as Deetz has shown, help recreate the larger scene. Deetz writes that documentary and archaeological records are complementary, citing the study of probate records as an instance where each source can provide the necessary perspective for the other. The anomalies which occur in the comparison of the two sources lead to more, and perhaps better, questions, and thence towards a deeper understanding. (8)

The dichotomy of written/material sources used in historical archaeology may be extrapolated towards another useful dimension. The written word often expresses the more theoretical side of human activity, for example the thoughts, plans, ratifications and existing knowledge which usually precede action. Material remains represent the complement - the practical outcome of such plans and foreknowledge. While

this observation by no means categorises the two into well-defined sections, it can be seen that historical archaeology, by the synthesis of both written and material records, in fact juxtaposes "theory" with "practice" in a given situation. It can thus actually recreate and portray the continuum of humans activity, providing a fuller, more rounded account than would be possible through the study of either source in isolation.

Many questions may be asked of such a study. The relationship between theory and practice in a given situation may be explored, including the process of adaptation of pre-existing theories to new conditions with new problems. The interrelationship between a particular cultural or social framework and the activities and lives of certain generations may be examined. Thus, by focussing on one or more aspects of human action, as shown through both written and material evidence, a new angle of perception on the past can be achieved.

2. The Great North Road 1825-36 : A Case Study for Historical Archaeology

The methodology of historical archaeology is most appropriate for a study of the Great North Road. Built by convict gangs between Sydney and the Hunter Valley over a ten-year period, it generated an abundance of both official and unofficial written records, and, as a grand public work, involved extensive construction work, much of which survives today. It is thus possible to combine the two sources and set them against the wider historical context of the early colonial society of N.S.W.

The period just preceding the construction of the road in N.S.W. was one of revolutionary developments in road-making in Britain. Since the nature of almost all the aspects of the colonial road-building process can be ascertained through the sources available, the comparison of these with contemporary road-building theory is a particularly relevant instance of the simultaneous study of theory and practice. Such a comparison reveals the process of importation, implementation and adaptation of theories and ideas. The interplay of factors such as demography, geography, political and social conditions, and individual personalities and approaches may be discerned in the examination of a continuum spanning the ideas of the English road buildings, the work of their colonial counterparts, and the use and final abandonment of the road. The examination of both material and written sources is often essential, since the gaps in one source are frequently filled by the other. For example, where material remains have disappeared entirely, maps, plans and written evidence have been combined to pinpoint the original location of the road. Conversely, where historical references are scant, the comparative study of the construction features can

often suggest their period, gang and supervisor.

The research problems for this study are pitched at a number of levels. The most basic of these are concerned with the road itself, and include the practical methods of early colonial road-engineers, the conditions under which the convicts laboured, their numbers and the diverse approaches of their supervisors. It is found that the material remains play a particularly important role in explaining the working problems, living conditions and even something of the motivation of the convicts, who otherwise would remain for us simply a resource, the "refuse of the colony", as they were described in contemporary accounts.

The broader questions concern the reasons for the construction of the road, for its location and for the grand scale on which it was built. While the makers of more humble artefacts, such as pots and chairs, were generally unconscious of the information they encapsulated in their handiwork, the Great North Road has an added dimension, since some of the construction work at least was intended by its builders to convey certain unmistakable impressions to observers. The plans and ambitions of men such as Ralph Darling, Thomas Mitchell, Percy Simpson and Heneage Finch were purposefully represented in the steeply climbing retaining walls and the extravagant bridges. The road also illustrates the problems they encountered, and the general preoccupations and difficulties of a small colony in a vast land. Set in the wider historical context, the Great North Road is a material expression of contemporary attitudes and expectations of the colony with regard to its future.

3. Historiography

In the earlier part of this century, the Great North Road, along with other early roads in N.S.W., generated a good deal of interest among scholars. In 1915 Frank Walker wrote an article for the Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society which was for the main part an account of his own trip along the road, although it contained some snippets of historical information. (9) Another article by James Jervis entitled "The Great North Road" appeared in the same journal in 1930, and contained more detailed but undocumented information concerning the background to the establishment of the road, its original survey, its construction and the number of convicts who worked on it. (10) A similar article was published in the Journal of the Institution of Engineers by T.H. Upton in 1932. (11) Less detailed and directly relevant material can also be found incorporated in local and family histories, general histories, travellers' and tourist guides.

Most of the historical research undertaken so far can be traced back to one source - Sir Thomas Mitchell's Report upon the Progress Made in Roads and in Public Works in N.S.W. from 1827 to June 1855, written in 1856 at the end of his career as Surveyor General in N.S.W. (12) Unfortunately, this is an unreliable source. In his efforts to justify the work of his department, and also to claim credit for the major works undertaken in N.S.W., Mitchell was selective in the letters he chose to reproduce, prefacing them with statements concerning his own efforts and skills in surveying and road-tracing. In addition, his recall of the historical details of thirty years earlier is often inaccurate, most likely as a result of the fact that he himself had little involvement in the actual construction of the roads. His account has, however, been

unquestioned by subsequent historians.

Therefore, the Great North Road has so far not been thoroughly and critically researched, with the result that a large amount of misinformation has been generated. Interest in the road has been antiquarian rather than historical - historians have focussed solely on the road itself rather than its meaning in the wider context of colonial history. Only passing reference has been made to the material remains of the road. The various construction features have not been examined and analysed, and the information they hold therefore not utilised.

This thesis will incorporate these aspects in its approach. As secondary sources concerning the road's history are for the main part lacking in accuracy and detail, the study of the road's history relies heavily on primary sources, such as official records, contemporary accounts, maps and illustrations. Of the official records, much of the correspondence of the Surveyor General's Department, the Roads and Bridges Department and the Colonial Secretary is available, providing detailed information about the inception and progress of the road and about administrative and construction details. The volume of surviving records increases with the growing entrenchment of the Roads and Bridges Department and the convict road-gang system from 1828 to 1832, while they are not so numerous for the earlier period. After 1832 the Great North Road was de-emphasised by the government, and this is also paralleled by a decrease in surviving records. A collection of Road Gang Reports, including both monthly and weekly reports, is valuable in the study of the division of labour during construction, the various tasks allotted to the convicts, their methods, progress and working conditions. Although, as shown in the Bibliography (Section 1/i, Table 13), they have not all

survived, those which do appear to be fairly representative. Contemporary accounts of both the Great North Road and the state of the colony in general by men such as William Dumaresq, Peter Cunningham, Allan Cunningham, Thomas Mitchell, A.W. Breton, James Atkinson, James Maclehose, Henry Dangar and numerous others, help to recreate the historical context. Their inaccuracies and exaggerations, emphases and omissions provide insight into the colonial mind and its perception of the new colony. The correspondence between Darling and his superiors in England provides background information concerning the establishment of the road gang system, the role of Great Roads in the colony, and Darling's own ambitions for the colony.

In order to provide the technological background to the roads construction, a survey of nineteenth century road building technology in England has been made. The theories of the leaders of the road building revolution, Thomas Telford and John Loudon MacAdam have been examined, along with the lesser-known work of John Metcalf, David Hughes and Richard Edgeworth, and of those road builders who later recorded more or less the same methods in their books, including Henry Parnell, Henry Law, James Browne, Edward Dobson and William Gillespie. Evidence about the colonial experience has been gathered from both written and material sources, and the combination of the two has in this area proved vital for a full understanding. While the official records as listed above provide information about the dating of particular structures, and about the approaches of the supervisors, it is the physical remains which tell us most about the actual techniques used, and thus about the extent to which British theory was adapted to the new environment. The aspects of road making examined through physical remains include the actual location of the line of road; the earth and stone

formations and cuttings; the evidence of blasting and quarrying activity as shown by jumper marks, wedge pits and the massive, benched quarries; the various types of culverts and side drains in diverse locations and positions; some evidence of broken stone surfaces; the retaining walls which range in quality from the crudest low rubble walls to durable ashlar construction over 4 m in height; and the remains of seven stone bridges which also demonstrate the range of skills and techniques available to the road builders of the 1820's and 1830's. Like the written records, the material evidence is more scanty for the early, modest construction period (1826-28) and also for the final period (1834-36) than it is for the middle period (1828-34), when ambitious men directed the works, hundreds of convicts laboured on them, and the road was generally considered the most important underway in the colony.

Maps made at various stages during and after the construction of the road are also valuable sources, locating the original line, illustrating the improvement in surveying technique between 1825 and 1829 and showing, by comparison, the places where Mitchell's grand scheme for the road evidently could not be practically executed by the engineers. Later nineteenth and twentieth century maps indicate where, when, and occasionally why the road was altered over the next 150 years.

SECTION I

INTRODUCTION

Notes

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3. James Deetz, In Small Things Forgotten, The Archaeology of Early American Life, New York, 1977, p. 25.

4. Ibid., p. 23.

5. Ibid., p. 160.

6. Ibid., pp. 156, 160.

7. D.P. Dymond, Archaeology and History - A Plea for Reconciliation, London, 1974, p. 83.

8. Deetz, pp. 8-13.

9. Frank Walker, "The Great North Road", in Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society, (hereafter J.R.A.H.S.), Vol. 3, 1915, 59-79.

10. James Jervis, "The Great North Road" in J.R.A.H.S., Vol. 16, 1930, 102-111, and "The Great North Road - Supplement" in J.R.A.H.S., Vol. 20, 1934, 335-336.

11. T.H. Upton, "The Establishment of Direct Road Communication between Sydney and Newcastle", in Journal of the Institution of Engineers, Vol. 4, Nos. 5, 6 and 7, May, June and July, 1932, 159-174, 204-211, 234-240.

12. Sir Thomas L. Mitchell, Report Upon the Progress Made in Roads and in Public Works in N.S.W. from 1827 to June 1855 (hereafter Report on Roads), Sydney, 1856.