Alan Gordon Thorne 1939–2012

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OBITUARY

Alan Thorne, Australia's leading paleoanthropologist, died of Alzheimer's in June, 2012.

Alan Thorne in 1999 (photograph by Maggie Brady).

When he was 18, Alan became a reporter for one of Australia's most widely read newspapers, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which in those days had a policy of sending many of its young reporters to get an arts degree at Sydney University. Here, Alan graduated in Zoology and Anthropology, and came under the influence of the charismatic Professor of Anatomy, "Black Mac" Macintosh, who inculcated in him a passion for paleoanthropology, in which he took a Master's degree and in which he then enrolled for a Ph.D. During his period in Sydney, he rapidly acquired great expertise in osteology and general anatomy, and Macintosh held him in high regard and got him to do some teaching. In 1969, Macintosh urged him to apply for a recently advertised Research Fellowship in the Department of Prehistory at the Australian National University, in Canberra; although still a Ph.D. student, he was appointed to the post, and here he worked until his retirement.

It was while Alan was still studying and lecturing at Sydney University that he was asked to go to Melbourne to make a catalogue of the human skeletal collection of the National Museum of Victoria. In the course of examining and cataloguing the collection there, he discovered a box of unregistered bones, including some evidently mineralised skull fragments of very unusual form and exceptional thickness. In the box was a small black-edged card bearing the words "Bendigo Police" in black felt pen. He made enquiries, and found that such black-edged cards had been issued to the Bendigo police after the death of King George VI in 1952, and that the supply had run out in 1962; while felt-tipped pens had first been issued to police officers in 1957. Alan accordingly travelled to Bendigo and carefully studied all the records of skeletal finds between 1957 and 1962 in the Bendigo Police district, and turned up the information that the skull fragments in the box had been found by a bulldozer digging an irrigation channel on a property at Kow Swamp, in northern Victoria, on May 1, 1962. And

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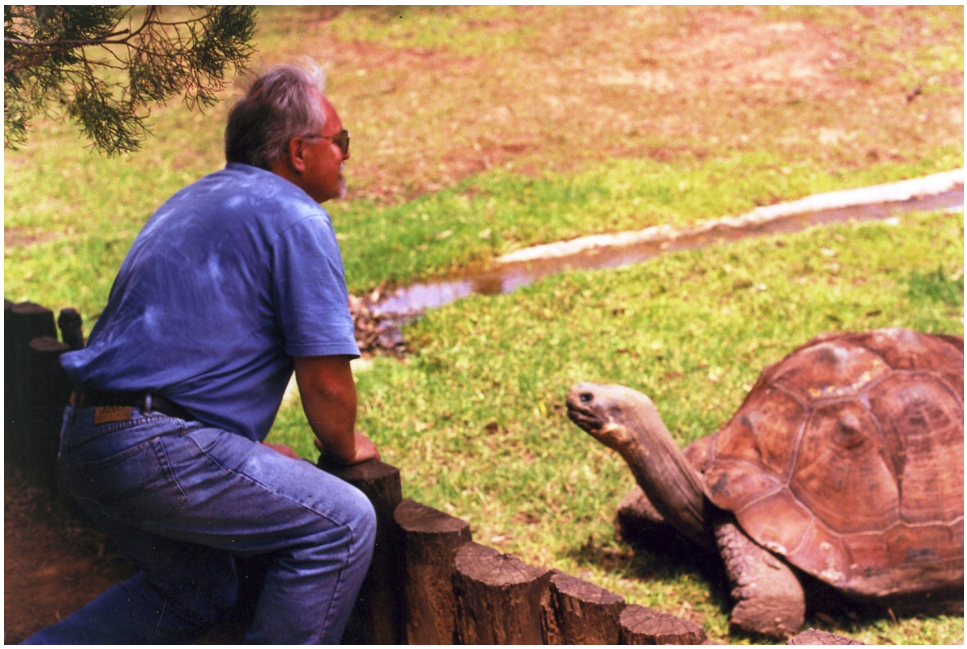

Alan Thorne at the Dubbo Zoo, Australia, in 1999 (photograph by Maggie Brady).

so it was that in early February, 1968, Alan visited Kow Swamp, and here he was shown the place where the bones had been found. Digging a little at the same place he uncovered a few more fragments, and found reason to suppose that this had been quite a large burial ground. Three months later, he returned and excavated further, and got together a team which, working on and off until 1972, retrieved first the remainder of the original skeleton, and later the skeletons of many more individuals. Dating showed that they were mainly terminal Pleistocene in age.

When Alan published the material, its archaic, almost *Homo erectus*-like appearance caused quite a sensation in the world of paleoanthropology. Alan gave a brief description of the first skeleton (Kow Swamp 1) in a chapter in the book *Aboriginal Man and Environment in Australia*, edited by Mulvaney and Golson in 1971, drawing attention to the large brow ridges, extremely receding forehead, and very large palate and mandible. A description and assessment of all the Kow Swamp remains was published in *Nature* in August, 1972, co-authored with geologist Philip Macumber. This paper included the following remarks: "Although much more recent than equivalent material from other parts of the world, the morphological complex indicates long-term preservation of early *sapiens* characteristics in southern Australia… The frontal bones are particularly archaic, preserving an almost unmodified eastern *erectus* form…" As some commentators have interpreted Alan as saying that the Kow Swamp remains were actually those of *Homo erectus*, it is worth emphasizing this careful choice of words.

Shortly afterwards, the site of a Pleistocene cremation was excavated at Lake Mungo, in the far west of New South Wales; these remains were evidently older than Kow Swamp (at that time the cremation was thought to be about 24,000 years old, now known to be 40,000) and Alan, in recognition of his growing reputation, was invited to describe this material (Mungo 1, or "Mungo Lady"). In 1974, he himself led a team to excavate another skeleton at Lake Mungo, this time a burial (Mungo 3, or "Mungo Man"). Both the Mungo individuals were, as he called them, "gracile," with relatively small jaws, small brow ridges, and rounded, not strongly receding frontals, and they contrasted dramatically with the robust Kow Swamp individuals. Alan published several papers on them, eventually concluding that Kow Swamp and Mungo represented two separate streams of occupation of the Australian continent (one from Southeast Asia, one from China), which had later fused to form the present day Aboriginal population.

In 1975 he helped to organize a symposium for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, later published as a book (co-edited with R.L. Kirk) entitled *The Origin of the Australians*. His Ph.D. was awarded later in that year for a thesis entitled *Kow Swamp and Lake Mungo: towards an osteology of early man in Australia*.

Alan's work on Kow Swamp, in particular, led him to formulate a hypothesis of regional continuity between Southeast Asia and Australia. He was convinced that Java *Homo erectus* had been subjected to sapientizing gene flow so that the Indonesian population became *Homo sapiens* while at the same time preserving regional characteristics, and that this population had then spread to Australia and New Guinea. It was natural that he should collaborate with others who were thinking along the same lines, especially Milford Wolpoff and Wu Xinzhi, and together they formalized the multiregional model of human evolution, eventually producing a paper which is still today regarded as the classic exposition of that model (Wolpoff, Wu, and Thorne 1984).

Contacts with Wu Xinzhi and other Chinese paleoanthropologists had commenced in the early 1970s, when

Alan was invited to be part of the first Australian scientific team to visit China, and he began to forge close links with a number of Chinese workers who were later to become close colleagues. He was one of the first non-Chinese researchers to study the fossil human and anthropoid material that had been discovered subsequent to the Second World War and the Communist revolution.

Meanwhile, Alan's career was taking an unexpected turn. He happened to be in China in 1982 at the time that a Film Australia crew was making a documentary on the Entombed Warriors of Xian, and he was asked to be the on-screen commentator, a role which suited him perfectly, and his charisma and genial personality gained him considerable public recognition. It was on this basis that he was recalled, in 1988, to front an 11-part TV series *Man on the Rim: The Peopling of the Pacific*. The series was a great success, and was sold widely internationally, and afterwards he and Robert Raymond, the filmmaker, produced a book, also called *Man on the Rim*, published the following year.

When he returned full-time to academia, he found that a controversy had flared up about some of his views, particularly his dihybrid model of Australian Aboriginal origins. One of his then PhD students, Peter Brown, maintained that the flat receding frontals of some of the Kow Swamp remains was not inherited from Javanese *Homo erectus*, but was actually the result of artificial head modification in infancy; this would, of course, have the effect of considerably reducing the difference between "gracile" and "robust" Pleistocene Australians. Alan never published his assessment of this new interpretation of Kow Swamp, but he did continue to maintain a distinction between the two types.

In the late 1990s Alan travelled with Colin Groves to study fossils in museums in South Africa, Indonesia, Germany, France, the UK, and the USA, in an attempt to shed light on how *Homo sapiens* had really originated. Although, expectedly, a definitive solution to that particular problem remained elusive, a number of publications did result (Groves and Thorne 1999, 2000; Chech et al. 2000).

Alan received a number of awards, notably the inaugural Riversleigh Medal for contributions to Australian Paleoanthropology, and he was made a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 1994. He was invited to give the prestigious Morrison Memorial Lecture at the Australian National University in 1982, and the Robert Broom Memorial Lecture in Johannesburg in 1994. He gave numerous other lectures, to public as well as academic audiences, both in Australia and overseas.

But what he always regarded as one of his major contributions was his ceremonial return, in 1992, of one of the Mungo individuals, LM1 or "Mungo Lady," to the custodianship of the Aboriginal communities of the Willandra Lakes region. Although it is true that Alan's first excavation, in 1968, in effect rescued the Kow Swamp 1 skeleton from destruction by an irrigation channel, it is also true that later he, like all of his contemporaries, excavated burials routinely. This was standard archaeological practice all over the world at the time, although even by the early 1970s it seems that Alan was quite conscious that what he was excavating were not just skeletons, they were the remains of human beings (I recall him asking for a moment's silence "in honour of the first Australian" after we had excavated the Mungo Man skeleton in 1974). The generally unthinking cavalier attitude of Australian archaeologists, and particularly the lack of consultation with local Aboriginal communities, changed through the 1970s and 1980s. Initially, there were angry confrontations between Aboriginal people and archaeologists, which gradually settled into earnest dialogue—the Aboriginal communities were interested in knowing what the study of the skeletal remains could tell them about the relationships and lifeways of their forebears, but continued to be disturbed that the remains were out of their control, and away from the land in which they had been carefully and respectfully interred. So when in 1992 the three Aboriginal communities of the Willandra Lakes (of which Mungo is one) successfully petitioned that the remains of Mungo Lady should be returned to their care, and Alan himself arranged the handover and officiated at the ceremony, it not only earned him the undying respect of the Willandra Lakes people, but was the catalyst for a new relationship between Aboriginal people and archaeologists in general.

Alan was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 2009, but even as late as December, 2010, he was able to attend and appreciate a symposium in his honor at the annual Australian Archaeological Association conference.

Alan's first wife, Judy, was killed in a car accident in the United States in 1993. He is survived by his second wife Maggie Brady, whom he married in 1999, and by his two children Nicholas and Rachel, and five grandchildren.

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