

## II. Papers

### The Curious History of the Talgai Skull

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In the Australian winter of 1886 William Naish, a shearer in summer and a fencing contractor in the winter, erected a farm fence along Dalrymple Creek on East Talgai Station, c.125 km southwest of Brisbane. Work was interrupted by six days of torrential rain. On returning to the site Naish found that the rain had extended an erosion channel which he now had to cross walking to work, and from the extended section he retrieved a skull, heavily encrusted in carbonate, but clearly of human origin.

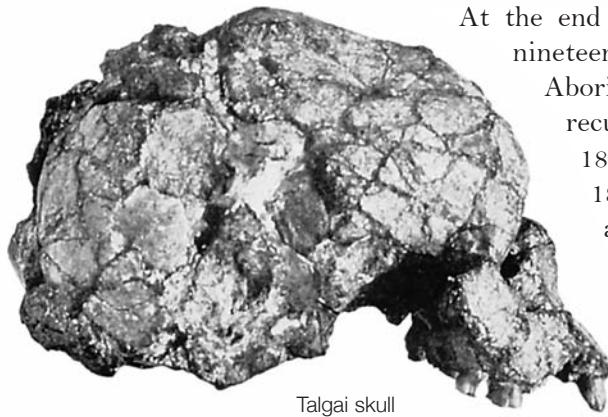
Although it would take three decades to recognise and a further five to confirm, Naish had discovered the first direct proof of the Pleistocene antiquity of humans in Australia. Details of this history of Talgai are taken principally and extensively from Macintosh (1963, 1965, 1967a, 1967b, 1969), Elkin (1978), Gill (1978) and Langham (1978).

#### Aborigines and Colonial Curiosity

To understand the history of the Talgai skull first we need to digress to a brief history of scientific enquiry as it developed in colonial Australia in respect of Aborigines.

Rousseau's (1762) conceptual development of an ideal noble savage occurred only six years before Cook sailed for the Pacific and objective ethnological observations of Aboriginal Australians began. Cook's writings countered the earlier attitudes of repulsion and intrigue about Aborigines shown by seventeenth century explorers such as Carstenz and Dampier (Dampier 1927 [1697]: 312; Heeres 1899: 39). Cook offered detailed descriptions of the people he encountered and their material culture, tempered with an explorer's curiosity about them (Beaglehole (ed.) 1955; Mulvaney 1958). Importantly it was Cook who first considered the origin of the Australian Aborigines, arguing that the linguistic differences between them and the New Guineans, and an apparent lack of contact between them – whereby coconuts and other fruits 'proper to the support of man' had not crossed Torres Strait – argued for different origins (Beaglehole (ed.) 1955: 397–398).

As European sailors, settlers and explorers encountered a continent of hunter-gatherers, abstract philosophy and dispassionate observation was tempered by the immediate experience of cultural difference. In Tasmania with the Baudin expedition in 1802, Péron (1809: 181) initially recorded his 'inexpressible pleasure' at observing the happiness and simplicity of people living in a state of nature, but after two short months, he railed against the Tasmanians, describing them as treacherous, untrustworthy, unattractive, dirty and miserable (1809: 197). At the same time and more dispassionately, Péron considered the physical and cultural differences between Tasmanians and mainland Aborigines as a basis for the ancient separation of the two land masses, and also developed a evolutionary scale of complexity between their respective technologies and those of Timor (Jones 1988: 63–64) – a forerunner to the widespread use of Tasmanians and mainland Aborigines and their material culture as proxies for Palaeolithic humans in Europe (e.g. Lubbock 1869 [1865]: 416; Tylor 1878 [1865]: 196, 1894; Sollas 1924 [1911]: 107, 258; Roth 1899: ix; Bonwick 1870: 221–222; Spencer 1922: 13).



Talgai skull

At the end of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century the twin colonial interests about Aborigines, as social and scientific curiosities, became recurring themes (see for examples reviews by Roth 1899: 221ff; Howitt 1904: 1–33; Mulvaney 1958). In 1823 W. C. Wentworth could poetise Aborigines as ‘untutor’d children, fresh from Nature’s mould’ but at the same time ask the pertinent scientific question: ‘Say – whence your ancient lineage, what your name/ And from what shores your rough forefathers came?’ (cited by Mulvaney 1958: 52. Wentworth, then at Peterhouse College, was runner-up for the

Vice Chancellor’s medal at the 1823 Cambridge Commencement with this poem, ‘Australasia’). In 1827 Cunningham could place Aborigines at ‘the very zero of civilization’ while being captivated by their ‘wild, roaming life’ and simultaneously drawing on the differences between mainland and Tasmanian Aborigines to propose a theory where the latter were exterminated by the former on the mainland (Cunningham 1827 – an idea that implied cultural succession and time depth, even if bounded by a biblical chronology). Almost a century later Sir Arthur Keith (1925) would propose that Talgai was one such Tasmanian.

In 1859 when Darwinian theory broke the shackles of the short biblical chronology, humans in Australia were quickly and more directly related to other areas of natural scientific research. Before Darwin, Mitchell (1838: 347) could explain the absence of the dingo from the fossil bones he had discovered in the Wellington Caves in New South Wales in 1830, in that it had obviously been introduced into Australia by humans, whose similar absence from the record was a product of belief and thus unremarkable. But under the new orthodoxy the more vexed question was soon raised about whether humans might have co-existed with the extinct megafaunal species, such as those found by Rankin and Mitchell in the Wellington Caves in 1830 and later described by British anatomist Richard Owen (1843; see Horton 1991: 28, 55 and *passim*). As in Europe, it was perceived that a demonstrated association of megafauna and human remains, or of megafauna and discarded stone artefacts, was proof of a long human history. Unlike Europe, where, by the end of the nineteenth century, such associations were commonplace, in Australia this association remained elusive despite the systematic analysis and description of megafauna from various localities (e.g. Wilkinson 1887; Anderson 1889; Jack and Etheridge 1892; Stirling 1900). Indeed, by the early twentieth century the dingo argument had been turned around: if the dingo could be shown to be contemporaneous with the extinct megafauna then humans must also be contemporaneous with the megafauna because humans introduced the dingo into Australia (Edgeworth David 1924; *The Mercury* 9.10.1923).

Inevitably tenuous claims for human cut marks on megafauna bones (e.g. De Vis 1883, 1899; Spencer and Walcott 1911) and deeply buried stone artefacts (see a review of claims between 1855 and 1896 in Howitt 1904: 15ff.) came and went. Although systematic collections of Aboriginal stone tools were being made by the end of the nineteenth century, the anthropological view that Aborigines were part of a ‘crude and quaint’ fauna that elsewhere had ‘given place to higher forms’ (Spencer and Gillen 1927) was transferred to appraisals of their tools as well (Mulvaney 1957: 34–35). The view that Aboriginal stone tools could not document cultural difference across space or through time was dominant (e.g. Kenyon and Mahony 1914: 4–7, 13) and persisted well into the second half of the twentieth century (see review by White 1977).

By the time of the unveiling of Talgai in 1914, two defining markers of the European Upper Palaeolithic, megafaunal associations and cultural sequences, reflected in stone artefact typologies, were still missing in Australia. To his question ‘has man a geological history in Australia?’ Etheridge (1890) suggested the answer was a resounding no. The intellectual view of Aborigines and their

works and origins into which Talgai was introduced was one described by Mulvaney as a 'doctrine of hopelessness'.

Talgai overturned this view.

### **The Talgai Skull Before 1900**

Upon finding the skull William Naish gave it to the station owner, G. J. E. Clark and by 1896 it had passed into the ownership of E. H. K. Crawford, the husband of Clark's niece, who lived in northern New South Wales. Thinking that the fossil might have monetary value, Crawford sought information on its worth, apparently both through his brother studying medicine in England, and directly, by sending a photograph of the skull to the British Museum. At the same time Crawford sent the skull to Sydney where it was exhibited in the window of a firm of city stationers. While in Sydney, and at the request of the curator of the Australian Museum in Sydney, Robert Etheridge, the skull was submitted for assessment by the museum's trustees. According to the recorded minutes of the relevant meeting, the trustees present included J. T. Wilson, Professor of Anatomy at Sydney University and Tannatt William Edgeworth David, Professor of Geology at the same institution. The trustees were interested in the fossil and determined to try to acquire it for the museum if an acceptable price could be set. Despite a flurry of correspondence over the next few months no arrangement was reached and the fossil was returned to Crawford's possession.

Several times during this correspondence Etheridge sought details of the skull's discovery to attempt to determine if the object had a 'geological history'. Crawford's knowledge of its recovery was both vague and inaccurate and this may have contributed to the lapse in negotiations, since Crawford's account suggested that the fossil was not datable and thus was of diminished scientific worth. As well, Crawford by this time might have received the surprising view of an unnamed scientist at the British Museum, that the skull was evidently that of an animal and of no value. Although Crawford was certain this was incorrect, failing to achieve this stamp of authority may also have induced him to let the matter drop.

What Etheridge must have realised, however, since he had recently co-authored a work on the palaeontology of Queensland which mentioned the locality of Talgai on multiple occasions (Jack and Etheridge 1892), was that the skull came from the same general area as a famous fossil megafauna locality, then known for more than half a century and with fossils from it described by the British anatomist Richard Owen in 1844.

### **The Talgai Skull 1914**

Subsequently, the Talgai skull slipped from scientific view for a further eighteen years. While it is puzzling that nothing came of this first interaction between Australian scientists and the fossil, its later rediscovery and representation to the public was even more curious. This was less so for the fanfare of its unveiling and the scientific and public curiosity it aroused, than because its two presenters, Edgeworth David and Wilson, aired it as a new discovery and not one which they had seen at the museum trustees meeting eighteen years earlier. As both Macintosh (1969: 195) and Langham (1978: 209–210) state, it is inconceivable that both of these university scientists could fail to recognise this distinctive fossil, if they had seen it in 1896. Macintosh questioned whether or not they were actually at the trustees meeting, even though they were recorded as present, while Langham imputed more sinister motives.

### ***Piltdown***

The big palaeontological event that separated the first and the second Sydney appearances of the Talgai skull was the discovery and extensive discussion of 'Piltdown man', with its apparently modern braincase, ape-like jaw and associated but separate large canine tooth. These remains, found in a Sussex gravel pit in Great Britain in 1912, were considered to be a plausible 'missing link' between