



BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS

JIM ALLEN

September 11, 1938–November 19, 2025
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A Biographical Memoir by James O’Connell

But since it falls unto my lot
That I should rise and you should not
I’ll gently rise and I’ll softly call
Good night and joy be with you all.
[from *The Parting Glass*, an Irish ode]

OVER HIS SIX-DECADE professional career, Frederick James Allen, known to all as Jim, made highly influential contributions on the initial human colonization of Sahul (Pleistocene Australia-New Guinea), the Late Pleistocene history of Tasmania, the ancestral Polynesian Lapita cultural complex, and the development of pre-European coastal trading networks in New Guinea. Apart from archaeology he was known for, among other things, his exploits on the cricket pitch, his late-night *a capella* performances of traditional Australian songs and poetry, his (sometimes) intimidating style in debate, and his knowledge of Australian wines, honed over decades of personal experience.

Jim was born and raised in the coastal Sydney suburb of Manly, the youngest of four children of Frederick and Florence Allen. He read Classical Mediterranean archaeology at Sydney University but was drawn in the early 1960s to fieldwork on Indigenous sites around Sydney and in Tasmania. He was accepted as a Research Scholar (graduate student) in Jack Golson’s Australian National University (ANU) Department of Prehistory, joining what was then developing into the best archaeology program in Australasia. Other (later internationally known) members of the 1965–70 student cohort included Ian Glover, Carmel Schrire, Jim Specht,



Figure 1 Jim Allen. Image captured and reproduced here with permission of Jill Allen.

and Peter White. Jim’s dissertation reported on fieldwork at Port Essington, an early attempt at British settlement near what is now Darwin in the Northern Territory. It was the first Ph.D. for an Australian-born non-Classical archaeologist and the first professional excavation of a European site on the continent.

On completing graduate work, Jim was appointed Lecturer at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) (1969–71), then (successively) Research Fellow, Senior Research Fellow, Fellow, and Senior Fellow at ANU (1972–84), Foundation Professor of Archaeology at La Trobe University (1985–93), and Australian Research Council-funded Professorial Fellow



at La Trobe (1993–98), continuing thereafter at La Trobe as Emeritus Professor. He was Commonwealth Fellow at St. John's College, Cambridge in 1974 and Visiting Professor at the Universities of Arizona (1979), Auckland (1989) and Utah (1993, 2006).

COASTAL NEW GUINEA TRADE

On taking up the appointment at UPNG, Jim started an archaeological field school on Motopure Island near Port Moresby.¹ Excavations there prompted his interest in the history of coastal trade, particularly the *Hiri*, an enterprise that annually moved by sea tens of thousands of pots produced by Motu people along the Papuan coast north to the head of the Gulf in exchange for tons of sago carried back south to offset the impact of seasonal food shortages. This led to a series of journal articles and book chapters on details of the trade and more generally on the relationship between trade and the evolution of social hierarchies, bringing Jim into contact with similarly interested investigators in the United States and United Kingdom.^{2,3} Ethnographic and experimental work by then-Ph.D. student Geoffrey Irwin and independent ceramist Owen Rye played important roles in these studies.

LAPITA HOMELAND PROJECT

In 1984, Jim organized an archaeological initiative, the Lapita Homeland Project, to investigate a Late Holocene Southwest Pacific archaeological complex characterized by distinctively decorated pottery, shell tools, jewelry, and a mixed marine and agricultural subsistence base. Its Austronesian creators are generally seen as the initial colonizers of the remote Pacific. The complex was first identified on New Caledonia in the early 1950s and later became better known through excavations in Fiji and Western Polynesia. Dates pointed to an origin in the Bismarck Archipelago but the relationship between outsiders arriving there from the west and local Melanesians was poorly understood. The project combined the efforts of more than twenty archaeologists from Australia, Papua New Guinea, the United States, and New Zealand operating semi-independently over a five-month period in 1985 on sites from the Admiralty and St. Matthias Islands in the north down through New Ireland and New Britain to Nissan in the northern Solomon Islands, a straight-line distance of nearly 600 kilometers. The preceding year Jim led a small reconnaissance party that scouted locations across the region identifying potentially important research sites and establishing relationships with local communities whose cooperation was essential to the proposed work. Logistic support for major fieldwork was provided by a motorized sailing vessel, the *Dick Smith Explorer*, that ferried gear and supplies to more than a dozen widely scattered excavation crews and carried away the collections they produced.

Well-known, regionally experienced co-investigators on the project included botanist Doug Yen and archaeologists Dimitri Anson, Wal Ambrose, Roger Green, Jack Golson, Pat Kirch, Jim Specht, and Peter White. ANU post-doctoral fellow Chris Gosden was project manager.

Results of the project are reported in many articles and book chapters, most comprehensively in the final project report.⁴ They doubled the number of Lapita sites known from the region and provided valuable information on subsistence economy, technology, and trade. They also produced unexpected insight on pre-Lapita history including a minimum 35,000-year-old date for the occupation of New Ireland (now estimated along with sites on New Britain at about 40,000 years), evidence of the introduction of exotic plants and animals from New Guinea (marsupial phalanger by 20,000 years and nut tree *Canarium* by 12,000), and of marine-assisted trade in obsidian across the archipelago from at least 20,000 years ago. These findings undercut the notion that agriculture arrived in the region with Austronesians and showed that local Melanesians had been effective environmental managers and manipulators since at least the Last Glacial Maximum.

SOUTHERN FORESTS PROJECT

In 1987, Jim embarked on what would become six years of fieldwork on the Southern Forests Project. A radiocarbon date of 20,000 years from a site in the southwest Tasmanian rainforest pointed to a potentially productive research area relatively close to La Trobe. Student and professional participants from La Trobe and elsewhere joined the effort. Ph.D. student and later fellow La Trobe faculty member Richard Cosgrove was Jim's primary collaborator throughout. Brendan Marshall, Ian McNiven, Nick Porch, and Nicola Stern were key participants. The exercise was challenging. Just reaching target limestone caves and rock shelters that contained archaeological deposits required travel by small boats down the fast-moving Franklin and Gordon Rivers or landings by helicopter on gravel bars midstream, followed by arduous treks inland through dense cover. It was cold, rain was near-constant, gear and clothing were always wet, and conditions within small caves were cramped and sweaty. As one reviewer put it, the region ranks as "one of the most naturally intimidating in the world for archaeological field research."

Results made the effort well worthwhile.⁵ Radiocarbon dates from excavated sites revealed occupation of what were then alpine heath and upland moors from about 40,000 years ago, just after falling sea levels exposed the land bridge from southeast Australia across what had been Bass Strait. Occupation ceased about 12,000 years ago, when rainforest reclaimed the southwest. Tiny excavations, none more than

one cubic meter in volume, produced hundreds of thousands of stone artifacts and nearly a million animal bones, nearly all from Bennett's wallaby. Insights on prey choice and hunting strategies informed by a novel application of optimal foraging theory followed.⁶ Political considerations terminated analyses before they could be completed,⁷ but Cosgrove has since been able to reinitiate them productively.

SAHUL COLONIZATION

Following his 1998 formal retirement from La Trobe, Jim remained active professionally on projects in various parts of Melanesia and Australia, usually in supporting roles. His best-known efforts during this time focused on published evidence of the date for initial human arrival in Sahul. Prior to the 1960s, that date was generally taken to be no earlier than the beginning of the Holocene. But starting with the 1964 publication of a 16,000-year-old radiocarbon date from a site in central Queensland, it was pushed back over the next five decades to a minimum of 50-45,000 years. Claims as early as 100,000 years based on luminescence and other radiometric techniques were brought forward often in those years but nearly all were rejected after careful review. However, dates older than 50,000 years from the Arnhem Land site of Madjedbebe, including a 65,000-year luminescence determination have gained widespread acceptance, notably among some Aboriginal Australian communities and representatives of the Australian government. Jim and I, sometimes with others, have challenged the significance of the date, given uncertainty about its relationship with evidence of past human behavior.⁸

The issue is important because it speaks to a connection between Sahul colonization and the mid-Late Pleistocene movement of *Homo sapiens* beyond an east African/southwest Asian homeland. Dates of 50-45,000 years for Sahul tie it with the spread of L3 mitochondrial DNA lineages across Eurasia starting around 50,000 years ago. These lineages are characteristic of Indigenous populations throughout Australia and New Guinea today and on genetic analysis have apparently been rooted there for nearly 50,000 years. In short, the movement of L3-derived *H. sapiens* into Europe and Sahul appears to have been part of the same meta-event. This inference is supported by the observation that all modern humans outside of Africa carry genetic evidence of introgression with southwest Asian Neanderthals sometime in the interval 55-45,000 years ago, probably early in that range. As we observed in our last paper on the topic, the colonization of Sahul must have occurred after that.⁹ This means that if truly associated with archeological remains, the early date from Madjedbebe must represent the presence of a human (but not necessarily *H. sapiens*) population unrelated to modern Australian and New Guinean Indigenous.

PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS

Jim and I were friends for more than fifty years, beginning when we were Research Fellows in Golson's department in the mid-1970s and continuing to his passing. The years at ANU were important to both of us. The department was populated by serious players, staff and graduate students both. There was no formal teaching. It had its own research budget, allocated in-house; members were expected to identify good projects and pursue them vigorously. And they did, on topics ranging from the development of regional culture historical sequences to the documentation of the Australian human fossil record, the investigation of pre-European trade and exchange systems, the ethnography of traditional subsistence practices, the origins of Highland New Guinea agriculture, and the constant search for the oldest archaeological sites on the continent. Progress reports were presented in regular late Friday afternoon seminars. The tone was often confrontational, so much so that the venue was sometimes labeled the "piranha pool" on t-shirts gifted to visiting speakers. *Larrikinism*—a uniquely Australian term for irreverent, sometimes rowdy behavior—was part of the department's reputation and Jim contributed to it. But it was socially tight and interpersonally supportive. Jim was a vital presence in that realm, from taking the lead in welcoming visiting scholars regardless of status, through batting and bowling on the cricket pitch in pursuit of inter-departmental trophies like the Vice Chancellor's Ear, to quietly supporting from his own salary at least one graduate student whose scholarship had expired. And all the while pursuing his own research.

He mellowed somewhat in later years but remained a force, well suited to what some have called "the rough and tumble of Australian academe." His support for La Trobe staff and students was famous, sometimes making higher administrators uncomfortable. He built the department almost from scratch in less than five years making it an attractive venue for prospective graduate students, competitive with well-established older programs elsewhere in Australia and New Zealand. His positive influence on the profession through his Ph.D. supervisees and other protégés from both ANU and La Trobe was widely felt.

Jim was deeply committed to the scholarly integrity of his discipline and highly critical of the professional shortcomings of some of its practitioners. His in-person observations could be performative, leading some to favor the phrase "doing a Jim Allen" (sometimes shortened to a "Jallen") to describe them. But the upset nearly always passed quickly, and all were the better for weathering it. The exception was the Tasmanian affair, in which Jim's commitment to scientific priorities in completing the project clashed with a change in government attitudes toward ownership of Aboriginal cultural properties, including archaeological remains. By court order, material

was returned to some members of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community, with analyses for a time incomplete. The lack of support in the matter from some of his colleagues cut deeply and encouraged his ultimate retirement. But for the next quarter century he remained an intellectual and personal touchstone for archaeologists throughout the Pacific and beyond. The respect and affection with which he was regarded is obvious in the thirty-one chapters by forty-one authors from Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe in the *festschrift* presented to him after his retirement.¹⁰ Apart from the volume's archaeological contributions, historian Stuart Macintyre's notes on Jim's time at Cambridge, especially his reaction to the stuffiness of college traditions and his memorable performance on an afternoon at croquet, are particularly entertaining.

Jim died in Moruya, New South Wales, from injuries sustained in a fall. He was eighty-seven. He is survived by Jill, his wife and true partner of forty-seven years, Tess and Jonas, his children from a previous relationship, and six grandchildren. His friends and colleagues gathered last December for a celebration of life in the family home overlooking Broulee Bay. They made a small dent in Jim's 600-bottle wine cellar, all praising in the process his attention to building its remarkable content.

For Jim. As the blessing says, "May the road rise to meet you, may the wind be always at your back."

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- 8 O'Connell, J. F., J. Allen, et al. 2018. When did *Homo sapiens* reach Southeast Asia and Sahul? *Proc. Nat. Acad. Sci. USA* 115:8482–8490.
- 9 Allen, J., and J. F. O'Connell 2025. Recent DNA studies question a 65 kya arrival of humans in Sahul. *Archaeol. Ocean.* 2025:1–4.
- 10 Anderson, A., and T. Murray, eds. 2000. *Australian Archaeologist: Collected Papers in Honour of Jim Allen*. Canberra: Coombs Academic Publishing and Australian National University.

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- 5 Allen, J., ed. 1996. *Report of the Southern Forests Archaeological Project. Vol. 1: Site Descriptions, Stratigraphies and Chronologies*. Melbourne: School of Archaeology, La Trobe University.
- 6 Cosgrove, R., and J. Allen 2001. Prey choice and hunting strategies in the Late Pleistocene: evidence from southwest Tasmania. In: *Histories of Old Ages: Essays in Honour of Rhys Jones*, eds. A. Anderson, et al. (eds.) pp. 397–429. Canberra: Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University.