Histories of old ages. Essays in honour of Rhys Jones

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Main content

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There can be few festschrifts that so reflect the affection with which so many people regarded Rhys Jones. He was a man inspired by and to inspire passions. Many of his loves and enthusiasms are reflected here not only in the photographs, and poetic pieces outside the academy, but through the care in writing and the authority of the archaeology by so many people affected in so many ways by the life and work of one of Australia's most influential archaeologists. Not least there is an affectionate biography/autobiography by Betty Meehan, who must be the only archaeologist apart from Alexander Downer's wife to commit to print her perceptions of her husband's legs! The volume was published before Rhys's death, but the prospect of death pervades the volume, so that it is at once a celebration of his life and an anticipation of a memorial to it.

The book could well be one of the well-used ones, given the breadth of its interests. The quality of the papers is high, and presentation very high quality. It is unfortunate that there are several errors in the list of Rhys's publications (The third editor, with Su Solomon and me, of Hall and Jones 1990 was our Departmental Administrative Assistant, Di Watson; there is no title for Spriggs and Jones 1993). The book could benefit from more drawings of artefacts (why are stone tools now very rarely, and often poorly, illustrated in Australian publications?), particularly in the papers by Bowdler and Golson, and O'Connor and Fankhauser's claim for the antiquity of painting at Carpenter's Gap would be enhanced by the publication of a stratigraphic section.

I first encountered Rhys at the famous 1974 conference of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (as it then was) where he delivered his "Tasmanian Paradox" paper (1977). As I recall it, the applause which greeted his ringing phrases about the doom that faced the Tasmanians (discussed here at length by Schrire) was more for the manner of the poetic delivery than from agreement with the statement (as some have claimed)--though I acknowledge that he believed this was a brave conclusion from his analysis, rather than just sentiment more befitting the rhetoric. It is one tragedy of Rhys's career, and more particularly of Australian archaeology, that that rhetorical style was rarely put to its best advantage in teaching and exciting aspiring undergraduate students.

The connection between artistic style and scientific message--and the need for honest representation of...
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