Foreword

One of the most common problems in archaeology is the publication of excavations — a problem because it is done cursorily, or by someone else decades later, or not at all. The thrill of fieldwork past dulls as the enormity of necessary analytical tasks become apparent and the romance of further fieldwork calls. Those who do produce the results in a timely fashion should thus be honoured in the profession. Even more praiseworthy is when these results move beyond a dry catalogue to be presented in the frameworks not only of the original investigations but also of those which have arisen and developed during the years of analysis. This monograph is one such publication.

Val Attenbrow’s archaeology in Upper Mangrove Creek was among the first pieces of research aimed at the scientifically rigorous understanding of an environmentally defined area. It attempted to sample the area and the sites in a theoretically justifiable way. These data, the original block of which was from a salvage program carried out by a public utility, were then enlarged and transformed by Val’s perspicacity and persistence into a larger-scale, research-oriented PhD thesis. The core problem of the thesis in 1987 was whether a proposed ‘intensification’ of Aboriginal occupation during the later Holocene could be substantiated in a close-grained analysis of excavated data. The 17 years between thesis and publication have seen continuing research by consultants and academics. The original proposals concerning ‘intensification’ have been modified and new views and approaches raised. The question is no longer as simple as it first seemed. Environmental changes, better dating, more sophisticated technological understanding and a wider range of possible subsistence and land-use patterns can all now be seen as parts of a larger, more complex prehistory. This monograph not only discusses all of these aspects, but remains, in my view, Australia’s best data-driven analysis of this proposal. Val’s results demonstrate how complicated the archaeological record is and how apparently simple propositions wilt under careful scrutiny.

Val Attenbrow’s archaeological career has been marked, in particular, by a commitment to regional archaeology. Her Honours and PhD theses were both concerned with areas of New South Wales. Her earlier employment, as a consultant and then with the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NSW), continued this focus. Her research since 1989, based at the Australian Museum, has seen the completion of the large-scale and successful Port Jackson (aka Sydney Harbour) Project and the beautiful and comprehensive publication, Sydney’s Aboriginal Past (UNSW Press 2002). These, along with this monograph on Upper Mangrove Creek, establish her as a profound interpreter of the Sydney region’s archaeological past and as someone who can contribute substantially to the wider understanding of Australia’s Aboriginal past.

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