Aubrey Parke: An Enthusiastic Amateur in Fiji?

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Over the next 16 years [after Gifford’s 1947 project] the only archaeological work was carried out by enthusiastic amateurs. One of these was Aubrey Parke… (Best 1993:396)

Background and Career

Aubrey Laurence Parke was born on 11 November 1925, the son of Laurence Stanley Parke (1890–1940) and Mildred Frances Parke. He was born some two years after his father participated in the Dorset Minor Counties Cricket Championship team. Aubrey—no mean hand with the bat himself—came from a long line of cricketers, his grandfather Laurence P. Parke (1860–1929) having participated in the same Counties championship in 1902. Aubrey’s father was the only one of three cricketing brothers to have survived the Great War, and Aubrey was presumably named after one of the two that didn’t return, John Aubrey Parke (1892–1915). The third brother was Walter Evelyn Parke (1891–1914), who merited an obituary in *Wisden* such was his prowess on the pitch as a left-handed batsman. The family had a military and legal background, which included service in places such as the Crimea, Jamaica and even a diplomatic posting in Mexico.1

Aubrey was born in Moreton, Dorset, while the previous few generations hailed from Henbury House in Sturminster Marshall parish, near Wimborne. Henbury House had been bought in 1847 by his great-great-grandfather Charles (born Jamaica 1791). The family are traceable back to Whitbeck Hall in Cumberland in the 1620s. His father Laurence Stanley Parke took up the position of Commissioner of Police in Aden, then a British colony, leaving the family, including a younger sister Bridget, to be raised by relatives. The father died in Aden in 1940. Bridget recalled Aubrey’s interest in archaeology from a very young age, with many surface-collecting expeditions across the Downs near their home at Sixpenny Handley. His collections from that time can now apparently be seen in the Dorchester Museum. He participated in Mortimer Wheeler’s classic excavation at Maiden Castle Iron Age hillfort at the age of about 12. His Aunt Merry, who lived nearby, recalled that although very young, he was trusted as an active participant because of his clear understanding of archaeological technique.2

Aubrey spent 1939–1941 living with his great-uncle Colonel Henry Aubrey Cartwright (born c.1858 in London) at Upwood, just outside the village of Sixpenny Handley. It seems to have been there that he developed an interest in local myths and legends, which he collected assiduously at that time and later published in *Folklore* (Parke 1963). His uncle and aunt Mildred (née Parke, 1

Information here on Aubrey’s family comes, perhaps most appropriately, in part from a cricketing website (cricketarchive.com/Archive/Players), consulted July 29 2012, augmented by information from his son John (personal communication, July 2012) and from the eulogy presented at his funeral service on 26 February 2007 by his daughter Fiona Parke; I have drawn freely on this latter source throughout the paper. Wider details of his family come from Burke (1912), and from census information presented at (www.opcdorset.org/Sturminster/SturminsterMarshall), again consulted July 19 2012.

2 Information from the eulogy presented at his 2007 funeral service by Fiona Parke, and from my own conversations with Aubrey over the years.
born c.1859), the latter a noted cat breeder, were both donors to Pitt Rivers’ second collection after 1880, which became the basis for the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, so a continuing interest in archaeology may well have been fostered by them.\(^3\)

Aubrey was educated at Hordle House and Winchester schools. Upon leaving Winchester in 1942, he joined the Royal Air Force as a navigator/bomb aimer and saw active service. Like so many, he never talked about it much afterwards. One thing he did talk about was an excavation of Bokerley Dyke adjacent to one of the airfields he was based at in 1942–43. A later publication on this earthwork noted that his work was carried out under ‘difficult wartime conditions’ (Bowen 1990:21). When I asked him what these were, he told me that German planes were machine-gunning the field at the time, but he felt quite safe as his excavation pit was rather deep. After the War he read Greats—Greek and Latin—at Lincoln College, Oxford, and participated in the Oxford Scientific Expedition to Tunisia in 1950 in search of a unique hot water shrimp, \emph{Thermosbaena mirabilis}. The shrimp was finally located in the women’s baths at El Hamma, necessitating special permission from the Caliph and a police escort to investigate. The report of this discovery in the \emph{Illustrated London News} mentioned that ‘Aubrey Parke, archaeologist...was able to examine some of the prolific Roman and megalithic remains in the area’\(^4\). Upon leaving Oxford he spent a year based in London preparing for overseas service in the British Colonial Service, and attending lectures at the Institute of Archaeology and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS).

In 1951 he was posted to Fiji and worked there for 20 years, initially in the Western District, and during the 1950s and 1960s collected much of the information presented in his 2006 thesis and here in slightly revised form. He held various official positions as discussed in his Preface including: District Officer for Ra, for Lautoka, Nadi and the Yasawa Group (twice), for Suva, for Navua, and during a period in 1964 for the island of Rotuma, as Deputy Secretary for Fijian Affairs, and as Commissioner for the Northern Division. These various positions, not an exhaustive list, allowed him to travel widely in the Colony, particular on Viti Levu, Vanua Levu, the Yasawas and of course Rotuma. He was also a Trustee of the Fiji Museum and its archaeological adviser.

In 1955, after four years’ service he went home to England on leave. He seems to have got right back into the swing of Dorset archaeology during this ‘time off’, directing excavations at Greyhound Yard/St Rowland’s Chapel Site in Dorchester over two seasons 1955–56. Remains of Roman and medieval buildings were recovered (reported in Farrar 1957, Draper 1981). The excavation archive is in the Dorset County Museum. He also found time to meet his wife of 50 years, Tamaris, at the time a cordon bleu chef, and after a whirlwind romance of 6 weeks they married and she relocated to Fiji 4 months after his return in 1956, the plane journey at the time taking 5 days from London.\(^5\) In his Preface he describes her, one hopes somewhat tongue-in-cheek as his “long-suffering research assistant”, acknowledging that she was ‘a marvel with the trowel, the camera and the measuring tape’.

After Fiji became independent on 10 October 1970 Aubrey soon moved on, doubtless feeling he had accomplished a job well done. He settled in Canberra taking up an invitation to become

\[^3\] Information from the Pitt Rivers Museum website (web.prm.ox.ac.uk/rpr/attachments/), “Donors to Pitt Rivers Second Collection”, accessed 29 July 2012.


\[^5\] I am again indebted to the eulogy by Fiona Parke for this information.
Administrative Officer for the recently established Canberra College of Advanced Education, now the University of Canberra. He restarted his academic career at this time, obtaining an MA at the Australian National University in 1981 for his thesis *Clause Structure in Fijian* (Parke 1981). A B Litt in Fijian archaeology followed, and then in 1992, after having retired in 1990, he embarked on full-time study for a PhD. It was a very rough road over the next 14 years and relied tremendously on the support of his wife, Tamaris. Patrick Guinness recounts that his medical problems were such that in 2002, he had medical certificates covering 10 of the 12 months of study. He bore his afflictions with quiet determination, a determination that paid off in October 2006 when in a formal academic ceremony at his hospital bedside he was awarded his degree, the second oldest student, at very nearly 81, ever to receive a PhD from The Australian National University. Patrick Guinness recounts that soon afterwards he was summoned to Aubrey’s bedside for a consultation on publication plans for the thesis, and for four further papers that he wanted to work on. Sadly, these were not to be and he died on 20 February 2007, in his 82nd year."

Although I had seen Aubrey around ANU, I had no real idea who he was until I joined the then-Department (now School) of Archaeology and Anthropology as a Professor in 1997 and soon after took over as Head of Department. I must admit I found his old-school courtesy, indeed deference, to the Head somewhat unnerving; being of a later generation I suspected there must be irony involved, but I don’t think there was. I also saw first hand the tremendous determination that he had both to finish his thesis and to return the results of his wider research to the host communities concerned. Given his deteriorating health he realised that he might not have much time to reach his goals. Over the 11 years from 1993 to 2003, after which his health curtailed much of his writing, he produced two substantial monographs on Rotuma and a further nine papers that I know of, six of them in internationally refereed journals. Apart from one paper that completed his Rotuman work, the rest concentrated on aspects of the history and archaeology of the two main islands of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu and their satellite islands. This book, based on his thesis, is his major contribution in this regard.

He definitely had much more to contribute, not least on the linguistic study of the various communautics of Fijian spoken on Viti Levu. The linguist Alfred Schütz, working in Fiji in 1962, had noted that: ‘At the time of the writer’s own survey Aubrey Parke was completing a grammar and a word list of the Navatu dialect in Ra; material for a study of Navatu kinship terms; and word lists for certain Ra and Ba dialects. He was also beginning to collect word lists from the Sigatoka area, planning eventually to produce a grammar of that dialect’ (Schütz 1963:259). He produced a 146-page report on the Navatu dialect, undated but possibly in 1954 (Parke 1954b), and drew upon his linguistic researches both in his MA thesis (Parke 1981) and throughout the current book. Professor R.M.W. Dixon acknowledges Aubrey in his Grammar of Boumaa Fijian (1988), noting that he ‘speaks the language fluently; we had four or five long sessions together, in Canberra, in which he went through the grammar, chapter by chapter, helping me to amend and improve it’ (Dixon 1988:xii). But much remained to be done. Very sadly, his extensive archive was destroyed in the inevitable downsizing of belongings that follows a death.

**An Enthusiastic Amateur?**

The quotation that begins this appreciation suggests merely a very minor contribution to scholarship. In defence of the author of it, the date of composition must be mentioned—1993 was just on the verge of Aubrey’s amazingly productive period of publication. He had previously only published five papers on his Fijian and Rotuman studies, two of them in the limited-circulation proceedings of the Fiji Society, and a short linguistic monograph on Rotuman—see

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6 Much of this information comes from Patrick Guinness’ eulogy given at the funeral.
the bibliography of this book for references. His last publication had been more than a decade earlier. His work was barely mentioned in the only reasonably up-to-date summary of Fijian archaeology at the time (Frost 1979). It is fair to say that Aubrey had, in effect, been hiding his light under a bushel.

I have to admit that until I came to prepare this piece, I too was almost completely ignorant of his contribution. I had never read his seminal paper, delivered to the Fiji Society, on 11 April 1960 that constitutes a masterly overview of what was and wasn’t known at the time about ‘Archaeology in Fiji’. It was eventually published in 1965, a victim of ‘Pacific Time’ clearly (Parke 1965)! By then Bruce Palmer had taken over the Directorship of the Fiji Museum and had begun an aggressive program of archaeological survey and engagement with overseas scholars in Auckland and elsewhere to open up Fiji to outside archaeological interest. Aubrey’s earlier contribution was thus overshadowed, and he was too modest to push forward his continuing claims to archaeological expertise.

In part this was because his particular interest was in what he called protohistoric studies, the melding of oral tradition, recorded in his case in the vernacular, and its materialization in archaeological and ‘natural’ sacred sites relating to the recent Pre-European past. The push in Fiji and elsewhere among most other archaeologists was to find the earliest sites of human occupation in the islands and to build a chronological framework through sequencing of pottery styles linked to radiocarbon dating (Frost 1979). His own interests may have seemed quaint and ‘non-scientific’, hence amateur.

But let us go back to the beginning of his time in Fiji, and this evaluation appears seriously flawed. When Aubrey arrived in Fiji in 1951 he would have been the most highly-trained archaeologist living and working in the Western Pacific, having absorbed the classic British prehistoric site excavation techniques of Wheeler and Piggott. Jack Golson, coming from the same archaeological background, was not to arrive in Auckland to take up the first Australasian academic post dedicated to regional prehistory for another three years.

Aubrey’s problem was that he had no institutional support to conduct serious excavations in Fiji, and indeed was employed to do something quite different; to assist in administering a British colony. While he could doubtless argue that a knowledge of the customs and traditions of the Fijians was a valuable skill in dealing with land and other administrative issues, the same could not have been argued at the time for his archaeological interests, which would have had to be largely confined to weekend excursions. Nevertheless he was able to take advantage of the clearly-comprehensive libraries of the Colonial Secretary and Dr H.S. Evans in Fiji, and was familiar with Alphonse Riesenfeld’s magisterial compilation of ‘pre-modern’ sources for knowledge of Western Pacific archaeology, *The Megalithic Culture of Melanesia*, he cites Riesenfeld (1950) in his 1960 paper (Parke 1965).

The ‘modern’ era of archaeology in Fiji had been ushered in only a few years before his arrival, when Berkeley professor E.W. Gifford had conducted surveys and excavations on Viti Levu, the results of which were published in 1951 in a major archaeological monograph and an article on ‘Fijian Mythology, Legends and Archaeology’ (Gifford 1951a, b), and in a much lesser-known monograph *Tribes of Viti Levu and their Origin Places* in the following year (Gifford 1952). Radiocarbon dating was invented by Willard Libby in 1949 and Gifford was quick to take up Libby’s offer to date samples (Gifford 1955). Aubrey immediately got in contact with Gifford upon his arrival in Fiji and in his 1960 paper quotes from a 1953 letter he received revealing details of the first radiocarbon dates from Fijian sites that Gifford had received from the laboratory:
The carbon-14 date is 1000 A.D. and is based on an ample sample of charcoal from a hearth that lay on sterile soil, 30 inches deep in the rock shelter at Navatu. With this age for 30 inches deep, I anticipate that the bottom of the deposit outside the rock shelter must be much older. It goes down ten feet as you will see in consulting my paper. At location B the deposit goes down to twelve feet. I recently submitted a sample from 96 inches deep at Location B, Navatu, but it was too small, only 3 grams. Unfortunately I did not get sufficient charcoal from the deeper parts of the Navatu and Vuda sites. It is too bad, because an adequate sample would give us the approximate date of the founding of the settlements. My guess would not be later than the time of Christ. I recently obtained a date for a New Caledonian sample I dug last year at 78–84 inches. The date is 73 A.D. (Parke 1965:36).

Thus Aubrey was one of the first to hear of the Fijian dates two years ahead of publication and of the exciting dates Gifford was also receiving from his 1952 excavations in New Caledonia, including at the eponymous site of Lapita. In 1953 Aubrey was truly at the heart of Western Pacific archaeology; recall Jack Golson hadn’t yet packed his bags for the journey out! As recognised by Best (1993), Aubrey’s 1960 paper included the first classification of Fijian archaeological site types and it began the systematisation of Fijian archaeology, taken over in the 1960s by Bruce Palmer, Roger Green and others.

Aubrey realised what the problems were for a clear understanding of Fijian prehistory, the most pressing being chronology and sequence building. He had a very British scepticism of the—at the time very new—technique of radiocarbon dating, presumably communicated to him by Stuart Piggott among others. He wrote: ‘Even when sufficient carbon is available the resulting date is not necessarily reliable. Certainly British archaeologists do not generally pin such faith in this method of dating as apparently do their confreres across the Atlantic’ (1965:11). This attitude lingered a long time in Britain; dying echoes of it were still voiced when I began my own undergraduate training there in 1973. So Aubrey was thrown back upon relative dating of artefacts linked to genealogical dating by number of generations, the pre-radiocarbon staple of much of Polynesian archaeology. This necessitated linking sites mentioned in myths and legends to such genealogies, very much the method employed in this book. Aubrey’s long-standing interest in legends and oral traditions, the pertinence of them in this case to issues of land ownership and traditional governance, and Gifford’s published but largely unrecognised attempts in this regard combined with British scepticism of radiocarbon dating to drive his own archaeological agenda, both in Fiji and in 1964 on Rotuma.

In the 1960s and later Aubrey’s type of approach appeared somewhat old-fashioned to the newly ‘tech-savvy’ archaeologists of the Australasian centres. Important too was a growing scepticism of the value of oral traditions as history, and an unmasking of those in New Zealand of ‘The Great Fleet’ as being an illegitimate melding of disparate traditions to create a seemingly unified history (Simmons 1969, 1976; Sorrenson 1979). French scholars were much more open to the kind of approach that Aubrey was perfecting in Fiji, and José Garanger’s stunning results in the then New Hebrides in relation to archaeology and traditions of Roi Mata and of the Kuwae eruption of the AD 1450s (Garanger 1972) provided a resounding confirmation of the value of combining oral traditions and archaeology. Garanger’s work was recognised among Anglophone scholars, but largely ignored in their own practice for many years after. Pat Kirch and Doug Yen’s work on Tikopia, which clearly drew inspiration from it, is one honourable exception (Kirch and Yen 1982). Much of what today passes for landscape archaeology or cultural geography in the wider region is largely a development from the kind of research Aubrey undertook in Fiji and Rotuma; ironic, as these are claimed to be very much ‘post-modern’ theoretical pursuits.

When he could, Aubrey did also excavate—although the records of most of his efforts in this regard are lost, preventing an evaluation. The necessity of rebuilding the Council House on
the ceremonial mound of Navatanitawake on the island of Bau, led to an early Western Pacific example of salvage archaeology in 1970, albeit much constrained by the sacredness of the site. It was also an early example of multidisciplinary field investigation of a burial site, otherwise a feature mainly of new millennium practice:

Members of the project team included Mr. W. Bullock, a Government surgeon with experience in osteometrics, who came to Bau and measured bones and made comments on their characteristics; Mr. M. Maberly and Mr. Titus, two Government dentists, who spent some time on the island in order to study the teeth and jaws and to make plaster casts; and Mr. Les Thompson, a Government surveyor, who prepared survey plans...officers of the Fiji Departments of Geology and Forestry who commented on the stones and charcoal (Parke 1998; cf. Parke 1993).

In his writing up of this work more than two decades after the excavation, Aubrey also drew on bioanthropological opinion from Prof. Colin Groves and fellow-student Peter Dowling, the study of animal bones by Dr Wilfred Shawcross, also of ANU, and comments on his paper by Professors Marshall Sahlins of Chicago, and Dave Burley of Simon Fraser University in Canada (Parke 1998). Another 1970 study was carried out in association with anthropologists Ron Crocombe and Aselela Ravuvu of the University of the South Pacific in Suva (Parke 1997).

Even in 1960, the signs that the cultural heritage of Fiji was fast disappearing because of economic development, particularly of the sugar industry, were also apparent to Aubrey. His suggestion was eminently practical, if also showing his colours as a budget-conscious functionary of the Empire:

I suggest that an archaeologist be invited to visit the Colony, at no expense to Government, and to carry out a proper survey of the ancient sites, and after consultation with the owners, to recommend to the Board of Trustees of the Museum, and thence to Government, which objects, if any, should be declared to be monuments under the ordinance. This would serve the purpose of providing a schedule of ancient monuments in the Colony, which would thereby be afforded official recognition because of their importance (Parke 1965:36–7).

One wonders to what extent this suggestion led indirectly or directly to the 1963 appointment of Bruce Palmer to the Directorship of the Fiji Museum and the renaissance in archaeological research into Fiji’s early prehistory that followed?

Aubrey’s own renewed vigour in archaeological pursuits at this time came as a result of his posting to Rotuma for a period of four months in 1964 as District Officer. In this isolated outpost of the Colony he could clearly do pretty much as he pleased with his time, and he devoted an amazing energy to research on the ‘Legends, Language and Archaeology of Rotuma’ (Parke 1969), which ultimately led to three monographs and three other academic papers on these subjects—all listed in his bibliography. They all give generous acknowledgement to previous studies of the island and are meticulous bibliographically. Notable is Aubrey’s acknowledgement of the immediately preceding work of anthropologist Alan Howard, later a distinguished Professor at the University of Hawaii and a colleague of mine there in the 1980s.

One of Aubrey’s Rotuma books is subtitled ‘Traditions of Rotuma and its Dependencies, with excerpts from an archaeologist’s field notebook’ (Parke 2001). To my shame I had never heard of this work until now, although I suspect I must also blame Aubrey’s extreme modesty for never bringing it to my attention. In my own recent research I have been trying to construct an archaeology that is sensitive to indigenous interests and places importance on the kinds of sites that people locally in Vanuatu find significant, and which records for the future traditions and
places that may be lost otherwise. In looking at Seksek e Hatana/Strolling in Hatana (Parke 2001) I realise that Aubrey was there long before me, in what I was imagining was a rather innovative approach in the region.

All those who have conducted research in relatively remote areas of the Pacific can recall times when it all seems to go so well—the findings are significant, the field experiences overwhelmingly pleasant, the landowners interested and cooperative. Clearly on Rotuma in 1964 it all came together for Aubrey. We also all have those moments when we are tempted to undertake actions that could potentially be disastrous. I loved Aubrey’s own laconic description of one such moment, when visiting some Rotuman cave sites ‘would have entailed the erection of a winch to enable me to go up and down the 80 foot pit (there was no other way up or down the sheer walls). But pressure was put on me to desist—and I regret to say that I gave way to pressure and so I cannot record a first hand account of the depths and caves of Mamfiri. The last man to try apparently passed out from lack of oxygen’ (Parke 1969:112–3).

Aubrey Parke was no amateur. In terms of those living and working in the Western Pacific in the early 1950s before Jack Golson’s arrival, he was without doubt the most highly trained. He was in touch with those, such as Professor E.W. Gifford, who were kick-starting archaeology in the region after World War II, and he was among the pioneers of an archaeology informed by oral traditions that is only now really coming back into its own, after a period when such oral sources were largely disparaged. He operated entirely in local languages wherever he worked, and was evidently a gifted linguist as well as archaeologist. He has been largely ignored in the history of archaeology in the region because the vast majority of his publications came long after he had left Fiji, in the years between 1993 and 2003 and culminating in his 2006 thesis, which will constitute his final work. The publication of his very important stock-take and summary of what was then known in Fijian archaeology in 1960 was delayed for five years as well as being inaccessible to most scholars outside Fiji (Parke 1965). Another important paper on his Rotuma work written in 1965 also had a delayed publication in the same journal (Parke 1969). Apart from these two papers and a two-page summary of his Rotuman research published in the Journal of the Polynesian Society (Parke 1964), he had no further archaeology-related works published until after he had left Fiji.

With the loss of his archive, the opportunity to evaluate his contribution fully has gone. But enough remains to make it clear that although he was an extremely unassuming man he was a uniquely significant figure in the development of Pacific archaeology. It is indeed sad that the discipline did not at all realise this until after his death and that he did not receive the recognition he deserved.
Aubrey Parke at his PhD graduation ceremony at the age of nearly 81 in hospital in Canberra on 21st October 2006. His award represented a lifetime’s dedication to anthropology, archaeology and linguistics, particularly in Fiji.

Photo: John Parke
References


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