

25

Looking beyond Australia's shores in the 1930s: F.D. McCarthy in Southeast Asia

Campbell Macknight

By the early 1930s, research into the social organisation, the art and the past of Aboriginal Australians was being vigorously pursued in various institutions across Australia. Melbourne had failed to follow up the work of Baldwin Spencer at the beginning of the century, and now Sydney and Adelaide were the new centres. Both the Australian Museum in Sydney and the South Australian Museum in Adelaide saw ethnology as within their remit and interpreted this very widely. Support from both the University of Sydney and the University of Adelaide came principally from the medical faculties with their interest in the origins of Aboriginal Australians. Australia's first university Department of Anthropology began at the University of Sydney in 1925 with a focus on research in both Australia and New Guinea.

The various museums all had a long history of collecting Aboriginal artefacts, especially stone tools, and there were sporadic efforts to estimate the antiquity of human occupation of the continent. Norman Tindale, originally an entomologist, and Herbert Hale, then director of the South Australian Museum, dug the classic archaeological site of Devon Downs in 1929. In 1932, F.D. McCarthy transferred from the bird and reptile department of the Australian Museum to become assistant

ethnologist, and soon curator of ethnology. In the same year, he joined the Anthropological Society of New South Wales and entered the world of stone tool collectors. Archaeological surveys and excavations by the society soon followed (McCarthy 1984).

These early excavators recognised that different deposits, often the successive layers laid down on the floor of a cave, yielded different types of artefacts; that is, they could see change over time. Without any means of absolute dating, however, they could only compare one site with another on the basis of similar stone artefacts. McCarthy, together with his colleague and eventual wife, Elsie Brammell, set about developing a standard classification of stone implements, which was later expanded to cover wood and bone materials.

It was through his contacts with physical anthropologists in Sydney University's Department of Anatomy that McCarthy was given the chance in 1937 to visit Southeast Asia. He was invited by Dr P.V. van Stein Callenfels, then the prehistorian in the Archaeological Service of the Dutch East Indies, to assist with excavations in Sulawesi (then called Celebes), to visit museums in Java and finally to go on to Singapore (Australian Museum Archives [AM] 234/37, van Stein Callenfels to Shellshear, 3 April 1937). In the event, McCarthy was also invited to present a paper in Singapore at the Third Congress of Prehistorians of the Far East in late January 1938. Right from the beginning, a key purpose of the trip was to compare stone implements and other finds in Southeast Asia with those in Australia. The assumption was that any similarities observed would indicate some kind of prehistoric contact, whether in the actual movement of people or by the diffusion of ideas.

Happily, the proceedings of the Singapore congress were published in 1940, before the Japanese invasion swept away the certainties of the time, so in McCarthy's lengthy paper we can get a good idea of the conclusions from his travels (McCarthy 1940). We also have his letters and reports to the Australian Museum and a daily diary that contains much information about his ideas as they developed (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATSIS] MS 3513/21/12). Taken together, we have a detailed view of archaeological problems and work in Australia and Southeast Asia as seen by an active fieldworker and museum curator in the late 1930s.

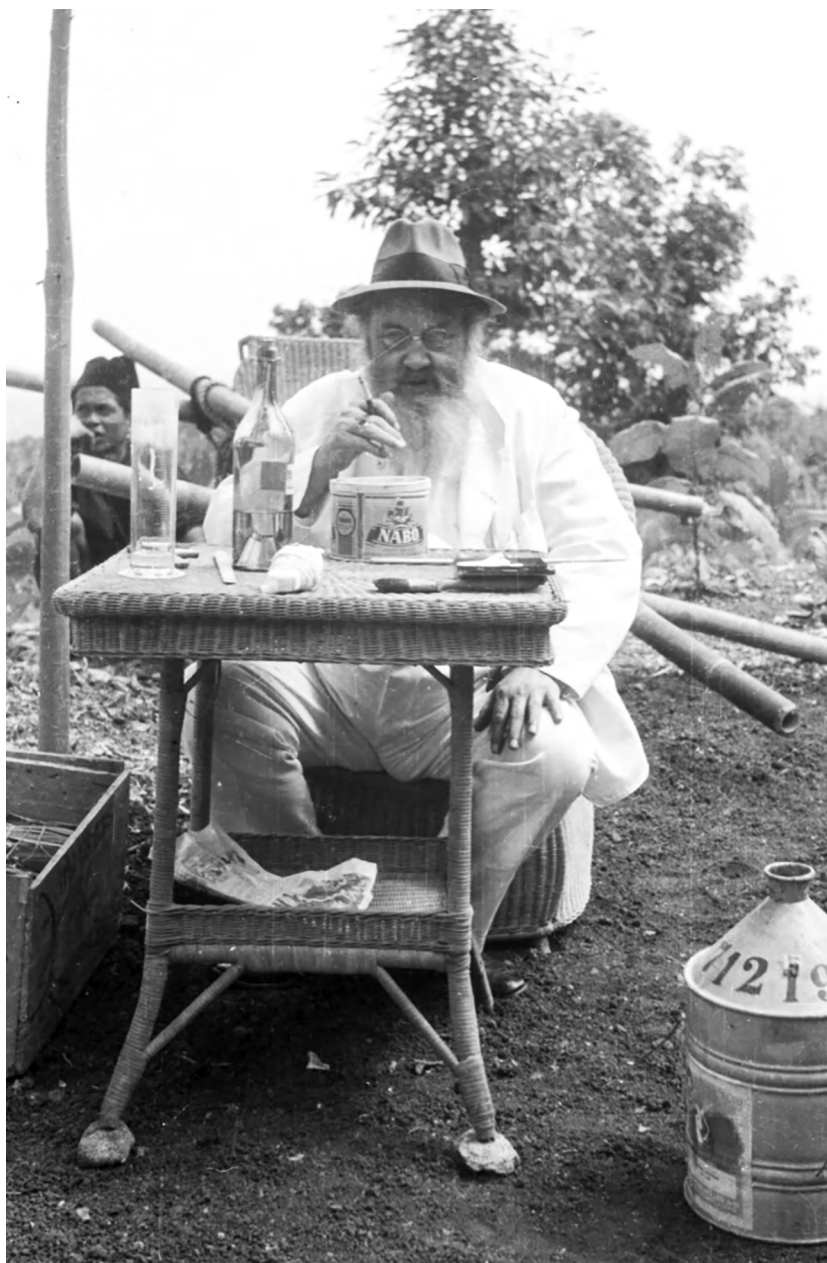


Figure 25.1. P.V. van Stein Callenfels at Leang Codong, South Sulawesi, 29 August 1937. This was his only visit to the site.

Source: Photographer F.D. McCarthy. Reproduction courtesy Australian Museum Archives (AMS683/J/12).



Figure 25.2. Excavation in progress at Panisi' Tabbuttu, South Sulawesi, July 1937.

Note: The man in the white shirt is W.J.A. Willems; the man with the broad hat is Munaf, the long-suffering assistant to van Stein Callenfels; the man in the white shorts is probably a local doctor. Note the theodolite in the background.

Source: Photographer F.D. McCarthy. Reproduction courtesy Australian Museum Archives (AMS683/M/23).

The possibility of significant similarities between stone artefacts in Sulawesi and Australia goes back to the publication by Paul and Fritz Sarasin of their archaeological discoveries in Sulawesi at the beginning of the twentieth century and their comparison of these finds with Australian materials (Macknight 2018). McCarthy, who had had to face the situation in Australia where there was not much other than stone implements to go on, brought his experience to bear on the issue. Thus, he could correct van Stein Callenfels's sloppy use of the term 'microlith' when he recognised true microliths, that is, small flakes with backs for hafting produced by bipolar retouch, in the deposits they were excavating in Sulawesi (AIATSIS, MS 3513/21/12:79). The Australian comparisons were never far away and implements similar to the backed adze-flakes, called *elouera* in the Australian context, were recognised both in Sulawesi and Java. Like many others, McCarthy could not resist noting the technical similarities between the small points with serrated edges and a concave base from Sulawesi, known today as Maros points, and the points with serrated edges and a convex base from the Kimberley region of north-western Australia (McCarthy 1940:40). More distant expressions of this 'microlithic culture' were noted in India and Japan (AIATSIS, MS 3513/21/12:12, 42).

Most of the data for McCarthy's quest to find links between Australia and Southeast Asia came from his work with museum collections. For example, in his Singapore conference paper, when discussing the distribution of 'round-axes' and the hammer dressing technique, he added new examples from the Malay Peninsula that he had seen in the Raffles Museum in Singapore and material he knew well from the Australian Museum in Sydney. This fuller information allowed him to reach new conclusions about, as he saw it, the diffusion of 'round-axes' and hammer dressing through New Guinea to Cape York and eastern Australia (McCarthy 1940:41).

Things became more difficult with older and simpler types of stone artefacts. Although he could point to some similarities between apparently early Australian stone artefacts and the 'Palaeolithic' material he saw in Java, he was unwilling to claim a direct connection that would imply a vast age for humanity in Australia. He was content merely to suggest that the similarities supported a relatively early date for the material in Australia (McCarthy 1940:30–32). For other types, such as the 'horse-hoof core', he judged that it occurred in so many different contexts in Australia that any similarity with early Javanese material was coincidental

(McCarthy 1940:32). There was also the question of whether this was really a core, as generally agreed today, or, as maintained by G.H.R. von Koenigswald, the expert in Java with whom McCarthy had extensive contact, the type was really an implement in its own right (AIATSIS, MS 3513/21/12:23 Nov. 1937).

Some of McCarthy's conclusions now seem far-fetched. He suggested links between stone mortars and pestles from New Guinea, New Ireland and Bougainville and those of Island Southeast Asia within 'the late phase of the megalithic period which is associated with metal-working' (McCarthy 1940:45). He also saw features of Aboriginal art in central Australia and the Kimberley as very probably deriving from Bronze Age expansion to the north (McCarthy 1940:45). Such speculations show the problems of interpretation without independent chronological control.

By the time he returned to Sydney after the Singapore congress in 1938, McCarthy was confident that 'our present knowledge of prehistory is such that the path of the aborigines to Australia can be said definitely to be via the Malay Archipelago and New Guinea' (AM 183/38, Report, p. 5). Two major difficulties, however, lay in the way of defining this path more closely.

The first difficulty was the problem of associating stone artefacts with people. Could one link particular artefacts or types of implement with a distinct population and thus trace the movement of 'races', or was the distribution of an artefact or concept to be explained by the diffusion of ideas? This is a classic problem of archaeological interpretation, but the limited data McCarthy and his contemporaries had at their disposal made it next to impossible to resolve the issues. There were clear genetic differences between groups across Island Southeast Asia, the south-west Pacific and Australia, but even the terms with which to discuss these differences were confused. McCarthy records his dissatisfaction with terms such as 'Papuo-Melanesoid' and 'Australo-Melanesoid', although is not sure of better ones (AIATSIS, MS 3513/21/12:18 Nov. 1937). What is striking to the modern reader is the absence of any reference to linguistics and, in particular, the distribution of Austronesian languages (see also Aigner, **Chapter 22**, this volume). It is a reminder of how much of the present understanding of the region's prehistory is based on Austronesian linguistics.

The second difficulty was the lack of any means of absolute dating that would allow changes in one area to be correlated with changes in another. While the early hominin remains in Java and the stone artefacts they produced could be linked with various palaeontological strata in Java, no such dating was available in Australia and there were still no absolute dates. Occasional finds of bronze objects or imported ceramics generally proved too insubstantial to provide firm comparative dating. The whole structure of regional prehistory, as elsewhere in the world, now hangs on absolute dating, especially radiocarbon dating that was introduced from the 1950s onwards (see also Spriggs and Howes, **Chapter 26**, and Litster et al., **Chapter 32**, both this volume). An explicit aim of the joint Indonesian–Australian expedition to Sulawesi in 1969 was to provide radiocarbon dates for sites like those McCarthy had helped to excavate three decades earlier (Macknight 2018; Mulvaney and Soejono 1971).

Whatever the limitations of McCarthy's archaeological work and efforts to create a secure prehistory for the region, the range of his interests and attention was remarkable. Constrained in part by his need to recuperate after illness, he spent over a month in and around Bandung in West Java and had sustained contact with G.H.R. von Koenigswald, the palaeoanthropologist. When given the chance to handle a recently found *Pithecanthropus* (*Homo erectus*) skull, he felt as though it was a 'sacred object'. Particularly given that the impetus for the trip had come from the physical anthropologists in Sydney, there was much discussion of fossil finds in Australia. At the other end of the chronological scale, he discussed with A.A. Cense, the government linguist in Makassar, the trepang fishermen who had visited northern Australia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He regretted that he was not well enough to accompany Cense to meet an old captain who had made the journey. Ten years later, he was to be in Arnhem Land investigating the industry from the other end. At dinner in Singapore, he met Teilhard de Chardin, the famous thinker and palaeoanthropologist, and took part in a conversation about religion and evolution, as well as exchanging palaeoanthropological gossip. Given an opportunity just before the Singapore congress, he travelled to Malaya where he joined H.D. Noone and other anthropologists working with Temiar, Senoi and Semang peoples (Figure 25.3). His photographs of these tribal groups and their way of life were clearly intended for museum use.

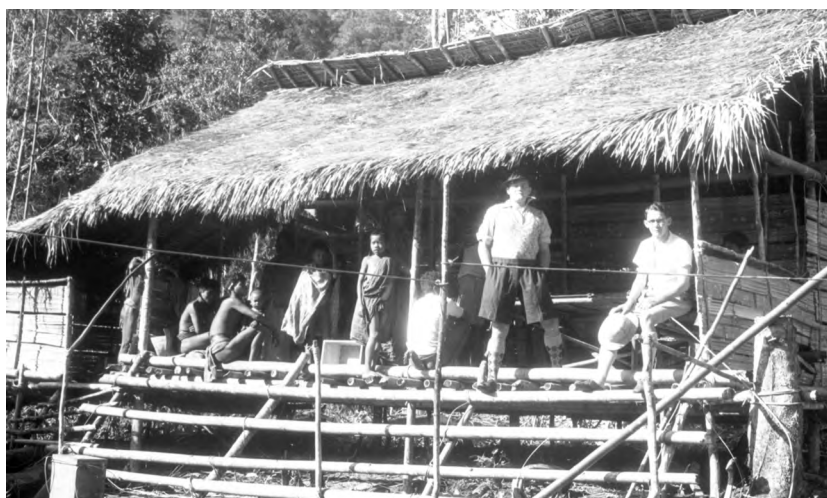


Figure 25.3. F.D. McCarthy, seated with glasses, and H.D. (Pat) Noone, standing, with Temiar and Senoi people at Kedol, Cameron Highlands, Malaya, in January 1938.

Source: Photographer unknown. Reproduction courtesy Australian Museum Archives (AMS683/B/27).

While much of this may have been a steep learning curve for McCarthy, who actually had had limited formal education, he brought a wealth of experience from his years of working in the Australian Museum. He was constantly observing the natural world, especially the birds. He described in detail the local people in Sulawesi and happily spent a day helping to measure the physical characteristics of prisoners in a gaol. He wondered about the political future of the Dutch East Indies and took detailed notes on ceremonies and dances he witnessed. Museum matters were constantly in his mind, whether the display and captioning arrangements in the museums he was visiting and the possibilities for layout and display at home in Sydney, or potential exchange of specimens between museums. He was particularly impressed by the scale models of volcanoes in the Dutch museums in Java and pushed hard to arrange exchanges of fossil skull casts. He was in no doubt that museums were institutions for research and public education. They were also staffed by men – almost exclusively men in those days – about whom a variety of views and gossip are recorded in his diary. The collegial help and hospitality extended to him was very extensive, though the warmth of his welcome may also have had something to do with his own enthusiasm and openness to ideas.

The most telling indicator of McCarthy's view of himself as a museum man and of his understanding of the scope of the Australian Museum of which he was such a committed staff member lies in what he tried to collect for the museum, even if he failed to meet what he saw as the huge potential. He was in the midst of people about whose languages, cultures and histories he knew next to nothing from his upbringing in early twentieth-century Australia. Everything about the natural world, from volcanoes to tropical plants and animals, was utterly different from the environment he knew so well around Sydney. As guides and mentors, he had access to the best experts and those driving the very latest scientific research. How could he help his museum present this wealth of information to the Australian public?

Though his diary is full of plans to collect material and to arrange exchanges between institutions, the items in the museum's collections that can now be identified as coming from his trip are relatively few. A major reason for this outcome was an urgent injunction from Dr Charles Anderson, director of the Australian Museum, not to spend money on collecting material (AIATSIS, MS 3513/21/12:18 Nov. 1937). There was also little enthusiasm from others in the museum to follow up McCarthy's contacts and promises. None of his plans for scale geological models or fossil skull material seems to have borne fruit. Though he took with him a collection of Australian stone artefacts, some of which, at least, he gave to van Stein Callenfels (AIATSIS, MS 3513/21/12:132), the only reciprocation was a collection of obsidian flakes from Bandung and a quadrangular stone chisel from southern Java, neither of which is mentioned in the diary and that may have come from Dutch friends in Bandung.

Among the collectible items of contemporary material culture, musical instruments were available, cheap and represented an art form unfamiliar in Australia. Only one instrument bought in Sulawesi has survived, but most of the collection of instruments he made in Bandung with the help of a young Dutch friend can now be identified (AIATSIS, MS 3513/21/12:10 Nov. 1937). The diary includes a chart comparing the European and Javanese musical modes and explaining the use of the instruments. Some items were too big to collect, such as the fish traps that he had hoped to get near Makassar. Whole houses, however, could be represented by models and the exact circumstances in which the two examples from Sulawesi were obtained are described in detail in the diary (AIATSIS, MS 3513/21/12:62, 140). Although he resolved to make a collection of household items, the only result of this was an arrangement

by a Dutch official to have 'some old type pottery made for me at 25 cents a piece' (AIATSIS, MS 3513/21/12:140) (Figure 25.4). This arrangement produced six spectacular earthenware pots. In fact, they turn out to be more interesting as demonstrating local capacity to satisfy the taste of colonial rulers than as examples of Indigenous material culture (Macknight 1993). The safe arrival of the house models and the pots in Sydney is probably due to the care of Dutch friends in Watampone who packed and sent the items on after McCarthy had left the area.



Figure 25.4. Terracotta pot and lid with deeply carved floral decoration. Made to order for F.D. McCarthy in or near Watampone, South Sulawesi, in 1937.

Overall height of pot 245 mm and maximum diameter 255 mm. See Macknight (1993:161–162) for detailed description.

Source: Photographer S. Florek. Courtesy of the Australian Museum (iE44350+04).

McCarthy also had an informed interest in art and there are many comments in his diary on paintings he saw in Dutch houses. After the conclusion of the 1938 congress, he returned to Australia through Java and Bali, essentially as a tourist. He gave up his diary entries in Yogyakarta with the calculation that he had just enough money to get home if he was careful. That did not prevent him, however, from buying three paintings in Bali that have also ended up in the museum's collection.

More than 80 years after McCarthy's trip, we are less impressed than he was with the use of stone implement types as markers of prehistoric contacts between Australia and Island Southeast Asia; the whole subject has been transformed by new methods and a wealth of discoveries. Ironically perhaps, given that McCarthy made only slight reference to interactions with local people since his focus was on the Dutch, British and other Europeans in the Indies, a long-term result of his work has been the extensive collaboration and warm relations between later Australian and Indonesian archaeologists, especially in Sulawesi. This example of looking beyond Australia's shores, which is vigorously sustained by today's archaeologists, has produced the oldest continuous field of cooperation between our two countries.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the help of David Bulbeck with this paper.

It did not prove possible to mount an exhibition of objects highlighted in this chapter at the Australian Museum.

References

- Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). MS 3513/21/12, F.D. McCarthy diary 1937–1938. This is paginated up to p. 200, thereafter references by date.
- Australian Museum Archives (AM). McCarthy, F.D. Prehistoric Research in D.E.I/ etc., 234/37, P.V. van Stein Callenfels to J.L. Shellshear, 3 April 1937.
- Australian Museum Archives (AM). McCarthy, F.D. Tour – Dutch East Indies 1937–38, 183/38, Report of Visit to Dutch East Indies & Malay Peninsula, 21 March 1938.

- Macknight, C.C. 1993 Six pots from South Sulawesi. *Records of the Australian Museum, Supplement* 17:159–171. doi.org/10.3853/j.0812-7387.17.1993.67.
- Macknight, C. 2018 The joint Australian–Indonesian archaeological expedition to South Sulawesi in 1969 in context. In S. O'Connor, D. Bulbeck and J. Meyer (eds), *The archaeology of Sulawesi: Current research on the Pleistocene to the Historic Period*, pp. 9–16. Canberra: ANU Press. doi.org/10.22459/TA48.11.2018.02
- McCarthy, F.D. 1940 Comparison of the prehistory of Australia with that of Indo-China, the Malay Peninsula, and the Netherlands East Indies. In F.N. Chasen and M.W.F. Tweedie (eds), *Proceedings of the Third Congress of Prehistorians of the Far East, Singapore, 24th January – 30th January 1938*, pp. 30–50. Singapore: Government Printer.
- McCarthy, F.D. 1984 A coat of paint. *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1984(2):72–81.
- Mulvaney, D.J. and R.P. Soejono 1971 Archaeology in Sulawesi, Indonesia. *Antiquity* 45:26–33. doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00069015.
- Willems, W.J.A. 1940 Preliminary report on the excavation of an urn-burial ground at Sa'bang near Palopo (Central Celebes). In F.N. Chasen and M.W.F. Tweedie (eds), *Proceedings of the Third Congress of Prehistorians of the Far East, Singapore, 24th January – 30th January 1938*, pp. 207–208. Singapore: Government Printer.

This text is taken from *Uncovering Pacific Pasts: Histories of Archaeology in Oceania*, edited by Hilary Howes, Tristen Jones and Matthew Spriggs, published 2022 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/UPP.2021.25