

Message From Mungo

by Andrew Pike and Ann McGrath

70 mins, Ronin Films, Mitchell, ACT, 2014,
ISBN 9781922005151, Rated G, \$34.95.

Review by Kate Rogers
Southampton University

When settling down to watch an archaeology documentary you expect certain conventions to be followed: an excavation or laboratory investigation plays out on screen, an expert presenter translates the findings, and perhaps some clever CGI (Computer Generated Imagery) accompanied by a suitably dramatic score reinforces the overall narrative. Following this formula, archaeology documentaries tend to reinforce easily digestible narratives of the past rather than challenge audiences by questioning the status quo. Ronin Films' *Message From Mungo*, however, breaks with tradition and turns its lens on the history and practice of archaeology itself in order to expose some necessary but uncomfortable truths about the discipline. In this feature-length film there is no slick scientific method illustrated, no presenter, no CGI, and barely any music. Instead, through a series of raw and compelling interviews with Aboriginal elders and spokespersons, prominent archaeologists and local landholders we are guided on a journey through the stratigraphy of memory and time, gently taking us even deeper than the revelations granted by scientific investigations, to level our gaze on the very foundations of Australian archaeology and its impact on Aboriginal Australia and beyond.

Considering that *Message From Mungo* is constructed almost entirely of formal interviews, it is a surprisingly arresting story. It is a story about the impact of one individual on a multitude of others despite a distance of millennia. Mungo Lady was a woman who lived and walked the Eden-like Pleistocene landscape of what has now become the dried up ancient Lake Mungo, in outback New South Wales, an estimated 40,000 years ago. We know little more of her life. After her death she was cremated and buried in one of the dunes beside the lake, and there she remained until 1968 when geomorphologists and archaeologists

who were surveying the now arid and dramatically eroding landscape of Lake Mungo identified her remains. Realising the potential scientific importance of the fragmentary skeletal remains they had found, and concerned by the destructive forces of weather and grazing stock, geomorphologist Jim Bowler and archaeologists Rhys Jones, John Mulvaney and Harry Allen packed the remains into a suitcase the next day and took them back to The Australian National University in Canberra for analysis. That analysis revealed Mungo Lady to be the oldest then-known cremation in the world, and put Australia 'on the map' of prehistoric archaeology.

But science of course does not function in a vacuum, and the news of Mungo Lady quickly attracted the attention of three local Aboriginal groups – the Paakantji, Ngyiampaa and the Mutthi Mutthi – who found themselves excluded from these events. When local Aboriginal activists Dorothy Lawson and Alice Kelly approached the archaeologists, their curiosity inevitably turned to conflict as Mungo Lady quickly came to personify the clash of scientific research and living Aboriginal culture, all against the background of the Protection Acts, child removal, the Freedom Rides and the land rights movement. Within archaeology as a discipline too, factions arose, and as women such as Isabel McBryde and Sharon Sullivan entered the arena, they added gender as another dimension to the debate and series of allegiances. Soon the local pastoralist community also joined the fray, key among them Des Wakefield, who was concerned by the impact of the newly granted UNESCO World Heritage status on their land and livelihoods. With all the players in position, what follows is not simply an account of what became an international repatriation controversy that spanned four decades, but also the story of the creation-through-crisis of a distinctive Australian history extending into the deep past, informed by archaeology and forged by Indigenous values.

Something particularly remarkable about *Message From Mungo* is that the film never actually shows you its main character. We are briefly shown a couple of old photographs of the place of her burial with trowels stuck upright in the sand as makeshift markers, but otherwise our only clues as to who she was are words, our imaginations and the sound of the wind – a recurring motif throughout the film. In this way the film takes the position that Mungo Lady's significance is about more than her physical remains (although there is room given to the scientific importance of her age and 'gracile' characteristics). Instead, more emphasis is given to her role as an uniting influence with her own agency, a guiding light for modern Australia. Thus the argument that she was not so much 'discovered' but rather 'surfaced' of her own will at a time when she was most needed, almost King Arthur-like, is woven throughout the film.

The unique moon-like landscape of Lake Mungo, is another prominent feature of the film and in a way becomes its own character. The dramatically coloured pillars and dunes of eroding clay and sand are captured through a very human lens: for example, there is a particularly wobbly close-up of a dune top with the sand whipping off it in the high winds that are a feature of the ancient lake system. This may irritate those who dislike handheld cinematography, but in a way actually offers a human touch to what could have just been standard camerawork. *Message From Mungo* is very much an authored film, and although you rarely hear the directors Andrew Pike and Ann McGrath speak, it is through shots such as this that one can nearly sense their presence as they travel and learn from country for the eight years of the film's production. Their journey becomes ours as we too begin to gain an understanding of the weight of the Paakantji, Ngyiampaa and Mutthi Mutthi's profound and continuous connection to country and its people – including those who died long ago.

Message From Mungo is a sensitive and brave act of storytelling, skilfully filmed and thoughtfully crafted. As a former ANU archaeology student, I remember the story of the suitcase being whispered in the university's corridors: it never seemed to be quite made official – and as such it is intriguing the film's production was instigated not by archaeologists but by historians. In this film not only is the story finally publicly acknowledged by academia, but all those involved are given a genuine voice to share their version of events and are treated with compassion and thoughtfulness, resulting in candid and extremely moving testimonies by some of the biggest names in Australian archaeology and Aboriginal activism. Although the controversy has not been entirely brought to rest (Mungo Man who was later discovered not far from Mungo Lady is yet to be repatriated), the film leaves its audience with a hopeful mood and a sense of more to come.

While the film is intended for general and classroom audiences interested in Australian history and archaeology (there is also a useful study guide by Wiradjuri scholar Jeanine Leane available via Ronin's website), I feel it is particularly essential viewing for archaeologists, including those outside of Australia. In fact, *Message From Mungo* would be an extremely helpful aid in explaining the tone and context of Australian archaeology to our overseas colleagues; as an archaeologist living and studying overseas I routinely meet colleagues who still consider Australian archaeology to have swung too far in favour of the rights and values of Indigenous groups – as though to the detriment of science. Thus the voices featured in this film deserve not only domestic scholastic attention but very much need to be carried to an international stage.

As a researcher examining the sometimes lonely ground between documentary and archaeology, and who therefore watches endless archaeology documentaries back to back as part of my work, I found *Message From Mungo* a refreshing

and welcome voice in what can be a jaded and static sub-genre ('Pharaohs and Fuhrers' as it is nicknamed in the film and television industry). What *Message From Mungo* deftly achieves is an original, compassionate and vital telling of the difficult genesis of Australian archaeology and its impact on Aboriginal groups. It is also a successful blending of the documentary sub-genres of archaeology with social justice filmmaking, avoiding polemics but gently reminding its audience that we still have a long way to go, and if we truly wish to understand Australia's past, including its deep past, then we cannot afford to forget the message at the heart of the story of Mungo Lady: ask first, and listen.

This text is taken from *Aboriginal History, Volume 39, 2015*,
edited by Liz Conor, published 2015 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.