

The story of the interaction between Scientists and
the Custodians of Indigenous Heritage at Lake Mungo,
one of the world's richest archaeological sites.

MESSAGE FROM MUNGO

A film by **Andrew Pike**
and **Ann McGrath**



Released by
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MESSAGE FROM MUNGO



“This is a lovely film, subtle and engaging. Neither patronising nor judgmental, and avoiding cliché and sentimentality, it recounts Lake Mungo’s ancient past and contested present through the interwoven stories of five sets of witnesses: the landscape itself, its Indigenous custodians, academic archaeologists, pastoralists, government parks and heritage officers. Their accounts are elicited and edited by the film-makers, but the speakers are fully in charge and proud of their own stories. Beautiful cinematography and a soundtrack composed of human voices, sounds of the natural environment, and silence, give the film a simple elegance and quiet authority”.

- Prof Jill Matthews, Humanities Research Centre,
Australian National University

MESSAGE FROM MUNGO

SYNOPSES

ONE-LINE

The story of the interaction between Scientists and the Custodians of Indigenous Heritage at Lake Mungo, one of the world's richest archaeological sites.

ONE PARAGRAPH

Lake Mungo is an ancient Pleistocene lake-bed in south-western New South Wales, and is one of the world's richest archaeological sites. The film focuses on the interface between the scientists on one hand, and, on the other, the Indigenous communities who identify with the land and with the human remains revealed at the site. This interface has often been deeply troubled and contentious, but within the conflict and its gradual resolution lies a moving story of the progressive empowerment of the Indigenous custodians of the area. The film tells a new story that has not been represented in print or film before, and is told entirely by actual participants from both the science and Indigenous perspectives.

ONE-PAGE

Lake Mungo is an ancient Pleistocene lake-bed in south-western New South Wales, and is one of the world's richest archaeological sites. **MESSAGE FROM MUNGO** focuses on the interface over the last 40 years between the scientists on one hand, and, on the other, the Indigenous communities who identify with the land and with the human remains revealed at the site. This interface has often been deeply troubled and contentious, but within the conflict and its gradual resolution lies a moving story of the progressive empowerment of the Indigenous custodians of the area.

The film tells a new story that has not been represented in print or film before, and is told entirely by actual participants from both the science and Indigenous perspectives. It focuses on one particular archaeological find – the human remains known generally as “Mungo Lady”. In 1968, scientist Jim Bowler came across what he thought might be human remains exposed by erosion. Other scientists confirmed that they were the remains of a young woman who had been given a formal ritual of cremation. The remains were the subject of international academic excitement and debate: claims were made that the remains were as much as 40,000 years old or even older. Lake Mungo became recognised as an archaeological site of world importance.

Through the 1970s and 80s, led by three remarkable Aboriginal women – Alice Kelly, Tibby Briar and Alice Bugmy - and encouraged by archaeologist Isabel McBryde, Aboriginal groups associated with Mungo began to question the work of the scientific community, and became increasingly involved in the management of archaeological work. In 1992, after much pressure from Indigenous groups, the remains of Mungo Lady were handed back to the Indigenous custodians. This hand-back ceremony was a turning point in the relationship between scientists and the local tribal groups.

MESSAGE FROM MUNGO

PRINCIPAL CREDITS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Produced and directed by
Andrew Pike and **Ann McGrath**

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Editor
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Approx. 70 mins

2014

MESSAGE FROM MUNGO

CO-DIRECTORS' BIO-FILMOGRAPHIES

ANDREW PIKE

Andrew Pike is a film historian, documentary filmmaker and film distributor. With Ross Cooper, he co-authored the seminal history, *Australian Film 1900-1977* (published by Oxford University Press). His company, Ronin Films, has distributed many Asian and Australian films and today specialises in documentaries. In 2007, he was awarded an Order of Australia Medal for his services to the film industry, and an honorary doctorate from the University of Canberra. He was a Board member of the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia until mid-2012. As a documentary filmmaker he has directed ANGELS OF WAR (1982), THE CHIFLEYS OF BUSBY STREET (2008), EMILY IN JAPAN (2009) and **MESSAGE FROM MUNGO** (2014, co-directed with historian Ann McGrath), and has produced many others, including MAN OF STRINGS (1999, director, Gary Kildea), BETELNUT BISNIS (2004, director, Chris Owen) and ACROSS THE PLATEAU (2007, director, Zhang Zeming, and filmed in China).

ANN McGRATH

Ann McGrath is a distinguished Australian historian with a special interest in working with film. She has been an historical advisor on numerous television productions and co-produced the documentary, A FRONTIER CONVERSATION (2006). **MESSAGE FROM MUNGO** is her first film as director or co-director. She is currently the head of the Australian Centre for Indigenous History at the Australian National University. She speaks at numerous conferences and her work has been widely published, including the award-winning *Born in the Cattle: Aborigines in Cattle Country* (1987) and recently *How to Write History That People Want to Read* (2010, co-authored with Ann Curthoys).

MESSAGE FROM MUNGO

CO-DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

ANDREW PIKE

I am keen to explore documentary forms that are outside the mainstream.

MESSAGE FROM MUNGO aims to use oral history to give an insight into an era and an event. In a way it is "constructed" oral history, using a variety of voices to tell a story shared by the speakers. The story is told only by participants, and there are no outside experts or a narrator mediating information, coming between us and the participants' own stories.

We are interested in the participants' own words, as well as their body language, their facial expressions, their pauses, their hesitations, their self-corrections. The thinking, talking face is at the very centre of the film.

One inspiration behind the film was expressed many years ago by my father's mentor, historian Keith Hancock. Hancock argued that historians need to avoid "detachment": he called it a disease. What we need is the opposite, what he called "attachment, that is, empathy with all sides involved. From that empathy, he felt, can emerge an understanding and a broader view that will help everyone.

So in **MESSAGE FROM MUNGO**, we want to encourage an audience to empathise, without betraying the participants' intentions, whatever they may be. If they wish, viewers can look up the science or the dates and places on the internet: that's easy to do. What we are trying to do is to engage them emotionally in sharing experiences with the participants.

MESSAGE FROM MUNGO is a development of what I started with the historian Robin McLachlan in our film **THE CHIFLEYS OF BUSBY STREET**: the film is "about" the participants as much as it is about events in the past. Instead of providing data - maps and dates - we are focused on facilitating the voices of the people who are remembering. Their memories may be flawed and the speakers may not always be great "talent". We can nudge their words a little by filmic devices, and we can provide a little context - but we want the film to be *about* them, so the contextualisations need to be as minimal as possible.

I am wanting the participants to speak for more than the usual 5 second sound bite. In **MESSAGE FROM MUNGO**, we allow people time to finish a thought, and, yes, they may stray off-topic and may fumble for the right words, or they may be deluded or they may lie, but that's part of who they are and that's the way we are presenting them, warts and all.

Even more radically for a history documentary, we have opted to use very few archival images, in order to keep the focus on the participating speaker. Archival clips can set up a rhythm where visual interpolations are expected, to break up extended passages of speech. Archival images can turn the film into something else other than a study of the speakers themselves.

In adopting this approach, I am partially thinking of the audience in the broad education sector where viewers will choose to watch the film because they have a specific interest in the subject, and a specific reason to watch it: they are likely to be an attentive audience, and ready to pick up on the nuance and complexity that we hope we have captured in the film. The education market is the area of Ronin's specialisation: we're not talking about classroom instructional films, but we're thinking of education in the broadest possible sense – incorporating public libraries, community associations, government agencies and so on.

One of the wonderful things about this audience is that it is constantly renewing, and the film will hopefully continue to attract viewers for many years to come. We want to offer them something that has not (yet) appeared in any other text, whether film or written word. Already the story is literally dying out. Rightly or wrongly, I feel that it is an important story about the steps towards some form of resolution for the Aboriginal population, for the abuse and damage caused by our own sense of self-righteous purpose. In a sense, the film is a form of Outreach and I hope it helps in a healing process.

September 2014

MESSAGE FROM MUNGO

CO-DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

ANN McGRATH

As a historian, I wanted to record how Indigenous custodians of the Lake Mungo region remember and celebrate their remarkable history. I also wanted to glean accounts from scientists who have researched the area. We soon became immersed in a story of conflicts, exchanges and collaborations spanning the past forty plus years - since the surfacing of one woman's cremated remains. A deeply spiritual and emotional narrative started to emerge - of a spectacular landscape, and of Mungo Lady herself.

I was interested in using film to tell this significant historical story. **MESSAGE FROM MUNGO** is about a specific, unique landscape that has been constantly eroded by wind and sheep. The winds reveal a changing treasure trove of evidence from an ancient civilization. As far as was possible, I was eager for the camera to witness the historical revelations in situ - being prompted, seen and felt in the landscape itself. The Aboriginal people were experienced interviewees who were keen to talk on film. For they could show the end product to their families, in schools, and then wider audiences could also learn their story. We were filming for research too, in the process creating a biographical and historical archive. However, we aimed to produce a filmed story that participants could significantly shape. It would be a history set down on the record, and for their use.

I soon came to realize that the story of Lake Mungo is not only one of vital importance to Australian and to world history, but it is a game changer. It reframes the time-scale of Australian history from one that starts with the arrival of British convicts in 1778 to a history of homo sapiens - people just like us - who lived in the Pleistocene era. Mungo Lady or Lady Mungo, the first skeletal remains to appear at the vast, dried-up Lake system, has been dated to 42,000 years before the present. Her dating also shifts European and world history, because it reveals that collective cremation rituals were conducted so far back in history. Indeed, this is the earliest cremation site known in the world. Its revelation was a defining moment for Australia - of a life lived on a continent thought to lack an ancient history of its own.

By regular visits to the site, by participating in anniversaries, workshops, conferences and other special events, we came to appreciate how this generation and their antecedents had themselves made history - by changing scientific practice, heritage law, and finding a way to work together and to learn from and appreciate each other. Indigenous leaders like Alice Kelly and archaeologist Isabel McBryde were ahead of their times, bringing a wider

group together to advocate for a new heritage regime where Aboriginal consent was a key research principle. What transpired for the nation since Mungo Lady surfaced is also important historically.

At first it seemed a film about Aboriginal people versus scientists. But the pastoralists added another dimension, as did the heritage managers and more politically-oriented scholars. Some scientists were keen to explain to us as filmmakers how their eyes had opened and how their attitudes had changed – often it seemed for the first time. Others were open about their anxieties and, with commendable integrity and candour, used film to defend their good intentions.

In the many long interviews that we conducted for **MESSAGE FROM MUNGO**, I was keen to be quiet and to listen. I wanted everyone to have the opportunity to think through issues, to tell the stories in their own fashion, and if we gave them enough time, from the heart. Rather than framing questions to fit a pre-planned script, I encouraged participants to select what they saw as relevant. I wanted them to identify what was important in the Mungo story and for us to then follow their narrative cues. I was particularly interested in what Lady Mungo meant to them personally. This was their personal biography, their career, their awakening. What happened in the filming process often saw an intimate revelation of a private, hidden spiritual awareness.

With repeated visits to Lake Mungo, Mildura, and the other small towns where the participants lived, the layers of meaning, and the passions being revealed, grew ever more complex, and ever more emotionally raw. Some people grew angrier, willingly revealing their frustrations on film. Men cried – four of them did. There were many powerful moments where I knew they were admitting to feelings and decisions not previously confessed. I like to imagine that the filming process helped people think further about their history, that it led to new or more developed ideas and will continue to spark future conversations.

All participants were conscious of what Mungo Lady meant for ‘science’, specifically archaeology, and for the Indigenous people of Australia. Yet, as interviews progressed, there were as many surprises as there were reinforcements of earlier viewpoints. What at first seemed like a reconciliation story – and an inspiring one of mutual exchange and transformation – started to emerge as one replete with all the lingering and resurfacing pain of colonialism, and all the cultural conflicts between a privileged set of coloniser people, and the often impoverished, Indigenous people of south-western New South Wales, who nonetheless remain so culturally strong.

On film, people’s passion for the deep past, for knowledge of a large history being exposed by eroding sands, becomes a potent force for change. It is a story calling out to be understood by the nation, Australia, and the wider world around us.

I hope our film will provoke its audiences to rethink Australian history, and the way we think about discovery, place, and colonising forces. It reveals the empowerment of having a wondrous history, and is testimony to an ancient civilization that survived both the harsh conditions of dramatic climate change and epochs of lakeside opulence.

September 2014