



**MEDIA
AWARDS**
**WINNER
2014**



MESSAGE FROM MUNGO

A film by Andrew Pike
and Ann McGrath



*Photo: Alice Kelly, Mutthi Mutthi Elder,
at Lake Mungo*



www.roninfilms.com.au

A STUDY GUIDE BY JEANINE LEANE

Jeanine Leane is a Wiradjuri scholar and writer. She is currently a Research Fellow at the Australian Centre for Indigenous History in the Australian National University.

**THE FOLLOWING REFLECTIONS ARE INTENDED
FOR TEACHERS TO CONSIDER.**

In 1968 something happened that changed Australia. In the Country of the Mutthi-Mutthi, Ngyiampaa and Paakantji peoples, the remains of an Aboriginal woman surfaced at Lake Mungo, a dry lake in the far southeast of New South Wales. She became known as Mungo Lady and her remains were estimated to be at least 40,000 years old. **Message from Mungo** brings to the foreground the many layers of this story.

These reflections on the film are my own response as an Aboriginal viewer, historian and writer. My reflections are followed by what I think are important points to consider when using the film in the classroom.

The film is an historical piece that shows deep and continuing relationships to Country. It also shows evolving relationships to land between Aboriginal people and settlers. *Message from Mungo* is a complex juxtaposition of voices that are as layered as the Willandra Lakes system, of which Lake Mungo is a part. For me it is a very powerful, deep and at times unsettling film. But it is important to listen, because there is a message here for all Australians.

The film begins with the silence of the land. The voice of the land begins to stir through the sounds of wind, water, birdcalls and the movement of animals. But this quietness speaks very loudly to the power of Country before we begin to hear the voices of the people.

The first voices we hear are those of the Aboriginal people. Dawn Smith speaks first to the power and peace of Lake Mungo. Warren Clark speaks to the continued presence of Aboriginal people and invites viewers to *'cast your mind back about 18,000 years ... see all the birdlife ... it would have been rich ... There was no reason for them to go anywhere else. ...'* Dorothy Lawson speaks of Mungo Lady as surfacing *'for a reason'*. Throughout the film Aboriginal people speak of Mungo Lady's 'rising up', 'coming up' and 'coming back'. She was always there as well as many other Ancestors – it is not a revelation for the Aboriginal people of the Willandra Lakes to know that their Ancestors' remains rest on Country. These are narratives of permanence and continuance.

When we hear the voices of the 'white scientists' – the archaeologists – Isabel McBryde speaks of *'a great power'* that she feels there but does not *'have the keys to understanding it'*. When the remains surface the archaeologists speak of 'discovery'. This discovery narrative goes beyond Mungo Lady to a whole new discovery for settlers – this time it is of Australia's deep past.



I had many personal reactions to the film – ranging from feelings of tremendous satisfaction and sometimes even elation at the power of some of the narratives emerging, to frustration at what at times seemed insensitive theorisation by scientists of a living landscape, to being deeply moved by the testimonies that told of the dispossession and the precarious, unequal position of Aboriginal people in Australia - even as the lake was being excavated; and the testimonies too, of the pastoralists, who had developed a relationship with both the land and the traditional owners. And, to the testimonies of the archaeologists and conservationists who were later arrivals to the scene and whose lives were in some way transformed or changed by this encounter with the Aboriginal past.



Archaeologists at Mungo: (l to r) Alan Thorne, Jim Bowler, Rhys Jones and Harry Allen

This I think is why the film is so important. It is not a glossy story of repatriation and reconciliation. It is very raw in places as it brings to the foreground voices speaking for the first time, and the spaces these voices fill are like the missing pieces of Australian history.



John Mulvaney at Mungo

John Mulvaney, for example, commented that suddenly (for settlers) Australian history went back 30 to 40,000 years! Coming to terms with this has not always been easy or straightforward, as practices and beliefs on how to represent the past and who represents whose past differ and diverge, but the conversation, the dialogue between traditional owners, settler pastoralists, archaeologists and conservationists has been very significant in connecting Australia's more recent past with a much deeper one.

Message from Mungo is a rich tapestry of testimonies of a particular place. The film illustrates an ongoing and sometimes fraught interface between Aboriginal people and settlers and this is the very nature of reconciliation: it is meant to be a continuing dialogue - it is not meant to be 'over and done with' but is a continuum of unfinished business. Most importantly, a reconciliation story can't always be happy: this is a story that needs to be told and listened to. As Mary Pappin points out: *'Things are nice but you can't be living in a dream.'* This film, then, is the beginning of a dialogue between settler colonists and Australia's first people – the beginning of a process.





The layered landscape is an important metaphor for interpreting the film. Like the layers of the landscape – the bed of a dry lake – the different voices are the different layers of experience with and knowledge of this landscape. On the surface there are the ‘white scientists’ whose narratives it may be tempting to be overly critical of in hindsight, but their voices are an integral part of the story that tell of how Australia was in the 1960s and 70s – in particular, the way Australian history was understood and interpreted from a settler perspective pre-Mungo Lady. The excavation of the surface of the lake is symbolic, as archaeologists were only just beginning to scratch the surface of what was a much deeper history. As Aboriginal scholar and activist, Marcia Langton points out in the film: *‘Ninety-nine point something per cent of Australian history is actually Aboriginal history’*.

The next layer of memory and relationships to the land are the settler pastoralists. Their connections to the land began in the 1840s and over generations, the farmers developed relationships with the traditional custodians. The voices of the farmers begin to be heard in the 1970s when Lake Mungo is officially listed as a World Heritage site. Their reaction to this news is completely different from that of the archaeologists and conservationists.

The deepest layer of memory of all comes from the voices of the Mutthi-Mutthi, Paakantji and Ngyiampaa people. Their stories are a narrative of continuance and reflect an older and deeper history of place that is still resilient, despite some of the oppressive government policies and practices spoken of.

All of these layers are part of this story and tell how the surfacing of Mungo Lady changed the way settler Australians and the rest of the world came to see and think about Australia’s history. Not all of the testimonies are easy to listen to. They are emotionally charged and express at times very different and conflicting understandings of and investments in the same piece of Country.

The filming took place at intervals over several years, between 2006 and 2013. During this time a familiarity between the filmmakers and the participants emerges through the frankness and free-flowing narratives. There are no direct questions posed to any of the speakers: it is their story to tell as each remembers. The voice of the interviewer is never heard – but the interviewer is an active listener as the layers of the story emerge.

The film has inspired different reactions from viewers. These range from anger at the treatment of Aboriginal people, shock over some of the testimonies and the complexities of situation, to concern over what appeared to some as an unfavourable depiction of archaeologists. All of these responses can be expected in the classroom. Aboriginal students viewing the film may find – as I did – some of the testimonies by the traditional custodians emotional as they speak of Protection Acts, the assimilation policy and child removal: such acts and policies impacted on the lives of all Aboriginal Australians, and still do. The devastating effects of child removal have had cross-generational consequences, leaving many people still searching for relatives and connections.



Dawn Smith, Ngayampaa



Lottie Williams, a Paakantji Elder

Stories are and were central to Aboriginal people. It is through story that history and culture are transmitted, remembered and passed down to future generations. Dreaming stories have a special significance, as do stories of survival, resistance and resilience that continue to connect us to people and places. In this film, apart from a few maps, newspaper clippings and brief shots of academic papers, the Mungo story is told through voices and landscape. In this way, the film preferences and gives predominance to a continuing cultural practice and method of recording history for Aboriginal people.

Marcia Langton makes the point in the film that it was important for Aboriginal people to have a date, because it proved to western scientists and historians that this story resurfacing at Lake Mungo is a narrative of continuance and that this is the first story of place. Horton's map of Aboriginal Australia (see www.aiatsis.gov.au/maps) shows the vast number of Aboriginal Countries that Australia is comprised of today. Each of these Countries has its own first story.

As part of a panel with the film's directors, Professor Ann McGrath and Andrew Pike, I asked what they thought the important message from Mungo was. It was agreed that there were many messages – about communication, respect, repatriation, the importance of listening, reconciliation and the possibility of shared histories. But the important thing about a message is that to hear it in the first place, you have to listen.

Mungo Lady or Mungo Woman as she is also known, had a tremendous influence on all who were part of the layers of this story. Dorothy Lawson called her '*our queen (who) surfaced for a reason*'; Gary Pappin said she '*gave us a voice, so we're using it!*' and scientist Alan Thorne said that when he attempted to put Mungo Lady's bones together it '*changed*' him. I like to think of her as Lady Mungo – because she is one of Australia's first people.

The most important message of this film is that which emerges through the layers of testimony – much like the land itself: the Mutthi-Mutthi, Ngayampaa and Paakantji always knew that this was their people's burial ground – a sacred place.



Filmmakers Andrew Pike and Ann McGrath at Mungo

POINTS OF CONSIDERATION AND FURTHER DISCUSSION IN THE CLASSROOM

The material below has been designed for secondary and undergraduate students in keeping with my areas of teaching expertise.

Before viewing the film with students, it is very important to set the context of Australia for Aboriginal people and settlers in the late 1960s. In particular, the Aboriginal speakers refer to Protection Acts, the Assimilation Policy and the Stolen Generations, directly and indirectly. For example, Dawn Smith speaks of the 'Protection days', and Dorothy Lawson tells stories of missions, dormitories, and parents being 'led to believe' that their children had been 'sent overseas'. Tanya Charles remembers being told that she was not going to school today and to 'go bush' and wait for 'the whistle to come back'.

Setting the socio-historical context allows students to think about the period from which the voices in this story speak of and to. I suggest pointing out to students that it is important not to see the speakers from a retrospective position, but to consider the time and context of the people involved in the story of Lake Mungo. Alan Thorne comments: 'It was the sixties!'

VOICE OF THE COUNTRY – LISTENING TO LAND

How does the Country speak for itself?

How do the Aboriginal people speak of Country?

Think about Isabel McBryde's comment that there are some places that you know have 'great power'. She speaks of not always having 'the keys to understanding it.' As the film evolves, do some of the 'white scientists' change in their understandings of land and Country?

The archaeologists, historians, conservationists and pastoralists speak of Lake Mungo and the surroundings as land. The Aboriginal people speak of Country. Consider the differences in these two interpretations of place.



GENDER

Apart from Warren Clark, Gary Pappin, Badger Bates and Dave Johnston, many of the leading Aboriginal speakers are women. Why do you think this is so?

What was the life expectancy of an Aboriginal man in the late 1960s and early 1970s? How did this compare to non-Aboriginal men? What is the life expectancy of Aboriginal men now?

Discuss the traditional role of Aboriginal women as gatherers and keepers of family histories. Look at how this role continues today.

Consider the matrilineal structure of Aboriginal society.

What is meant by 'Women's Business' and 'Men's Business'?

Think about Tanya Charles' comment:

'My Nan (Mrs Alice Kelly), she was the voice for all the Aboriginal people, and out here she was the voice too for the other tribal groups when they came on board. So she led the way for women, my Nan'.



Marie Mitchell, Paakantji

Discuss the role of Aboriginal women at Lake Mungo. How do they bring about changes in the attitudes of the archaeologists and conservationists?

All but one of the archaeologists at Lake Mungo were men. Isabel McBryde makes a comment on the gendered nature of archaeology at the time. Consider this comment. Have things changed?

What implications would the gendered nature of archaeology have on the way it was practiced at the time? Consider the socio-cultural climate of Australia in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Has this changed? If so why and how is archaeology practiced differently now?

HISTORY NOW

Think about Professor John Mulvaney's comment: *'Historians deal with 1788 to the present day – that's Australian history.'*

How do you experience Australian history in the classroom today?

Think about Marcia Langton's comment that *'Ninety-nine point something per cent of Australian history is actually Aboriginal history'*. Is this reflected in the classroom?

How did the intervention of the traditional owners at Lake Mungo influence the way archaeology is practiced in Australia now on culturally significant Aboriginal sites?

Consider Aboriginal archaeologist Dave Johnston's comment: *'the principle of good ethical archaeology in Australia is "Ask first!"'*

Can you think of other examples in Australia where the kind of ethical archaeology that Johnston refers to is being practiced?

This film challenges the idea of a 'closed book' or that history only appears and survives in written form. Discuss the idea that history is fluid, and negotiable, rather than fixed.

How did the oral testimonies of the continued history of Aboriginal presence and knowledge challenge the fixity of Australian history as it was understood in the 1960s and 1970s? Think of other examples where the testimonies of Aboriginal people have changed the way all Australians think about our history?

CONFRONTING DIFFICULT AND SENSITIVE ISSUES

Harvey Johnston spoke of his first day at Lake Mungo as an archaeologist for NSW National Parks as being *'difficult'* because he encountered a large crowd of Aboriginal people visiting the site who were *'dealing with deaths in custody'* and who were *'really angry'*! Consider Johnston's final comment *'I ran into a whole lot of people who had a lot of issues to talk about ...'* What do you think are some of the 'difficult issues' that Australians need to talk about to gain a better understanding of the past and to move towards a shared future?

British archaeologist, William Shawcross, recalled that he was surprised to be *'accosted'* by Aboriginal people who said: *'You're taking our past from us!'* He went on to say: *'Our careers internationally and so on were very much to do with the sense we made of somebody else's past. It still is taking time for those adjustments to take place.'*

Consider and discuss the idea of 'making sense of someone else's past'. What might be some of the sensitivities involved?

What do you think the 'adjustments' that Shawcross spoke of are or might be?

How did the surfacing of Lady Mungo's remains from 40,000 years ago bring a greater awareness to settler Australians of Aboriginal people in the present? Gary Pappin comments: *'My grandmother always says that Mungo Lady comes to the surface for a reason. And even though she's been around and everybody's looked at her and done this and done that, she came back to her people. So the working relationships that we have not only in the scientific arena but worldwide, nationally and locally, change the views that people have about Aboriginal people, of who we are and where we come from scenarios.'*

It is important to elicit in this discussion that none of the Aboriginal people speak in discovery narratives. They speak of 'coming back', 'surfacing' and 'returning' and in doing so assert and re-assert a deeper history.



LISTENING

The final scenes of the film are very powerful. We see Aboriginal people speaking to and leading visitors around the site of Lake Mungo. How does this contrast to the earlier images of the Mungo site?

Think about Tanya Charles' final comment:

'We're working a lot better. The scientific group's got a better understanding. They seem to know where we're coming from, and we're getting a better understanding and we're learning all their scientific words, so there's nothing they can say now and hide from us, because we're learning all that.'

Discuss the agency and empowerment that can come through listening and respectful communication.

In the film we hear many voices – it is important to listen to and consider them all: they are all pieces of a continuing dialogue of Country and people. Mungo Lady does not speak directly but her voice is the most powerful of all that penetrates and resonates throughout. Gary Pappin said she surfaced and *'gave us a voice, so we're using it. And that's it.'*

How did Lady Mungo speak to all those involved in this story – to her descendants; to the pastoralists; to the 'white scientists; to the conservationists; to Australia and to the world?

How does she speak to you today?



Mungo cremation as found 1969

IMPORTANT RESOURCES TO DRAW ON WHEN SETTING CONTEXTS

www.AustLit.edu.au/BlackWords

BlackWords is the definitive virtual and information resource for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literary, print and narrative culture. BlackWords records a diverse amount of information about the lives and works of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers and storytellers and the literary cultures and traditions that formed and influenced them. It covers all forms of creative writing, film, television, criticism and scholarship both by and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers and storytellers. All teachers, whether primary, secondary or university can use BlackWords through the AustLit. database.

Goodall, Heather, 'New South Wales' (1995), in McGrath, Ann ed, *Contested Ground* Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, pp 55-121. This chapter provides a good summary of Aboriginal policy and practice in this state.

Heiss, Anita & Minter Peter (2008) *Anthology of Australian Aboriginal Literature*, McGill Queens University Press, Montreal.

Horton's Map of Aboriginal Australia, The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies www.aiatsis.gov.au

Leane, Jeanine (2012) *Teaching with BlackWords* www.austlit.edu.au/BlackWords
This essay is useful for setting contexts.

Leane, Jeanine (2010) *Aboriginal Representation: Conflict or Dialogue in the Academy*, Australian Journal of Indigenous Education, Volume 39, Issue 1011

McGrath, Ann and Mary Anne Jebb (eds) (2015) *Long History, Deep Time*, ANU Press, Canberra. Also available on line: <http://press.anu.edu.au/titles/aboriginal-history-monographs/long-history-deep-time/>

Price, Kaye (ed.) (2012) *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education: An introduction for the Teaching Profession*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne

Michael Smith, (2013) *The Archaeology of Australia's Deserts*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Wheeler, Belinda (ed.) (2013) *A Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature*, Camden House, Rochester, New York

AVAILABLE FROM RONIN FILMS

PO Box 680, Mitchell ACT 2911 Australia
Ph: +61 2 6248 0851 Fax: +61 2 6249 1640
Email: admin@roninfilms.com.au

www.roninfilms.com.au



© 2015 RONIN FILMS

