A visit to the Joulni sites took on aspects of Anzac Day. Conference delegates gathered on the lunette overlooking the site of a blowout, a place where wind and rain had exposed older strata more than 30 years before. A star picket in front of a ‘residual’—a sculpted remnant dune—marked the site of the Mungo Lady burial. Another 450 metres to the east designated the resting place of Mungo Man, found by Bowler in 1974. This was Aboriginal land. The 3TTGs held the lease over the old sheep station, and the public was banned from the area. It had significance, too, for the researchers who, in the early days, dug the sites in an area described as ‘Australia’s Rift Valley’, a zone which to Aborigines is the centre of creation, and which to scientists holds the key to understanding the evolution of our species.

There was one, a former cattle musterer from the Snowy Mountains, who is now one of the giants of geology. Jim Bowler translated the story written in the sediments, a story he says changed his life. It is encoded in coarse gravel dumped by big waves whipped up by the westerlies, in fine quartz beach sand hurled onto the lunette by the wind, in tiny grey clay pellets dislodged from the lake floor in dry times, in wüstenquartz—red desert dust—swept onto the dunes as the arid Centre expanded, and in soils that form when dune building ceases. In the early days, the radiocarbon dating revolution revealed that the burials were very old. A second dating revolution, based on the liberation of energy from grains of sand, later pushed back the age. The synthesis of the data told a familiar story. It was about Australians struggling with aridity.

Archaeology students arrived on the lunette. Only a few were Aboriginal, but enough to swell the ranks of indigenous archaeologists, at the time of the Legacy of an Ice Age conference numbering only about 10. Then the father of Australian archaeology said his piece.

John Mulvaney founded an Australian prehistory department at the Australian National University in the 1960s and wrote the first textbook on the subject. An outspoken conservationist who fought hard battles to protect Aboriginal heritage in Tasmania and Kakadu National Park, he had campaigned to get the Willandra Lakes region its World Heritage status. In 1965, he populated the Pleistocene with people, with the discovery of the first site dating from that epoch—Willandra Lakes Murring Station in Queensland, where a dated sequence of stone tools extended nearly 3 metres deep to about 22,000 years ago. Later, along with Wilfred Shawcross, he dug at Mungo. It was to be his last archaeological excavation.

On his return to Mungo in 2006, by then in his eighties, he could not resist a gentle dig at the three generations of dating experts assembled—radiocarbon specialist Richard Gillespie, and Rainer Grün, John Prescott and Matt Cupper who use newer methods. Many archaeologists worry about losing prehistory completely to these practitioners of the arcane sciences—the ‘timelords’.

‘I do want to say, particularly to the scientists who think only in dating, what is the significance of this Mungo site,’ he said. ‘It dates early occupation, but it does far more. These burials were reliably dated now—we have a cremation, we have an inhumation [burial] in which the corpse has been sprinkled with considerable quantities of ochre. The ochre, as far as we know, had to come [from] at least a couple of hundred kilometres from here. Forty-two thousand years ago, already people knew enough about the country, knew enough about geology, to know about this ochre. The point about the burials is that they are human actions. That is to me the real significance of Mungo. In the nineteenth century, indigenous people were thought to be just savages—they were incapable of counting, incapable of drawing—they were sub-human. Here we have, at 42,000 years ago, people who were burying the dead. We don’t know for what reason but they seem to be human values—respect and love of the dead, fear of the dead and a particular process—you burn the body and you smash them up and bury them in a hole. What’s the significance of that? Why do that? Or why cover the corpse with ochre? People obviously have thoughts about the afterlife.’

When Mulvaney began his work, the study of the human past was still based in humanities faculties of universities worldwide. Then a ‘new archaeology’ or ‘processual archaeology’ swept academia. New archaeology propelled the field towards the natural and social sciences and viewed humans as part of the ecology. Archaeologists were adopting Enlightenment philosophy—positivism, empiricism,