Funeral for a Friend: a discourse on the relationship between farmers, vehicles and machinery.

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Introduction
This paper presents a particular aspect of the social and economic issues raised by my thesis research that I have found too irresistible to ignore. Some of the thoughts that have arisen during preliminary research for my doctoral thesis in Archaeology are discussed here. I tentatively explore the issue of what society does with vehicles once a car has come to the end of its useful life. Collections of old vehicles found on farms form the focus for this research where the main theme is the archaeology of vehicle, machinery and implement assemblages associated with rural farming properties.

The discipline of Archaeology traditionally involves the exploration of the past through the physical traces left on the landscape and this evidence forms what is termed ‘material culture’. The detritus of daily life, buildings, monuments, shipwrecks and many other artefacts are the means through which the past is understood. Presented through the tangible evidence of human activity is the essence of archaeological research. Yet the more traditionally accepted, aesthetically pleasing and materially outstanding these representations of our past are deemed to be, in both cultural and economic terms, then the more worthy of academic esteem and public attention they receive. Often forsaking the everyday minutiae, such a narrow exclusivity cannot purport to reconstruct or realistically interpret the past with meaningful credibility. I hope to throw a metaphorical spanner in the works… Perhaps, it should logically be a trowel.

The objective of my research is to understand why and how farmers in Australia and in overseas countries retain assemblages of used and obsolete vehicles, machinery and implements on their land and to record the features and characteristics of these sites. The methodology will utilise a program of fieldwork to map and record sites, conduct oral history recording, and undertake an analysis and interpretation of farmers’ responses to a questionnaire. Not only have farmers created collections of such items since early colonial settlement, but also they continue to create, maintain and abandon these sites today. This practice has continued in Australia and in countries across the world where land set aside for agricultural use has not been limited by availability, nor overly regulated with regard to size, occupation or production and where distance and isolation is involved.

There is a paucity (dare I suggest, a non-existence?) of investigation of sites that result from farmers disposing of unwanted, obsolete and wrecked machinery on their properties. Archaeological academic publication has broached this agricultural legacy on several occasions (refer for example, Birmingham, Jack and Jeans 1979, Connah 1993), but few have followed the interest beyond the documentation of old woolsheds, outbuildings, pastoral landscapes, and individual items of agricultural innovation such as, Ridley’s Stump Jump plough. In one intriguing publication, David Nash (1985) made some fascinating observations about the incorporation of motor vehicles in to central Australian Aboriginal society. Among these observations, Nash discusses words used by Aboriginal people (predominantly, Walpiri) to describe their vehicles and interestingly raises the issue of the various Aboriginal uses for wrecked vehicles (Nash 1985:3.17). Some of these uses are
common to those that many farmers have for derelict vehicles and one example is that of
salvaging spare parts. So it would appear that the exclusion of vehicle, machinery and
implement sites from historical documentation has left an apparent gap in what we understand
about the heritage of farming life in Australia. There are so many of these sites in this
country alone it seems that to continue to ignore their presence would constitute something of
a paradigmatic oversight for the discipline of historical archaeology.

Graham Connah (1993:84-104) has discussed the archaeological value of the countryside in
Australia’s history. He drew attention to the fact that the Australian countryside is not the
‘natural’ landscape it is so often portrayed as. This is an especially significant statement in
light of the collections of disposed vehicle and machinery sites that are encountered in so
many places in the Australian landscape. (I would conservatively estimate the number to be
at least two to three thousand). Vehicles on the road verges, dumped in paddocks, a timber
cartwheel lying against a fence; the presence of this material culture may be interpreted as
statements of land colonisation. During these initial months of my research I have yet to find
one paper that considers the assemblage of obsolete vehicle, machinery and implements on
farming properties as sites significant to Australian heritage.

Somewhat to my surprise, I have come to the realisation that the resultant sites of agricultural
land occupation are something of an opaque icon in this country. These sites are everywhere,
yet they are clouded and obscured by our own recognition and value-laden judgements of
what heritage should consist of and how it is represented. Why is it that farmers continue to
create, maintain and abandon these objects seemingly to the detriment of a serene pastoral
view? That is the paradoxical setting.

One reason I suggest for these assemblages may be found in a consideration of the ways in
which we deal with death. If we become so attached to our vehicles during their useful life, is
it reasonable then to surmise that such a relationship existed by observing the form that
disposal of the vehicle takes? Is there such a thing as disposal of a vehicle in a respectful
manner? I believe that these questions form part of the answer that explains the treatment, or
course of action taken, by some people to dispose of material culture that has been imbibed
with particular sentimental meaning during its useful life.

She drives me crazy!
In Australian culture we are particularly aware of the special relationship that we share with
vehicles, particularly cars. From the vast range of vehicles now available on the market the
car fulfils an extensive role in our daily lives. Whether we are aware of it, or not, we respect
that role and, often, when a vehicle comes to the end of its useful life we are unable to deal
with it in the way that is expected of today’s consumer society. There are people who elect
not to trade in or to on-sell their cars, nor to deliver them to scrap merchants or to tow them to
wrecking yards. Rather, they choose instead to dispose of the vehicle on their property. If
these people are farmers working and living on the land, then it seems more than likely that
they will conform to the latter option. There appears to be a range of reasons that influence
this choice, however, these will not be discussed in depth here. One of the more curious
choices, however, is that which characterises personal attachment to the vehicle.

Fetishism and the reification of the motor vehicle in daily life escape the boundaries of pure
functionality of the object (Pickett 1998:23). It is to that ritualised and personalised inclusion
of the car that I will now turn to discuss a feature of the overarching link between vehicles
and society, and hence, set the background for the particular case of the farmer and the farm
vehicle. The market-driven agendas of vehicle manufacturers do not form part of this
discussion. It is an interpretation of the physical form that the associations we develop and
make for ourselves with inanimate objects and machines that are broached here.

Cars are included in our modern suburban lives from the moment we are born. We are ferried
in cars to and from the hospital of our birth, to school, to sporting events and recreational
activities, to the pub, to the church wedding service, to the reception, to the honeymoon, to
the hospital – again, and maybe repeatedly, throughout our lives, until we are finally driven to
the grave, so to speak, in a hearse. The attainment of ‘P’ plates after passing the driver’s
licensing test, for example, heralds adulthood and marks the transition from passenger to
driver. This transition is often viewed as a significant achievement and cultural marker in
life. By gradual degrees, the car has become intrinsically involved in Australian tradition and
ritualised life over the last century. It has taken over from where the horse departed as the
major contributor to transportation.

Where brumbies were once the romanticised workhorse, the car is now celebrated as an icon
in this country. Up until the early twentieth century the horse and carriage were a definitive
measure of social standing and refinement. Cars now occupy that distinction. It is not likely,
however, that the automobile will outlive its equine counterpart in the history of
transportation. What with limited resources of petroleum and metals, together with the more
recent entry of environmental consciousness in to the history of transportation, the car as a
viable means of transportation will not survive. It is therefore imperative that such aspects of
technological history be fully recorded before it becomes obsolete in our memories and the
car bodies succumb to the last vestiges of rust.

Manufacturer and model are often the defining factors in the hierarchy of the car’s iconic
status. Rivalry between Ford and Holden as manufacturers in Australia has extended to
individual statements of loyalty to particular makes of vehicles in social situations.
Ownership of an FJ Holden, for example, may be viewed as a post-war expression of what it
was to be an Australian in the 1950s and 1960s. An Adelaide ceramicist, Margaret Dodd
(b.1941 Berri), produced a popular series of ceramic cars in the mid-1960s (Thompson 1986)
that played with the socially constructed meanings that surrounded Australian notions of car
ownership, gender issues and personal relationship or attachment to vehicles. Notably,
Dodd’s rendering of the 1948 (the popular 48/215) and FJ Holden models endowed her pieces
with metaphors of the female experience and became highly representative of her work (for
example, Dodd 1977 Bridal Holden is an earthenware Holden model glazed in pastel pink
with a bridal veil of tulle highlighted by rose-buds forming a tiara-like feature attached above
the front windscreens) (Thompson 1986).

Dodd’s work creates a parody of the close relationship that Australian men have developed
with their vehicles, a relationship which has at times seemingly shunned the company of
women in preference to the car. This interpretational view can be compared to the many long
hours that farmers must spend by day, by season, working with their vehicles and machinery.
A close relationship occurs, it is suggested, through both necessity and the desire for
companionship. The result is a keen respect for the inanimate vehicle, whether it is a truck,
tractor, motorbike or combine harvester. The primary relationship for farmers and their
vehicles has evolved from the days of the workhorse on the farm.

References to pre-automobile days, station life (this term may refer to the outback, or the
range, evoking wide open spaces, working and recreational vehicle use) and use of animal and
female metaphors surround cars. These references can be found in the names allocated to car models and in the language used to describe a vehicle or its performance. The following list is a small selection of those references:

Pre-auto reference names: Horsepower, Mustang, Bronco, Colt (see also animal names below);  
Station life: Station Wagon, Jackaroo, Rodeo, Estate, Range Rover, Land Cruiser;  
Animal names: Falcon, Impala, Cougar, Viper, Cobra;  
Female metaphors (names or descriptions for our cars): She, (including a large range of women’s names), ‘what a beauty’, the ‘body’, ‘sleek lines’ – these descriptors often evoke animal and feminine imagery.

Cars are an extension and expression of where we have been, who we are and where we are going. This mass produced item of transport has become perhaps the ultimate iconic expression of the consumer ego.

But what do we do once our car ‘dies’…?

In Australian cities and suburbia we trade-in, sell or dispose of vehicles in a variety of ways, but if we had the space and the choice would we do what farmers do? Obviously, there will always be exceptions. Front and back yards in suburban Adelaide are sometimes used as repositories for car bodies, despite council regulations to the contrary. For the farmer, whose ancient close relationship with the horse has been supplanted by the car, the demise of a vehicle seems to pose a problem that has resulted in a material response. The resultant site is a delightful response for investigation through archaeological study.

The relationship between the farmer and vehicle can be traced by using a number of approaches that investigate responses to the vehicle; for example, the vehicle as workhorse, the vehicle as a companion or family member, the vehicle as farm equipment and the vehicle as status. Other points to ponder and investigate may be the use of terms that directly refer to the farmer’s reverence for the vehicle. Farmers’ automotive vehicle and machinery sites are often referred to as ‘graveyards’ and ‘bone yards’. The very adoption of these terms by farmers indicates the creation of sites and the maintenance of them (through the addition or removal of other items) as being part of a process that simulates a funeral rite. These sites are indeed cemeteries for close and revered friends or ‘workhorses’. How could a farmer contemplate losing his closest friend or workhorse to the scrap dealer? For many farmers, the response is possibly akin to the agonising decision of having to put an old workhorse down due to old age. Does one send the animal off to the knackery or abattoirs? Or, does one keep the animal on the farm and choose the perhaps more humane action of putting the horse out to pasture? I would imagine that the more sensitive the farmer or the more receptive to family pressure or ideals, then the more likely the latter response is followed.

We can see many of these automotive vehicle and machinery sites while driving through the South Australian countryside. Farmers loyal to one or a couple of particular car makes can have literally dozens of similar vehicles occupying a paddock, rusting out the rest of their numbered days. Other farmers retire their faithful vehicles to piles or clusters of rusty machinery and implements, in what may seem to replicate a funeral pyre. The reddish-brown shells of derelict vehicles merge in to the shadows of the trees, echoing the calm and quiet of a country town cemetery. Slowly oxidising, reverting back in to the ground, the workhorses sink further into oblivion, just as the bones of their predecessor’s lie decaying beneath the
earth. It all seems quite feasible that these sites represent in many cases a suitable resting place for the late and honoured mechanical workforce of a farm.

**Planned obsolescence**

The designers and manufacturers of cars and machines build and warrant their products to last for a certain period of time. Planned obsolescence has created a huge problem for the environment and has strained our resources worldwide. This singular factor has made an impact on the rate at which farmers must acquire and accumulate vehicles and machinery in an effort to maintain a viable farm business. How will the more rapid turnover of vehicles and machinery affect personal attachment for farmers and the ways in which obsolete vehicles are dealt with?

**Rust or reincarnation?**

Some of the vehicles become defacto organ donors, relinquishing their parts from the after-life to keep other vehicles serviced and running. Rust or reincarnation; the choice may be delayed until the farmer realises the need and potential to reuse or re-cycle parts from their sites in times of hardship, or as an innovative and resourceful use of obsolete vehicles and machines. As a point of interest, some farmers refer to their sites as ‘the spare parts shop’ or ‘the service and repair centre’.

Processes of decay and issues of recycling will also depend on site conditions for preservation of material. This will differ from place to place, state to state and country to country. My thesis research is developing to form the claim that these places of deposition are significant heritage sites that reach beyond the grave to provide a range of uses and may serve to contribute knowledge to our emerging history. The sub-disciplines of historical archaeology and modern material culture studies allow this research to develop in respect to the interpretation of sites, site formation processes, abandonment of sites and the recycling of material culture.

**Conclusion**

My thesis aims to include the provision of an approach to understanding how farmers have coped historically with technological change and how they incorporate and maintain responses to technological innovation and development in varying agricultural and pastoral regimes. This research comes at a time when new technology is being increasingly introduced. A new cultivator, for example, with the futuristic name of ‘Rotocult’ has recently been tested and found to cultivate huge tracts of land in half the time and cost, using less fuel (The Advertiser 17 April 2001:21). The Rotocult effectively makes five items of machinery redundant. Farms are rapidly changing shape from traditionally held estates and ideals. Agricultural monopolies are seeking to dictate farm organisation, size and production. Therefore, I do not believe that we will see similar types of assemblages of vehicle and machinery sites on the farms of the future. The farming family unit itself will change and is in danger of extinction.

While old technology is being celebrated to a degree, memories of such State treasures as John Ridley’s 1843 Ridley Stripper are being preserved in replicated form, for example, one replica is now the centre-piece of Pinnaroo’s Mallee Tourism and Heritage Centre. The National Motor Museum at Birdwood, South Australia, gives the exhibited vintage and
veteran vehicles a restored life through engaging public interest and patronage. Museums maintain selected vehicles and machinery in a more stable condition through the process of accessioning and repository. Yet, it is the open-air museum on the farm that is closer still to the heart of the farmer and to the history of the agricultural landscape. It is the bone yard that whispers secrets of the past to those who are willing to listen.
References


