Tribute to Prof. Morwood – by Emeritus Professor Graham Connah

Amongst researchers, there are few who make major contributions to knowledge, and Mike Morwood was one of them. With the aid of his Indonesian and Australian colleagues, he discovered a new species of human: *Homo floresiensis*. This achievement puts him amongst the great names of research into human evolution, such as Eugène Dubois, who discovered *Pithecanthropus erectus* in Java, Raymond Dart, who found *Australopithecus africanus* in South Africa, and Louis Leakey who made so many major discoveries in East Africa. Some lesser researchers have questioned Mike’s evidence for a hitherto unknown diminutive species of humans, but the scientific community has now generally accepted his interpretation, although it could be some years before his discovery is fully understood. This is in the nature of innovative research, Mike’s work shook things up and forced us all to reconsider our previous assumptions. At a time when the media constantly promotes the frequently exaggerated claims of researchers, who are said to have made so-called ’breakthroughs’, he really did make a discovery of outstanding significance. It is the fundamental task of archaeologists to help us to better understand ourselves as humans, and Mike Morwood deserves to be remembered for actually doing this.

Perhaps I should explain my part in this. As head of the then Department of Prehistory and Archaeology at the University of New England, it was I who gave Mike Morwood his first academic appointment, in 1981, and it was at the University of New England that he stayed for over twenty years, in spite of recent obituaries ignoring this. After completion of a PhD, he had been working as a heritage officer for the Queensland government, but had already published research papers that convinced my colleagues and I that his future lay in university research and teaching, rather than in...
heritage management. It turned out that, for once, we were right, Mike was essentially a gifted field researcher, in particular an excavator. In a period when many others were obsessed with archaeological theory, Mike actually wanted to discover new things: in south-west Queensland, in Cape York, in the Kimberley and, eventually, in Indonesia. He had those essential qualities that make a good researcher: curiosity, imagination, and dogged persistence. I remember insisting during the 1980s that Indonesia offered immense opportunities for archaeological research, that were largely being overlooked by Australian investigators, but Mike was one of the few who called my bluff and really did something about the matter. His attitude to teaching was similarly forthright: his lectures were well prepared and rigorously presented. It was the same with seminars, practicals and field trips. If I took out a student field trip, we would visit maybe four sites and be back for tea, if Mike took out a field trip he would take the students to seven or eight sites and be back by midnight. A whole generation of undergraduate and postgraduate students owed him more than they will ever admit or, in some cases, even realise.

Nevertheless, Mike was a quiet, unassuming man, who merely got on with the job, whatever it was. I once asked John Mulvaney, the acknowledged ‘father’ of Australian archaeology, about his memory of supervising Mike’s PhD work at the ANU, ‘You know’ said Mulvaney, ‘he was no trouble at all, he never bothered me, he just got on with it’. That was just how it was: Mike ‘just got on with it’, whatever he undertook. I have long been convinced that all of us have to try to justify our existence in this world, and actually accomplish something in our lives. Mike Morwood really did do that and he deserves to be remembered for his achievements.