



Roger Llewellyn Dunmore Cribb 1948–2007

Many people knew Roger Cribb, or we thought we did. Since he died on Sunday 26 August 2007 in Cairns, north Queensland, a variety of people have written about the Roger they knew (for example, the obituaries by his ex-wife and friend Gulcin Cribb (2007) and the Wikipedia page put together by Bruce White (2007)). The questions many of us now ask ourselves are 'How many Rogers were there?' and 'Where did the Roger we know fit in?'

I was asked to write this obituary and I was happy to do so as I admired Roger's tenacity and his genuine concern for Aboriginal peoples in Cape York. However, I felt inadequate for the task on my own and so sought input from two other north Queenslanders who knew him well, Bruce White and George Skeene. Bruce worked with Roger at Tharpuntoo Legal Service and George is a Yirrganydji Traditional Owner with whom Roger worked on a voluntary basis over many years, helping him to map and record the archaeological sites of his people.

The obituaries mentioned above present two ends of a spectrum along the trajectory of Roger's life and in the first, particularly, there are glimpses of a Roger that only a few would know and remember: *Roger the young and passionate* and *Roger the loving father*. Many of us would, however, recognise *Roger the idealist*, who railed against injustice, championed minorities and chafed at bureaucratic restrictions — that Roger remained throughout his life, vying with that later persona, *Roger the cynic*.

For many of us, we heard of Roger before we ever met him. Perhaps the most widely known Roger is *Roger the serious academic author*. He produced many academic papers (e.g. Cribb et al. 1988; Cribb and Minnegal 1989; Cribb 1996b), book chapters (e.g. Cribb 1995); and a well-received and scholarly book *Nomads in Archaeology* (1991a). This was the Roger of whom I first heard. Once I started working in Cape York it was inevitable that I would become familiar with Roger's work on the Aurukun Database Project (Cribb 1987a; 1987b; Cribb and Sutton 1988; Cribb et al. 1988) and his work on the shell mounds of western Cape York (Bailey et al. 1994; Cribb 1988, 1991b).

One of the aspects of Roger that I did not know was *Roger the artist*. Bruce, who knew Roger well, notes that his first appearance in the published world seemed to be as an artist doing illustrations for publications by other archaeologists. This artistic aspect of his person has seen his memory preserved in the National Library, following newspaper articles and a documentary of his sand sculptures on Stradbroke Island. Using these skills, he partly financed his trip to Hong Kong, and ultimately through China, Russia and into Turkey, drawing caricatures of people.

The AIATSIS newsletter was itself an early beneficiary of Roger's artistic talents. As some long-term readers may recall, he contributed a drawing of an automatic archaeological digging machine (every archaeologist's dream)!

Roger's skills in this area contributed in a practical way to his archaeological work. Many of his site plans and artefact recordings are items of far greater beauty than most of us produce. George Skeene recalls, 'Roger was a good artist. When I saw his drawings of artefacts, it was like he brought them back to life!'

I didn't meet Roger until I was living and working in Injinoo and running the Ranger Training program for the Northern Cape York cluster. I think he was *Roger the consultant and 'ratbag' stirrer* by then. It was about 1989 or 1990 when we first met; he was working on and off for Tharpuntoo, the Aboriginal Legal Service in Cairns. During this period, Bruce remembers his commitment and vigour and the intense pleasure that he derived from his work at Tharpuntoo. At that time Tharpuntoo was involved in challenging and mitigating the impacts of mining and development on Cape York Peninsula. Many Cape York Peninsula researchers and other north Queenslanders will recall, for example, the Farndale Project and the Cape York Space Base proposals. As an example of Roger's provocative wit, Bruce recalls sitting opposite him as he pointed out to a journalist from *The Australian* that, having read the workplace health and safety requirements for constructing a refinery and conveying material to the Weipa port, all the Aboriginal people living at Napranum would be required to wear hardhats should Comalco's plans proceed as intended. This comment was quoted in *The Australian* and caused quite a stir.

It was during his time at Tharpuntoo that I asked him to come to Injinoo on the tip of Cape York Peninsula and run an archaeological field school as a component of a module in the ranger-training course. He had never been to Injinoo before and was surprisingly nervous, although I was unsure whether that was because I (another archaeologist) was there or because of the unfamiliar crowd. However, all the rangers found him easy to get along with and slightly eccentric — just what they expected of an archaeologist.

Around 1992 I moved back to Sydney with my family and didn't see Roger for a while. As the years passed, from time to time stories filtered south of his escapades...the establishment of the Ratbag University and his often explosive run-ins with colleagues. You could almost smell the smoke rising from the many bridges he burned! He was *Roger the kamikaze pilot*, spiralling out of control at times...or so many of us thought...at the mercy of his bipolar disorder, which dogged him even during good times — leading to depression and frustration on his part and inducing fear and rejection on the part of colleagues and others.

Bruce White (nominated by Roger as Honorary Professor of Anarchy and Chaos at the Ratbag University) recalls:

at times when Roger's world was darkest, and he felt wholly disengaged from any existing community of scholars, he placed a box in the centre of his table...and started writing cards to place in the box, one idea per card...urging me to do the same, in a bright, ambitious hope to use this system to start his own community of scholars, idealising and celebrating anti-authoritarian and anti-colonial ideals and ideas over and above what he then perceived to be a prevalent, academic/scholarly mediocrity.

Bruce also recalls that Roger the rat-bag stirrer or comic provocateur invented a game, a kind of Aboriginal heritage version of *Monopoly*. It was based on his overview of what was happening across the Cape. Tharpuntoo Legal Service distributed the game to all and sundry. Needless to say, some entities did not find Roger's biting caricature of the processes, systems and development in Cape York very funny!

Roger collaborated on many projects while at Tharpuntoo but Bruce recalls several that stand out in his memory, such as:

- Tharpuntoo's combined legal, anthropological and archaeological action to mitigate and restrain Mitsubishi's/Cape Flattery's proposal to extend the mining of silica sands north of their existing mines. This Tharpuntoo project also involved Bruce Rigsby and Leslie Deveraux and members of the Hopevale community, with Roger conducting the archaeological survey. Bruce recalls that he took everyone up and down the sand dunes, identifying and mapping sites, and documenting impacts on them from motorbikes and buggies.
- His work at Ngarrabullgan (Cribb 1993; David et al. 1995). This project involved a combined archaeological and anthropological survey of this large, freestanding sandstone and conglomerate massif, with fossils scattered at its base and undisturbed archaeological sites on its tabletop. Bruce recalls:

during that first trip in a hire car we scraped the bottom out of the vehicle driving through country no one else would dare contemplate. But it was worth every bone-jarring moment! Roger's report documented the unquestionable cultural landscape and archaeological heritage values of this monolith and its surrounds, photographically recording the impressive rock-art, and detailing the impacts of pigs, brumbies and motorbikes on this valuable heritage. His report was submitted to the then Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, and ultimately led to the purchase of the property for the Djungan peoples.

- 'One lousey matchbox', a provocative discussion paper prepared by Roger for Tharpuntoo on the *Queensland Aboriginal Land Act* (Cribb 1991c), which established the Aboriginal Land Tribunal.
- Roger's development and use of his own geographical information systems software to supplement Tharpuntoo's monitoring of 'hot spots' around the Cape.
- Access for Aboriginal peoples to his genealogical software 'Gentree' (developed when working for the Central Land Council), which enabled them to record their own genealogies.

George Skeene worked closely with Roger over many years as Roger helped largely on a voluntary basis to map and record the many archaeological sites in George's Country. George recalls:

Our first archaeological surface study was in 1993 at Wangetti. Over the years we did many surface studies between Port Douglas and south of Cairns. Roger also did volunteer work with us. He worked with the Yirrganydji and Djabugay rangers mapping the walking tracks from the coast to Black Mountain. He was a regular visitor to my place and to the other Yirrganydji people. We had many cups of tea over the years and spoke mainly about my Country between Cairns and Port Douglas. I always spoke to Roger about a campsite hidden away in the mangroves near the airport. During July 1994, I received a phone call from Roger. He said, 'Want some good news?' I answered, Yes! He said, 'We found your campsite today and it's exactly where you said it would be, surrounded by tidal waters, thick mangroves and full of artefacts.' We did a surface study on this old campsite during November 1994.

By the time I moved back to live in the north in 2006, it was a much frailer and more subdued Roger who greeted me. He still had the same challenging sense of humour though — knocking on my open office door after years of little or no contact — starting his conversation in the middle as if picking up on something left unfinished only recently. No polite 'hello' or 'do you remember me?' — he simply stated, 'I know that name...' and launched into a series of anecdotes (not all of them particularly complimentary) about various experiences with other Tamwoys!

While many of the other Rogers lived life at break-neck pace as if they cared little for whether they lived or died, this new Roger — *Roger the reflective* — was conscious that life was short. At the front of his mind were the books as yet unwritten, the tasks not completed and the field ideas that would now never be put into action. This is not to say that he had given up; he continued to work on the manuscript for his new book until the end — in fact, he had recently taken yet another rough 4WD journey up the Cape to visit Aboriginal friends and he confided that he knew it would probably be his last.

Roger was a familiar sight wandering around the Cairns campus of James Cook University. He could be found pounding away on a keyboard, compiling what he intended to be his last major work...a book sadly unfinished at the time of his death. He was a regular attendee at our Thursday afternoon seminar series and, of course, a fixture on the balcony afterwards; drinking wine — grape-stained moustache; smoking cigarettes — nicotine-stained fingers; and yawning; surrounded by student and academics laughing, or complaining (depending on the subject matter). It was during one such session that he told me that he had decided, at some unspecified time in the past, that I could be a member of the Ratbag University. I think it was a compliment, but of course you could never be sure, with Roger it was always contextual. He complained often that there were very few ratbags left in the world and that students nowadays were a lot more conservative. These discussion times revealed a Roger still full of ideas, compelled to try to order his research papers before he died, although somewhat overwhelmed with the magnitude of the task; a Roger who was still living life, loving and fighting.

In this last period of his life he no longer chose anarchy and chaos at all costs; that was never the dominant Roger — that was the overlay of *Roger the kamikaze* who surfaced when his bipolar disorder and depression was at its peak. Sadly for many, this was the only Roger that they got to experience, avoiding further interaction wherever possible. Many of these people would be surprised at George's summation of Roger as 'a kind and gentle man, always willing to help. He will be sadly missed by the Yirrganydji people.'

Roger had so many sometimes seemingly contradictory sides to his personality that it seems that people 'knew him' as many different personae. Perhaps, through his obituaries and the legacy of his work, Roger Cribb, the entire complex person, will be more widely remembered.

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