

Mungo Man returning to his ancestors



The remains of Mungo Man being loaded into a hearse for his final journey yesterday.

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- Stephen Fitzpatrick

Mungo Man, the 42,000-year-old Aboriginal ancestor whose discovery more than four decades ago upturned previous notions of human history, is heading home — but his eventual resting place remains unknown and a cloud hangs over the original removal of his remains.

The complete skeleton discovered by Australian National University geologist Jim Bowler in 1974, arms crossed and ceremonial ochre in his gravesite indicating the earliest known liturgical burial, was dispatched yesterday from the National Museum in Canberra.

Loaded into a restored historic “Aboriginal hearse” — a black Valiant wagon used through the 1970s and 80s as part of a culturally sensitive indigenous funeral service — the skeleton in its casket of 8000-year-old timber donated for the purpose by Dr Bowler began a slow journey home to the Willandra Lakes region of southwestern NSW.

There will be a ceremony this afternoon at Balranald, with local Mutthi Mutthi elder Mary Pappin ecstatic at what she called “a very proud day today for us mob”.

“We’ve got a few nations to go through with Wagga Wagga, that’s Wiradjuri country, then Balranald, that’s where the Mutthi Mutthi people live, then back to Willandra where they belong,” Mrs Pappin said.

Mungo Man will rejoin Mungo Lady, a female skeleton Dr Bowler found five years earlier in the same region, after her return to a temporary keeping place at Lake Mungo in 1991.

Elders from the Mutthi Mutthi, Ngiyampaa and Barkandji people were responsible for the journey and for a final ceremony at Lake Mungo tomorrow, and will continue to work towards a permanent resting place, which could include reburial.

On the initial handover two years ago, the ANU expressed “sincere regret for the indignity suffered by your ancestors, whose remains were removed from their resting place by academic staff representing the university. We recognise the removal ... caused ongoing grief to your communities”. “The Aboriginal people have taken control of this special moment in Australian history,” Dr Bowler said yesterday.

Mungo Man’s discovery proved ancient Australians were anatomically modern people who, as Dr Bowler has written, “would be indistinguishable among the crowd in Melbourne’s Bourke Street” if dressed in collar and tie.

The removal at the height of the 1970s emerging land rights movement also made it a political act, with new rules eventually put in place requiring traditional owners’ participation in the gathering of cultural material.

“It’s been a long journey, a very long time in coming,” Mrs Pappin said.