

## ABORIGINAL CAVE PAINTINGS

By W. J. ENRIGHT

THE earliest forms of Australian art mentioned were the rock "carvings" from the Port Jackson district referred to by White. Numerous writers subsequently referred to them and attention was later drawn to engravings on trees and implements.

Sir George Grey was the first to refer to aboriginal rock paintings and later E. M. Curr<sup>2</sup> and R. Brough Smythe<sup>3</sup> mention them but cast no light on their use or meaning. The first important contribution that I can trace is R. H. Mathews's paper read before the Royal Society of New South Wales on August 1, 1895, entitled "On the Aboriginal Rock Carvings and Paintings of N.S.W." This paper was never published as read, nor was any portion of it so far as I know published in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales*. In a letter to T. Worsnop he stated that he described fifty caves and forty carvings. Possibly, he meant sets of carvings.

I have reason to believe, however, that the substance of material contained therein was published as follows between 1895 and 1905:

*Journal of the Anthropological Society, Washington.*

"Australian Rock Pictures," Vol. VIII, pp. 258-278.

"Australian Ground and Tree Drawings," Vol. IX, pp. 33-49.

*Journal of the Royal Society of New South Wales.*

"Rock Paintings by the Aborigines in Caves etc.," Vol. XXVII, pp. 353-361.

*Proceedings of the American Philosophic Society.*

"Rock Carvings and Paintings of the Australian Aborigines," Vol. XXXI, pp. 466-478.

"Aboriginal Rock Pictures in Queensland," Vol. XL, pp. 57-58.

*Journal of the Anthropological Institute, London.*

"Rock Paintings and Carvings of the Australian Aborigines," Vol. XXV, pp. 145-163.

"Rock Paintings and Carvings of the Australian Aborigines," Vol. XXVI, pp. 532-541.

*Queensland Geographical Journal.*

"Aboriginal Rock Pictures of Australia," Vol. X, pp. 46-70.

"Rock Pictures of the Australian Aborigines," Vol. XI, pp. 86-105.

"Rock Carvings of the Australian Aborigines," Vol. XIV, pp. 9-11.

*Bulletins de la Société d'Anthropologie de Paris.*

"Gravures et Peintures sur Rochers par les Aborigines d'Australie," Tome IX, Serie IV, pp. 425-432.

*Proceedings of the Royal Society of Queensland.*

"Rock Carvings of the Australian Aborigines," Vol. XII, N.S., pp. 142-156.

*Journal of Transactions of the Victoria Institute, London.*

"Pictorial Art among the Australian Aborigines," Vol. XXXIII, pp. 291-310. And in conjunction with myself, "Rock Carvings and the Aborigines of N.S.W.," which was published by the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science, Vol. VI, pp. 624-637.

I believe that between those dates more was written and published about the Aborigines than in all the previous years that had elapsed since the foundation of the State. In the course of his inquiries, R. H. Mathews found that rock paintings had been discovered in every State of Australia and carvings in every State except Victoria. He recorded many of these himself in the course of his journeys to various parts of Victoria, New South Wales and Southern Queensland for the purpose of placing on record as much as he could ascertain from tribal remnants, of aboriginal social organization, ritual, belief and language. With regard to the "carvings" and paintings his conclusion was: "From reliable sources I have satisfied myself that rock painting was practised by the aborigines for many years after N.S.W. was first occupied by the English people. Judging by the comparative freshness of some of the rock carvings I am not disposed to attribute any great antiquity to them. I think it is highly probable that many of the native drawings are a rude kind of picture writing, but as our present collection of material is very limited it will be better not to advance any theories until a very much larger and more varied number of paintings and carvings can be copied and described."<sup>4</sup> Mathews, however, passed away without discovering the meaning.

<sup>1</sup> J. White, *Journal of a Voyage to New South Wales*, p. 141.

<sup>2</sup> E. M. Curr, *The Australian Race*, Vol. I, pp. 95, 96; Vol. II, pp. 402, 476.

<sup>3</sup> Brough Smythe, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol. 2, p. 309.

<sup>4</sup> R. H. Mathews and W. J. Enright, "Rock Paintings and Carvings of the Aborigines of New South Wales," *Proceedings of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science*, Vol. VI, pp. 62-4, 626-7.

Professor Elkin in 1930<sup>5</sup> described a number of paintings he saw in the country lying between Prince Leopold Range and Drysdale River Western Australia, and described their significance and use and quoted from Basedow (*Australian Aboriginal*, pp. 321-2) about the use of the stencilled hands which the latter called shadow hands. Those published remarks and the work of Ursula McConnel published in *Art in Australia*<sup>6</sup> together with what I had learnt about carved trees in the secret life of the east coast natives, with whom I had first come into touch some forty years ago, led me to make a further effort in 1936 to get an interpretation of the paintings. The Karadji, probably the last surviving one on the east coast, told me that the red hands were painted on rocks about Port Stephens but as, owing to the absence of caves, they were on exposed rocks they had weathered. They were used to indicate the number of people that passed by the place where they were marked, and the direction in which they had gone. I showed him Figure 2 from Mathews's *Notes on the Aborigines of New South Wales* (p. 23). He stated that the black lizard was the dream totem of a Karadji who was staying there. The figure of the snake was the dream totem of another Karadji who, as indicated by the tracks, had gone a journey, while the two suns of different sizes showed that the journey would be one full day and one part of another day. The Karadjis had to go through a ceremony called the *numbin* and at the conclusion of that a totem was selected for and bestowed upon the Karadji. No other group had reptiles for their totems except the Karadjis, and it was not always that a reptile was the totem bestowed. I showed him cave No. 1 described by Mathews in the *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 3, Plate X. He stated that that was a drawing of a man who had been condemned and killed for an offence against the aboriginal law by three men, whose hands were pointing to him, and that the fourth hand was pointing in the direction in which the body was taken after the execution.

<sup>5</sup> "Rock-Paintings of North-West Australia," *Oceania*, Vol. I, No. 3, pp. 257-8.

<sup>6</sup> "Inspiration and Design in Aboriginal Art," *Art in Australia*, May 1936, pp. 49-68.

Following on that, I reported the matter to Professor Elkin, who accompanied me on a subsequent trip. We showed the Karadji numerous copies of paintings and carvings and he gave an interpretation of a great number of them, and the remarkable thing about it was that the interpretations were consistent. One could easily see that the drawings or carvings (for he dealt with both) would bear the interpretation assigned to them. Professor Elkin took full notes of these, and will publish them on a future occasion, and I can refer to them.

Mr. A. F. Davidson, who has taken a keen interest in aboriginal cave-paintings, has been investigating the caves in Howes Valley and Putty, near Singleton. The country there is of Hawkesbury sandstone, rather barren, and incapable of sustaining a large aboriginal population. The drawings on the caves indicate the great antiquity of some of them. Mr. Davidson has taken several photographs showing the drawings clearly, but I have not yet been able to obtain interpretations of them. His work entailed a good deal of labour, as some of the caves were over sixty miles away from the rail. Those paintings are of interest, because some of them are of the West Darling type, and some of the straight and parallel markings are similar to those found west of the Darling and Central Australia. The same remarks would apply to the distorted suns. Some of the caves contained a great depth of ashes, indicating long occupancy. I append Mr. Davidson's brief notes.

*Notes on Paintings in Rock Shelters in the Districts of Howes Valley and Putty, near Singleton*

"Situated on a tributary of the Macdonald River, in the Parish of Wareng, the first rock shelter visited contained stencillings in a fine state of preservation and are evidently of great age as shown by the deep erosion which has occurred through the 'gallery.' While most of the stencillings were of left hands, some were of the right and a few included the forearm. Together with the hands were three groups of perpendicular lines, one group having on top a horizontal line. This shelter shows signs of having been used for some considerable time as the sand on the floor to a depth of about three feet is mixed with charcoal and ash.

"Another shelter some miles south-east contained stencilling of a hafted axe, three hands and a group of perpendicular lines. An axe-sharpening stone of hard, fine sandstone was found in the cave.

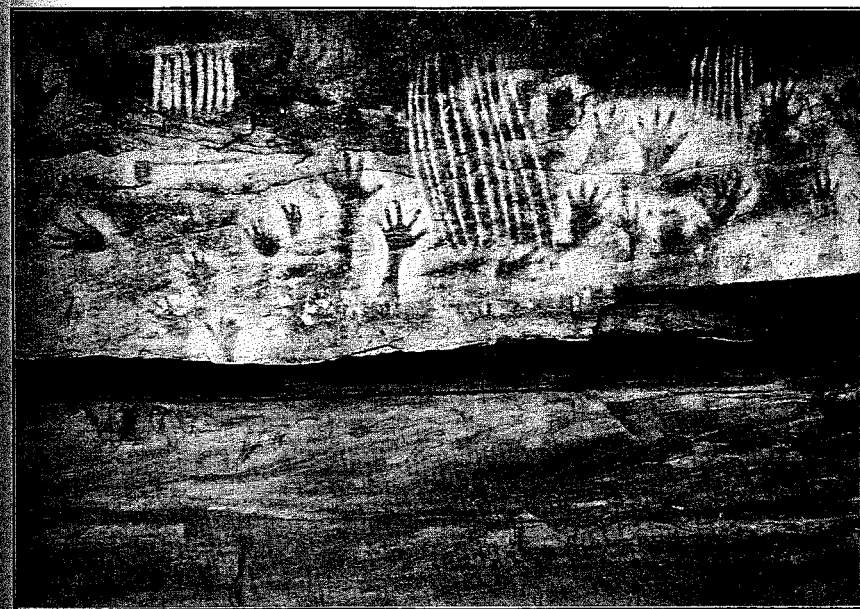
"Next was visited an eroded boulder of sandstone on the face of which was drawn in charcoal a figure about fifteen inches high with upraised arms on head of which was a pointed cap.

"The third rock shelter visited was in the Parish of Tupa near the village of Putty and the old convict-built road to Sydney. Apart from the usual stencilled hands, there were three unique drawings. Two consisted of a roughly circular design of rays drawn in pipe-clay and the third a stencilled right hand enclosed by a circle from which rays extended. These three drawings were superimposed on stencilled hands.

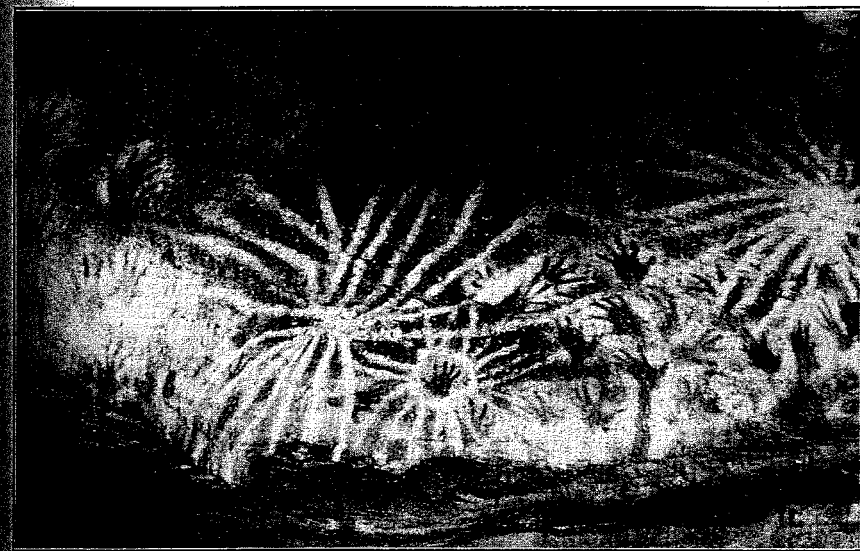
"Three or four more rock shelters remain to be investigated in these districts which promise to be of interest."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This paper was read to the Anthropological Section of the Canberra meeting of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science, January, 1939.



A. *Paintings in rock shelter, Parish of Wareng, near Singleton, N.S.W.*



B. *Paintings in rock shelter, Parish of Tupa, near Singleton, N.S.W.*