ABORIGINAL CAVE PAINTINGS
Sorcery Versus Snider Rifles
[By P. J. TREZISE]

(Read by Frank P. Woolston at a meeting of the Society on 25 July 1968.)

In December 1895, Dr. Robert Logan Jack, a Government geologist and explorer, read a paper before the Royal Society of Queensland. The paper was entitled “On Aboriginal Cave-drawings on the Palmer Goldfield,” and also contained sixteen scaled drawings of human, animal, reptile, fish and bird figures found in rock shelters along Chinky Creek, a tributary of Mossman Creek, and Mun Gin Creek, an affluent of Cradle Creek which is a tributary of the Palmer River.

Viewed in the light of present knowledge of aboriginal culture and art, Dr. Jack’s quaint interpretations of the various figures are highly amusing—indeed, I feel that Dr. Jack read his paper “with tongue in cheek.” In common with general opinion of those times, Dr. Jack was reluctant to concede a degree of intelligence, and only a small degree of humanity, to the aborigines. He referred to the paintings “as examples of the art of a race in a stage of intellectual infancy, and which race will certainly die before attaining manhood; they possess, however, a certain interest for ethnologists.”

Jack considered that all the paintings were the result of European influence and therefore could not be more than thirty-five years old, and that “they can hardly be expected to outlive a single generation.” Dr. Jack had the reputation of being kind to aborigines, but his opinions may have been influenced by the serious spear wound he received some years earlier. Furthermore, to have conceded intelligence and humanity to the aborigine at that time would have virtually been to condone such crimes as murder, rape and robbery then being inflicted on the hapless natives by the miners and early pastoralists.

However, my interest in Dr. Jack’s paper was not concerned with moralising over past issues, but in the durability of the paintings he recorded. Consequently, I decided to try to find some of the paintings recorded by Jack, during my visit to the area in June 1968. I was accompanied by two
aborigines, one of whom knew the Mun Gin Creek area intimately.

The old Cobb and Co. road from Laura to Maytown passes along the watershed above Mun Gin Creek. This track has deteriorated considerably, but with care, and the guidance of an aboriginal tracker, it can be negotiated in a Land Rover.

FOUR GALLERIES LOCATED

Mun Gin Creek drains a large area of rugged sandstone country. It is well timbered and the upper reaches of the creek are, in many places, walled by vertical scarps of red sandstone. Unfortunately Dr. Jack did not give any specific details of the location of the shelters recorded. However, as the galleries are nearly always located near permanent water, I asked Caesar, my aboriginal guide, to locate any permanent springs which feed the creek. A solid day of walking revealed that Mun Gin Creek has at least three heads, each containing a spring to provide the creek with permanent water. Four separate galleries of paintings were located.

Two of the galleries are small and contain only a few faded paintings. The first major gallery we found is located on a terrace just above the south-easternmost spring. The spring gushes a strong stream of crystal-clear water from under a sandstone shelf. Just below the spring there is a large outcrop of white pipeclay. Ferruginous concretions are common in the sandstones of the area, and red and yellow ochres are obtainable from these concretions.

The large gallery has a northerly aspect; it is over a hundred feet long and about thirty feet deep, with a roof height varying from four to twenty feet. This ideal shelter was obviously a major camp-site; cooking stones, charcoal and stone flakes litter the sandy floor. As Mun Gin Creek was invaded by miners early in the Palmer goldrush, it is highly probable that the site has not been occupied since those times (1873), its owners probably fleeing, with other remnants of the Gugu-Yalanji tribe, to the safety of the rugged coastal ranges to the east, where some of their descendants still live around the Bloomfield River.

FIGURES IN PIPECLAY AND OCHRE

The gallery contains forty-five figures and all are on the rear wall or low portions of the ceiling. Most of the figures are painted in white pipeclay, and a few in dark red ochre. Two large white crocodiles dominate the gallery. One eight feet long crocodile has a very broad head, and is obviously meant to represent the saltwater species. Five human figures
in red ochre have been superimposed over the crocodile, the main figure being that of a man wearing a rayed headdress, and under each outstretched arm is a woman, probably representing his wives. The other white crocodile is over ten feet long and has a long thin snout typical of the freshwater variety. Outstanding among other subjects are eight bird figures. Caesar identified these as representing Nun-gadin, the pied butcher-bird, which abounds in the area.

The human figures obviously represent ancestral beings, and the crocodiles, birds, fish and marsupials are totemic creatures. Most of the figures are in a very good state of preservation, but the general standard of art around Mun Gin Creek is rather impoverished when compared with the Laura galleries.

The second important gallery is about half a mile north of the Butcher-bird gallery, on the next spring. The narrow gorge runs east to west, and the only suitable shelter is located just above the spring, at the base of the north scarp. The shelter has a southerly aspect and is much smaller than the Butcher-bird gallery. Its twenty-two paintings include rock-wallabies, eels, fish, brolgas or emus, and human figures.

Two of the human male figures are similar to one described by Logan Jack; he wrote “Number twelve is painted in red, on an upright wall. The human figure is one of a rather numerous series, with upturned legs. What distinguishes this figure from the rest is that the head is covered with an unmistakable hat—a circumstance which may be accepted as proof that the drawing was made subsequent to the European occupation of the district. As for the upturned legs, possibly the artist had seen the performance of some professional contortionist in Cooktown or Maytown.”

**SPIRIT BEINGS**

Caesar gave an entirely different interpretation of these figures, and said they were called Anurra, spirit beings who bounce about at night on their large knobbed penes; they can bounce half a mile in one hop, and they live on frogs. The head shape that Logan Jack mistook for a hat is actually the large ears of Anurra. Large and well-drawn representations of Anurra occur in many of the Laura galleries, particularly at Red Bluff and Split Rock.

The newly discovered galleries are certainly not those described by Dr. Jack, and I concluded that his galleries must be located further down Mun Gin Creek, perhaps just above its confluence with Cradle Creek. This area will be explored later this year, but the well-preserved figures in the
new galleries indicate that those recorded by Jack will still be there and in much the same state of preservation as he saw them.

Many years of discovering and recording aboriginal rock art in Cape York Peninsula have confirmed these opinions. At present there are no reliable methods for establishing the age of any particular painting or engraving, but it is now accepted that the earliest art forms, particularly rock engravings, were executed some thousands of years ago; and that some paintings, including figures of Europeans and their imported animals, were painted in historic times.

SUPERIMPOSED PAINTINGS

Some major galleries contain layers of paintings superimposed one over the other, with a series of rock engravings under the paintings. A study of these superimposed layers has yielded the following chronological sequence of art styles for the Cape York area; the earliest are listed first.

(1) Rock engravings of geometric and tectiform shapes, bird and animal tracks, and other linear designs. The geometric and tectiform shapes may represent highly symbolised maps of totemic and other sacred sites, or travel stories of the ancestral beings.

(2) Rock engravings of more figurative shapes, including human beings, animals, plant life and weapons.

(3) Paint stencils of hands, weapons and simple linear drawings in monochrome, usually light red.

(4) Solid colour silhouettes of male and female ancestral beings, in light red monochrome.

(5) Solid colour silhouettes of male and female ancestral beings, and totemic animals and birds in dark red monochrome.

(6) Large bichrome and polychrome figures of ancestral beings, and totemic animals, birds and reptiles. In these large figures a light colour is outlined and often highly decorated with dark red and yellow ochres.

(7) Large bichrome figures of humans, birds, animals and reptiles in dark red, these being outlined and decorated with light colours of white, cream or yellow.

(8) A profusion of smaller bichrome and monochrome figures of humans, animals, reptiles, fish, birds and plant life, in all colours.

(9) In some areas only, large bichrome figures of Europeans and European animals.

(10) Small monochrome figures of humans, animals, birds, fish and reptiles in white or cream pipeclay. These latter figures are usually poorly drawn.
THE MOTIVATION

The motivation behind each particular painting is sometimes obscure, but information from aborigines and a study of tribal laws, legend and custom has resulted in the following list of motives:

- Worship of ancestral beings and culture heroes.
- Totemic creatures, plants and objects.
- Increase rituals.
- Hunting magic.
- Fertility and love magic.
- Sorcery.

SORCERY MOTIVE

During a recent study of some 1,200 figures in the Laura area, a sorcery motive was attributed to almost a third of them. The "singing to death" of an enemy is a well-recorded custom among aboriginal tribes. Informants from the Laura tribes stated that if it was not possible to kill an enemy with a spear, then sorcery was employed. The figure of the intended victim, male or female, was painted on a rock surface, the artist cursing, and chanting the manner of death as he painted. The act of sorcery was filtered to the victim, by word or sign, and his death was considered inevitable.

Consequently, when the aborigines found that their spears were useless against the Snider rifles of the invading miners and cattlemen, it was natural that they should retire to their rock-shelters in the ranges and resort to sorcery. These large horizontal or inverted figures of Europeans, usually depicted booted and rifle under arm, illustrate the last chapters in a history of art which had its beginning away off in Dreamtime.

History reveals that sorcery, like spears, was of no avail against Sniders. Deep despair must have gripped the hearts of the few remaining warriors when they realised that their way of life, and entire race, was doomed.

The great galleries of an art which records the history and culture of these intelligent and very human people still remain. The lack of care and preservation of the galleries may be the subject of a further charge levelled against us by future, and perhaps more enlightened, generations of Australians.

RECORDING ROCK ART

Frederick D. McCarthy, Principal of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, in a survey of Institute activities in the August Newsletter under the heading Recording Rock Art, states: "The detailed recording of rock art on scale charts or by photography has now become an urgent task in all parts of Australia, due to the
natural deterioration of the art sites, and to the spread of industry
and population with their accompanying destruction and vandalism
of engravings and paintings.

"One of the aims of our recent Manual on field techniques in
archaeology is to promote recording on a wider scale, and an exhibi­
tion of photographs will be distributed widely to encourage a wider
interest in the protection of sites. The Institute has sponsored a
photographic survey of the rock art in Central Australia and the
Northern Territory by Edwards and Maddock, in Cape York by
Trezise, and in north-west Australia by B. J. Wright, all areas in
which Aborigines are still available to supply information of varying
degrees about the art. In areas where Aboriginal informants are
not to be found the rock and other antiquities are being recorded by
both professional and other workers with quite striking results. Thus
it can be said that, whatever happens in the Sydney-Hawkesbury
area in the way of suburban spread obliterating sites, over 90 per
cent of the 1,000 or more groups of rock engravings have been
recorded in scale drawings, work which is being continued for the
Institute by Sim and Lough, and by W. Moore and others privately.

"Recording the rock art drawings of this area has not been given
so much attention, and it remains an interesting unit of art to be
studied. Mrs. Lesley Maynard is analysing the styles in eastern
Australian rock art, and other field work includes the recording of
over 30 caves and paintings in the Atherton district of Queensland
by Ron Edwards, and a similar number of galleries in Victoria by
Drs. D. and E. Tugby, while Robert Edwards has continued his
work on rock engraving sites in north-east South Australia. Edwards
and Terry visited Thomas's Reservoir in the Cleland Hills, N.T.,
where they examined a remarkable series of human face motifs
engraved on surrounding rocks.

"The Institute has published two memoirs on rock art records and
the manuscripts of further monographs and books are in preparation,
and in some cases well advanced. They will not only reveal in detail
part of the great and intensely interesting rock art motifs in Aus­
tralian galleries, but inculcate a more positive attitude towards their
protection. Another valuable and timely contribution is a survey
of stone arrangements in western New South Wales and Queens­
land, following on previous work in the Central Australian region
by Mr. and Mrs. Rowlands, as these antiquities are numerous and
are being destroyed in the clearing of bush, and damaged by cattle
displacing the stones.—Ed.