

PAINTINGS IN CAVES BY ABORIGINES

Primitive Designs of Hands Seen at Congewai

(By RENE CROUCH)

Evidence of the existence of aborigines in Maitland and surrounding districts is to be found in numerous rock paintings in obscure caves at Wollombi, Millfield and Congewai, and a recent visit to two caves at Congewai proved interesting.

In both caves the walls were covered with several designs, the accompanying photograph depicting types of stencilled hands.

To visit the first cave we walked through thickly timbered bush, where possibly many a corroboree had once been held. Reaching the summit of the spur of the mountain we commenced descent of a precipitous path.

At this stage of the journey our guide was nearly "bushed." After a lengthy search we found our goal. The cave, situated about half way down the side of the spur of the mountain, was about 30 feet long, 12 feet wide and 9 feet high.

The walls were covered with markings of various types, including about 30 or more hands, clearly defined, some average size, others miniature, none large, and all with very thin wrists. A wallaby, an iguana and other unidentified markings were also to be seen.

The second cave at Congewai we visited later in the day. It was smaller, had paintings of numerous hands of a similar type, but,

In reply to a question regarding the motive for the paintings, Mr. Enright referred to the following paragraph in his writings:

"No doubt many of these figures are fanciful and many representing objects familiar to the aborigines may have been drawn merely for pleasure, but it is hard to believe that the hands which we find stencilled in groups varying in number and in the relative positions of the individual member of the group, and the series of lines called tribal marks to be seen varying in number and length are without meaning."

METHODS OF PAINTING

"Aboriginal rock paintings were executed in three different ways," stated Mr. Enright.

"In stencilling figures of the human hand or other objects on the walls of caves a smooth surface was selected. The palm of the hand was then placed firmly on the rock with the fingers and thumb spread out and the re-



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owing to swarms of hornets nesting there, our stay was short.

Mr. W. J. Enright (well-known Maitland solicitor), who has made an extensive study of aboriginal life, stated he visited the first cave described over 40 years ago, and it is apparent there has been little defacement over the years.

Following is a quotation from a report written by Mr. Enright some years ago:

"In October 1893 I happened to see in the newspapers the report of a paper entitled "Rock Paintings by the Aborigines in caves on Bulga Creek near Singleton," which was read by Mr. R. H. Matthews before the Royal Society of New South Wales.

"I then commenced to study aboriginal drawings and having been informed that there were several of them in the Wollombi district I determined to visit that locality immediately I had time at my disposal."

DRAWINGS AT MILLFIELD

In describing drawings found in a cave at Millfield Mr. Enright stated:

"The cave in which these drawings were found is situated in a cliff of Hawkesbury sandstone on the right bank of Bally's Arm, a tributary of Cedar Creek, and about 25 chains westerly from the north west corner of Portion No. 6 of 40 acres in the parish of Millfield, County of Northumberland.

"The length of the cave is 46 feet, height about 12 feet and depth 20 feet. The front of the shelter faces N 20 degrees W and the floor, which slopes to the edge of the cliff, is covered with one foot depth of sand derived from the disintegration of the rock which is very fine grained. There are also charred sticks, a great quantity of cinders and shells of the fresh water *Unio* lying about, together with flakes of smoke-blackened stone which have dropped from the roof, where slight traces of the smoke are still to be seen.

"There are nineteen figures drawn in solid black and they consist of a large fish, surrounding the small figure of a man, with the beak of a seagull in its mouth; a laughing jackass; a figure of a woman, the lower portion of which is somewhat weathered and one leg has entirely disappeared; a figure of the sun; a small fish; a bird which appears to be a member of the cormorant family in the grasp of a mud-turtle; an elliptically shaped figure with numerous rays projecting, which may be intended for a porcupine rolled up or possibly a moon in its third quarter; a small figure like a snake in the act of striking; one which bears a rude resemblance to a foot; four which may be dilley bags, or the light bark shields of the natives, are shaped like a waddy, except that the thick end is disproportionately wide; also a figure somewhat triangular in shape."

The location of another cave Mr. Enright gives as "400 yards

quired colour, generally pipe-clay, red ochre or powdered charcoal, was squirted or blown over it out of the mouth.

"This method of drawing was also adopted in many instances in representing implements of the chase such as boomerangs tomahawks, waddies, etc.

"The colour to be used was mixed with water, or with oil obtained from fish or birds, in some kind of native vessel into which the palm of the hand was lightly dipped and then pressed against the surface of the rock. On the removal of the hand the coloured imprint of it was left clearly defined.

"Objects to which neither of the preceding methods would be applicable were drawn in outline in the required colours. In some cases the objects were merely outlines, in other instances they were shown in solid colour all over, whilst in others the space within the margin of the outlines

was shaded by strokes of the same colour or a different one.

"Judging by the appearance of the lines in several of the figures drawn by this method I think it likely that, before commencing the drawing, the surface of the rock was damped with water or moistened with animal oil, and then a piece of the required colour such as a lump of red ochre or pipe clay or charcoal was held in the hand of the operator and the necessary lines drawn."

(Next week some historical and geographical details will be given in connection with caves, also some characteristics of the Australian aboriginal).

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The location of another cave Mr. Enright gives as "400 yards from the Wollombi Brook."

A second cave in this district, he states, "is only a short distance from the Wollombi-Maitland road."

PRIMITIVE PAINTINGS BY ABORIGINES

Widely Distributed Throughout Australian States

(By R. CROUCH)

One of the most primitive races in the world, the Australian aborigine, is being relegated to inland mission stations, the history of civilisation in this continent proving the advance of the white people inland from coastal areas and the retreat of aborigines.

In last Wednesday's issue of the "Mercury" information was given regarding the existence of aborigines in Maitland and surrounding districts over a century ago.

A visit to obscure caves at Congewal, Wollombi and Millfield resulted in an observation of primitive rock paintings and a photograph of painted hands on the side of a cave was published.

Rock paintings, however, have a much wider geographical range than this district. This fact is exemplified in the following quotation from an article entitled "Rock Paintings and Carvings of Aborigines of New South Wales," written by Mr. R. H. Matthews, L.S., and Mr. W. J. Enright, B.A.

"They are widely distributed over New South Wales and in Queensland. They are scattered from Cape York to the southern limits of the colony. Rock paintings have been seen in West Australia at places far apart. They are found throughout South Australia from the southern portion to the Gulf of Carpentaria and Port Darwin.

"In Victoria they are found on the Western side of the Victorian Range, County of Dundas, and on the north-eastern side of the Grampians, in the County of Borung, and probably exist in other parts of the Colony."

EARLY DISCOVERIES

Addressing a meeting of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science at Brisbane in 1895 the president, Mr. T. Worsnop, told how, for many years after Australia was first settled by white men, little was known of aboriginal art, including sculptures, carvings and paintings.

"The first to call attention to these were Captain Cook, Governor Phillip, Surgeon White, Captain Finch, Flinders and the officers of the first Government on the establishment of the colony of New South Wales.

"These were followed by Mitchell, Grey and the officers of the Imperial Navy when surveying the eastern, northern and western coasts.

"Subsequently Leichardt, Stuart, Giles, Forrest, Kennedy, Gregory and others wrote of their discoveries of artistic paintings and carvings of the natives.

They have been discovered delineated in caverns, in rock shelters, on rocks, and up on the now almost inaccessible faces of high cliffs."

The difficulties of livelihood of the aboriginal is almost beyond our comprehension but an idea can be gleaned from the following remarks made by Mr. Worsnop:

"There were certainly a considerable variety of mammals indigenous to the country and peculiar to it, but amongst them all not one useful for labour, for the carrying of burdens; so also was there a lack of cereals suitable for human food.

PRIMITIVE RACE

"Equally as peculiar and isolated as its flora and fauna are the aborigines, whose low social culture as a race stands strange to their fully developed speech.

"They had no implements to till the soil, they were equally ignorant of the art of making pottery and their art of spinning was of a most limited character."

Mr. Worsnop pointed out that this primitiveness tended to infer that the original family came before the discovery of these arts, and stated that, with the absence of earthen or metal vessels to boil water, their cooking was done by broiling or baking in the

ashes or steaming in a hole in the ground.

Professor Elkin, narrating of tribes found on the coast of New South Wales, stated:—

"The Geawe-gal, who occupied part of the Hunter Valley, are reported to have had medicine-men who were in communication with supernatural influence. The Gringal around Dungog believed that fat extraction was practised by medicine-men of hostile tribes."

The primitive art of aborigine painting is almost lost, but there is one disciple who should be encouraged.

The aborigine painter, Albert Namatjira, possesses a brilliant style that has been recognised by connoisseurs, but he is neglected because of his colour.

Had Namatjira lived over a century ago he may have been the subject for Australian poet Douglas Stewart, who wrote the following verse on aboriginal rock painting:

"I watch him working through a summer afternoon,
Patient as the stone itself, while his tribesmen sleep;
The children jostle, the girls cry out in the sun.
And first the fish and then the great 'roo takes shape.
The work is crude and he knows it, but now it is done;
And whoever laughs is a little afraid by the end,
For here is a swimmer in stone, and a 'roo that leaps.
Now here for ever and both can be touched with the hand."

ABORIGINAL PAINTINGS AND CARVINGS

Sir.—As a native of the Wollombi district, and having taken an interest in the life, history and habits of the aboriginal as we knew him in my boyhood days, I was much interested in an excellent written article in your "Mercury" of the 26th January last on the aboriginal rock paintings in sandstone caves in the Maitland district, and particularly those so well known near to the town of Wollombi. These were referred to years ago by the well known authority (Mr. Walter Enright) who—at a much earlier date than this went farther afield to "Mogo" and Blaxland's Ridge on inspections of rock carvings of more recent discovery.

Mr. Enright's theories as to how and why these strange markings were made would be very interesting. When sheltering from the rain or the extreme heat or cold, we can assume that the aboriginals of the locality would make these caves or "gibber-gunyahs" their homes, and the younger members of the family with a natural desire to do something would place the palms of their hands in some prepared dye known at that time only to themselves, and then press them to the roof and sides of the caves. These figures could also be effected by using the boomerang or spear, which are also seen. From my recollection there was a striking similarity in the size and shape of these figures on the roof of the cave, suggesting that the artists were few in numbers.

The rock carver on the other hand must have practised his art on the tribes' return inland from their annual summer-visit to the coast or river where fishing and oystering produced food in abundance. On finding rocks flat and otherwise suitable he would let his imagination loose on these rough outlines of things so recently seen (fish of various kinds, birds, marsupials and such like).

These rock carvings are frequently found through the valley of the Hawkesbury and close to Sydney Harbour. Those found on the old Berry estate within a few miles of Milson's Point and before the railway and closer settlement submerged them were taken over by the Crown by acquiring the small areas on which they stood. They are permanently protected from the destroying hand of the vandal. The significance of these rock carvings, it is alleged by some, is to convey some method of "bush telegraph" to friendly or unfriendly nomads.

Miss Crouch is to be complimented on her article, the subject of which is familiar to so many readers of the "Mercury," and those like myself now living outside your district. Many members of the Historical Society are greatly interested in this subject, Professor Elkin of the Sydney University, and familiar with the Wollombi caves, would, I am sure, be glad to make some contribution to this subject.—Yours, etc.,

F. J. LYNCH.

Edward-st., Bolwarra.