CHAPTER VIII

Aboriginal art in the Hunter Valley, generally to be found in the Singleton-Tullombi-Howe's Valley area, is typical of much of the art in the east coast of New South Wales and in style and subject matter forms a unit with the Sydney-Hawkesbury region. The art media included rock carvings and paintings, hand stencils and the tree carvings already mentioned in connection with the initiation ceremonies. Very little is known of the meaning of this art. Some appears to be of considerable antiquity, and not understood by modern aborigines, though in view of their characteristic reluctance to reveal sacred traditions to white men, it is probable that the significance of art which pertained to their own lives was also a guarded secret. F.D. McCarthy has made some attempt to interpret the art, (1) but there is so little evidence that his conclusions must be regarded as tentative.

The most common motif among cave paintings is the stencil. This was made in two ways, either by blowing liquid pigment from the mouth onto a dry surface, or by blowing powdered pigment from the mouth or a small sheet

Approximate Location of Art Sites in the Hunter Valley
of bark onto a wetted surface, around an object held against the rock. (2) This was most commonly a hand, usually the left one; sometimes the forearm was included as well. Among other things stencilled are feet, boomerangs, hafted axes and clubs, but these occur less frequently.

White pigment is generally used for stencils, and sometimes red, although this colour is more often employed in the making of impressions. This is done by pressing the hand, or foot, which has been dipped in paint, onto the rock. (3)

Practically nothing is known of the meaning of these stencils and impressions. An anonymous writer in *Science of Man* says that the red hand, even more so than the white stencil, was a precaution against the sorcery of other tribes (4), but there is no evidence to substantiate this. Of the early settlers Miller alone refers to the impressions and stencils on the rock walls, and he makes no attempt to explain the custom. The significance of it seems to have varied from region to region (5), and the only indication of what it meant in the Hunter Valley

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(2) *ibid.* p38.
(3) P.B. McCarthy *op. cit.* p42.
(4) *Article, Science of Man* n.s. vols 7-8, April 1906: p17. The writer continues

'The Blacks of Australia probably derived it [the red hand] from the Kushites in India, before they moved from that land in their wanderings to Australia.'
(5) P.B. McCarthy *op. cit.* p39.
A. Paintings in rock shelter, Parish of Wareng, near Singleton, N.S.W.

Photos: W.J. Enright.

B. Paintings in rock shelter, Parish of Tupa, near Singleton, N.S.W.
comes from Port Stephens. An old native, a koradji, told W.J. Enright that the hand motif was used to indicate the number of people that passed by the place where the hands were marked, and the direction in which they had gone. (6)

As well as stencils and impressions, the Hunter Valley cave paintings include human figures, animals and weapons. The human figure appears frequently, and is usually depicted in a round rather than a stick manner, in stiff conventional poses, as at Howe's Valley. The animals, for example kangaroos, are often represented in a way which suggests a hunting scene. This may be an indication that the art was of a magico-religious significance. From the native at Port Stephens Enright learned that a snake and a black lizard were each dream totems of two medicine men. This native also explained that a figure of white radiating lines represented the sun. (7) Mathews mentions that 'the sun with rays' was one of the figures carved in the earth near an initiation ground. (8)

An example of what McCarthy terms the culture-hero (9) is drawn in red lines in a cave at Milbrodale - a huge,  

(7) Ibid.
(9) F.D. McCarthy op.cit: p42.
A large male figure, drawn in red outlined with white, eyes and giraffe pendant in white; it is surrounded by sets of white lines and white stencils of boomerangs, hafted stone axes, and human hands. Bulga, N.S.W.

Photo: F.D. McCarthy.
slender man, arms outstretched, nine feet high and seventeen feet across. Mathews thought this figure probably represented 'Baiaum or the Great Spirit', and was connected with the initiation ceremony. He compared it with figures of earth and sticks made on the ground by tribes such as the Kamilaroi. (10)

Cave art in the area extends north to the Hunter and Goulburn River valleys and west towards the Great Dividing Range, (11) but the engravings are not so widely distributed. McCarthy observed that engravings of the central coast were limited to the counties of Cook, Cumberland, Hunter, Northumberland, and Westmoreland, and that they did not appear to extend throughout the Hawkesbury sandstone formation (12). More recently Sim has noted the apparent absence of engravings north of the Putty and Wollombi districts (13). There is however, one site further north, on the Page River just below Gundy. (14)

(10) R.H. Mathews "Rock Paintings by the Aborigines in caves on Bulgar Creek, near Singleton", *Journal Royal Society of New South Wales*, vol 27, 1893: 339.
(13) I.H. Sim op.cit: p33.
(14) Illustration *R.H.S.A.*: op. p132. The caption says the carvings are 'in the Hunter River' but I have ascertained from Mr. W. Dalton, President of the Society, that they are on the Page River.
Map showing rock engravings in the MacDonald River Valley.
I.M. Sim.
It is a group of carvings in which human figures, a kangaroo, a snake, a boomerang and other items are depicted.

I.M. Sim has made a study of over twenty sites in the MacDonald River district. (15) Of these, five groups of carvings are situated on a ridge adjoining the valley of Wollombi Brook, a tributary of the Hunter. The five groups will be discussed in more detail later on in this chapter.

From his examination of the sites, Sim discovered a significant fact about their distribution.

"Most of the engravings described here are distributed along main ridges, the majority being on two ridges which provide routes between some of the more fertile valley areas in the region." (16)

Goddard also thought that two new sites discovered at Buragura in 1935 and at the base of Yengo Mountain in 1936 lay along a definite trade route,

"once traversed by the natives of these and more distant parts of the east coast of Australia." (17)

Kangaroo and emu tracks occur frequently amongst the carvings, and it has been suggested that they were of religious significance, being connected with the ceremony

(15) I.M. Sim _op.cit._
(16) _Ibid._: p33
(17) F.H. Goddard and F. Slater _loc.cit._: p91.
of initiation. Kangaroos and emus themselves are also often represented. Sim quotes Elkin as being informed by a local koradjji that the group of emus depicted on one site,

"Show that the country belonged to the emu totemic clan - the Macdonald River Group." (18)

Alternatively, the kangaroo in the Gundy carvings appears to have been wounded by a spear. This suggests that it was part of some magico-religious practice designed to increase the food supply.

Another interesting feature discovered by Sim is that while most of the carvings have been grooved in the normal manner, many kangaroo tracks have been pecked or hammered (19). In some cases both styles occurred within the one group, and he believes that the alternate technique was adopted to permit a more accurate reproduction of the footprint. He is also of the opinion that the technique is a local development. It is possible that the two types of carving were done at different times, but Sim maintains that the association of the pecked with the linear figures suggests that the techniques were not of separate phases as McCarthy believes similar engravings in central Australia were. (20)

(18) A.H. Sim op.cit: p35.
(19) Ibid.
(20) P.D. McCarthy Australian Aboriginal Rock Art: p23.
Other interesting features of the art in this area include the culture-hero, or "All-Father" figure, and another indeterminate figure, termed a koala by Sim, with breast-like protuberances on its chest (21). It is suggested that figures such as these, which appear to represent human-animal composites, are totemic symbols, and that the sites where they occur are totemic centres.

Basing his statement partly on an interpretation of a site near Buragura by a Port Stephens Koradjji, Elkin says that many of the rock engraving sites may have been sacred centres of ritual, the figures being

'cut to serve as records and symbols of historical, moral and totemic import which could be and were interpreted.' (22)

It is almost impossible to determine the age of the aboriginal art. Mathews was of the opinion that some of the paintings and carvings were modern, having been done since the arrival of the Europeans.

'From reliable sources I have satisfied myself that rock painting was practised by the aborigines for many years after H.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.' (23)

(21) I.M. Sim op.cit: p36.
(22) Quoted in ibid.
(23) Quoted W.J. Enright loc.cit: p167.
Although he does not quote his source specifically, McCarthy records that Mathews quoted natives of the Darkinung tribe on the Hunter River who had told him that in their youth they had seen both paintings and carvings done between 1843 and 1855. Mathews also said that a Hawkesbury native pointed out to him a carving of a large man which he had seen one of his own tribesmen make. (24) McCarthy supports Mathews in his claim for the modernity of much of the art, and quotes Elkin as being of the same opinion. (25) Enright also shared this view.

'I have, however, been informed by reliable people, that the aboriginals had been seen in the Wollombi district during the last half century executing paintings which are contemporaneous with the carvings... The carvings are always in a position where they are exposed to the influences of the weather, and judging from their present state of preservation, the authors cannot have been long dead.' (26)

McCarthy suggests that the hand stencils were probably prehistoric. (27) This would explain the aborigines' apparent inability to explain them in the early days of the colony. A statement by Miller implies that the practice

(24) F.D. McCarthy op.cit: p32.
(25) Ibid.
(27) F.D. McCarthy op.cit: p43.
of making impressions on the rock walls was still part of aboriginal culture at the time of white settlement.

'They had, too, a custom of daubing their hands and feet with a compound of fat and red ochre, and then impressing them on the sides of the caves.' (28)

Nevertheless, he could have assumed this, merely from seeing impressions which may have been made centuries ago.

Mathews, describing the painting of the large culture hero, quotes an elderly resident of the area as saying the figure was in the cave when he came to the district, and it was beyond the knowledge of 'the local blacks' even then. Moreover, the gentleman had noticed no deterioration in the state of the painting during the fifty years that he had lived there. (29)

The weapons and other material objects represented in the paintings and engravings are identical with those in use at the time of white settlement, and the same could probably be said of the economic and religious motifs portrayed. This suggests that no major cultural change took place between when this art was practised and the end of the eighteenth century.

McCarthy maintains that because there are so many axe-grinding grooves in association with the linear engravings,

'There can be no doubt that this art flourished during the Bloueran period.' (30)

Sim agrees with him. (31) However, the discovery of edge-ground axes in a Bondaian level dated to 917 ± 57 B.C. at Capertee (32) renders this assumption invalid.

Undoubtedly most of the carved trees in the Hunter Valley mentioned by the early writers were not of any great antiquity. In an earlier chapter it was noted that many of the settlers referred to ceremonial grounds which were still in use and which were surrounded by carved trees. (33) There are no known dendroglyphs surviving today. Mathews mentioned some near Gresford which had recently been destroyed by fire (34), and no doubt others fell foul of the settler's axe. One group near Gundy has disintegrated within living memory. (35)

(30) F.D. McCarthy "The Lapstone Creek Excavation" : p30
(31) L.H. Sim op.cit: p37.
(33) Amongst them
  W.R. Breton op.cit: p232.
(34) Ibid: p323.
(35) Mr. W.C. Green saw some in the final stages of disintegration. They may have been those referred to by A. MacDonald loc.cit: p255.
List of Sites

I Carved trees

a) Junction of the Page and Isis Rivers, location of a Bora ground.

'Round about this place for some considerable distance, are about one hundred and twenty trees marked with tomahawks... on some the marks reach as high as fifteen feet above the ground.'

A MacDonald loc.cit., p255.

Map location - (1) Illustrated.

b) "Kelvinside", Aberdeen, location of a Bora ground.

'On "Kelvinside", where large cattle-yards are now in position... many box trees in the vicinity bore beautiful carvings.'

W. Bridges loc.cit., p153.

Map location - (2).

c) Fifteen miles north-east of Gloucester.

'At this locality is one of the best examples of a teleteglyph I know of - A large laced-lizard, head upwards was cut in the sapwood... the whole of the bark was removed previous to incision. Under the left foreleg is a human figure with arms elevated, and below the right hind leg two concentric ovals... the lizard is a totem of one of the tribal classes.'


Map location - (3) Illustrated.
d) Near the town of Gloucester. Location of a Bora ground.

"In the thickest depths of the forest there on a mountain spur which runs east and west were the incised trees around the larger circle; one of the glyphs extended for twenty and another for twenty-five feet up the respective trunks. The glyphs are of a high order and very interesting."

R. Etheridge loc. cit., p85.

Map location - (4) Illustrated.

e) Some miles west of Tinonee. Location of Bora ground.

'A number of trees were marked... the devices upon them... were cut upon the bark only... [and] extended from near the butts of the trees to an altitude varying from 6 feet to 22 feet up the bark or trunk. Most of the trees were marked all round the trunk, but some were ornamented only on the side facing the goonam-bang' [larger circle].


Map location - (5).

f) Allyn River, branch of the Paterson River, on the left bank of a small tributary of the former three or four miles north-west of Cresford. Location of a Bora ground.


Map location - (6).

g) Forster, Cape Hawke. Location of a Bora ground.

'The trees along the pathway between the two circles have geometrical figures and representations of various animals carved on their trunks'.

R. Etheridge loc. cit., p86.

Map location - (7).
h) Hunter River district. Location of a bora ground.

'Some of the trees in the neighbourhood were marked with rudely drawn and cut animals, the totems or badges of the tribe, and designs, the meanings of which they would never disclose.'


Map location - (§).

i) Coastal district from Newcastle to 'about Sydney', area of the Darkinung. Location of a Bora ground.

'A number of marked trees, on the bark of which were carved representations of the emu, the wombat, the opossum, the kangaroo, the "iguana", the "squirrel", a snake crawling up, and other figures.'


Map location - (§).

II Cave Paintings.

a) Howe's Valley in the Parish of Wareng. Stencilings, apparently of great age. Mostly of the left hand, but some of the right, and several including the forearm. Three groups of perpendicular lines.


Map location - 10. Illustrated.

b) Some miles to the south east of a). Stencilings of a hafted axe, three hands, and a group of perpendicular lines.

Ibid.

Map location - 11.
c) Same area - sandstone boulder. Charcoal figure five inches high, with upraised arms and a pointed 'hat'.

Ibid.

Map location - 11.

d) Howe's Valley, not specified. A series of 'hockey stylizations' of the human figure; in black outlined with white.

F. D. McCarthy sp. cit., p40.

Map location - 12. Illustrated.

e) Near Putty in the Parish of Tupa, by the old convict road to Sydney. Stencilled hands and three unusual drawings. Two consist of a roughly circular design of rays in pipe-clay, and the third is a stencilled right hand enclosed by a circle from which rays extend. These three drawings are superimposed on stencilled hands.

W.J. Enright loc. cit. p170.

Map location - 13. Illustrated.

f) Parish of Whybrow, on the southern side of Bulgar Inlet, a tributary of Wollombi Brook. Ten hand stencils, all but one of the left hand, and two including the forearm. Apparently of some antiquity.

R. Mathews loc. cit. p357.

Map location - 14.

g) Harris's Flat, two miles north of Wollombi, approximately a hundred yards from the Cessnock to Wollombi road. Two shelters containing stencils of hands, feet and weapons, and a white radiate figure.


Map location - 15.
h) Vollandi, A Man (in the "lizard" stylization)
   spearing a kangaroo; two fish or tadpoles below;
   all in red outlined with white.

   P.D. McCarthy *loc.cit.* pp40.

   Map location - 16.

i) Parish of Milbrodale, near Bulga Creek, fifteen
   miles southwest of Singleton. Culture-hero,
   drawn in red lines; nine feet high and seven
   feet across the hands; the eyes and pubic apron
   are white. Surrounded by sets of vertical lines,
   stencilled hands, boomerangs, and a hafted axe.


   Map location - 17. Illustrated.

III Rock Carvings.

   With the exception of one site all of the carvings
   in the area occur on the Hawkesbury Sandstone formation.
   These sites have all been described and illustrated by
   various people, including Enbright (36), Goddard (37),
   Elkin (38), McCarthy (39), and more recently, Sim (40).
   It is felt, in view of this, that a description of these
   rock carvings is unnecessary.

   There is one site which has attracted little
   attention. This is a group of engravings situated
   approximately nine and a half miles from Scone, along
   the Gundy road, on one of the banks (41) of the Page River.

(36) W.J. Enbright "Aboriginal Rock Carvings in the Wollombi
   District", pp181-183.

(37) R.H. Goddard and F. Slater *loc.cit.* pp91-92.

(38) A.P. Elkin "The Origin and Interpretation of Petroglyphs

(39) F. D. McCarthy *loc.cit.*

(40) I.M. Sim *loc.cit.*

(41) It is not known which bank.
It is uncertain whether the engravings were completely destroyed or buried in silt as a result of the 1955 flood. In 1939 the late Mr. P.C. Badier of Scone photographed the site, and his photographs are reproduced here. In subject matter and style they are similar to the Hawkesbury engravings, although the human figure in Fig. 6 is stylistically different from its Hawkesbury counterpart, being linear rather than rounded, and having unusual subdivisions of the upper body. As a whole the Gunditjmera carvings are much closer to those of Hawkesbury in subject matter and style than, for example, the simple linear engravings of the Clarence Valley. (42)

The outlines appear to have been chalked in for clarification, and as a result the method by which the rock was carved is not known. None of the figures seems to have been pecked. No scale is provided, and from the photographs it is impossible to determine the size of the figures or the exact situation of the group.

As Mr. Badier actually saw the engravings, his explanatory notes which accompany the photographs have been reproduced here almost unchanged.

Fig. 1. The figures include a bat or a flying fox, with a snake superimposed over the nose, and one right hand.

Fig. 2. Besides showing some of the figures already mentioned, this photograph includes a lizard, an echidna, and an emu track.

Fig. 3. Two clubs, and a snake are depicted here. The figure on the right Mr. Badier defines as a fish, with unusual markings. To the left is what appears to be a crayfish, although Mr. Badier does not say what it is.

Fig. 4. This section of the group includes another snake, a kangaroo, and a boomerang. There is also what seems to be a spear emerging from the back of the kangaroo.

Fig. 5. This is the same as Fig. 4, photographed from a different angle.

Fig. 6. Dominant in this group is a human figure, according to Mr. Badier it is 'Ayomee (Spirit of Creation)'. The figure is short in the body, but has disproportionately long legs and an exaggerated penis. The upper body is subdivided by roughly circular markings. Other figures in the group have already been described.

Fig. 7. This photograph includes the whole group of engravings, most of which are visible.

Fig. 8. Three rubbing grooves are shown here, outlined with chalk. Their position relative to the engravings is not certain.

Map location - 13.
Fig. 1.

Photos: P.C. Badier.

Fig. 2.
Fig. 3.

Photos: P.C. Badier.

Fig. 4.
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ILLUSTRATIONS

Australian Museum, Sydney.

P.C. Badier. By courtesy of the Scone and Upper Hunter Historical Society.

Dick Collection. From some copies of this collection of photographs of Port Macquarie housed at the University of New England.


University of New England Photographic Department.