

# Aborigines had artistic love

The aborigines who lived on and around the flats and mountains of Broke and Bulga must have had a great love for artistic as well as ceremonial activity.

The formation of sandstone rock and their associated overhangs (gunyah-gibber in Awabakal) are rich indeed in artistic expression.

Naturally, many of the overhangs, a physical feature of the mountain area, have a large number and great variety of hand stencils.

This is understandable, for many of the overhangs could have been close to sites of boras — a ceremonial occasion of initiation or rising a male to a higher degree.

It would seem from evidence examined of rock carvings and overhang stencils and paintings that the coastal and Hunter Valley tribes had much in common so far as expression and use of material are concerned.

Mostly the stencils were done in a stone colored ochre, but occasionally, as was the case with paintings, there were color departures, mainly with the use of red and yellow tints.

The most striking use of red ochre is with Boambee, who featured the outstanding collection of aboriginal art expression at Milbrodale, Boambee, about whom

## Gallery in natural overhangs

so little is known, was known as the "guardian of the valley."

Occasionally black was used for stencil work, but there is a suggestion this was used only after certain ceremonies, not merely because other colors were not available.

The known examples of aboriginal art work are many, but it is also safe to suggest that many more remain to be discovered in the mountain vastness of this district.

It would probably require a properly organised and equipped expedition to un-

Story: P. A. HASLAM  
Pictures: GEORGE STEELE

I have seen a variety of overhangs and rock formations, but it was not until recently that I saw for the first time examples of color changes in the mountain area near Broke.

dertake a complete survey of the region where aboriginal tribes were known to have had camps and fixed living places.

But such a search should be supervised by the appropriate authorities and documented by persons experienced in such work.

Historians would need also to consult old settlers, whose long association with such areas are invaluable in providing basic information on tribal activity; to which often can be added the legends that have passed down through generations.

During my recent excursion into some of the more rugged sections of the mountain region, an expedition made possible by Brian

Laut, of Cessnock who himself is a keen historian and conservationist, I was made realise that aborigines did not mind if their art work involved extra physical effort in climbing to the tops of mountains.

It would also seem they chose at random the sites of their stencils and paintings, since such work may be found in one of the cluster of a dozen or so overhangs.

Several times I have noted that perhaps the most difficult overhang has been chosen; perhaps what I do not and will never know is the actual reason for the choice.

Our first objective required a fair amount of walking and climbing. It also meant crossing Wollombi Brook (also called by locals the Cockfighter Creek).

The spreading and much eroded overhang that was our destination showed the ravages of time; and this also applied to the collection of stencils and paintings in red and stone ochres.

Some of the outlines of paintings had almost been obliterated, probably by moisture.

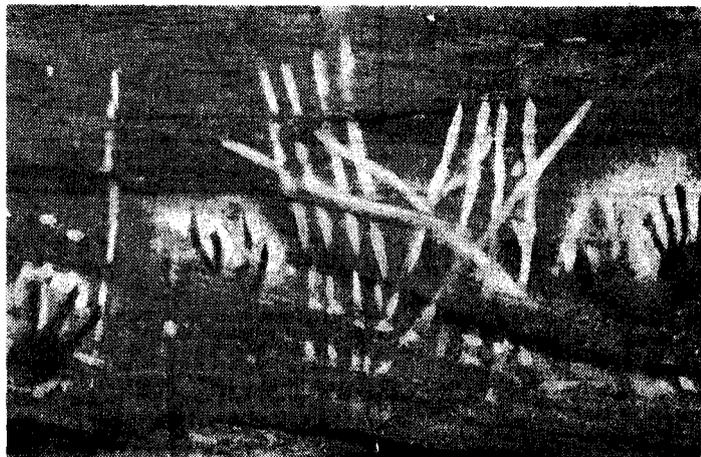
The hands were all shapes and sizes; there was one example of one hand superimposed over another. Did this mean that two brothers had been initiated in the one tribal group?

The second hand was darker in color than the first.

One peculiarity we noticed in a long line of hand stencils: the thumb was always pointing to the right.

Despite the amount of fading outline in some figures, some white — a rare color intrusion for the area — could still be seen. Then came the puzzling feature, so rarely seen in a stencil area: a hand actually painted in ochre.

Stencils usually have a



sharp and simple outline to conform with the natural formation of a hand.

But the painting was different: it had rough edges and a clear example of copying.

Our next object meant a long drive and crossing the almost dry Stockyard Creek. Here, again, the aborigines chose a location of substantial rock formation, but with easier access.

It was here we met a first-class artistic mystery. Near some stencils was a series of crossed lines in stone ochre, surmounted by a long line of dots that extended for about three metres.

Nobody questioned could indicate the meaning of or reason for the crossed lines. It is highly unlikely that aborigines had any knowledge of 'noughts' and crosses.

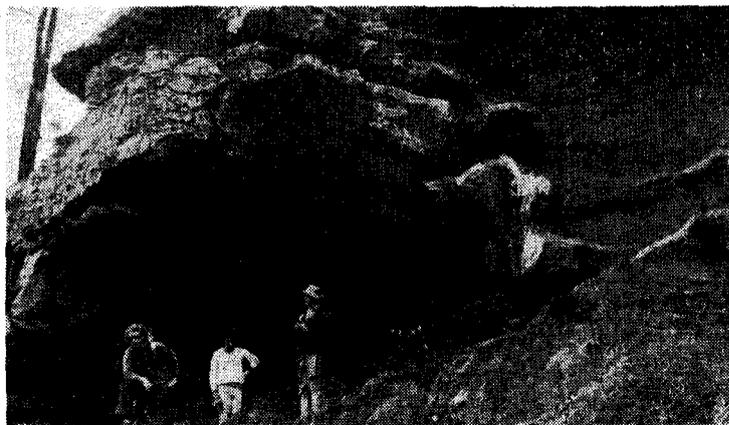
We may never know also whether the artists were Awabakal or Kamilaroi because some of this area was

The mysterious crossed lines in a cave painting by aborigines in the mountain region of Broke. A mystery just as deep is the line of ochre dots surmounting the lines and hand stencils. At right is a painting of a three-fingered hand; by contrast, at left, is a stencil of a full hand.

regarded as "no man's land" by wandering tribal groups

It should be remembered that not too many miles away is Bulga, the site of the last great corroboree in 1851, when tribes from the North Coast and South Coast, Hunter Valley, Lake Macquarie, Central Coast and Newcastle gathered in their many hundreds.

Fortunately, there is a record of this event, which probably marked the end of mass ceremonies for the occasions when major tribes forgot their differences over totems, hunting grounds and violation of tribal laws.



A typical example of a rock overhang used by aborigines as sites for stencils and paintings.

# NATIVE HERITAGE IN DANGER



Mr. Roy McTaggart, of Broke, points to a district property.

Officials of historical groups in the North strongly support the view that the Australian Government should make funds available to preserve aboriginal art where the tribes are extinct.

They say that Lake Macquarie and Hunter Valley regions are rich in this primitive art — a segment of an ancient culture not fully understood by the average Australian.

The Secretary of Cessnock Historical Society (Mr K. Maheine) said that unless something was done now to preserve the paintings, stencils and carvings, much of this work would disappear in the next 50 years.

"We do not know just how old some of the paintings and carvings are. Most are at least 150 to 200 years old," he said.

"Some stencils, because of their association with ritualistic ceremonies, could be a little more recent, but, mainly, it is a matter of conjecture."

Mr Maheine agreed that Broke, Bulga and Wollombi areas in the Lower Hunter and the Hawkesbury on the Central Coast had rich and extensive groupings of aboriginal art, particularly carvings.

There were also small canals cut into rock for water drainage.

Mr. Maheine said that native art should be available for all to see, but access must be protected.

Much work was on Crown land and a fair amount on private property.

Some property owners had in recent years adopted a responsible attitude to protect this art; others had ignored it.

There was at least one

example of scarce rock carvings being bulldozed into the ground.

He agrees with the suggestion that money could be wisely spent in appointing guardians, who also could be rangers, to protect primitive art from vandals.

He also believes that many of the outstanding paintings should be restored and preserved because these represented an expression of art as well as indicating a culture about which so little was known.

"There was nothing false about aboriginal art; they painted and carved as they saw and felt," he said.

"I have seen a hand stencil with only four fingers, the middle one evidently having been chopped off in a battle, or possibly because of a snake bite."

Mr Maheine is correct on the need for preservation and protection against vandalism.

Exposure to weather has caused ochre paintings to fade. According to experts there is still time to apply restorative measures to preserve them for many generations to come.

Vandalism is evident at one rock overhang in the Watagan Mountains. At this site there is a collection of animal and reptile paintings in drab ochre.

Some of these figures have been obliterated by obscene writing.

This overhang was close to what the aborigines would have considered a defence outpost.

Within 20m of the paintings there are grooved rocks where warriors sharpened their hunting and fighting weapons.

● Editorial, P 2.

**ERIC TAGGART** is not certain whether he is 64 or 65; the year's difference does not worry him.

Because Eric is a descendant of the first Australians, for whom time is ageless, and sometimes of little consequence.

Eric has a home at Singleton, but he spends much time at Broke and environs, for it was in this district that he was born and reared.

He is proud of his aboriginal heritage: of its longevity in terms of history, and of its closeness to nature.

Broke is a fringe area for aboriginal tribes that were prominent in the region for countless centuries: here are found evidence, in language and art, of long and spreading occupation by the Awabakal.

And close by there are signs that often groups of Kamalaroi (sometimes pronounced Karmalarai), the large and once powerful tribe belonging to most of the Hunter Valley and Liverpool Plains, were in the area.

Eric is a softly-spoken, gentle type of person; humble, yet having a knowledge about things that cannot possibly be gained in one lifetime.

He is a living symbol of an ancient past, yet fitting in with the setting of modern society when he deems fit.

But he has something more: in the age-long call comes, he can set out and live off the land as his ancestors did.

And like the learned men of the tribe of other

# A living symbol of an ancient past

days, Eric is silent on many questions; we may never know just what store of knowledge he has of the past.

Recently, it was our fortune to spend a day with Eric around Broke and its surrounds, to be told of the practical past of his boyhood when food was ac-

quired season by season as provided by nature.

It began with a promise to be shown in the mountain spurs rising from the Cockfighter Creek the places where aborigines once obtained salt from caves.

We did not have time to reach the major source of salt, the presence of which suggests an interesting geo-

logical background, but a small overhang was found, where Eric scooped out fine white dust.

"This is it; taste it," he said. We did. It certainly had a salty taste.

"In my youth, we called this area Salt Pan Gully,"

In the party was Max Tolson, orchardist, whose family owns a large property, with lines of citrus groves.

He was surprised when Eric pointed to the north and said: "You see that peppercorn tree, in the dip — that is where we lived many years ago; that is where I was born and reared."

Eric explained that the aborigines used charcoal to purify the salt taken from the caves.

"We got salt by the bucketful and it was first class," he recalled.

Max Tolson said he was amazed to learn that his family's property had such a link with the past.

It was the first time he had been told that there had been aboriginal habitation in the area.

Eric then became reminiscent and revealing. He spoke of the days of his youth when game abounded in the small area we had traversed.

"There were plenty of kangaroos and other animals," he said.

Before he proceeded, he deftly showed us how the aborigines used small but strong trees as spring traps for kangaroos.

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**Why worry about matches when one can light a fire this way. Eric Taggart shows how aborigines twirl a dead stick to create a flame in grass. He can also start a fire by using a flaked flint.**

"Bit different getting the roos this way than using the boomerang."

He demonstrated how a hunting or killing boomerang was thrown.

The demonstration showed it to be an art of weapon use probably exclusive to his race.

"Boomerangs were sharp and hard; I have seen them, at a short distance, chop a kangaroo's head clean off in the hunt."

As we walked through the bush, dotted with sandstone rocks, he observed: "This used to be a great place for kangaroo

rats. All gone now. They were lovely to eat."

Hunting this small marsupial in his hole home in the ground, often hidden by thick grass, had its hazards, mainly in the form of snakes.

"Once found an adder in the hole, but we didn't get bitten, but got the kanga rat," Eric said.

Eric loves the outdoor life; he prefers to sleep in the open than indoors.

He admits he finds it no problem to "go walk-about" and live off the land as his forebears did so easily in this region flush with food and water.

It is a call to which he finds no barrier in responding because he has experienced the real tribal life in the Northern Territory.

"I moved about from Darwin to Katherine for some years," he said. "I was accepted without hesitation by tribes.

"I went to their corroborees and camps by invitation and saw their ceremonies.

"Yes, I did not find it difficult to understand their ceremonies."

We pressed Eric about living off the land in the area over which we had

just trudged, up and down, with Brian Laut, a young minerworker from Cessnock and a keen conservationist as well as historian.

"We had no sugar, so we used wild honey to sweeten food," Eric said. "We had no trouble to get it.

"We also had witchity grubs. I rather like them."

While in Northern Territory Eric learned to throw the local type of hunting spear.

He threw it free, that is, without the traditional woamera — a weapon aid to give the thrower greater force and distance.

His longest throw was about 34m — "quite a handy throw when hunting, or even fighting."

Eric believes that his father and a companion were among the last of the local tribe in the area to survive.

We were proceeding along the Putty-Broke Rd when we stopped suddenly.

"Look over there," he said, pointing northwards to a clump of acacia trees.

"When I was a boy my father took me on long walks and we always passed around this spot.

"For this was a burial ground of the tribe, now long forgotten and part of farm cultivation.

"But I shall always remember it; to us it will always be a sacred spot."

Eric said often his father would go hunting alone for days on end, but he always brought back food.

In this area was a tribal camp, not far from trees and caves.

When Eric returns to our way of life he acts accordingly; in fact, he is a citizen of repute whether in Singleton or Broke. And he is not without knowledge of white man's law.

Eric has a dual personality, but that which belongs to the ancient past is certainly the stronger.

Because of this we should be grateful for a brief if inadequate glimpse into the past as portrayed by him.



# Army honors settlers

The name of a sports field at Singleton Army camp is connected with an Aboriginal tribe that originally settled the area.

The sports oval has been named the Kamilaroi Sports Field.

The Commanding Officer (Col. C. M. Townsend) said the oval never had a name, though several suggestions were put forward.

"Some wanted to call it after former commanding officers or leading identities," he said.

"Then someone suggested we call it after the first settler of the land occupied by the Army.

"However, the land wasn't occupied by anyone specific. Then we decided to go back to the original settlers—the aborigine.

"From our investigations and help from Mr P. A. Haslam, of Newcastle, an authority on aborigines, we discovered that the Kamilaroi community lived on part of the land of the oval," Col Townsend said. Mr F. Dangel was re-



sponsible for painting the sign.

Mr. Dangel, a part-time teacher of signwriting at Newcastle Technical College, painted the letters of

the sign based on aboriginal boomerangs.

"All other types of lettering come from America so I had to design my own style," he said.

"I thought since it was an aboriginal name the lettering should depict the same theme," Mr Dangel said.

Mr Dangel is an alder-

man on Maitland City Council.

The 2IC of the Corps Training Company (Capt D. Wellard) admires the new sign.

# Historic aboriginal grave in Sandgate

By **NORM BARNEY,**  
Staff Reporter

THE weeds are tall on the Sandgate Cemetery grave of Tom Dillon but not quite tall enough to obscure a small tombstone and an inscription which tells of a man 'who held the esteem of all who knew him'.

It is some of the other things listed on the stone that may lead to the recognition that Tom Dillon's last resting place is the most historic grave in the cemetery and a strong link with Australia's past.

For Tom Dillon was the last full blood Aborigine of the Hawkesbury River tribe, the Darook.

His death in 1923, from burns accidentally received, ended possibly thousands of years of tribal history. With Tom Dillon's death the spiritual link with what the Darook prob-

ably knew as 'creation time' disappeared. The only things that remain are the rock carvings and paintings that are scattered throughout the Hawkesbury River and Central Coast area just below Wyong.

Tom Dillon was not only the last of his tribe; he was also the last of the Aborigines who had very early contact with early settlers in the district.

He was 90 when he died in Newcastle Hospital in 1923. He was obviously well accepted in the community. The inscription on his grave lists his record as 'one of honesty, industry and faithful service'.

A little is known of Tom Dillon's life. He lived for some time in the Wollombi Brook area. He was a fine horseman, a fast runner and a keen cricketer. He also spent a period as a black tracker for the police based at Bulga.

He was known to be a fully initi-

ated member of his tribe for his chest was scarred and a front tooth was missing.

Tom Dillon's gravestone was erected by the Australasian Society of Patriots, a society now defunct but which during the 1920s and 1930s was a powerful group in the Newcastle area and one which highlighted Australian patriotism and history. If the Dillon grave is any indication the society rightly did not accept that our history began with the coming of the Europeans.

The lettering of the gravestone was originally chiselled out and filled with lead. Most of the lead has disappeared but the inscription can still be read. It is simple and precise and yet somewhat saddening to read for it was erected to 'mark the exit of the Hawkesbury River tribe as represented by Tom Dillon. He was the last full blood aboriginal of the Hawkesbury'.



Cemetery employee **Garry Hitchens** at Tom Dillon's grave.