

RETRACING THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE EARLY WEST KIMBERLEY EXPLORERS (AND THEIR ROCK ART FINDS)

On 5 September 2007, Dr Hamish McGlashan, President of the Kimberley Society, spoke about expeditions on which he and others have seen rock art and other interesting things recorded by explorers. His summary of the talk, which included PowerPoint slides with impressive “then” and “later” images of rock art, appears below.

The tracks of six explorers were traced from their books or journals, in time ranging from 1838 to 1926. They were George Grey, T C Sholl, Joseph Bradshaw, Fred Brockman, the Rev R Love, and J C de Lancourt. Their paths criss-crossed the Kimberley, as did those of our groups of friends who have backpacked over the routes with a particular interest in rock art.

The first European Kimberley explorer to penetrate inland was [George Grey](#), an outstanding colonial administrator in Victorian times. He later became the Governor of South Australia, New Zealand and The Cape Province, obtaining a Knighthood and a peerage on the way. A great linguist, naturalist and writer as well, he started his prominent career in Western Australia by leading two expeditions at the age of twenty-five. Both narrowly escaped disaster and were recorded in his *Journals of Two Expeditions of Discovery*, an original edition of which was presented to Perth City by Queen Elizabeth. His first journey from Hanover Bay near the Prince Regent River was to explore the North West of the continent and hopefully walk to Perth finding a great inland sea on the way! He was speared by Aborigines of the Worrorra tribe and did not get far, but he recorded finding two caves with remarkable rock art and a “carved” head. Over many years, people tried to find these sites: Brockman in 1901 found at least one but it was not until 1947 that both were revisited by a European, Howard Coate, who received a commission from Sydney anthropologist A P Elkin. Coate, who died a few years ago in Derby, spent 18 months searching with a group of Aborigines and a team of donkeys before he was successful. He had a copy of Grey’s journal but not his map. He did not find the “carved” head.

[Our involvement](#) with Grey, Coate and the Kimberley started in 1983 on the expedition phase of an Australia and New Zealand Schools Scientific Exploration Society. (Four of the participants were at the meeting.) We studied Grey’s and other maps beforehand, and five bush innocents were dropped by helicopter close to where we thought Grey’s 26th March cave might be. Next morning, triumph! And a little later triumph again when the second cave was found, but not the “carved” head. (Pictures were shown of Grey’s original drawings and our photographs.) We then walked out to Pantijan Station to be picked up by Dick Robertson in his plane.

Five years later on a trip organised by Kevin Coate, Howard’s nephew, we retraced Grey’s entire trip from Hanover Bay (probably the first to do so) again walking out to Pantijan Station. It had, and still has, an Aboriginal presence which waxes and wanes over the years, as does the state of the station.

On the first day we found a length of chain, deemed too heavy to carry, which we thought must have been left by Grey as it was at the site of his store depot. We left it on top of a rock in burned out country. This time Peter Knight found the “carved” head, a coup in view of all the previous failures: it proved to be a natural flaking of the rock, untouched by human hand. Grey was suffering greatly from his spear wound when he saw it.

Some years later we attempted to retrieve the chain on a day walk from Port George the IV to Hanover Bay, but we were defeated by the terrain, and the long grass. Interestingly, this was the same walk that the [Rev. Love](#) took when he first arrived at Port George the IV mission in 1914 ... and he too noted the impossibility of progress with long grass which had not been burned. Love was a farsighted missionary whose views were ahead of his time. He was also a great linguist and ornithologist.

Also on Grey's route, two of us climbed Mount Trevor. Both Brockman and Love had climbed it before and both had seen a cairn of stones and a quartz pillar, which it was surmised had been put there either by a Wandjina or T C Sholl coming from Camden Harbour. On reaching the summit as marked on the map there was no cairn to be seen but through the binoculars it could be seen on an adjacent peak, which we then ascended to find the cairn and pillar. The summit was wrongly placed on our map and disappointingly is still in error on a new edition.

Although Grey was an accurate recorder (apart from his estimations of latitude and longitude) he was deceived as to the fertility of the country that he traversed, partly because of an exceedingly heavy wet season. His glowing reports led to the disastrous [Camden Harbour settlement](#) in 1865 when deaths of both settlers and livestock were heavy. Exploration by T C Sholl from Camden Harbour proceeded south to the Walcott Inlet. He named the rivers and hills of this area, often after his companions who had died at Camden Harbour and he also identified Panter Downs (now Pantijan) as a suitable place for the raising of livestock.

[Joseph Bradshaw](#) was a pastoralist from Victoria who journeyed from Wyndham to assess a land allocation he had taken up on the Prince Regent River. On 16 April 1891 he noted some rock art, different in nature to that he had seen previously and of evident antiquity. This art has been subsequently referred to as "Bradshaw Figures" or Gwion Gwion. If finding the Grey figures had been difficult, the Bradshaws were even worse and many expeditions over the years had failed, including one of ours. Eventually Mike and Wendy Cusack felt that they knew the place and discussed it with Grahame Walsh who announced two weeks later that he had found the site, just a few days before a Cusack trip that was also successful.

[Brockman's journey](#), already discussed by Mike Donaldson at a previous meeting, was notable for its extent and for the mapping and naming of Kimberley rivers. He, or at least the naturalist Dr House on his team, was the first to photograph Aboriginal art at Bachsten Creek. Changes due to repainting and flood damage were shown.

The final explorer to be considered was [J C De Lancourt](#), who was in the Kimberley in 1926 while walking round the coast of Australia for a bet. Fred Easton, who ran Avon Valley Station (later known as Munja) was taken by a crocodile while trying to cross Walcott Inlet to reach De Lancourt. He related this in his despatches to the *Western Mail*, as well as sending interesting notes on cave paintings and Aboriginal burial customs in the area, before embarking on an arduous journey to Port George the IV Mission and then to Kalumburu.

Further reading

Bradshaw, Joseph. Journal, 1891 (Mitchell Library, copy in Battye Library); and 'Notes' (*Proceedings of the Victorian Branch of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia*, vol. 9, part 2, 1892).

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de Burgh, W J (ed.). *On Australia's Rim: JC de Lancourt's Travels in Australia 1924–1929*. Hesperian Press, Carlisle (WA), 2006.

Grey, George. *Journals of Two Expeditions of Discovery in North-west and Western Australia, during the years 1837, 38, and 39*. T. and W. Boone, London, 1841, Hesperian Press, Carlisle (WA), 1983, facsimile edition, vol. 1.

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Sholl, T C. Letter re expedition, 1865 (State Records Office of WA, AN 365/1, Acc 193, Item 14).