



Kimberley Society

Book Note (with discussion)

***Lost World of the Kimberley: Extraordinary glimpses of Australia's Ice Age Ancestors* by Ian Wilson. Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest (NSW), 2006. Soft cover, 315 pages, colour illustrations, maps. ISBN 1 74114 391 8. RRP \$35.00.**

Very interesting! My reaction to this book—that of one historian reading another historian's work—will no doubt differ markedly from that of an Aboriginal custodian, an archaeologist, an anthropologist, or a rock art enthusiast. Other readers may take issue with some of the book's more provocative or speculative components but I was impressed by its attempts to add a human dimension to the Kimberley's Bradshaw, *Gwion Gwion*, or *giro giro* rock art.

Ian Wilson is new to Australian topics but, with more than twenty books to his credit, he has a solid background in historical research and writing. His books include *Before the Flood: The biblical flood as a real event and how it changed the course of civilization* and, with a narrower focus, *The Blood and the Shroud: New evidence that the world's most sacred relic is real*.

Lost World of the Kimberley takes the reader on a personal journey in which the author and his wife Judith researched, visited, photographed, sketched, and analysed some of the Kimberley's early rock art. He is generous in acknowledging his predecessors and guides but expresses frustration at his inability to establish a rapport with Grahame Walsh and that author's patrons. He comments on Grahame Walsh's published work but was unable to persuade him to discuss theories, reveal the location of any of his discoveries, or provide access to unpublished photographs. That impediment was, to a limited extent, offset by other rock art enthusiasts sharing their knowledge and photographs and taking the Wilsons not only to sites that matched published photographs but also to others apparently 'unknown to Walsh'.

For me, the most interesting parts of *Lost World of the Kimberley* are those in which the author relates aspects of Kimberley rock art to non-Kimberley art works, artefacts, photographs and sketches. For example, in musing about Grahame Walsh hypothesising that the presence of what appear to be dingoes may be indicative of a work having been executed within the last 4000 years, Ian Wilson positions a photograph of one of the "dingoes" against a rare image of thylacine. The thylacine, extinct in mainland Australia for 5000 years, bears a strong resemblance (helped by flipping the image to the left), to that of the animal in the painting. The thylacine hypothesis came from Kimberley archaeologist Lee Scott-Virtue but, in running with it, Ian Wilson follows Dr David Welch's approach of comparing components of rock art with archival photographs. That approach lends strong support to Dr Welch's hypotheses about ceremony in rock art, and it works well with the analysis of human and animal figures, and objects such as boats, in *Lost World of the Kimberley*.

In putting forward his hypotheses, conjecture and opinions, Ian Wilson hopes to generate 'the widest possible, intelligent debate' about the origin, meaning and management of Kimberley rock art. Robust debate is certain to occur but it may focus on the present rather than the past. Throwing down the gauntlet in the areas of access and management is not without its risks, and it will be interesting to see how the rock art fraternity responds to a newcomer who dares to offer opinions not just about the content and context of the art but also about who has the right to see it. *Lost World of the Kimberley* will be in the public domain following its launch on 3 February, and copies will be available for purchase at the Kimberley Society meeting of 1 March. The review copy will be available for perusal at the February meeting.

Cathie Clement (January 2006)

Members' Views of *Lost World Of The Kimberley*

Boab Bulletin No. 72 carried a book note on Ian Wilson's *Lost World of the Kimberley*. The opinions expressed in it contrasted sharply with those of Nicolas Rothwell (*Weekend Australian*, 28–29 January 2006) and Bruce Elder (*Age*, 22 February 2006). Other members' reactions to the book were therefore solicited. The space available in this newsletter was insufficient to publish their contributions in full but the following extracts convey the essence of each member's view of the book.

I bought this book after having read the guarded review by Cathie Clement in the Boab Bulletin (it may stir up controversy) and the most destructive criticism I have ever read by Nicolas Rothwell in the Australian (this should never have been published).

I enjoyed the first chapters which give an easy to read summary of the history of the "discovery" of the Bradshaw art and of the research that has been done. I could not help but laugh at his confrontation with Grahame Walsh ("the grey wolf of the Kimberley" according to Rothwell), when, never having seen a site, he propounds a theory stating that Walsh's ideas may be wrong and then asks Walsh to tell him where sites can be found. Even Walsh's friends would tremble at such suggestions!

My trouble with this book starts when, having read Walsh's theories on the dating sequence, he visits the Kimberley, on a quick trip with a guide. With a prose style more fitting to the weekend travel supplement of a popular magazine he gushes forth about his guides, the food, the scenery and the rock art he has seen. All of us seeing the Bradshaw rock art in situ for the first time tend to exclaim "this looks like a..." or "this reminds me of..." or what on earth can that be?" but we really do not know and neither does anyone else. However, Wilson's imagination takes us further and despite disclaimers such as "it may seem far fetched but..." proceeds to link the Bradshaw painters with whatever he knows about Ice Age cultures throughout the world. There are fanciful ideas supported by photos taken by his wife but the reproduction of the pictures is too poor to be convinced of any interpretation postulated: but Wilson "instinctively" knows.

It is sad to see such undisciplined thought and paucity of academic rigour in a book which claims to be a serious contribution to the corpus of knowledge of Kimberley rock art. Surely he could not have written it if he had attended our recent Rock Art seminar in Perth. It is also of concern that because of the power of the written word it seems inevitable that these flights of fancy will be copied, plagiarised, repeated and then become part of popular "knowledge". We still see quoted von Danniken's theory that Wanjinias are evidence of visits from outer space! Now we have reindeer in the Kimberley!

*I would have liked to be able to recommend this book for the early chapter summaries and the politics of rock art at the end. But no, I must side with Rothwell in feeling that this book should not have seen the light of day. – **Hamish McGlashan** (March 2006)*

Here in this book we have someone from overseas who has given us a fresh look at the Bradshaw paintings. . . His arguments about the types of rock art, the depictions, classifications and meanings that can be interpreted are quite well argued. However, he is a little weaker on many aspects of the Kimberley. He would have us believe (page 16) that Worrora, Wunambal and Ngarinyin speakers dominate the Kimberley. However in referring to the Handbook of Kimberley Languages by William McGregor (1988), we find about 150 to 200 Worrora speakers, which would be about the same number as speakers of Wunambal and Ngarinyin. Languages with more speakers include Kija, Kukatja (both with 300) and similarly Miriwoong and Bardi. All of these are overwhelmed by Walmajarri with 1000 speakers. So what does that leave us with?

Here we have an affordable book (\$35), with over 50 colour photographs of Bradshaw scenes taken by the author, his wife or associates. Some of these apparently are not known to Grahame Walsh and hence do not appear in either of his books. There is no messing around and by page 4, there is a depiction of a Gallery called Reindeer Rock with what certainly looks like Reindeer to me. These seemed to have been unaccounted for previously and may be difficult to explain. He also continues some of the themes of the Da Vinci Code with numerous references to the "Great Mother Figures". He interprets many of the figures as being female, which some may debate. A colleague of mine who spent many years in Wyndham, made numerous forays out into the bush, and has a vast collection of photos of Bradshaw figures, claimed that he has never seen a female figure. Does it really matter? Are these figures meant to be asexual in their representations or were only men painted? Who will ever know, and to me this is the whole essence of the mystery of the Bradshaws.

The book is certainly a good description of the varying types of Bradshaw figures that can be seen. The author is quite referential and reverential towards Grahame Walsh who, as we all know, is the acknowledged leader in the study of these figures and this art. Yet Walsh's books, which change hands at between \$1000 and \$2000 are beyond the reach of most people who are interested in this art.

*Overall I wasn't as offended at all as I thought I might be after reading Rothwell's scathing report. However, in his introduction, Wilson certainly explained his aims and mentioned the book's possible short-comings. If we follow these criteria I don't think one would be disappointed after reading this affordable and well illustrated book. – **Jack Vercoe** (March 2006)*

It is always interesting to read another book on the fabulous Kimberley Rock art, and this book is no exception. Wilson readily admits that he is a newcomer to Australia, and had never been to the Kimberley before his very brief visit to see some of the Bradshaw paintings he writes about. This lack of familiarity shows through everywhere in the book, and one has to ask what does this armchair historian add to our knowledge of these enigmatic paintings. The answer, I'm afraid, is very little. The book is full of wild speculations, and some glaring factual errors, but there is always something to learn from such a work. He reveals some admittedly general location data that is otherwise poorly known except to the few who spend time searching for and researching these art works. And his depiction of a frieze of "reindeer" is certainly interesting, whatever they may be: unfortunately his photos are so poor that it is not at all clear what species they may represent.

Historians live and die by their accurate portrayal of facts. And the author lost a lot of credibility with this reader when on page 2 he talks about his plan "to walk back down from the 3000-metre elevation" at Mitchell Falls. These falls are at an elevation of about 200 metres, although there are hills in the area up to about 300 metres. This is not a trivial error; it is out by a factor of 10! Most Australians will be aware that Mt Kosciusko is the country's highest point, and a 10 second Google search of that name will reveal it is only 2228 metres high! It is easy to dismiss this as a simple typographical error, but it does not instill confidence in the factual veracity of the rest of the book.

Still, the book will certainly create further interest in the Kimberley and its incredible rock art, and it will therefore fulfill the author's aim of bringing the subject and the question of just who were the Bradshaw painters to a much wider audience. – Mike Donaldson (March 2006)

Not for a long time have we had a popular Australian book by an author with a craftsman's knowledge of good writing and the knowledge and imagination to put together a book which has the potential to become extremely influential. It is probably the most important book yet to be written on the Kimberley. This will put Kimberley on the world map as nothing else ever could.

Perhaps the most important aspect is the bringing to the popular mind the understanding that there were multiple waves of "aboriginals", and that there are no truly indigenous peoples, we are all immigrants. As the Europeans displaced the Aborigines, so they had 'absorbed' the previous peoples, and new cultures will morph the current inhabitants. Now DNA results are starting to show what many have suspected, both intuitively and deductively, about the connectivity of cultures and peoples. From other independent researchers we see new data on the stretch of dolmen builders from Western Europe to Korea to Indonesia. De Santillana and Dechard's shattering work on the universality of the fundamental theme of legends. The discovery of tobacco and cocaine in an Egyptian mummy. Europic mummies and blonde princesses and emperors in China. Who were the pre-Maori whites in New Zealand? The ancient measuring of the earth to a higher degree of accuracy than was possible with our civilisation until the late 18C. There is much more to come, if we are to be allowed to know. And it will come from such as Wilson, who are free men, untrammelled by the demons of the establishment's dungeons. – Peter Bridge (March 2006)

The Author Replies

After what Jack Vercoe rightly called Nicolas Rothwell's 'scathing' review of my book in *The Australian*, it was doubly painful to find Hamish McGlashan and Mike Donaldson saying much the same in the *Boab Bulletin* – Hamish referring to my 'fanciful ideas' and 'flights of fancy' and Mike to my 'wild speculations'.

Yet I can only ask, in genuine bewilderment, what 'fanciful ideas', what 'wild speculations'? Hamish vaguely referred to my linking the Bradshaw painters with Ice Age cultures throughout the world, and perhaps had in mind the single example that Rothwell cited as 'pure fantasy'. Specifically, Theda's Bradshaw panel depicting nine net-clad dancers, a dance which I suggested may be the distant ancestor of a dance by nine maidens still performed on Java in honour of a prehistoric sea goddess. Now get real, Hamish and Nicolas, this is hardly speculation of the Von Daniken kind. Even Grahame Walsh has recognised that the Bradshaw people must have come from somewhere else before they arrived fully developed in the Kimberley. Geographical logic suggests that somewhere else to have been Southeast Asia. All that my book does, tentatively, and with full acknowledgement of the many difficulties and my own personal shortcomings, is to point to a series of indicators of South East Asian links. Some of these suggestions may stand the test of time, some may not. But as a qualified historian who has actively studied the world's figurative art for more than five decades, was it really so wrong for me to try to answer the fundamental questions that the Bradshaw paintings raise concerning who painted them, where they came from, and what happened to them?

Accused as I am of being an 'Englishman' (I am in my twelfth year of residency and ninth of full Australian citizenship), also of dashing off a book on the strength of just one 'very brief' visit to the Kimberley, perhaps I might cite reviews of earlier books that have been published internationally. The *Washington Post* of my book on the Turin Shroud: 'Wilson's outstanding study must surely be the most complete yet undertaken of the subject.' The London *Times* of a book about the evidence for life after death: 'In a field littered with shards of crackpottery, Wilson treads with commendable wariness'. Oxford academic and Shakespeare specialist A.L. Rowse of my biography of Shakespeare: 'Full of good sense. The reader will not go wrong with it... Ian Wilson is conscientious, as a good Oxford man should be.' In every subject that I choose to write about, almost always associated with historical mysteries, I make a point of doing a great deal of preliminary research before approaching key experts in that field. Over the years many specialists in art, archaeology, botany, medicine, forensic science and other fields have responded generously to such approaches and have become personal friends as a result of the correspondence and ideas generated. I adopted exactly the same approach in the case of *Lost World of the Kimberley*. So where did I go so badly wrong with it?

Amongst my detractors the general perception appears to be that any book on the Bradshaws based on a single visit to the Kimberley surely must be flimsy and inadequate compared to the quarter of a century of periodic field-work that has been put in by Grahame Walsh. But as a former Walsh backer, sculptor John Robinson, has pointed out, there is such a huge amount to be learnt from photographs of the paintings that

you do not need to have personally visited every site. Had I had access to a properly referenced photographic archive, undoubtedly my book could and would have had more substance, and much less of the chatty travelogue than it became. But Walsh's books, despite their lavishness and huge expense, simply do not provide the data necessary for proper investigative evaluation. Does that mean that it is in Walsh's direction that any 'lack of academic rigour' charges should be levelled, not in mine?

Let us take a painting that both Walsh and I have seen in person, and have created interpretative drawings from, the panel that I have called the 'bagmen', located near the King Edward River at the site local Aborigines call Munurru. The figures on this panel feature bulky bulbous objects fastened to their waists to which Walsh simply accords the label 'Dancing Balloons'. In my book I noted what Walsh had missed (as evident from his interpretative drawing), that the balloon-like object is further supported by straps from the neck. In this light I gently 'speculated' that the objects could be bags or baskets. And I then referred to anthropological descriptions of Aboriginal ceremonies involving such items. So whose approach did more to further understanding of the Bradshaws? Walsh's, providing no location information, and merely a misleading label? Or mine, identifying and describing the painting's setting, and venturing a plausible constructive interpretation for the mystery object?

Let us take the other piece of 'speculation' that I have been severely castigated for, the suggestion that some figures might represent a 'Great Mother'. Again there is nothing 'wildly' unreasonable about this. A.P. Elkin was a respected 20th century anthropologist who travelled widely talking to Aboriginal elders still in touch with the old traditions. In his book *The Australian Aborigines* he included a map of Australia showing an early "Mother Goddess" cult in a large swathe of northern Australia encompassing the Kimberley and Arnhem Land. He spent five pages discussing this cult. If there was such an early, pre-Wandjina 'Mother Goddess' cult, surely we might expect it to be reflected in the art of the same era?

And sorry to disagree with you, Jack Vercoe, but if you want to begin to understand the Bradshaw paintings, getting the figures' gender right does matter. My now infamous query to Walsh on this issue was in exactly the same spirit as an undergraduate putting a question to his tutor – in the expectation of receiving an informed, authoritative answer. To my huge disappointment, Walsh simply looked at me with cold contempt, and refused to explain his 'all male gender' interpretation, even though there is no adequate explanation to be found anywhere in his books. So who is the one who 'instinctively' knows – me, who has explicitly disavowed any such authority in my Author's Preface, or Grahame Walsh?

What to me beggars belief is the implicit acceptance by Hamish McGlashan and others that there has to be some virtue in Walsh being so generally uncooperative towards others expressing interest in the Bradshaws (as I am increasingly discovering, I am far from alone in receiving the Walshian brush-off), likewise his deliberate withholding of information on where the paintings are located. As I tried so hard to plead in my final chapter: without provision of accompanying location information the Bradshaw paintings have much the same seriously devalued status as antiquities illegally looted in the Middle East and elsewhere. Walsh has undoubtedly provided a valuable service doing the Indiana Jones thing of searching out the paintings. But that surely does not entitle him and his patrons to treat such priceless items of Australian heritage as if their own personal property?

Thanks to Allen and Unwin's exemplary diligence and care as publishers, *Lost World of the Kimberley* turned out exactly the way that I wanted – a much-needed colourful yet inexpensive introduction of the Bradshaws and their mysteries to the public-at-large. Whatever textual or other faults the book contains are my responsibility. Pre-occupied by some complex illustration-juggling at proof stage, I was certainly blind to the elevation error pointed out by Mike Donaldson, and can only apologise and kick myself for committing the very sort of howler that I too deplore in others. In the case of the indistinctness of the so-called 'reindeer' panel, this was the fault neither of my wife's photographs nor of the book reproduction. It was the weathering that the huge rock has sustained over the millennia. Even when up close and personal, distinguishing the line of creatures was far from easy. Nonetheless there was sufficient for all of us present to be sure beyond reasonable doubt that we were seeing a line of four-legged creatures with antlers, and most definitely not the 'set of genuflecting men' so pontifically asserted by Rothwell.

Which causes me still to seek the answer to the question that I raised in my reply to *The Australian* review: from where did Rothwell receive his higher intelligence? All logic suggests that this was from Grahame Walsh. But if so, what was Walsh's basis for making the assertion? Just as I have answered my critics, perhaps he too might now care to answer this and other issues through the intermediacy of the *Boab Bulletin*?

Ian Wilson (May 2006)

A postscript

The comments that follow come from a summary of a talk titled 'Aboriginal Art and Culture in the Kimberley and adjoining areas: A Historical Perspective' presented to the Kimberley Society by Dr Phillip E Playford in April 2008.

Perhaps the most important rock-art discovery made in Australia in recent years is that of a panel of about 25 deer paintings in the Mitchell River area of the Kimberley. The deer are shown standing in line along the wall of a quartzite rock shelter. Because of their age many are faded and otherwise degraded, or are partly

covered with precipitates from water seepages, but some remain well preserved. This discovery was greeted with disbelief among some students of rock art, and one article absurdly described the figures as 'a set of genuflecting men painted on the rock face'. But there can be little doubt that the paintings do represent deer. They show four-legged animals with prominent antlers, and presumably represent the Timor Deer, *Cervus timorensis*, that was once very abundant as big herds on Timor. Those deer have now disappeared from that island, but the species has survived on reserves elsewhere in Indonesia and in several other countries, including eastern Australia, where they were introduced long ago. Some that occur on isolated islands are thought to have been introduced there by Indonesian fishermen.

Associated with the deer paintings are some of the representations of watercraft. There can be little doubt that all of these paintings belong to the Bradshaw era, and that they were probably painted some time around the peak of the last ice age, when voyages from Timor may have been most common. The deer could have been painted by someone who had come recently from Timor, bringing with him memories of those animals, or alternatively they might have been introduced into the Kimberley, but have since died out. If that is so, it seems surprising that no other deer paintings have yet been found in the area. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the Pleistocene coastal plain adjoining the mountainous country of the Kimberley would have been well suited to Timor Deer, as they are known to flourish in low-lying marsh country. If they were introduced to that coastal plain they probably died out as sea level rose and the plain disappeared at the close of the Pleistocene. The Thylacine or Tasmanian tiger is another mammal that features in Kimberley rock art but had disappeared from the area prior to the arrival of Europeans.