



Kimberley Society

Book Note

Gwion Gwion: secret and sacred pathways of the Ngarinyin Aboriginal people of Australia Ngarjno, Ungudman, Banggal and Nyawarra with editing by Jeff Doring. Könemann Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, Germany, 2000. Hard-back, 336 pages, lavishly illustrated with colour plates. About \$40 to \$80 (shop around!).

This is an unusual book in its layout of three text columns per page, one in English, one German, one French, even for photo captions. It has arisen as a by-product of a film documentary by Doring on aspects of Ngarinyin, Worora and Wunambul culture, the "[Pathways Project](#)", assisted by the Australian Film Commission. Doring has acted as editor incorporating dialogue relating to country and art sites by four Kimberley Aboriginal elders, Ngarjno, Ungudman, Banggal, and Nyawarra, with photographs of Kimberley rock art, Aboriginal people, and places.

Many Kimberley Society members will recognise the *Gwion Gwion* of the title as a Ngarinyin word for the fascinating and enigmatic rock art figures of the northern Kimberley. These delicate and ancient paintings are perhaps better known as "Bradshaws" after the first European to describe them in 1892. Preliminary dating of these figures suggests they may be the oldest art yet recorded from the Kimberley, at over 17,000 years.

This book is not an outsider study of the Gwion Gwion or Bradshaw art, rather a commentary of various aspects of the culture associated with the elders who provide most of the narrative, lavishly illustrated with photos. In the acknowledgments at the end of the book, most of the excellent photography is accredited to Doring, and a long list of helpers includes well-known Australian rock art academics Paul Tacon, John Clegg and Graeme Ward. A bibliography includes most well-known researchers in the Australian rock art field, but incredibly there is no mention of, or reference to, Grahame Walsh, whose two definitive books on the Bradshaw art will be well known to many Kimberley Society members. This is clearly a deliberate omission by the editor of *Gwion Gwion* and severely detracts from its usefulness in coming to understand the origins of these paintings. Many earlier researchers have documented Aboriginal elders as having no cultural knowledge of the Bradshaw figures, and for a variety of reasons Walsh suggests that they may have been the work of an earlier wave of settlers to Australia, perhaps as long as 50,000 years ago, and predating the last great ice age. The *Gwion Gwion* book would appear to be attempting to discredit the disclaimers of earlier Aboriginal people.

Even so, this is a fascinating collection of stories from some of the older Aboriginal men of the Kimberley (some now deceased), and the many great photographic images of the country, the rock art, and the Aboriginal people, make it an essential book for those interested in the region and its Aboriginal history. But don't accept it as a scholarly work on the origin of the Gwion Gwion rock art.

Mike Donaldson