

CAVE ART OF THE CONJOLA DISTRICT

New South Wales

by

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(Plate 22, Figures 1-5)

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Three of the five sets of aboriginal drawings described in this paper were discovered in the early 1880's by Messrs. A. Cork and F. White, local residents, but the latter, and Mr. A. Milne, failed to find them just before 1900 in the heavily forested sandstone ranges in which they are situated. They were, however, re-located a few years later by Captain J. Cork, Inspector A. Milne, and Mr. J. Higgins, and this enabled Robert Etheridge, jun., then Director of the Australian Museum, to visit the site and publish (1904) a brief but somewhat inaccurate description of the drawings. His description, however, indicated that the drawings were of unusual importance among eastern New South Wales pictographs, and several years ago inquiries about their situation were again instituted. Etheridge did not include a map and his written directions were too vague to be a guide. Mr. H. C. Claydon had visited these shelters in 1938 and had sent to the Museum a series of six tracings of various figures. He was able to find the shelters again early in 1957, but two local residents—interested in the matter by Mr. D. Hasell—Messrs. G. Turnbull and C. Woods, in searching for them found two additional sets of drawings several miles away on Bunnair Creek. I am grateful to these four men for their interest and help in this task, and particularly to Mr. Turnbull, who acted as guide and assisted me with excavation work during a week spent in the area in November, 1957. I was accompanied by Mr. John Beeman, artist at the Australian Museum, who made the actual recordings, but much consultation was necessary between us to elucidate many of the figures owing to their age and the weathering of the rock surfaces.

A special frame has been devised by Mr. Beeman for recording cave drawings. It consists of a 6-in. string grid attached to a flexible 3-ply frame. Adjustable legs are attached at each end and two other supports are used when necessary. This grid can be pressed into the curve of a ceiling or wall, and moved along a datum line to cover the whole area of drawings.

FLAT IRON CREEK SITES

Flat Iron Creek flows eastward for several miles from the ranges into a marsh near the main Prince's Highway. A timber track runs into the site, a distance of $4\frac{1}{2}$ m west of the main road, the military map reading being 512385. Three of the shelters are situated on one of the tributaries at the head of this creek.

Cave 1 (Figs. 1 & 2)

The main or biggest shelter is located on the western bank of the creek, at the base of a high ridge. The shelter runs from north-west to south-east, facing the north-west, and the sun does not enter it, so that it forms a cool retreat in summer but a cold one in winter. It is 140 ft long, being wide and high from the middle to the northern end; from the middle to the southern end the ceiling is only a few feet from the floor, and the back wall a few feet from the front ledge. The cave is 20 ft at the widest part, with a floor 16 ft wide. The ceiling is from 7 to 8 ft high for between 10 and 12 ft from the back wall, then slopes upwards at its front edge. The floor is a slightly sloping bench of sandstone on which an ashy soil deposit up to 1 ft thick is spread over the middle and northern end. Water levels on the rocks indicate that in periods of heavy rain the creek rises almost to the floor level, which is only a few feet above the creek bed.

In this shelter the surfaces suitable for drawings are not very good and the paintings are widely distributed. The ceiling is of hard coarse red sandstone, with inclusions, and has not been used for drawings; these are on various surfaces of a finer-grained creamy bed of sandstone. In this locality the coarse sandstone grades down through finer grades to a hard quartzite-like variety.

In Section II the rock has weathered in such a way that the surface has formed a thin hard crust, portions of which, bearing parts of drawings, have fallen away or disintegrated into sand. In other places thicker pieces have weathered out of the wall. Not all of this weathering took place since the aboriginal artists worked in the cave. There is, for example, a particularly well preserved little stick-man drawn across one white patch from which the surface has weathered away.