

Petroglyphs of Dampier—Preface

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The multiple beginnings of this book are spread over nearly one half century, dating from only a few years after the initial archaeological and anthropological reconnaissances of the Pilbara region of Western Australia. Much earlier, of course, is the Indigenous Australians' habitation of the area now known as the Dampier Archipelago, Burrup Peninsula and Murujuga. There are good reasons why we think that this initial occupation happened during the Pleistocene period and to have endured for tens of thousands of years, with land use and subsistence patterns adapting to the progressive inundation of the western coastal shelf. The evidence of this occupation is multi-faceted but its most evident and indeed spectacular component—and the one that most concerns us here—is the presence of the Dampier petroglyphs. There are probably hundreds of thousands of decorated rocks and many more individual and group images; they bear witness to the artistic endeavours of many generations. These images catch the attention of the visitor because when they were carved the original light colour of the rusty-weathered rock-faces was exposed; and because their diverse subject matter reveals much about the cultures and societies of those who carved them. It has been argued that the Dampier petroglyphs represent the most extensive and intensive example of ancient rock art and that they have cultural values of World Heritage significance.

The second beginning was the clash of land-use interests in the area that became manifest in the 1960s with the development of the mining industry in the Pilbara. When the need for port facilities to export the iron ore from proposed inland mines was recognised, the statesmen of distant Perth were, of course, sufficiently enlightened to ensure that an archaeological survey of the first choice of location was conducted. Depuch Island was found to contain significant

rock art of sufficient heritage value to conclude that it should be preserved, and so the decision was made to develop ports at King Bay and at Finucane Island, Port Headland. Unfortunately, this age of enlightenment was but brief and no comparable evaluation was made of the second choice. The petroglyphs of Dampier are particularly numerous and extensive and demonstrably have immense cultural values. Regardless, in addition to a deep-water port, over the next half century development of an industrial park for sea salt extraction, iron ore loading and petrochemical processing has compromised severely indigenous heritage values of the region. There have been several attempts to mitigate the destruction of the indigenous, national and world heritage values of the archipelago. This book may be seen as one.

The third part might be due to a few persons and historical chance. A company engineer whose personal interest in the wonder of the petroglyphs translated into action to record and preserve elements of the 'archaeological resource' where he was working; a heritage professional contacted by the engineer who took action locally and into the national sphere; a new leader of a national organization who could access resources to provide for detailed research of some parts of the ancient cultural landscape of Dampier. The last, the then Principal of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, in 1975 directed a new researcher, a French archaeologist—recently arrived in Australia—to the study of the rock art of the archipelago that increasingly was under threat from the industrial development there.

The fourth was Michel Lorblanchet himself—until then a student of the European Pleistocene. Lorblanchet welcomed the opportunity to work in the Pilbara. He had the assistance of a small team and a series of volunteers and visitors—including members of the Roebourne Aboriginal