Aboriginal rock paintings and engravings, where they appear as naturalistic representations, portray Aborigines' experience of their own world. As well as pictures of sacred mythological subjects they also portray people, tools and features of the environment at given periods of time. Where paintings are superimposed on each other, they often document change. A sequence of styles in which new weapons replace the old or where animals now extinct in northern Australia are depicted can be associated with the contents of occupational deposits ranging perhaps from 20,000 years ago until the present. On the walls of some rock shelters subjects radically different from older paintings are also depicted, chronicling the arrival of non-Aboriginal people.

A number of paintings depict the visits of 'Macassans' who probably began to visit northern Australia in the eighteenth century. The 'Macassans' sailed southwards from present day Indonesia in their praus to collect beche-de-mer, pearls and tortoise shell; contact with Aborigines was extensive and some Aborigines in turn visited Macassar on their boats. There are many rock paintings depicting aspects of these visits — pictures of praus (boats), smoke houses and personal belongings such as the ornamental kris (knife). Some time after 'Macassans' had established contact with Aborigines on the northern coasts, Europeans began to settle. Their occupation of the land was seldom peaceful and the gun, the symbol of European violence and conquest, is commonly represented in the rockshelter paintings. Unlike the 'Macassans', the Europeans did not leave at the end of the season, so their influence was more profound. The Aborigines soon began to depict other aspects of European life: the range of new tools (often highly desired by Aborigines) and the new animals introduced.

In the shelters of the Wellington Range and in the other outliers of the Arnhem Land Plateau the history of European contact and settlement between the early 1800s and the mid-1950s is documented through paintings. The survey ships sent to chart the northern coasts and rivers, the supply boats for the first attempts to settle in northern Australia on the Cobourg Peninsula (Port Wellington in Raffles Bay in 1827 and Victoria in Port Essington between 1838 and 1849), and later the supply boats and merchant craft bound for Port Darwin — all are recorded in various places.

At one rock shelter is a panorama of Darwin harbour, complete with jetty, and two boats in midstream, one clearly a paddle steamer. Another site contains an illustration of a steamship which closely resembles that in a photograph of Darwin harbour taken in the 1880s by Police Inspector Foelsche. The painting faithfully reproduces not only the boat but also the goods discharged from the vessel. As boats were the only means of major supply and access to the northern settlements they dominate the contact paintings for some time.

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1 On the Aboriginal rock art of this area see Brandl 1973; on aspects of chronology see Chaloupka 1977.
2 See the illustrations, some of which are my own, in Macknight 1976.
3 Recently Lyon and Urry (1979) have suggested that an Aboriginal rock painting near Sydney depicts European cattle which may have escaped from the settlements of the First Fleet in 1790.
4 See also the Victorian Aboriginal engravings of Murray River paddleboats on spear throwers (West 1978).
PACK-BELLS ON THE ROCK FACE

When the settlements on the Cobourg Peninsula were abandoned by Europeans, the buffalos brought as food were abandoned and they spread outwards into the Alligator River area where they were exploited for their hides by hunters from the 1890s. The buffalo, and European hunters with their horses, weapons and implements all became new themes in the rock art. Some of the buffalo shooters constructed more permanent dwellings, which were also depicted on the rock shelter walls along with the cattle, goats and pigs they kept.

By the early years of the present century the tradition of rock painting had almost ceased in most areas of north-eastern Arnhem Land. In places, however, drawings were still made and some depict the continuing encroachment of European culture, reflecting an Aboriginal knowledge of wider aspects of Australian life. Pictures of motor vehicles, a four engined aeroplane with a comment on the Qantas Kangaroo Route to London and an outline of Sydney Harbour Bridge can all be assigned to the 1950s.

Of the hundreds of contact paintings covering a wide range of European subjects and activities only a few can be dated and specific historical events identified. One group of paintings which might be identifiable and possibly dated portrays a number of horses and riders. The paintings are located in an extensive shelter at the base of an escarpment in the catchment of Magela Creek in western Arnhem Land. The paintings could depict buffalo hunters, who were active with large teams of horses in this area at the turn of the century. However, if buffalo hunters were depicted it is unlikely that all horses would have riders (as they do in these paintings) for most of their horses were pack animals carrying provisions and hides. I argue here that the paintings (see cover illustration) show a nineteenth century European exploring party in this region, probably that of Leichhardt or McKinlay.

In 1844 Ludwig Leichhardt and his party on their epic journey from Moreton Bay to Victoria Settlement at Port Essington descended from the sandstone plateau of south-western Arnhem Land and followed a tributary which led them out onto the plains of the South Alligator River. They then crossed to the East Alligator, on the way meeting large numbers of Aborigines who were exploiting the resources of the vast wetlands. Relations between Leichhardt and the Aborigines were amicable and groups accompanied the Europeans until they crossed the East Alligator River and moved northwards toward the Cobourg Peninsula.

The second expedition in the area was led by John McKinlay, an explorer of some repute in mid-nineteenth century Australia. In 1866 McKinlay set out on a journey of exploration which was to end six months later in complete failure. The South Australian government had requested him to explore the country between the Adelaide and the Liverpool, Roper and Victoria Rivers and to report on suitable sites for a new capital of northern Australia to replace the unsuccessful settlement at Escape Cliffs.

On 10 January 1866, at the height of the wet season, McKinlay’s party left the settlement of Escape Cliffs, then the only European settlement in northern Australia. The party moved eastwards towards the Liverpool River where they intended to meet the survey ship H.M.S. Beatrice on 1 April. Captain Howard on the Beatrice waited at the rendezvous point but though he learnt of McKinlay’s movements and condition from various Aboriginal groups he encountered he did not meet with the exploration party. Six months after leaving Escape Cliffs McKinlay’s exhausted party managed to reach the East Alligator River, a mere 200 kilometers from their point of departure. The surveyor Edmunds, second in command, left a detailed account of this journey. He reports how the expedition, consisting of 15 men, 45 horses and 69 sheep, spent

5 Leichhardt 1847.
the first two months crossing flooded plains and were periodically marooned on areas of higher ground surrounded by streams and bogs made impassable by the wet. After months of toil and privation most of the men were ill with dysentery or suffering from ophthalmia. Their provisions had run out by the time they arrived at a location they named Camp 39.

The sheep were long gone and the staple source of food was fresh or jerked horse meat. The party now found itself in a maze of rocky outliers and swamps. McKinlay grew despondent at the hopelessness of the party’s situation and after climbing a peak to obtain a view of the country confided to Edmunds that the view made him ‘turn sick and giddy’; he said he could do no more as ‘fate is against us’, and would tell the men ‘that each must do the best he can for himself’.

Edmunds disagreed and after four days of argument and reconnaissance the party finally found a way out through the swamps to the East Alligator River. Here, after killing the remaining 27 horses the party made a punt of saplings, laced the dried hides to the framework and sailed down the crocodile-infested river and back along the coast to Escape Cliffs. The rock painting frieze of horses and riders is situated in the vicinity of McKinlay’s Camp 39. Members of his party did not record meeting any Aborigines in the area, or mention seeing any signs of their presence, but at that time of year the Aborigines would have been living in shelters high above the inundated valley floor. They would undoubtedly have been aware of the movements of the Europeans and the strange activities of the desperate party.

The paintings of the horses and riders are executed in a dark red pigment, imbedded now into the surface of the slightly protected, hard sandstone wall. There are eight horses and perhaps the trace of a ninth. The horses bear a resemblance to kangaroos, with fore-shortened front and long rear legs. But they are clearly horses: the hooves are distinctly shown and the bushy tails are carefully painted. Around the necks of the horses are bells, commonly used at this period on expeditions to locate animals that wandered off.

There is of course no way to prove that the paintings are of Leichhardt’s or McKinlay’s party. But Leichhardt passed some 30 kilometers to the north of this site and McKinlay was much closer. Seeing the paintings, I recalled the lines describing McKinlay’s expedition written by Ernestine Hill:

Pack-bells in the jungle, ringing the white man’s coming to earth’s last wilderness...

And no doubt the Aborigines heard the bells and came to see, unobserved by the whites, the struggles of European enterprise to control their country.

NORTHERN TERRITORY MUSEUM, DARWIN

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6 Quotes from Edmunds’ unpublished diary entry dated Tuesday 29 May 1866 (Edmunds 1864-66).
7 Basedow (1916/17:206) illustrates a similar Aboriginal rock painting of a horse and rider from Berrial Bluff in Western Australia where the horse again is drawn like a kangaroo.
8 Hill 1951:87.

94
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Segment of the 'Pack Horse Scene'. Each horse is approximately 2½ metres long.

Photograph by George Chaloupka