Introduction

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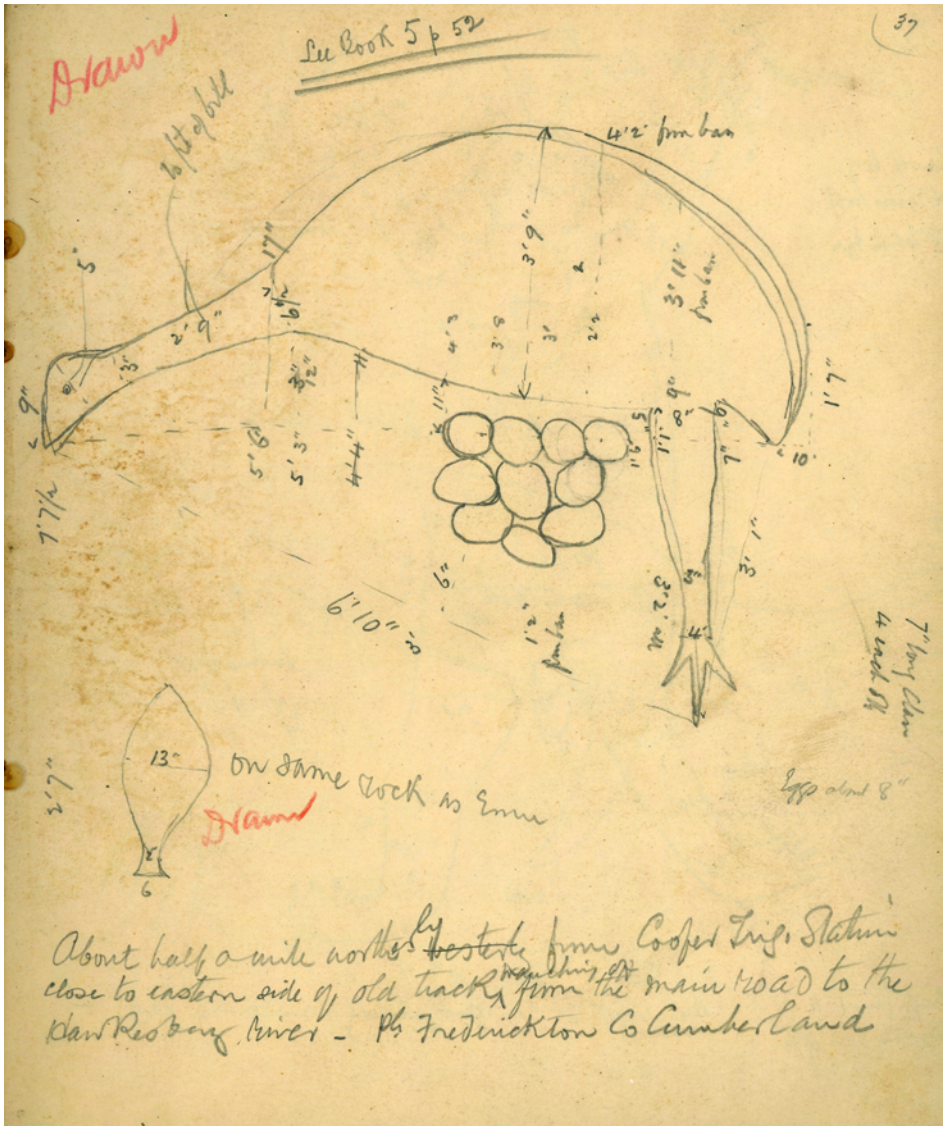
In these three texts we meet R. H. Mathews as a student of rock art and as a close observer of daily life in Aboriginal communities. Evidence of his surveying background is apparent in all three publications, though with very different effect. The two rock art papers reveal his determination to measure, record and physically locate each art site discussed. In contrast, 'Contributions to the Ethnography of the Australians' (1907) takes us into the domestic environment of Aboriginal camps. In all these papers Mathews reveals a keen interest in how Aboriginal people deal with the practical problems of sustenance, survival and self-expression. He also turns his attention to the much neglected subject of leisure and recreation.

I will start by considering the rock art documentation, which is integral to understanding Mathews as an anthropologist. It was a short paper on this subject that launched his ethnological career in 1893.[1] His son William records that this first paper, a discussion of art sites in the southern part of the Hunter Valley, was well received by the Royal Society of New South Wales. He received particular encouragement from W. D. Campbell, a fellow surveyor with an interest in ethnology, whom Mathews quotes in the 1910 article, reproduced here. Campbell was already collecting material for the Royal Society's 1894 essay competition, which had as its topic 'the Aboriginal Rock Carvings and Paintings in New South Wales'.[2] Mathews prepared an entry at Campbell's suggestion—to the latter's disadvantage as events transpired. In late 1893 and early the following year, Mathews made a number of field trips, travelling as far west as Mudgee, and to Howes Valley on the Macdonald River, northwest of Sydney. He also visited a variety of locations in the Sydney Basin including the Botany Bay settlement of La Perouse. Mathews won the essay prize and this encouraged him to pursue his research further. His victory was blemished, however, by the refusal of the Royal Society of New South Wales to publish his paper, as was customary for a prize essay. To the irritation of the society's executive, it was discovered that Mathews had published a condensed form of his paper in the 1894 *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*.[3] There was little friendliness between the rival societies; all publications were supposed to be original and unpublished. So Mathews sought other forums for his extensive rock art documentation, sending submissions to journals in France, Britain and the United States. His work was widely welcomed, and he ultimately published 23 articles containing descriptions of rock art in the years between 1893 and 1912.



This drawing from a notebook shows how R. H. Mathews approached the documentation of Aboriginal rock art. The image drawn here is a rock engraving at the site known as Devils Rock near the Hawkesbury River, NSW. By permission of the National Library of Australia. (NLA MS 8006/3/2).

Translated here are the two rock art papers Mathews published in a foreign language. Both are pointedly directed at French anthropologists who (as we see in the discussion recorded at the end of the 1898 paper) discerned connections between Aboriginal art and ancient cave paintings in Europe and elsewhere. Three images of sea creatures, engraved in the sandstone at La Perouse, are described in the 1898 article, titled 'Rock Carvings and Paintings by the Australian Aborigines'. He also describes caves containing hand stencils. One,

near Dural Creek, he could have reached by horse from his home in the western Sydney suburb of Parramatta. The other, at Coxs Creek, west of the Blue Mountains, he visited while researching his prize essay.[4]

Discussing the settlement of La Perouse, Mathews explains (perhaps unnecessarily with this audience) that it is named after the famed French navigator who stayed there briefly in 1788. This French connection inspires him to give a précis of La Pérouse's visit to Australia. For Mathews this was a rare segue into matters historical. Otherwise the article adheres to his usual formula for describing rock art.

Mathews was clearly intrigued by cave paintings, hand stencils and the spectacular representations of people, animals, artefacts and spirit ancestors that adorn so many sandstone platforms in the Sydney region. As he knew from his library-based research, Europeans from the time of the First Fleet had been moved to comment on, or reproduce in their notebooks, the rock art they observed along the Sydney foreshore. But little systematic documentation had been attempted. Mathews, Campbell and R. J. Etheridge Junior, a curator at the Australian Museum, were part of a small cluster of individuals who in the late nineteenth century began to document this art in a 'scientific' fashion.

Mathews would always try to identify the motifs depicted at an art site (animals, implements, men or women, etc). Using his surveyor's methods, he gave the county, parish and portion number so that others could readily find it. As we know from his notebooks, he measured each artwork carefully and copied it with a high degree of fidelity. He considered this method more accurate than photography. Eventually he worked his drawings into illustrative plates for an article.

Admittedly, there are limitations to what Mathews achieved in these papers. His illustrations reveal something about his assumptions, for despite his surveying background, suggestive of an interest in locality, he did not attempt to *map* the art site. That is to say, he did not analyse its location in relation to water supply, camping grounds, shelters, or other (possibly related) cultural sites—all of which might impact upon its meaning. Nor did he remark on the often stunning views obtained from many of the engraved rock platforms, which might also reflect on their significance. Rather, Mathews tended to treat the carved and painted motifs as specimens, arranging them in an almost ornamental fashion on the page. Similarly, he said little at all about the meaning of the art, or its possible connection with ceremonial life.

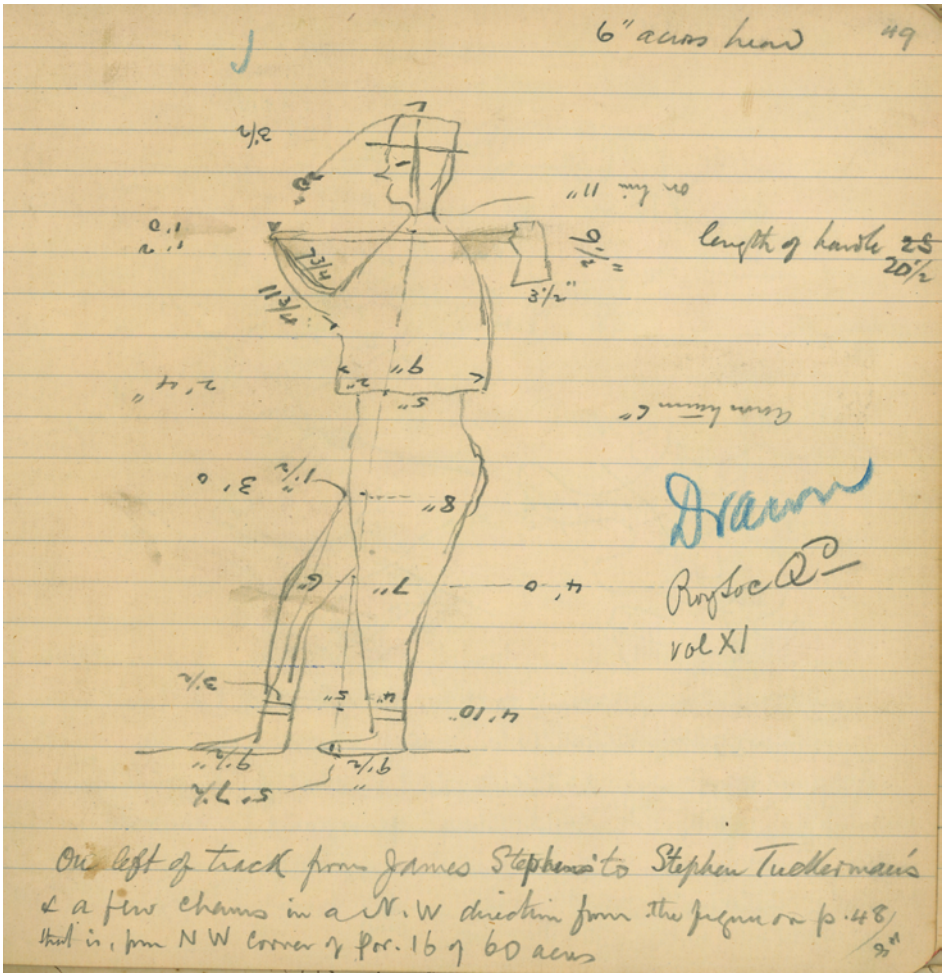
Possibly, this dearth of cultural information is due to the location of the sites discussed. The Sydney region is extremely rich in Aboriginal art. A total of 875 rock shelters containing painted motifs have been recorded; there are almost as many rock engravings.[5] But since this was the first area to suffer colonisation, the few Aboriginal survivors lost contact with many rituals and traditions. As

revealed in 'Rock Carvings and Paintings by the Australian Aborigines', he spoke to Aboriginal people about their art where possible. Always curious about the age of the art, he was interested to hear that the engravings at La Perouse predated the arrival of the British. At the outset, Mathews was curious about whether Aboriginal art-making in Sydney had continued into the post-contact period. He came to realise that in parts of the Sydney Basin rock art traditions had survived and were possibly continuing. Charley Clark, who lived at the Sackville Reach Aboriginal Reserve near Windsor,[6] was introduced to him as a maker of hand stencils near the Hawkesbury.[7] Mathews also met a Darkinung man named Andy Barber who led him to a rock engraving that he remembered being made in the 1850s. Located in the parish of Wilberforce, it depicts a white settler wearing a cabbage-tree hat and carrying an axe. Barber testified that the artist was a man known as Hiram.[8] These are among the very few cases where works of Sydney rock art can be attributed to particular individuals.

Poignantly, Mathews reported that when Hiram depicted the foreigner striding into his territory, he made the carving with a European axe instead of traditional implements. Mathews was always interested in the practical business of how things were made and how people survived with the technological resources available to them. His own surveying experience, which involved camping out for extended periods, led him to respect the makers of traditional arts and crafts. Hence his interest in the technique used by Aboriginal artists to create smooth grooves in Hawkesbury sandstone, a medium likely to split and shatter. In the 1910 paper (reproduced here), Mathews accurately describes their production. First 'a row of holes was pierced with a piece of pointed stone, establishing the outline of the drawing, after which the intervals between these holes were cut in such a way as to produce an uninterrupted groove'.

In reading this work we must bear in mind that Mathews' enthusiasm for his subject is sometimes obscured by his desire to sound authoritative and scientific. For example, in an early article he describes rock art in the following way:

> Rude pictorial representations found on the walls of caves and on the smooth surfaces of rocks in various parts of Australia show that the aboriginal inhabitants were not altogether without appreciation of the beauties of art. Drawings more or less artistic and elaborate have been found in a number of places throughout Australia.[9]



R. H. Mathews observed this rock carving of a settler in the parish of Wilberforce, northwest of Sydney. Andy Barber, a Darkinung man, told him the artist's name was Hiram and he carved it with a steel hatchet during the 1850s. This is a rare case where an example of Sydney rock art can be attributed to a particular artist. By permission of the National Library of Australia. (Fieldbook No.5, NLA MS8006/3/3).

If the tone sounds condescending, or seems to damn with faint praise, we must keep in mind the context in which he was working. Mathews' choice of level-headed, unemotional language was integral to his argument that Aboriginal life was important and worthy of study. His diction set him apart in a society that positioned 'blackfellows' as objects of ridicule, even in supposedly scientific forums. Compare Mathews' description to that of his contemporary, Robert L. Jack, writing about rock art in 1896.

> The figures about to be described are not introduced to your notice on account of their artistic merits, which would hardly procure for them a place in the National Gallery. They are, in fact, not much above the level of the dawn of art displayed on school slates. As examples of the art of

> a race in a stage of intellectual infancy, and which race will certainly die before attaining manhood, they possess, however, a certain interest for ethnologists.[10]

This was the prevailing culture of Mathews' epoch, the mores of which he subtly resisted. While it is unfortunate that his writings do not elucidate the cultural meaning of rock art in greater detail, his plain descriptions and illustrations afford it a dignity. It was his fascination with rock art that drew Mathews into anthropology and led him to explore his Aboriginal contacts and friendships in new ways. Soon he would be studying initiations, making careful observations of the ceremonial grounds and the designs marked on trees or carved directly into the earth. In his writings on ceremony the cultural meaning of art is seen from a very different perspective.

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'Contributions to the Ethnography of the Australians' (1907), the first article presented here, was published by *Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft*, a leading Austrian journal. Mathews published nine articles in this forum during the period 1903-10. This is an important article, unlike any other he published. Running to more than 11,000 words, it is his longest foreign-language publication. After its translation back into English, I discovered that the text is very similar to the chapter of an unpublished book by Mathews, a draft of which survives in the National Library of Australia.[11] This is probably the manuscript that Mathews tried unsuccessfully to publish in England (see letters to E. S. Hartland in 'Correspondence', this volume). So the article provides important insights into how Mathews intended to synthesise his observations on Aboriginal life for an international readership.

Superficially, the theme of the article is material culture. But it is very different to Mathews' other writings on the subject which typically consist of taxonomic descriptions of weapons, bullroarers, message sticks, etc. This article is very much concerned with material culture in its social context. Mathews gives fascinating information on subjects ranging from tool-making to ball games and other pastimes. He states that all information 'is the result of my own observations and visits to natives of various districts', although some data are drawn from published sources including E. M. Curr's *The Australian Race* (1886). Mathews says at the beginning of the paper that the 'geographic spread of the individual custom is in every case fixed', a promise not always fulfilled. Even so, the close observations of camp life in Aboriginal communities make this article especially valuable. It is Mathews' most sustained evocation of the communities where he sat, ate and talked for extended periods, studying language, kinship and other aspects of traditional life.

ENDNOTES

[1] RHM 1893, 'Rock Paintings by the Aborigines in Caves on Bulgar Creek, near Singleton', *Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales*, vol. 27.

[2] Biographical and Historical Notes of the Mathews Family, R. H. Mathews Papers, National Library of Australia (henceforth NLA) MS 8006/7/8.

[3] Thomas, Martin 2004, 'R. H. Mathews and anthropological warfare: On writing the biography of a "self-contained man"', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 28.

[4] Diary 1893-1907, entry for 3 January 1894. R. H. Mathews Papers, NLA MS 8006/1/2.

[5] Attenbrow, Val 2002, *Sydney's Aboriginal Past*, UNSW Press, University of New South Wales, p. 146.

[6] RHM 1897, 'The Burbung of the Darkinung Tribes', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*, vol. 10 (new series), p. 1.

[7] Red notebook, R. H. Mathews Papers, NLA MS 8006/3/11, p. 1.

[8] RHM 1896, 'Rock Carving by the Australian Aborigines', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Queensland*, vol. 12, p. 97 and Red notebook, p. 1.

[9] RHM 1894-95, 'Aboriginal Rock Pictures of Australia', *Proceedings and Transactions of the Queensland Branch of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia*, vol. 10, p. 46.

[10] Jack, Robert L. 1896, 'On Aboriginal Cave-Drawings of the Palmer Goldfield', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Queensland*, vol. 11, p. 91.

[11] *Australian Aborigines* [manuscript of book], R. H. Mathews Papers, NLA MS 8006/5/6.