Rock Carvings and Paintings by the Australian Aborigines

R. H. Mathews

First published as 'Gravures et peintures sur rochers par les Aborigènes d'Australie' in *Bulletins et Mémoires de la Société d'Anthropologie de Paris*, vol. 9 (4th series), 1898, pp. 425-32. The article was written in English and translated into French by an unnamed translator. This version was retranslated into English by Mathilde de Hauteclocque.

For more than 20 years, a colony of Aborigines has lived near the hamlet of La Perouse, situated on the northern shore of Botany Bay, about 16 kilometres south of Sydney, New South Wales, which today numbers about 40 people of both sexes, most of them half-castes. They are the last descendants of the aboriginal race who have lived in the area since the occupation of the country by the English in 1788. The government of New South Wales, while providing a weekly allowance for the elderly and disabled, demands that the others look after themselves. During my visit to this settlement, in order to research the habits of the natives, they showed me drawings of three large fish carved into smooth slabs of Hawkesbury sandstone (which surrounds the bay), adding that it was the work of their ancestors before the arrival of the white man. Thinking that the members of your society would be interested in these sketches (found next to the monument erected in memory of La Pérouse), I have done a drawing which carefully reproduces them and to which a map is attached, showing the area where they are found.

The short extract that follows, from the official history of New South Wales,[1] will perhaps be of interest to your society.

> The ships of the French expedition under the command of La Pérouse sailed from Botany Bay on 10 March 1788. During their stay Father Le Receveur, who had come out in the 'Astrolabe' as a naturalist, died. His death was occasioned by wounds he received in an unfortunate encounter at the Navigators' Islands. A monument was erected in his memory, with the following inscription:
>
> HIC JACET LE RECEVEUR.
> EX F.F. MINORIBUS GALLILAE SACERDOS
> PHYSICUS IN CIRCUMNAVIGATIONE MUNDI,
> DUCE DE LA PEROUSE
> OB. 17 FEB. 1788.

> This monument having been destroyed by the natives, Governor Phillip caused the inscription to be engraved in copper and affixed it to a nearby tree.

Neither La Pérouse nor his ships were seen again. An expedition charged with finding out about their disappearance was unable to discover anything. It was only 40 years later that Captain Dillon of the vessel *Research,* belonging to the East India Company, recorded that the *Astrolabe* had been shipwrecked on a coral reef and that most of the crew had perished. The survivors were washed ashore on the Mallicolo Islands and died many years before the arrival of Captain Dillon. A monument, bearing the following inscription, was erected at Botany Bay in memory of La Pérouse, and is still standing to this day:

> To the Memory of Monsieur de la Pérouse
> This country, which he visited in 1788, is the last from which he sent news. Erected in the name of France, under the care of Messrs Bougainville and Ducampier, commanders of the frigate La Thétis and the corvette L'Espérance off duty in Port Jackson in 1825.
> Foundation laid in 1825.
> Raised 1828.

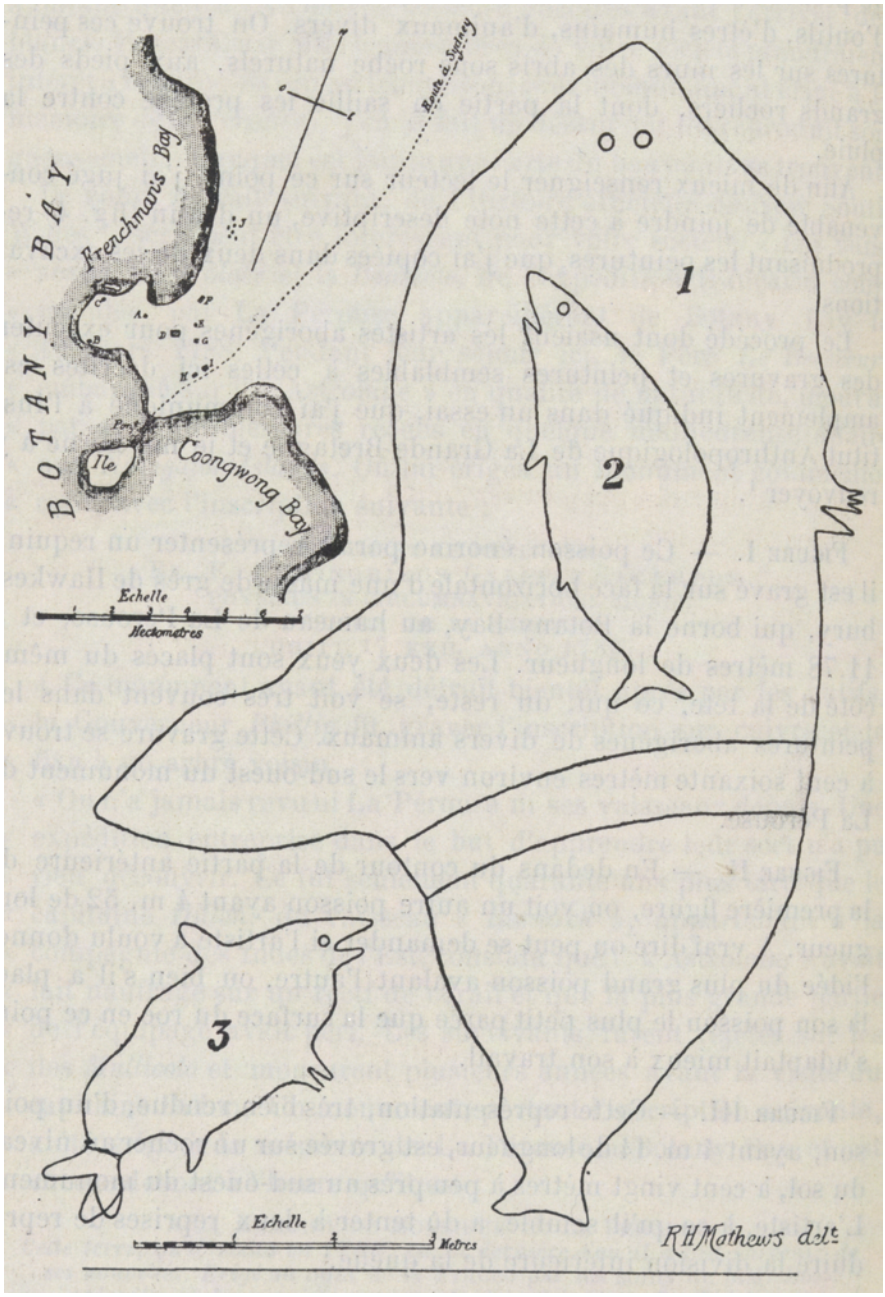
In many parts of Australia, the Aborigines customarily paint, in different colours, representations of hands, tools, human beings and various animals. These paintings are found on the walls of natural rock shelters, at the foot of large rocks, which protect them against the rain.

After familiarising myself with the literature on this subject, I judged it appropriate to add to this descriptive note a drawing (see Figure 4) reproducing the paintings which I copied from two of these caves.

The process used by Aboriginal artists in executing the carvings and paintings described here is amply described in an essay which I forwarded to the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain.[2]

FIGURE 1. This enormous fish seems to represent a shark. It is carved into the horizontal face of a mass of Hawkesbury sandstone, which surrounds Botany Bay, at the hamlet of La Perouse, and is 11.78 metres long. The two eyes are placed on the same side of the head, which, however, is frequently seen in aboriginal paintings of various animals. This carving is found about 160 metres southwest of the La Pérouse monument.

FIGURE 2. Inside the outline of the front part of the first figure, we see another fish, 4.52 metres long. One can ask if the artist wanted to give the impression of the bigger fish swallowing the other, or whether he put the smaller fish there because the surface of the rock in that position was more suited to his work.



Fish engraved on rock at La Perouse, Botany Bay. Reprinted from *Bulletins et Mémoires de la Societé d'Anthropologie de Paris*, vol.9.

FIGURE 3. This well-made representation of a fish, 4.14 metres long, is carved on a rock at ground level, approximately 100 metres southwest of the monument.

The artist, it would seem, must have made two attempts to create the lower division of the tail.

Explanatory note on the map adjoining the carving

To the northwest of the southern headland on which the hamlet is built, is Frenchmans Bay, so named in honour of La Pérouse.

A. Point where the monument was erected in his honour.
B. Location of the rock showing the two carvings (1 and 2).
C. Location of the second rock, carrying Figure 3.
D. Telegraphic office from where the underwater telegraph to New Zealand departs.
E. Tomb of Le Receveur: a slab carries the aforementioned inscription, surrounded by an iron fence.
F. Restaurant.
G. Post Office.
H. Public School.
I. Customs.
J. Site of the Aboriginal community mentioned above.

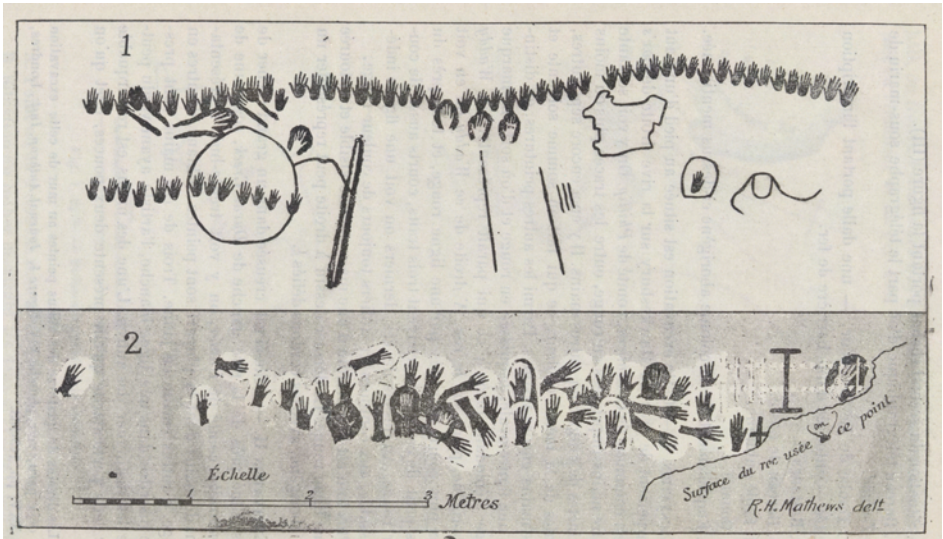


Fig. 4. — Peintures sur rochers. — 1. Toutes les mains sont peintes en rouge, ainsi que les divers autres signes. — 2. La plupart des mains sont peintes en blanc, quatre sont peintes en rouge et trois en jaune.

Paintings on rock: 1. All the hands are painted in red, as are the various other motifs. 2. Most of the hands are painted in white, four are painted in red, and three in yellow. Reprinted from *Bulletins et Mémoires de la Societé d'Anthropologie de Paris*, vol.9.

CAVE 1. This cave is situated at the foot of a tall escarpment of Hawkesbury sandstone on the right bank of Coxs Creek, parish of Coolcalwin, county of Phillip. We see 64 hands, printed in red, as well as more or less distinct traces of 25 other hands. There are seven more, painted the same colour, making 71

visible hands in total. In the midst of the other paintings, we can distinguish an oval figure, sketched in red and from which a red mark extends right up to what seems to represent an aboriginal *waddy*, painted on the rock. To the right of this *waddy* we see two shorter ones, each indicated by a red line, and right next to the smallest of these are three lines in red, also short. Above these last ones, we see an indistinguishable figure of an irregular outline, also red in colour. Further on is the clear imprint of a left hand surrounded by a red line. The last drawing to the right could represent an aboriginal bag, with loose strings.[3]

CAVE 2. This engraving is carved into a large sandstone rock, situated near the left bank of Dural Creek, parish of Coonbaralba, county of Hunter. We see 38 representations of hands, most of which are painted in white, others in red and others in yellow. Three of these hands are almost marked in a white line, the artist perhaps having wanted to distinguish them from the others. One of the hands is particularly noticeable because it has two thumbs, an effect which seems to have been produced by first placing the right hand on the rock and spraying around it with a coloured liquid, and then putting the other hand there, in order to represent the other thumb, in a similar way. In certain figures, the arm has been reproduced up to the elbow or as far as is necessary. The most remarkable drawing at this location is one made up from a combination of white and red lines and two rows of white dots. It is regrettable that most of these unusual inscriptions have disappeared as a result of the crumbling of the rock surface on which they were carried out. The opening of the rock at this location has allowed the rain to get in, crumbling the sandstone, which does not resist the effects of humidity well.

The monument erected in memory of La Pérouse, of which I am sending a photograph which I took especially for you, is seen from the eastern side. The gate of the enclosure is open so that the pedestal may be seen more clearly. The southern side bears the inscription reproduced at the beginning of this article, minus the date of the erection, which was engraved in the eastern side; the northern and western sides bear the English translation of the inscription. The monument is surrounded by a low stone wall, topped with an iron fence; this wall is interrupted by a gate on the side. The officers and crews of passing French ships often visit the monument. On one of these occasions, the crew of a war ship marked their visit by screwing onto the base of the monument a metallic plaque bearing the following inscription:

"LE BRUAT"

TO LA PÉROUSE AND HIS MEN

1884

Discussion

[By] M. Capitan

This article is of real interest and is above all topical. Because of the particular interest these days in rock carvings and paintings from prehistoric times, it is vital to record this precious information.

These paintings and carvings on the faces of Australian rock shelters reveal ethnic customs similar in all respects to the prehistoric inhabitants of the grottos of Pair-en-Pair in France or of Mouthe or even the Altamira Cave in Spain. They are also reminiscent of the carvings recently studied in the grottos of the Yucatan by American scholars.

The comparison of these relatively recent customs, which have already been detected in all parts of the world, with similar ones from prehistoric periods, throws a strong light on these ones and helps us understand their genesis.

ENDNOTES

[1] Richards, Thomas 1883, *An Epitome of the Official History of New South Wales, etc.*, Thomas Richards, Government Printer, Sydney, pp. 20-1.

[2] RHM 1896, 'The Rock Paintings and Carvings of the Australian Aborigines', *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, vol. 25, pp. 147, 150.

[3] The drawings of 40 hands painted on the wall of this cave have already been published. See RHM 1896, 'The Rock Paintings and Carvings of the Australian Aborigines', *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, vol. 25, pp. 145-163, fig. 4.