

ROBERT AND CHARLES

Robert and I were sitting beside his pool at his home above Aspen looking across at the mountains. We had just had lunch under the shade of the native scrub oaks. It was a beautiful sunny autumn day and the leaves had started to change colour. We were feeling pretty good as we had just finished building the colossal edition of my sculpture *Creation* out of 10-foot long Oregon planks. Everything had gone well and we both agreed that the sculpture looked great!

Robert asked me about the trip that I had just done with Damon and his family to Mt Agnes. I told him the story, including our chance meeting with Grahame Walsh, and the mystery of the missing paintings. I raved on about Mount Agnes, about how I felt that I had some kind of affinity with the place and ended by saying that if I had one wish in my life, *it would be to sleep naked on top of Mount Agnes under a full moon*. Well, sometimes you can get carried away!

Robert looked across at me and said, "Why don't we?" I was speechless and nearly fell off my chair. He went on to explain that anything that I spoke so passionately about, he wanted to experience for himself! He also would like to spend some time with his 30-year-old son, Charles, and what better place to do it than on a trip into the Outback. He had never been to Australia and he would like to see some Wandjina paintings and Kimberley before it was ruined by tourism, as it soon surely would be.

I explained that there was no way that Robert, Charles and I could just head out into the Bush in one vehicle. Even if we had a radio we would be very hard to find if anything went wrong. We had to have two vehicles, and more people. His expressing an interest in the Wandjinas gave me an idea. I had received my copy of the book that Grahame Walsh had published on the Aborigine paintings. The photographs were outstanding and the text showed that he certainly knew a great deal about his subject. I had seen his gear and I thought he would make a marvellous guide.

I suggested that I should try and get Grahame to take us for seven days and have him show us some sites near Agnes. I was sure that he would be in the area next July as he had written to me saying that he had just finished the season and was planning to return the following year. This part of Kimberley can only be visited in June, July and August when the rivers have fallen to their lowest level, but before all the drinking water has disappeared. In December the Monsoon rains arrive causing giant floods that make the country totally impassable. In the north it is called the Wet.

Robert said he would finance the trip if I organised it, so when I got home to England I wrote to Grahame and asked him if he would be our guide. He wrote back agreeing so I started to put a plan together. This would be my third trip to Agnes, and this time I would sleep on the top!

We landed at Kununurra on July 24th 1991. I had arranged our trip to coincide with the full moon, the night of July 26th. We collected our Toyota truck, bought food, jerry cans for water and fuel, filled them up and drove out of town. The road was even better than it had been with Damon and we literally flew over it, eating up the miles, a long plume of dust billowing out behind us. The dust plumes are actually a help, as you can see if anyone is coming towards you. I thought that as long as we didn't hit a kangaroo at this speed, everything would be all right!

We arrived at Mt Elizabeth's front gate by mid-afternoon and drove up to the homestead. Grahame had told us that Peter Lacey liked Port wine so

Robert had brought a case over for him from Los Angeles. Mr and Mrs Lacey were very welcoming and handed us a message from Grahame. He was out in the Bush recording a site and would meet us that night at the Hann River Crossing where I had last met him. We thanked the Laceys and drove off towards the Hann. The light had started to fade and we reached the river just before the sun went down.

We set up camp on the same spot that Grahame had used and soon had a fire going, a billy boiling, and a tuna and rice goo heating for dinner. We were exhausted. A day of hard driving on top of a long flight from America had left us all feeling like zombies.

There was no sign of Grahame, but I was not worried. We had arrived on time and I was sure he would. I walked out onto the rock barrier after eating and looked up at the stars. Living in the Northern Hemisphere dims the memory and you forget how bright they are. A dazzling silvery white moon came up over the horizon, not quite full. At that moment I heard an engine and saw the headlights of a truck coming along the track.

Grahame pulled up, hopped out, and I introduced him to Robert and Charles. Grahame introduced us to his mate, Paul, who was giving him a hand to carry his photographic equipment. He told us later that his helpers usually only lasted a year, because they found it so hard to keep up with him. When we walked to a Wandjina site after Agnes and I saw the amount of gear Grahame and Paul carried in the midday heat, I was not surprised that his helpers only lasted a year!

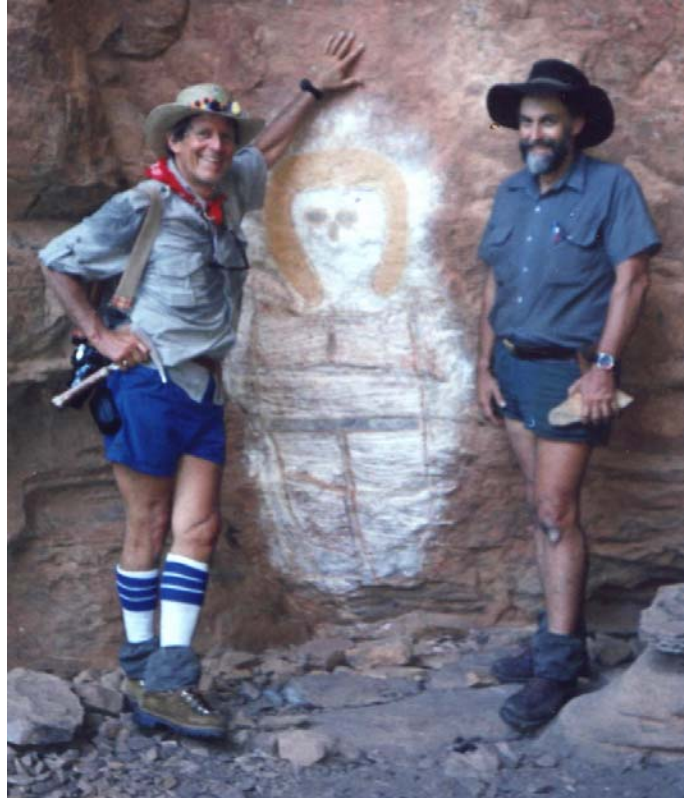
They had eaten at the station with the Lacey family, so we were soon wrapped up in our swags. Before dropping off I looked up at the moon and started counting the craters. I only got to about ten before I fell into a deep sleep and I am sure I had a grin on my face. I was back again and I had to pinch myself to make sure I was not dreaming.

We were up early and built up the fire to boil the billy. The Bush started to come alive in the grey pre-dawn light and the magic had started. We set off along the track towards Mt Jameson and within three hours reached the spot where we turned off to head north to Agnes.



Mt Jameson Arch

Before we left the track I asked Grahame if he had seen the Wandjina Astronaut up by the Jameson Arch. The Arch is enormous, 100 foot wide and another 100 tall, and is formed by a whole section of the escarpment having collapsed. We stopped in the shade of a tree and climbed up the scree to a cave on the right of the arch as it was also something Robert needed to see.



Robert, Wandjina 'Astronaut' and Grahame

Next to the Astronaut's cave is another one that had two stone slabs erected at its mouth. These were just like the ones that Andreas Lommel had shown Buster Thorpe and myself in 1955, saying that the Aborigines had told him that they represented Wandjina snakes coming out of the ground.



Petrified snakes

After driving round the end of Mt Jameson we stopped beside a large rock that I had not noticed before and Grahame showed us some more paintings under its overhang. They included beautiful white ochre serpents and Wandjina heads, but nothing as appealing as *Old Quizzical*. Biscuits and jam washed down with Staminade served for lunch while Grahame began to teach us the complicated mythology of the Kimberley Aborigines. He has a gift for telling a story and over the following days he wove an intriguing tale for the three of us about their religious myths.

I took over the lead in our truck after lunch as I knew the way. Robert drove while I guided him with a stick from the top of the cabin with Grahame following in our tracks. I told Robert to stay in low first gear and go really slowly, as we didn't want to hit a rock or fall into a pothole. The grass was even thicker this year than on the previous two trips.

We started off, crawling along, but covering the ground at a good walking speed. My memory of the country was helping and with a very good idea of where we were and where we should go, things were working out really well. Then I heard Robert change up a gear! The next moment a very large pothole leapt up out of the grass in front of us and I yelled, "STOP", which he did so sharply that I went flying over the bonnet into the hole. I was not hurt but neither was I very happy! I looked at the crash bar and thought, *What if I had caught my leg in that* and nearly fainted at the thought. A broken leg was the last thing I wanted right now. I asked Robert if he would like to swop places and sit up top, but he declined!

We started up again and continued to crawl along the edge of the plain. After an hour Robert decided that he needed some exercise and Charles should drive. We stopped, they changed places and he set off towards the escarpment we were following to look for paintings. As we were travelling very slowly he would be able to catch up easily so I was not over concerned about him going off on his own.

Meanwhile Charles and I pushed on with Grahame following. We passed the wash-a-way that I remembered had been just before the shelf, so started to look out for the cairn of stones that marked the way up. It soon appeared and up we went over the ramps that we had made in 1981 and fixed the year before with Damon.

Grahame was not very happy about taking his vehicle up the ramps, as he had a lot of weight on board and he was worried about his springs, pointing out that his truck was his life. In the end he decided that it would be all right, and it was, but I began to worry about what he would think about going down *Hell's Highway* at the other end of the shelf.

We arrived at the end of the shelf and got out to look at the track. "I hope you don't think I am taking my truck down that? Even if I didn't break a spring on the way down, I would never get up again." He was probably right!

I explained about the camp being about half an hour's walk from here. I suggested that he should leave his truck on the top, and come with us to the camp so he knew where we were. We would drive him back to his truck where he and Paul would spend the night.

Our plan was that we should sleep at Camp Borya that night, climb Agnes the following day, spend the night on top, and then leave the next day. If he camped by his truck on the shelf I would drive over and collect him at first light, so we could all climb Agnes the following day.

Grahame thought about this and then decided that he would not climb Agnes as he had a lot of sorting to do with Paul so would rather wait for our return. He would come with us so he knew where our camp was, while Paul got a fire going, and then walk back. Having made a plan and as the afternoon was fast disappearing, we got into our truck, went down and headed towards Camp Borya. There was still no sign of Robert, but Paul said he would tell him the plan and point out the direction, when he passed by, which he was bound to do as he would see the fire Paul was about to light.

Once safely down we started off across the plain looking for the old campsite. Grahame drove and I sat up on top so I could spot the tree with William's cow skull sitting up in the fork of branches. By now the light had nearly gone so we started to collect a lot of wood as there was still no sign of Robert and we would need a good blaze to guide him into the camp. I decided to make a quick trip down to the waterhole to check how full it was for bathing the following day while they collected the wood.

I climbed down into the ravine with a torch and hurried along the rocky creek bed, avoiding the green ants, thinking of Lucy, and arrived at the pool. This *IT REALLY WAS EMPTY*. I stood there and stared at the rock bottom of a big empty space. I couldn't believe my eyes.

I started back up the creek. All light had gone and the ravine was in total darkness. I hurried up the slope, puffing and panting, dripping with sweat, as it was a boiling-hot night. I almost ran across the flats towards the flames that I could see leaping into the sky as they had built a Guy Fawkes bonfire.

Still no sign of Robert! Leaving Charles by the fire, we set off back towards Paul and I told Grahame about the dry waterhole. With no water, we would have to cut our stay short. We certainly didn't have enough for two nights and a day as planned. I was bitterly disappointed as now there was no way we could sleep on the summit under the full moon the following night.

We were about halfway back to the truck when Robert walked out of the night. He had seen our torches although missed Paul's fire up on the shelf. I told him about the dry pool, which I had believed was a permanent waterhole and apologised. I should have known never to take anything for granted in the Bush, especially water, as many people have died making that mistake.

At that moment the full moon came up over the horizon, bathing everything in a silvery light. Robert looked at me and said, "I have not come all this way not to sleep on top of Agnes. Why don't we climb it in the moonlight? We have enough water for that. We shall be back here by ten tomorrow. Do you think you will be able to find the way at night?"

I desperately wanted to sleep on the top of Agnes and thought I knew the way well enough to do it even in the dark. Grahame looked at us as though we were stark staring mad, which of course we were, but as I believe you have to be mad once in a while to get the most out of life, I said, "Okay, let's go!"

We walked back to the fire to find Charles really worried about everyone disappearing. His father told him what we were going to do, and asked him if he wanted to come or would rather stay by the fire. "I'm not staying here on my own. Of course I want to come!" We each put a gallon of water wrapped in a blanket and a torch in our packs. I threw in some dried apricots in mine and Robert added a tin of beans to his. We put out the fire, turned towards Agnes, and started walking, in high spirits, drunk out of our minds on adrenaline.

By now the moon was well up and the light that she gave had turned the whole world silver. The temperature had dropped a little, but it was still very

hot. As we walked Robert told us of his afternoon's adventure. He had reached the foot of the escarpment and, finding the rocks to be massive, had soon got lost in the maze of alleys that wound between them so he was unable to find his way out again and had to climb up over some rocks to get back to the flats.

I just didn't want to think about the possibility of him getting lost in that jumble as we would never have found him in the dark. He said that he had never seen such rough country anywhere in the world. *You wait*, I thought to myself, *there's plenty more of that to come*.

We reached the first barrier of large rocks and started to cross them, but this time not hopping from top to top like kangaroos. The difference now was the cracks in-between the rocks were pitch black and as we were well aware of the danger of breaking a leg, we moved forward with extreme caution.

At last we arrived at the cliff edge above the little valley. In the daytime you looked down on a peaceful grassy scene and across to the rocky hill and the entrance to the ravine. Now it was all pitch black and looked very ominous, full of dense shadow. Because the moon was still low on the horizon there was not a drop of moonlight in the valley. This was going to be very difficult and I began to wonder if we were really crazy and should abandon the attempt.

Not so the Hefner men! The cliff face was lit by the moonlight and they were off, so I followed them down. At the bottom Robert asked, "What next?" I replied, "Straight across until you hit a deep ditch, drop down into that and turn left, follow along until you bang your head on a tree trunk. Climb out to the far side and head at right angles to the ditch towards the hills." *Might as well sound confident*, I thought and hoped the tree bridge was still there.

Robert set off with his torch. "I've found the ditch," and slid to the bottom. Minutes later a curse announced that his skull had also found the bridge! You couldn't see your hand in front of your face if you switched off the torch. We clambered out and started towards the ravine and walked right into the entrance which was an absolute miracle as it was as black as hell.

Halfway up the ravine Charles had his first experience of green ants. The poor bloke had walked right into a nest. Eventually we stumbled out into the brilliant moonlight at the top. Charles got his shirt off and got rid of the last of the ants, while Robert opened his tin of beans.

We sat in the blessed moonlight, drank some water and ate a couple of apricots. Robert ate some beans from the tin and handed it to Charles, who ate some. Both agreed that they were great. I tried some and thought my mouth was on fire. "We eat a lot of spicy food in Oklahoma," they said. I quenched the fire with a gulp of water and handed the tin back. I was going to stick to apricots and they could keep their spicy beans!

I wondered how *Old Quizzical* was around the corner. What a surprise he was in for! We would go and see him tomorrow, that is if we were still alive! I couldn't wait to introduce him to Robert.

Glad of the moonlight, and being back where we could see again, we put away our torches, and set off towards the scree that led up to Agnes and 'Jacob's Ladder'. I don't think I have ever experienced such a hot night, the sweat was pouring off me. There was not a breath of wind and the ground was like a furnace throwing heat up into our faces.

I had warned the two of them to step with care when traversing back and forth up the scree, as there were treacherous holes between the rocks. We were about halfway up the climb when suddenly Robert said, in rather a quiet voice, "John, there is a very large snake in front of me." I told him not to move

and got the torch out of my sack. I crossed to within about ten feet of the frozen Robert and shone my light on the ground in front of him. There in the beam lay a gigantic cat snake, striped like a tiger, watching us with his baleful eyes and sniffing an alien scent with his flicking tongue. He was long, at least ten foot, as round as a clenched fist and not very about our being there!

Charles came up behind me and said, "I'll throw a rock at him." Robert exploded, "DON'T YOU DARE. The last thing I want is an angry snake." I suggested, "Back off, and come behind me while I keep the light on him." Having done this, we all eased off across the slope away from the snake, which watched us go, then slowly turning his eyes away also began to leave by making a U-turn. following his head his body seemed to go on forever!

We continued up the scree and reached the crack, which was of course in shadow and pitch black. Charles started to climb and Robert followed. We were all making plenty of noise now to frighten off any other occupants, as we definitely did not want to come across another venomous snake in this confined space. Charles was tackling the climb with gusto and this soon freed a lot of loose rocks that all came tumbling down, bringing out the worst of his father's language. We reached the Standing Stone, and then headed off towards the summit, which we reached in another half-hour.

We sat on the top and looked out over the silver landscape. I thought of Margie saying that the view was quite surreal. I wished she could have seen it in the moonlight. The Prince Regent Country was a fairyland.

I looked at my watch. It was only nine o'clock! We had only been going for three hours, but it seemed like a lifetime and we were completely knackered. We had a drink, ate some apricots, and laid out our blankets, one of us on the top of each of the three small cakes of rock on the summit of Agnes.

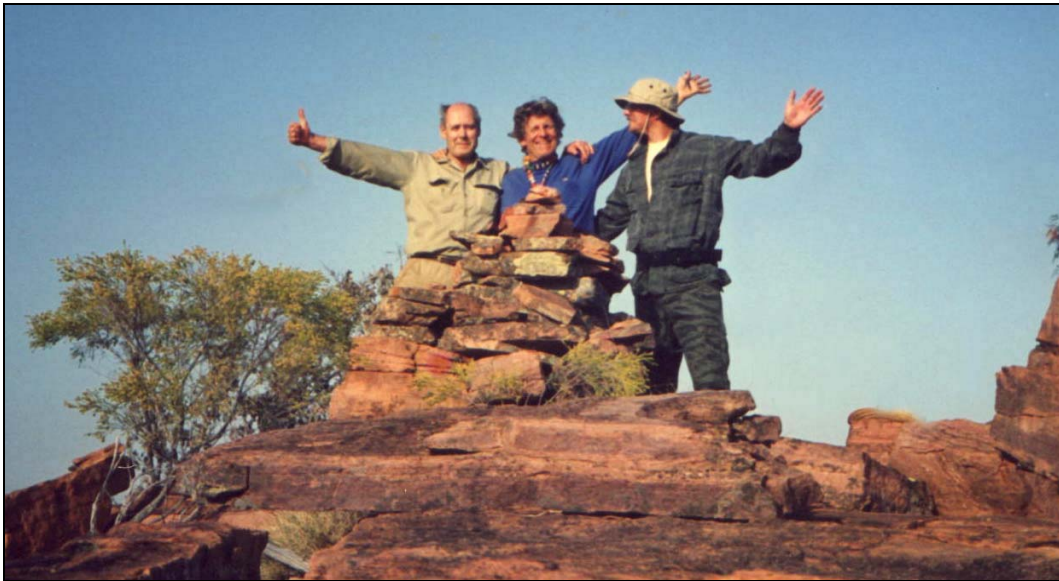
I took off my sodden clothes and lay on the rock looking up at the moon. We had made it and here I was naked on the top of Agnes under a full moon! I was completely blown away. And then the cramps hit me. I have never experienced anything like it in my life. Every single muscle went into spasm. I was racked in pain and unable to move. The top of the rock was pretty confined and the drop over the edge was a good 20 foot, so space for manoeuvring was limited. I tried to relax and talked to my legs, arms, and shoulders. Slowly they started to listen, the cramps eased, and I relaxed. The heat coming from the rock comforted my aching body that collapsed like a wobbly jelly. Next morning Robert told me that he also had suffered violent cramps. Were we both getting too old for this sort of thing?

We woke to find the whole world had turned pink. The sky was pink and so was the land. The rocks glowed orange and the dawn chorus had begun. The moon was being chased from the sky by the sun that was a raging fireball on the eastern horizon. I had slept like the dead. After much stretching, apricots, and a lot of water, we took the mandatory photograph!

When I think back to what we had accomplished that night and how absolutely crazy we were even to have thought we could do it, I am still amazed. It does, though, sum up for me what life is all about. If you don't give things a go life just passes you by and you might as well be dead. The Earth is such a wonderful place and being aware of being alive is the greatest of all gifts.

We packed up and started to head down towards the Standing Stone. I had told Grahame about the stone and he had asked us to take some photographs for him. We made good time back to the head of the ravine and I took them to meet *Old Quizzical*. I could tell he was very pleased to see me

because he definitely winked when I said goodbye for ever, turned, and set off after Robert, while Charles brought up the rear, waiting for us to point out any green ants' nests. Once bitten twice shy.



JR, R III and Charles

We crossed over the valley, using the bridge this time, climbed up the far cliff, and headed for the camp. Grahame had heard us coming, with I am sure some relief, as the last thing he would have wanted to do was search for three crazy people lost on Agnes. He asked how we had got on, and if we had got to the top. "Piece of Cake," we lied. We told him about the cat snake. "Mean buggers those," was his only comment. Robert looked at me and smiled. We rounded Mt Jameson and headed due west towards Wren Gorge.



Two Cupids

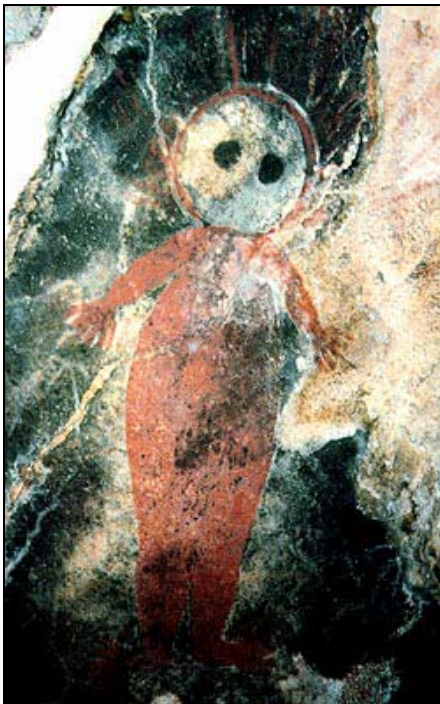
We stopped to enable Grahame to photograph a Wandjina Devil painting that looked like two Flying Cupids and then crossed the dry sandy bed

of Calder River and reached the Wren Gorge campsite by evening. Here was a beautiful rock hole and waterfall so we had a glorious swim and washed off the sweat and dirt from the climb, then lay flat on our backs on the hot rocks.



There's nothing like splashing about in the rain

Next day we stopped again to photograph two more Devil paintings. One was a cute Baby Doll, but the other was an evil zigzag-tailed spirit creature. You have never seen such an ugly-looking thing in your life.



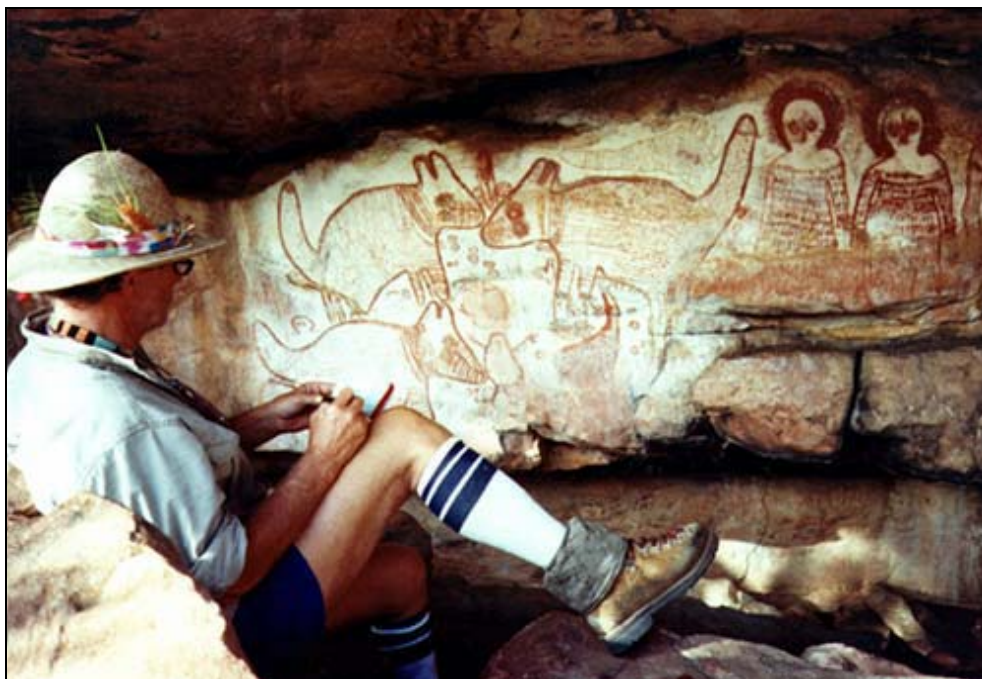
Baby Doll



Zigzag



Centrefold Play Girl



Robert sketching a Dingo Wandjina painting

The following day we saw some more Wandjina paintings that Grahame wanted to photograph. The scenery was idyllic, red rock cliffs above the water-washed sheets of rock along the river bed bordered by lush green gum trees smelling of eucalyptus oil. A tiny stream of pure clear water trickled over miniscule waterfalls, joining sparkling pools together as a string of pearls. The site was very difficult to reach and required a tough climb, but the Wandjina paintings and the views made it all worthwhile.



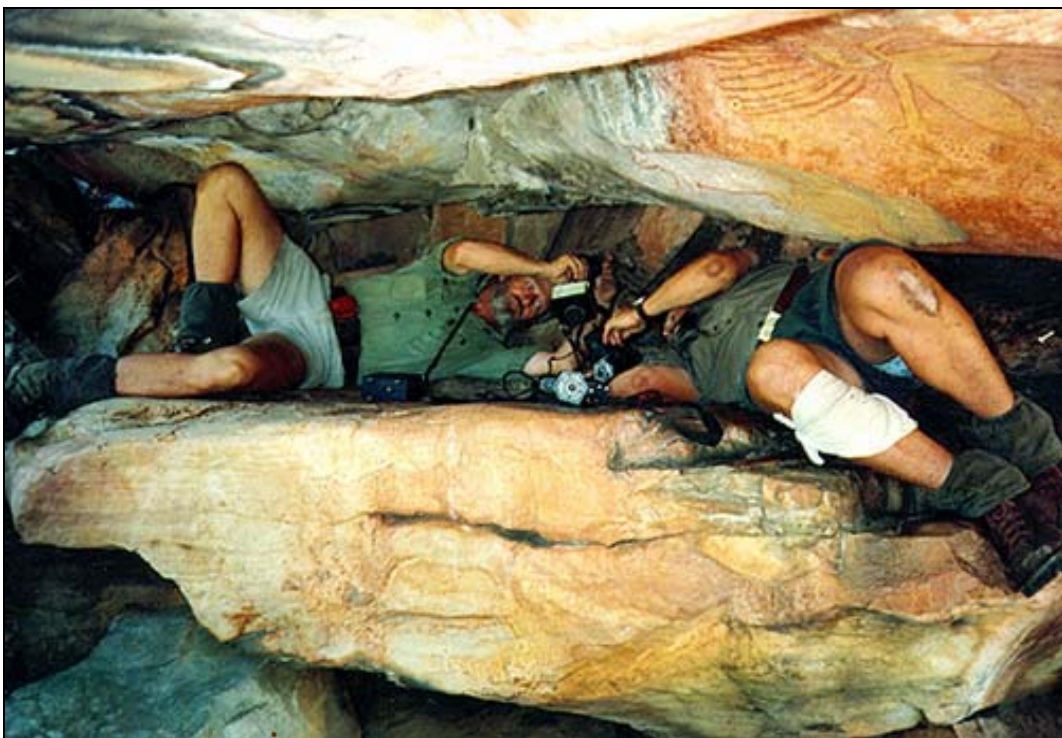
Unbeatable scenery...



...with Oriental serenity



Some places were hard to get to... but worth the effort



Grahame and Paul taking photographs

Grahame described one of the Wandjina sites we visited as a cathedral. The central Wandjina head was enormous, four foot across, with grey eyes circled in red. Grahame thought that in the past this painting must have been the central site for a tribe and that many of the smaller sites we had seen were like out-lying churches. It was certainly the most powerful Wandjina painting we had seen on the whole trip.



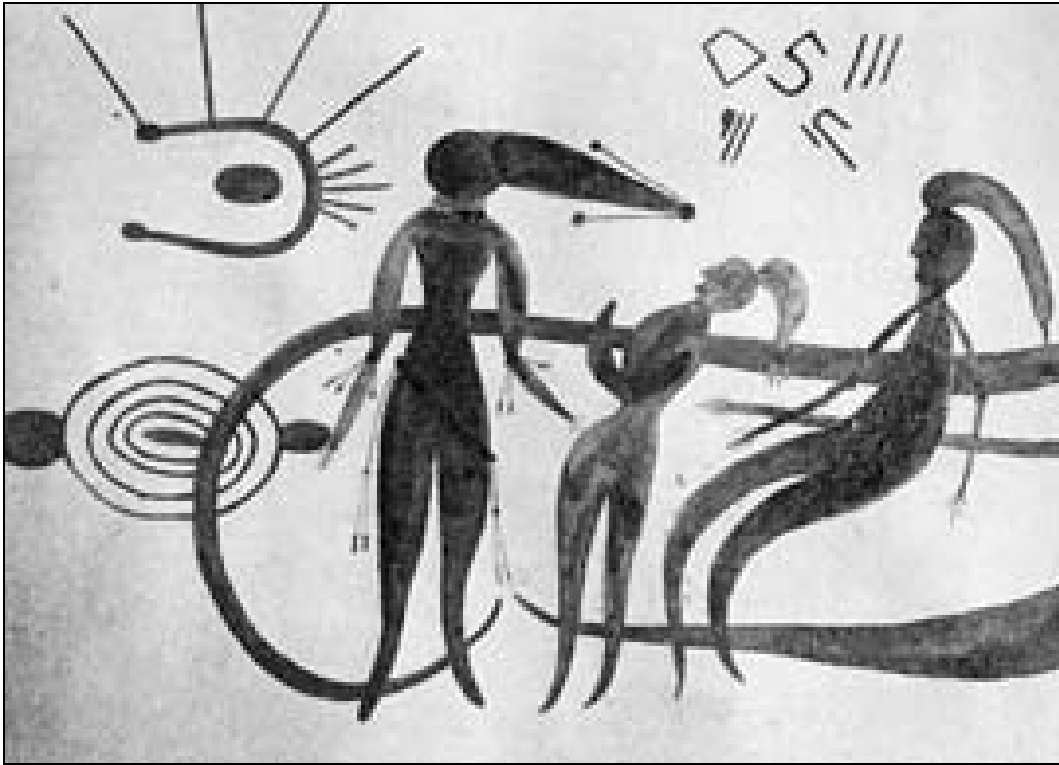
Prince Regent Wandjina Cathedral Site

When we reached Wren Gorge we sat around the campfire and talked far into the night. This was the first time that we had heard Grahame really open up and he was fascinating to listen to. He told us that in his opinion there were people living in this area long before the present Aborigines. The paintings we had seen were done between 500 to 1,000 years ago. The paint was ochre, and what we were seeing was the latest layer, as the paintings were continually renewed in order to keep their power. There could be up to 100 layers of paint!

While hunting for Wandjinas, he had come across another sort of painting. These were totally different and the images were locked into the rock. The colours ranged from mulberry to terracotta red. The paint seemed to have been absorbed into the rock surface and over the years been protected by nature with a layer of desert varnish. You could scrub them with a brush and it would not harm the images!

The paintings were all of very fine-bodied people, very elegant, small and never showed a gender. There was nothing like them in the rest of Australia, or the whole world. They were absolutely unique. My ears had really pricked up because it was as though he was describing the little figures that I had first seen in 1981, and couldn't find with Damon when we had first met Grahame.

He told us that these paintings had first been recorded 100 years ago by Captain Joseph Bradshaw in 1891, when he and his brother were looking for cattle-grazing pasture and became lost somewhere near the Roe River to the north of the Prince Regent River. Joseph had made drawings in his diaries that are now held in the Mitchell Library in Sydney. Grahame showed us a photocopy of them and I was amazed to see that they looked very like the leading figure in the painting we had found in 1981 by the Hann River.



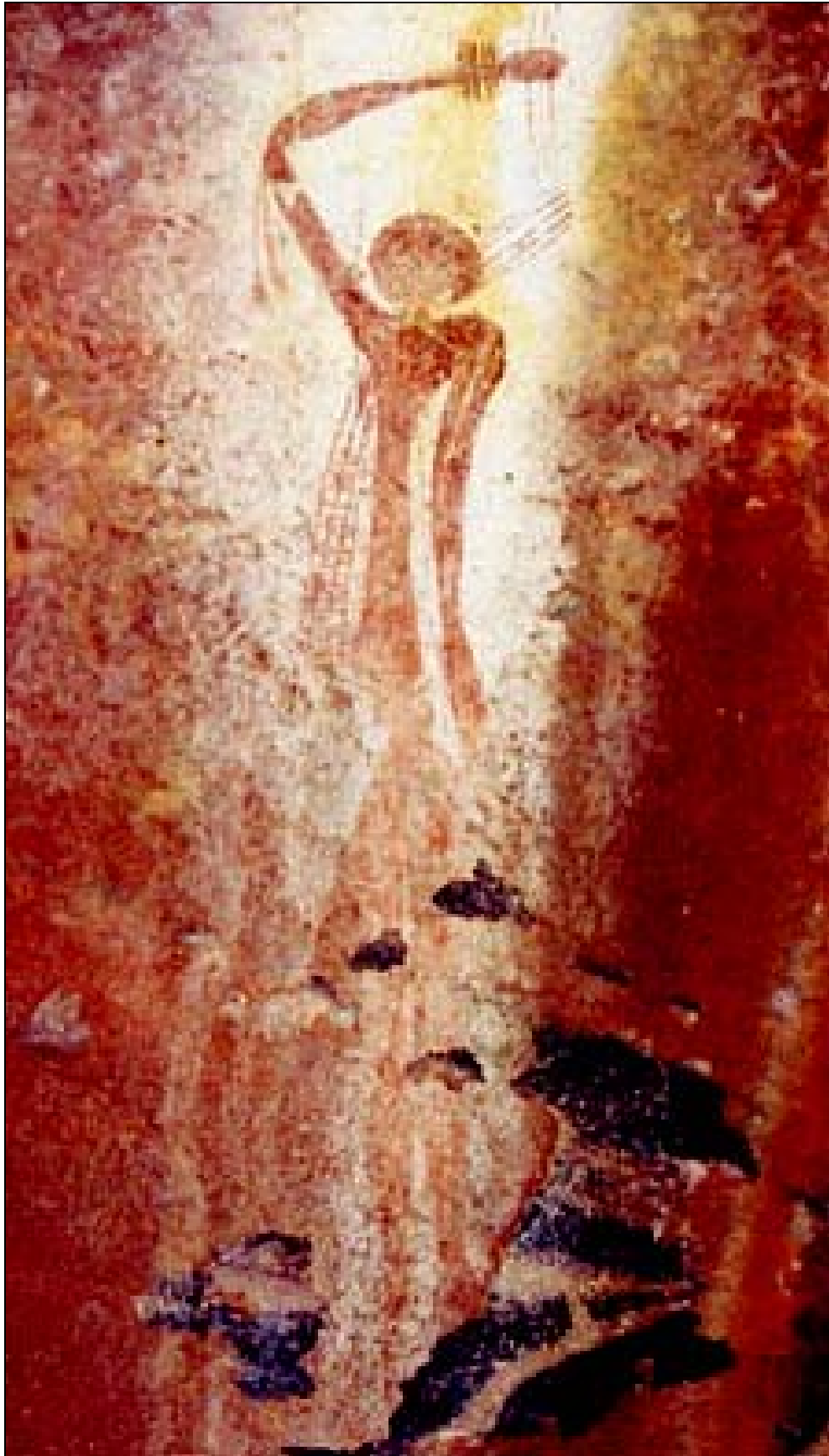
Drawing made by Captain Joseph Bradshaw in 1891

The Aborigines had told Andreas Lommel in 1938 that they were *rubbish paintings* and *had been painted before their time*. They claimed that *they were painted by a little grey bird that lived in the bush, who had bashed its beak against the rock to make it bleed and then done the painting with a tail feather dipped in its own blood!*

We were transfixed by this tale and asked Grahame if we could see some of these paintings. "You have already," he said. "You remember telling me how you had seen some little dancing figures at the site near Hann River? Well they were Bradshaws. Not very good ones, but they were Bradshaws. I hadn't seen them, which is why I said that there weren't any there. I know that place like the back of my hand, and I couldn't believe you had found them. There are very few that far south, most of them are north of here on Drysdale River Station. I went back to the Hann River site last year and had another good hunt around the rocks that you had pointed to and found them. A bush had grown up and completely covered that wall of rock. Just goes to show how hard these things are to find. I will show you a much better Bradshaw painting on the way out." This was incredible. I had been right all along! The figures we had found were not painted by Aborigines but were Bradshaw paintings, and had been painted by *a little grey bird with one of its own tail feathers, with blood from its bleeding beak*. I was thrilled.

The following day Grahame showed us a tiny, 18-inch high, elegant Bradshaw painting of unbelievable fineness. It made our 1981 figures look amateurish. This was a lone standing warrior, with pins in his hair, static but showing incredible movement. The composition even possessed Hogarth's *Line of Grace!*

I still preferred my figures because there were five of them following the leader in a dance, with gaiety and rhythm, but this figure also told a story. What wouldn't we all give to know the meaning!



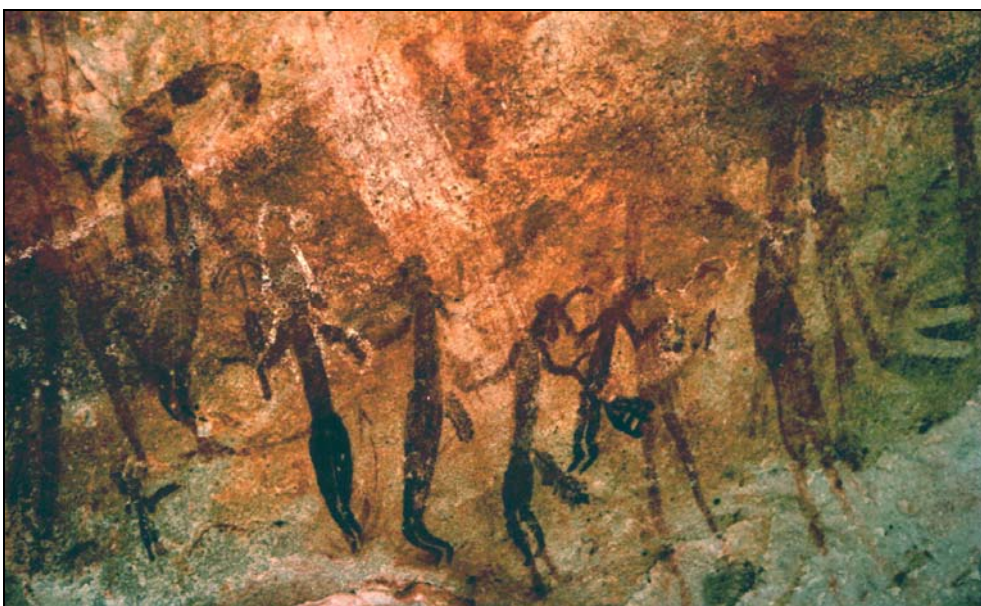
The first Bradshaw painting Grahame showed us

Grahame told us that most of the figures were small like this one, although a month ago he had found a life-size figure. We wanted to go and see it immediately, but he told us that it would take a week of driving and walking to reach it. He made our mouths water.

We travelled on and crossed the Hann River for the last time and went straight to the entrance of the canyon I had first visited in 1981 and walked straight up to the shelter. There were the little Dancing People. Grahame might be right about them not being a very good example, but to me they are perfection. *Not everyone is the first to find a painting done by a little grey bird painting with its own blood with a tail feather!*



The Hann River shelter and Bradshaw paintings found in 1981



Indian-file follow-the-leader Bradshaw painting

We said our goodbyes to Grahame and Paul and thanked them for looking after us so well. I think he was secretly glad to see the back of such crazy people. Fancy sleeping on top of a mountain naked in the moonlight! (Obviously he didn't know the story about the silver screw in the navel and the moon.) He was now free to get back to hunting Bradshaw paintings!

We had come to the end of our trip and were exhausted. After parting ways we headed for Mt Elizabeth Station. We pulled up beside a dry sandy riverbed as the light was failing and built a fire to cook a meal. It would soon be dark so we collected a pile of wood to keep the fire going through the night before crawling under our blankets. I was just dropping off when Robert asked what the time was. I turned on my torch to have a look. "Half past six." We all laughed and went to sleep not waking until daybreak the following morning!

We did a couple of things on the way home like going to see a crocodile farm and flying over the Bungle Bungles, but these were nothing compared to the Bradshaw paintings and Agnes, so are not worth recording. We returned to Darwin and said goodbye to each other, the Americans to fly to China and me home to Margie.

On the long flight back I thought about the Bradshaws. Surely these paintings were one of the great discoveries of pre-history Rock Art. What must I do to make sure that they became known to everyone in the world, and how could I help Grahame carry on his incredibly important research and discovery of yet more masterpieces?

The answer had to be a colour-plate book of Grahame's photographs of the Bradshaw paintings with a text by him, but how could I arrange this?



King George River from the Timor Sea, 300-foot high cliffs



Salute
Bradshaw Foundation Logo