THE BRADSHAW DEBATE:

Lessons Learned from Critiquing Colonialist Interpretations of Gwion Gwion Rock Paintings of the Kimberley, Western Australia

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Abstract

The history of archaeology includes its colonialist roots and the development of conceptual frameworks (tropes) disassociating Indigenous peoples from their land and heritage. While these tropes were products of nineteenth century scholarship, in settler colonial contexts such as Australia these tropes continue to have currency and will be resurrected in the media during periods of political conservatism. During conservative government in Australia in the 1990s and 2000s, high profile media attention was given to amateur research on Gwion Gwion (Bradshaw) paintings of the Kimberley region and notions of non-Aboriginal authorship. The disassociation of Aboriginal people from the paintings played into the hands of conservatives wishing to undermine Aboriginal land claims. Hamstrung by limited empirical research, reactive criticisms by professional archaeologists to the colonialist underpinnings of these views had little traction in the media and were dismissed as political correctness. The 'Bradshaw debate' teaches us that strategies to successfully counter publically-contested colonialist archaeologies are underdeveloped. Minimally it requires the combined efforts of archaeologists (professional and amateur) and Indigenous peoples focusing more on empirical facts, and less on theoretical concepts, in proactive mass media engagements.

Introduction

The role of archaeology in disassociating Indigenous peoples from their land and heritage has been well-documented (Díaz-Andreu 2007; Kehoe 1998; Mann 2002; McGuire 1992; McNiven and Russell 2005; Thomas 2000; Trigger 1984, 2006; Watkins 2000). The process of disassociation has been linked to the colonial foundations of archaeology and the discipline's role in legitimising European colonial expansion, particularly during the nineteenth century. In many respects, this checkered past represents an interesting chapter in the long and complex history of archaeology as a discipline. Yet the continuing use of archaeology to disassociate Indigenous peoples from their lands and heritage in selected parts of the world during the twentieth century indicates that this insidious process is not a relic of history but continues to have currency in certain contexts. Significantly, these contexts tend to be associated with conservative political agendas and the archaeology associated with non-professional researchers outside of the disciplinary and disciplined confines of academic institutions.

Recent examples of the non-professional politicisation of archaeology and its employment as an ideological weapon of dispossession against Indigenous people come from Australia. Grounds and Ross (2010) document the 'resurrection' and manipulation of Birdsell's 'defunct' trihybrid colonisation model by conservative politicians in Australia to delegitimise Aboriginal associations with land during the 1990s when many Aboriginal Australians were actively seeking legal recognition of Native Title rights following introduction of the historic *Native Title Act 1993*. Part of the armoury of the resurrection was the accusation of political correctness against academics who, it was argued, had deliberately ignored the model in order to support Aboriginal political agendas (see McNiven and Russell 2005:90-92; Westaway and Hiscock 2005). Grounds and Ross (2010:64-65) state that it is 'essential for archaeologists to respond to such constructions of the past so that subjugation of minority groups is not the result of the dissemination of these inaccurate alternative understandings'. They call on archaeologists to move beyond the academic confines of the 'ivory tower' and to tackle misrepresentations of Indigenous archaeology and Indigenous pasts head-on in public arenas. While philosophically I accept dimensions of epistemic relativism, pluralism, multivocality and people's right to produce 'alternative archaeologies' (Holtorf 2005; Lampeter Archaeology Workshop 1997; Shanks and Hodder 1995:19), I endorse McGuire's (2008) manifesto for professional archaeologists to engage directly with the politics of the past and to use their authority to counter oppressive and ideologically-driven misrepresentations of archaeological knowledge. Yet strategies for successful countering of 'alternative archaeologies' are undeveloped and Grounds and Ross (2010:65) conclude rightly that 'further research … is essential to develop ways in which archaeologists can counter the misuse of archaeological data and the presentation of invalid arguments'. In a related sense, Nichols (2006:35) stated that: 'Although regularly discussed by archaeologists, specific mass media presentations of archaeology to the Australian public have yet to be systematically investigated'. This paper takes up these challenges.

Between 1994 and 2006, a high profile political debate took place in Australian archaeology concerning the origins of Bradshaw paintings (hereafter 'Gwion Gwion' paintings, the current preferred terminology of local Aboriginal people – see Ngarjno *et al.* 2000) of the Kimberley region of northern Western Australia. Indeed, it is fair to say that this issue caught the imagination of the Australian media and public like no other issue in Australian archaeology. The core of the debate was whether or not the paintings were created by either the ancestors of Kimberley Aboriginal people or a pre-Aboriginal 'race'. Couched in terms of the 'Bradshaw debate', media stories have been replete with titles including 'An outback whodunit', 'Our mysterious Ice Age artists', 'They left their mark … But, who were they?', and so on. The non-Aboriginal

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origins interpretation was elaborated by high-profile, non-professional, and mostly privately-funded rock art researcher Grahame Walsh, while the Aboriginal origins interpretation was pushed by archaeologists (both professional and amateur) and many Kimberley Aboriginal people. As such, the debate transcended the usual epistemological divide between amateur and professional archaeologists in contestations over 'alternative archaeologies' (cf. Cole 1980; Fagan 2006a). It was a debate that involved some of Australia's richest and poorest peoples, amateur and professional researchers, and different Aboriginal groups. Unlike politicisation of Birdsell's model discussed by Grounds and Ross (2010), the 'Bradshaw debate' involved claims and counter-claims in both academic texts and in high profile media outlets in Australia and England. As such, the 'Bradshaw debate' provides a rare opportunity to critically examine the capacity of professional archaeologists to successfully counter ideologically-driven archaeologies that attempt to disassociate Indigenous peoples from their heritage. More importantly, what lessons can be learned from the 'Bradshaw debate' to help limit the misuse of archaeological information and the public misrepresentation of Indigenous pasts?

'Bradshaw Debate': Identifying Colonial Tropes

My analysis of the 'Bradshaw debate' is framed theoretically and analytically by recent literature that implicates nineteenth century European colonial expansions across Africa and the New World continents of Australia and North America in the development of archaeology. Critical is social evolutionism which held European civilisation as progressive, historical and the pinnacle of cultural development and many of the world's Indigenous peoples as culturally undeveloped, ahistorical and time-locked to a prehistoric past. While anthropology provided increasing complexity to the developmental ladder, archaeology gave a temporal and historical dimension to this schema. As a result, Indigenous peoples, especially hunter-gatherers in places like Australia, were seen as living fossils and anachronistic peoples standing in the way of rightful and legitimate human progress expressed as European colonial expansion. In many instances, the illegitimacy of Indigenous peoples as rightful prior owners of colonised lands was reinforced by fanciful archaeologies suggesting other peoples, including Europeans, were the original occupants of these lands (e.g. Mann 2002; Russell and McNiven 1998). Archaeology aided colonial expansion through the dual processes of disassociation and appropriation, whereby Indigenous peoples were disassociated from their heritage sites which were subsequently appropriated as dimensions of European heritage. Lynette Russell and I noted that disassociation and appropriation were operationalised through a series of colonial tropes or methodological/conceptual, stereotypical frameworks which we identified as progressivism, antiquation, migrationism, diffusionism and subjectation (McNiven and Russell 2005).

In *Appropriated Pasts*, the 'Bradshaw debate' was framed primarily within the colonial trope of diffusionism (McNiven and Russell 2005:Chapter 5). That is, 'certain elements of Australian Aboriginal culture are defined as advanced and therefore anomalous and exotic in origin' (McNiven and Russell 2005:8; see also McNiven 2006). Critically, the debate is nothing new and has been ongoing since the Gwion Gwion paintings were brought to the attention of the wider world by Joseph Bradshaw's (1892) published drawings of some of the paintings. The key issue has been 'who made the paintings?' For over 100 years, various researchers have argued for a foreign origin for Gwion Gwion paintings. The basis for this hypothesis is their assumed non-Aboriginal authorship. For over a decade between 1994 and 2006, this hypothesis received unprecedented national media attention in Australia due largely to the research of Grahame Walsh. Three inter-related lines of evidence were used by Walsh to disassociate Aboriginal people from Gwion Gwion paintings – stylistic, cosmological and temporal. In a nutshell, *stylistic* disassociation is the assumption that aesthetically the paintings fall outside the parameters of Aboriginal art. *Cosmological* disassociation is based on ethnographic information which suggests certain Aboriginal people have little interest in the paintings. *Temporal* disassociation is based on an occupational hiatus across much of the Kimberley region during the Last Glacial Maximum which separates Aboriginal people from what are seen as pre-hiatus Gwion Gwion peoples and paintings. Isolation of these subtropes provides the first step in analysing and understanding how the process of disassociation is formulated and presented as a plausible intellectual argument. In the following sections of this paper, I go through each of these subtropes and chronicle claims and counterclaims voiced in a range of publications and national and international media outlets that form the basis of the 'Bradshaw debate'. This critical assessment sets the scene for critical discussion of claims and counter claims for foreign origins of Gwion Gwion paintings.

Stylistic Disassociation

Stylistic complexity, artistic sophistication, and conformity to Western notions of aesthetics have been fundamental to arguments denying Aboriginal authorship of Gwion Gwion paintings. These arguments commenced over a century ago and have been advanced numerous times since in mainstream academic texts (see McNiven and Russell 2005:150-155 for details). The line of reasoning starts with Rev. John Mathew of Melbourne who, in his 1894 paper on 'The cave paintings of Australia' published in the *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, described the paintings as 'immensely superior to the ordinary aboriginal level' (1894:42). In his 1930 paper in the journal *Oceania* titled 'Rock-paintings of north-west Australia', anthropologist A.P. Elkin (1930:275) commented that: 'The shape of the heads, head-dress and body-forms suggests an origin and workmanship other than native'. Anthropologist Daniel Davidson in his 1936 book *Aboriginal Australian and Tasmanian Rock Carvings and Paintings* published by the American Philosophical Society noted that: 'The paintings reproduced by Bradshaw, however, are marked by many features which serve to distinguish them from all other known specimens of Australian rock paintings' (1936:132). In his 1955 article in *Anthropos*, missionary Rev. Ernest Worms described Gwion Gwion paintings as 'advanced' and 'masterpieces' and associated the paintings with an ancient 'pygmoid race' who 'possessed a higher artistic standard than that of the present Australian Aborigines' (1955:558, 566). In his 1958 book *Australian Aboriginal Rock Art* published by the Australian Museum, archaeologist Fred McCarthy (1958:53) noted that the paintings exhibited 'un-Australian' characteristics and associated these

'more advanced and complex' paintings with the 'early movement of people into this continent'.

It was rock art researcher Ian Crawford who broke with tradition and proclaimed an Aboriginal origin for the Gwion Gwion paintings. In his 1968 book *The Art of the Wandjina*, Crawford (1968:82) stated that the paintings were part of 'a style which was once in fashion throughout the northern regions of Australia'. As we all know this view is widely accepted amongst professional archaeologists and anthropologists, as indicated by Rob Layton in his 1992 book *Australian Rock Art: A New Synthesis*, Josephine Flood in her 1997 *Rock Art of the Dreamtime*, and Mike Morwood in his 2002 *Visions from the Past*.

However, it is with the work of rock art researcher Grahame Walsh that the notion of non-Aboriginal authorship of Gwion Gwion paintings was resurrected and given prominence. In his 1994 book *Bradshaws: Ancient Rock Paintings of North-West Australia*, Walsh (1994:74) noted that 'Features such as exquisite form, composition and application of the art are alone sufficient to warrant considering this culture as quite different from others reflected in later Kimberley arts periods'. Indeed, Walsh (1994) associated the Gwion Gwion paintings with what he labelled the 'Erudite Epoch' and the more recent Wandjina paintings with what he labelled the 'Aborigine Epoch'.

Media attention to Walsh's work soon followed. The December 1995 issue of *Time Australia* published a story featuring Walsh's research and interpretations of Gwion Gwion paintings (Smith 1995). While citing criticisms of Walsh's interpretations by archaeologists/anthropologists such as Marcia Langton, John Clegg, Sandra Bowdler, Phillip Jones and Paul Taçon, the debate is presented as legitimate and unresolved. Yet University of Sydney rock art researcher John Clegg did make the pertinent point that: 'What scares me about this Bradshaw claim is that Aboriginal people are having their Aboriginality stolen from them yet again. You know: the [idea that the] paintings are too good – therefore someone else did them' (Smith 1995:67).

A week after the *Time Australia* article, the Australian Archaeological Association Inc. (AAA) issued a press release criticising Walsh's claims for non-Aboriginal authorship of Gwion Gwion paintings. The press release was authored by rock art experts Andrée Rosenfeld, Claire Smith, Jo McDonald, Darrell Lewis and Paul Taçon. Andrée Rosenfeld got straight to the crux of the matter when she stated that 'it is the aesthetics and elegance of the figures that is being used to substantiate a non-Aboriginal authorship for these works' (AAA 1996:59). Claire Smith pointed out the spurious underpinnings of Walsh's work, saying 'such interpretations are based on and encourage racist stereotypes' (AAA 1996:59).

Mike Morwood (1996:47) in his review of Walsh's *Bradshaws* book in *Australian Archaeology* stated that: 'independent invention is a much more parsimonious explanation. There is no real reason to invoke non-Aboriginal artists to explain the Bradshaw paintings and certainly no reason to assume this'.

Also in 1996, amateur researcher David Welch published an important paper in *Rock Art Research* on modern analogues of Gwion Gwion material culture. Welch demonstrated empirically that the types of elaborate headdresses and body tassels adorning Gwion Gwion figures were similar to those used by Aboriginal people of northern Australia in recent times (see also Welch 2007). Paul Taçon in his 1998-1999 article on Gwion Gwion paintings in the popular journal *Nature Australia* rightly pointed out that Welch 'has documented a recent use of every type of artefact depicted in Bradshaw art, strongly suggesting the paintings reflect an Indigenous Australian way of life' (1998-1999:46). Academically, Welch successfully undermined the credibility of arguments for the non-Aboriginality of Gwion Gwion figures based on accoutrements.

A feature article on the Gwion Gwion paintings controversy in the 21 June 1997 issue of *The Good Weekend* magazine from *The Age* newspaper of Melbourne highlighted the central role of sophisticated style in the authorship debate: 'The controversial kicker is the contention that the Bradshaws are just too good, just too distinctive, to have been painted by the ancient relatives of contemporary Aboriginal people' (Hogarth and Dayton 1997:14). However, the article also cites David Welch and his *Rock Art Research* paper – pointing out the demonstrated material culture continuities between Gwion Gwion paintings and recent Aboriginal ceremonial attire.

In 2000, Grahame Walsh released his second book on Gwion Gwion paintings, the lavishly-illustrated *Bradshaw Art of the Kimberley*. The limited edition volume retailed for AUD295 and sold out almost instantly. One well-known Australian rare books dealer recently advertised a signed copy of Walsh's book for sale for AUD5500 and noted that over the past 18 months that he had sold three unsigned copies of the volume for AUD3500 and AUD4000 each (Treloar 2011:12). Interestingly, in this publication Walsh (2000:419) simply reiterates the idea of non-Aboriginal authorship based on sophisticated style. However, Walsh (2000:210) did have a dig at David Welch for suggesting in his 1996 paper that 'there is a continuity of a high level of artistic skill from the earliest to the latest art' (Welch 1996:105). Walsh's (2000:210) response was trifling: 'Within the current politically correct environment any individual interpretation of just what constitutes a "high level of artistic skill" may remain an arguable point'. Beyond this, Walsh never engaged directly with criticisms of his use of 'artistic skill' as a measure of Aboriginality, perhaps an acknowledgment of the spurious nature of the concept and the traction of Welch's empirically-sound critique.

In *Appropriated Pasts* (2005), Lynette Russell and I went to some length to show that in all major settler colonial contexts, whether in Australia, Africa or the US, European colonisers often tried to deny local Indigenous agency in the creation of complex archaeological sites. Classic examples include Great Zimbabwe and the Mississippi mounds. It is part of the philosophy of colonialism that harks back to the ancient Greeks and Romans. It was in this sense that we suggested that Walsh's line of argument was anything but novel:

> The core issue is not the question of outside contacts per se; it is about the employment of the well-rehearsed colonial trope of inferring such contacts using material culture described and essentialised as too sophisticated to have been made by Indigenous Australians (McNiven and Russell 2005:157).

Cosmological Disassociation

One of the key planks of Walsh's non-Aboriginal origins hypothesis is so-called Aboriginal disinterest in Gwion Gwion paintings. In his 1994 book, Walsh (1994:13) states boldly that:

> To date there has been no indication of Aboriginals claiming that Bradshaw Figures were created by their ancestors, or were associated with their culture. In fact, the literature shows a complete Aboriginal disregard for this type of art, which has tended to be either ignored as not being part of contemporary culture, or disregarded as *rubbish paintings*.

Despite this assertion, Walsh (1994:13) goes on to state somewhat inconsistently that: 'The common belief amongst the more traditional and now deceased Elders of the west Kimberley was that the Bradshaw Figures were the work of "a little bird called *Kujon*, who lives in the rocks"'.

In January 1995, *Australian Business Monthly* magazine featured a six page spread on Walsh's research (Stannard 1995). The article's byline got straight to the point of their agenda: 'Tracing the origins of thousands of beautiful rock paintings in northern Australia could have repercussions for modern Aborigines who … may not have been the first Australians after all' (Stannard 1995:130). This byline is based on two quotes by Walsh in the article. First: 'Since the turn of the century every ethnographer who has questioned them [Aboriginal people] has received the same answer … They simply say "They are before our time"'. Second:

> If it could be demonstrated conclusively that this art pre-dates Aboriginal culture, there might be a lot of people who would be happy for it not to be known because it would undercut the [land] claims, which in turn support the multi-million dollar Aboriginal industry (Stannard 1995:132).

This article in the *Australian Business Monthly* magazine is highly significant because it exposed Walsh's political agenda and how archaeological evidence could be manipulated yet again as a weapon of dispossession against Aboriginal people.

The Australian Archaeological Association Inc. took a stand against this politicisation of the Gwion Gwion debate, and the 1995 press release authored by Andrée Rosenfeld *et al.* (AAA 1996:59) stated that 'The membership of AAA is concerned that such unsubstantiated claims could have adverse political implications for Aboriginal people's right to their cultural heritage'.

Many Aboriginal people were equally outraged by growing media attention given to Walsh's claims for so-called lack of cultural association with Gwion Gwion paintings. After all, Aboriginal people had the most to lose in this increasingly politicised arena. The 1990s was a period of intense political and legal wrangling over Native Title in the wake of the historic Mabo court case of 1992. Yet Aboriginal voices were given a hearing in the media. The feature story in *The Age*'s 1997 *The Good Weekend* magazine article was about the Gwion Gwion paintings debate with a focus on Aboriginal views. The article discusses how a delegation of Ngarinyin elders had recently gone to a UNESCO art history forum in Paris to present their side of the Gwion Gwion story. The article's authors, Murray Hogarth and Leigh Dayton (1997:12), make their position on Aboriginal voices clear: 'Their words are those of a living people connected through the millennia to the ancient artists'. Hogarth and Dayton (1997:15) also reiterated the politically-charged nature of Walsh's non-Aboriginal origins theory:

> This theory has dangerous implications for the Ngarinyin and all of Aboriginal Australia in the current political climate. Though not based on any unequivocal archaeological evidence, the theory dismisses the Ngarinyin as unsophisticated Johnny-come-latelies, implying they possibly dispossessed or even wiped out a superior culture.

The article goes on to say that 'Until now, Walsh's theory has won the publicity stakes' (Hogarth and Dayton 1997:16).

Three years later, the deep spiritual connections Ngarinyin people have to Gwion Gwion paintings were celebrated and documented in empirical detail in the lavishly illustrated volume *Gwion Gwion*, a product of the ambitious multimedia Pathway Project (Ngarjno *et al.* 2000). The multilingual volume is written in Ngarinyin, English, German and French, and along with a series of documentaries (Hamston 2006), gave an unprecedented Aboriginal perspective on Gwion Gwion paintings to an international audience.

However, 2000 was also the year Grahame Walsh released *Bradshaw Art of the Kimberley*. Here Walsh presents a distorted picture of Aboriginal association with Gwion Gwion paintings. For example, he cites Agnes Schulz (1956:12) as saying that Kimberley Aboriginal people simply refer to Bradshaw paintings as bush spirits (*d'imi*) while similar Dynamic Figures of Arnhem Land were referred to by local Aboriginal people also as bush spirits (*mimi*). Walsh (2000:443) concludes from this information that 'Schultz clearly states the absence of Aboriginal tradition associated with the Bradshaw art, and the significance of these assessments should be borne in mind'. Walsh (2000:443) then goes on to cite Father Worms (1955:555): 'The present natives are of the opinion that another people, who occupied this district long before their arrival, produced them. They call both paintings and painters *giro giro*'. Walsh (2000:443-444) also cites Ian Crawford (1968:86) who noted that: 'Unlike the majority of the paintings in the Kimberley, the Bradshaw figures are of no importance to the Aborigines, who simply regard them as the work of a bird … The paintings are "rubbish paintings", illustrating nothing of interest or value to the Aborigines'. Walsh (2000:444) adds that he was told by David Mowaljarlai in 1988 that the Gwion Gwion paintings were 'rubbish paintings' and that they were 'before our time'. The *Gwion Gwion* book helps put these comments on cultural disassociation into their proper cultural context. Furthermore, Anthony Redmond in his 2002 paper in *Australian Aboriginal Studies* points out that the term 'rubbish' in Aboriginal English does not mean 'garbage' but is a relative concept that connotes, amongst other things, something that is more in the background. At best, Walsh's claim for Aboriginal cosmological disassociation reveals anthropological naivety; at worst it reveals the fruits of an ideologically-driven research agenda.

Temporal Disassociation

According to Walsh, two chronological dimensions of Gwion Gwion paintings are consistent with the non-Aboriginal origins hypothesis. In his 1994 book, Walsh makes much of the presence of an occupational hiatus in the Kimberley between approximately 20,000 and 10,000 years ago as revealed by Sue O'Connor's excavations at Koolan and Widgingarri rockshelters (O'Connor 1999). Walsh (1994:57) suggests that the 'discontinuity

in occupation … might correlate with the discontinuities in the rock art' and 'changes of similar magnitude in ethnic identity'. That is, the Gwion Gwion paintings probably date to before the occupational hiatus. Walsh (1994:58-63) goes on to suggest that perhaps the earlier ethnic group of Gwion Gwion painters can be associated with initial colonisation of the continent by Negritos as outlined in Birdsell's trihybrid colonisation model. The fact that Birdsell's model has long been considered defunct by archaeologists failed to deter Walsh. However, as discussed in detail by Grounds and Ross (2010), Birdsell's model was a *cause celebre* for those wishing to create a disjuncture between Aboriginal people and their ancestral past.

The issue of vast temporal distance somehow equating with cultural disassociation and even ethnic disassociation was taken up by a few academic archaeologists. Mike Morwood (1996:48) in his review of Walsh's 1994 *Bradshaws* book stated that:

> If the Bradshaws prove to be relatively recent in age (i.e. Holocene), as preliminary AMS determinations would suggest, then one could argue for a fairly direct line of Aboriginal descent from Bradshaw artists to present-day local people. If the Bradshaw paintings prove to be much older, for instance if they were to predate the last glacial maximum and the associated depopulation of the region, then the Aboriginal line of descent is less direct, but still clear.

In our 1997 *Antiquity* paper: '"Strange paintings' and 'mystery races"', Lynette Russell and I pointed out that the fact that Aboriginal narratives of Gwion Gwion paintings 'do not identify specific human painters is consistent with Aboriginal cosmology, and ages of at least 4000 … and even 17,000 years … now suggested for early Bradshaw paintings' (McNiven and Russell 1997:806).

In his second *Bradshaws* book from 2000, Walsh attempts to use the available dates suggesting great antiquity for the Gwion Gwion paintings to discredit Aboriginal cultural ties. He stated bluntly that any 'argument' of cultural continuity is 'unworthy of serious consideration' (Walsh 2000:443). Furthermore, 'even if one were to hypothetically consider any form of fragmented cultural association between the Bradshaw era and contemporary Aboriginal culture, the plausibility of intimate knowledge of art forms surviving many millennia must surely be beyond rational consideration' (Walsh 2000:443). Why Walsh demanded Aboriginal people must possess the same cultural associations with Gwion Gwion paintings as the original makers of the paintings had many 1000s of years ago is not clear. While occupational hiatuses in a series of rockshelters around the margins of the main area of Gwion Gwion paintings are certainly extremely interesting, it is far from demonstrated that this evidence represents wholesale abandonment of a region stated to be the size of Spain.

Foreign Origins

A logical question that follows on from arguments for the non-Aboriginal origin of Gwion Gwion painters is: 'Where did they come from?' Rev. Mathew, in his 1899 book *Eaglehawk and Crow: A Study of the Australian Aborigines*, suggested some of the lines drawn in Joseph Bradshaw's rendering of Gwion Gwion paintings represent Sumatran writing, similar to that he believed was associated with George Grey's famous rendering of a Wandjina (Grey 1841). Mathew (1899:134) concludes that this 'at once suggest[s] Sumatra as the native home of the artist'.

In his first *Bradshaws* book from 1994, Walsh (1994:41) used the notion of the so-called sudden appearance of the Gwion Gwion tradition to argue the case that 'this artistic tradition arrived in the Kimberley in a fully developed form'. He goes on to note similarities between Gwion Gwion paintings and rock art from the African Sahara and Tanzania, but added that no 'direct association between these widely distanced art areas' is 'intended' (Walsh 1994:56). In an interview in the 1997 issue of *The Good Weekend* magazine from the Melbourne-based newspaper *The Age*, Walsh narrowed his geographical option: 'At this stage, I don't know where they came from, but it's a culture that arrived here intact, logically from Indonesia' (Hogarth and Dayton 1997:15).

In his 1997 Honours thesis from the University of Sydney, Michael Barry tested 'the hypothesis that the Gwion resemble prehistoric figures outside Australia more than they do those within the continent' (Barry 1997; Barry and White 2004:38). A total of 1694 human figures from 17 regions outside of Australia (including Africa) were compared with 536 human figures within Australia (mostly Gwion Gwion figures and figures from Arnhem Land). Visual analysis revealed some minor similarities between Gwion Gwion and Algerian paintings and major similarities between Gwion Gwion and Arnhem Land figures. Multivariate statistical analysis of up to 79 measurements made on the 2230 figures revealed that the 'Gwion images are isolated from all the other areas, but their closest affinities lie with Arnhem Land' (Barry and White 2004:42). These interpretations are consistent with Darrell Lewis' important 1997 paper in *Australian Archaeology* which demonstrated key similarities between Gwion Gwion paintings and Arnhem Land paintings. Barry's important empirical findings received positive media coverage in *The Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper (Dayton 1997).

In 1998, the *Australian Magazine* from the national newspaper *The Weekend Australian* ran a feature article showcasing Grahame Walsh and his Gwion Gwion paintings research and interpretations (Leech 1998). The story centred on a number of remarkable paintings of boats with high prows and sterns carrying numerous people. According to Walsh, these boats represent 'ocean' voyaging by immigrants who 'came from overseas at least 20,000 years ago – possibly as much as 30,000 years ago' and created the Gwion Gwion paintings (Leech 1998:18).

In his *Bradshaw Art* book from 2000, Walsh pushes the African connection hypothesis to a far greater degree than he did in his earlier 1994 book. Following positive coverage in the 1998 *Australian Magazine* article, broad media coverage of the book was supportive and focused on how paintings of ocean-voyaging boats added credibility to Walsh's foreign origins hypothesis (O'Neill 2000, 2001; Rothwell 2000). In *Bradshaw Art*, Walsh (2000:420) also responded to his critics forcefully. He suggested that Michael Barry's comparative analyses were based on 'a highly selective and unavoidably biased' sample of images. Walsh (2000) then attempts to show the virtues of his foreign origins hypothesis and how Gwion Gwion paintings are similar to African paintings and dissimilar to Arnhem Land paintings. Yet Walsh (2000) actually presents more evidence for

similarities between Gwion Gwion and Arnhem Land paintings than between Gwion Gwion and African paintings. Bizarrely, Walsh (2000:Figures 680-681) redraws 13 examples of Gwion Gwion, Arnhem Land and Algerian paintings by swapping hand-held artefacts between these to drive home the point that the Gwion Gwion paintings look similar to the Algerian paintings. Walsh (2000:424) ended his rather spurious comparative study with a warning to those wishing to see similarities between Kimberley and Arnhem Land rock art: 'Extreme caution should be exercised regarding overzealous attempts to link these two widely separated art regions'.

In their 2004 paper in *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, Barry and White (2004:44) sum up the situation aptly as follows:

> A proposal for an exotic origin of Gwion/Bradshaw figures must meet two conditions. First, closely similar paintings need to be found outside Australia. Second, some plausible link between the two occurrences must be established.
>
> Barry's work has demonstrated that Gwion figures do not, as suggested by the exotic origin story, resemble overseas figures more than Australian. They resemble Australian figures so strongly that an origin within the Australian continent is indicated. Finally, there is plausibility. Algeria as a source for Gwion is, in our view, about as implausible as one could imagine.

Despite trenchant academic critique, the popular desire for seeking a foreign origin for Gwion Gwion paintings actually intensified. In his highly popular 2006 book *Lost World of the Kimberley*, professional author Ian Wilson recounts his personal journey to understand the history and significance of the Gwion Gwion paintings. For reasons not entirely obvious, Wilson (2006:220) notes that 'the Bradshaw people were not actually indigenous to Australia. They came into the country from somewhere else, seemingly having already developed a lot of their culture, including boomerangs, in that as yet undetermined other place'. This sets Wilson on a foraging expedition looking around the globe for potential cultural links and origin centres. He points out similarities with African rock paintings (2006:154) and boomerangs from Upper Palaeolithic Europe (2006:220). Links, or at the very least travels, to Southeast Asia are posited based on admittedly curious paintings of deer-like motifs (2006:224). Interestingly, Wilson (2006:218) acknowledges similarities between Gwion Gwion and Arnhem Land Dynamic Figure rock paintings but sees this as simply reflecting movement between both regions and not *in situ* development.

Like Walsh's books, Wilson's *Lost World of the Kimberley* attracted high-profile media attention. However, this time discussions were much more critical. For example, in January 2006, journalist Nicolas Rothwell had a two-page spread reviewing the book in the *Weekend Australian* national newspaper. Rothwell titled his review 'Rock bottom' and he was clearly unimpressed. He writes:

> One hardly knows whether to laugh or weep on being confronted with such a bizarrely multiplicity book: at once a layman's overview of recent steps in Australian archaeology and rock art research, an account of one man's brief Kimberley trip and an exploration of certain unverifiable personal enthusiasms that even the author, in his wiser moments, half-ascribes to his 'overactive imagination' (Rothwell 2006:R9).

Rothwell finishes his lengthy review with a broadside on Allen and Unwin, publishers of the book: 'If a leading Australian publisher feels licensed to put out such material in the quest for profit, then we have reached a sad moment in the degeneration of the nation's writing culture' (Rothwell 2006:R9). Claire Smith in her equally scathing 2006 review of Wilson's book in *Rock Art Research*, fully concurred with Rothwell's summation.

In July 2006, *The Times Literary Supplement* (TLS) of London published a page and a half review of Wilson's book by famous British explorer Robin Hanbury-Tenison. Hanbury-Tenison (2006a:13), while admitting that 'Some of Wilson's hypotheses are rather bizarre', was somewhat surprised that Wilson's book was 'savaged' by Rothwell, and sees this attack as part of a broader 'conspiracy to play the whole story down, either from misguided embarrassment or political correctness'. The story, Hanbury-Tenison (2006a:14) writes, is that 'perhaps' the Gwion Gwion paintings were created by a 'prosperous society' but 'After the seas rose and the ancestors of today's aborigines [sic] arrived, they were wiped out, and almost all trace of the first real culture the world had known was lost'. Hanbury-Tenison (2006a:14) does draw the reader's attention to similarities between Gwion Gwion paintings and the Tassili rock art of Algeria, but does undermine the significance and indeed relevance of this comparison, stating: 'Yet they were painted 13,000 kilometres apart, and probably much more than 10,000 years apart'.

Wilson's wild and unbridled speculations, coupled with Hanbury-Tenison's suggestions of political correctness and a conspiracy of silence over the real truth of Gwion Gwion paintings, elicited a lengthy 800 word Letter to the Editor of the TLS by Lynette Russell and myself which was published in full a month after Hanbury-Tenison's review (McNiven and Russell 2006). In terms of the idea that the aesthetic form of the paintings makes them non-Aboriginal, we wrote:

> to suggest that these features make the art 'pre-Aboriginal' is naïve and based on nineteenth century colonialist representations of Aboriginal Australians as primitive people with limited capabilities. If Aboriginal people are essentialised as incapable of producing elegant art then by definition they are denied authorship of the Bradshaws. This simplistic line of reasoning is not based on objective research but is ideological.

We ended our letter with:

> The ancient Aboriginal heritage of Australia deserves better treatment than that offered by Wilson or indeed Hanbury-Tenison. Professional archaeologists, however, must take some of the blame for failing to fulfil public demands for accessible information on Australia's ancient past. Unfortunately, this demand is being met, at present, by amateur musings masquerading as scholarly, informed and objective truth.

Described as 'trenchantly critical' (Williams 2009:1016), our letter elicited two letters of response, including one by Hanbury-Tenison, which were published by the TLS. The first letter

accused us of 'political correctness' while the second accused us of 'excruciating political correctness' (Hanbury-Tenison 2006b; Voss 2006).

In 2007, Grahame Walsh, aged 62, died. Also in 2007, the Australian public ended the 11 year reign of the conservative Liberal Party at the Australian Federal Election and the more moderate Australian Labour Party assumed power. Since then, little media attention has been given to Gwion Gwion paintings. This change suggests strongly that media interest in the Bradshaw debate was energised largely by Walsh and a conservative political context.

Lessons Learned

What have we learned from the Gwion Gwion paintings debate? Media coverage of the 'Bradshaw debate' rarely presented academic criticisms of Walsh's interpretations in a credible light and invariably presented Walsh as a free-thinking 'maverick' whose credibility rested with his unchallenged experience and expertise in recording Gwion Gwion paintings over more than two decades (Rothwell 2007). Yet Walsh's appeal seemed to tap into something deeper within Australian society that wanted him to be right. As historian Robert Manne (2003:7) pointed out in relation to parallel high profile media attention given to revisionist frontier historian Keith Windschuttle, 'he was singing a song many people wanted to hear'. Cornelius Holtorf (2005:548) reminds us that 'every past is the construct of a particular present-day context'. Thus, I suspect, we have not heard the last of colonialist interpretations of Gwion Gwion paintings. As long as Australian society struggles to comprehend and acknowledge Aboriginal Native Title rights, archaeology will continue to be manipulated by those seeking to undermine Aboriginal authenticity and legitimacy of connections to land and heritage. Manipulation of the past is a powerful weapon of the coloniser. Whenever we move into a period of political conservatism, such as Australia experienced in the 1990s and 2000s, such ideological views will be given a privileged position and unprecedented media attention. Under such conditions, pointing out the empirical errors of dissociative archaeologies will only ever have selective traction and impact (see Cole 1980:19).

In *Uncovering Australia*, Sarah Colley (2002:154) posited that: 'The media is central to shaping and reflecting public understandings of archaeology in Australia'. She added that: 'Many Australian archaeologists are interested in the media and its relationship to them and their work, but few have published on the subject or engaged with theoretical issues identified by media studies researchers' (Colley 2002:168). Colley's (2002:169) own explorations of the issue identify that the Australian media focuses on archaeological stories with 'controversy, often linked to human interest' and 'scandals'. Clearly, the 'Bradshaw debate' was well-suited for media attention. Colley (2002:169) adds that: 'Stated "facts" about the past usually have greater news appeal than more cautious, and often more accurate, statements from archaeologists about what their finds could mean' (see also Boyd 1995). Unfortunately, in trying to counter Walsh's claims we in the academic and professional archaeological world were hamstrung by a paucity of sound and reliable archaeological information on Gwion Gwion paintings and their painters. In this empirical void, the voices of amateurs flourished with fanciful speculations that we as professionals could often only counter based on issues of plausibility or even what were perceived by the broader public and media as more abstract and nebulous theoretical and emotionally-charged notions of colonialism and racism. As we have seen, such criticisms are fertile ground for accusations of 'political correctness'.

Commenting on the criticism of 'mainstream academics', Walsh stated in 2004 that: 'If it was a scientific argument, I'd challenge it, but these sort of people don't have a good enough argument for open debate; they just use old chestnuts like racism and colonialism that make people cringe' (Winkler 2004). The fact that Walsh dismissed intellectual and theoretical critiques of his interpretations as 'old chestnuts' revealed that he had little interest in engaging in a 'scientific argument' with university-based archaeologists. Walsh's approach was to undermine the veracity of academic criticism by undermining the credibility of academics whom he often described using the pejorative term 'boffins'. This anti-academic stance is typical of maverick 'alternative archaeologists' across the world. As Fagan (2006a:33) cogently observes, usually in these contexts 'University credentials in archaeology thus become the basis for suspicion of a critic: expertise becomes the *prima facie* reason for rejecting expert analysis. As the underdog, the speculator can combine the roles of martyr and liberator, oppressed for their beliefs but struggling gamely to break the chains of "orthodox" thinking'. This situation reveals that even when academic archaeologists have a public voice their message either gets lost or is counter-productive (see Flemming 2006:57-59).

In many ways, it was Aboriginal people and non-professionals who responded more directly and effectively to the 'Bradshaw debate' than professional (institutionalised) archaeologists. Publication of the lavishly illustrated *Gwion Gwion* book by the Pathway Project in 2000 put the Aboriginal view forward and in a detailed and aesthetically engaging format that was available in most major bookshops in Australia and overseas. In marked contrast, the only academic book specifically on the Gwion Gwion paintings and presenting an Aboriginal origins perspective is *Rock Art of the Kimberley* published in 2007. Significantly, the book was edited not by archaeologists but by Mike Donaldson and Kevin Kenneally, non-professional rock art enthusiasts and members of the Kimberley Society based in Perth, Western Australia. The Society 'is a non-profit organisation formed in 1992' which has as one of its key aims 'to make information on all aspects of the Kimberley available to a wide range of people through publications and meetings' (Kimberley Society 2010). Significantly, the most important chapter in the book is by David Welch (2007) who is not a university-based academic (Taçon 2009). Welch's chapter provides more compelling empirical evidence using historical photographs as ethnographic analogues of Gwion Gwion adornments, building on his article in *Rock Art Research* (Welch 1996).

The role of academic archaeologists in the 'Bradshaw debate' was critical but incomplete. The critical role was twofold. First were publications revealing that Gwion Gwion paintings were more similar to the known Aboriginal rock art of Arnhem Land than to rock paintings in other countries such as Africa (e.g. Barry and White 2004; see also Lewis 1997). Comparative, quantitative and qualitative research demonstrated that Gwion Gwion paintings fall within the broader geographical

and cultural context of Aboriginal Australia. Second were publications identifying the historical pedigree of colonial tropes underpinning arguments disassociating Aboriginal people from their land and heritage (e.g. McNiven and Russell 1997, 2005). The legitimacy of dissociative interpretations as innovative and challenging was discredited. Colonialist critique revealed that far from being innovative and challenging, such ideas were little more than a recycling and resurrection of outdated scholarship. The intellectual theorising underpinning dissociative interpretations of Gwion Gwion paintings was done over one hundred years ago and not in the 1990s. 'Rehashing discredited ideas for the contemporary public' is one of the hallmarks of pseudoarchaeology (Fagan 2006b:363). In this sense, Walsh's use of the term 'old chestnuts' is somewhat ironic. Yet academics were incomplete in their critique due to limited engagements with the media which was the main arena where the 'Bradshaw debate' was contested. Scholarly publications are helpful, but their reach is limited and they 'preach largely to the converted' (Lilley 2005:99; see also Cole 1980:24). While some academic engagements in high profile media outlets may have had some positive impacts (e.g. AAA 1996; Dayton 1997; McNiven and Russell 2006) and raised the ire of Walsh (2000), such engagements were reactive and sporadic.

One outlet for academic information on Gwion Gwion paintings underutilised by professional archaeologists is the Internet. To his credit, Barry (2010) established a website that presented the results of his research in detail. The production of Internet sites with relevant and visually-engaging information to counter colonialist interpretations of Gwion Gwion paintings provides an alternative mechanism by which professional archaeologists can attain mass media access to the public beyond more traditional television and printed newspaper commercial outlets. Equally important, Internet sites may help democratise the 'Bradshaw debate' by allowing members of the public with a broad range of views readily-accessible and detailed information on Gwion Gwion paintings beyond Walsh's (1994, 2000) prohibitively expensive and largely inaccessible volumes. If these Internet sites are interactive and allow viewer feedback and dialogue, they provide unique opportunities to communicate *with* the public and address issues of mutual concern. In this sense, Internet sites provide a means for archaeologists to engage, and better understand, the unconverted. While an Internet approach introduces its own challenges and issues (e.g. Clarke 2004; Fagan 2006b; Reece 2006), particularly with regards to stimulating public discourse on colonialist archaeologies, it is an experiment worth pursuing to see what new lessons can be learned. We need to better understand the epistemological frameworks of the unconverted if we are to successfully counter spurious constructions of the past (Fagan and Feder 2006:722; Holtorf 2005:549; Lampeter Archaeology Workshop 1997:173). Watkins (2006:102) makes the point that 'It is important that we move beyond the elementary idea that merely talking with or telling the public is enough; it is important that we move on to actually communicating with them'.

Conclusion

McGuire (2008:xii) reminds us that 'archaeology is always political' (see Kohl and Fawcett 1995; Meskell and Preucel 2004; Shanks and Tilley 1992). It is this political dimension that makes archaeology both highly relevant in the present, and in terms of Indigenous peoples, a potential weapon for oppression and dispossession (McGuire 2008:231; McNiven and Russell 2005:92, 199). Remarkably, the oppressive dimensions of archaeology were formulated during the discipline's formative years in the nineteenth century. Such dimensions, expressed through a broad range of colonial tropes, continue to have currency in the modern world because issues of Indigenous sovereignty and Indigenous control and ownership of land and heritage remain unresolved in many settler colonial contexts such as Australia and North America. It is for this reason that the 'Bradshaw debate' flourished in Australia in the 1990s when Aboriginal Native Title rights were fiercely contested. In the politically conservative climate of the 1990s and 2000s, Walsh's work and interpretations made Gwion Gwion paintings a *cause celebre* in terms of delegitimising the cultural integrity of Kimberley Aboriginal people and disassociating them from their heritage and undermining recognition of their Native Title rights. Thus, these debates will surface periodically because the underlying issues of Indigenous sovereignty and land control remain unresolved and contentious.

The 'Bradshaw debate' teaches us that academic archaeologists only have a partial role to play in countering dissociative interpretations of Indigenous heritage. Other key players are Aboriginal peoples and non-professional members of the archaeological community (Holtorf 2005:549-550; Lampeter Archaeology Workshop 1997:174). Furthermore, as such debates are usually contested in the media, academic archaeologists could have done more on a proactive front to get authoritative, academic dimensions of the archaeological story across to the broader public, especially using the Internet. The challenge is to ensure that this story is empirically sound such that the facts bluntly negate fanciful archaeologies. Critically, the facts also need to speak for themselves in the eyes of the public and give credibility and support to more emotionally provocative and conceptually challenging anti-colonial critiques. Yet 'True believers may never be convinced, but many wavering bystanders can be – either way. If scientific archaeology is shown to have answers to unanswerable challenges, many people will be swayed, including opinion shapers in the mass media' (Cole 1980:24).

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