

# INTO THE LANDSCAPE

*To enjoy these works of stunning beauty, in their settings of comparable beauty, is an inimitable viewing experience. It is also a journey into prehistory.*

**John Van der Have: *Aboriginal Rock Art in the Blue Mountains*, Blue Mountain Education and Research Trust, 244 pages, 2016**



**John Olsen famously said:** "I am in the landscape, and the landscape is in me"—beautifully expressing what many Australians similarly feel in the depths of our being. This landscape is different from any other and is immediately identifiable, the tones of greys and greens and reds and blues we see in the eucalypt forests, the blacks and greys and sandstone pinks and yellows of the rocks which were never scoured clean by the receding ice age and so are the same today as they were millions of years ago. We feel this is where we belong and where aboriginal peoples have belonged for—who knows?—perhaps more than twenty millennia before us.

Not surprisingly, John Olsen is quoted by John Van der Have in his book about aboriginal rock art in the Blue Mountains—from Olsen's Profile in Hugh Speirs' landmark book 'Landscape Art and the Blue Mountains':

'...in Australia we are a comparatively new people in a very old continent—we have so much looking to do before we can find forms to explain it in poetic terms.

*We have to learn to dream with it  
.. as the Aborigines knew*

'We have to learn to dream with it—as the Aborigines knew; and, although some think of their art as being limited in its emotional range and visual schemata, I consider Aboriginal art to be still the finest body of work to be produced in this country because of their ability to 'dream', or, put another way, their ability to properly meditate upon it.'

Van der Have is an architect who specialises in harmonising design with the landscape and so when he looks at aboriginal rock art his first thoughts go to the particular environment where drawings are found, the place to which they are inextricably bound. He refers to the experiences of others who have worked with and recorded aboriginal rock art—Peter Stanbury and John Clegg for instance, who



*Gallery of Hands*

have described the sites chosen by aboriginals for their engravings, paintings and ceremonial grounds as being 'charged with atmosphere', and Graham Walsh who has said 'you can be literally flying in a helicopter and 'feel', so to speak, a site'.

Van der Have agrees: 'I too have felt power in these spaces when I encountered them. In several cases I knew as I encountered a site, even before I had seen any artwork, that I was in a place with a special sense of spatial presence.'

Readers will be surprised to learn that there are over 1,000 known rock art sites in the Blue Mountains, the area referenced by Van der Have, a tiny number in the context of the size of the Blue Mountains World Heritage Area which is well over a million hectares in area. He admits to not knowing the meanings of many of the artworks,

agreeing with the experts that much aboriginal rock art is difficult to decipher today. He has organised the works in this book into human figures, figures with circles, echidnas and fish, birds, macropods, other animals, hands, mudoes and tracks, mythological heroes, geometrical patterns, those with unknown meanings, and those referencing contact and consequences with Europeans.

Two examples I have chosen from this rich resource are for their familiarity for me: as a child I lived in Glenbrook and Red Hands Cave represented a strange and unknown presence that surrounded us in the bush and was hidden in the never-ending vista from our home across the undulating layers of the Blue Labyrinth. I don't know if the hands shown in Van der Have's book are those hands because he does not identify any of the locations of the rock art. Time and weather and deliberate destruction or defacing have taken a toll on our inheritance and there

A stylized signature or logo, possibly the author's name, written in a cursive, black ink style.



*Lyrebird Track*

is no useful purpose in putting up signposts. It is more than enough to know that the gallery of hands shown here 'were applied within a small cave in a secluded valley, close to a stream. Surrounded by tall ironbark and eucalypt trees, this is a tranquil, serene and special setting'. (However, Red Hands Cave in Glenbrook is one of the Blue Mountains aboriginal rock art sites which is publicly promoted to visitors and walkers and so perhaps not surprisingly, a wire mesh guard has been installed to prevent visitors from touching the cave wall and the images.)

The motif of the lyrebird track on that weather-worn and lichen-covered rock would have been recognisable to me as a bird but with no special meaning in my childhood and I was never conscious of seeing these shy and elusive birds in the bush surrounding our home. Today, however, quite unusually in the past two or three years, I find my upper Mountains garden has become the home of numerous lyrebirds, sitting on the roof or the deck, scratching around the paths and the shrubs. In fact they have almost become the bane of gardeners here as they

move great piles of earth and leaf mulch in their search for insects and grubs.

Every photograph of rock art is accompanied by a Blue Mountains scene (see above and previous pages) which describes the context of the work and emphasises Van der Have's overarching thesis that rock art is always specific to place.

John Van der Have's book offers an indispensable guide to understanding the concealed treasures of our unique environment, combining a sensibility and an essential reference for everyone.

**Carolynne Skinner**

#### References

- Hugh Speirs: *Landscape Art and the Blue Mountains*, Alternative Publishing Co-operative Ltd., 1981
- Peter Stanbury and John Clegg: *A Field Guide to Aboriginal Rock Engravings*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1990
- Graham Walsh: *Australia's Greatest Rock Art*, E.J. Brill-Robert Brown & Associates (Aust.) Pty. Ltd., Bathurst, 1988