

Rock art watercolours: the Kimberley paintings of Hill and d'Emo

By MICHAEL P. RAINSBURY

This article discusses the watercolour paintings produced by Father Nicholas d'Emo and Gerald Hill at Drysdale River Mission in the Kimberley of Western Australia in 1909/10. Their respective collections, generally unknown and un-referred to until recently, comprise a major body of research material.

The first work to discuss is the album of watercolours by Spanish missionary-priest Father Nicholas d'Emo (1849–1915). He worked in South America and South Africa before being assigned to Beagle Bay Mission in northern Western Australia. He was a Cistercian priest, and later associated with the Benedictine and Pallottine Orders (Perez 1977: 2–3; Smith 2011). He spoke French, Latin, Spanish and Catalan, and in Broome learnt the Yawuru and Nyul-Nyul languages (Ganter n.d.). D'Emo was one of the founding fathers

of Drysdale River Mission at Pago on Napier Broome Bay in August 1908.

The first record of d'Emo's interest in rock art is in a letter (11 February 1910) to Abbot Torres about his album of drawings (Nailon 2005: 155). D'Emo wrote that as he was not participating in Mission activities, he had started an album of Aboriginal paintings found in 24 rockshelters lying to the north, north-east and south-east of the Mission. He had by then drawn 26 illustrations reproducing as closely as possible the original colours. He noted the art was found on the roofs of long, low shelters between three and five feet (1–1.5 m) high, and many were affected by fires lit in the caves, making them difficult to reproduce. He had to copy them lying on the ground, the floor smoothed by Aborigines sheltering from rain or storms.

Father d'Emo's album of rock art watercolours is held by the Western Australian Museum (E6129) with a black and white photographic copy in the New Norcia Archives. It is a large (approximately 19.7 × 31 cm) financial ledger in which individual coloured plates, painted on lined writing paper, are stuck on the right



Figure 1. Pages from d'Emo's album with (a) the album cover, (b & c) two Wandjinas, (d) examples of girri-giri or kir-kiro figures (Pls 1, 5, 47, 57; images by permission of the Western Australian Museum).

hand, 'odd', pages. In a few cases individual motifs are cut out and pasted down. Each plate in turn is outlined by two or three rectangles in combinations of blue and red. There are 67 plates of rock art panels including the two title pages, the first of which comprises cut out letters and words. Originally intended for the Lord Abbot of New Norcia, it reads in Spanish (Fig. 1a): 'Album Iconimico-Etografico Aborigine de Pinturas. Ballados en los Museos Naturales (o' Cuevas de rocas en los Bosques) de los Aborigines Salvajes del N. E. de West Australia'. This is written in English on the inside cover as 'Album. Iconimico-Etografico-Aboriginal of Paintings, founded in the natural museums or caves of rocks in the forest of the wild aborigines of the N.E. of Western Australia'.

The panels are numbered sequentially

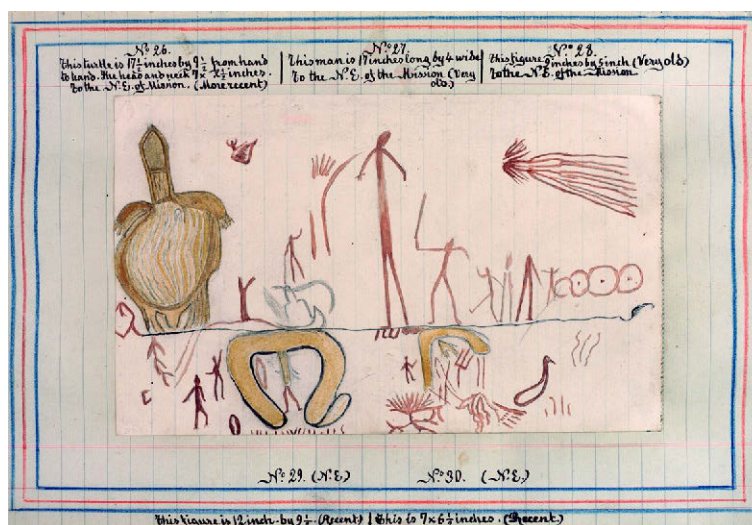


Figure 2. Plate 21, illustrating a composite scene of panels 26–30 (image by permission of the Western Australian Museum).



Figure 3. Plate 19 (panel 21) from cave R illustrating the 'murder' of the infant (image by permission of the Western Australian Museum).

and gaps in the numbering show not all the recorded art panels were stuck in the ledger. There is little indication of the number of art sites found, though Plate 65 is panel No. 90 from Cave 182. D'Emo wrote that the numbering was arbitrary and for his own private direction (Nailon 2005: 207).

D'Emo painted figures from over 91 sites and occasionally combined art from different sites or panels on the same plate (Fig. 2). Notes in copperplate handwriting give a description of each panel, its size, and direction from the Mission, along with occasional speculations on the subject matter, but no distances from the Mission or dates visited.

Sometimes d'Emo provided an opinion on age, e.g. 'more than 100 years old' (Pl. 13); or 'this figure has been painted in blood' (Pl. 11); and for two hand prints (Pl. 9) 'I think that the painter had produced this figure by painting his own hand in black, and then printing

here in the rock'. A representation of what now would be identified as a Wandjina head (Pl. 47) (Fig. 1c) is described as being a type of horseshoe with a shoe sole in the centre. Unfortunately without Aboriginal informants he did not know or understand what he was recording (Akerman 2016: 9–10). D'Emo's strangest interpretation concerns two human figures, one holding twin nested boomerangs (Plate 19) (Fig. 3). He wrote:

To the S.E. of the Mission (Cave R. bis). This group is 1 foot 10 inches by 1 foot wide. The figure on the left, is a man; that of the right, the woman that has killed her baby (still in her hands) [the nested boomerangs] with the stone tamiok. The baby is bleeding. The instrument of the crime is painted over her left arm. Close to the feet of the man, is a domestic opossum or cat smeling (sic) the blood; and bushes. The head of the woman is nearly gone. Whence come the wooden shoes that carry this man in his feet? (Very old picture) (d'Emo n.d.).

The above interpretation is most likely a product of d'Emo's imagination as in 1909/10 when recorded, personal contact with local Kwini people was limited with the monks living in fear. Living conditions at Pago were initially difficult with the monks retiring at night to the first floor of the Mission fearing attack. One memorable diary entry reads 'We are in the chapel saying our prayers, with the Rosary in one hand, and the revolver in the other' (15 March 1915 in Perez 1977: 24). Conditions were equally trying for d'Emo's rock art recording. In a letter to C. F. Gale, Chief Protector of Aborigines, he wrote 'I told you in my interview I was disappointed in leaving some interesting pictures ... in the caves of one place about 15 miles from the Mission ... I wanted three men with me (with guns) to allow me to remain two or three days in the place, and I could not obtain' (15 August 1913 in Nailon 2005: 207).

The second art collection is that by Gerald F. Hill (1880–1954) who produced a set of watercolour paintings of individual rock art figures. Hill was part of the Dept. of Economic Entomology in Canberra and visited the Mission from August 1909 to mid-1910 for scientific work. He later joined the Northern Territory Survey and Exploration Party of 1911–1912. At the Mission he was involved with biological collecting and is recorded as having shipped two boxes of birds to Sydney in February 1910. He was a photographer and sent films to Melbourne to be developed by an expert.

Gerald Hill's watercolours are held in the South Australian Museum (AA134/1/1–43). There are 43 plates in total, comprising 30 actual paintings and 13 slides of paintings with no corresponding paper in the archive. Of the 43 plates, four are of petroglyphs from Parry Harbour. The paintings are from a radius of 8 km from the Mission in the general Napier Broome Bay area.

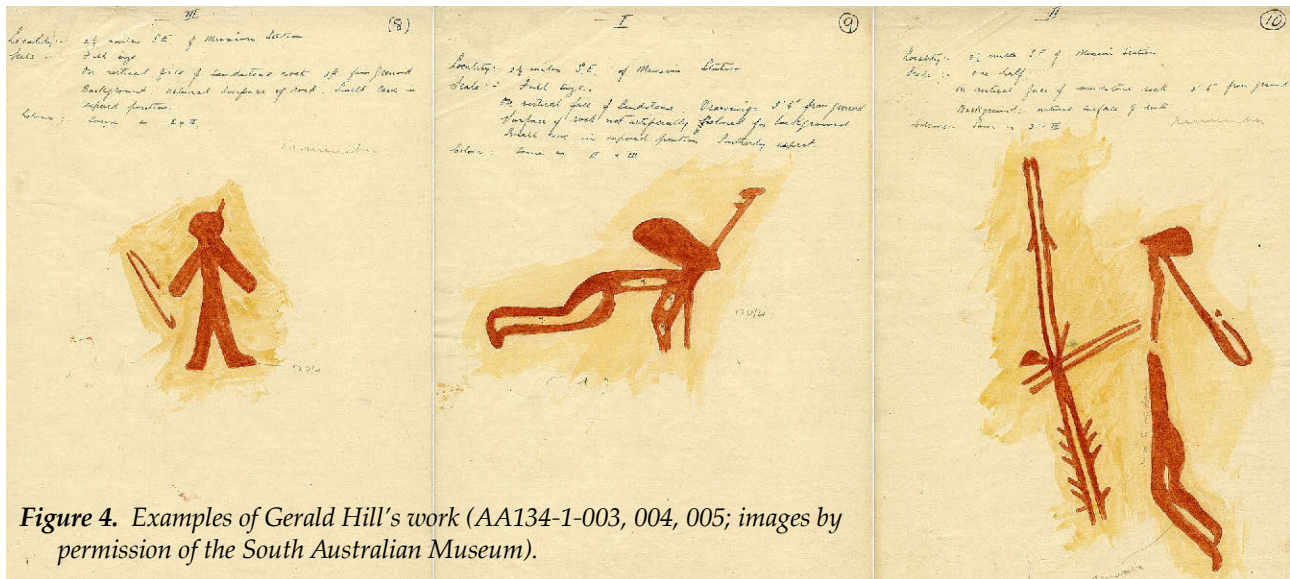


Figure 4. Examples of Gerald Hill's work (AA134-1-003, 004, 005; images by permission of the South Australian Museum).

The watercolours are of individual figures, one to the page (a little larger in size than modern A4), painted to represent the ochre of the original (Fig. 4). All the sketches are annotated in pencil with locality, distance and direction from the Mission, their scale whether full or half size, the location of the rockshelter and panel, and finally the colour rendering. Dates of visiting are provided for only seven plates: 10 February (Pl. 20), 15 April (Pls 27, 28, 35, 43) and 1, 26 May 1910 (Pls 35 and 7 respectively).

Hill painted recognisable anthropomorphs holding hooked stick spear throwers and in one case multi-barbed spears (Fig. 4), and a kangaroo hunt. Both men depicted macropod tracks, hand and foot prints, lizards, circular 'sun' signs and turtles, e.g. Figure 2. D'Emo though included geometric figures, canoes (see Ross and Travers 2013) and plants, e.g. two examples of strings of yams, ovals with tendrils thought to be long yams, and sets of undulating parallel lines he called grasses (see Veth et al. 2017 and Welch 2003).

It is difficult to determine whether they explored and painted together. The overlap of only seven panels in common suggests not. Their different ways of depicting the same figure is illustrated by comparing Figure 5a with the same motif in Figure 2. D'Emo included the associated *giri-giri* figures, Hill omitted them.

The uncertainty over their collaboration extends to their personal relations. D'Emo was disturbed by Hill's arrival leading him to complain the Benedictines were not observing monastic silence, on account of Hill talking until late with Father Planas in an adjacent room (Nailon 2005: 168). In such an environment the two men would be aware of the other's doings (the other monks knew of d'Emo's drawings but not his album). The two men did work together on other occasions such as Hill going with d'Emo to meet the steamer bringing supplies, and d'Emo helping Hill with his biological collecting.

D'Emo continued painting until 1913 when the 'Aboriginal album', as he called it, was presented to C. F. Gale, the Chief Protector of Aborigines. Writing

from Lombadina (15 August 1913), d'Emo sent four parcels to Gale, the entirety of his collection accrued from visiting over 200 Aboriginal camps. The collection included two small canoes, spears, iron and stone tomahawks, amongst other articles (Nailon 2005: 207; Smith 2011). The collection of 433 artefacts was passed on to the Western Australian Museum, some artefacts being still in their original packing (an *irgil* boomerang in newspaper wrapping dated 23 March 1912). The collection is of interest for the inclusion of women's objects, something unusual for collectors of the time (Smith 2011).

The album was sent to Gale as he had expressed an interest in it. In a rather poignant paragraph d'Emo wrote: 'I make a true sacrifice in depriving myself of its possession and sending it to you at your request; but trust that it will be a benefit to yourself and the State if you have it in the museum, as you intended' (15 August 1913 in Nailon 2005: 207). In a presumably earlier, though undated letter, d'Emo gave permission to an unnamed priest to advertise the album to the public and government, his name (d'Emo's) not to be used as he wanted the Benedictine fathers and Catholic religion to get the honour and credit for it. He thought the album might be published in the *Western Mail*, a newspaper specialising in publishing photographs (Nailon 2005: 158). If d'Emo's original intention to publish had occurred then it would have been the first ever guide to Kimberley rock art and possibly the first such guide in Australia.

Although donated as a personal sacrifice for the good of the (Western Australian) State, the album was consigned to an archive where it languished for the past century, being unknown and un-referred to until recently (Akerman 2016; Nailon 2005; Rainsbury 2016; Ross and Travers 2013; Smith 2011). The only other reference to it is from Perez's history of Kalumburu (1977: 165–171). Perez published images from the album of *giri giri* or *kir-kir* figures (so-called Bradshaw figures) (Fig. 1d) and said the album was used as a guide by Douglas Fox on the Frobenius expedition to the

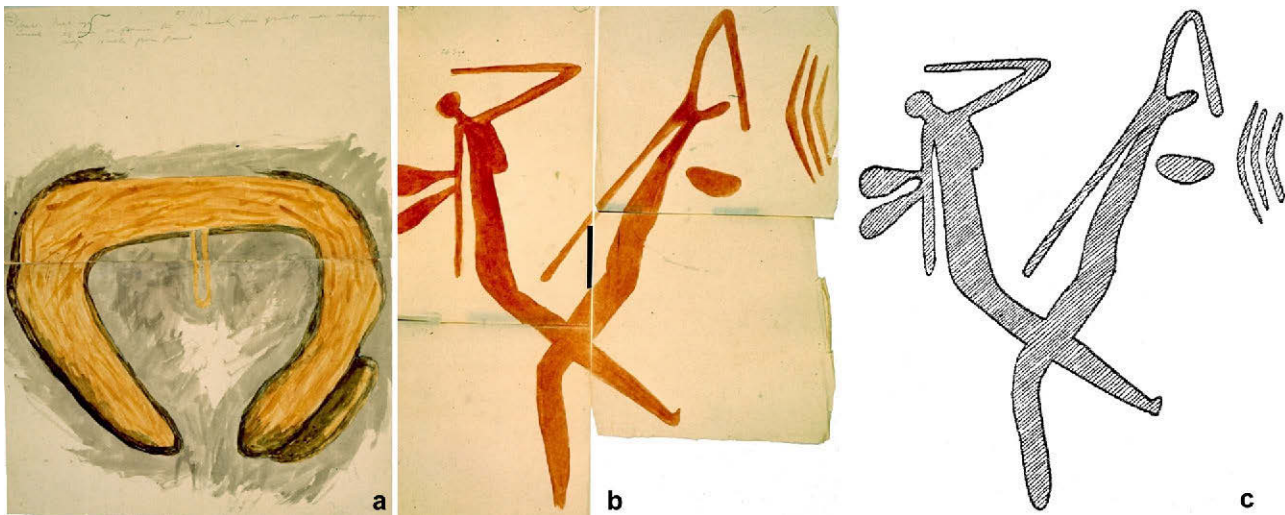


Figure 5. Hill's watercolours: (a) painting of a Wandjina head (AA134-1-037), (b) elegant action figures (AA134-1-041), and (c) Mountford's rendition of the same (1937: Fig 36). (Images by permission of the South Australian Museum.)

Kimberly in 1938/39 (Perez 1977: 166). The expedition photographed the site painted by d'Emo in Figure 2 naming it Kalu.

Gerald Hill's watercolours have languished in obscurity too for the last eighty years. Charles Mountford discovered them and published an account in the mid-1930s (Mountford 1937). In the intervening years they have not been referred to, one reason perhaps being Mountford's article. He redrew and colour coded them for publication, and in so doing changed the paintings from lively images (Fig. 5b) into rather soulless figures (Fig. 5c). The watercolours themselves show pencilled comments and notation in a different hand to Hill's, presumably Mountford's.

In conclusion Father Nicholas d'Emo and Gerald Hill produced 108 watercolour plates of rock art from their time at Drysdale River Mission, their two collections having lain in obscurity for almost a century. Only now is their value towards understanding the early days of settlement and the interests and pursuits of the monks and their visitors being appreciated.

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