

Murdoch and Walsh
beneath the curved
Bradshaw figures. "This art
has opened up so many
questions," says Murdoch.

What brought a rough diamond and a serene dowager to a remote reach of the Kimberley? A shared belief that ancient art found here is part of an amazing Australian saga.

Two faces, caught by morning light, stare upwards at a painted figure. One of them, a man's, half-shadowed in this North Kimberley rock shelter, is angular, wary, quick-eyed. The other is a woman's – calm, radiant, bearing the insistent passage-marks of time. They are gazing at a single, ancient painting – a sleek warrior, mulberry-red upon the sandstone, a masterpiece of prehistoric art. And though these two scarcely know each other, this moment marks the climax of their charming, improbable connection. He is Grahame Walsh, lone wolf of the Kimberley, brooding maverick of the rock art world – the researcher who put these “Bradshaw” figures on the map. She is Dame Elisabeth Murdoch, his supporter and admirer, 94-year-old matriarch of a media dynasty, a woman who has looked at Bradshaw photographs for years but has not – until today – stood before the real thing.

Fierce controversy surrounds the age and origin of the enigmatic Bradshaw rock art paintings of the North Kimberley, named after

explorer Joseph Bradshaw, who in 1891 noticed their distinctive style, featuring aquiline figures that reminded him of those in Egyptian temples.

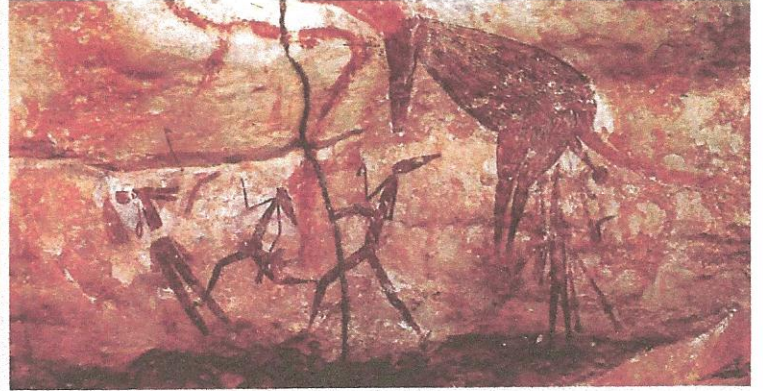
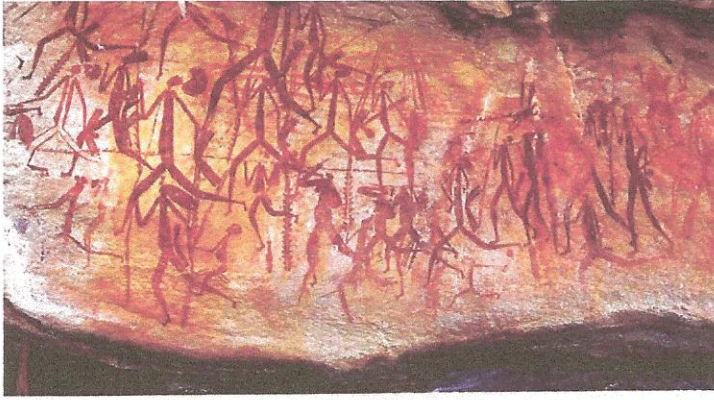
How, though, did a rough, wild-hearted former service station owner from Injune, in central west Queensland, come to be squiring a Melbourne establishment dowager round the serrated ridges of a north-western wilderness? What was it about the lovely, long-limbed, painted figures that brought together these two individuals from disparate worlds? The answers, like much about Walsh and Murdoch, are somewhat surprising, and say much about the way passion transcends differences and reaches into unusual corners of Australian life.

The first coincidence came more than a decade ago, in a Kimberley creek bed where Walsh, an obsessive rock art recorder who has no university affiliation or higher academic qualifications, was conducting his dry-season search for evidence of the deep Australian past. Every year since the mid-'70s he has been haunting the far north-west, compiling a body of data and a set of striking theories. Chief among these is ▶

STORY **NICOLAS ROTHWELL**
PHOTOGRAPHY **PETER EVE**



The & the matron maverick



Left: The figure-crowded Bradshaw painting that Walsh describes as a "Rosetta stone for the elegant action figures". Right: Kangaroo hunting scene.

his model of Bradshaw art. He argues that these paintings, anomalous in Australia, stem from a pre-ice age time, more than 17,000 years ago. His version of history throws open the possibility that several distinct migration events took place in the Kimberley; that several cultural waves broke upon the continent's north coast. This picture has been fiercely contested by Walsh's critics in universities and in Aboriginal political circles for its revolutionary time-depth and for its suggestion that there may have been a "pre-Aboriginal" past.

It was while Walsh was incubating these ideas that a party of Melbourne adventurers, led by sculptor John Robinson, stumbled upon his campsite and fell into conversation. What a mesmerising, if foul-mouthed, man he was, wrote Robinson's wife in a letter to her friend Janie Dyson, then wife, now widow, of the prominent Melbourne stockbroker Bruce "Dasher" Dyson. Some months later, Janie Dyson noticed that Walsh was lecturing in Melbourne. She and her husband went along and were hooked. They went with Walsh to

the world rock art conference in Flagstaff, Arizona. Dasher Dyson even pulled together an international sponsor network to publish the first systematic account of Bradshaw paintings, a lavish, limited-edition volume written by Walsh. He was also the president of the Arthritis Foundation of Australia, which Dame Elisabeth Murdoch had long supported. Dyson, who was not without a streak of social whimsy, invited the open-minded, ever-curious Murdoch to meet Walsh at lunch in Kooyong.

"At first she just looked like a nice

old lady, only she kept on saying she wanted to know the truth about the Bradshaws," remembers Walsh. "I'm sure she didn't know much about me and my life. If she did, she wouldn't have been game to shake my hand. She seemed really interested in this art, though ..." So much so that when she heard that the quad motorbikes which Walsh used for darting round the rock art sites were breaking down, she sent him a warm letter and bought him a new pair. Welcome, if conventional, patronage.

The next year, however, Murdoch,

who was already in her late eighties, flew to El Questro station in the Kimberley for a first attempt to see the art sites. Walsh and his long-time offsider, Toby Ware, met up with her. Would she like to see the quads?

"See them? I want to ride one," insisted Murdoch.

"I began, then, to get an idea of the kind of person she was," says Walsh. "She's such an in-your-face old chick. Nothing gets past her. I really admire the way she tells people just what she thinks."

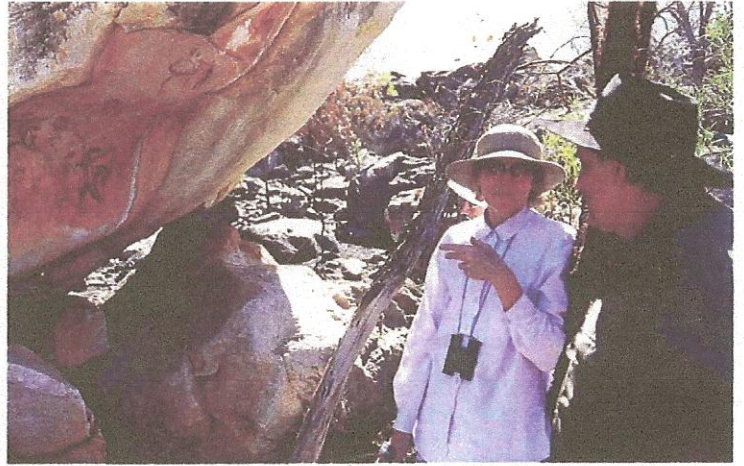
"He was obviously an extraordinary man," says Murdoch. "I became very enthusiastic about his work. I was also worried that he wasn't getting the recognition and support he deserved. He's dedicated his life to this art under very difficult circumstances.

"Of course, I was so deeply impressed by the elegance and beauty of the Bradshaws. As for him, belief in people is sometimes intuition. Sometimes the rough diamonds are the most admirable people. You don't gauge your admiration for people on the basis of their apparent education, or sophistication, or even the attractiveness of their personalities. He's got a core of character you can't help but admire."

A year later, Walsh was with Dyson once more in Melbourne. An invitation from Murdoch arrived. Lunch, at her



Walsh's true believers: the Kimberley Foundation's Susan Bradley (above); and Maria Myers (right, on site with Walsh), who backed his book.



property outside town. "It was a startling place - to my eyes, at least," Walsh recalls. "Big bronze brolgas everywhere." All the conversation was Bradshaws.

They stayed in touch. Murdoch attended his talks in Sydney and Melbourne. By this stage, Walsh, for all his outsider status, was beginning to attract private support on a startling

scale. A nexus of backers - men and women from the legal and corporate stratosphere - were prepared to fund his site research trips.

The combination of the elusive Bradshaws and Walsh's own dynamic urgency cast a cult-like shadow. First a Bradshaw Foundation, and then a Kimberley Foundation were created principally to back his work. Several impressive networkers lay behind this effort, among them the jazz-fancying, Paspaley pearl-wearing Susan Bradley, "queen of the Kimberley" and owner of

Australia's best-connected address book. Bradley had been involved with an odd "bush university" run by North Kimberley Aboriginal groups and had heard bad things about Walsh before being introduced to him by developer Warren Anderson in 1998.

"Well! I realised he was a one-off, and I was fascinated. I liked the larrikin and outlaw in him, and I saw his love and knowledge of the Aboriginal world." She alerted the Kimberley Foundation - which she had helped set up - to Walsh's ideas as they developed, and a

◀ succession of Australia's most powerful men and women began making trips to remote bush camps for informal rock art seminars.

A year on, and Walsh had reached a research full-stop. He had his chronology and art sequence, and photos. He started writing up his magnum opus, *Bradshaw Art of the Kimberley*. He went south again to give lectures. Dyson held another lunch, this time at the Toorak Tennis Club. Murdoch turned up, driving, at high revs, a Peugeot, number-plate, VIC 15. This was enough to win over the car-obsessed Walsh for good: "You must have had that plate a long time," he said. "Seventy years," she replied. There was much talk about life in the bush on the rock art trail. "I'd tell her in camp we eat fish, and she'd ask what fish," recalls Walsh. "I'd say it was tuna; she'd ask how we cooked it. I'd say it was tinned; she'd ask what brand. I'd say it was Black and Gold - and she'd say she found, for her part, that Home Brand was quite acceptable. Well, at that point I just had to invite her up to the Kimberley."

Another supporter, sapling-thin, Titian-haired pastoralist and lawyer Maria Myers, was also beginning to play a part in Walsh's research life. Myers had a child attending Geelong Grammar's Timbertop campus one year when Walsh came to lecture. She was already a keen student of the Aboriginal past in Victoria. She had heard, and taken on board, Bernard Smith's Boyer Lectures, in which he argued that until Australians were steeped in their landscape, and knew - really knew - their plants, soils, trees, their ancient history, the nation would be no more than a shallowly transplanted European copy.

Walsh laid out his Bradshaw ideas. "I was stunned," recalls Myers. "Waves of migration. The end of the 40,000 years of undifferentiated occupation. I was really set on fire by it." She took her family to Walsh's old base at Carnarvon Gorge in Central Queensland, and then, a year later, to the Kimberley. "On that first visit I saw the Bradshaws. I thought to myself that we don't understand this country at all - who's been here, what its history is. The sophistication of the art was evident, but how unfamiliar the adornment is, at least in the Australian tradition. I felt an explanation that was new to what we've always understood as Australian history was hovering just before us." Myers had become a true believer.

She decided to back Walsh's book. She also decided to approach Dame Elisabeth Murdoch. She wrote a letter, walked edgily twice round the block

near North Carlton Post Office, and mailed it. The next morning, a fax arrived confirming Murdoch's support.

And so Walsh's masterwork, the massive, impossibly elaborate *Bradshaw Art*, known to aficionados as the "purple crocodile" for its bizarre mock-croc binding, saw the light of day. There were launches, and controversies. In the front was a picture of Murdoch on the quad-bike, and a fulsome dedication to her and to Myers - "true patrons of the arts, history and heritage of Australia". A friendship of a kind, you might think, was blossoming by this stage. Walsh, though, sounding positively Dickensian, sees the tie as something both more precious and more formal. "Oh no, I'd never ring up Dame Elisabeth. I might send her a Christmas card, but I'm very class conscious. I know my place in life - right under the snake's arsehole,

north of the Gibb River Road. They shortlisted two stations. Maria Myers leased them, then Walsh set to work. "The thought came to me," says Myers, "that I would like Dame Elisabeth to come up, to see the art. It took two years, but it's happening. She doesn't say no to challenges. In fact, she says yes to life."

This was the prelude to one of the more surreal visitations in recent North Kimberley experience. On a hot, clear morning in late July, an R44 mustering helicopter, bearing Murdoch and her friend and travelling partner Janie Dyson, looms in the sky above Walsh's bush camp, beside an unnamed reach of an unnamed river channel, in burned scrub country far from anywhere. Walsh shows her through his beat-up caravan, where laptop computers hold images of new-found art: clothes-peg figures, archaic panels, blurry rune-marks from

high-prowed, with no fewer than 29 figures inside it. After all these, at the helicopter's furthest range, a newly found, figure-crowded panel showing a clear transition between styles. "This," enthuses Walsh, by now in overdrive, "is a real Rosetta stone for the elegant action figures."

And Murdoch, who rests on a ledge beneath the final gallery of her whirlwind tour, pronounces: "Such figures. Beautiful, elegant. They almost have charisma, even charm - that dangerous thing. I'm so happy to have seen them. I only hope I survive long enough to see some great breakthroughs made."

She pauses, rather gravely, then continues. "Of course, you know, when I was younger, I didn't realise the importance of our history. All the history I ever knew about was since 1788. This art has opened up so many questions in the last

few years in my mind. Why, for instance, did these artists, whoever they were, come up to these remote places to paint? I think it's crucial that we establish as part of our heritage the history of Australia. After all, Australia's the oldest piece of land in the world, and this, right here where we are in the Kimberley, is a unique, ancient part of Australia.

"It's somehow in tune with itself. And what is it saying? Is it telling us anything about the mind of Aboriginal Australia? We can't avoid this issue, and I think this is so difficult. The way Aboriginals think is so different from the way we think, and so it's hard to get on common ground. How to surmount this? There needs to be a better understanding in Australia of how we can best help the Aboriginals with education and health. It's not an easy challenge, even with the best will in the world, since their culture has been so different. These questions were already in the air when my husband was alive - but he died 50 years ago, when the understanding of how difficult the problems were was only just starting to emerge. I know great wrongs were done to early Aboriginals, but I don't think the full story's been told. There's much to be ashamed of - but also to be proud of. We don't know the past unless we know the whole of the past. Those are the ideas that come to mind when I come to this place with all its questions."

No more. The light pelts from the sky; the Bradshaw figures, frozen in their grandeur, stare down. Could those who created them have imagined such a pair of visitors, staring, searching for clues to the present, yearning back in time? And do we, in today's fast-paced nation, have the strength and wisdom at last to know, and own, all of our past? ©



Surreal visitation: Walsh chats with Dame Elisabeth in his Kimberley bush camp.

looking up. She's never seen the bad side of me. I make an effort not to swear and things like that when I'm around her. I always reckoned if you could spend time with her one-on-one, she'd be really interesting - but I never thought that was likely to happen."

In the background, the Kimberley Foundation had been keen to expand Walsh's art recording efforts. With the Bradshaw book published, the time had come for wider studies: environmental surveys, rock sequence work. Because of its remoteness, the rock art of the far north Kimberley has been little studied by government or academic scientists. Indeed, West Australian legislation sets tight limits on what can be done, and there are arguments that Bradshaw research should require the consent of traditional indigenous owners. In this fraught context, the foundation was keen to secure and support a research base at the sites' heart, in the pastoral country

the edge of human time. There are promising research programs to talk about. Griffith University is studying the Kimberley's cover of Aeolian (wind-borne) sands. The University of Wollongong's tsunami expert, Ted Bryant, had been up and down Cape Voltaire the week before in a successful quest for devastation trails. There is a very Walshian camp to show off, with a trailer full of throw-outs from the "Clean Up Brisbane" campaign, a truck-wagon rescued from a road smash on the Mitchell Plateau, a sink from a station rubbish-dump. There is tea, and biscuits, but above all there is art to see.

The helicopter soon lifts off, out to a series of distant sites. At last Murdoch comes face to face with Bradshaw paintings. A single figure, curved, self-contained upon its rock-face; a more complex set of images, multiple warriors in motion, spears poised. A Bradshaw-period depiction of an ocean-going boat,