Myths that refuse to die. Kimberley rock art and the interpretation of Australian Indigenous heritage

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A review essay on Nicholas Hasluck, The Bradshaw Case. Melbourne, ARCADIA/Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd, 213 pages, ISBN: 978-1-925333-48-0. This essay is also available to download as a pdf or via academia.edu here.

Summary

The publication of Hasluck’s The Bradshaw Case is extremely frustrating. It contributes nothing to an understanding of the multidimensional past and present of Kimberley heritage, which continues to fascinate so many people in Australia and beyond. To the contrary, it reiterates viewpoints and convictions that had been put forward and refuted decades ago. As a historical novel, it is largely a failure. The author seemingly had no intention to accurately reflect and comment on the complex history he uses as inspiration for his book. Rather he seems to aspire to be a player himself, by creating an elaborate statement of admiration for Grahame Walsh, his work and convictions. Yet the selective combination of fictitious and factual elements make this book a politically problematic and outdated statement on this subject. This book will only be appreciated by those who prefer a simplistic and sanitised version of Australia’s past, and who refuse to accept the difficult historical challenge of the process of reconciliation with Indigenous Australians.
The rich and complex rock art record of the Kimberley region in Northwest Australia continues to intrigue many people. There is no doubt that this region contains one of the most complex and diverse records of art anywhere in the world (Donaldson & Kenneally, 2007; Layton, 2010; Morwood, 2002; K. Mulvaney, 2013; Veth, Myers, Heaney, & Ouzman, 2017). The region is also home to living Indigenous cultural traditions that integrate aspects of the rock art into their ongoing cultural practices and philosophies. The most well-known of these relate to the Northwest and Central Kimberley and form the so-called *Wanjina Wunggurr* cultural bloc—although rock art is a part of many more Aboriginal groups’ culture in other parts of the Kimberley as well (Blundell, 2003; Blundell & Woolagoodja, 2005, 2012; O’Connor et al., 2013; Ryan & Akerman, 1993). Most recently, radiometric dating efforts have suggested that some rock art expressions in the Kimberley are at least 16,000 years and that *Wanjina Wunggurr* art is at least 5,000 years old (Ross, Westaway, Travers, Morwood, & Hayward, 2016). These are extraordinary findings that not only suggest a great antiquity of Kimberley rock art, but also

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draw attention to the survival of continuous Aboriginal cultural traditions that reach back well beyond the antiquity of the European Bronze Age.

All Australians have a lot to learn from the respective Aboriginal Elders, Traditional Owners and knowledge holders as well as the ongoing archaeological work in this region. However, it appears that a lot of public interest is less concerned with this extraordinary and multi-faceted cultural and historical situation and ongoing collaborative research efforts. Rather, it seems that a very large number of people continue to be mostly intrigued by the possibility that Kimberley rock art relates to a hidden and mysterious part of Australia’s prehistory, the presence of a lost population, race or civilisation that thrived in the Kimberley a long time ago (McNiven & Russell, 2005, pp. 133-162; Porr & Bell, 2012; Redmond, 2002). At the centre of these views is the so-called ‘Bradshaw art’*, which is supposedly a technically and aesthetically very sophisticated expression of rock art in the Kimberley and stylistically very different from more recent phases of the rock art (see e.g. Smith, 2006; Wilson, 2006). Formally, it is particularly viewed as being different from the recent Wanjina Wunggurr rock art, which plays a key role in present Aboriginal mythologies and philosophies. Over the last decades, a range of intense arguments have arisen about the interpretation of different aspects of Kimberley rock art and how the links between Indigenous cultural traditions and the rock art should be viewed. These disputes are not only academic arguments. They also must be seen in relation to Aboriginal rights of access to significant sites and Native Title determinations as well as general aspects surrounding the interpretation of Australia’s past (McNiven, 2011; McNiven & Russell, 2005; Redmond, 2007).

(*Please note that the term ‘Bradshaw art’ is used in this text when writing about historical ideas about Kimberley rock art such as presented in Hasluck’s novel; the more appropriate and contemporary term is Gwion Gwion.)

For a significant amount of time, Grahame Walsh stood at the centre of these disputes. Walsh was an independent enthusiast, who was born and originally worked in Queensland on rock art recordings. He is most famous for his two lavish books on the ‘Bradshaw art of the Kimberley’ (Walsh, 1994, 2000). The art was named after Joseph Bradshaw, who was the first European to describe it in a publication in the late 19th century (Bradshaw, 1892). During the 1980s, Walsh argued that Aboriginal people in the Kimberley should be prevented from continuing the practice of retouching and repainting rock art, because this would destroy heritage that ultimately belongs to the whole of humanity (Walsh, 1992). Later, he developed the view that the so-called ‘Bradshaw rock art’ was the product of an unknown population that migrated to the Kimberley during the height of the last Ice Age from Southeast Asia. Most significantly, because of the differences in style, he argued that the ‘Bradshaw art’ has no connection to living Aboriginal cultural traditions (McNiven & Russell, 2005, pp. 150-162; Redmond, 2002; Walsh, 2000). Walsh’s speculations about the origins of this rock art were rejected by professional archaeologists and anthropologists, who repeatedly emphasised that these views were not supported by archaeological and ethnographic evidence (Bowdler, 1988; McNiven & Russell, 2005, p. 157; Mowaljarlai, Vinnicombe, Ward, & Chippindale, 1988). This latter view was also confirmed by the Native Title Determinations related to the Wanjina Wunggurr cultural areas between 2004 and 2011 (http://nativetitle.org.au/profiles/profile_wa_wanjinawunggurr.html). Walsh died in 2007.

These disputes have created substantial anger and divisions. The respective frontlines and attitudes are not always easily discernible and there are no simple truths. Understanding the views, motivations and actions of all the relevant players is a complex task that requires time and patience. It is imperative to acknowledge the complexity of this history or, rather, the complexity of the intertwined histories and stories and how almost every aspect of modern Australian history is reflected in these relationships (Bell, 2009; Doring & Nyawarra, 2014; McNiven, 2011; McNiven & Russell, 1997; Mowaljarlai & Malnic, 1993; Redmond, 2002, 2005). Consequently, only a small part of these stories has so far been recorded, described and discussed. Engaging with these histories in a systematic, open and collaborative way would be of immense importance, because the people and the heritage of the Kimberley deserve to be fully recognised (Doohan, Umbagai, Oobagooma, & Porr, 2016; Porr & Bell, 2012). Building trust for these explorations takes time, but there is no substitute to an open-minded collaborative engagement for producing quality research that benefits Indigenous and academic participants alike.

It is against this background that the new novel by Michael Hasluck (2016), The Bradshaw Case, must be understood and read.

The book is a novel that is set in present-day Broome. The first-person narrator is a young
lawyer from Perth, who is to work on a Native Title case, and his first task is to pick up the
criminal, Jack Otway. The story subsequently revolves around Jack’s
knowledge, convictions and mysterious past. The latter includes Jack’s father, who was an
anthropologist, working in the Kimberley in the first decades of the 20th century. Not
surprisingly the interpretation of the so-called ‘Bradshaw art’ takes centre stage in this novel
and becomes the main point of contention between the team of lawyers, Jack Otway, the judge,
the Aboriginal Land Council and so on. This review is not a literary criticism so I do not want to
comment on the quality of the writing or the narrative devices. I rather want to concentrate
here on the presentation and treatment of a range of aspects related to Indigenous heritage in
general and particularly Indigenous heritage of the Kimberley.

It would be easy to treat this book simply as a work of fiction. One might contend that this is
nothing but an individual’s interpretation and imagination of the past loosely based on the
available evidence. However, this would be to deny the potential impact of works of fiction.
Fiction can shape our perceptions, our emotions and our attitudes. In the case of Hasluck’s
book, the situation is indeed more complicated to call it merely ‘fiction’.

Hasluck weaves together fictitious aspects with real places, historical events and realistic legal
terms and circumstance. The author does not explain his approach and relationships of these
elements. What is real, what is invented? He also does not provide extra guidance or an
appendix to clarify the situation or his own position and how and why he has selected to play
with certain historical elements and perspectives and neglect others. However, through the
title of the book itself the author makes very clear that he wants to have his work linked to the
historical disputes surrounding the so-called ‘Bradshaw art’. The book is undoubtedly based on
a solid amount of research. In this brief review, it is not possible to list all the references I have
noticed that are related to the available literature, actual persons and events. However, one can
also note the absence of a range of notable players, perspectives and viewpoints. The inclusion
of some elements and the omission of others does not appear to be a product of ignorance.
Rather, these are deliberate choices. The author appears to be more than happy with this book
itself becoming a statement in support of its narrative’s misguided central message: in modern
Australia, supposedly independent and true scientific anthropological and historical research
is no longer possible, because of the omnipresent effects of misguided political correctness.

This overall orientation is reflected in different ways by a range of themes in this book. I will
discuss some of the more important ones here and will demonstrate briefly how they relate to
available evidence and how they are represented and misrepresented.

**Presentation of current archaeological and rock art evidence**

In several parts of the book, current archaeological and rock art evidence is presented as if it
supports the possibility that the Kimberley was once home to an unknown human population
or civilisation with no links to past and present Aboriginal people. This is a misrepresentation
of the evidence. That this suggestion is inaccurate has been the unanimous assessment of
professional and academic archaeologists working in Australia for many decades now (David,
The most important observation to make here is that the presentation of evidence to support
such claims in Hasluck’s book are almost entirely direct reflections of Walsh’s own arguments
and convictions (Porr & Bell, 2012; Redmond, 2002; Walsh, 1994, 2000).

At this stage, it needs to be stressed that in the nine years since Walsh’s death no
archaeological evidence has been discovered that could provide support to his claims about
the so-called ‘Bradshaw art’ nor supposedly recent population movements. In direct contrast,
going research (including recent genetic research) (Malaspinas et al., 2016; Rasmussen et al.,
2011) continues to challenge and refute different aspects of his arguments and assumptions.
Hasluck’s book therefore represents a very selective reading of the available literature that
replicates an outdated and misleading interpretation of the deep past of the Kimberley and
Australia.

The absolute dating of Kimberley rock art has been a topic of major contention for several
decades. In 1997, a single Gwion Gwion motif was given a minimum date of 17,000 years ago
(Roberts et al., 1997), and this (OSL) determination was used as the basis for a lot of the above-
mentioned interpretations and speculations about the age and prehistoric context of the
‘Bradshaw art’ in Hasluck’s book. Apart from the fact that this date has so far not been
replicated in another context, several significant methodological problems have been pointed
out in relation to the original research; the accuracy of that date is therefore in some doubt
(Aubert, 2012; David et al., 2013). Only very recently, new radiometric dates have been
published that extend the known date for Wanjina rock art to about 5,000 years and provide a
It doesn’t come from rocks or ridges. It comes from the political landscape” (Hasluck, 2016, interpretation of Indigenous heritage: “The Gwion Gwion ‘legend’ is a convenient cover story. repeatedly presented as a modern invention and a product of the modern disputes about the attitudes and orientations of Walsh and his supporters. The term In Hasluck’s book this complex history is not represented at all. Rather, he virtually replicates Bell, 2012). The term Gwion Gwion 2000) and four Senior Ngarinyin Elders on the other (Doring, 2000). In the latter case, the book that represent the opposing visions of Kimberley rock art by Walsh on the one hand (Walsh, 1990; Chalarimeri, 2001; Doring & Nyawarra, 2014; Mowaljarlai & Malnic, 1993; Porr & Traditional Owners in the Kimberley today and has been so for a considerable amount of time ’Bradshaw art’ is widely regarded as an inappropriate and offensive term by Aboriginal knowledge related to rock art imagery in the Kimberley. For some it was reflective of a lack of deep cultural connection, while others argued that this statement needs to be seen in its specific cultural and linguistic context (Redmond, 2002). It is not possible here to discuss all the details of these disputes (overview in McNiven & Russell, 2005, pp. 133-162). However, the conflicts that were fought during the 1990s culminated in the publication of two books in 2000 that represent the opposing visions of Kimberley rock art by Walsh on the one hand (Walsh, 2000) and four Senior Ngarniny Elders on the other (Doring, 2000). In the latter case, the book Gwion Gwion most prominently introduced the Ngarniny term for the ‘Bradshaw art’, a term that is now widely used by Indigenous people and in academic contexts. Not surprisingly, ‘Bradshaw art’ is widely regarded as an inappropriate and offensive term by Aboriginal Traditional Owners in the Kimberley today and has been so for a considerable amount of time (Bell, 2009; Chalarimeri, 2001; Doring & Nyawarra, 2014; Mowaljarlai & Malnic, 1993; Porr & Bell, 2012).

In Hasluck’s book this complex history is not represented at all. Rather, he virtually replicates the attitudes and orientations of Walsh and his supporters. The term Gwion Gwion is repeatedly presented as a modern invention and a product of the modern disputes about the interpretation of Indigenous heritage: “The Gwion Gwion ‘legend’ is a convenient cover story. It doesn’t come from rocks or ridges. It comes from the political landscape” (Hasluck, 2016, Collaborative research between archaeologists and Aboriginal communities into the archaeology of the Kimberley has been ongoing for some decades now and important insights are coming to light. Excavations have established the use of red pigment about 40,000 years ago in the Kimberley (O’Connor & Fankhauser, 2001), and the earliest human settlement traces within and around the Kimberley reach now ages of almost 50,000 years (Langley, O’Connor, & Aplin, 2016; Veth et al., 2009). Also, over the last 50,000 years, dramatic shifts in all aspects of human settlement took place in relation to changing climatic and environmental conditions and socio-cultural responses of past populations (Fillios & Taçon, 2016; Hiscock, 2007; Williams, Ulm, Cook, Langley, & Collard, 2013). No evidence, however, has been discovered that could support the population replacement scenarios proposed Walsh.

**Indigenous people and Indigenous heritage in the Kimberley**

Aboriginal people represented in The Bradshaw Case fall basically into three categories. First, there are those that exist at the extreme margins of today’s society. They appear as a background to the story, conveying a sense of despair, pessimism and a latent threat of violence, fragments of a former world that has now disintegrated (e.g. Hasluck, 2016, p. 20). The second group is foremost represented by an old Aboriginal couple, Maggie Aspro and Tracker Ningulai. They represent the ‘old ways’ in a romanticised fashion. They still have preserved the ancient and mysterious Aboriginal knowledge of Country and the rock art (e.g. Hasluck, 2016, pp. 44, 46). These aspects are elaborated in the novel in the context of the narrator’s visit to the local Aboriginal Arts Centre, the fictional Ngerika Arts Centre. Here, he spends some time looking at the local paintings and starts thinking about the aesthetic merits of the Indigenous paintings. The Arts Centre seems to offer mostly paintings in the Wanjina Wunggurr style, but the narrator is not particularly impressed. The art works are described as “crudely-painted images” (Hasluck, 2016, p. 48) and lacking “the subtlety, the power of authentic images, as to both colour and line” (Hasluck, 2016, p. 50).

However, while looking through a few leaflets in the Arts Centre he comes across one brochure with “reproductions of images in the entirely different style known as ‘Bradshaw rock art’” (Hasluck, 2016, p. 51). These images are accompanied by a text that repeats the supposedly generally accepted archaeological position, its dating to between 17,000 and 20,000 years ago, “when the ocean gap from the islands to the Australian continent was at its narrowest, at a time when voyages from islands may have been most common” (Hasluck, 2016, p. 51). The character’s deliberations are then interrupted by Maggie Aspro, who dismisses the images of the ‘Bradshaw rock art’ as “rubbish art” (Hasluck, 2016, pp. 51-52). This is a significant episode that directly relates to an extensive discussion about Aboriginal attitudes toward ‘Bradshaw’ rock art in the Kimberley (McNiven, 2011). The expression of ‘rubbish art’ was first included in Ian Crawford’s seminal study The Art of the Wandjina published in 1968, which is probably the most important publication on the Wandjina Wunggurr cultural complex in the 20th century (Crawford, 1968). Particularly from the 1980s onwards, bitter disputes raged about the interpretation of the ‘rubbish art’ statement and the nature of Aboriginal attitudes and knowledge related to rock art imagery in the Kimberley. For some it was reflective of a lack of deep cultural connection, while others argued that this statement needs to be seen in its specific cultural and linguistic context (Redmond, 2002). It is not possible here to discuss all the details of these disputes (overview in McNiven & Russell, 2005, pp. 133-162). However, the conflicts that were fought during the 1990s culminated in the publication of two books in 2000 that represent the opposing visions of Kimberley rock art by Walsh on the one hand (Walsh, 2000) and four Senior Ngarniny Elders on the other (Doring, 2000). In the latter case, the book Gwion Gwion most prominently introduced the Ngarniny term for the ‘Bradshaw art’, a term that is now widely used by Indigenous people and in academic contexts. Not surprisingly, ‘Bradshaw art’ is widely regarded as an inappropriate and offensive term by Aboriginal Traditional Owners in the Kimberley today and has been so for a considerable amount of time (Bell, 2009; Chalarimeri, 2001; Doring & Nyawarra, 2014; Mowaljarlai & Malnic, 1993; Porr & Bell, 2012).
After it has been established that Sam has no cultural connection to the Country of the people he represents, it is confirmed that he is mostly influenced by distant academic arguments and political motivations (Hasluck, 2016, pp. 87, 114). The book clearly positions itself against the so-called ‘Aboriginal industry’ that is supposedly a product of the modern Native Title legislation (McNiven & Russell, 2005, pp. 160-162). In relation to the Aboriginal rock art and art of the Kimberley it constructs a hierarchy of knowledge and people that is structured along the elements of originality, primitiveness and purity. Contemporary Aboriginal culture is presented as a cheap and impure version of a beautiful and fascinating past. *Wandjina* rock art is still aesthetically acceptable, but it is particularly the ‘Bradshaw art’ that is repeatedly described in elaborate terms, which echoes Walsh’s original terminology of an ‘Erudite Period’ in the deep past of Kimberley prehistory (Walsh, 1994, 2000). Similarly, Aboriginal individuals, who are actively and vocally engaged in Native Title and land rights proceedings, are presented as being of mixed descent, urban and fraudulent, with little connection to ‘real’ ancient Aboriginal culture. This group is supposedly actively suppressing elderly knowledge holders, like Maggie and Tracker, who are not only described as ‘fully black’, but also preserve the ancient truths that are inconvenient in today’s political climate. Again, this is a direct reflection of opinions that Walsh voiced in the 1990s: “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” (quoted in McNiven & Russell, 2005, pp. 156-157).

These elements make this book a problematic piece of writing that mocks the Native Title process and the diversity of contemporary Indigenous culture and celebrates an outdated vision of Australian history, valorising the supposed righteousness of European exploration, discovery and knowledge of Indigenous Australian heritage and Australia’s deep past.

**The representation of the German expedition(s) to the Kimberley**

In *The Bradshaw Case*, the above hierarchy of knowledge and people is supported by two German anthropological expeditions, which supposedly collected ethnographic materials and information in 1938 and 1939. Historically, only one German expedition was conducted. In 1938 the then *Institut für Kulturmorphologie*, based in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, conducted an ethnographic expedition (also known as “the Frobenius expedition”) into the remote Northwest Kimberley (Lommel, 1952; Petri, 1954; Schulz, 1956). Despite some earlier activities and publications, this expedition represents the first dedicated effort to conduct detailed and extensive ethnographic work in the region. It was also the first endeavour to specifically focus on the recording of rock art images and related ethnographic information (Beinssen-Hesse, 1991, 2004; Doohan et al., 2016; Elkin, 1973; Porr & Doohan, in press). Over the last decades, the importance of this expedition, the respective publications and the related collections in Germany and Australia have been repeatedly recognised, particularly in relation to the perception and understanding of Kimberley rock art. However, systematic and collaborative community-based research has not been conducted (Porr & Doohan, in press). In the novel, this expedition is mentioned, but it is combined with a fictional second German expedition, which reached the Kimberley in 1939. It is this second expedition from the fictitious Neurath Academy that involved some of the main characters of the book (Hasluck, 2016, p. 58).

Both German expeditions are presented as reliable sources with respect to their ethnographic work and the Neurath expedition is also cleared of any connection to Nazi Germany (Hasluck, 2016, p. 208). As was mentioned above, the main role of the German expeditions in the novel is to provide an insight into the original condition of Kimberley Aboriginal culture when it was less disturbed by modern influences and not subjected to the alleged political power games of the modern ‘Aboriginal industry’. This position is a direct reflection of Walsh’s view of the historical Frobenius expedition. Walsh (1994, p. 13) also stressed that one of the expedition’s members, Agnes Schulz, introduced the term ‘Bradshaw paintings’ itself into the literature in a paper that she published in 1956 (see also Walsh, 2000, p. 14). In this same paper, she also states that these images are “un-Australian paintings” (Hasluck, 2016, p. 78; Schulz, 1956, p. 88).
However, a more extensive and closer reading of Schulz’ original publication reveals that her position was much more complex. As an experienced field researcher, she was very careful to consider the different dimensions of the art forms that she encountered in the Kimberley. She appears to have been mindful of the limitations of the fieldwork situation, but also unable to integrate the cultural information that she was provided. She states that there is no connection to the Aboriginal culture they encountered during fieldwork and at the same time she relates the Indigenous story about the *Kujon* bird, who painted the images a long time ago. She clearly preferred a local explanation of cultural and historical change over time: “For anthropological research has shown, precisely, in the Kimberleys, that aborigines did not preserve their old-time culture in never-changing, rigid forms” (Schulz, 1956, p. 48). Processes of cultural change are yet very poorly understood and in relation to the relation between the *‘Kujonfiguren’* (*Kujon* figures) and the more recent *Wanjina* *Wunggurr* paintings she states: “But inconsistent as the two styles of rock painting appear in their typical examples, we still find intermediate forms of technical process” (Schulz, 1956, p. 48).

There is little doubt that the collections and materials related to the historical German expedition to the Kimberley in 1938 are invaluable to researchers and the relevant Aboriginal communities. However, to understand these appropriately they must be systematically assessed and seen in relation to a complex historical and political situation as well as the expression of a particular intellectual tradition. It is a dangerous and simplistic illusion to assume that in 1938 the Aboriginal communities in the Kimberley were in any way untouched by European influences or that that needs to be a prerequisite for establishing Aboriginal people’s authority to speak about their own culture (Crawford, 2001; Green, 1995; Jebb, 2002, 2008; McKenzie, 1969; Owen, 2016; Povinelli, 2002). It is equally simplistic to either reduce the members of the expedition to professional and objective scientists or supporters of Nazi Germany. They were neither and the historical situation was much more complex – and indeed fascinating (Reinsen-Hesse, 1991; Doohan et al., 2016; George, Ivanoff, & Kuba, 2016; Hauschild, 1995; Streck, 2014, 2000). Consequently, in an equally diffuse and powerful way, Hasluck’s book contributes to the erasure of the political history of the Kimberley, the agency and personality of both past Indigenous people and researchers to perpetuate his own political views about Australia’s past and present.

**The representation of Joseph Bradshaw and the Pioneering Myth**

The book begins and ends with Joseph Bradshaw. In the beginning and towards the end of the story the narrator reflects on the apparent erasure of Joseph Bradshaw’s achievements from memory. In the narrator’s opinion, Bradshaw’s name is replaced by *Gwion Gwion* truth is replaced by fiction; scientific objectivity is sacrificed for political scheming. Elsewhere in the book, Jack Otway, the character who is modelled onto Walsh, compares himself to Galileo and Darwin in the name of science, objectivity and truth (Hasluck, 2016, p. 199). As I have tried to show above, in light of the dubious and biased treatment of the available evidence in Hasluck’s book, such a claim is woefully naïve at best. It is, however, particularly bizarre to include Bradshaw here as well, which is only made possible through a selective representation of Bradshaw’s life, and – in addition – virtually replicates Walsh’s views (compare esp. Walsh, 2000, pp. 8-12). Both are reflections of a discourse that has so far contributed most substantially to the misrepresentation of Australia’s history; the Pioneering Myth. This Australian legend celebrates “courage, enterprise, hard work, and perseverance; it usually applies to the [white] people who first settled the land, whether as pastoralists or farmers, and not those employed, although these were never specifically excluded. It is a nationalist legend which deals in a heroic way with the central experience of European settlement in Australia: the taming of the new environment to man’s use” (John Hirst, quoted in Bottoms, 2013, pp. 7-8).

The main effect of the Pioneering Myth has been the creation of a romantic and sanitised version of the colonial settlement of Australia. It silences Aboriginal agency and presence and has contributed to the denial of frontier violence (Owen, 2016; Reynolds, 2006). It has also contributed to a skewed understanding of the character of Australian Aboriginal culture and heritage. These elements are all clearly reflected in Hasluck’s misrepresentation of Joseph Bradshaw. He is portrayed as a pioneering explorer, pastoralist and adventurer, who reads scientific papers about the results of his challenging travels in the Kimberley to Royal Geographic Society meetings in London and Melbourne, and who is deeply fascinated by the rock art and the deep history of the Kimberley (Hasluck, 2016, pp. 76-77).

Joseph Bradshaw was born in Doutta Galla in Victoria in 1854. Given the lasting impact of his person, his involvement with the Kimberley was in fact relatively short-lived and largely
Joseph Bradshaw and his cousin Aeneas Gunn became members of the Society foremost because they regularly sent botanical specimens to Ferdinand Mueller, who was Government Botanist of Victoria for most of the second half of the 19th century and the leading authority on plants in Australia. Bradshaw had contacted Mueller already in November 1890 asking for advice about poisonous plants in the Kimberley and their danger to his pastoralist endeavour (Kenneally, 2012a, pp. 146-148). In November 1891 Bradshaw established the settlement of Marigui at the Prince Regent River to develop it into a pastoral station. Less than a year later, he already started to focus on other business opportunities and Marigui was never stocked or functioned as a pastoral station (Kenneally, 2012a; Willing & Kenneally, 2002). There is a substantial correspondence available from Bradshaw from his time at Marigui and Gunn was later to write a memoir as a series of newspaper articles titled ‘Pioneering in Northern Australia’ that chronicles his experiences at Marigui (Willing & Kenneally, 2002, pp. 19-64). The available first-hand accounts and correspondence show that Bradshaw was a typical entrepreneur of his time. He and his family were clearly educated and interested in current scientific developments and knowledge. However, neither in Bradshaw’s correspondence nor Gunn’s articles was any further mention of the rock art included. In contrast, other aspects of Aboriginal culture and people do feature regularly in the writings of both men. Given the intellectual climate of the time, dominated by racist and social evolutionary theories of humanity’s past and present, it is not surprising that the overall attitude towards Indigenous peoples was rather dismissive. This situation provides ample context for Bradshaw’s views about the lack of cultural connection between the rock art images he described and the Indigenous population he encountered (McNiven & Russell, 1997). However, it seems that their views are also considerably shaped by the experience of ‘pioneering in Northern Australia’ itself. Particularly Gunn’s fascinating newspaper articles are full of references to confrontations between settlers and the Indigenous population and the violent character of life in Northern Australia and their time at Marigui. Lethal confrontations with Indigenous people, who actively resisted the appropriation of their lands and resources, are described as normal aspects of life in Northern Australia (see esp. Kenneally, 2012b; Owen, 2016). According to Willing and Kenneally (2002, p. 14), Bradshaw floated a new company in England in 1902, the Eastern and African Cold Storage Supply Company, and acquired more than 50,000 square kilometres of land in Northeast Arnhem Land. This venture has been described as a “scam” and had failed by 1908. Nevertheless, “in the oral history of Arnhem Land, the Company remains notorious for its genocidal punitive expeditions” (Willing & Kenneally, 2002, p. 14).

These examples should not demonise Joseph Bradshaw, Aeneas Gunn and his companions any more than their contemporaries. A cursory reading of the available literature, seems to suggest that they acted within the abysmal standards of their time; a particularly violent and painful period of Australia’s history (Green, 1995; Reynolds, 2006). Hasluck’s book contributes considerably to the continuation of the Pioneering Myth and consequently contributes to the erasure of significant aspects of the history of Western Australia. The latter include the violence that characterised the frontier in the Kimberley in the 19th century (Owen, 2016). Joseph Bradshaw was more than anything an entrepreneurial businessman of his time. As such, he seems not to have had an extensive interest in the history of Kimberley and its people. In fact, apart from the reference to the rock art images in his 1892 paper, he seems to have been interested in Aboriginal people only as workers, trackers or as obstructions to his business ventures. No doubt, ‘Bradshaw’ is not a name to be given to any aspect of Indigenous heritage. And the continued valorisation of this man in relation to the topics Hasluck includes in his novel is nonsensical.

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Owen, C. (2016). Every Mother’s Son is Guilty: Policing the Kimberley Frontier of Western Australia, 1882-1905. Crawley: University of Western Australia Press Scholarly.


The finest Authentic Australian Aboriginal Art. The Australian Indigenous people have over thousands of years maintained a link with the Dreamtime and Dreaming stories of the past to the present. Due to their customs and beliefs they have sustained a rich cultural heritage. None of the hundreds of Aboriginal languages contain a word for time. When we try to explain in English their philosophy we are perhaps best not to use the term 'Dreamtime' but use the word 'Dreaming' instead. It conveys better the timeless concept of moving from 'dream' to reality which in itself is an act of creation and the basis of many Aboriginal creation myths. Abo Myths that refuse to die. Kimberley rock art and the interpretation of Australian Indigenous heritage. It contributes nothing to an understanding of the multidimensional past and present of Kimberley heritage, which continues to fascinate so many people in Australia and beyond. To the contrary, it reiterates viewpoints and convictions that had been put forward and refuted decades ago. As a historical novel, it is largely a failure. The author seemingly had no intention to accurately reflect and comment on the complex history he uses as inspiration for his book. Rather he seems to aspire to be a player himself, by creating an elaborate statement of admiration for Grahame Walsh, his work and conv