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BEING IN THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME

Don Millar
Napier

I suppose like many others who have an archaeological interest, I have been fortunate on many occasions “to be in the right place at the right time.” As a 16-year-old at a scout camp at Raincliff, South Canterbury, I met Theo Schoon who was using the camp as a base while he was working for the Internal Affairs Department copying the Maori rock drawings in the vicinity of the Opihi River. When the camp was over two of us stayed on for a couple of days and helped Theo by carrying camera gear, sketch boards, etc. Viewing those fascinating and haunting images on the limestone created a lasting impression.

Four years later I wondered if Theo had visited another area where the presence of rock drawings was a possibility. One Saturday, to satisfy my curiosity, I biked out to the Pigeon Rock area and wandered along the river bed to a limestone cliff face which was extensively obscured by willow trees. Worse than that, in recent times the river had changed course, undercutting the rock shelter and leaving a deep backwater between the limestone face and the rapidly growing willows.

I knew what to look for and sure enough, there on the rock face were several dark humanoid shapes and other less recognisable forms. No, I was sure Theo had not recorded this site. As I biked back to Timaru I kept wondering how best those drawings could be recorded. Fortunately, three friends eventually joined the challenge and a month later we borrowed a small truck and took out to the site several tractor tyre tubes, a small ladder and sufficient timber to make a small raft, which when floated on the backwater enabled me to superimpose a visual grid for copying the drawings. Copies were then forwarded to the Canterbury Museum.

Sixteen years later a casual visit to the same site was a great disappointment. The increased humidity caused by the backwater and the lower light levels due to willow tree shading had led to extensive moss growth and eventual flaking of the limestone surface. The Pigeon Rock drawings were virtually gone. Sadly I recorded a brief review of the remnants of the drawings

and forwarded it for inclusion in the Site Recording Scheme. A review by Aidan Challis of Canterbury rock art sites (1992) noted that this was the only site where a record of successive visits had been filed. In our gallery area at home a crayoned replica on a thick sheet of roughened polystyrene holds a dominant position, reminding me of the privilege I experienced in recording those rock drawings at site J38/148 over 50 years ago.

My university studies at Otago in the 50s included anthropology under H.D. Skinner who, though in semi-retirement, was inspirational and had high expectations of his small number of students. Jim Eyles, a fellow student who was currently on study leave from Canterbury Museum was one of a small group of us who during the Saturday morning practical classes shared a more than academic interest in the extensive collections of taonga Maori displayed in the Otago Museum in those days. My introduction to Wairau Bar occurred in 1953 when Canterbury Museum Director Roger Duff authorised Jim Eyles' excavation of a further area of the Bar and I was able to join the small team.

A few years later while living in Golden Bay, I joined Owen Wilkes and Ron Scarlett when they excavated at Anapai in the Abel Tasman National Park, and later took part also in the Heaphy River excavations

In January 1964 Owen Wilkes conducted a major excavation at Wairau Bar and once again I joined the team—the highlight for me being the excavation of a significant cache of five argillite adzes.

During that excavation at Wairau Bar my wife Joy had stayed with her parents at Tahunanui, Nelson, so, prior to returning to our schoolhouse at Motupipi in Golden Bay, I stopped over at Tahunanui for a couple of days. The Ballard home was situated on the busy Main Road, next to a block of shops and approximately 200 m in a direct line to Nelson's well known Tahunanui Beach. Marge, my mother-in-law, was a keen gardener and had a meticulous garden with seldom a leaf or twig out of place, while Joy's father Jim grew a wide range of vegetables and kept the lawns in impeccable condition. Naturally, on my return from Wairau everyone wanted to know what the archaeological team had been doing and what had been found. I couldn't resist making a facetious remark. "Tell you what Marge", I said, "I have my archaeological equipment with me. I'll put down a square in the middle of your lawn and show you what archaeologists do!"

Marge's garden environment was sacred to her. There was no way she would allow such disturbance. I waited for the expected protest. It didn't come! "Yes", said Marge in a contemplative tone, "I think I would like to see that."

I glanced at Jim and said, "She's joking, isn't she?"

He hesitated. "I don't think so", he said.

“But Marge”, I said, “I’d have to take the turf off the lawn. There would be a pile of dirt, pegs and lines all over the place.”

“I don’t mind”, she said, “and you would clean up afterwards wouldn’t you?”

Joy tells me I muttered incoherently, but it was obvious I was committed. I went into Jim’s shed and used his saw bench to cut some wooden pegs. The alleged temporary datum line NS magnetic was corded across the lawn and a 5 ft x 5 ft square (M10) was level pegged. The observant in-laws were still interested so I very carefully “spade cut” the turf and placed it on an old car cover of Jim’s. Clip boards, record sheets, brushes, etc. were placed strategically near by and I proceeded to use my trowel and a small hearth shovel on the top soil (Layer 1). After a few minutes of my demonstration and explanation, Marge and Jim wandered away and the time came for me to replace the spoil and turf, but then I hesitated. The appearance of a darker patch warranted further trowelling, especially when two or three shell fragments and the odd piece of charcoal were present.

With trowelling, the dark patch widened and intensified and suddenly the trowel struck something firm. I picked up my brush and soon the object was revealed. A point limb of a one piece bone hook! An archaeological site in the middle of my in-laws back lawn! When I called Marge and Jim back to have a look, I cautiously suggested it may be merely a spot find but secretly I was hoping for more and believe it or not, Marge was encouraging me to continue. Several hours later, Square M10 eventually revealed in a shallow occupation layer, 19 recordable artefacts including several argillite drill points, two argillite adze fragments and of course the prestigious point limb of the one-piece hook. What had started as a facetious remark on my part became an excavation extending over a considerable period of time.

The 110 km drive from Golden Bay over the Takaka Hill to Nelson meant that long weekends and school holidays were the only times when excavation at Tahunanui was possible, however it is one of the few excavations I have attended where cups of tea were instantaneous, meals were substantial and regular and a comfortable bed was taken for granted. The archaic site at Tahunanui (Millar 1971) was notable for evidence of the extensive working of argillite, the production of bone hooks, the presence of stone lure shanks, numerous flakes and a sizeable core of Mayor Island obsidian and the utilisation of bone from at least two species of moa. Carbon dating suggested 14th century occupancy in the lower level.

Backed by the Nelson Historical Society a small group of people obtained basic archaeological training at Tahunanui and eventually formed the core of a dedicated team which later excavated at Rotokura (Cable Bay) and Haulashore

Island. Two young enthusiastic students at that time, Kath Prickett (nee Walls) and Michael Hurst both eventually followed careers in archaeology/museums while the late Ron Scarlett at Canterbury Museum was a strong supporter in providing identification of the bone residues.

Friends used to tease me by saying that I had married for archaeology and although I laughingly denied that, the Tahunanui excavation has for several reasons always been the one closest to my heart. The last time I drove past the Tahunanui site, the Ballard's home had long since gone and the excavated area was covered by a modern two storeyed Medical Centre.

These days, my involvement as an honorary curator at the Hawke's Bay Museum and the regular publication of *Archaeology in New Zealand* (and associated publications) continue to stimulate my interest in New Zealand's prehistory.

References

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