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FRENCHMANS GULLY AND THEO SCHOON

Michael Trotter and Beverley McCulloch
Summer Wine Initiatives,
Tuahiwi, North Canterbury

Of all the Maori rock drawings in the South Island, few are better known than those of the complex at Frenchmans Gully (site number J39/17) in South Canterbury, with its three so-called 'birdmen' – one with five small birds walking on its outstretched arms – and other motifs (Figure 1).

These distinctive figures have appeared in many scientific and popular publications on Maori rock art, as well as on calendars, T-shirts, place-mats and glasses, and countless other tourist-oriented items. They are popular, not only because of their distinctive and pleasing design, but because they are in an easily accessible reserve, close to the road; and even more importantly, they are easy to copy or photograph, being clearly 'retouched' in a black medium over the original charcoal.

It is unfortunate, but inevitable, that whenever retouching and Maori rock art are mentioned in the same breath, it is the name of Theo Schoon that immediately comes to mind.

Amongst the investigators of Maori rock art during the past century or so, Theo Schoon ranks highly. He was employed by the Department of Internal Affairs in 1946 and 1947 to make painted copies of rock drawings in Canterbury and North Otago on heavy card, being paid a fixed sum (variously stated to have been one guinea, three guineas and four pounds) for each copy made. Schoon also photographed a number of the drawings, using quarter-plate cut film. The trials and tribulations he faced in the course of this work have been well researched and documented by Neil Roberts (1985), and it says much about his

enthusiasm for his subject that he persevered against considerable difficulties and under adverse conditions.

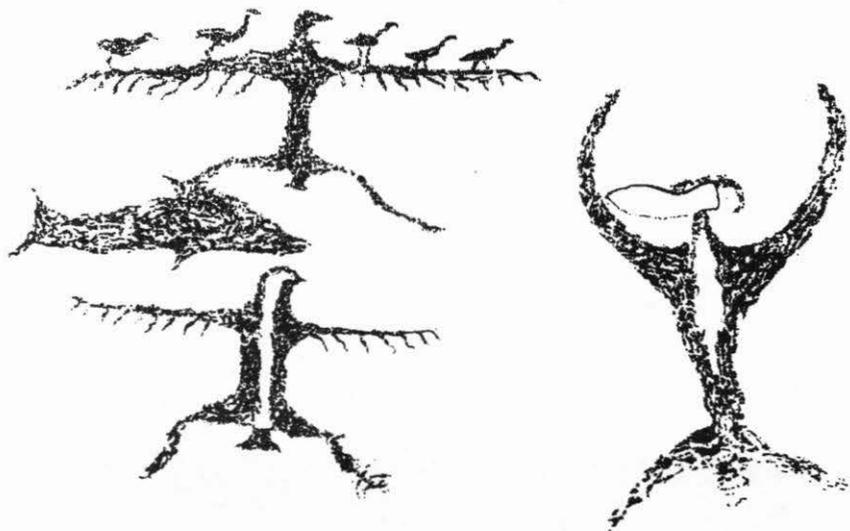


Figure 1. Tony Fomison's 'dot-for-dot' copy of the Frenchmans Gully birdman group, traced onto clear polythene in 1960. The outstretched arms of the top left birdman measure 42 centimetres from tip to tip. After Fomison 1969.

Initially Schoon went to much trouble to make his painted copies as accurate and realistic as possible (McCulloch 1985). And his rendition of the Frenchmans Gully 'birdman' group (reproduced by Duff 1950: 9) is very similar to photographs of it taken at that time. (However, he soon abandoned this style in favour of diagrammatic interpretations, sometimes even making a mirror image of the original.)

But whatever acclaim Schoon achieved for his pioneering work on recording rock drawings, his practice of 'retouching' the original art work (prior to copying it) has also earned him some serious criticism.

One of those who was most critical of the 'retouching' practice was fellow-artist, Tony Fomison, who made an extensive survey of South Island rock art

in the early 1960s, tracing the artwork ‘dot for dot’ on polythene sheeting. Tony, who was faced with the results of retouching wherever Schoon had been before him, had something of a running battle with him over this. He was concerned that Schoon had inaccurately retouched with “large grease crayons” (Fomison 1962: 141; Fomison 1987).

There is no doubt that Schoon did retouch both black and red drawings – he himself admitted this (Schoon 1962: 126) – and he may have also attended to some executed in ‘white’. We have a photograph, taken in 1947 and kindly supplied by Bill Hart-Smith, of Schoon in the act of retouching a South Canterbury drawing – Bill accompanied Schoon on several field trips. But to complicate matters, according to Bill Hart-Smith (personal communication 1974) all Schoon did “was to outline the drawings with a piece of soft charcoal and then step back and study the whole complex. Then he would freehand, on paper, a visual interpretation of the drawings. This he did with great accuracy, but inevitably with some small subtle change of his own being introduced.”

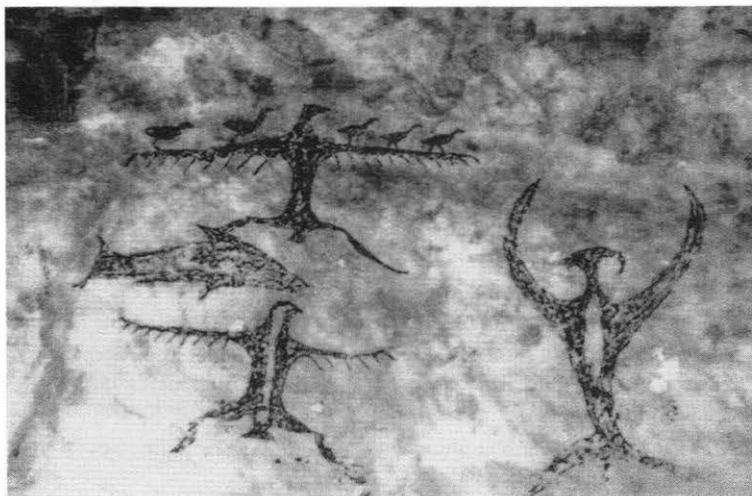


Figure 2. 1920s photograph of the Frenchmans Gully birdman group. Original photograph by Allister Evans; scanned and printed by Don Hutton.

Published photographs of the Frenchmans Gully group include Schoon’s photograph taken in 1947 reproduced in Trotter and McCulloch (1971: 29; 1981: 23), one taken about 1970 pictured in Dunn (1972: 11), and our own

1970 record published in the Association's site recording handbook (Walton 1999: 70, or Daniels 1979: plate 26 if you haven't bought the new edition yet).

Just recently we were given a 224 x 250 millimetre copy of a photograph of the Frenchmans Gully 'birdman' group. The original photograph was taken by the late Allister Evans in the 1920s and our copy was scanned at 900 dpi by his cousin Don Hutton from a contact print of a size 116 orthochromatic negative. (Our sincere thanks to Don for his work on this, and for the reduced copy shown here as Figure 2.) This photo clearly shows that the Frenchmans Gully drawings were already retouched by that time, and comparison with the later photographs taken by Schoon in 1947 and ourselves in 1970 indicate that no further retouching had taken place.

So although it's not exactly world shattering stuff, at least in the case of retouching at Frenchmans Gully, we can absolve Theo Schoon of blame and declare him *Not Guilty*.

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