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REVIEWS

Pat Mizen. *Ahuahu: The Maori story concerning Mercury Island*, published by the author, Whitianga 1997. *Great Mercury Island: The Pakeha story concerning Mercury Island*, published by the author, Whitianga 1998. \$49.50.

Pat Mizen's father bought Great Mercury Island and began farming it in 1929, when Pat was 11 years old. Pat grew up on the island and took the farm over from his father in 1951 and ran it until 1975 when he first leased and then sold it to Michael Fay and David Richwhite. He retired to Rarotonga, where Sir Tom Davis was an old schoolmate of his, and then settled in Whitianga, where he has written and published these two books.

The first book, *Ahuahu*, might be described as an archaeological survey of Ahuahu based on fifty years of near-continuous amateur fieldwork. On most surveys an archaeologist walks over a landscape only once, seeing only what is visible at that point of time, missing things which have already disappeared and things which have not yet been revealed. Pat Mizen has looked at every square yard of Ahuahu in all seasons, in all lights, from the perspective of one who was just as dependent on Ahuahu's resources, both terrestrial and marine, as were the former Maori inhabitants. He has been there before soil erosion softened the lines of earthworks, and after storms and floods have exposed artifacts and occupation residues. He has burnt and ploughed. This continuity of observation meant that he had the opportunity to record far more of the archaeological remains of that landscape than any professional archaeologist is likely to ever have. Mizen was also obviously very observant and has a sharp memory.

In his introduction Mizen writes "I am not an archaeologist. I am not capable of writing a technical book and I shall not try.... The basis of this book is entirely practical, based as it is on physical facts, such as "on site" monumental Maori works, plus the collection of dated "on site" artifacts, allied with the reading of early manuscripts and listening to the "old time" Maori friends of my younger days.... As an untrained non-academic, the best that I can hope for is that this narration proves to be interesting and possibly helpful. It is part hypothesis, part history and part just story."

It is in fact more than that. It is also a very detailed and readable description of the field archaeology of the island. Conventional archaeologists will disagree with much of the hypothesis, and history, but they cannot dispute the quality of the field observations. The Mizen family hosted archaeological excavations led by Jack Golson in 1955, and the book includes a more detailed account of the dig than was ever published by Golson. The family also hosted a young and very energetic Steve Edson in 1973, and Pat Mizen more or less took over field recording where Edson left off. He uses Edson's site plans where they are available, and has mapped a further 20 or so sites to more or less the same standards as Edson adhered to. The site plans are supplemented by some quite beautiful site sketches by John Hovell. Three hundred-odd localised artifacts collected by Mizen are illustrated by Edson. All sites plus presumed taro growing areas are shown on a superb aerial photo "atlas" spread over 4 pages.

The second book *Great Mercury Island*, will be of less interest to archaeologists, but is still very interesting as an account of all the transformations that have taken place in the Ahuahu landscape since Maori times. It covers alienation from Maori ownership, early Pakeha occupation, and a detailed account of the Mizen era. There is also an amusing account of a practical joke gone wrong. Mizen directed a topdressing pilot to empty his hopper on the Golson dig, just for a laugh. Golson was less than appreciative given that everyone had just knocked off for lunch, after cleaning down several squares in readiness for photography. Sandwiches and cleaned down surfaces all ended up with a liberal dressing of superphosphate.

The two books are priced at \$49.50 each, and are available from Whitianga Stationery, 79 Albert St, Whitianga. Add \$4 to orders to cover packing and postage..

Finally, here is Pat's recipe [pers com] for optimum preservation of archaeological landscapes, which might be worth passing on to other farmers:

"My sincere opinion (with 50 years experience behind me) is that the best method of preserving these properties is under an intelligent and kind regime of grazing by both sheep and cattle on a 50/50 basis of grazing capacity, taking 5 sheep as equalling 1 breeding cow. Under such a regime each area is grazed (overall) by cattle for a spread total of six months, and by sheep for a spread total of six months. That way both the long feed and the weeds are kept in order. Both the ewe flock and the cattle herd must be bred on site – an indigenous herd – so that they grow up knowing the place and do not track about."

Owen Wilkes

Paul Bahn. *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Prehistoric Art.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998. A\$69.95.

This book is in the same large format series as *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Archaeology* edited by Paul Bahn and as such it is handsome, beautifully illustrated, very readable and informative. Art, of course, is a subject with its own particular fascination and, as Desmond Morris says in his Forward, it forces us to accept that the artistic impulse sets us apart from other animals as much as our language and technology. Morris' comment is timely because, in the last few decades, many anthropologists have been loathe to say anything that might be construed as less than complimentary to our primate cousins.

Art exists in every modern society and probably in every ancient one too, back to 40,000 years ago and perhaps beyond. It is truly worldwide and many millions of images are known from hundreds of thousands of sites. All of which compounds the difficulty of finding a satisfactory archaeological definition for art. Paul Bahn is clear that there are no necessary boundaries between the aesthetic and the practical, or between the secular and the religious. Some Australian Aboriginal languages, for instance, have no separate word for art. As a consequence, some scholars talk of "paintings" and "engravings", etc, and reject the use of the word "art" altogether. But, to Bahn, art is art, regardless of its diversity of meaning, function, ethnicity or aesthetic appreciation.

Chapters 1 and 2 deal with the history of the discovery of prehistoric art including the absolute bombshell of Ice Age art following decades of sporadic and misunderstood finds. The discovery of famous sites such as Altamira in 1879 is described, together with the careers of scholars such as Henri Breuil the "Pope of Prehistory" whose views dominated the turn of this century.

Most of us paint, pierce, or otherwise decorate ourselves artistically, on occasion. Chapter 3 provides some marvellous images of such art. Body painting is thought to be one of the early forms of artistic expression. A few Acheulian sites have pieces of pigment that could have been applied like crayons. It becomes increasingly frequent in Neanderthal occupation sites and burials, and then abundant and ubiquitous by c.30-40,000 BP with fully modern humans. One can only imagine how the Neanderthals might have decorated themselves. Excavated bone needles suggest tattooing from the French Upper Palaeolithic to Polynesia but, owing to the decomposition of bodies, the first direct evidence is from the Ice-Man who managed to preserve himself in what are now the Italian Alps, some 5300 years ago. Iron Age bodies from Siberia testify to how widespread this practice was. Various other habits of some antiquity include head-binding, tooth evulsion and decoration, etc. Art surely pervades life when the human body is decorated.

Portable art is the subject of a chapter which deals with many famous figures and fakes, while another chapter deals with art on rocks and walls, where the artists clearly intended it to be. There are interesting sections on engravings, petroglyphs and wall sculptures. Wall paintings are extremely diverse in their pigments, application and composition. They range from simple lines and outlines, to prints and stencils, and from monochromes to polychromes. Geoglyphs are huge drawings in the landscape including the giant hill figures, such as the Uffington Horse in southern England, where turf has been removed to expose chalk. Other comparable examples are the effigy mounds of the USA.

The science of art is making an increasing contribution. For example, the analysis of pigments can help distinguish single images from larger compositions. It can also reveal modern materials and identify forgeries. Radiocarbon dating by AMS of charcoal fragments and other organic materials is providing new information on chronology. Presently in Arnhem Land, the dating of bee's nests *under* rock paintings is showing maximum ages, and those *over* rock paintings, minimum ages. Other dating is by OSL and TL, and some paintings have been tentatively dated by the alleged

depiction in them of extinct animals. So far, art in Europe is no older than art in Australia.

The study of meaning in prehistoric art is the most difficult subject of all and this is where some theorists literally leave the planet. There are chapters on literal interpretation (7) and symbolic interpretation (8). Bahn says that it used to be thought that art was made by men for men and therefore it could be about male interests such as hunting, fighting and girls. But he points out that some women ethnographically made art, just as some men make pots. "Handedness" can be read in some paintings and engravings; right-handers tend to have the light source on the left so their hand does not shade the image. Some scholars have tried to identify individual's works by style and this has been done with some success for recent Australian artists.

Something of an obsession with sympathetic hunting magic dominated theories of Palaeolithic art in the earlier part of this century. This was replaced mid-century by structuralist approaches but grand schemes like that of Leroi-Gourhan were products of their time and so collapsed. Bahn explains that, just as in archaeology itself, since the 1960s there has been a rather desperate search for new approaches and, in rapid succession, we have passed through structuralism, processualism, post-structuralism, structural-marxism and contextualism.

The bottom line is that the art of the past may speak to us, but not in the languages of its creators. However, it is clear, at least, that some art was secular and some religious. Some art was evidently intended to be public and some private. Some sites are as much as a kilometre underground in complete darkness. Some art clearly tells a story. Some is humorous and some is lewd and humorous. "Prehistoric art cannot be encompassed by any one grand unifying theory ..." says Bahn. It is part of the history of peoples, embedded in the landscape.

Finally, the book (Ch.9) considers current threats and future prospects. In contrast to the conventional Western view, much art was not intended to be permanent. In fact sometimes it was over-painted as groups renewed their links with ancestors and the land. Yet, all the same, such art as does survive is exposed to constant weathering, to accidents, excessive tourism, theft and vandalism. So now the emphasis is on recording methods which are non-destructive and on conservation. Boardwalks are used to direct traffic, vulnerable sites are covered and barred off, while some sites, like the very

famous Lascaux, have been closed permanently. At Lascaux an excellent replica was built, which I can recommend as worth a visit.

For those who like to read generally about archaeology and, perhaps even more, to look at the pictures, this book and its companion volumes in the *Illustrated* Cambridge series, are excellent.

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