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THEO SCHOON AND THE RETOUCHING OF ROCK ART

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In 1962 this Newsletter carried my report on an exploratory survey of South Canterbury rock art undertaken as one of the projects by which the local Regional Committee of the Historic Places Trust marked the South Canterbury Centennial year, 1957 (Fomison, 1962). As a state-of-the-field report, it had a responsibility to clearly identify the nature and extent of Theo Schoon's retouching in grease crayon (which has so far proved irremovable). Schoon was invited to defend himself, and his resultant comment was printed in conjunction with my report (Schoon, 1962). The then editor told me that Schoon's justifications had been libellous in their original and had had to be considerably edited.

I had met Schoon in Auckland in the year or two previous during a trip of which one function was to unobtrusively find out whether his photos were taken before or after his retouching. As a protege of the late Dr Roger Duff, I was suspect in Schoon's eyes but after several visits to his Grey Lynn gourd-growing house, I found that his wariness relaxed, and in the enthusiastic demonstration of some rock art motifs, he unexpectedly pulled out a tin trunk from under his bed. The slides he held up to the light confirmed for me that his retouching was done for the camerawork, not after.

After my 1962 report, I assumed that he would not want to see me again. So when, twenty years later, I heard that he was back in this country, I wrote ahead saying I would like to see him again and that I wouldn't mention retouching. I had been doing fieldwork on Bay of Plenty rock art sites for the Rotorua Art Gallery and Museum and so I visited him the next time I was in Rotorua (other visitors later told me that he did refer to his retouching once, when I was out of the room and that he recalled using 'only charcoal').

Theo's final years in this country are well described by Gerhard Rosenberg and Helen Mason in New Zealand Crafts. During his final weeks in this country, he was tracked down to an old peoples' home in Mangere, his air ticket to Sydney already bought. This was a last chance to record him on anything he wanted to talk about. An ad hoc team formed around Martin Rumsby (Alternative Cinema), Marcelle Tromp (of Gnome Productions, camera) and Richard Lomas (sound). Despite the short notice, we found enough private and public sponsorship for the cost of materials for recording and filming with the borrowed equipment that the crew had assembled.

One problem remained: his room was too small. He agreed to shift to my studio which we cleared for the purpose, on condition that all his boxes, left behind in a private house, were allowed to catch him up. Once installed, he looked forward to meeting old friends, although given the short notice, a number were missed out. Since I was hosting a crowded household, I took care not to refer to the rock art myself. I left to others to bring it up whenever I was out of the room. In a matter of days, film footage and sound tapes had been used up; and Theo had picked enough fights to confirm his decision to return to Sydney, which he did.

The footage and tapes are safely with the National Archives, as a record for anyone to use in the future and hopefully they contain his final statements on his retouching of the rock art.

A contemporaneous account of his retouching does in fact exist. When in 1946, Schoon first took to the field, Roger Duff was asked by Internal Affairs to oversee. Duff, then the ethnologist at Canterbury Museum, had the previous year done a week's fieldwork on rock art sites for the South Canterbury Historical Society.

The following extracts from Duff's fieldbooks record not only the retouching, but also Duff's changing attitude towards it.

Retouching is first mentioned in the fieldbook entry for 17 October 1946: "The early afternoon to inspect Gould's Taniwha cave where by judicious restoration, Theo has brought up previously scarcely recognisable figure."

12 November 1946: "Skillfully retouched by black crayon."

15 November 1946: "...brought up by Theo in 4 days tedious retouching..." "...Figures greatly improved by accurate and painstaking retouching and this has picked out for the first time a ...", etc.

In a four months absence from the field, Roger Duff's opinion, however, changes.

19 March 1947. Upper Waitaki. "...red ochre probably drawn on as with sheep raddle, as too pointedly demonstrated by Theo in going over the drawings to freshen them up..."

"March 20th. During a long discussion on previous night, obtained a promise from Theo that he would not restore any figures in future...During day, Theo got on with his usual method of attacking a shelter - first photographs (NB, no photographs taken before other figures restored)..."

Following well after the event, my fieldwork noted the following aspects of Schoon's retouching. He used large grease

crayons: black, and the one red then available, regardless that red in the rock art varies from near-purple through to yellow-orange. Also his use of the crayon was inaccurate. It did not attempt to cover mark for mark, such as our polythene tracings now try to do. And because he did not recognise the relevance of superimpositions for identifying a style sequence, his retouching, along with his copies, often amalgamated a sequence of drawings over-lying one another into one incomprehensible image.

A final comment, for this very much interim account: the few images already well known before Schoon's fieldwork he did not (dare?) retouch: the Frenchmans Gully 'birdman' compositions, the Craigmore 'moa' depictions, the 'Taniwha' composition on Gould's and a number of large compositions where his retouching is confined to 'restoring' flaked-off areas.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Canterbury Museum for photocopies of the relevant R.S. Duff fieldbook.

References

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