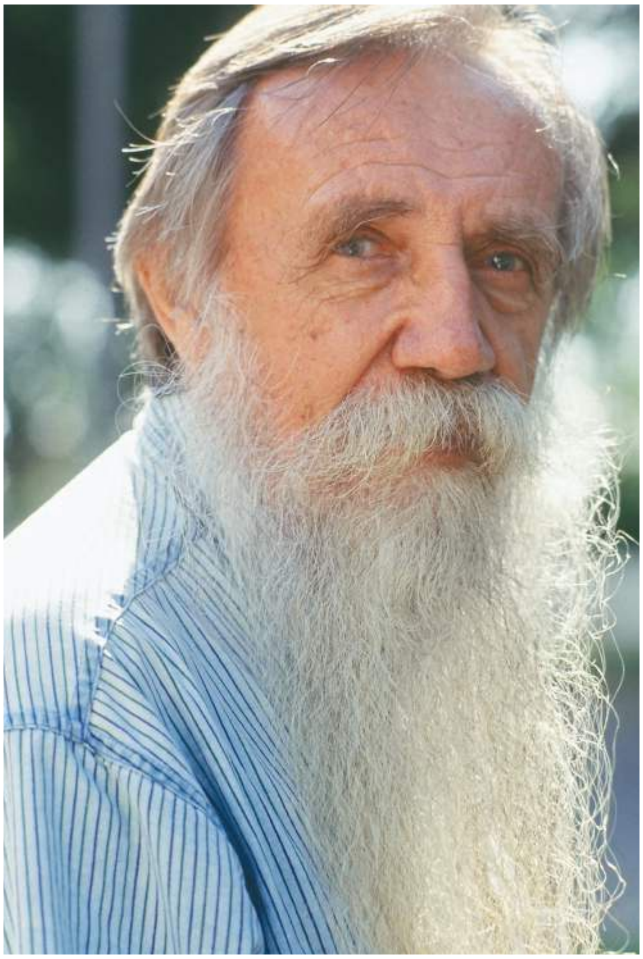
GEORGE CHALOUPKA

1932-2011



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THERE can be little doubt that George Chaloupka (1932-2011)—the doyen of western Arnhem Land rock art—made a major contribution to the field. He established the importance and beauty of the region's rock art and drew it to public attention. Along the way, he shaped a milieu in which rock art is an important part of cultural heritage, and where rock art studies are a major field of research.

I first met him in March 1980 when I joined the Northern Territory Museum as the Museum's field archaeologist. By then George at forty-eight was in full stride. Within weeks, I was dropped by helicopter on Mt Brockman, with George and Mick Alderson, to complete a rock art survey that George had begun the previous year. It was late in the wet season and the country was an unbelievable emerald green with running water almost everywhere you looked, and just to the east loomed the magic of the Arnhem Land escarpment. The following year, this time in August at the end of the dry, I returned to the same plateau with George, Nipper Kapirigi and Rhys Jones, to excavate an archaeological site called Yiboiog as part of the Australian National University Kakadu archaeological project. I remember Nipper burning the relict *Anbinik* monsoon forest, with clouds of smoke billowing around the dig site—and then the long walk out to Barolba Springs with packs filled with samples. Much of my subsequent work hinged on the desert—but for me these trips were a glimpse of George's world.

The man I knew had the trademark beard that was de-rigueur for an old Darwin hand (did George ever *not* have a beard?). He had a twinkle in his eyes, middle-European manners and charm, a sense of decency, a rogue-ish eye for women, and was clearly a man of strong passions. Born in Tyniste in Soviet-controlled Bohemia, Czechoslovakia, in 1932 he slipped across the border at sixteen and escaped to the West, reaching Australia in 1950. Thirty years later, he retained a thick Czech accent. One day at the Museum's offices in Bishop Street, I was momentarily impressed when George announced that 'some bankers from Melbourne are coming to see me', but of course he hadn't said 'bankers'. A later film on the rock art was memorable for the fact that Nipper (whose English was perfect) was subtitled, while George's muffled heavily accented speech was not.

George's fifteen years as a government hydrologist in the Water Resources Branch, installing gauging stations on remote Northern Territory rivers, made him a lean indefatigable fieldworker. In the course of this work he saw his first Aboriginal rock art at East Alligator River in 1958. 'I looked up in the ceiling', he later recalled, 'and I was mesmerised by a spell that has never left me'. He joined the Northern Territory Museum when it was formed in 1973 and by the time I met him he'd had seven years to focus on rock art research (six if you exclude destruction of the Museum by Cyclone Tracey in 1974).

It was the 1980s that saw George really scale up his research, extending his rock art recording from the more accessible parts of the escarpment into really remote and inaccessible areas—often on foot, but also clocking up an impressive amount of time in little Bell-47 helicopters. He survived at least one forced landing, bush fires, and embraces by lepers. On one occasion, when I arrived back at the Bishop Street offices, muddy and dishevelled after a particularly disastrous fieldtrip of my own, George took one look and nodded knowingly. 'You know, it always takes the first trip of the year to shake things out', he said.

His interest in the rock art of Arnhem Land was irrepressible and not to be crossed—and he was notoriously unforgiving of other rock art researchers. It was immediately obvious that there were no shades of gray in George's universe. He found cabals and conspiracies wherever he looked. If the NLC was 'too lazy to get out and talk to blackfellas', it was Pancon and Ranger that attracted his most implacable bile. His outspoken opposition to uranium mining in the region was one of the factors that stalled Pancon's plans to develop the Jabiluka mine. In 1978, he nominated the Djawumbu massif for the Register of the National Estate. The Aboriginal Land Claim that culminated in declaration of Kakadu National Park (Stage 1) in 1979 drew on his anthropological notes. And when his friend Nipper Kapirigi died in 1987, George organised a platform burial near Djuwarr waterhole, effectively closing off Deaf Adder Gorge for several years, and making a strong statement about this being Aboriginal land. I can almost see the twinkle in George's eye when Energy Resources Australia funded the 2011 'George Chaloupka Fellowship' for rock art research.

Looking back over this work, George did everything we could expect of a dedicated rock art researcher. He established the distribution, extent and richness of a regional corpus of rock art, recording perhaps 2000-3000 art sites. He produced a series of research papers, a monograph and lavishly illustrated reports documenting the art. In films and books, he promoted the beauty and significance of the art—especially of the exquisite dynamic style figures—and fought passionately for its conservation. Over the course of several decades of fieldwork, he built up a nationally important archive of images, field notes and uniquely important records of *Bininj* accounts of the rock art. Famously, he also worked out a sequence of phases and changing styles over time, arguing for the deep antiquity of Kakadu rock art.

His style sequence was widely criticised. And it did not help that George eschewed quantitative analysis, arguing that style and form should not be reduced to numbers (this was the artist in him). But it is important to realise just how innovative his work in this area was. He set out the first version of his rock art sequence at an AIAS conference in Canberra in 1974 at a time when detailed regional studies of style and sequence were unusual and before Lesley Maynard's seminal work put rock art studies on a new footing.

Despite all the internecine feuding, most rock art researchers will see something of themselves in George: an intimate and intuitive knowledge of local rock art based on years of fieldwork, a keen eye for detail, an astounding memory for relocating sites in broken country amidst a 3D maze of rock surfaces, and an intuitive grasp of sequence and style based on the accumulated records of thousands of art sites. George supported the archaeological excavations at Malakunanja in 1989 by the ANU. Our dates of 50,000 years for Aboriginal settlement went some way towards vindicating his views on the depth of Aboriginal history in western Arnhem Land.

George's contribution to rock art research was recognised during his lifetime. He was inaugural president of the Australian Rock Art Research Association and presided over the First AURA Congress in 1988; won a Churchill Fellowship in 1983; received an Order of Australia in 1990; was elected an Honorary Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 1997; received a Doctor of Letters from Northern Territory University (now Charles Darwin University) in 1998; and was awarded a Centenary Medal in 2001. Despite being stalked by cancer for a decade or more, George seemed indestructible. On the prospect of dying he commented: 'I want to carry on doing what I'm doing. I wish there was a return ticket, I'd sell my soul to the devil for another lifetime. There are thousands of sites still out there that I will never see'. He was given a state funeral in Darwin on 4 November 2011.

- MIKE SMITH