



Frederick McCarthy

Frederick David McCarthy (1905–1997)

F D McCarthy was an outstanding pioneer of Australian archaeology, museology and Aboriginal rock art research. He joined Sydney's Australian Museum staff in 1920, a lad working as a library clerk. Eventually he moved sideways, through the Department of Birds and Reptiles until, in 1932, he was promoted as Curator of Ethnology. He held this post, with increasing stature, until his appointment in 1964, as the first Principal of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.

McCarthy's museum career spanned those depressed decades when museums were the cinderella of cultural institutions, neither commanding support from the public nor the private sector. Those lack lustre decades of Depression, War, and Reconstruction evidently affected administrators. In 1932, when the Harvard University Museum offered to donate the museum a motor vehicle, the offer was rejected, even though the museum had no vehicles, because it could not afford the running costs.

Consequently, although anxious to gain field experience, McCarthy could not leave base. As field recorders of Aboriginal rock engravings and paintings, therefore, McCarthy and his volunteer weekend team made day trips by train at their own expense. Numerous sites which they laboriously surveyed and sketched have been destroyed by Sydney's urban sprawl, so these records are the sole testimony to many prehistoric art galleries.

Because McCarthy lacked any formal training in anthropology, he enrolled at the University of Sydney in 1933 for the diploma of anthropology. His future wife, Elsie Bramell, also took that diploma and assisted him to curate and catalogue museum collections which had been amassed under lax curators. When they married in 1940, however, Public Service regulations compelled Mrs McCarthy's resignation, so he spent the next two decades without staff assistance. Undeterred, Fred McCarthy published over 300 papers between 1931 and 1988, two thirds of them while at the Australian Museum.

McCarthy's most significant publication for archaeologists was written jointly with his wife. *The Stone Implements of Australia* (1946) was the most systematic study yet attempted to bring order into the classification and functional purpose of Aboriginal artefacts. For many years it was the basic reference for all archaeologists. Art researchers, however, may credit McCarthy's primacy in the serious evaluation of Aboriginal arts and crafts on a national scale. Published as attractive museum handbooks, his well-illustrated *Australian Aboriginal Decorative Art* (1938) and *Australian Aboriginal Rock Art* (1958), sold more than 100,000 copies.

When the American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land was formed in 1948, McCarthy was invited to join the team as archaeologist and anthropologist. This recognition provided opportunity to work amongst

traditionally oriented people and proved a stimulating experience; a number of publications resulted. His collaboration with Margaret McArthur, while they were based at Oempelli, provided them with an opportunity to study and quantify the role of women and the time they spent in the food quest. In later years this has gained recognition as a classic paper, anticipating the concerns of the 'Man the Hunter' conference of the late 1960s. Another field opportunity offered in 1961 when he studied clan dances at Aurukun, Cape York. He described forty-three dance events and collected the decorated materials used for the future National Museum.

McCarthy vainly attempted to interest people in the protection and conservation of Aboriginal art sites and other items of heritage. This was in 1938, when the citizenry of Sydney smugly celebrated the sesquicentennial year by ignoring the first Australians. McCarthy urged legislation to protect places and to prevent vandalism, one of the first to publish on such matters. Greatly daring for those insensitive times, he named several overseas scholars who had visited Australia and departed with archaeological collections which should have been housed in museums, but no legislation existed to prevent their actions. Fred McCarthy was then decades ahead of public and government thinking. He must have sensed achievement, as Principal of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, however, when he convened a national conference in 1968, on the nature and protection of Aboriginal sites and antiquities. The battle for State legislation was almost won by the time of his retirement in 1971, but McCarthy soon realised that the next struggle was to ensure that State Acts were effectively implemented by the appointment of sufficient qualified staff.

Fred McCarthy was a very modest but sincere man, whose interests were diverse and his application total. Although he had little formal academic training, his publications covered broad fields of Melanesian, Polynesian, and Indonesian ethnography in addition to his Australian mainstream work. In 1980 the Australian National University admitted him, *honoris causa*, to the degree of Honorary Doctor of Science. The Academy elected him to the Honorary Fellowship in 1990. He died in Sydney on 18 November 1997.

As time passes, his name will be remembered for his unselfish and lonely role in championing research into, and the preservation of, the Aboriginal past. During his retirement years he lodged his diaries and field manuscripts in the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, including a massive compilation on the art of the Sydney region. He generously donated his library to the National Museum of Australia.

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