



# Historical Papers

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## Prehistory of the Blue Mountains and the Riverlands

*by Father Eugene Stockton*

### Introduction

In Father Dr Eugene Stockton's Foreword to the book, *Blue Mountains Dreaming - The Aboriginal Heritage* (1993), to which he was a major contributor as well as being its editor, he describes how as a young boy growing up at Lawson he became fascinated by the enchantment of the surrounding bushland. Later, as a teenager with more 'scientific' perception, he started to recognize stones that were out of place in the geology of particular areas through which he went exploring. Having been initially pointed in the right direction by one of the archaeologists in the Australian Museum, he has since probably seen and handled more aboriginal stone artefacts of the Blue Mountains than any man alive! Later still, he was to meet and work closely with many of the descendants of the former Aboriginal people of the region, in his attempts to understand more about them and the culture of their people.

Eugene Stockton's professional life took him, firstly, to Sydney University, where he gained doctorates in theology and philosophy, and later to Rome and the Middle East. He gained a licentiate in sacred scriptures in Rome, taught philosophy in Cairo, and worked with a team of British archaeologists on the excavation of the biblical Sites in Jericho.

Upon returning to Australia, he lectured for many years in the Catholic seminaries at Springwood and Manly and, as well, undertook numerous pastoral duties. As time has permitted him to do so, he has continued his anthropological, archaeological and social interests. Notable among his substantial archaeological excavations in the Blue Mountains region were the sites at Kings Table Shelter [Wentworth Falls] and another in the Nepean gravels that yielded a stone axe. When Dr Stockton delivered this paper to the Historical Society, he believed this latter site to be about 40,000 years old, but, recently that date was reassessed, by more sophisticated dating procedures, to an age of 50,000 ±BP (Before the Present). And this is the Blue Mountains - a region which many scholars have until recently written off as having been almost uninhabited by Aboriginal people in the past!

**Bruce J Wright**

**Father Stockton continues:**

I grew up at Lawson in the Blue Mountains. I loved the bush. My interest in all its aspects drew me to read all I could on natural history and human history. As a schoolboy at St Columba's College, Springwood (then a seminary), beside the drive I found two stones that I knew were out of place in a sandstone environment. The pebbles of basalt and chert must have been carried there from the riverbed. I took them to the Australian Museum, where Fred McCarthy (at that time one of the only two archaeologists in the country) told me they were Aboriginal artefacts: a pounder and a chopper. He proceeded to teach me how to identify Aboriginal implements, further assisted by his book of the same name, I started to look everywhere in the bush for artefacts and sites. Emotionally, it was enormously important to me, because it meant that my Blue Mountains was a peopled place, and had been, long before settlement. Once, I remember picking up a stone tool and reflecting that the last time it had been held was by a black hand: it was like a handshake across the centuries!

I was lucky to meet a number of significant scholars who showed me how to pursue archaeology, tool typology, stratigraphic excavation, geomorphology and surveying. After priestly ordination, I was placed on the staff of St Columba's College (in 1962) and I began an archaeological campaign in the Blue Mountains in earnest. Travels to other parts of Australia allowed me to make comparisons with distant parts of the continent. Since there were so few archaeologists in Australia, I found it easy to have my reports accepted and published. My Springwood stay was interrupted by several years of study in the Middle East, where I combined Biblical Studies with further training in European methods of stratigraphic excavation and tool typology. This boosted my Blue Mountains research on my return to Australia.

Archaeology has two principal operations: a) survey to establish the horizontal distribution of human remains, and b) excavation for vertical distribution; that is, back through time. Both are summarized in our book, *Blue Mountains Dreaming* (1993). Figure A shows the current occupation pattern of the Blue Mountains, with roads and towns, and it is obvious that occupation is confined to the main west ridges. By contrast, Figure B shows the Aboriginal occupation with sites more spread out across the landscape, not only on the main ridge but also on the side spurs, upper slopes and shallow valleys. The different kinds of sites, which are indicated by symbols include: occupation sites (both open and rock shelter sites); stone arrangements (probably used in ceremony); axe grinding grooves (to produce ground-edge axe heads); rock engravings and cave paintings. The large black circles indicate excavated sites: Shaws Creek (near the Nepean); Springwood Creek; Horseshoe Falls (Hazelbrook); Kings Tableland; Lyrebird Dell (Leura) and Wells Cave (Blackheath).

*Note: 'In using the maps the reader should first pick out the two main ridges crossing the mountains from east to west and carrying the principal road and rail links to the west, with their string of towns (Figure A). The secondary ridges or spurs, running roughly north and south, are outlined by the network of rivers and creeks. Figure B shows that most of the sites are spread over the ridges and headvalleys, with a few sited on broad valley floors and none in the deep narrow creek gorges. In other words, Aboriginal occupation parallels patterns of settlement today, except that it reached out further along the secondary ridges.'* (Blue Mountains Dreaming, pages 55, 58).

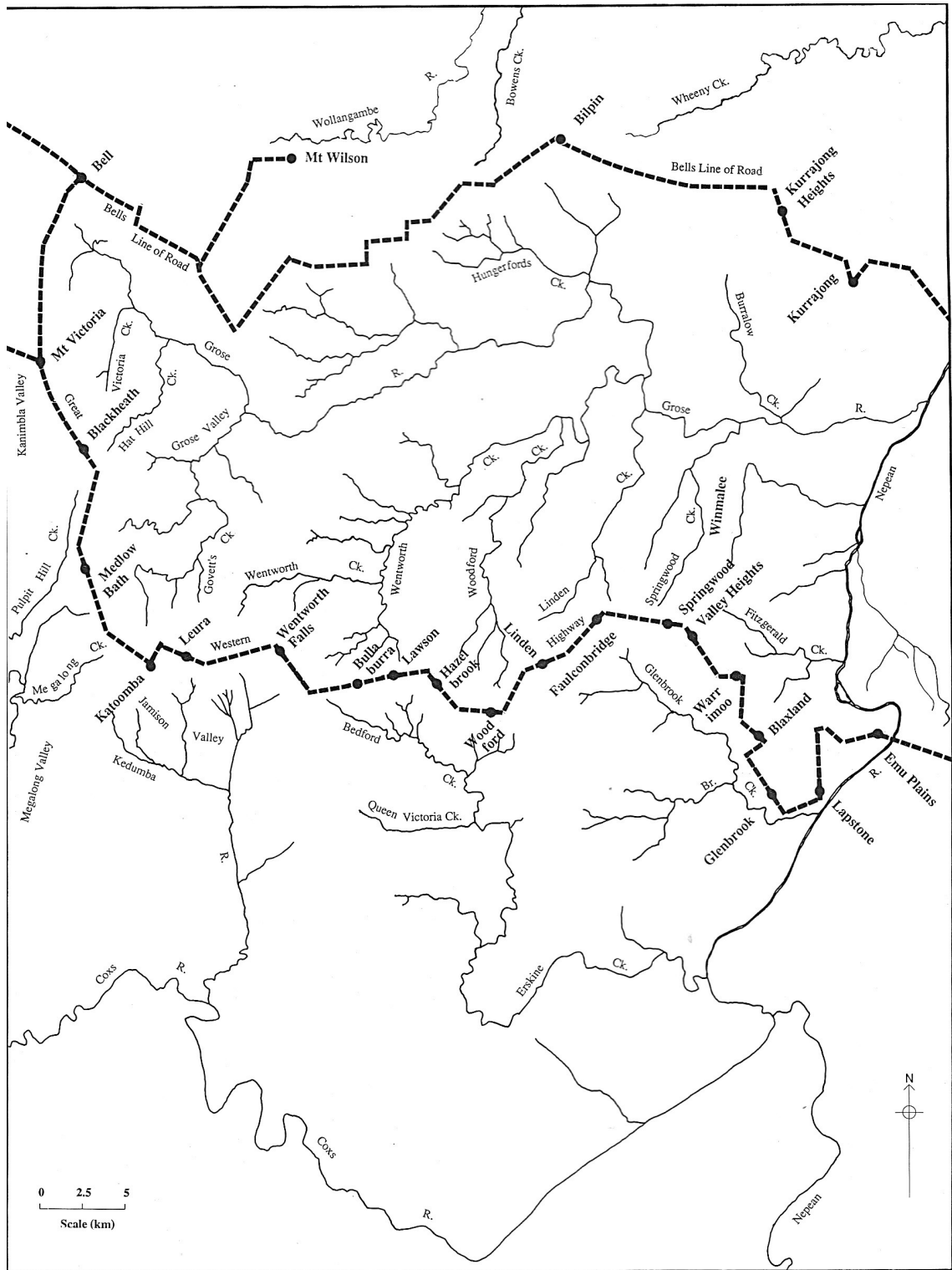


Figure A: 'The present settlement pattern of the Blue Mountains. The main roads follow the two main ridges. Secondary spurs are outlined by the network of rivers and creeks'. (Fig. 3.1, page 56, Blue Mountains Dreaming)

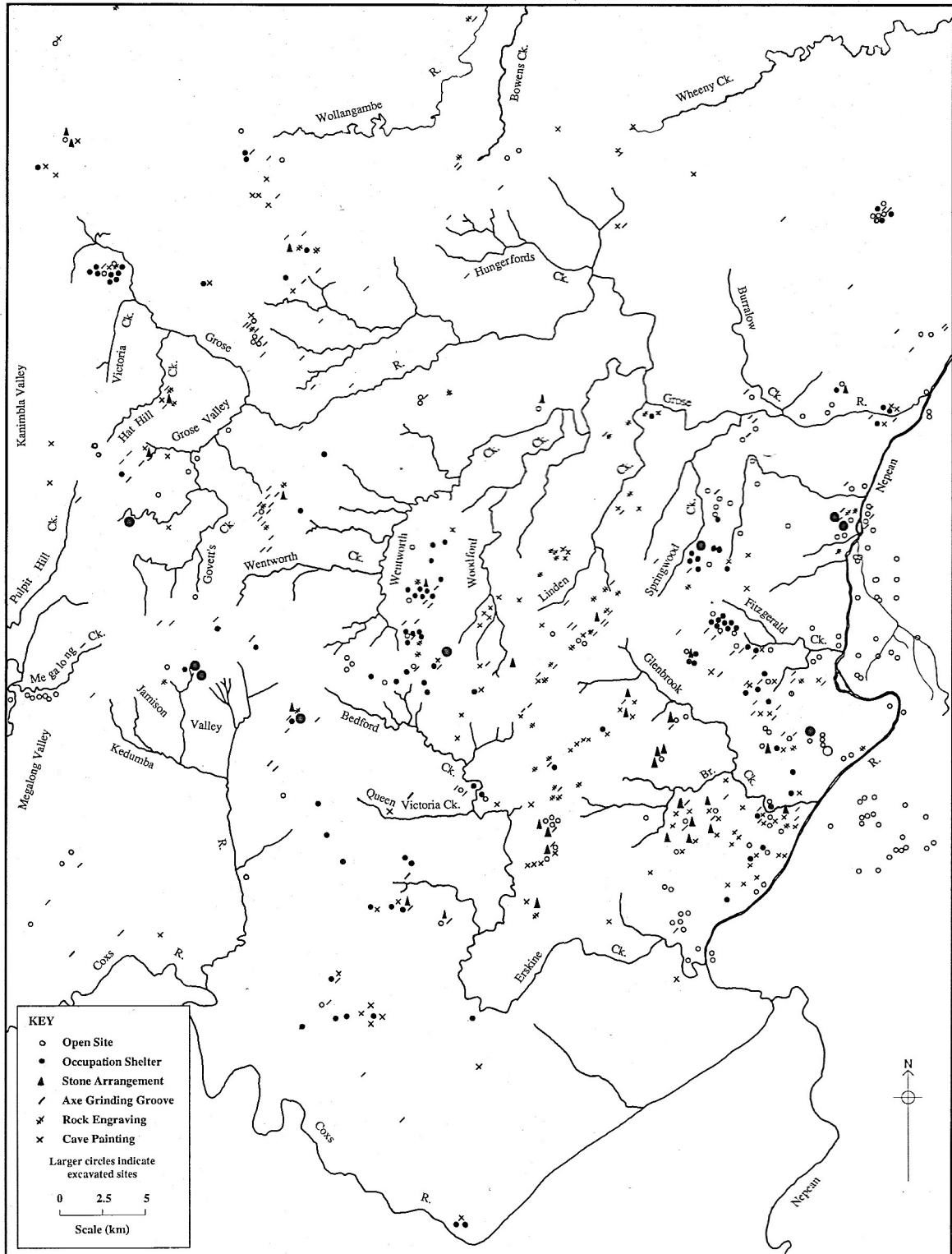


Figure B: 'Aboriginal occupation of the Blue Mountains: distribution of sites as recorded up to 1991. Aboriginal occupation reached out further along the secondary ridges than does current settlement. The cluster of sites on parts of the map are the result of closer investigation by individual researchers in these localities'. (Fig. 3.2, page 57, Blue Mountains Dreaming)

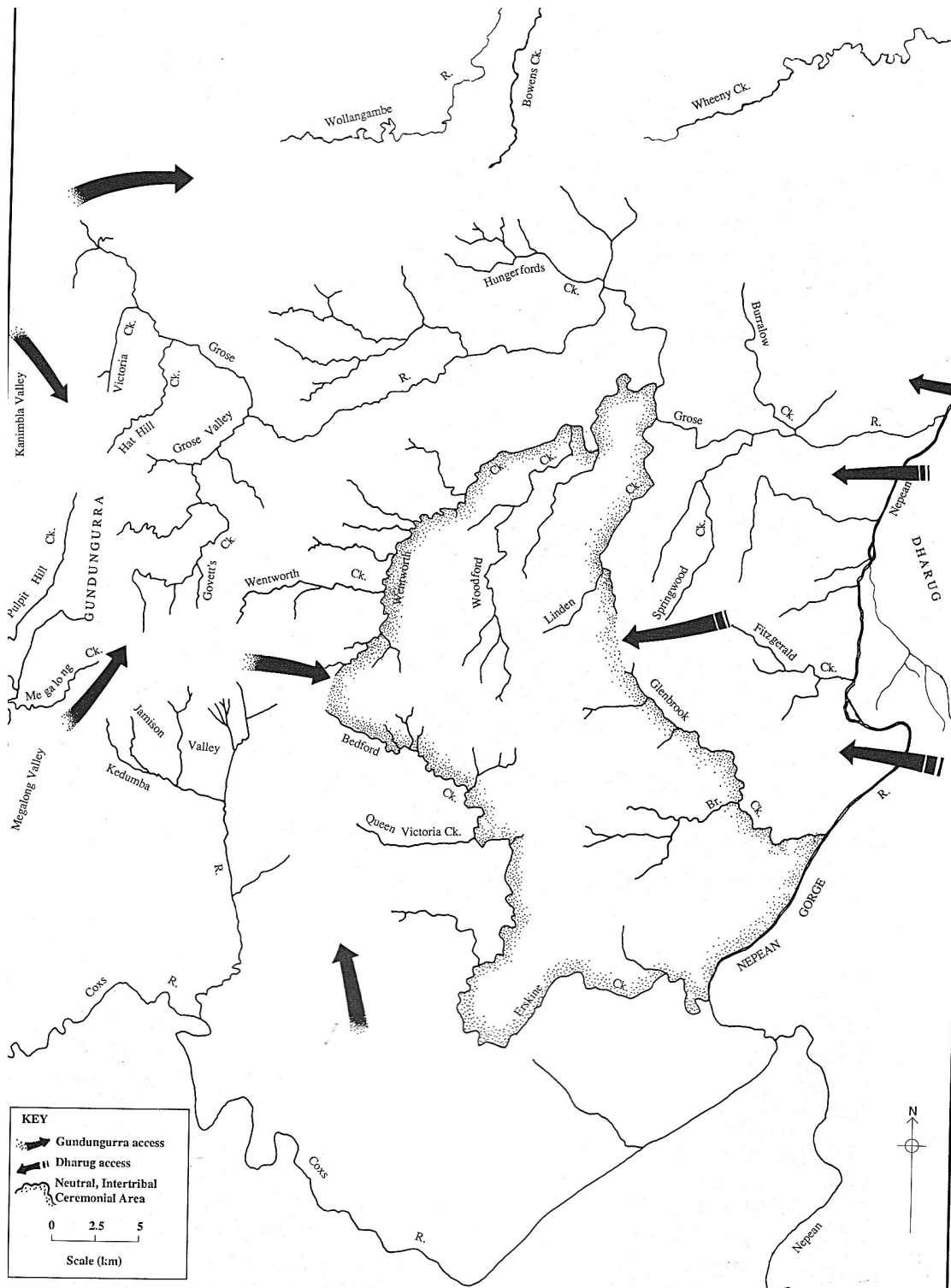


Figure C: 'Gundungurra Dharug land and access routes (Fig. 3.3, page 60, Blue Mountains Dreaming)

Figure B indicates 600 sites; that is, those known up to 1991. My catalogue of sites eventually rose to 700, but, certainly, there would be very many more. The clustering of sites in certain parts of the map is not an indication of closer occupation in those areas, but more, of thorough searching by individual investigators. I thoroughly surveyed the North Lawson Ridge and the Winmalee Ridge running north to the Grose Head South. Others who contributed to the map included Bruce Cameron, Greg Gaul and rangers with the National

Parks and Wildlife Service. The whole map should be imagined as being crowded all over, just as much as the clustered areas. I use a site density index of the number of sites per square kilometre. Some parts of the map show a site density of seven sites per square kilometre, which I have found to be greater than for other parts of the state that have been exhaustively surveyed, such as Mangrove Creek (near Gosford) or parts of the Cumberland Plain.

All this demonstrates that the Blue Mountains were very favourable to human occupation. The advantages included plentiful water and food resources, occurrence of tool-making stone and rock shelters. Rugged terrain and climate are cited as disadvantages. Residents of this area are aware that movement is, relatively, on the ridge tops. For climate, Figure D compares the location between Lithgow and Sydney, showing rather benign conditions for the Blue Mountains, especially in the temperature range. Springwood or Lawson would be preferable to Penrith, in both winter and summer. The survey highlighted a peculiarity of the Central Blue Mountains, in comparison to the Upper and Lower Blue Mountains. The site density is much the same, but the site usage appears to be much lower.

In other words, there is to be found a smaller quantity of linked stones, indicating shorter stays. At the same time, there is a higher proportion of stone arrangements and rock art, indicative of religious activity. Several archaeologists have concurred that these areas may have been important for ceremonial purposes. Topographically, the area is notable in being surrounded by deep gorges - Wentworth Creek, Grose River, Linden Creek, Glenbrook Creek, Nepean Gorge, Bedford/Erskine Creek - so that, virtually, the area is an island in the middle of the Mountains, with only narrow access points at Bullaburra and Linden. It has been speculated that the Gundungurra from the Great Valleys had access to, and probably ranged in, the Upper Blue Mountains, while the Dharug of the Cumberland Plains frequented the Lower Blue Mountains. If the Central Blue Mountains were given over to religious purposes, by analogy with similar areas elsewhere in Australia, it could have been a neutral and inter-tribal ground for the coming together of the two peoples. (See Figure C.)

While surveys can tell us what is happening across the landscape, excavation can reveal something of what took place through time. First, what time span are we considering? At the blue-metal quarries alongside the Nepean, river artefacts were found at the base of the gravels, fifteen metres below the surface, which dated up to 50,000 years ago (a result finally published only in 2003). People living by the river would have had no difficulty foraging in the Lower Blue Mountains. The dating is remarkable, as the first modern humans to leave Africa, the forbears of our Aborigines, did so about 60,000 years ago or less. While comparable dates are coming from areas to the north and west, this is the only one to be verified on the eastern Seaboard.

The oldest occupation site, indeed the oldest in the Sydney Basin, is at King's Tableland with a date of 22,000 years ago. Shaws Creek, just before it flows into the Nepean, has a large rock shelter with a deep, well-stratified deposit. The earliest recorded date in the deposit is 15,000 years, but the deposit goes deeper, perhaps to 20,000 years ago. The Shaws Creek site yielded a large amount of flaked stone and, together with the other mountain excavations, shows a good sequence of flaked stone industries. At the base of the Shaws Creek deposit is an assemblage, quite different from the overlying industry, that I have called the Yarramundian. It is characterized by large flakes with further retouch on the sharp edges. (Are they knives?) I have seen similar material in disturbed finds elsewhere in the district (see reference, Jim Kohen\*), in Tasmanian museums and in reports from Kakadu, dated to about 20,000 years. There follows the Capertian industry dating from 15,000 to 4,000 years

ago first reported by Fred McCarthy, from Capertee. It is a very nondescript assemblage of rough, ad hoc tools used for cutting and scraping, mostly without further retouch. The very different Bondaian industry, characterised by the careful control of flaking and retouch, both on edges and backs of the flakes, occupied the last 4,000 years (See Figure E). The back blunting of flakes (bondi points, geometric microliths and elouera edge-flakes) facilitated the hafting with resin onto wooden hafts. I have further subdivided this period into Lower, Middle, and Bondaian, with quality and quantity of workmanship peaking in Middle at about 2,000 years ago. From about that time edge-ground axes came into use.

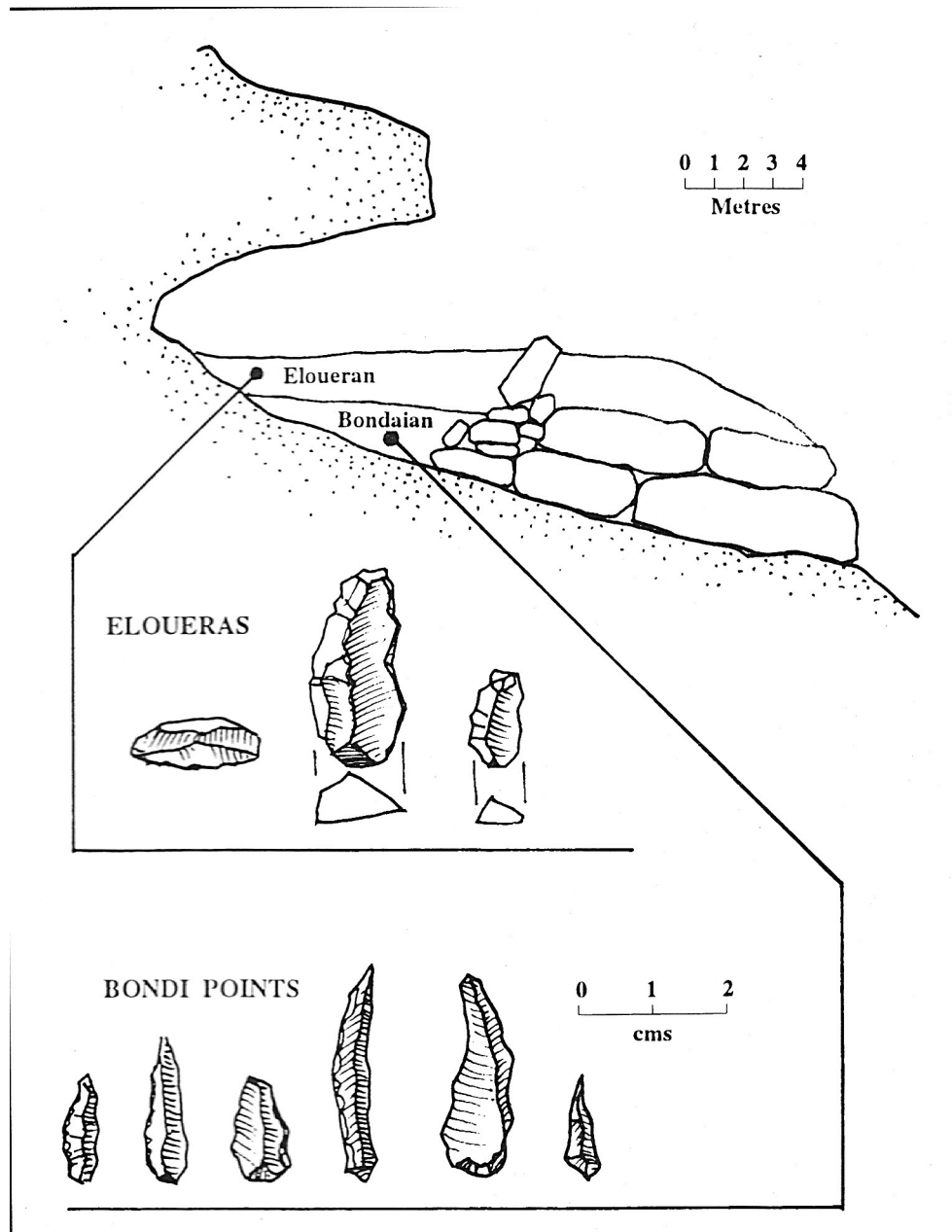


Figure E: 'Cross- section of Lapstone Creek Site showing McCarthy's Bondian-Eloueran sequence, with bondi points and eloueras (from McCarthy, 1948, pp, 4, 8).' (Fig. 2.2, page 16, Blue Mountains Dreaming)

The Bondaian industry raises interesting questions. The bondi points and geometric microliths are quite beautiful products, but their function is not clear. They are found abundantly on large sites, but are much less frequent on small sites. Bondian levels in each deposit yield large amounts of flaked stone, evidence of much tool-making activity. Archaeologists speak of intensification, suggesting a greater population. Certainly, more sites came into use at this time. I would suggest another form of intensification, namely in camp life: that is, all the social interaction of the group around the hearth. As the climate improved and resources became more plentiful, less time had to be given over to hunting and gathering and more leisure time could be afforded for what the Aborigines love to do the most – talk. I suggest that the beautiful tools found at this time here and elsewhere – to the north-west where surface trimmed points and adze flakes predominate – represent a pastime activity, as people sat around a camp fire conversing. Think of a knitting circle!

These beautiful, but enigmatic, stone tools may be archaeological pointers to the increasing higher life of Aboriginal people: the intense elaboration of religion, stories, ceremony, law and kinship systems that have baffled scholars in our time.

A question that has interested me throughout the Blue Mountains campaign has been the environmental backdrop to human habitation. Evidence of changes to the environment has been sought from excavations, from the stratigraphy of the Nepean quarries and from core samples of swamps. Vegetation does not seem to have changed much - but, if anything, becoming more diverse and plentiful - up to the present day. Climate, however, has changed dramatically. When King's Tableland was first occupied, the last Ice Age was advancing, reaching its peak about 20,000 to 18,000 years ago. Then, the temperature was said to be about 9 degrees less than the present. Sea level was 150m less than now and the shoreline at Sydney was 20km further out. It was a period of intense aridity. Three of our subject sites, which are now too wet to camp in, were occupied then. At Walls Cave, people were camping on the dry bed of the creek! Dunes were forming at Newnes Plateau, which the researchers say could only occur with a vegetation cover of less than 15 %. As far as we know, there were no swamps resulting in rapid run off of rainwater and active erosion. The earliest swamp we know began forming at Leura, 17,000 years ago, as the arid period began to recede.

Despite the aridity at the peak of the Ice Age, the Blue Mountains were relatively moister than neighbouring regions to the east and west, and so served as a haven for all forms of life: plant and animal, including human, life. Then the climate improved, becoming both wetter and warmer, and sea levels rose. I suspect the vegetation became denser until it reached the state we know today. Successively, more swamps were formed and extended, conserving water, slowing erosion and attracting a variety of food resources. Increasingly, the Blue Mountains became a habitat ideal for human occupation,

### **Eugene Stockton**

\* Jim Kohen was one of the contributing authors to Blue Mountains Dreaming. In 1993 he was a lecturer in the School of Biological Sciences at Macquarie University, teaching Aboriginal Palaeocology and Pre-History. His doctoral research involved prehistoric Aboriginal sites in western Sydney, but his interests extended to contact history and Aboriginal languages.



*Note that the diagrams, maps by Greg Gaul and drawings referred to in this paper are to be found in Blue Mountains Dreaming - The Aboriginal Heritage, edited by Eugene Stockton. Published 1993, Three Sisters Production Winnalee for the Aboriginal Resource Collective. Supported by the City of the Blue Mountains and the Australian Bicentennial Authority by a grant to the Aboriginal Resource Collective. They are reproduced here with the kind permission of the editor, Eugene Stockton.*

**Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine - What of their Pre-History?  
Little has been written; little is as yet known or understood.**

Father Eugene Stockton was invited to speak at our Special General Meeting on 17th May 2003 by our Chairman, Bruce Wright, himself an experienced Archaeologist in Aboriginal Rock Art. This was our first attempt to publicly recognize that our history stretched far back beyond the late 19th century. It was gratifying to find that so many attended that meeting and expressed enthusiastic interest in the subject, reflected in the number of questions Father Stockton's talk generated.

In May 2004 the Society continued that pursuit of knowledge by having Wayne Brennan, an experienced Archaeologist speak on the recent discoveries of Aboriginal art in the Wollemi National Park. There were references to sites associated with Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine. Again this meeting aroused much interest and lively discussion.

The significant issue is that, through Father Stockton's work and studies and those of Wayne Brennan and others, not only the Blue Mountains generally, but Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine were recognized as places of habitation for Aboriginal people.

It is strange and curious that the Surveyor of Mt Wilson in 1868, Edward S Wyndham recorded later that while he was undertaking that task he saw no sign of 'human habitation'. We now know that artefacts have been found, both in Mt Irvine and Mt Wilson. Perhaps Wyndham's powers of observation were limited at that time, for he had not been long in Australia.

It is important that the Society recognize, in its studies and research, the occupation of both Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine by Aboriginal people.

**Mary Reynolds (Research Officer)**

**A Note for the Historical Paper, Number 5**

The Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine Historical Society Inc. aims to add substantially to the recorded history of Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine, conserve its heritage and to present aspects its history, publicly, through exhibitions in the Turkish Bath Museum, the centre for Society's activities.

The Mt Wilson/Mt Irvine district is part of an elevated basalt plateau located within the Blue Mountains National Park and World Heritage area. From its initial survey in 1863, its history has followed a unique path compared with other settlements in the region.

In 1993, an exhibition featuring the history of Mt Wilson was held in the Mt Wilson Village Hall. Following the success of that exhibition which was held in conjunction with the 125th Anniversary celebration of the 1863 Survey of Mt Wilson, the Mt Wilson Community History Group was formed within the Mt Wilson Progress Association. The Community

History Group became the nucleus of the Mt Wilson Historical Society Inc., which was incorporated in 1996. The Society's scope was expanded in 2001 to include the Mt Irvine community.

The former owners of the 'Wynstay' Estate, Bill Smart and his Jane (nee Wynne), assisted greatly in the formation of the Historical Society, making the 1880s Turkish Bath building and the surrounding precinct available as a base for the Society's activities on a fifty lease at a 'peppercorn' rental of \$2 per year.

From the entrance, near the junction of the Avenue and Mt Irvine Road, Mt Wilson, there is a formed pathway through the precinct leading to the Turkish Bath Museum.

The Turkish Bath Museum has been largely funded by the work of volunteer members of the Society, some generous donations over the last ten years, along with funds from the State in 1998 and Federal Governments in 2001-2. It is important that it is maintained and continues to be open to the public. Those who visit are warm in its praise and find the exhibitions of early history of great interest.