

Monument under threat

The saviour of rock art on the Burrup has spoken, writes **Nicolas Rothwell**

RED-SPINED, austere, its peaks topped by sombre standing stones, its valley pathways winding through a maze of boulders, the Burrup Peninsula stretches into the Indian Ocean like a smashed and broken bone.

Largely unvisited by tourists passing through the remote Pilbara, this spit of land contains the world's largest concentration of rock art sites, cheek by jowl with several of Australia's most important industrial plants.

It is a place of unearthly beauty where, at almost every turn, the presence of the past confronts the eye: for, across much of the peninsula, there is scarcely a single flat rock surface that does not bear carvings engraved into the hard red stone. Faces, animal figures, geometric forms, spirit beings: the art of the Burrup is as elusive and protean as anything in the surviving record of Australian antiquity.

It was almost four decades ago that a young central European scientist, freshly arrived in the northwest, pioneered the study of these treasures. *Australian Apocalypse: The Story of Australia's Greatest Cultural Monument*, a succinct and driven account of the Burrup's gradual devastation, also serves as a capsule memoir of its author, the impassioned and relentless king of antipodean rock art studies, Robert Bednarik.

There is little a mere review can do to capture the intensity of Bednarik's tale: it relates to conventional scientific writing as pure ethanol relates to an evening glass of cool white wine.

In his pages, compressed, stripped down to basics, is the entire political, environmental and ideological history of the coastal Pilbara, beginning with the massacre of the Burrup's original inhabitants in 1868.

By the time Bednarik arrived in the Pilbara, the economic transformation of the region was under way, as the great iron ore mines of the interior were being opened.

A large deepwater port was needed: the Burrup's indented coastline was chosen, and a new township, named for buccaneering British explorer William Dampier, was built.

"I can still recall the moment when I stepped off the plane on to the newly graded gravel aerodrome of Dampier," Bednarik writes.

"Squinting in the harsh sun I gazed across the coastal plain and saw the flattest land I had ever set eyes upon, but towards the north were dark brooding shapes riding on the shimmering heat, apparently many metres up in the air.

"They looked rather like some kind of whales floating on invisible water. I had no idea what they were, but I realised that I had landed in another world."

Such was the young scientist's introduction to the rock peaks of the Burrup Peninsula. For several years, he surveyed the rock art, tracing and recording its patterns, talking to the last generation of Pilbara elders, piecing together the clues of the past. It was a vanishing record.

"Wherever one looked, petroglyphs were being destroyed by construction work," he writes. "The first I saw were at the power station, located next to the coast, between the single men's quarters and the ore-loading conveyors. The imposing structure was being upgraded right within a major petroglyph site and decorated, damaged boulders were strewn within a few metres of it."

This piecemeal, casual destruction of the Burrup's art galleries continued spasmodically until 2000: at that point about one-quarter of the peninsula's engravings had been damaged, torn from their original locations or eroded in the course of three decades. Bednarik's volume includes a series of remarkable photographs capturing the range of the carvings and their spectacular siting upon the deep red rock piles, silhouetted by hard blue skies.

There are kangaroos, birds, marine creatures

and elaborate ceremonial scenes, but the most startling art panels, showing mask-like faces, abstract patterns or headdresses and staring eyes, all defy interpretation.

Four years ago, plans to extend industrial development on the Burrup gathered pace. Bednarik, by this stage a key figure in the international scientific publishing world, launched a fierce campaign to save what remains of the region's rock art. This book is the record of that bitter-accented campaign and the struggles of various world scientific organi-



Robert Bednarik

sations to bring pressure on the West Australian state Government.

It is a tale of ignorance and official obfuscation, of intellectual guerilla warfare, cascading compromises and sharply marshalled interest-group politics.

Hardly anyone emerges with much credit: academic archeologists and parliamentarians, ministers, public servants and corporate flacks all stand arraigned. Bednarik's efforts have raised the profile of the Burrup somewhat, and encouraged the Government in Perth to step up environmental monitoring and establish scientific panels to check the effects of pollution from the peninsula's industrial sites.

But the prospects for the mid-term remain bleak in Bednarik's judgment. He expects the rock surfaces and their precious carvings to be worn away within a few decades by the effects of acidic emissions in the air, and he records devastating instances of vandalism in parts of the Burrup that lie on crown land.

The World Monuments Fund continues to list the Burrup as one of the 100 most threatened monuments in the world.

For all its grandeur, the Burrup is unlikely to secure a place in the nation's heart. It is almost unknown and it lacks the instant appeal of natural formations such as Uluru or the Bungle Bungle range in the central Kimberley.

Its power is communicated only at first hand, by walking its bleak valleys and feeling the iron, annihilating heat that radiates from its rock.

Bednarik, who knows its pull, has felt the urge to trace the story of this tiny speck of land: and the Burrup's history, in his hands, turns out to be a microcosm of the broader Australian record. "It is all there," he writes, "the ruthless treatment of the indigenes, the shameless exploitation in the name of progress, the frontier mentality, the economic control by forces far removed from the scene of their effects, the falsification of history by the academic lackeys of empire."

Wow! Only as one draws to the close of this slender, remarkable book does one realise its concealed provenance. For Bednarik has penned an art historical *J'accuse*, a very European kind of broadside, naming names and levelling charges.

It is an unfamiliar form of public argument in this nation of whispered co-options, stakeholder coalitions and backroom deals.

He calls none other than Friedrich Nietzsche as his ultimate authority, citing Zarathustra's comment that the earth's skin has diseases, and one of those diseases is man.

"Using Nietzsche's metaphor," pursues Bednarik, "it is fair to say that Western Australia has a pretty severe case of skin disease, called its government. I beg the thinking people of Western Australia to rid this beautiful land of the barbarian, vulgar government that deliberately destroys the cultural remains of the only true and indigenous civilisation this land has ever known.

"I beg you on my own behalf, as the scientist who had the great fortune of rediscovering the greatest gallery of petroglyphs in the world."

Doubtless a detailed response to this *cri de coeur* is even now being prepared by the West Australian Government and will shortly be laid before the eyes of an expectant public.

Robert Bednarik's Australian Apocalypse is available from AURA, PO Box 216, Caulfield South, Victoria 3162. Phone: (03) 9523 0549.



Walking gallery: Almost every flat rock on the Burrup Peninsula is covered with art