

# australian ARCHAEOLOGY

The official journal of the Australian Archaeological Association Inc.

NUMBER 78 | JUNE 2014



# australian ARCHAEOLOGY

*Australian Archaeology*, the official publication of the Australian Archaeological Association Inc., is a refereed journal published since 1974. It accepts original articles in all fields of archaeology and other subjects relevant to archaeological research and practice in Australia and nearby areas. Contributions are accepted in eight sections: Articles (5000–8000 words), Short Reports (1000–3000), Obituaries (500–2000), Thesis Abstracts (200–500), Book Reviews (500–2000), Forum (5000), Comment (1000) and Backfill (which includes letters, conference details, announcements and other material of interest to members). *Australian Archaeology* is published twice a year, in June and December. Notes to Contributors are available at: <[www.australianarchaeologicalassociation.com.au](http://www.australianarchaeologicalassociation.com.au)>.

*Australian Archaeology* is indexed in the Arts and Humanities, Social and Behavioural Sciences, and Social Sciences Citation Indices of the Thomson Reuters Web of Knowledge, SCOPUS, Australian Public Affairs Information Service (APAIS), and Anthropological Literature and Anthropological Index Online.

*Australian Archaeology* is ranked as a tier A journal by the European Reference Index for the Humanities and French Agence d'Evaluation de la Recherche et de l'Enseignement Supérieur.

Subscriptions are available to individuals through membership of the Australian Archaeological Association Inc. or to organisations through institutional subscription. Subscription application/renewal forms are available at <[www.australianarchaeologicalassociation.com.au](http://www.australianarchaeologicalassociation.com.au)>. *Australian Archaeology* is available through Informat and JSTOR.

Design and Print: Openbook Howden

Front Cover: Excavation in progress, Boodie Cave, Barrow Island (Kane Ditchfield, entered in the AAA2013 Photography Competition).

All correspondence and submissions should be addressed to:

## ***Australian Archaeology***

PO Box 10, Flinders University LPO

Flinders University SA 5048

Email: [journal@australianarchaeology.com](mailto:journal@australianarchaeology.com)

<<http://www.australianarchaeologicalassociation.com.au>>

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ISSN 0312-2417

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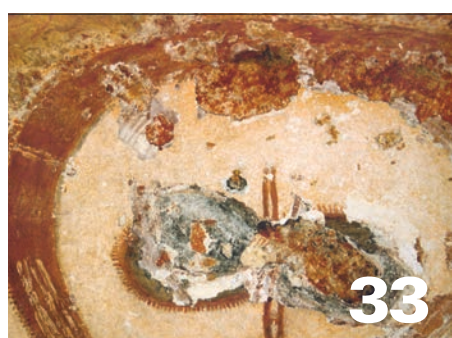
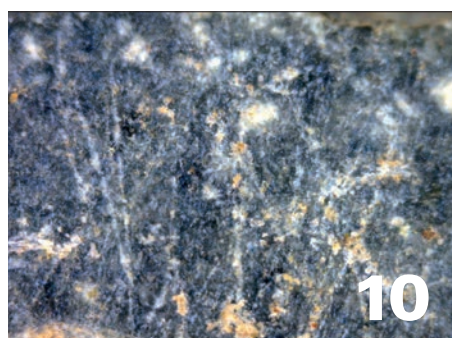
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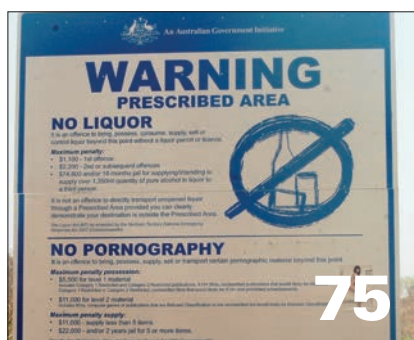
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grammatical etc. errors. The author should, however, make up her mind whether 'data' is a single or plural entity (I would support the latter on etymological grounds): p.98 'the data suggests' on p.98, but on p.127 'the data ... suggest' and again p.138, but on p.163, 'the data supports'.

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## **Secrets at Hanging Rock** by Alan Watchman

2013. Vivid Publishing, Fremantle, 191 pp.  
ISBN 978-1-92220-468-4 (pbk).

*Reviewed by Claire St George*

Department of Archaeology, Flinders University,  
GPO Box 2100, Adelaide SA 5000, Australia  
<[claire.stgeorge@wallisheritageconsulting.com.au](mailto:claire.stgeorge@wallisheritageconsulting.com.au)>



On Valentine's Day 1900, a group of schoolgirls from Appleyard College picnicked at Hanging Rock, near Mt Macedon in Victoria. During the afternoon three members of the party disappeared without a trace. In 2008, a group of archaeologists are excavating the interior of a rockshelter when they discover a narrow opening blocked by a fallen slab of stone. Within this cavern, they discover human skeletons—are these the remains of the missing girls Miranda St Clare, Marion Quade and their governess Miss Greta McCraw, or has the archaeological team uncovered something else?

While Hanging Rock is an actual geological feature near Mt Macedon, the story of the missing girls is fictitious, and Watchman's novel extends upon this storyline by presenting a fictional account of the potential archaeological discovery of the girls' remains at Hanging Rock. The reader alternates, chapter by chapter, from the nineteenth century investigations that occurred immediately following the disappearance of the girls (with a particular focus on an inquest in August 1900), to the potential discovery of

their remains by a team of archaeologists in 2008. While an excellent tool for providing background to readers unfamiliar with the history of Hanging Rock, each time period could arguably be a stand-alone story—there are no links (other than the topic of the missing girls) to bring each time period together into a directly cohesive storyline. As a fictional novel, Watchman had the potential to tie the two time periods inexorably together, perhaps by inserting clues or unanswered questions during the 1900 inquest (mystery artefacts, perhaps), which the archaeologists uncover and resolve during their 2008 investigations.

Initially, the chapters are kept very short, which, coupled with different writing styles for each time period, created a somewhat uneven tone. The 1900 flashbacks are told from the point of view of Michael Fitzhurbert, who was present at Hanging Rock the day the girls went missing and became integral in their search in the week following their disappearance. These flashbacks present an eloquent re-imagining of the day the girls disappeared, the experiences of those involved in the search and the August 1900 inquest that followed. This style of writing is in stark contrast to the 2008 archaeological investigations, where language is very casual and occasionally feels a little stilted and unnatural. Watchman may have purposefully done this in order to highlight the different time periods; however, this also has the potential to create a somewhat disconcerting experience for some readers. Towards the end of *Secrets*, the focus shifts entirely to 2008, and the pace picks up as clues build and some answers are forthcoming. While the main characters of the 2008 investigations are fictional, Watchman has them interact with, and refer to, present-day, real-world archaeologists, in an interesting interplay between fiction and non-fiction.

Throughout *Secrets* there is a strong focus on the relationships between archaeologists. Three chapters in particular (Chapters 8, 14 and 17) are devoted to people in the archaeological team agonising over current, past and potential future relationships. In fact, most chapters set in the 2008 time period contain some level of relationship tension and/or sexual innuendo. While such content has its place (and perhaps is an accurate reflection of the discipline?!), it did feel unnecessarily heavy-handed and diverted without a clear purpose from the overall storyline.

*Secrets* contains very few grammatical errors, although the incorrect spelling of Wurundjeri (Wirundjeri e.g. pp.16, 93) is surprising, and abbreviations used are not always appropriate (e.g. id for identification would be best spelt out in full [pp.35, 158], as would JCU for James Cook University [p.35] and XRD/SEM [p.35]).

*Secrets at Hanging Rock* is a short, easy read aimed at a general readership with only minimal technical information. It takes a little while to find its stride, but once it does it presents an interesting fictional account of what it might be like for a group of archaeologists to, over 100 years later, potentially solve the mystery of the three missing girls at Hanging Rock. My main criticism is that, as the storyline reaches its peak, the book ends with many questions left unanswered. Is a sequel forthcoming, perhaps?