

# Obituaries

## *Patricia Vinnicombe (1932–2003)*

‘There is no-one else remotely able to take her place,’ is how Janette Deacon, the renowned South African archaeologist, reacted to the news of the sudden death of Patricia Vinnicombe on Sunday 30 March 2003. Pat’s colleague at the Western Australian Museum, South African Warren Fish, who was with her on the field trip during which she died in Australia, wrote: ‘She was a fantastic woman and her loss is greatly felt.’ Retired University of Natal publisher Margery Moberly acknowledged that working with Pat on her book *People of the eland* changed her life. Many mourn Pat’s passing.

Patricia Vinnicombe was born on the family farm *West Ilsley* at Underberg on 17 March 1932. Even as a child she was interested in rock paintings in the area. She made her first rock art copy at 13. She went to school in Underberg and Pietermaritzburg and intended becoming an occupational therapist. However, her contact with the renowned palaeo-anatomists Raymond Dart and Philip Tobias at the University of Witwatersrand changed her mind and she concentrated all her efforts on her childhood interest in Bushman rock paintings in the foothills of the southern Natal Drakensberg. Back on the farm, with no electricity, Pat had difficulty working up her tracings. Dr Pringle of the Natal Museum offered her space in the museum as well as a large light box to complete her redrawings for the then National Council for Social Research, Bureau for Archaeology who were supporting Pat financially. She worked at the museum, often at night, between 1959 and 1961. It was at this time that she met and married Patrick Carter, an archaeologist from Cambridge University who was employed at Natal Museum. These copies and much additional research, while living in Ghana and Cambridge, England, resulted in the University of Natal Press’ 1976 publication of Pat Vinnicombe’s *People of the eland: rock paint-*



*Patricia Vinnicombe*

ings of the Drakensberg Bushmen as a reflection of their life and thought, now a piece of Africana. Besides her description of the paintings Pat dug around in archives and correspondence files in various institutions, including the then-named Natal Archives, Pietermaritzburg, The Natal Society Library, the Killie Campbell Africana Museum and the Natal Museum, to provide the history and background to the Bushmen. It has been said that Pat knew more about the archive and archaeological collection in the Natal Museum than did the archaeologists who succeeded her. Her archival research forms the first three chapters of her book and is a fount of information for subsequent researchers. The number of references after each of the eight chapters averages around 50. The bibliography alone has over 400 entries. *People of the eland* is still well regarded as a reference work and is used widely around the world. In addition to *People of the eland* Pat published many papers and articles. She was awarded a doctorate by Cambridge University, UK for her exhaustive work. Her innovative research on the interpretation of the paintings opened the door for several other rock art researchers, notably David Lewis-Williams. Most (298) of the completed redrawings of her tracings are in the Rock Art Collections at the Natal Museum. This highly valued collection is kept in climatically controlled conditions and is accessible to *bona fide* researchers.

Over the past few years Pat has obtained funding from the Oxford University's Swan Fund to assist her in working up the remaining tracings made 40 to 50 years ago. This is being done, mainly by a research assistant Justine Olufson, at the University of Witwatersrand's Rock Art Research Unit to which Pat returned each year for three months. During this time she used to visit her Natal family and friends.

I first met Pat in early 1975. I can still picture her striding up the hill towards Crazy Paving Shelter near Himeville. In tow was a rather straggly line of members of the Natal Branch of the SA Archaeological Society. That evening, in the Himeville Arms, she gave us an exciting talk on the Bushman paintings and her work. This was my first serious introduction to southern African rock paintings. Since then I have had many meetings with Pat and listened to some of the numerous lectures she has given in Natal. Although the University of Natal Press held copyright of *People of the eland*, they passed on any requests to Pat. Since the Natal Museum held the painted rock art copies, she asked me, then on the staff of Natal Museum, to monitor requests for the use of photographs from *People of the eland* in other publications. I last saw Pat when she visited me at my home in April 2002. It was then that she told me an extraordinary tale. She was in the field at The Kimberleys, in northwest Australia, far from home and had had a hard day. She took herself off to one of the hot springs, which string out like a row of pearls. She selected her pool in this isolated area and while relaxing noticed a woman approaching. To Pat's disappointment the newcomer chose Pat's pool when she had so many others from which to choose. The woman began to chat and Pat recognised a South African accent but said nothing. Eventually the woman asked Pat what she was doing in the area. Pat mentioned rock art. The woman responded excitedly. 'We have a lot of rock art in our area in South Africa. Have you heard of Patricia Vinnicombe, she wrote an important book?' Pat did not let on who she was – she was too tired and did not want to encourage conversation. The woman was from Durban, had never visited a painted site, yet knew Pat's name and work.

In 1977 Pat Vinnicombe took up a post in Sydney on contract to the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service to carry out the large North Hawkesbury

Archaeological Project. This aimed to investigate Aboriginal sites to the north of Sydney ahead of the building of a dam in the valley. Sites previously recorded included rock engravings on sandstone pavements, drawings, paintings and stencils in rock overhangs. During the project many more art sites were identified, plus other types of sites such as shell middens. A great deal of information was produced and is still being added to. It was the first regional project in NSW, if not in Australia. Pat's report on the project, 'Pre-deliction and Prediction', although not published, is constantly referred to in other researchers' work. The many people who worked with her on the project learnt a great deal about field techniques and she was liked by all.

Still in Australia, Pat moved in 1981 to Perth where she was employed in the Western Australian Museum. She worked on Aboriginal art and explained to us that it was far easier to interpret since she could ask the Aborigines what the intentions of the painters were. Pat retired from the WA Museum about three years ago but has not taken retirement seriously. Since the late 1990s, Pat has been very involved in fighting development issues on the Burrup Peninsula, Western Australia. Rich in Aboriginal engravings the area is threatened by the expansion of the gas industry already located there. A multi-million dollar contract to supply China with liquid gas has already been signed without knowing what impact the chemical emissions will have on the thousands' year-old Aboriginal heritage.

Pat was invited to India about four years ago by local rock art experts whom she had met at international conferences. She and George Kendrick were given a guided tour during which Pat made several tracings and took a number of photographs.

Towards the end of March 2003, Pat and her colleague, Warren Fish, completed some fieldwork on the Burrup Peninsula, north of Dampier and Karratha in northern Western Australia. A meeting in the area with the developers regarding the possible damage to the art by industrial emissions followed the fieldwork. Pat did not feel very well and at the end of the meeting left the room. Shortly afterwards she was found dead in the bathroom. Pat could not have arranged a better end: in a place that she loved and doing what she enjoyed – fighting heritage issues.

Pat is survived by her ex-husband Patrick Carter, a retired archaeologist, in England; her partner George Kendrick, a retired but still active marine palaeogeologist, in Perth, WA; her son Gavin Carter, a commercial fisherman in Point Sampson near Dampier WA, his wife Kayleen and their infant daughter Karrah Lea Vinnicombe Carter; her brother and sister-in-law John and Brenda Vinnicombe in Underberg and a multitude of friends and colleagues around the world.

Patricia Vinnicombe was a truly well respected and loved academic, colleague, family person and friend. Her life was celebrated at her burial service in Perth, Australia on Tuesday 8 April followed by a wake at her home; at a memorial service in Underberg, South Africa on Wednesday 9 April; at a memorial get-together in a rock art site north of Sydney, Australia in April and at a rock art film première in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa on 29 April, 2003. Truly, there is no-one remotely able to take Pat's place.

VAL WARD