

Exposé or misconstrual? Unresolved issues of authorship and the authenticity of GW Stow's 'forgery' of a rock art painting

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Abstract. George William Stow (1822-1882) is today considered to have been one of the founding fathers of rock art research and conservation in Southern Africa. He arrived from England in 1843 and settled on the frontier of the Eastern Cape where he gradually started specializing in geological exploration, the ethnological history of the early peoples of the subcontinent and the rock art of the region.

By the 1870s he was responsible for the discovery of the coalfields in the Vaal Triangle of South Africa.

In recent years Stow's legacy has been the subject of academic suspicion. Some rock art experts claim that he made himself guilty of 'forgery'. In the article the authors argue in favour of restoring the status of Stow by pointing to the fact that two mutually exclusive interpretational approaches of rock art, than it is about an alleged forgery, are at the heart of the attempts at discrediting his work. In the process, irreparable and undeserving harm has been done to the name of George William Stow and his contribution to rock art research and conservation in South Africa.

Key words. GW Stow, rock art, shamanistic approach, geology, archaeology, heritage conservation.

Introduction

For the researcher engaged in a study of the rock engravings of Redan near Vereeniging, it is usually inevitable to come across the name of George William Stow (1822-1882). Stow discovered the rich coal fields in the Vaal area that would lead to the formation of a vast coal empire and the establishment of the industrial city of Vereeniging.² Stow also laid the foundation for rock art research and conservation in South Africa. Twenty-three years after his death his treatise *The native races*

1 Dr Marguerite Prins, completed a PhD in history at North-West University in 2005. It was titled *The primordial circle: the prehistoric rock engravings of Redan, Vereeniging*. An earlier draft of this article was presented at a conference of the South African Association of Art Historians, at the University of Stellenbosch in September 2003.

2 R Mendelsohn, *Sammy Marks: 'The uncrowned king of the Transvaal'* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1991), pp. 11-15.

of South Africa was published posthumously.³ The publication was illustrated with four copies of rock art including a copy entitled 'Bushman disguised as ostrich'. Recently Stow's name was resurrected, not to honour his many achievements, but to 'expose' him as a liar and a cheat and to accuse him of deliberately forging the ostrich copy for his own gain. A close scrutiny of Stow's voluminous correspondence, both published and unpublished and of his copies, reveals a number of inconsistencies that seriously weaken, if not refute, the claim that he perpetrated an intentional hoax. A more serious repercussion of this allegation is that it has impacted directly on how Stow's contribution, both his copies and his written treatise, are perceived and utilised by researchers.

The man and his times

Stow emigrated from England and settled on the turbulent Eastern Cape border in 1843, where he rapidly became known as a skilled amateur geologist. In the course of his geological explorations he developed an interest in the Bantu-speaking and Khoisan peoples, and began documenting their histories and customs, and making copies of their rock paintings. Stow started copying rock art in 1867. He wanted to use it as a visual clue to their customs and manners.⁴ In 1879, 36 years after settling in South Africa,⁵ he started writing what was to become one of the earliest contributions on the history of the Khoisan peoples of southern Africa.

Stow was the quintessential autodidact, completely self-taught in the three fields that would bring him fame, geology, ethnology and the study of rock art. He pursued these disciplines simultaneously. He travelled in an ox-wagon, covered thousands of kilometres, frequently into unexplored terrain, worked for long periods without remuneration and suffered extreme physical deprivation.⁶ He conducted interviews with the Bushmen he encountered, and became an indefatigable recorder of their art, and a passionate spokesman for the preservation of Bushman art and culture. On occasion he explained:

One thing is certain, if I am spared I shall use every effort to secure all the paintings in the state that I possibly can, that some record may be kept (imperfect as it must necessarily be ...). I have never lost an opportunity during that time of rescuing from total obliteration the memory of their wonderful

3 GW Stow, *The native races of South Africa: a history of the intrusion of the Hottentots and Bantu into the hunting grounds of the Bushmen, the aborigines of the country* (Edited by G. McCall Theal, Swann Sonnenschein & Co. Ltd, London, [1905], [reprinted 1906], 1910).

4 D Lewis-Williams, *Stories that float from afar: ancestral folklore of the San of Southern Africa*, (Second printing, (first 2000), David Philip, Cape Town, 2002), p. 21; RB Young, *The life and work of George William Stow*, (Longmans, Green, London, 1908), p. 18.

5 GW Stow, *The native races of South Africa: a history of the intrusion of the Hottentots and Bantu into the hunting grounds of the Bushmen, the aborigines of the country*, (Edited by G. McCall Theal, Swann Sonnenschein & Co. Ltd, London, 1910), p. 2.

6 RB Young, *The life and work of George William Stow*. (Longmans, Green, London, 1908), pp. 7-11.

artistic labours, at the same time buoying myself up with the hope that by so doing a foundation might be laid to a work that might ultimately prove to be of considerable importance and value to the student of the earlier races of mankind.⁷

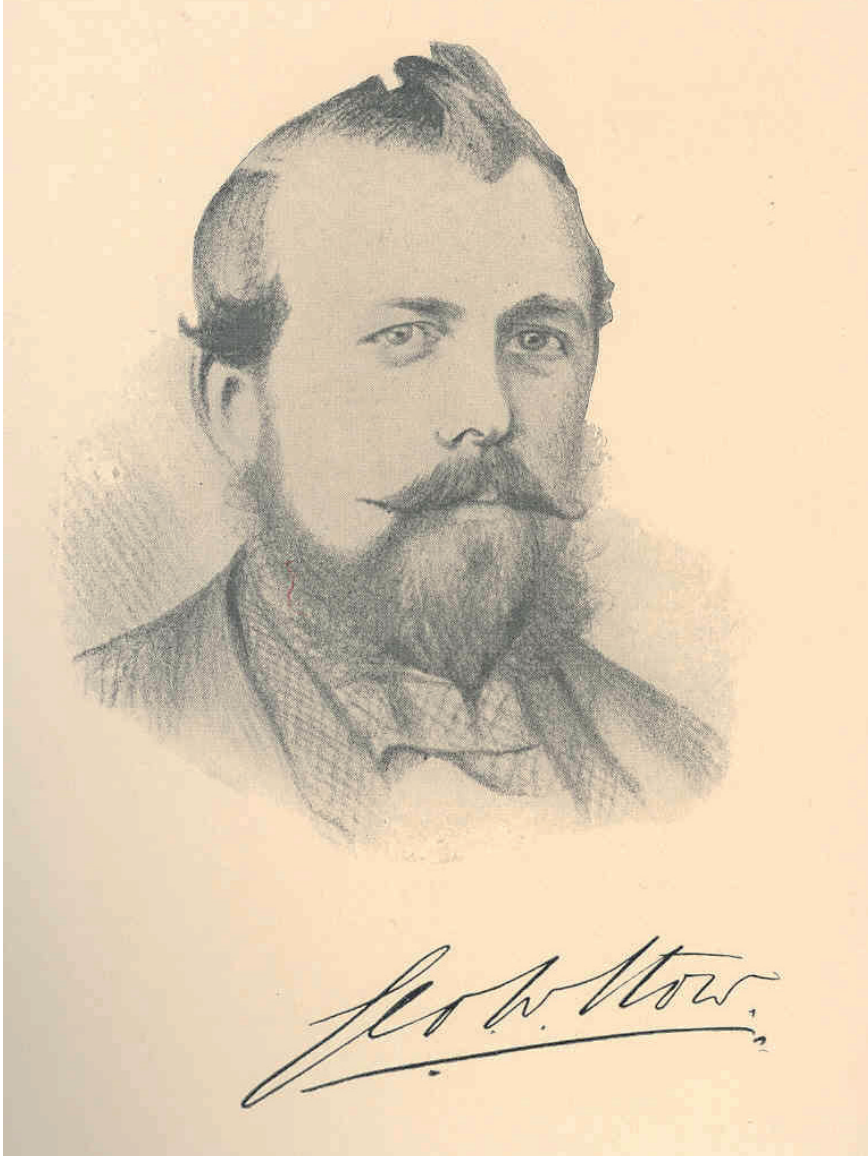


Illustration 1: GW Stow. Source: Young

⁷ GW Stow – Lucy Lloyd, 4 June 1877, in K Schoeman, *A debt of gratitude: Lucy Lloyd and the 'Bushman work' of GW Stow*, (Cape Town: South African Library, Cape Town, 1997), p. 73.

Judged by today's exacting standards, Stow's copy method appears somewhat unorthodox. It consisted of two distinct stages. On site he took a few basic measurements, transferred these to rough paper, drew in the images free-hand, made pencil annotations of the colours and collected pigment samples *in situ*. The final copy was made by tracing and scoring through the images, transferring these to cartridge paper and adding colour washes. It is also widely known that many of his copies are in fact compilations consisting of the selection and omission of images from different parts of the rock face, to form a single composition.⁸ This practice was not considered unusual or fraudulent. It was dictated by Stow's extreme sense of urgency to record as much of the art as possible in order to preserve it for posterity. As a result of the acute shortage of paper he invariably experienced in the veld⁹ he was also anxious to make each copy as 'representative' as possible.

In 1874, while engaged in geological reconnaissance for the Legislature of Griqualand West (North West Province), Stow began corresponding with the philologist, W.H.I. Bleek, Curator of the Grey Collection in Cape Town and renowned scholar of the Bushman language and culture. As a result of Bleek's interest in the Bushman culture, a number of interested individuals had been sending him copies of the rock art.¹⁰ Stow subsequently sent him a portfolio containing 72 of his copies of rock paintings and engravings. In a letter to Bleek he expounded his narrative view of the art:

Some may have a mythological character but others are certainly historical paintings ... These are frequently representations of battles – huntings and dances in which the Bushmen are represented wearing the different disguises they are known to adopt on such occasions – but which European eyes when they see representations of men enveloped in skins with beaks or birds' heads – or with tails of iguanas and other animals fastened around their wrists, make them believe they must have a mythological or fabulous meaning, instead of representing the manners and customs of the Bushmen as they really were.¹¹

Bleek did not dispute this interpretation, and in his second official report, published the following year, he acknowledged these copies as a 'magnificent collection' and added that their publication

cannot but effect a radical change in the ideas generally entertained with regard to the Bushmen and their mental condition. An inspection of these pictures and their explanation by Bushmen has only commenced; but it promises some valuable results and throws light upon many things hitherto unintelligible.¹²

8 GW Stow and D.F. Bleek, *Rock paintings in South Africa from parts of the Eastern Province and Orange Free State*, (Methuen, London, 1930), p. xxvi.

9 *Ibid.*, p. xxvii.

10 K Schoeman, *A debt of gratitude: Lucy Lloyd and the 'Bushman work' of GW Stow*, p. 42.

11 McGregor Museum Depot MMKD 2650/1. Correspondence: GW Stow – L. Lloyd, 14 December 1874.

12 K Schoeman, *A debt of gratitude: Lucy Lloyd and the 'Bushman work' of GW Stow*, p. 42.

This promising correspondence was cut short by Bleek's sudden death on 17 August 1875,¹³ but was continued by his sister-in-law and collaborator Lucy Lloyd.¹⁴ Lloyd was responsible for much of the interviews, transcripts and translations of the verbatim accounts delivered by a number of Bushmen, residing with Bleek in his home.¹⁵ Isolated in the field, Lucy Lloyd became Stow's confidante and mentor, and he kept her informed of every step of the progress he was making both with his written treatise, and his copies of the rock art. In the course of his travels the idea came to him to use his copies to illustrate his written treatise.

Stow did not live to see his text or his copies published. While in the field he heard the heartbreaking news that due to its great length, the publisher John Murray of London was unable to publish his treatise.¹⁶ He died 18 months later (presumably of a heart attack). In spite of her own precarious financial situation, Lucy Lloyd purchased the remaining copies that were in the possession of Stow's widow. Furthermore, regardless of ill health, Lucy Lloyd persevered for many years in trying to find a publisher. She eventually enlisted the help of the historian G. McCall Theal, and *The native races of South Africa* was finally published in 1905, illustrated with a copy of 'Bushman disguised as ostrich'.¹⁷

The case against Stow

In 1994, more than 100 years after Stow's death, an article 'The mystery of the blue ostriches' appeared in the prestigious publication *African Studies*.¹⁸ It was co-authored by three prominent academics, Thomas A. Dowson, Phillip V. Tobias and J. David Lewis-Williams. This article was preceded by a provisional exposé earlier.¹⁹ In the 1994 article, it is alleged that Stow perpetrated an intentional hoax, in order to support his 'firm belief that the rock paintings faithfully chronicled the customs and hunting activities of the Bushmen'.²⁰ The authors argue that the blue os-

13 D Lewis-Williams, *Stories that float from afar: ancestral folklore of the San of Southern Africa*, (Second printing, (first 2000), David Philip, Cape Town, 2002), p. 22.

14 D Lewis-Williams, *Stories that float from afar: ancestral folklore of the San of Southern Africa*, (Second printing, (first 2000), David Philip, Cape Town, 2002), p. 24.

15 E. Eberhard, "Wilhelm Bleek and the founding of Khoisan research", in J. Deacon & TA Dowson (eds), *Voices from the past: IXam Bushmen and the Bleek and Lloyd collection*, (Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1996), p. 54.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

17 GW Stow, *The native races of South Africa*, (Swan & Sonnenschein, London, (1905) 1964), p. 82.

18 TA Dowson, PV Tobias and JD Lewis-Williams, "The mystery of the blue ostriches: clues to the origin and authorship of a supposed rock painting" in *African Studies*, 53(1), 1994, pp. 3-38.

19 TA Dowson, "The making of the 'blue ostriches': further light on a scientific fraud" in *South African Journal of Science*, 89, 1993, pp. 360-361.

20 TA Dowson, PV Tobias and JD Lewis-Williams, "The mystery of the blue ostriches: clues to the origin and authorship of a supposed rock painting" in *African Studies*, 53(1), 1994, p. 4.

triches (as the copy 'Bushman disguised as ostrich' became known) is not copied from an original rock painting, but is derived from an illustration in Robert Moffat's *Missionary labours and scenes in South Africa*.²¹ This is substantiated with an illustration.²² The authors believe that Stow reversed the illustration left to right and that he deliberately omitted some of the images to make it appear more like a genuine rock painting. Apart from a superficial resemblance between the composition of the blue ostriches and Moffat's illustration, these allegations remain unproven and speculative.

As further evidence the authors argue that no field copy has ever been located, but that an Indian ink copy in possession of the Rock Art Research Unit of the University of the Witwatersrand,²³ shows that the deeply curved neck of one of the ostriches, is a deliberate falsification. Moreover, that the blue colour of the ostriches is unusual (hence the name 'blue ostriches'), and that the composition suggests 'a sense of European perspective'.²⁴ The authors assert that the original rock painting has never been located, in spite of Stow's daughter testifying in the 1930s to Dorothea Bleek that she recalled visiting such a cave with her father. Miss Stow's testimony is questioned and rejected, implicating her together with her father.²⁵

Stow (and a number of early travellers) are brought into further discredit by questioning the validity of the ostrich hunting strategy of the Bushmen. In the article the authors argues that there have been frequent borrowings amongst early writers,²⁶ and conclude that:

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21 R Moffat, *Missionary labours and scenes in Southern Africa: twenty-three years an agent of the London Missionary Society in that continent*, (John Snow, Paternoster-Row, London, 1842).

22 TA Dowson, PV Tobias and JD Lewis-Williams, "The mystery of the blue ostriches: clues to the origin and authorship of a supposed rock painting" in *African Studies*, 53(1), 1994, Fig. 5.

23 Now known as the Rock Art Research Institute.

24 TA Dowson, PV Tobias and JD Lewis-Williams, "The mystery of the blue ostriches: clues to the origin and authorship of a supposed rock painting" in *African Studies*, 53(1), 1994, p. 9.

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 23.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

27 Now known as the Rock Art Research Institute.

28 TA Dowson, PV Tobias and JD Lewis-Williams, "The mystery of the blue ostriches: clues to the origin and authorship of a supposed rock painting" in *African Studies*, 53(1), 1994, p. 9.

1930s to Dorothea Bleek that she recalled visiting such a cave with her father. Miss Stow's testimony is questioned and rejected, implicating her together with her father.²⁹



Illustration 2: 'Bushman disguised as Ostrich' now called 'The blue ostriches'. Source: GW Stow (1905), Opposite p. 82.

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the supposed employment by Bushmen of ostrich disguises, and their depiction of some other types of hunting disguises have been seriously questioned.

They believe that the therianthropes (half-men/half-beasts) frequently depicted in rock paintings do not portray hunting and dancing disguises, but the trance experience of the shaman:

The art is now believed to have been principally, though not necessarily exclusively, associated with the activities of shamans who entered trance to cure the sick, change the weather, go on out-of-body travel, control the movements of animals, and transform themselves into animals.³¹

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 23.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

This overt reference to the trance hypothesis / shamanistic approach³² is a clear indication of the theoretical stance of the authors.

In their zeal to convince the reader of the validity of the trance hypothesis as opposed to the speciousness of Stow's narrative approach, parallels are drawn with the infamous Piltdown hoax:

Acceptance of false evidence can have the unfortunate consequence that genuine advances are thereby marginalised and their acceptance delayed, as were Raymond Dart's claims for the Taung skull³³

The authors are at pains to point out that:

once a culprit has been identified, the rest of his or her work must be subjected to more critical scrutiny.³⁴

Researchers are cautioned to practice extreme caution when interpreting rock art:

The uncritical citing of Stow's writings to interpret rock paintings would therefore run the risk of circularity.³⁵

In order to unravel the mystery of the blue ostriches, a close reading of all available correspondence was undertaken. This included the extensive correspondence that passed between Stow and Lucy Lloyd over a period of five years, introduced and edited by Karel Schoeman (1997), and a number of unpublished letters obtained from the archives of the McGregor Museum. The latter includes a brief but significant correspondence between Stow and W.H.I. Bleek, and more recent correspondence dating from the 1940s between Dorothea Bleek and Maria Wilman. This correspondence was augmented by studying Stow's copies, and by comparing the two printed versions of the blue ostriches. The latter led to a startling discovery.

The correspondence

In his correspondence Stow frequently expressed concern regarding fraudulent copies. Even at this early date and given the low esteem that Bushmen were generally held in by the majority of colonists and travelers, there was nevertheless a demand for copies of their art, and copies were being duplicated and even fabricated, and sent back to England.³⁶ After entrusting his portfolio of copies to Bleek in 1875, Stow sought some reassurance from him regarding their safety and confidentiality.

32 See also JD Lewis-Williams, *Believing and seeing: symbolic meanings in southern San rock paintings*, (Academic Press, London, 1981); JD Lewis-Williams, and TA Dowson, *Images of power: understanding Bushman rock art*, (Johannesburg: Southern Books, Johannesburg, 1989).

33 TA Dowson, PV Tobias and JD Lewis-Williams, "The mystery of the blue ostriches: clues to the origin and authorship of a supposed rock painting" in *African Studies*, 53(1), 1994, p. 7.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 23)

35 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

36 Referred to as 'home' in the correspondence.