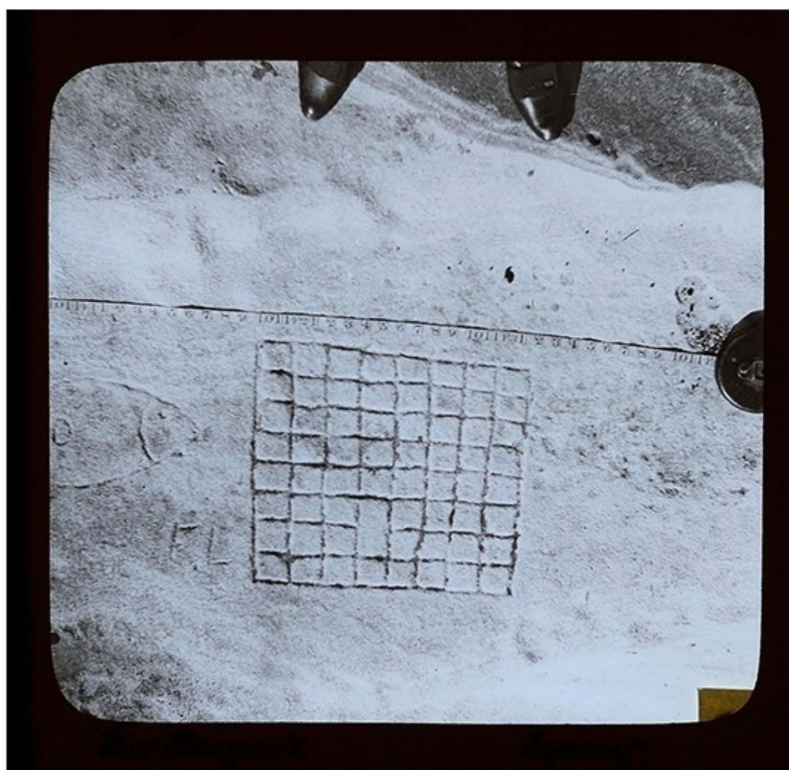


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## The Makings of an Argument: A slide from the National Library of Australia's Lawrence Hargrave collection by ANU DECRA researcher, Dr Ursula Frederick



**Title slide. Photographs: Elisa deCourcy, images reproduced with permission of the National Library of Australia**

It would be wrong to suggest that this is my *favourite* magic lantern slide, or even that it is my favourite within the Hargrave collection but for various reasons it has captured my attention. The slide forms part of a set of some 60 magic lantern slides and corresponding glass-plate negatives made by the lauded Anglo-Australian inventor and aviation pioneer Lawrence Hargrave in the first decade of the twentieth century.

At the centre of the image there is a grid-like form comprising 64 roughly equilateral squares which has been cut into sandstone bedrock. Alongside it are two other engravings: a fish motif that extends beyond the image; and a series of marks which might be letters, perhaps initials. A measuring tape has been stretched across the rock and we can see from its imperial scale that the grid is approximately 1 foot 2 inches wide. Some may find a semblance of scientific method in the ruler's presence but for me it is more of a compositional feature. It acts as a spatio-temporal divide between the traces of past human activity embedded in the rock and the traces of the present-now-past fixed in the emulsion of the photograph. Looking at this image within an image I become attuned to the fact that the ground is always an active membrane upon which multiple histories accumulate.

But what really catches my eye are the pointy-toed shoes and the downward point of view. This is an orientation which is quintessentially archaeological and which places the photographer within the frame of his subject. It is an apt reminder that research is a process in which data is not simply gathered but is purposely composed and managed. I also find this image intriguing because as a researcher and photographer who has recorded rock art and historic inscriptions I can imagine myself in this very position. This leads me to wonder how I would interpret the grid-like engraving and what I might make of its rendering. Would I assume it was made by the local Aboriginal people? Would I try to interpret its meaning or motivation? Would I expect it to hold some deeper relevance beyond the grasp of my cultural understanding? While I can't be sure of how I would read this motif in present circumstance, there is one thing I know for certain; I would not dare to suggest that it was a chessboard made by Peruvian slaves in the company of a lost Spanish galleon. Yet this is effectively what Hargrave saw in this rock engraving. And it is one of several found at Woollahra Point which he used to support his extraordinary theory that the Spanish had sailed into Sydney Harbour in the late sixteenth century. More specifically, Hargrave posited that the galleon Santa Ysabel, under the command of Lope de Vega, moored there with its crew. As well as searching for gold and carving a 'Spanish Proclamation' on the Bondi headland, they were apparently responsible for this "rock-cut chessboard... that has never been played on by an Englishman" (1).

When I first went to view the Hargrave collection at the National Library in Canberra I was provided with a box of glass plates rather than the actual lantern slides that Hargrave had developed. Despite my initial confusion it soon became clear that these plates were part of Hargrave's lantern slide production process: the unpolished copy slides made from ink drawings and book illustrations pinned to wood; negatives of rock engravings photographed in situ; and a striking series of linear/outline motifs masked off with paint and bright orange paper cut outs. Aside from the rock art motifs there was also a bizarre assortment of images reproduced from secondary sources. Amongst them were a model of a galleon in a vitrine, drawings of European huntsmen, Renaissance-period fashion, and a pubic covering in the Australian Museum. There were several maps of the east coast of Australia and the Torres Strait upon which were traced the expeditionary routes that the Spanish are proposed to have taken. What fascinates me is how these plates more broadly reflect upon the genesis of the magic lantern slide collection, the material processes of its making and the ideas underpinning its production.

What I was looking at was essentially the 'makings of an argument', that is, Hargrave's thinking process and his efforts to accumulate a body of visual evidence that might support his unusual theory. At the time I viewed the collection I was unaware of Hargrave's work on rock art, his presentations to the Royal Society of

New South Wales (2) and his persistent efforts to convince both the academy and the public of his unconventional line of thought. Hargrave clearly went to considerable effort to gather and make his slides. Although there was no catalogue or list of captions to explicate the images I was viewing, this sparked my curiosity further. One aspect of my current ARC DECRA project is to consider how ideas and arguments about archaeology and cultural heritage are constructed through visual media. So in a way it offered an opportunity to attempt to unravel the content of the slides and to imagine what Hargrave might have been intending to communicate.

Each slide was simply labelled with the NLA's picture id and in some cases a number was written in pencil on the back, which gave me some sense of a sequence in which the slides might have been used for building an argument. From the odd assortment in general and the maps in particular I began to get a sense of where Hargrave might be going with his images. In a nutshell, he believed the rock art was made by foreigners. I came to this conclusion in part because it is, unfortunately, an idea that has pervaded commentary on Australia rock art for decades.

Reading between the shoes, the rock art, the tape measure and the camera of this, my not-favourite, slide we can see that Hargrave is an active presence in the construction of the image and the argument he formulates through it. In short, as author he is never quite far enough from the subject he seeks to interpret. Early rock art recorders interpreting motifs through their own cultural bias, knowledge system and training often got it wrong. What appears to distinguish Hargrave is that he was less concerned with understanding the rock art itself but focussed by a desire to prove something else. As Gojak points out, Hargrave used rock art as evidence insofar as it would corroborate rather than test his ideas (3).

Hargrave was neither the first nor the last to offer misguided interpretations of rock art (4) and his Lope de Vega / Spanish Proclamation theories were largely dismissed by other scholars, both within his own lifetime and in the decades after his death (5). Nevertheless, arguments such as Hargrave's reverberate in the present, and this collection is pertinent in reminding us of their legacy. As erroneous ideas and public misconceptions regarding the origins of Australian rock art continue to circulate (6), it is important to consider the persuasive power of visual media in contested discourse.

(1) Hargrave's unpublished manuscript quoted in C.W. Salier 1928 'Lawrence Hargrave. A Prelude to Biography', presentation to the Royal Australian Historical Society, November 27.

(2) Hargrave, L. 1909. 'Lope de Vega' (I and II), *Journal and proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales*, 43 (June) pp. 39-54, (Dec) pp. 412-425.

(3) Gojak, D. The 'Spanish Proclamation', *The Secret Visitors Project*, [secretvisitors.wordpress.com](http://secretvisitors.wordpress.com), accessed June 26, 2018.

(4) See for example George Grey (1837) and Erich von Daniken (1968) with regard to the Wandjina in Kimberley rock art.

(5) Elkin, A. P. 1949. 'The Origin and Interpretation of Petroglyphs in South-East Australia', *Oceania*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Dec.): 119-157; Gojak, D. 2012. 'Lawrence Hargrave's Spanish Sydney', *Placenames Australia* (December) pp 3,6-7.

(6) McNiven, I.J. 2011. 'THE BRADSHAW DEBATE: Lessons Learned from Critiquing Colonialist Interpretations of Gwion Gwion Rock Paintings of the Kimberley, Western Australia', *Australian Archaeology* 72 (June), pp. 35-44.