These pages were taken from “Stone Age Paintings” by Selwyn Dewdney, a booklet on Manitoba’s Aboriginal Rock Paintings. It was published in 1965 by the Manitoba Government and is no longer under copyright.

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BERENS AND BLOODVEIN RIVER SITES

Through the courtesy of Ontario’s Lands and Forests and financial help from the Wilderness Research Center in Minnesota I was able to reach three sites east of Lake Winnipeg and five miles inside the Manitoba boundary, from Red Lake, Ontario. Two of these are on arms of Fishing Lake, which empties into the Berens River drainage; the other, on Bushey Lake, lies within the Bloodvein drainage basin. The east shore of Lake Winnipeg is low and swampy, with large tracts of muskeg and few lakes or rock outcrops. It is not until one gets 20 or 30 miles inland that one reaches the typical Shield maze of rocky-shored, wooded waterways. Here, however, is one of the most promising areas for petrograph sites, and the work done so far is a mere beginning.

The most exciting feature of the two sites illustrated in figures 13, 14 and 15 is the appearance of a bow and arrow. When firearms first reached Ojibway hunters in this area about 1750, they were first and foremost “status symbols”, rather than efficient hunting weapons; and were highly regarded for their magical potency. It is likely, therefore, that any shaman-artist with a knowledge of firearms would regard the familiar bow and arrow as a relatively “weak” symbol. If so, we can date paintings in which a bow and arrow appear at least two centuries back, and probably more.
But the pigment on Fishing Lake site is still fairly strong. This strengthens my growing conviction that the right paint applied in the right way in the right place can resist the forces of nature for many centuries.

Of the two sites found on fingers of the southeast arm of Fishing Lake only a couple of miles apart, one is small and badly obscured by lichen and is not reproduced here. The other, consisting of the single face some four feet square that is reproduced in figure 13, has a remarkable ruddy appearance, contrasting strongly with the surrounding rock, most of which has been coated with precipitated lime (dissolved from calcite veins in the granite). One gets the impression that this face has been painted many times, leaving a residue of colour after weathering that has accumulated through the ages. In fact, we spotted the colour from the air at a thousand feet.

Another unusual feature of figure 13 is the emphasis on genitals, not uncommon in primitive paintings elsewhere but very rare in the Shield ones. We must consider the possibility that these petrographs were the work of a group of people who preceded the ancestors of the present Ojibway population; another reason for giving it an early date. The style of the moose, too, with its bent knees suggesting action, distinguishes it from most other renderings of this animal. The alert viewer may have noticed two small unpainted areas in the moose's body. These are bullet holes; and it is not unusual to find that passing hunters have used the paintings for casual targets. There are only two paintings I know of where a weapon is shown sticking into an animal to indicate a possibility that the artist was trying to use sympathetic magic to increase his hunting success.

The Bushey Lake Site consists of two faces, both of which are illustrated in figure 14; although the figures in Face B have been brought closer together. The streaked appearance of the animal is due to lime-bearing seepage. The "bird-man" reminds us of the one already noted in figure 7. The single figure in a canoe is unusual but not unique. The only other figure on this face that one can comment on intelligently is the obvious rendering of the snake — a favourite symbol all through the Shield region. The bow and arrow on Face B is not nearly as strongly painted as that on the Fishing Lake site. A large site farther up the Bloodvein River drainage basin in the two provinces seems to be a "happy hunting ground" for petrographs.
Figure 13 Fishing Lake — whole face

Figure 14 Bushey Lake