

WILDERNESS MYTHS AND AUSTRALIAN CAVES

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Abstract

Beyond a preliminary discussion of some of the basic issues in the writing of any history, the paper looks at what might be called the 'Wilderness Myths' of Australian caves. Any wild place generates myths, and Australian caves have their share of these, which constitute the 'folk history' of caving areas (and often that of cave guides). It is argued that these are more-or-less systematic and are not simply the result of error or simple exaggeration in transmitting the story.

Examples include myths about bottomless pits, blind fish, Aboriginal-white conflict, bushrangers and popular heroes of cave discoveries (along with the interesting result that non-heroes are neglected or even completely forgotten).

Wilderness myths present two issues to the would-be historian : what actual events contributed to them and what does their evolution as myths mean ?

INTRODUCTION

Any historian is faced with the problem of validity. The traditional perspective demands that one must check every bit of information with the aim of discovering objective and final truth. There are a number of other ways of looking at history (see Pascoe, 1979 for a review of these) and many contemporary historians would argue that there is no single final truth, but rather various competing, although still valid, perceptions of reality, and further, that even an objectively false view, to the extent to which it is believed, must be taken into account as part of reality, and as often having as much influence on events as if it did have total objective reality (Melbourne Historical Journal Editorial Collective 1984).

So, in opening this discussion, it must be emphasised that the central question is not one of distinguishing truth from fiction, but rather one of trying to understand the range of perceptions held, and something of why and how they arose. In talking of the notion of 'wilderness myths', it can usefully be related to the well-known phenomenon of 'urban legends' (Brunvald, 1986 and earlier works by the same author). We all know some of these - the man who falls naked from his caravan while his wife is driving, the chihuahua and cat incidents, or any one of a multitude of others.

The urban legend is anecdotal, happened 'to a friend of a friend', has some sort of ironic twist and a seductive plausibility. Some may have, somewhere, a factual foundation, but the fact that the same legend appears widely, even internationally, certainly leads us to doubt this - and no one ever really finds that foundation! As indicated below, our wilderness myths may have some foundation, although their relationship to popular belief is extremely tenuous in some cases. The most interesting thing is that many of them can be found, in essentially the same form, in a wide variety of geographic locations, and this in itself suggests some sort of systematic origin, not necessarily based in any local reality.

We all know about bottomless pits (although perhaps less than some years ago, when caves were much more often seen as objects of mystery) although this myth does not warrant any detailed discussion. However, its very ubiquity serves as a useful pointer to its systematic character.

This paper will deal in more detail with four other commonly occurring examples - blind fish ; the white-aboriginal conflict ; the bushranger's cave ; and the cave hero. Then the issue of commonality between these and their possible origins will be discussed.

BLIND FISH

There are, of course, blind fish found in caves. They occur in Australia at North-west Cape but were only discovered there in the 1940's (Whitley, 1945), and are virtually unknown to the general public (even to many speleologists). The first record of blind fish in caves is probably that of *Ambyloopsis*, first described in 1842 from Mammoth Cave (U.S.A.). However, the *Proteus* of Yugoslavian Caves has been known for centuries, even though first formally described by Valvasor as recently as 1689 (Vandel, 1965). Although not a true fish, it has been commonly perceived as one, and so, there is a long and relatively well-known history of blind fish living in caves.

There is no hard evidence of blind fish in any of the Eastern Australian caves, although there may well have been examples of etiolated specimens of carp, trout or other common freshwater fish as described from Kubla Khan (Scott, 1960).

To take Jenolan as an example, Cook (1889) reported that carp were actually introduced to the Underground River, and suggested that within three generations, they may become blind. He also reported at some length, quoting Agassiz, the blind fish of Mammoth Cave. However, the letters of early visitors to Jenolan frequently contain references to blind fish in the Underground River. They were probably told of this by the guides - there does not appear to be any which actually claim, in the first person, to have seen a blind fish.

At Buchan, blind fish achieved much greater recognition, being reported from Moon Cave in a brochure published by the Minister for Lands (Anon., 1913, 1925). There are examples from other parts of Australia, but the most recent was probably that from the Nullarbor, widely reported in the popular press during 1969.

WHITES vs. ABORIGINALS

A number of examples of Aboriginal skeletons or mummies have been found in caves. Both these and others, rumoured but not found, give rise to a range of stories. The puzzling thing is the extent to which these relics are seen as evidence of conflict between white and black Australians.

Some of these occurrences are reported accurately by the guides at tourist areas, e.g., Skeleton Cave, Jenolan or Yonderup Cave, Yanchep, as pre-dating white occupation and being simply the result of accident. Yet visitors often ask about or even postulate killings by white settlers as the 'common-sense' explanation, and it is not unusual to be told, very seriously that the skeletons concerned did result from a murder by white settlers.

A more striking case is perhaps the slaughter at Murrindal. The contemporary folk history tells of the total Aboriginal population being rounded up into a bend of the river, shot, and their bodies thrown over the cliffs into the Murrindal River, which ran red with blood for weeks afterwards (reported in Mill, White and Mackey, 1980: 15). The earliest account so far discovered is a manuscript by C.H. Grove, not dated but reporting on the author's personal experiences in 1867. This describes a number of Aboriginal men (between a dozen and sixteen) being apprehended in the course of killing sheep, shot, and their bodies hidden in a cave at the foot of the cliffs (Hamilton-Smith 1986). Time appears to have enlarged the incident considerably !

Then there is the world-famous petrified Aboriginal of Naracoorte Caves. The popular story diverges widely from the contemporary reports, and a few of the variations are summarised in Table I. However, the key difference for present purposes is that although there is absolutely no evidence to support the idea of killing by white settlers, this often appears in recent accounts, either as a certainty (Barrett 1944) or as a suggestion (reported in Lewis 1977). As with the Buchan incident, the story appears to have been embellished over the years, and in this case, many aspects other than the killing by whites seem to have been 'improved'.

THE BUSHRANGERS' CAVES

Right across Australia one seems to find bushranger's caves, even in regions where there is little likelihood that bushrangers would have found any cause for their attentions. So, there are Melville's Caves in North-eastern Victoria ; the bushranger's cave on Hanging Rock at Woodend in Victoria ; Bushranger Cave at Cania Gorge in Queensland ; all the stories of Abercrombie ; Pigeon's Cave at Windjana Gorge in the Kimberleys and, of course, the discovery of Jenolan by the Whalan family in pursuit of the bushranger McKeown.

Many of these appear to be without any factual basis, although there is no question that the Bathurst region was one particularly prone to bushranging exploits and Bates (1982) describes the Abercrombie bushranging stories at some length. Nevertheless, a careful reading of even his narrative suggests that the connection with the caves was probably sporadic at the best and generally a very tenuous one.

Similarly, Havard (1934) has discussed the McKeown myth at some length, and demonstrates that although cattle thieves probably did live in the Jenolan area, there is little real evidence that one of them was named McKeown, or that his hiding at Jenolan led to the discovery of the caves, or even that the Whalan family were in fact the discoverers. As one of the correspondents cited by Havard points out, if there were any truth in the story, then surely McKeown would have been recognised as the discoverer rather than the Whalans. There does not appear to be any further evidence which conclusively establishes the truth of the McKeown story.

THE PETRIFIED ABORIGINAL OF NARACOORTE CAVES

The Contemporary Story

Body was desiccated, weighing only 28 pounds and had a leathery texture. The general description fits with the possibility of a ceremonial burial as known to occur at other sites. The only evidence of any wound was a small nick in the skin of the neck.

The thief was met by the Crown Lands Ranger - a Mr. Lawrence Egan - as he was carrying the body away. Egan then engaged the attention of the police to recover the body, obtaining a magistrate's order from Wehl, then Magistrate at Mt. Gambier.

After the recovery of the body, it was replaced in the cave and protected by iron bars. Some months later, and following a court hearing in Adelaide, the thief returned and again stole the corpse.

(Border Watch, 20 Sept. 1861 ; Adelaide Observer, 30 Nov. 1861; Adelaide Observer, 4 Jan. 1862.)

The Present-day Story often includes :

The body was heavily calcified (and one can only speculate upon the possible relationship of this description to Haggard's novel King Solomon's Mines!) The death was the result of a sheep-stealing episode, ending in shooting of the Aboriginals concerned, one of whom managed to find refuge in the cave and died there.

The thief who stole the body hid it under a hotel bed where it was discovered by a curious maid, who then reported her find to the police.

Following the court case, the body was replaced in the cave and protected by iron bars. However, the thief returned and stole the body again before the cement fixing the bars in place was dry.

Table I: Two accounts of the Petrified Aboriginal story at Naracoorte, South Australia.

THE HEROES OF DISCOVERY

Most cave areas have their stories of a discoverer, recognised above others as a key figure in the history of the caves. One could cite many examples - Olsen of Rockhampton, Atherton of Chillagoe, Whalan, Wilson and Wiburd of Jenolan, Moon of Buchan, Reddan of Naracoorte, or Dawson & Connolly of the South-West.

In many such cases, one can only question the extent to which the 'hero' belief may well conceal a much more complex story from view. Any critical historical analysis must explain, for instance, why the discovery of new caves at Jenolan should have been the monopoly of the caretaker of the day, or that Wiburd's discoveries ceased with the death (while seeking new caves) of his long-time colleague in exploration, Jack Edwards, on 8 Dec. 1908. In the same way, the name of James Mason appears pencilled on the walls of many more caves at Naracoorte than that of William Reddan, caretaker of the caves. Yet Reddan is remembered as discoverer of most of the caves and Mason is virtually unknown.

As an illustration, it is particularly interesting to look at the role of Frank Moon at Buchan. Popular history at present credits Moon with the discovery of most caves at Buchan, associates the Rev. John Flynn ('of the Inland') with him in his explorations and certainly reports that tourism at Buchan commenced with his discovery of the Fairy Cave in 1907. Moon has also been credited in the popular media with a remarkable range of adventurous attempts to extend knowledge of the caves. The Melbourne Argus of 16 Nov. 1951 even ascribed to him an exploit of swimming underwater with matches and candle in his bathing cap - a carbon copy of Casteret's famous entry to the Montespan Cave (Casteret 1933). It is important to note that romantic notions of this kind do not appear to have been claimed by Moon himself, either at the time or in recorded interviews during the 1960's.

In fact, tourism at Buchan was established by at least 1885 and was described in Pickersgill's Railways Tourist Guide of that year. Although Flynn's photographs played an important role in obtaining the support of the state government for exploration and development at Buchan, there is no evidence that his actual cave experience extended beyond a few visits purely for photographic purposes. Moreover, although commonly credited with sharing in the exploration of Fairy Cave, Flynn was no longer resident in the area in 1907. The actual record of discovery is presented in Table II, and indicates that Moon's role in discovery and exploration was remarkably limited. It is not surprising that Henham wrote (in 1909) to the Surveyor-General claiming that Moon was taking the credit for Henham's work.

The person most eclipsed by Moon, however, was Frank Wilson. He was already 66 years of age when he arrived at Buchan as manager in 1907, and finally retired at 80 years, having discovered and explored a number of caves, and being responsible for the whole of the physical development of the caves. He had spent a lifetime in cave management at Jenolan, the South-West of Western Australia and at Buchan, yet receives virtually no reference in present-day popular history. There does not even seem to any extant photograph of him as an identifiable person.

DUKE'S CAVE : Explored by Stirling 1889.

DICKSON'S CAVES : Known for many years, explored by Stirling 1889.

SPRING CREEK CAVE : Known for many years, used as a tourist cave in 1885, surveyed by Stirling 1889.

WILSON CAVE : Known for many years, used as a tourist cave in 1885, surveyed by Stirling 1889.

SLOCOMBE'S CAVE : Known for many years, probably first explored by Slocombe (landowner)

KING'S CAVE : Used as a tourist cave in 1885, probably first explored by King (landowner)

MOON'S CAVE : Supposedly explored by Moon in 1906, but had been known for many years and was entered both by Stirling (1889) and at least 'to a considerable extent' by Kitson in 1900.

KITSON CAVE : Discovered and explored by Moon 1906

FAIRY CAVE : Discovered and explored by Moon 1907

SHADES OF DEATH : Discovered E. Henham (1905?) and entered only to top of pitch by Moon in 1907.

BABY BERGER : Discovered C. Wright, explored by Moon 1907.

MURRINDAL CAVE : Discovered E. Henham 1908, explored by Moon.

LILLY PILLY CAVE : Discovered E. Henham 1908, explored Frank Wilson 1909.

ROYAL CAVE : Apparently discovered by Frank Wilson in 1910 but explored by Wilson, Moon & Brown.

FEDERAL CAVE : Discovery and exploration by Wilson and Bonwick 1915.

Table II: Summary of the discovery and exploration of major caves at Buchan, Victoria

TOWARDS ANALYSIS AND EXPLANATION

It is probably tempting to ascribe this pattern of myth-making to the desire of tourist guides to tell a good story. However, it is not nearly as simple as this, and in seeking an explanation, it is firstly necessary to look at the overall direction and pattern of the stories. In summary, we find :

Bottomless Pits: These are world-wide, particularly in places where caves are not well-known or widely understood. Obviously, there is no factual basis.

Blind Fish: Common wherever underground rivers or other large water bodies occur in caves. No factual basis in Australia.

White-Black Conflict : Common throughout Australia. The conflict obviously has a factual basis, but rarely is there any evidence to relate it to the caves concerned. The pattern seems to consistently ascribe the origin of skeletons in caves to killing by whites, or in some other way to exaggerate the extent of violence by whites.

Bushrangers Caves: Common throughout Australia. Again there is an extensive factual basis in Australia, but the relationship to specific caves is usually extremely doubtful or tenuous.

Hero Discoverers: Common throughout the world. Usually a reasonably strong factual basis, but the exploits of the hero are exaggerated at the expense of his colleagues.

From this summary, there is a continuum from no factual basis at one extreme, through to a strong factual basis at the other. In each case, the relationship between the myth as expressed in present-day folk history and the story as reported by contemporary observers or records seems to be consistent from one area to another. It would be easy if we could find one simple explanation which would deal with myth-making in total, but it is doubtful whether this will be possible.

However, there is a degree of unity and continuity in these cave myths, based in the 'mystery' and unfamiliarity of caves, which in turn demands a way of formulating satisfactory images in our own mind. To describe a cave as bottomless is in effect a tangible recognition of its mystery - and to label something, even as being bottomless, is one way of dispelling the uncertainty that its mystery provokes.

Further, given a degree of mystery, we are also likely to impose some sort of structure upon whatever phenomenon baffles us. If we have expectations of a phenomenon, then we will tend to use those expectations to formulate descriptions. Thus, underground rivers have blind fish because we expect that to be so ; Aborigines were murdered by whites, and it is reasonable to expect that the bodies would be concealed, e.g., in a cave ; all our schooldays thrillers tell us that caves are used by pirates and bushrangers and in any case, many caves look as if they are natural lookouts or refuges.

So, a first level of explanation rests in the mystery of caves and the way in which we react to that. A second level is the cult of the hero (whether bushranger or explorer) and their relationship to the cave environment.

Interestingly, Manning Clark (1985: 61-63) in an essay on Australian heroes, identifies the bushranger and the explorer as the first two indigenous white Australian heroes. The general Australian sympathy for bushrangers, as pioneers of resistance against political and socio-economic repression, still permeates our culture, and as Clark expresses it:

The convicts and their descendents had raised to the status of a hero a man who had defied the laws of God and man. This bushranger hero was a colonial Ishmael, a man whose hand was raised against every man because every man's hand was raised against him. He was also a colonial Cain, a man who did not accept that he was subject to either the laws of God or the laws of man.

He continues to argue that the explorers were raised to the status of heroes "... because they had shown that it was possible to subdue the Australian wilderness". Given both the fear of the wilderness and the mystery of caves together, it is relatively easy to see the origin of the hero myth being personified in a cave explorer. Thus, both the bushranger and the explorer exemplify the potential dominance of the individual over social or environmental determinism.

Even the 'conquering' of the Aboriginal people probably reflected something of this ethos, but in later years has become overlain with a realization of our own savagery and a consequent sense of guilt. Perhaps by telling stories of the slaughter, we mentally transfer the guilt back to the perpetrators, yet at the same time, their power over the alien environment is acknowledged, and so we have the ambiguity of guilt and admiration together. All explorers are individual heroes in the public mind, and the people who support them and make their exploits possible are forgotten - we only need to think of Hilary on Everest as an example. So, our cave exploration over many years comes to be seen as being related to one dominant individual, such as Frank Moon. In the case of Moon, his association with another popular hero, Flynn of the Inland, is exaggerated, thus amplifying his own standing.

At the same time, this personification serves a valuable function both for the individual concerned and for the tourism experience. In so far as there is any validity in the argument that guides want to tell a good story, there is probably an extent to which early managers like Wiburd, Reddan and Moon recognised the way in which the hero cult potentially increased their power over the cave reserve for which they were responsible. At the same time it is easier to translate the idea of exploration to the public when it can be symbolised through an individual personality.

More fundamentally, we are socialised to make the assumption that conspicuous success is due to individual capacity rather than to any organizational or structural explanation. So, we see Moon or any of his peers as having conquered the environment which they explored through their own strength and determination.

Finally then, we come to the point that varying perceptions each have their own validity and their own impact upon reality. The hero may achieve better management, more resources for management, greater visitor numbers or any one of a number of other benefits which might have been denied to a less heroic manager. Whether his superior standing is objectively true is not the point; the fact that it is widely believed is enough to give it potency. In turn, that potency is re-inforced and reproduced through its continuing repetition by guides and others.

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