

Some Historical Materials on Tasmanian Caves

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INTRODUCTION

It is commonly assumed that tourism in Tasmanian Caves commenced with the opening of the some caves at Mole Creek in the early years of this century. However, if we recognise that nineteenth century tourism was indeed somewhat different, in that travellers (usually from the gentry) penetrated into quite remote places, often with the assistance of local guides, then Tasmanian cave tourism has a long history indeed. This has already been pointed out by the Skinners (1978) in their *Mole Creek Caves*, summarising references from 1829 onwards, and including a delightful description of a visit to one of the caves (Honeycomb).

The purpose of the present paper is simply to note a number of further records of cave history in the state, which may otherwise escape notice.

TOURISM AT MOLE CREEK

Honeycomb Cave, then known as Oakden's Cave after the landowner, was depicted in a magnificent engraving in the *Illustrated Australian News* of 1877. This same engraving almost certainly would be found in the other associated journals of the day ; given the work involved in making a printing block, it is not surprising that they appeared in a number of locations. It appears that the lighting used was probably bark torches soaked in kerosene - a technique also used at Buchan, Victoria.

An important and long overlooked record is the first published account of the Tasmanian glow-worm. This reported their occurrence in the Chudleigh Caves (again Honeycomb) and was contained in an essay on caves by that astounding polymath, the Rev. Julian Tenison-Woods, writing in the *Sydney Mail* of 12th. April, 1879.

There is a brief account in the now rare *Tourists' Guide to Tasmania*, published in 1899 by the Union Steamship Company for the information of passengers. Like comments of that time upon most other cave areas around Australia, the author is strongly concerned about conservation :

... the Chudleigh Caves, those natural wonders that will yet be recognised as a valuable national asset and cared for accordingly ... The neglect of these caves, and their consequent mutilation by irresponsible persons who chip off bits of the many coloured and variously shaped stalagmites, is a matter for regret, and it is to be hoped will soon end.

At the same time, travellers were encouraged to visit the caves :

At a cottage close by a fire and a hot cup of tea may be enjoyed before beginning the return journey. The road is quite good enough for cycling to within half a mile of the entrance, when walking would be easier for the remainder of the distance.

This sounds not unlike the 1870 description quoted by the Skinners ; one assumes things were slow to change, just as the neglect of cave resources has also been slow to change !

Thus, it is interesting to note from the Tourist Department's 1918 *Complete Guide to Tasmania*, that visits to the Wet Caves group at Caveside were still being encouraged, even though the development of the four more conventional show caves at Mole Creek had taken place by then. At that stage, the train to Mole Creek left Launceston in the later afternoon, returning in the morning, so night-time inspections were available to visitors. Various of the early references use the name 'Wet Caves', but it is clear that these generally refer to what is now known as Honeycomb Cave, not today's Wet Cave.

Another example of slow change is the information circular on Mole Creek Caves issued by Tasmanian Railways. I have copies dated 1916 and 1926, and the only change is that the provision of accommodation by the Scott family is deleted from the second. However, Scott's Cave is still listed among the attractions, even though it was apparently closed by then.

Tasmanian show caves appear to be the only ones in Australia which were lit by reticulated acetylene. This was the case at Scott's Caves and Baldock's Caves while hand-held acetylene lamps were used at Gunns Plains. Although there have been some statements about acetylene being used elsewhere (e.g., Naracoorte, South Australia), there is no evidence that this was so. However, it must be noted that hand-held lamps (drover's camp lights) were also used at Chillagoe.

CAVE PHOTOGRAPHY

Those interested in the history of Tasmanian show caves are fortunate, in that a number of excellent early photographs are readily available.

The famous John Watt Beattie - explorer, photographer, antiquarian, historian, tourism promoter - arrived in Tasmania (from Aberdeen) in 1878, and soon commenced his interest in photography. He is said to have been the first (in 1879) to use dry plates in Australia, and this took place on an excursion to Lake St. Clair. Then in 1882, he abandoned the family farm, and became a professional photographer, continuing work until the late 1920's. He photographed every part of Tasmania, including the West and the great river valleys, carrying a 15" x 12" plate camera which weighed 60 pounds ! His works include striking pictures of the sea caves of the Tasman Peninsula, as well as others of the Mole Creek Caves.

But Stephen Spurling III was probably more important to cave photography. Stephen Spurling I arrived in Hobart as a naval officer in 1837, settled there and worked as a surveyor, then established one of the earliest photographic studios. He was later assisted by his son, Stephen II, who then moved to Launceston and opened a studio there. He had a special carriage on the Western Railway which provided both studio and darkroom, and took some of the early photographs of the West Coast mines. Stephen III commenced his working life as a surveyor, but soon became a landscape photographer of distinction.

Using a 10" x 12" plate camera, he photographed the Western Tiers and Central Plateau country while cutting a track to Zeehan in 1898, and his second major project was then to photograph the Mole Creek Caves. He returned to the caves time and time again as new discoveries were made, and his negatives provide a great record of the caves there as they were. Some appeared in the press, generally the *Launceston Examiner*, many were used over the years in brochures, but probably the best series are to be found in his own high quality postcard prints. He also provides early views of Gunns Plains Caves, the cave of Goat Island, and a number of the pseudokarst caves.

His other exploits include the first winter ascent of Ben Lomond, exploration of the Cradle Mountain area, and the introduction of Gustav Weindorfer to that area, and what is claimed to be the first aerial photography in Australia (Cato 1979).

One of the additional benefits of the postcard copies is that they may have letters of interest on the back. Two cards from Gunns Plains, dated 19th. February 1909, in my own collection have together a letter which says, inter alia :

'... they were officially opened by the Premier and party on Jan 5th., three days after our visit. Over 200 persons went through, you were taken in by the guide 10 at a time, being charged one shilling for admission ... you have to have lights, each of our party had an acetylene gas lamp, we also had magnesium lights ... about 60 persons entered into them the day we went through ... we were in just one hour and a quarter.'

CAVES IN FICTION AND POETRY

Marie Bjelke-Peterson, who migrated with her family to Tasmania from Denmark, wrote a large number of 'romantic' novels all with a strong evangelical Christian flavour, between 1917 and 1937. The first of these, *The Captive Singer* (1917), tells of love in and about the Mole Creek Caves. Although she was highly regarded in her own time - a sort of Barbara Cartland of the Australian bush - and actually won the King's Silver Jubilee Medal for writing in 1935, her writing is so melodramatic that it is hard to read it today as other than humour :

... I suppose I might as well let you know all - such scandal soon leaks out ; I tell you she has behaved most disgracefully, most shockingly ! They have spent afternoons together in dark caves, terribly wet places where you prowls about under hills and what not ; think of my daughter in that awful blackness for hours together with such a man ! However she comes to like these things is past my comprehension !

You will all be glad to know that, nevertheless, the heroine's story has a happy, economically successful and Christian ending.

But there is worse. Frederick Charles Meyer wrote and published at least three books of verse during the 1920's and 1930's. The last of these, *Bijoux of Mountains and Valleys of Tasmania* was copyrighted on 20th. December 1940, and one assumes it appeared at about that time. Meyer is without question a worthy rival to that famous Scot, William McGonagall, who is notorious for his doggerel commentary upon almost everything which was characterised by its forced rhyming and absence of rhythm, and is often described as the world's worst poet. Meyer took it upon himself to immortalise caves at Jenolan, Buchan, Hastings, and Mole Creek. I'll restrain myself and quote only one example :

NEWDEGATE CAVE

Stalagmites are forming figures,
Hanging down in thousand forms,
Personalities of vigour,
Frame the ceiling and the roof,
with silent whispers they confer.

Stalagmites are growing slowly,
Drop by drop accumulating,
Men and women high and lowly,
Seem together promenading,
Upturned faces sweet and holy.

Stalagmites are working wonders,
Rising almost from a mound,
Others like the winged condors,
Spontaneously flee from the ground,
And leave behind the wanderers.

CONCLUSION

I suspect many more historical materials relating to Tasmanian caves remain to be found. My own work in relation to other Australian caving areas has uncovered a remarkable amount of memorabilia, and this has often proved invaluable not only in understanding the past of our caves, but more importantly, in helping to guide management decisions today. I would encourage any of you to seek out any such materials and do what you can to ensure their proper preservation and recording.

SOME HISTORIC MATERIALS

- 1877 Oakden's Cave, Near Chudleigh, Tasmania. Wood engraving 22.8 cm. x 19.8 cm., from the *Illustrated Australian News*
- 1879 Tenison-Woods, Rev. J.E., The Wonders of Nature in Australia, *Sydney Mail*, 12th. April, 1879, p. 569.
- 1899 Morton, C.E. (Ed.), *Tourists' Guide to Tasmania*, Hobart : Union Steamship Company, 124 pp.
- 1904 and later
Beattie, John Watt, Numerous postcards, generally real photos.
- 1905 and later
Spurling & Son, Launceston, Numerous postcards, both Collotype and real photos. In particular, note the Collotype cards with the following numbers ;
- | | |
|---------|--------------------------------|
| 135-139 | Scott's Cave |
| 400-423 | King Solomon's Cave |
| 424-435 | Scott's Cave |
| 464-466 | Baldock's Cave |
| 655-657 | Marakupa (sic) Caves |
| 439-443 | Ulverstone (Gunns Plains) Cave |
- 1916 *Tasmanian Railway Tours / Mole Creek District*, Hobart : Tasmanian Government Tourist Department, 4 pp., 10 cm. x 17.5 cm. (also 1926 edition)
- 1917 Bjelke Peterson, Marie, *The Captive Singer*, London : Hodder & Stoughton, 307 pp.
- 1918 Tasmanian Government Tourist Department, *Complete Guide to Tasmania*, Hobart : John Vail, Government Printer.
- n.d. but late 1920's or early 1930's.
The Wonder Caverns at Mole Creek, Tasmania, Tasmanian Government Tourist Bureau, 8 pp., 30 cm. x 24.8 cm., folded twice.
- 1940 Meyer, F.C., *Bijoux of Mountains and Valleys of Tasmania*, Hobart : The Author, 224 pp.

OTHER REFERENCES

- Cato, Jack, *The Story of the Camera in Australia*, Third Edition, Melbourne : Institute of Australian Photography.
- Skinner, A.D. & R.K., 1978, *The Mole Creek Caves*, Hobart : The Authors.