

Cave History Presentations

Where is Australia's First Identifiable, Recorded Cave Discovery?

John Dunkley

At our previous Conference in Bathurst I gave a talk on early cave visits in the Central West of NSW, later expanded to a more comprehensive account in the Proceedings (Dunkley, 2002).. The brief presentations today mostly cover material not known at the time of the previous Conference.

The association of Aboriginal Australians with caves has been summarised by Jennings (1979) and by archaeologists, but I am here concerned with the records of white settlement. The first colonists suffered from a shortage of lime for building, for many years relying on dwindling coastal shell middens, and expensive imports from Norfolk Island and Van Diemens Land. Very early supplies were obtained from sandstone shelters in Sydney Harbour, which were recorded as early as 1789 but we don't know the precise location of those described, like the one shown here (Fig. 1) from the early 19th century. All the early governors bemoaned this shortage, but the obvious answer of scouting the country beyond the limits of the settlement in Sydney was resisted for fear of unregulated settlement and absconding convicts if good land was discovered beyond the encircling sandstone.

Possibly to circumvent these restrictions, in 1802 Governor King appointed a visiting French Ensign, Francis Barrallier as his aide-de-camp, soon despatching him on several explorations of the country south-west of the colony, in the Burragorang Valley country west of Picton, bounded by the Nepean, Warragamba and Wollondilly Rivers. Of Barrallier's first trip, King himself said: *"The officer I sent to endeavour to pass the mountains has returned from his first trial with little hope of effecting it, or making any new discovery, except a very imperfect limestone and a better kind of iron ore than has yet been found"* (King to Hobart, 30 OCT 1802).

Like most explorers, Barrallier talked up his discoveries, because a month later, on 1 November a doubting George Caley wrote to Joseph Banks that *"I was informed that he had discovered a new river, limestone in great abundance, iron almost pure, and had been 50 miles or better in a western direction, but of all this I have doubts"*.

On his second trip, though, Barrallier sheltered in a cave. This passing reference has apparently escaped previous notice by speleo-historians. He recorded that on 25 November, 1802:

"At six o'clock in the evening I found myself at a distance of 2 miles from the western passage. I was here obliged to ascend a very steep hill on the summit of which I found a cave large enough to contain twenty men. I was then half a mile from the passage, and I sent two men in order to discover it, instructing them to ascend the mountain at the north of this passage. The rain compelled me to seek a shelter for myself and my men in the cave which, the natives assured me, was the home of wombats. I waited till 7 o'clock in the cave for my two men ..."

Beyond this cave Barrallier passed through a gap, noting more sandstone caves: *"The width of this passage is about half a mile; its sides are perpendicular. The mountain is very steep and full of caves which are the homes of various wild beasts which go there in crossing the swamps near by."*

Now the big question is, where *is* this cave? For a century, various historians argued about the route taken by Barrallier, and most mentioned the cave (eg. Cabbage 1910; Else-Mitchell 1938). But none had been to look for it. Not until a decade ago did realisation dawn that pinpointing the precise location of the cave was integral to the argument about how Barrallier crossed from the Tonalli to the Kowmung River. Some effort was then expended by competing historians in locating it. A CSS trip in 2002 followed, locating a roomy cave (Fig. 2) near Byrnes Gap, a few kilometres north of the ghost town of Yerranderie, and several smaller ones. This was definitely the one first reported by Andy McQueen (1993). From the entrance we took in a wonderful view almost unchanged since Barrallier saw it 200 years ago. It is in rugged, steep and heavily forested country, Yerranderie is almost indiscernible, and there is only a tiny glimpse of the water in Lake Burragorang. This, however, is almost certainly *not* Barralliers Cave, for in 1998 an experienced surveyor, Alan Andrews described a better prospect, 10 metres long and 3 metres deep,

Cave History Presentations

commodious and comfortable enough for camping. Both caves are in sandstone, the more likely candidate in an eroded conglomeratic layer which we glimpsed at a distance from below, late in the day with no time left to reach, high on the south face of Gander Head and about 400 metres east of Byrnes Gap. Furthermore, between these sites and Byrnes Gap, we did pass several small sandstone shelters suitable for wombats and the like, as noted by Barrallier. Another trip is planned in 2003 to settle the question.

If Andrews' site is Barrallier's Cave, it adds strongly to the evidence that his route lay through Byrnes Gap to the Kowmung, and not via Church Creek, as some historians believed. Had he taken the latter route, he could not have missed remarking on the prominent limestone cliffs – that was, after all, one of the main reasons he was out there. Indeed, some speleo-historians (eg. Middleton 1969; anon. 1970; Battye 1984) have asserted that he *did* sight these cliffs, assumptions which have been repeated elsewhere. But there is no evidence of this in his writings, emphasising a lesson worth repeating: always check primary sources. He was unlucky. He missed the limestone, and by sheer misfortune he missed finding his way across the Blue Mountains.

We should keep in mind that until quite late in the nineteenth century, no significant distinction was drawn between what we would now refer to as karst caves in limestone, and artificial grottos, rockshelters and shallow sandstone caves. Both limestone and caves were regarded as significant more for their contents than for any consideration of genesis or aesthetics. From the earliest days of settlement there exist sketches of sandstone shelters in Sydney Harbour, but these are not unequivocally identifiable today. My conclusion is that Barrallier's account, just over 200 years ago, is of the first clearly identifiable cave recorded by the European newcomers to Australia.

POSTSCRIPT

In November 2003 another search at Yerranderie relocated the original Barralliers Cave on rugged slopes between the Tonalli River and Byrnes Gap. A report will appear in a future issue of *Caves Australia*, probably no. 164.

REFERENCES

- ANDREWS, A.E.J. (1992). Barrallier and Caley: The evidence of their Burragorang maps 1802-1806. *JRAHS* 82 (1): 60 -72.
- ANDREWS, A.E.J. (1998). *Earliest Monaro and Burragorang 1790 to 1840*. Canberra: Tabletop Press, 208pp.
- ANON. (1970). *History* (in) *Gundungura: A guide to the Greater Southern Blue Mountains and the major part of the Kanangra Boyd National Park, NSW*. Sydney: Sydney University Rover Crew , 64pp.
- BARRALLIER, F.(1802). Barrallier's Journal. HRNSW Pt 5.
- BATTYE, B. (1984). Church Creek Caves. *Anthodite* 2: 2 – 7.
- CAMBAGE, R.H. (1910). Barrallier's Blue Mountains exploration in 1802. *JRAHS* 3 (1): 11 – 25.
- ELSE-MITCHELL, R. (1938). Barrallier's Blue Mountains Explorations, 1802. *JRAHS* 24 (4): 291-313.
- JENNINGS, J.N. (1979). Man and other animals in Australian caves and shelters: a review. *Trans. British Cave Res. Assoc.* 6: 93-130.
- MACQUEEN, A. (1993). *Blue Mountains to Bridgetown: the life and journeys of Barrallier 1773-1853*. Springwood: A. Macqueen, 160pp.
- MIDDLETON, G. (1969). A Case for the conservation of Colong Caves Reserve, New South Wales, Australia. *Stud. Speleol.* 2 (1): 1 – 11.



**Figure 1 - Caves, hunting and fishing of Aborigines of Port Jackson
(early 19th century engraving by A Delvaux & J Devilliers)**



**Figure 2 - Sandstone cave near Yerranderie,
previously thought to be Barralliers Cave**