

### *Who was Australia's First Speleologist?*

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John Dunkley

In 1973 Ken Pickering drew attention to an account of a visit to a cave, probably Limekilns Cave near Bathurst, by Lieut. William Lawson (of Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth fame) on the night of 9 November, 1821. Ken suggested that Lawson was Australia's first speleologist. Well, this is the earliest account so far located of a visit to a limestone cave by Europeans, but as pointed out elsewhere in these Proceedings in relation to Francis Barrallier's claims on cave history, no distinction at the time was drawn between caves in limestone and those in other hosts. In any event, a single brief visit scarcely qualifies Lawson as our first speleologist.

Two others can lay some claim to that title. First credit is often given to Surveyor-General Thomas Mitchell for his paleontological exploits, along with his wonderful surveys of caves at Wellington (Mitchell 1831, 1834, 1838).

However, a second contemporary figure has recently appeared in the Wellington saga. At the very time that Mitchell was at Wellington, in mid-1830, a certain Dr John Henderson appeared in what was then a tiny military outpost on the very frontier of white settlement in Australia. A surgeon in the Bengal Army, Henderson arrived in Hobart on furlough in 1829, where he founded the Van Diemens Land Society, Australia's first scientific society. A few months later he turned up in Sydney where he probably heard about the discovery of the bones at Wellington from the same source as Mitchell.

In a forthcoming paper I examine evidence that Henderson visited, described and produced sketch maps of Boree (Borenore) Caves before Mitchell's visit, that he reached Wellington probably before Mitchell but was there when Mitchell arrived, and that (partly at the behest of Governor Darling) he also collected bones at Wellington and produced an account of their origin. I will also argue that Mitchell and Henderson almost certainly were acquainted but definitely not on good terms with each other. Thereby obtaining credit for the first published maps of Australian caves, Henderson published sketches of Wellington caves six years before Mitchell, he was the first to describe karst topography, and first to write on the supposed effects of fire or heat on limestone. I have been unable to find what happened to Henderson's bones.

Except for a passing reference by Armstrong Osborne (1991), Henderson's very existence escaped the notice of all chronicles of the Wellington saga, including one written in 1986 for the first of this series of seminars on Australian cave history. But even Osborne missed one curiosity: why, despite their apparently simultaneous presence at Wellington engaged on the same mission, did neither Mitchell nor Henderson ever, anywhere in their writing, mention the existence of the other? It is now evident that it was because they were engaged in a pioneering example of intellectual rivalry, vanity, jealousy and possessiveness of a kind not unknown to later generations of scientists and speleologists. Henderson's writings were very critical of Mitchell's administration. They just didn't get along.

The protagonists were both well educated, literate men: Mitchell's writings are well recorded, while Henderson published a number of scientific papers catalogued by the Royal Society of London, and he founded Australia's first scientific society. However, neither was particularly qualified to write about the bones: both were opportunistic amateurs. Both were egotistical, vain and possessive. The difference was that Mitchell was the Surveyor-General. He had status and well-placed friends in the colony with connections in England. Henderson didn't: he left Van Diemens Land after getting offside with the Governor and others, and returned to India from New South Wales shortly after the Wellington saga.

Henderson was a strange character whose behaviour suggests someone who lingered too long in the tropics. After returning from Sydney he founded numerous enterprises in India, then he vanished, reappearing in Srinagar in November 1835. By then destitute, he had a remarkable tale to tell, having been one of the first half dozen or so Europeans to cross the Great Himalaya and

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Karakorum Mountains, from which, alone and in disguise, he reached Yarkand in what is now Xinjiang. His health destroyed by these privations, he died in Ludhiana, between Delhi and Lucknow, on 12 March, 1836.

Mitchell, of course, went on to lead some of Australia's most successful journeys of discovery. On his instructions, his Assistant Surveyors recorded numerous limestone occurrences throughout NSW. His Wellington cave maps published in 1838 are models of surveying. He did eventually publish on the bones, whereas Henderson's were lost to posterity.

History, it's often said, belongs to the victors, or at least to the last man left standing. Mitchell survived Henderson and Governor Darling, both of whom were highly critical of his administration. Because he foresaw Darwinism, Mitchells' views on the bones prevailed over Henderson's outdated, antediluvian explanation of their origin. He was eventually knighted.

John Henderson deserves a place in the history of cave science, and indeed of science generally in Australia. But Major Mitchell was the greater explorer, he was closer to the truth on the bones, his writings attracted more influential attention, and he rose to greater honours. He was our first speleologist.

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### ***Early Maps Of Tuglow Caves: The Bracewell Collection***

**John Dunkley**

A manuscript collection of previously unrecorded maps of Tuglow Cave and other items has been located in the State Library of NSW, donated by Professor R N Bracewell. A more complete report will be presented at the next ASF Conference in January 2005.