

Cave History Presentations

Some Little-known Early Cave Visitors

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JOHN GALE: CAVING PIONEER

The practice of speleologists wandering Australia, or indeed the world, is something we take for granted these days. In the nineteenth century, however, there were surprising numbers of wanderers examining caves all over the country. They weren't speleologists but many wrote of their exploits. Some were well-known explorers (eg. Lawson, Mitchell) or adventurers and opportunists (John Henderson), some were naturalists (George Bennett) or gentlemen of leisure, others were not at all well off but somehow found the means to journey to remote places (James Backhouse, who founded Quakerism in Australia; Godfrey Mundy), and a few were painters seeking sublime subjects (Charles Conder). In some cases they traversed almost unexplored country to arrive at the caves.

In his account of Barbers Cave at Cooleman Plain, Joe Jennings (1968) mentioned in passing that the cave had been visited in 1875 by John Gale of Queanbeyan. However no reference was given and it appears to have escaped the notice of speleo-historians that this remarkable man not only journeyed to these remote caves but wrote a book on his exploits. Originally serialised in the Queanbeyan Age in 1875, the book was published in 1903.

The twelfth of thirteen children of Francis and Mary Gale, John Gale was born on 17 April, 1831 in Bodmin, Cornwall. After an apprenticeship as a printer in Monmouthshire, Wales, he was later ordained a Wesleyan minister. Posted to Australia in that capacity, he emigrated in May 1854, was sent to the Goulburn district, and eventually settled in Queanbeyan in 1857 after leaving the ministry. Here in September 1860 he founded the Queanbeyan Age, editing it for 43 years & continuing his journalistic and Wesleyan interests until his death in 1929. Freemason, head of a Temperance Movement and strong advocate for the eventual site of the national capital, he also acted as Coroner and was MLA for Murrumbidgee in 1887-89.

His only full-length book was *Canberra: History of and Legends relating to the Federal Capital Territory of the Commonwealth of Australia*, in which he recalls how, on Christmas Day 1855 he rode a horse to the top of Capital Hill, now the site of the Parliament of Australia. Of perhaps greater value are the two long booklets on his more adventurous exploits, *Six Days in the Mountains of Cowley*, and *An Alpine Excursion: Notes of a Trip to the Mountains, Rivers, Plains and Caves of the Australian Alps* (Fig. 1). The former appeared in 14 parts in the Queanbeyan Age between 6 March and 12 June 1875, the latter in ten parts in the Queanbeyan Observer between 3 February and 17 March 1903. Both were reissued as small books and are quite rare,

Although he conducted only two lengthy caving expeditions, and several minor ones, Gale was one of the first to write extensively of his exploits, albeit sometimes with journalistic licence. A Centenary of Federation project in 2001 saw the erection in Queanbeyan of a statue to this famous son.

Coolamon Caves 1875

In about 1872 a note appeared in the Queanbeyan Age and was copied widely in the colony's principal newspapers, alerting readers that:

"News was brought in from Brindabella ... that a stupendous waterfall had been discovered on a tributary of the Cotter by two diggers whilst prospecting for gold ... various descriptions were given by those who retailed the account of the discoverers, no two of them agreeing, either as to the exact locality or the topography of the region where this great sight was to be seen."

Gale set several dates for investigating this phenomenon, but for the same reasons which bedevil cave explorers today, *"Something invariably occurred to frustrate our design."* Several years then passed before he eventually determined to seize an opportunity to visit a friend, John McDonald at Uriarra Station, and to investigate *"not only the waterfall but the beautiful stalactite caves of Coolamon Plains"*.

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At last he set a departure date, and again *“Several Queanbeyan residents who formerly had been very enthusiastic volunteers for the trip, now found excuse for staying at home”*. Nevertheless, this time he departed on Monday 15 February, 1875. The original newspaper accounts identify his companions only by initials, but we now know that they included at various stages Sarah, daughter of John McDonald of Uriarra station, and her uncle Sandy McDonald. Breaking their journey at Yarralumla, Uriarra and at Brindabella Station, where they left Sarah, the men continued to Long Plain and on to the caves, basing themselves at the homestead for several days, where they were *“up to a late hour – such as the manufacturing of torches and candles, and collecting tools for operations in the caves...”*. Augmented by various local residents such as Albert McClung, Albert McCullam and Steve Grady, the party explored several caves, including what he called Haunted or Murderers Cave, in which he said two bodies had been found in about 1872. Hanging from a tree at what we now call Blue Waterhole they found a sardine can inscribed from 1860 with the names of W Fane de Salis and John White of Cuppacumbalong, and of P. O'Rourke of Currangorambra, dated 1868. He went on to describe the appearance of the Plain itself:

“The appearance of the place was that of the extinct crater of a volcano; or as I rather incline to believe, the funnel-shaped hollow of the roof of a collapsed cave.”

While exploring the main passage of what is probably Murray Cave, they were *“enraptured with its wonderful objects, every individual or cluster of which presented some novelty or charm possessed by no others. This passage extends at least three-quarters of a mile, judging by the fact that it took twelve minutes of brisk walking to go from end to end. At one time this main passage extended much farther and was never thoroughly explored, owing to the presence of foul air”*.

Gale's journalistic embroidery shows in his account of cave exploration: a conspiracy of practical jokers from the homestead entered one cave in advance of the main party, 'planted' a ghost, and secreted themselves to make appropriate ghostly noises:

“It surely could be nothing else than a curious stalamite (sic) formation in human shape, the folds of whose snow-white raiment were formed of graceful foliated limestone. And yet there was the long, flowing, flaxen beard, with corresponding shaggy locks, the glaring eyes, the firmly set mouth, and the hands with clenched fingers resting on the breast... the younger ones slunk behind; the boldest spirits amongst us stood their ground, it is true, but stood as if in breathless awe. A deep guttural moan uttered by the apparition extorted the cry from more than one...”

After a night with some shepherds they started for the legendary waterfall, across the Goodradigbee directly towards Mt Bimberi. Even today the Ginini Falls are difficult to reach. Although only 200 metres high, Gale compared them favourably with the greatest in the world. A few days later they were back home.

It is not clear from the account whether his six days included some travelling time, but in any event this was a remarkable journey for its time, and his account is a significant piece of pioneering literature.

Yarrangobilly 1903

Almost 28 years later, and now aged 71, Gale set out on another trip along much the same route in 1903, with the aim this time of:

“... eighteen days of mountain climbing, whipping the mountain streams for their very dashing trout, shooting game, brumby hunting, cave exploring, and whatever furnished excitement, contributed to exhilaration of the spirits, the invigorating of bodily health and afforded physical exercise.”

Leaving Queanbeyan on 24 January, 1903, they idled (and idylled) at Gininderra and Wallaroo (near Hall) and then, at Uriarra, joined the festivities for Anniversary Day (ie. Australia Day, 26 January), which was even then a public holiday. By this time there was a surveyed road of sorts from Yass to Long Plain and Kiandra via Uriarra and Brindabella, and it seems the party grew as successive properties were reached: Gale, his grandson Alf Fallick, William McClung and his daughters May and Bertha of Murrumbateman, two McDonalds from Uriarra, George Harcourt from

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Gininderra, and Barclay Haley, who held summer leases in the high country. We can picture this party of mostly young men and women, crossing the Brindabella Ranges and beyond to the relief of the high country at the height of summer, travelling by buggy, sulky, three on horseback and one on a bicycle, by a road which always was and still is rough, steep and narrow.

After a stay with the Franklins at Brindabella they climbed to the McDonald brothers' other property at Little Peppercorn, near the head of Long Plain, following a route now almost a memory for speleologists driving from Canberra to Coolemon, for it is now closed to the public. Soon after they reached Yarrangobilly and met caretaker Bradley. Here the party, now totalling twelve, was augmented by Lena Lampe and Linda Franklin, relations of the Brindabella Franklins, and other members of the Lampe family from Tumut and Talbingo. Over the next few days several caves occupied their attention and Gale's lengthy description covers Glory Hole, Castle Cave and Jersey Cave:

"This gentleman (Mr Bradley) is an enthusiast in caves and cave-lore. "Don't you find this daily guide-duty and reiteration of description becomes sometimes becomes stale, flat, and unproductive?" The question was a very natural one; but the answer revealed the enthusiast, the lover of Nature's sublime handiwork. "I find my work no drudgery. Every time I enter these caves, especially with visitors who appreciate what they see, I seem to love them more and more, and to discover richer beauties and loftier grandeur than before". These are not the exact words in which our plain-spoken guide expressed himself, but they correctly convey the sentiments he uttered.

Lake George and Mt Fairy Caves

The riddle of Lake George has made good newspaper copy for well over a century. But for some, when the mist hangs over the waters, imagination takes flight. Some locals believe the lake to be connected via underground caverns to another lake sited variously in the Nullarbor, or maybe New Zealand. When Lake George is full, so the story goes, its counterpart is empty.

John Gale added to the confusion, either taking a minimalist approach to research or determined not to let the facts ruin a good story. *"As for the lake itself, there can be no question of its having in bygone ages been an active volcano,"* he wrote in 1927. The water, he insisted, escaped through a fissure opened by *"some convulsion of nature"*. It flowed into a subterranean river coursing through limestone caves nearby. *"Nor can there be the least doubt that the water heard flowing beneath the floors of the Mount Fairy Caves is that escaping from Lake George,"* he wrote. The lake refilled, he said, after cattle trampled mud into the hole.

Considering his long local residence and the perspicacity of his other writings, it is strange that Gale did not notice the connection between precipitation and evaporation, and the filling and emptying of the lake.

Black Mountain, Canberra

In his 1927 book (p. 98) Gale mentions a cave with a legend on Black Mountain:

'...On the eastern side of Black Hill, Canberra, there is a cave, the shelter of several outlaws in the early days. Seventy-five years ago two of these unfortunates were arrested on Canberra Plain. They had escaped from the Queanbeyan lockup, and were half-starved at the time of their recapture; a third got away and was never after heard of. I believe, however, that the human remains found in that cave a few years ago are those of this unfortunate. This cave is of the size of an ordinary living room in a modern house. It has only one means of ingress and egress, and to enter it one has to go on all fours. Two friends of mine examined this cave in 1915. When it was first discovered, about sixty years ago, it contained some blankets and personal clothing, much decayed, and a few cooking utensils...'

A cave is known on the east side of Black Mountain. Numbered I5P-1 in the Australian Karst Index and about 8m long, Limestone Plains cave is now drowned by Lake Burley Griffin. However Andy Spate thinks this may not be the site described by Gale; if that is the case, Gale's site is unknown.

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Conclusion

Gale rode extensively over the land that is now Canberra, including to the top of Capital Hill in 1855, and was a passionate campaigner for the Limestone Plains site for our national capital. Though no geologist, John Gale (Fig. 2) on the whole shows a solid understanding of the processes of cave formation, without allowing his journalistic urges to overwhelm. He was an enthusiast about many things, founding newspapers not only in Queanbeyan but in Junee, Manly and elsewhere. Described as the father of trout-fishing in Australia, and publishing a small booklet on the subject, in a recent Federation Centenary memorial, he was further described as the father of Canberra. His prose reveals the enthusiasm, adventurousness and curiosity of a speleologist. Yet, compared with the turgid travelogues of some nineteenth century foreign visitors to our caves, *Six days...* and *An Alpine Excursion* ... are unassuming, revealing much about life of pioneering communities in the district. John Gale adds light to the social history of cave exploration in Australia.

References

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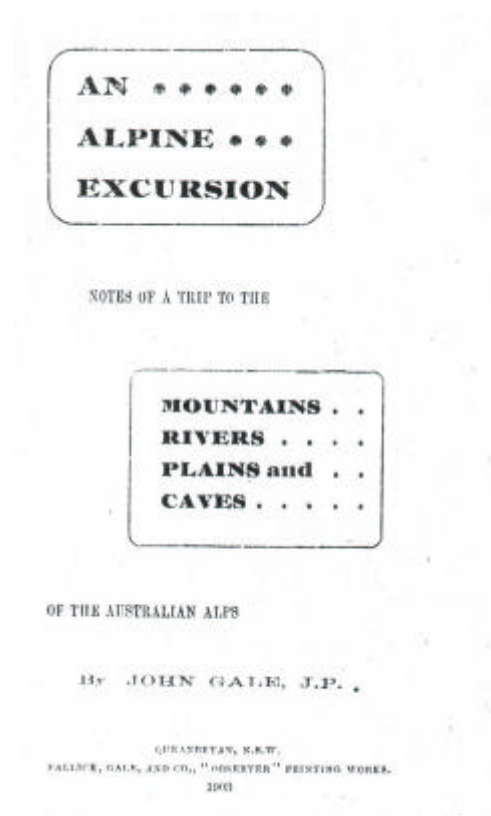


Figure 1 - Title page of an Alpine Excursion



Figure 2 - John Gale