

ONCE MORE UNTO THE DEEP: EARLY HISTORY OF CATHEDRAL CAVE, NARACOORTE

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A cave possessing little of interest

Cathedral Cave, also known as Deep Cave and 60 foot Cave, was discovered around 1845, along with other large caves in the Naracoorte complex. The name Cathedral Cave likely references the imposing form of the chambers, and the shape of the rocky entrance cone which resembles an altar.

The Reverend Julian Tenison-Woods, famous for penning the first detailed descriptions of Naracoorte's caves and fossils, never visited Cathedral Cave. He was certainly aware of it, but cited difficulty of access and paucity of interesting features as the reasons for his lack of attention. The prospect of descending its depths, dangling from a rope, apparently challenged even his adventurous and curious spirit:

"At the side of this cave there is another cave, probably also communicating; the passage has been discovered at the same time. This is exceedingly deep, probably over sixty feet, and only a wide spacious chamber. As there is no possibility of descent except by a rope, and as I was informed that the cave possesses little that is interesting, I preferred to wait for its exploration until a more practicable passage should be found between it and its neighbours." Woods (1862, p. 332).

Whether it was due to the depth of its entrance, or the presence of other caves deemed far more spectacular, Cathedral Cave never became a celebrated tourist attraction like Blanche, Victoria or Alexandra Caves. Palaeontological and

ecological research in recent decades has shown that it is every bit as significant scientifically as those other caves; nevertheless, information on the early history of the cave is scant in comparison with Naracoorte's more famous caves. In this paper I aim to highlight various aspects of Cathedral Cave's history, and present photographic images that have not (as far as I am aware) been published previously.

Photographic records

Few photographs of Cathedral Cave exist in Australian public collections. Two images are held in the State Library of South Australia (PRG 280/1/43/401 and B26141). Photographs and stereoviews also exist in private collections, including that of the author (Plates 1, 2 and 3). The best known of the Naracoorte Cave photographers, William Augustus Francis, captured two images of the cave in approximately 1900. Plate 1 shows a stereoview by Francis depicting the rubble cone beneath one of the entrances. Two gentlemen are evident sitting on the wall, and there is a stacked rock wall and staircase visible (Plate 1). Another stereoview by Francis shows the 'Water Grotto', which is an area with a small pool at the far end of a passage adjacent the main entrance chamber (Plate 2). Graffiti is clearly visible on the cave wall above the decorations. The same image is held in the State Library of South Australia (B26141).

A particularly interesting image is attributable to Thomas G. Campbell of 'Naracoorte' (common spelling of Naracoorte prior to 1924). This stereoview image (Plate 3) again shows the



Plate 1. Stereoview W.A. Francis, approximately 1900 – 60ft Cave, Cathedral Chamber.

Note the seated gentlemen at the base of the pitch.

Photographed from the original, collection of the author.



Plate 2. Stereoview W.A. Francis, approximately 1900 - "Water Grotto, 60 ft Cave, No. 15."
 Note graffiti on the wall above the scene.
 Photographed from the original, collection of the author.



Plate 3. Stereoview T.G. Campbell, photo. No. 8 "The Cathedral, 60 foot Cave."
 Photographed from the original, collection of the author.



Plate 4. Cathedral Cave, Naracoorte. Unusual double exposure.
State library of South Australia, accession number PRG 290/1/43/401. Part of the Searcy collection, approximately 1910.

entrance pitch and cone, but also clearly shows that a fence had been constructed in the cave, presumably to protect areas of the floor and decoration from visitors. Rocks and pieces of wood that can be seen scattered on the floor in the photo by Francis (Plate 1) appear to have been stacked up, and the area tidied. This was likely the work of William Reddan who was caretaker of the caves at the time this photograph was taken, which is probably between 1900 and 1910.

Another photograph from around 1910 (Plate 4), is part of the Searcy Collection in the State Library of SA (280/1/43/401). It shows the same view of the Cathedral Cave entrance, but is unusual for its double exposure; clearly showing elements of another cave scene blended with the image (Plate 4). This photograph also shows the fence within the cave and the 'tidy' nature of the scene, perhaps placing it at a similar time to the Campbell photograph.

Esteemed visitors

During the 1860s, at least two Governors of South Australia visited Cathedral Cave, namely Sir Dominick Daly and Sir James Fergusson. Daly was appointed Governor in October 1861, but did not take up residence in South Australia until the 4th of March 1862 (Manhood, 1974). His predecessor, Sir Richard Graves MacDonnell (1814 - 1881), visited Naracoorte Caves in 1856 and famously named 'Blanche Cave' after his wife the Lady Blanche Anne MacDonnell. Sir Dominick Daly served as Governor until his death on 19th February 1868 (Findlay, 1972). He visited the Naracoorte caves in 1863, including Cathedral Cave:

"After lunch the party proceeded to the deep Cave (60 feet) under the surface, where a chair was provided, with ropes and other appliances for lowering down the visitors. His Excellency at once descended, and was speedily followed by several gentlemen, who declined to avail themselves of the chair, but went down in the most plucky manner, "hand-over-hand", among the foremost of whom were the Chief Secretary and Major Brinkley."

Border Watch, Friday 20th of February 1863, p. 3.

An additional account of Governor Daly's visit:

"His Excellency was let down what is commonly known as the Deep Cave by means of a triangle and blocks erected over the opening, having a chair securely fastened at the end of the rope. Many others followed His Excellency, and some went down another cave by means of a ladder."

South Australian Register, Friday 20th of February 1863, p. 3.

According to another writer (likely the Reverend W.R. Fletcher), the descent into the cave for one Governor (possibly Daly) was less than perfectly executed:

"We heard a curious story of a narrow escape on the part of one of our recent Governors. His friends had done him the honour of providing an armchair, seated on which and dangling in state in

mid-air, His Excellency was to be content with touching the floor of the cavern. The idea was good; but, in utter ignorance of the capacity of glue to sustain such a weight, the ropes had been tied to the top rail of the circular back of the chair. Innocent and trusting, the Governor was just about to be swung off, in which case he would have found the bottom somewhat too speedily, when a loyal onlooker called out to him to stop. The chair was then properly attached and the viceregal party were saved from being actors in a most tragic comedy."

The Argus, 5th of May, 1879, p. 7.

Sir James Fergusson succeeded Daly as Governor in 1869 and served until 1872. Fergusson commenced as Governor during a difficult time for South Australia, when the state was in a depression. He controversially supported two separate dissolutions of parliament in 1870 and 1871, and this combined with his perceived aloof nature, meant he was at times criticised (Findlay, 1972). However, he put much effort into improving South Australia's economy, notably securing the overland telegraph line from the Northern Territory to Port Augusta (Findlay, 1972). He also strongly supported the establishment of a university in South Australia, notably The University of Adelaide which was founded in 1874.

In 1869, an impending visit by His Excellency Sir James Fergusson prompted an innovative proposal:

"Another suggestion was that a pulley should be provided to enable the Governor to visit the Deep Cave. This idea met with approval, and one gentleman present (who I grieve to say is on the Committee) intimated that as soon as the Governor was in the 'Deep' the rope should be drawn up, and His Excellency kept down until he made us a promise to grant a District Council for Narracoorte. There was no seconder to this proposition."

The Mercury (Hobart, Tasmania), Wednesday 19th of May, 1869, p. 3.

Perilous adventures

Several early accounts of Cathedral Cave focus on 'near-miss' incidents, and if one is to believe these reports, such occurrences were relatively frequent. A report titled 'A Perilous adventure at Mosquito Plains', tells the harrowing story of a narrow escape for a young man who ran into trouble exiting Cathedral Cave via a rope:

"On Wednesday last a gentleman had a narrow escape from meeting with a horrible death. He and two friends paid a visit to the above caves, and after inspecting one of the large ones, let himself down what is commonly known as the Deep Cave, - about forty-five feet, - with a rope, hand over hand, leaving the other two on the surface. Having spent some time below, and having doubtless more or less exhausted his strength, he commenced the ascent, which he found more difficult than he had imagined, for the nearer he came to the top, the weaker he became. He tried at one time to rest upon the rope, but failed, and of course fatigued himself the more with his efforts, but bravely pushed on again and again had to give in. One of those on the top called out, "Hold on then," and pulled up the rope; but from the position in which he stood at the side of the mouth of the cave he pulled the man under a projecting rock, and could not get him from under it. It was at this stage a case of life or death. The sight of the man hanging on a rope close to the top with no apparent means at hand to raise him, he exhausted, and a hard rock to fall upon, was one to be remembered. However, he threw out his foot and the one who had up to that time been a mere spectator of the scene, leaning as far down the cave as possible, caught his heel, drew him from under the rock, and the one who had hold of the rope pulled him up. From the number of hairbreadth escapes that have taken place here,

it ought to either be filled up or something done to enable visitors to see it without risk. The cave is attractive enough, and people will go down. The Government have been requested to vest the caves in trustees, who would make them safe if permitted. Had the adventurer above referred to broken his neck something would have been done, but as it is he had a narrow escape."

The Mercury (Hobart, Tasmania), Monday 10th of August, 1868, p. 3.

Another report from 1868, mentions an incident two weeks prior to the one described above. This time the 'near-miss' occurred in Bat Cave, where a man lost his balance on the rope and fell for a short distance before a knot caught in the block he had rigged. After safely reaching the bottom, he reports that his party of four proceeded through the cave:

"...we explored the cave, which we found had no very great attractions beyond the thousands of bats congregated there, who when disturbed usually fly round about one and extinguish the candles. But on this occasion they seemed to be in a state of torpor, clinging to the roof in clusters; and knocking them down, they remained on the ground, being apparently unable to rise."
The Argus, Saturday 8th of August, 1868, p. 6.

Thomas Hinckley, one of the first licensed bat guano miners at Naracoorte, cited the lack of visitation to Bat Cave to justify his mining application (Hamilton-Smith, 1998). After guano mining commenced in 1871, it is unlikely the cave received many visitors beyond those employed in mining activities. Undoubtedly, access had been made more secure for this activity. As the previous quote vividly illustrates, the welfare of the resident bats was not an important consideration at the time.

Prior to their mishap in Bat Cave, the same party had visited Cathedral Cave. They provide an interesting description of the cave:

"After visiting the caves of easy access, we started to have a look at what is usually called the 60 feet, or Deep Cave. On finding it, we discovered the entrance to be just large enough to allow one person to pass through. The thickness of the crust of this opening being only two or three feet, it affords no assistance in going up or down, as immediately under the crust is an immense cavern or chamber. Having fixed our tackling to a tree thrown across the mouth, we descended by placing one foot in a noose at one end of the rope and lowering away the other end. Having reached the bottom quite safe, we noticed that, although the cave was magnificently large, yet it did not bear comparison with the others for beauty of form, or fantastical, comical-shaped stalactites; still, by going to the end, and crawling along a narrow passage or drive, there are found some very pretty smaller caves, evidently not much disturbed, for their original beauty remained untouched. After a little "spell oh!" we made tracks for the summit again, and by really laborious pulling and tugging we all reached the top, and thought ourselves well out of our first adventure."

The Argus, Saturday 8th of August, 1868, p. 6.

This series of mishaps was used to argue for either the closure or modification of the deeper caves to protect visitors:

"To show the necessity of something being done, either by public subscription or the Government, towards providing a safe and easy mode of viewing the deep caves on the Mosquito Plains, a gentleman who recently visited the locality has sent us the following account of another very narrow escape, which

occurred a fortnight previous to the one referred to in our issue of the 31st ultimo."

The Argus, Saturday 8th of August, 1868, p. 6.

Tourism

It is unclear how visitation to Cathedral Cave proceeded after these various mishaps, and if steps were taken to make the deeper caves more accessible. It is striking that at the time, priority was placed on providing safe entry for 'visitors' rather than protection of the caves from vandalism and misuse caused by these visitors. Many reports describe souveniring of cave decorations, not to mention the damage done by graffiti, candle-smoke, magnesium lights, picnics and parties (Reed and Bourne, 2013). By the late 1860s the degraded state of the caves was noted by several key visitors, including journalist Ebenezer Ward who wrote rather a scathing report in 1868 (Ward, 1868; Reed and Bourne, 2013).

The situation changed after 1876, when the caves came under the control of the Forest Board and the area became the Caves Range Forest Reserve. Even up until the late 1870s considerable damage was being done to the caves (Reed and Bourne, 2013). In 1879, the consequences of guano mining and inappropriate visitation caught the ire of the Reverend W.R. Fletcher:

"As I wandered among these caves and saw everywhere the marks of this insensate spirit of mischief and snobbishness, I wondered why either the Government or the Tourist Board had not appointed a guardian over the place. Surely these caverns are worth preserving. A small salary joined to his perquisites as showman would afford a good living to a suitable man, and his appointment would be a public boon. I learn, however, since my return that this is to be done. The Forest Board have taken the matter up, and though the misdeeds of the past can never be undone what remains may be preserved and left to the tender care of nature to heal the scars."

The Argus, 5th of May, 1879, p. 7.

During the visit of Governor Jervois in 1880, local people expressed concern about this, and with increasing pressure to protect the caves, the Woods and Forests Department (formerly the Forest Board) set aside 50 acres around the caves as a reserve for their preservation. A caretaker was then appointed and work commenced to restore and 'beautify' the caves (Reed and Bourne, 2013).

While Blanche, Alexandra and Victoria Caves, were popular tourist attractions, there is little evidence available that Cathedral Cave was used for this purpose. Local guides may have offered tours into the cave, lowering guests down using a rope (Bourne, 2001). A tourist booklet, probably dating to the 1920s, provides a description of Cathedral Cave, yet does not mention it as a formal, guided option for visitors:

"The Deep Cave sometimes called the Cathedral Cave, might next attract the visitor's attention. The latter name is appropriate, because the principal chamber (150ft. long and 50ft. wide, with an arched and fretted roof) has the appearance of an ancient cathedral. The resemblance is further intensified by the dim religious light which filters through an opening in the roof and concentrates its clearest rays on the dais below. Looking back from the dais a beautiful curtain may be seen dividing the anteroom from the main hall."

The Naracoorte Caves. Issued by the Government Tourism Bureau, King William Street, Adelaide. Pp. 10. Probably dated to after 1924.

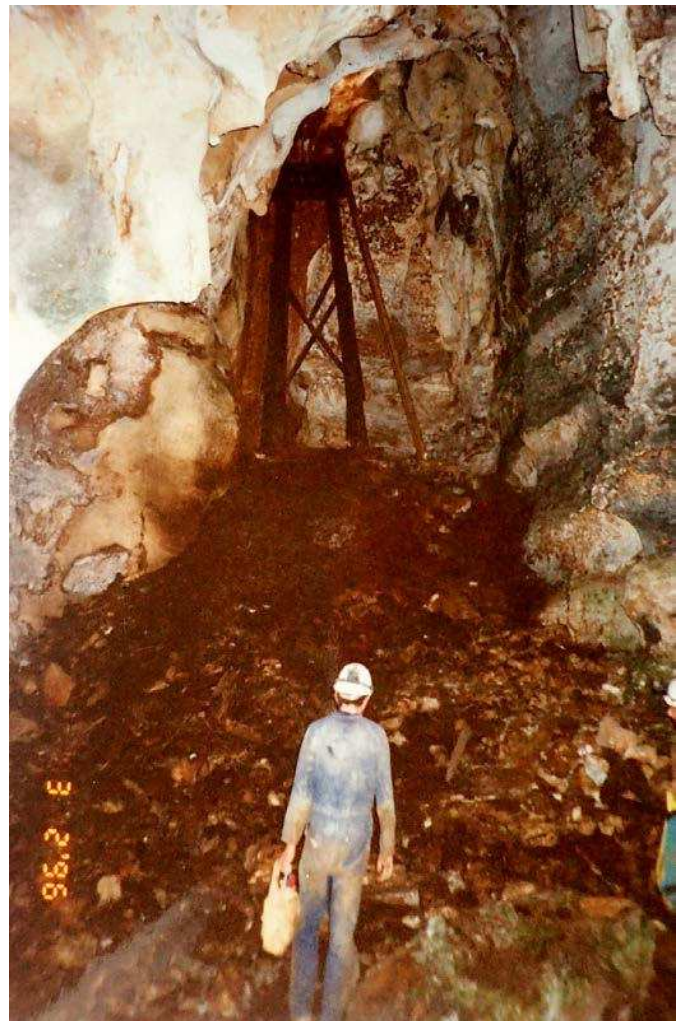


Plate 5. The wooden tower in Cathedral Cave in 1996 prior to removal.
Photo Steve Bourne.

To facilitate access into the cave, a wooden tower (Plate 5), was erected beneath one of the entrances (Bourne, 2001). This was likely in the early part of the twentieth century, and may have been around the same time the fences were installed (Plates 1 and 4). It is very likely this was the work of William Reddan. The installation of the tower undoubtedly increased the accessibility of the cave, and led to a rise in damage, particularly via graffiti (Bourne, 2001). This was only alleviated when the upper section of the tower collapsed around 1980 (Bourne, 2001). Prior to this, the cave had been used for very occasionally for tours, but most access was unsupervised (Bourne, 2001).

Scientific research

Given the World Heritage status of the Naracoorte Caves National Park, it is not surprising that Cathedral Cave has considerable palaeontological value (Reed and Bourne, 2000, 2009). Megafauna fossils were first reported from the cave in March 1959, following the discovery by cavers of cranial and postcranial specimens from the 'marsupial lion' *Thylacoleo carnifex* (Daily, 1960). In the late 1977/78 additional material was found further in the cave within a large sediment-floored chamber. Fossils collected by R.T. Wells in 1977 and 1978 were registered with the South Australian Museum, and included cranial elements from the extinct kangaroo *Procoptodon goliah*, giant devil *Sarcophilus lanarius* and Eastern Quoll *Dasyurus viverrinus*.

In the late 1990s, speleothems samples from the cave were used to reconstruct palaeoclimate at Naracoorte over the past 500,000 years, and provide dates for the fossil deposits (Ayliffe et al., 1998; Moriarty et al. 2000). Flinders University student Steven Brown conducted an excavation in 1998, which was the first systematic study of fossils from the cave (Brown and Wells, 2000). This excavation was later expanded by Gavin Prideaux, whose careful study showed that mammalian species diversity during the Pleistocene was broadly stable until megafauna extinction, which he concluded was unlikely to be driven by climate change (Prideaux et al., 2007).

Other scientific research in Cathedral Cave has focussed on the invertebrate faunas within the cave. A total of 34 species were recorded from the entrance zone and adjacent dark zone by Bellati et al. (2003), revealing a rich fauna (see also Moulds, 2004; Moulds et al., 2007). The cave is also important for the resident Southern Bent-wing Bats (Bourne, 2001).

Restoration

Cathedral Cave contains plentiful evidence of past damage, hence while its depth may have protected it from receiving the high levels of visitation that Blanche Cave endured, those who did brave the descent certainly left their mark. Following this long history of visitation, the cave floor was strewn with countless rocks, broken glass and other debris that had been thrown into the cave (Bourne, 2001). Graffiti covered most of the cave's walls, much of it modern. Recreational caving had impacted several areas of flowstone floors and rim pools, which were buried beneath a thick layer of clay (Bourne, 2001).

In 2000, a project was undertaken by park management to restore Cathedral Cave to a more natural state (Bourne, 2001). The pine forests above the cave had been removed in 1996,

improving water flow into the cave and reactivating cave formations. The cave floor was cleaned of the debris and rubbish that people had thrown in from above. Track marking was installed, and graffiti removed in some places. Removal of a concrete border at the base of the fences surrounding the cave entrances restored natural water flow; and abseiling was no longer permitted in order to protect the areas under the entrance. The entrance was gated, and a new outside fence was installed which was designed to be discourage climbing and increase security for the cave. It also made it more difficult for things to be thrown into the entrance.

The restoration work coincided with the first serious scientific research in the cave. A major fossil excavation in the far reaches prompted construction of a safer access tower, which was engineered so that the cave was not permanently altered for its installation (Bourne, 2001). Following this, small group tours were offered with a focus on cave conservation and scientific values. These continued for several years, but were later discontinued.

Nature's wonders hidden in the deep

Cathedral Cave has had an interesting and varied history. Although it was not one of the popular and much publicised show caves, it certainly provided adventure and wonder for many visitors over the years. Like many of the caves at Naracoorte, the impact of visitation is still evident in its chambers today. Restoration projects were undertaken in the cave a century apart, first by Reddan and later by the National Parks Service. In recent years, a wealth of scientific study has revealed much about its natural values. If the Reverend Julian Tenison-Woods had some inkling of what lay beneath, he may well have braved the depths and discovered that the '60 foot Cave' possessed many things of interest.

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