

WHEN GRAFFITI BECOMES HISTORICAL INSCRIPTION

- Rob Whyte

Once long ago, the conversation around the campfire turned to some of the old graffiti seen in caves. Some caves had a phenomenal amount and it was uncertain how much of it was recent. Whilst some of it had dates other messages looked so clear they must have been done in recent years. Curiosity as to who it was that left these messages spawned an investigation that continues to this day. Initiated by the University of NSW Speleological with myself as organizer, various speleological societies as well as guiding staff are regularly on the lookout for anything written on cave walls that is of interest.

The project has tended to centre around Jenolan Caves, for a number of reasons. It was a convenient area to work in and its history, whilst still being confusing in some regards, at least provided enough information from which to get to get some meaningful results. With the assistance of the Jenolan Caves Reserve Trust, the work commenced in earnest.

It was realized early on that quite a lot of information could be gleaned about the history of the caves just through the study of these inscriptions. If an assumption that all dates accompanying the graffiti were authentic, then it might be possible to gain an idea how quickly a cave was explored. As experience grew it became possible to examine the graffiti for indicators such as material used to write with and writing style, and use this as a guide to the authenticity of dates. Many inscriptions carried with them information about where visitors came from and when you started to look at groups of names you could even work out such an account of visits.

As an example of what could be deduced from looking at a group of names, the Arch Cave (Jenolan) had a list on one wall where a wedding party from Newcastle had left their names. We know it was a wedding party - they said so in their message! The following day several members of the group went into Elder Cave, evidenced by the fact that common names were present on consecutive dates. It wasn't as though this was only visit for these people as some names were found elsewhere dated a year later. All this happened in the mid 1880s and so we are presented with an insight into life which is independent of the conventional tools such as examining newspaper clippings or letters.

On a different slant, it has often been stated that the Aladdin Cave at Jenolan was discovered in November 1897. In the main chamber of the cave is a very large inscription to this effect. Hidden deeper in the cave in an obscure alcove though is a tiny inscription dated a month earlier. It would appear

that the person responsible wasn't that interested in gaining credit for the discovery, just the satisfaction of having been able to leave their name in the cave. Ironically the name is uncertain for it is nothing more than initials which could be FW, AW or RW so we will probably never know the original discoverer.

Tucked away in the Elder Cave can be found the mark of Brett Whitely, the noted artist. Brett was only 10 and had become depressed studying at Scotts College in Bathurst. Consequently his parents took him for a visit to Jenolan to brighten him up. Clem and Beryl Whitely left their names throughout the Elder whereas young Brett only left his name in one spot. Nearby is a sketch of a face in profile - Brett's first public artwork? Today adventure tour groups which are taken through the Elder are shown the inscriptions as a feature of interest.

These days the project has slowed up considerably. Nevertheless it has served to encourage those people who have come in contact with it to look more closely at the scrawlings on the walls of caves. From an historical perspective, it has proven an alternative primary source of information. From a tourism perspective it has yielded another dimension to the fascination that caves hold. Look at the graffiti and stop to consider just what mysteries it can unlock for you.

FOOTNOTE:

It has come to my attention that some caving groups have been using my name in order to gain access to various karst areas and resources. From what I have been told, the group arrive or write informing the manager that they are working on Rob Whyte's historical inscriptions/graffiti project. There is no group working on my behalf and the only group that I have been associated with which has worked on the project is the University of NSW Speleological Society. At present my work on this project is suspended although I hope to activate it again next year.

If a group does wish to document inscriptions by all means consider what they are saying on their own merits but keep in mind that any claim that work is on my behalf is fictitious. Should anyone wish to discuss this with me I may be contacted during business hours on (02) 9691 4894. Alternatively, Ernst Holland may be contacted as he is familiar with this work. I don't wish to discourage any research but I do object to groups utilizing my name to gain access to various areas - Rob Whyte.