

YARRANGOBILLY & COOLEMAN PLAINS - A POST ACKMA CONFERENCE EXPERIENCE WITH ANDY SPATE

- Arthur Clarke

After an interesting historical breakfast at Cooma Cottage (near Yass) on a crisp autumn morning on 5 May, fourteen post-Conference trippers played “follow the leader” and headed south with Andy Spate. First stop was Gundagai.... where we were introduced to *Rusconni's Marble Masterpiece* in the local Visitor Centre. Rusconni was the local artisan who designed Gundagai's famous “*Dog on the Tuckerbox*” – and to fill in his time over a period of 23 years, working 3-4 hours a night, he handcrafted nearly 30,000 pieces of coloured marble from a dozen karst areas in NSW to produce his “masterpiece”: a 1.5m high eight-level towering mansion with ornate carved figurines and balustrades – all set in a garden and courtyard of inlaid marble with miniature fountains, fences and facades. Truly magnificent – thank you Andy!

Continuing in his role as Master of Ceremonies, Andy headed us south to Tumut for a grocery shopping spree and fuel fills, then southeast away from civilisation, down the Snowy Mountains Highway towards Kosciuszko National Park. Under threatening storm clouds, we had a late lunch stop near Log Bridge Creek – where the ground was riddled with holes and the empty cocoon cases of Ghost Moths. Although it was still Saturday (not Sunday) this holey ground was the cue to set forth and see some other holes in the ground – firstly the closed Tumut Power Station near Talbingo, then the open hole-ridden karst at Yarrangobilly. While one of us slept en route, the rest of us learnt about the lessons to be learnt from growing pine plantations on karst: including the dewatered caves without fauna under the Jounama Pine Plantation. Caves House at Yarrangobilly was just around the corner... and we just in time to see one of Andy's former Talbingo neighbours' daughter being wedded, wooed and wined! With the caterer's kitchen in use for wedding guests, we deposited our shopping bags in the Caves House hallway and began our nightly routine of cuisine extravaganzas, complete with birthday cake and candles for two on the first night... and one extra the next morning.

6 May was a Sunday - a rest day (?) – but a walking day for us to visit surface karst, after driving past the headwaters of the *Murrumbidgee River* through the barren and desolate Long Plain grasslands with numerous pylons and their high tensile hydropower filled lines. At the Coonibil Homestead, two local Parks & Wildlife staffers joined us: Dieuwer Reyndes and Laura Knox, the acting Yarrangobilly Caves Manager. After Kay Shaw volunteered to take Chester's car to our destination point at *Blue Waterholes*, we headed off across the tussocky grassland to inspect our first alpine karst site - the Coonibil deposit – a low-lying, karren sculptured block of limestone covered in the thorny Austral Anchor Plant (*Discara pubescens*). Heading east through a

wooded area and across a swamp we passed burrow mounds of native freshwater crayfish (*Euastacus sp.*) and fragments of their bird-scavenged remains. We then became distracted by a few ferals: firstly Radiata Pines (finding yet another use for Leatherman knife/ saw units), then brumby stallion “poo” deposits and finally numerous rabbit warrens. After consultation with the map in spitting rain, Andy showed us that you don't really need to have a compass when you know the lay of the land! Following a circuitous route, over the rim of an ancient volcanic caldera, we could see our intended destination (*Clarke Gorge*) in the distance as we descended steeply through scrubby forest with snow gums and *Gaultheria* passing lyrebird mounds and a spring to eventually emerge beside the impressive *Devils Sinkhole* near the head of both Long Plain and Cooleman Plains.

Following another late lunch and a “play” in the doline swallets, our exit route took us across Long Plains, passing small moss and lichen covered outcrops of ice-shattered limestone with beds of more erosion resistant dolomite. We sidled across the grassy slopes passing an igneous outcrop in a creek bed and nearby flint quarry sites with views of brumby horses in the distance, and then headed out to Long Plain Road. We had not reached our intended destination, so Dieuwer trudged another three kilometres plus to the *Blue Waterholes* to collect Kay Shaw while the rest of us inspected the old Coolamine Homestead and its dated newspaper wall linings. Our three overseas visitors: New Zealanders: Dave Smith and Ray Scrimgeour, plus our Filipino guest: Gil Madronero all became quite absorbed in the antics of our bouncing wildlife: these relatively tame kangaroos soon became interested in us when we began eating apples!

After a tourist shop in the Yarrangobilly Caves ticket office, Monday became our “Yagby” caves day. Following the surface karst cliff-side walk, Laura guided us into *Castle Cave* where we even coerced Kay to join Chester after she found her own small cave. Spot (Wayne) and Jude Matthews and Arthur flashed away as camera buttons clicked at one of the June Maclucas painting sites, then down at the “donkeys tail” (pendulum on a straw) feature and the cave coral etched straws and shawls in the lower chamber. Back out along the raised walkway, we headed into *Harrie Wood Cave*, where the calcified bucket and soot stained speleothems became the focal point for many camera images. An ailing chest slowed me down a bit, but provided an unexpected bonus – giving Robyn Claire and Arthur a private tour with Laura through *Glory Cave* before heading back to lunch at Caves House. The afternoon tour session gave us some impressive cave decoration displays: firstly in *Jillabanan*, basically a single chamber cave where we could not find any exposed limestone rock that was not coated or

covered in speleothem formation. Three other outstanding features of note from *Jillabanan* - the cut (sliced) and polished chronological section: the stalagmite beside the entrance walkway; the wheel chair access down the gently sloping stair section; and the strange thin dripping bladed speleothem that Andy had not seen before! *Jersey Cave* was next on the touring list - where we saw the strange bluish-grey to black (smoke soot stained) surface on some formations, plus the brilliant large dogtooth spar crystal growth, huge crystal flowers and pool reflections. The evening entertainment included more donning of caving headlights as we toured the possum infested old section of Caves House with its old porcelain bath ware, carved tulips in an old balustrade staircase, and where Barry Richard rescued some old NSW Govt. carbon filament light globes amongst the historical relics of a bygone era.

Tuesday morning ... some early birds (across-Tasman visitors) went looking for platypus and others ventured to the Thermal Pool. Later on, most of us repeated the cliff side walk passing the mysterious iron hoop en route to *Glory Arch* following Andy on a guided tour of *North Glory Cave* then into *Glory Cave* with its illuminated interpretation boards detailing geomorphic processes and early cave area/ exploration history... exiting via the noisy "click-clack" ratchet gate. Interestingly, some local male lyrebirds are imitating this ratchet noise, including it as part of their mating repertoire. After an early lunch our cavalcade of cars headed out across Long Plain Road once more - towards *Blue Waterholes*, *Cave Creek* and *Clarke Gorge*.

The Long Plains Road terminates at *Blue Waterholes* where *Cave Creek* traverses the Cooleman Plains. Andy Spate gave us yet another excellent field presentation on the geology and geomorphology of the area, describing the previous detailed work of Joe Jennings at Cooleman Plains and discussing the management of remote wild caves. (Access to this area is closed for 4-5 months each year during the winter snow season.) Leaving our cars we ventured along the Jennings Walk to *Blue Waterholes* and several efflux springs - now reduced to a trickle by the absence of recharge waters. Cameron James attempted to find the cave behind one of these springs while the rest of us followed *Cave Creek* downstream via various rock-hopping stream crossings into the impressive limestone cliff-walled *Clarke Gorge*. Passing native wild

raspberry and some feral plants (rosehips and apple trees), Dianne Vavryn was leading the way as the Jennings Walk took us through the gorge and into a granite outcrop with scribbly gums where Dave Smith was tempted to check out some potential swimming pools. Walking into limestone terrain again, there was a convenient chocolate break at yet another photo opportunity beside an impressive waterfall with a vista downstream to *Wilkinson Gorge*. Above the waterfall there were a few small caves where Spot bared all (and some of us saw the emergence of bats)! Retracing our steps the setting sun was painting pink and orange hues to the walls of *Clarke Gorge* as we clicked our cameras and returned to the cars.

Back at Yarrangobilly for another (final) evening of fine cuisine presented again by Brett Farquarson accompanied by various wines and the evening entertainment - seeing the vagaries of the elusive black wombat on the front lawn of Caves House. Wednesday morning was clean up time - or taking turns with the vacuum cleaner - then after signing the Visitors Book, the front steps of Caves House provided a convenient group photo opportunity for our group of post-ACKMA Conference trippers. A cavalcade of dust-covered cars headed out to the Snowy Mountains Highway with first stop at Kiandra where Andy gave us a final presentation detailing the historical heritage and preservation of this once famous alpine gold mining town. Down the highway to Adaminaby, we stopped for coffees and snacks before going our separate ways: the two car loads of Tasmanians went south while the others went on to Canberra to check out the new National Museum.

Our Yarrangobilly/Cooleman Plains trip was a very successful and memorable experience. After several days of communal living with shared cooking and kitchen duties, evening stories and the obligatory Lap Top slide show presentations - re-living the days events - we had become like a close family group and it was sad to be parting our ways. Many thanks go to Andy Spate for all his guiding efforts, excellent presentations and imparting his knowledgeable experience - all following on from organisation of the ACKMA conference presentations and the daily planning or scheduling at Wombeyan, Bungonia, Goulburn and Yass. Remember, as ANDYSEZ: "I am the compass!"