

THE BLANCHE CAVE BODY

Steve Bourne and Liz Reed

Note: Some of the references to the body are inappropriate in today's society but are reproduced as stated in the original texts to maintain historical accuracy.

One enduring mystery at Naracoorte Caves in South Australia is the Aboriginal body that was found in Blanche Cave soon after the cave's discovery by European settlers in 1845. Many myths surround the body, how it came to be in the cave and what happened to it. Some locals still claim to have seen the body, but this is not possible given it is 150 years since it was stolen.

Hamilton-Smith (2003) provides a well-researched account, beginning when a travelling showman named Thomas Craig stole the body on 10 September 1861, and that it was taken to London. We were recently sent an intriguing newspaper article by Adam Lindsay Gordon expert Alan Childs, who operates Adam Lindsay Gordon's cottage near Port MacDonnell in lower South Australia. Gordon is a well known Australian poet who knew Julian Tenison Woods well and shared books and poetry with him (see ACKMA journal 90 "Old Cave, New Stories: Blanche Cave, Naracoorte", for more of Woods contribution at Naracoorte Caves). The article recounts an interview with Charles Mullalay, a close associate of Gordon and was published 5 January 1914. It reads:

Once Gordon got an awful shock. It was just before the wreck. I fancy I can see him now. We were sleeping in a hut on Mitchell's place. I was lying on my bed when Gordon suddenly said 'What's that under your bed Mac? What's that under your bed? Get up Mac, get up, it's looking at me.' I hopped out of bed and looked underneath and there was a petrified blackfellow. I pulled him out, and it was the same I had seen in the caves a day or two before. I kicked up a row about it, and Mrs Mitchell said the girls had told her that a man had asked if he could leave a parcel for the night, and they told him he could leave it in the hut. Next morning, Sergeant Jones, of Mount Gambier, took the blackfellow and the man who brought him there in charge.*

*The wreck refers to the SS Admella, which ran aground on Carpenters Reef in the early hours of August 6 1859. Rescuers struggled for a week to reach people stranded on the wreck with 89 lives lost over 8 days and the many failed rescue attempts making the wreck one of the worst maritime disasters in Australia's history.

An intriguing possibility that a small piece of the puzzle had been filled in, however the dates don't quite line up. Court documents relating to the case when Thomas Craig stole the body suggest he took it 10 September 1861 and that it was seized by Police Sergeant Young at Mount Gambier 12 September 1861.

Was Charles Mullalay mistaken with the dates and the incident occurred after the Admella wreck? Or is this another one of the many myths surrounding this case?

The second part of this story relates to what happened to the body after it was taken to England. In all likelihood, the body simply fell apart from being handled and travelled around. Hamilton-Smith (2003) states the last reliable account appears to have been in the Ipswich Express 3 April 1866:

SALE OF A PETRIFIED AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINE _ On Tuesday, Mr J.C. Stevens, of King Street, Covent Garden, submitted to public competition one of the aborigines of Australia in a petrified or mummy state. This remarkable specimen of a native Australian was found in a cave on Mosquito Plains, South Australia. It is the only specimen of the kind known in the scientific world. It is believed to be of great antiquity and is perfect in every detail. The biddings commenced at 10 guineas, and the lot ultimately realised 18 guineas.

During research for the article "Old Cave, New Stories: Blanche Cave, Naracoorte", we came across a brochure advertising "The Murdered Australian Savage" (reproduced on the following page). Written on the front of the brochure is;

Admission to see the above 1d. The above is called The Petrified Man and is exhibiting at 230 Westminster Bridge Road, (Jones Stables) Friday Jan'y 8th 1869 (first day).

This is nearly three years after the last account and would appear to show the body was placed on show again after the sale reported in the Ipswich Express. The chances of the body being preserved seem slim, but this find adds a few more years to the story.

Reference

Hamilton-Smith, E. (2003) People and caves: changing perspectives. In Finlayson, B. & Hamilton-Smith, E. (Eds) "Beneath the surface: a natural history of Australian Caves". (UNSW Press, Sydney).



THE MURDERED AUSTRALIAN SAVAGE.

*Admission to see the above 1^d
The above is called The Striped Man and
is Exhibiting at 230, Westminster Bridge Road
(opposite the Theatre) Saturday Nov. 2^d 1862 (first day)*

The following particulars of this remarkable specimen of the antiquity of man, are copied from the Australian papers, viz.—The “Sydney Empire,” of January 28th, 1862; the “Adelaide Register,” November 27, 1862; and the “Adelaide Advertiser” of the 25th

“Some months ago it became known in South Australia that very extensive lime and stone caverns existed at Mcquito Plains, in the south eastern districts of that colony.

The Caverns are said to be several miles in length, and up to the present time, have not been fully explored.

On exploring one of these caverns, some 8000 yards in the interior, was discovered the body of this black man, (Homo Nigra.)

Mr. Collins determined to add this rare species of man to his collection, and having wrapped him in a travelling rug, he emerged from the cavern and then started, and travelled over 100 miles, until he reached Mount Gambia, almost in a state of starvation and exhaustion. However, nothing daunted, he again started with his singular burden, and after undergoing numerous privations, reached Adelaide in safety.

This is certainly the most extraordinary instance on record, for how long the body lay in the cave it is impossible to say, it may be as antiquated as the pyramids or as youthful as Stonehenge.”

*FRM 10K 3019
The Van Kivell Collection
in black ink*



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