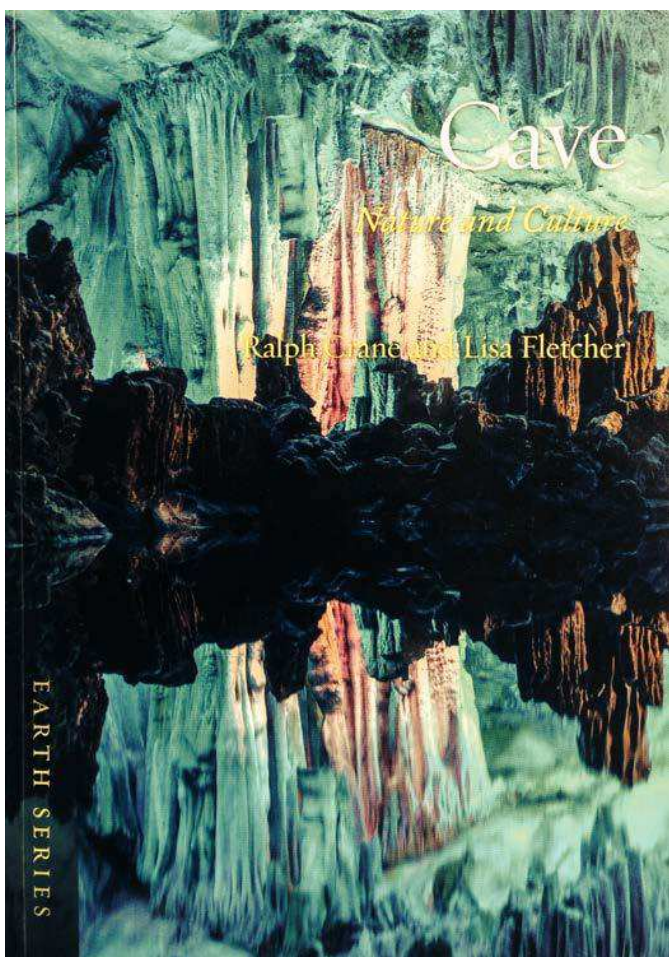


BOOK REVIEW

CAVE by RALPH CRANE and LISA FLETCHER

Greg Middleton

Back in February I attended a seminar at the English Department of the University of Tasmania which had been advertised as “*Cave Genres/Genre Caves: Reading the Subterranean Thriller*.” The seminar was jointly presented by Ralph Crane, Professor of English at the University and Lisa Fletcher, Senior Lecturer in English. For the most part it seemed to be a rather esoteric discussion about people’s interactions with spaces under the Earth. The thesis was presented that people’s usual initial response to caves was fear stemming from apprehension about the unknown and darkness. If they had a continuing interaction with or experience of caves their response supposedly changed to a feeling of security and even protection, presumably from “Mother Earth”. There followed a series of outlines of recent novels dealing with caves and how the main characters had responded to the unaccustomed environment.



The cover of *Cave*. ‘Nature and Culture’ also appear here but they are apparently not part of the title. It’s hard to imagine a worse cover for a book about caves.

While it was noted that most of these characters had been brought into contact with caves by forces beyond their control, rather than entering them because they liked the idea, it seemed to be assumed that their responses were typical of people generally. The discussion then went on to consider recent films dealing with caves, once again considering the responses of fictional characters to the challenges of their underground experiences. My primary thought as I came away from this seminar was “it’s amazing what academics can find to study”. Although it was mentioned that a book was in the offing, I wasn’t going to be waiting around with great expectations of it. I was slightly surprised, since there is only one caving group in southern Tasmania, that neither it nor any of its members had been approached by these academics for any sort of input to their studies.

I thought no more about the book until a friend mentioned he had seen a copy of a book called just “*Cave*” in a Hobart bookshop. (Maybe its title is “*Cave: Nature and Culture*” which it sort of has on the cover, but only “*Cave*” appears on the spine and on the title and half-title pages.) On the next available occasion, 23 June, I checked it out – and of course, bought a copy (despite the cover, of which more later). It’s fair to say that, at first glance, I was agreeably surprised by this publication.

Cave is actually an attempt, within a small book (15 x 21cm and 222 pp), to encapsulate much of what humans know and think about cavities under the earth. Far from being an obvious product of an English Department, the book is part of “The Earth Series” published by Reaktion Books, London and is classified as “popular science”. Its official publication date was 1 July 2015.

The preface points out that;

Caves are fundamental to human history. They are simultaneously places of shelter and places of deep, dark danger. [Ah, something that harks back to the seminar.] They are places of birth and of burial, dwelling places and sanctuaries from persecution. They are a human habitat and the home of mythical monsters.

Chapter 1 demonstrates that the term ‘cave’ is far from straightforward. They quote definitions from dictionaries and speleological works, showing that it is not easy to define the meaning of the English word ‘cave’. It is said that an isolated subterranean cavity cannot be a cave but goes on to acknowledge the term ‘entranceless cave’; it says a rock shelter or cliff-side overhang is not a cave – unless it contains “mineral formations typical of a ‘true cave’, or provides habitat for organisms which populate caves” – in which case “it may be described as



Not one of Steve's greatest images – but it does help break up the text. Twilight Cavern lava tube, Plaine des Roches, Mauritius.

a 'borderline cave'. I thought it was only cavers who indulged in such pointless nit-pickery (but perhaps the issue has to be raised). Surely better to just accept that a cave is a cave if it looks like one – and you want it to be. Fortunately they go on to make some interesting points about caves and how we see them – and how they have been seen through history.

At this point I have to say that, sneaking a look ahead, I was somewhat disappointed, given the Tasmanian abodes of the authors, that the book doesn't have more Tasmanian associations or references – it is as international as the publishers no doubt required it to be. Skimming through the reference list – in this case compiled chapter by chapter using those annoying little superscript numbers that students of the humanities are so prone to use (and emphasising that it is not a product of a Science Department) – and the brief 'select bibliography', one is struck by the few Australian sources that have been utilised. Dave Gillieson (*Caves: Processes, Development, Management* 1996) is cited – at least 7 times (but this book was published in the UK), Elery Hamilton-Smith but twice (from his entries in Gunn's *Encyclopedia of Caves and Karst Science*) and Armstrong Osborne only once. Steve Harris, Don Ranson

and Steve Brown get a guernsey for their paper describing the hand stencils in Ballawinne Cave. Of Tasmania's Carey, Goede, Kiernan, Clarke and Jacksons – nary a mention, nor of national speleological authors like Trickett, Woods, Jennings, Spate, James, Whites ... Finlayson & Hamilton-Smith (*Beneath the Surface: A natural history of Australian caves*) rates a mention in the 'select bibliography' but didn't provide one fact worth citing in the text. This is the only Australian book in the bibliography apart from Shaw's *History of Cave Science* which it manages not to acknowledge was published by the Sydney Speleological Society. In the acknowledgements section Elery Hamilton-Smith is thanked "for generously sharing his knowledge of caves with us" and Deb Hunter "for caving trips". It's good to know they actually went on some. The volume is lavishly illustrated, though nearly all of the photographs and graphics are from overseas; exceptions are the photos by our Esteemed Editor, of which there are nine (including one I was surprised to find myself in! Well done, Steve.) Unfortunately, many of the photos seem just to have been inserted to break up the text and do not relate directly to it.

This digression was prompted by my noting a quote from Adrienne Eberhard's poem *"Earth, Air, Water, Fire"*. Given the significant contributions to Australian speleology of Stefan and Rolan Eberhard, it is perhaps ironic that it is Rolan's wife who rates a mention in this book, rather than either of them.

I shouldn't give the impression the book is not about science, there are many scientific details given about a broad range of caves, many of them from impeccable sources, but some facts just appear out of thin air. For example, we are told that Bungonia Caves "have unusually high levels of foul air due to the decomposition of masses of organic matter washed into the cave during heavy rainfall and a lack of ventilation" but there is no reference to the source of this intelligence. Sadly, they fall into the trap of contrasting 'true karst' with that now out-of-vogue in informed circles term 'pseudokarst' (Eberhard & Sharples 2013) – nevertheless, they show a good general grasp of karst cave development concepts (though I don't think hypogenic concepts (Klimchouk 2007) get a mention). Volcanic caves (in the form of lava tubes) rate only two brief mentions, though they are featured in a couple of the illustrations (perhaps without the authors realising).

Chapter 2 presents a fair introduction to 'speleology' (very largely, and with acknowledgement, drawn from the writings of Trevor Shaw – and where better to start?) Early cave-scientists are introduced, along with terms such as 'karst', 'phreatic' and 'vadose' and a number of major cave-related texts. Speleology is not just a multi-disciplinary field, it carries overtones of exploration and adventure. The authors are fascinated by the metaphors drawn on by people trying to describe caves: decorated chambers are 'galleries', cave floors are 'repositories', entrances are 'mouths', twisting passages are 'bowels'. Their comments are verging on the critical – as though we should have come up with new words for these spatial elements. There are some interesting observations on cave maps and their limitations; they point out that caves are not really limited to the spaces we can walk – or crawl – through but are just the more open parts of much larger systems of interconnected spaces. Despite the fact that they are probably the features people associate most strongly with caves, speleothems don't get much of a mention. A quote from Tom Sawyer serves to explain the process of stalactite formation and how slow it is. The interesting range of other speleothems is ignored as is the valuable role they (especially stalagmites) can play in revealing past climates and in dating climatic events.

The third chapter deals with the adaptations of animals, including humans, to caves. It is a characteristic of this book that it does not just relate the 'scientific' facts but strays off into dead-ends such as Linnaeus' erroneous ideas about *Homo nocturnus* and H.G. Wells' imaginary flesh-eating troglodytes, the Morlocks. There is a lot of attention paid not just to observed facts, but to ideas and concepts relating to caves, even those that are purely the imaginings of novelists, presumably based on the assumption that these give us insights into how people perceive aspects of caves. That said, the

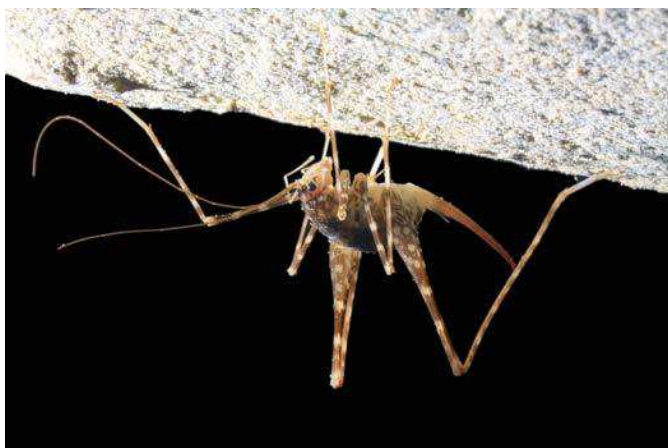
treatment of the development of biospeleology, and particularly its changing systems of classification, is well put together and seems accurate, despite more literary diversions (does a discussion of the nature and depiction of Tolkien's Gollum really have a place here?). David Attenborough comes in for some criticism for his perpetuation of the 'traditional perspective' of caves as islands. The implication is that caves are linked in many ways to the surface and deeper mesocaverns, so are not really isolated but it is true that for some species the daylight spaces between caves and the more or less solid rocks – especially non-karst ones, do isolate them; for such species the islands analogy is valid.

While cave-dwellers get fair recognition, there is no mention of the role caves can play in preserving the remains of earlier life, particularly vertebrate remains as in the remarkable deposits at World Heritage listed Naracoorte Caves and the Nullarbor's Flightstar. I don't think the word "palaeontology" gets a mention anywhere.

Cave explorers, from early humans to modern-day cavers, form the subject of chapter 4. A 1991 poem is quoted in relation to speculation about whether cave painters were actually explorers and then we move on to the early scientific explorers of Europe and then to Martel, "the father of modern speleology" and his impact on British caving. Casteret receives a no-doubt-deserved page. Development of European and US caving is traced – Floyd Collins gets a mention, the NSS was set up in 1941, a 'map-as-you-go' ethic for trips into new caves was developed, cave rescue organisations sprang up, new depth records were achieved. There is a rare error on page 84: sometime Tasmanian caver Jason Gardner is quoted explaining his love of underground exploration and it is stated that Tasmania has the longest and deepest caves in Australia – sadly only the latter is true (Bullita in the Northern Territory has held the longest record for a number of years now and the Jenolan system is probably second longest, pushing Tassie's Exit Cave into at best third place – more may be longer). There follows a section on cave diving – not outlining the great achievements of this admittedly dangerous pastime (other than by Casteret), but cataloguing a series of fatal misadventures.

Monsters and magic: Caves in mythology and folklore is covered in chapter 5. It doesn't tell us much about caves, but perhaps provides some insights into human fears and imagination. Chapter 6, on the other hand, deals with the reality of cave art – both art in caves and art featuring caves. This is a fair coverage of the subject with Australian Aboriginal art getting a mention, from Koonalda on the Nullarbor, finger fluting in caves near Mt Gambier and even, in Tasmania, Ballawinne in the Maxwell River valley and Wargata Mina (Judds Cavern) in the Cracroft.

Chapter 7, on caves in literature, is where we would expect these authors to excel – and we are not disappointed. Coleridge gets a good run, of course, but they might have brought it back to reality by totting up how many actual caves, or parts of caves, have subsequently been named after Kubla Khan or his



*Another image that made the book.
Cave cricket at Naracoorte Caves.
Photo: Steve Bourne*

Xanadu. Also mentioned is Auden's poem, "In Praise of Limestone", which I have to admit is a favourite of mine. They go on to find caves in Shakespeare, Hardy, Steinbeck, Forster, Defoe, Tolkien, Verne, Twain and more recent fiction – but it is all fiction (and did Enid Blyton really deserve a mention?) Again, this chapter tells us nothing about caves, but something about some people's ideas/fantasies about them.

The next chapter, on religious use of caves, does bring us back to real caves. While it is true that there has been widespread use of caves by a range of religious groups around the world, I have to say that of the many cave shrines and temples that I have seen, almost every one has resulted in degradation of the natural features and beauty of the original cavern or grotto. Never is there any thought for protection of the cave itself – always it is painted, decorated, concreted, excavated, disfigured and modified in ways that demonstrate no concern or interest whatsoever in what the worshipers surely should have seen as wondrous examples of their deity's handiwork. While the authors point out that many "holy" caves have become tourist attractions, never do they acknowledge the enormous damage that religious conversion has wrought on caves.

The final chapter deals with show, or tourist caves. It is perhaps the most information-rich chapter in the book, with not a lot about perception and few references to literature. There's a historical treatment, beginning, of course, with Postojna, working through Europe and the USA to Australia, then back to Europe before getting to Asia, where there is (thoroughly justified) critical mention of the use of "unnatural coloured lights and bright neon signs". (If the authors appreciate the travesty of this practice, how did they allow a thoroughly awful photo of such a cave to besmirch the book's cover? I think it may be the worst cave-book cover I have seen.) Jenolan gets a good wrap, especially for its range of tours, even to mentioning its Nettle Cave self-guided one – and, of course, they pick up on the commentary being available in Klingon). JCH&PS gets a plug.

On the first page of the chapter we are told that 'show caves' can also be called 'tourist caves' – as far as I was concerned, the commonly accepted wisdom – but at the end we are told that adventure caving has "blurred" the use of these terms (how can one blur the use of two terms that are the same?) – because tourist caves can be "undeveloped, or only minimally developed" while show caves' common hallmarks are lights, pathways and interpretation. This distinction, I suspect, is as artificial as the lighting in most Chinese 'caves developed for tourists'.

Appended are 1) a list of "Notable Caves" (presumably to avoid that now-confused distinction between 'tourist' and 'show'), 2) the references (divided up into chapters, littered with "ibid" and giving journal volume numbers in Roman numerals!), 3) a (very) 'Select Bibliography', 4) a list of relevant associations and websites (in English) – though missing the Karst Information Portal (<http://www.karstportal.org/about>), "the digital library linking scientists, managers and explorers with quality information resources concerning karst resources", 5) acknowledgements (it appears that EHS was the only speleologist actually consulted and Deb Hunter the only cave guide), 6) photo acknowledgements and 7) a reasonable index.

While I've been about as critical in this review as I ever have been in a cave-related book review, I found much of interest in this little book and it is certainly well-crafted (if one can overlook the ghastly cover). Nevertheless, I can't help but feel this book would have been better had it involved someone with a long relationship with cave exploration and/or studies. The title implies it is going to be the definitive book on the subject – it's not (though it's probably not a bad effort by a couple of "outsiders"). No doubt there are benefits from having a subject reviewed through 'other' eyes. As the endnotes say: "this book examines the allure of the subterranean world" – perhaps it should have been titled "The Allure of Caves". I won't say every speleophile should have a copy on his or her bookshelf, but I don't doubt many will.

Cave is published by Reaktion Books, London, July 2015, in their popular science 'Earth Series' RRP \$29.99.

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