

Something in Caves

EVERY now and then someone lights on a new cave.

The last was discovered during the investigation of the notornis colony. It has already received considerable publicity and prophets are saying already that it will rival Waitomo—or would, if anyone could get to it.

Why is everyone so interested in such a discovery? What are the reasons for the attraction that caves exert even on the civilised human being? Thousands of people at the Centennial Exhibition paid to stroll aimlessly through an artificial Waitomo. Admittedly artificial glow-worms were provided, but Orion in the night sky looked far better—and cost nothing. But the sky is not a cave.

I cannot tell the reason for this mania. I only know that I suffer badly from it, and besides collecting all data on caves at sight, spend much time prying through them. I remember writing a story when I was only 15, which I called proudly *Cavern, Chimaera*.

That was years ago, and I am still searching and collecting. But I do not complain, for this hobby has taken me to some queer places and to it I owe some queer, and even some dangerous, experiences.

For instance, I read once that ice-caves are a useful refuge for mountaineers in bad weather. The next time I was in snow I tested the theory. A storm howled up, and I talked my pessimistic companions into excavating an ice-cave. We set to and dug for some hours. We made a fine little cave—but the storm had passed. Fortunately it was not a bad storm.

WHEN I was in New Caledonia during the war I took every opportunity of visiting the caves which, though numerous, are little known owing to the natural superstitions of the Kanakas who inhabit the island:

These places are quite different from our limestone formations. They seem to have been caused, not by the erosive action of water, but by gigantic splittings and rivings in the earth's crust. Many of them are hundreds of feet high and as long. They also have inhabitants.

Perhaps for the same reason that civilised beings make caves into pleasure resorts, the New Caledonian natives chose them as a burial ground. It is not unusual there, when walking across country, to stub one's toe against a rain-swept skull—dragged from its resting place by human or animal agency. When it happens you know that caves are near by.

Once another soldier and I, having heard of the existence of such caves from some French friends, visited the tribe which owned them. The chief consented to take us to the caves and did so, but unfortunately his dread of afreets overcame his desire for the Yankee

Written for "The Listener"
by DORIAN SAKER

dollar at a crucial moment, and we were abandoned, a hundred feet below the earth, and with no idea of how to get back to the daylight.

For once my interest in caves deserted me. Eventually we penetrated to a vast cavern, lit eerily with green light by a tiny crevice in one wall, from which the sole outlet appeared to be that tiny crevice. Resorting to rock-climbing technique, we scaled the wall and slipped thankfully out of the crevice. Since then I have never had any nerve for rock-climbing.



"One cannot call wetas animal life"

That cave, I remember, was carpeted with bat droppings and occasionally we could see the bats; or rather we saw where they had been—a vague fluttering or disarrangement of the air molecules was the only indication of their presence. They lent excitement, however, to caves in the tropics, and I think that our New Zealand caves suffer from their absence of

animal life. One cannot call *wetas* animal life. Glow-worms, for all their beauteous luminosity, are but poor substitutes for flesh and blood bats (however invisible) and I marvel that caves like those at Waitomo have been able to maintain their popularity with such unsubstantial occupants.

WE can of course beguile visitors with the what-was-once-alive exhibit—the frequently found deposits of moa bones. These are a fascinating substitute for bats, both for the layman and the ornithologist, and we should be grateful to the old-time moas for their considerateness in thus parking their relics. Some, I understand, were less charitable towards posterity and died in swamps.

Moa bones were found in the caves recently discovered at Te Anau—but they were only the bones of a small forest species, probably about eight feet high. Once, when I was a boy, rambling round the coast of Wellington, I stumbled on a cave which held a penguin and penguin eggs. The penguin was hardly one foot high and was dead—still I carried it home and made much of it until my father (an unreasonable man), made me bury it.

Perhaps it was that penguin which has led me on over the years to look for bigger and better caves. I have never quite given up hope that some day I shall fall into the Cave of Caves, where, far from a mere penguin or a heap of moa bones of a small forest species, I shall be face to face with the king of moas himself, alive, and as regal as when his brothers stalked the country from North Cape to the Bluff. After all, if the notornis could conceal its tracks so well for half a century, is it hard to credit the moa with the same sagacity?

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