

The Archaeology of Caves in Ireland by Marion Dowd. 2015. Oxbow Books. 320 pages. Price £50. ISBN-10: 1782978135; ISBN-13: 978-1782978138. Available from www.wildplaces.co.uk.

The University of Bristol Spelaeological Society began its relationship with Ireland in July 1928 when Tratman first visited Co. Waterford. Two members of the Society had been invited to join a committee set up by the Royal Irish Academy to obtain material for the comparison of Irish and English cave fauna and this led to investigations in a number of caves, with a significant excavation at Kilgreany cave (Tratman, 1929). This was shown to have been used over a long period of time through the Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages, but their conclusion that occupation stretched back into Upper Palaeolithic time was later overturned by more extensive excavations by the Harvard Archaeological Mission led by Hallam Movius who showed that the deposits were far more disturbed than had been seen in the earlier work (Coleman, 1969; Movius, 1935).

The *Archaeology of the Caves of Ireland* by Marion Dowd is a comprehensive study of Irish caves and their archaeological content. In addition, it examines the myths and stories surrounding the caves and tells the story of how people have interacted with Irish caves in a variety of ways over the 10,000 years of human occupation of the island.

There are 980 caves documented across the limestone regions of the country and of these, 91 are registered archaeological sites. The vast majority of archaeological discoveries in

the country have been made by cavers not archaeologists, although early antiquarians also played their part. However, one of the huge problems facing anyone who tries to tell the full story of the archaeological past as found in its caves is the loss of documentation, archives and much of the original material from early excavations. Such losses are catastrophic for our understanding of the sites, rendering it impossible to obtain new evidence such as carbon 14 dates and the DNA evidence that is now playing such an important part in our understanding of many sites. These problems are not simply confined in Ireland, and in Britain we have our horror stories too, such as the cautionary tale of Totty Pot on Mendip (see Gardiner, this volume). There, bones entrusted to the police in case they turned out to be of recent origin were summarily disposed when they decided that was not the case. Nor is this an isolated problem. As recently as 2003 when a similar situation arose during a cave dig being undertaken at Tynings Great Swallet, members of the Society were advised by the police to place human remains in the care of a local vicar for reburial in a churchyard as a means of disposing of the material. They are now safely curated in the Society's Museum (Mullan and Boycott, 2004; Mullan, 2007.)

The first three chapters of the book provide an overview and set the scene for the later, period-specific chapters. Dowd briefly looks at caves in mythology and then examines the history of cave investigation in Ireland, as well as providing an outline of cave formation and details of the current state of research in Irish cave archaeology. The remainder of the book takes the reader through a chronological examination of cave archaeology through the Mesolithic, the Neolithic, the Bronze Age, the Early Medieval period, the Medieval period and the post-medieval to modern periods.

Dowd remarks that it is useful in cave archaeology to start with the assumption that strata are disturbed and that archaeological material is not still in situ. In many cases, caves are repositories for material brought in from outside for a wide variety of reasons, some obvious, some not. In addition, badgers are rather effective at rearranging strata. Dowd councils caution when attempting interpretation, but in many cases fails to heed her own advice, and therein lies an essential problem in what is, without a shadow of doubt, a long-overdue, important and extremely valuable book. Dowd's view is that archaeological deposits in the dark zone of caves relate primarily to religious activities and that secular activities in these areas relate perhaps only to the concealment of valuables and occasionally people, and ritual is invariably her first port of call when looking for explanations.

In her preface, Dowd makes it clear that she is not a caver and never had any fascination for them as a child. She came to caves entirely through her archaeological work. She talks at length about caves as liminal spaces and stresses fear as the dominant emotion people experience in caves, repeating claims that those entering caves experience disorientation, hallucination and she returns to the hoary old chestnut of altered states of consciousness, espoused by both Jean Clottes and David Lewis-Williams in the context of Palaeolithic cave art. This type of generalisation is common amongst academics in other fields, but almost never comes from cavers themselves and, frankly, I doubt that fear was the dominant emotion felt by the men, women and children who ventured deep into cave systems such as Le Tuc. D'Audoubert, Niaux, Rouffignac, Chauvet and many other caves, and left their marks behind them on the walls. Nor is her statement that acoustic chambers in caves are more likely to have cave art in them than non-acoustic ones borne out by the numbers involved. A lot of ink is spilt in the book concerning caves symbolising sex, fertility, womb theories and rebirth, and these return as recurring themes throughout. Dowd's main weakness is her tendency to veer immediately towards a ritual interpretation of any given set of observations, occasionally based on the existence of no more than one bone.

The book's strength lies in Dowd's comprehensive approach to the subject and in the very readable way she conveys the information. She has amassed an impressive amount of detail and succeeds in presenting her material in a way that remains both interesting and compelling. Even when I disagreed with her conclusions, I was still intrigued by her thought processes, and the theorising is unlikely to cause confusion in the future as it is mostly very easy to tell where she moves from fact into the realms of conjecture. There is an endlessly fascinating array of facts, such as the case of Annagh Cave, Co. Limerick, where disarticulated human bones appear to have been brought into the cave and then arranged to resemble a crouched burial by someone who must have been familiar enough with human anatomy to get the bones in the correct places.

There are, however, some notable and inexplicable omissions in the text. Whilst frequent parallels are drawn between Irish caves and their counterparts in Britain, the most outstanding omission relates to comparisons with the Mesolithic cemetery in Aveline's Hole, Somerset. Dowd is clearly familiar with the work of Rick Schulting but makes no mention of the site, despite referencing other work by him (see Schulting, 2005). The importance of Aveline's Hole in the story of cave archaeology is hard to over-estimate, and the parallels with other sites Dowd mentions are numerous. The entry point to the cave of Aveline was concealed by a large limestone slab, immediately reminiscent of the large rock believed to have covered the entrance of Aveline's, as described to the Reverend John Skinner in 1824, which is believed to have allowed the site to be curated between use. In addition the perforated periwinkle shells found there are similar to those from a grave at Knockmaree, Co. Dublin, so the lack of any comparison to Aveline's is strange, to say the least. In the context of curated interments, I did find the suggestion that people might have kept popping back to the cave to watch their friends and relatives decompose to be a little far-fetched. Any caver who has had the misfortune to encounter animal corpses under ground will know that anything even as small as a mouse or a rabbit emits a stench entirely disproportionate to its size, and anything bigger, from sheep to cattle almost immediately trigger a powerful gag reflex!

Some other statements are also open to challenge. In the chapter on the Neolithic, Dowd comments that: 'There is nothing to indicate that Neolithic peoples ventured deep inside caves'. However, in the south of France, there is indeed evidence of Neolithic entry into deep caves in the Réseau Clastres in the Pyrenees. Although the cave is now entered through Niaux (either by diving or on the rare occasion when the sumps have been drained, as they were when I visited in 2006), it is believed that in the Neolithic that entry was gained through the cave of Petite Caugno. A series of radiocarbon dates, the latest of which is 4590 ± 200 BP attests to ventures of at least a kilometre underground (Clottes, 1995). Dowd's lack of familiarity with French cave art sites is also demonstrated later when she claims in a section headed 'Altering the Subterranean Realm' that there is no evidence outside the Bronze Age that people sought to alter cave interiors. Those familiar with the Grottes de Vache in the Lot will be aware that Palaeolithic man was guilty of what would now be seen as some regrettable acts of vandalism, removing large numbers of stalagmites and stalactites, possibly to create a viewing window for the observation of the art being created on the cave wall. The many, many hours I've spent underground in sites in France has left behind the strong impression that prehistoric man was in fact quite hard on caves well before the advent of the Bronze Age.

The Archaeology of the Caves of Ireland, despite some flaws, remains a hugely important book that will have a lasting impact on our knowledge and understanding of Irish caves and their contents and the many and varied uses to which they have been put throughout prehistory and history. This is a book that anyone with an interest in Irish caves will enjoy. For archaeologists who have no desire to venture underground, it provides a comprehensive

resource, and for cavers it highlights the importance of always bearing in mind the archaeological significance of anything they might come across underground.

The book is well-illustrated and copiously referenced, with a lengthy bibliography and a useful appendix of all the caves of archaeological significance in Ireland. Oxbow Books have maintained their usual high standards with this volume. Photographs and figures are of excellent quality, as is the paper used and the hardback binding. The *Archaeology of the Caves of Ireland* has already won two major awards. It has been named Book of the Year by *Current Archaeology Magazine* and has won the Tratman Award for 2015, administered by the Ghar Parau Foundation, named in memory of UBSS president, Professor E.K. Tratman, who would surely have approved of this choice given his own involvement with Irish cave archaeology.

Marion Dowd's work hasn't ended with the publication of this book, however, and she recently contrived to render her own book out of date in one important respect. Her recent identification of butchery marks on a bear patella originally found in Alice and Gwendoline Cave, Co. Clare in 1903. Two independent C14 dates have returned a result of approximately 12,500 BP, pushing back knowledge of human occupation in Ireland to the Paleolithic. (Dowd and Carden, 2016) and vindicating the time spent by Tratman and others searching for such evidence on their early visits to Ireland. The moral of the story is clearly 'seek and [eventually] ye shall find'.

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