

REVIEWS

William Boyd Dawkins & The Victorian Science of Cave Hunting: Three Men in a Cavern by Mark White. 2017. Pen & Sword Books Ltd. Barnsley HB. 302pp. Price £25. ISBN-13 978-1-47382-335-8. ISBN-10 1473823358-10

The nineteenth century was an era that produced many great geologists, from Charles Lyell, through Henry de la Beche and Roderick Impey Murcheson, to the Geikie brothers, Archibald and James. At the same time, it produced some of the most famous names in prehistory: John Lubbock, John Evans, Augustus Pitt-Rivers and many more. William Boyd Dawkins, the subject of this book, could certainly hold his own in their company. He was curator of Manchester Museum from 1869 to 1890, Professor of Geology at Manchester from 1874, and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1867, followed by the Geological Society in 1861, the Society of Antiquaries in 1873 and the American Philosophical Society in 1880. In 1918, he was only the fifth ever recipient of the Geological Society's Prestwich Medal, and in 1919 he was knighted for services to geology. In that latter year, he was also, probably coincidentally, elected as a Vice-President of this Society, a position that he held until his death in 1929 at the age of 91.

To cavers, he is best known for his 1874 book, *Cave Hunting*, and for his explorations in Burrington Combe, Cheddar Gorge and Wookey Hole. To cave archaeologists, he will always be associated with excavations at Creswell Crags in Derbyshire, Victoria Cave in Yorkshire and other cave sites in the Pennines and in north Wales. The book mentions Dawkins' 1871 descent of Helnpot (Alum Pot) which is described as "nightmarish" and "bordering on reckless." This is an example of how different perspectives can lead to different opinions; I doubt that many cavers would regard a descent of that cave in those terms, even if they might prefer more modern techniques and equipment. It is also worth noting that at around the same time John Birkbeck had descended to the ledge in Gaping Gill, some 65 metres down and Thomas McKenny Hughes had explored Jib Tunnel and plumbed the shaft to an estimated depth of over 90 metres. Both of these men are mentioned in the book and their exploits would certainly have been known to Dawkins.

Mark White's book covers Dawkins' life and academic career in some detail and also makes mention of his parallel career as a consultant geologist to such bodies as the Channel Tunnel Committee and the Manchester Ship Canal Company. The book is divided into ten chapters of which the first sets the overall scene and then chapters two, three, eight and nine cover his life and career. Chapters four to seven and chapter ten, half of the book, deal almost exclusively with the excavations at Creswell Crags from 1875 to 1876 and the controversy that followed the suggestions that two of the most important finds from those excavations, the engraving of a horse on a section of rib bone and an upper canine tooth of *Machairodus*, a genus of sabre-toothed cat, had been planted.

What did not come over particularly strongly in White's account, were Dawkins' philanthropic works, for example his campaign for better education for miners, a cause to which he apparently donated his own money. Also, his work on behalf of those affected by the subsidence of salt mines in Cheshire comes across as if it was purely a commercial transaction. And surprisingly, given his long association with the Manchester Museum, no mention is made of the fact that when that institution launched an appeal to fund an extension, of the £1,015 2s 9d raised, Dawkins donated £500 himself. This omission is interesting given that many casual mentions are made of his recording of his expenses. The impression I get is that White

doesn't much like Dawkins. Saying, for example, about the Manchester Ship Canal that "... *He was on hand to offer geological advice, probably whether it was wanted or not*" seems unnecessarily sharp.

Before moving on to the main subject of the book, the Creswell excavations in the mid-1870s, I have to say that it is impossible not to share White's view that Dawkins' field work was sloppy and poorly recorded. I still fondly recall the late Roger Jacobi standing outside the Hyaena Den at Wookey Hole and speculating about Dawkins identifying specimens as the workmen blasted them over his head onto the spoil heap across the canal. However, it must also be said that such a judgement does not allow for the point that, with the exception of Pengelly at Kent's Cavern, the research questions being asked by people like Dawkins did not require the recording of fine stratigraphy. They were men of their time.

The discussions around what happened at Creswell in June and July 1876 make up the core of the book. The suggestion that either the horse engraving, the *Machairodus* tooth, or both, were planted, for whatever purpose, is a serious one and here I must be careful. After detailed accounts of the excavations and the subsequent events, White gives four possibilities:

"That both objects were found in the cave exactly where described, and that Heath and Plant were simply making trouble for Dawkins because of personal vendettas against him."

"That one or both objects were planted in the cave by Dawkins and/or Mello, for reasons of personal glory and the keen desire to find the British equivalent of Laugerie Basse or Le Madeleine."

"That one or both objects were planted in the cave by an unknown third-party, perhaps as a joke that went too far, perhaps as something more sinister."

"That both objects genuinely came from the Creswell Caves, but were found out of an archaeological context. Mello and/or Dawkins later conspired to construct one."

I do not have White's archaeological expertise, neither have I carried out the research in the archives that he has conducted to arrive at his conclusions. Given, however, his detailed comments on the poor quality of Dawkins' field work, especially his recording, there is a fifth possibility that could be considered, namely that the objects were genuinely found at Creswell, but that poor recording, by all concerned, meant that it was subsequently almost impossible to accurately cite their archaeological context and that the controversy arose largely from the differing memories of the main protagonists. Uncorroborated eyewitness testimony is notoriously unreliable but can be tenaciously held. It is clear what White's opinion is. He says, on page 142, "*The web of lies surrounding the excavations is impenetrable.*" He cannot know the motives of the protagonists, so words like "lies" cannot really be substantiated.

On the tooth, White's citation of Kenneth Oakley's 1963 Flourine, Nitrogen and Uranium determinations does seem to rule out its origin in other known deposits of the right age. I do agree with him, however, that further analysis with more modern techniques might lay this matter to rest one way or another. It seems odd that, according to the table White gives, Oakley compared the tooth with material from alternate sources but did not seem to compare it with other material from the same deposits at Creswell.

The Creswell horse is an iconic item from the British Palaeolithic, the first piece of Upper Palaeolithic art to be discovered in this country. I find it surprising that although White mentions both Pin Hole Man and the probably natural, not engraved, pieces from Mother Grundy's Parlour excavated by Armstrong in the 1920s, he does not mention the parietal art discovered in Church Hole in 2003 (Bahn and Pettitt, 2013). A strange omission, given that the finds do provide evidence of the presence of Late Upper Palaeolithic artists at the site.

At the Creswell conference, called to present these finds, doubt was cast, yet again, on the provenance of the horse, much to the surprise of many present. A discussion of the authenticity of a specimen has to start with the specimen itself. Jill Cook of the British Museum who is familiar with the assemblages from all the relevant sites, has pointed out that the condition of the specimen does not match any of the French sites known in 1876 (*pers. comm.*). And, having handled the object, myself, I doubt whether anyone in the 1870s would have faked its reverse side in that way. The closest parallel of which I am aware is the engraved 'gaming piece' from Gough's Cave (Hawkes, *et al.* 1970) which was excavated in 1958 but not cleaned and recognised until 1968. The reverse of that specimen has been roughened in a very similar manner. It is perhaps interesting to note that the reverse of the Sherborne Horse, mentioned by White and which was faked, probably by schoolboys, in 1911 does also have a rough-textured reverse side, but only coincidentally as it is broken to reveal the spongy bone of the interior of the specimen (d'Errico, *et al.* 1998, Figure 3).

A minor annoyance is that the plates, all in black and white, are referred to in text by number but are not themselves numbered. However, despite that niggle and my difference of opinion over White's conclusions, the book is an interesting read, contains a wealth of information, and is well-presented. It is a necessary addition to the shelf of anyone interested in the history of geology and of British Palaeolithic archaeology.

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