Archaeology and Ethnohistory of Cave Dwelling in Scotland

ROGER LEITCH and CHRISTOPHER SMITH

INTRODUCTION

In the popular imagination cave dwelling is considered to belong to the remote past. Few people realise that habitual cave residence was commonplace in many parts of Europe until quite recent times. In Scotland, the practice only ceased to be widespread around the time of the First World War.

One of us (RL), an ethnologist, has since 1982 been collecting documentary and oral material bearing on cave dwelling throughout Scotland as part of a study of the use of temporary dwellings. Some of this work has already been published (Leitch 1987, 15-20) while Angus Martin has also treated this subject in a study of Kintyre (1986, 123-4). The other author (CS), an archaeologist, has since 1985 been studying the archaeological traces of occupation in a group of caves and rock shelters in Mid Argyll. The majority of cave and rock shelters in the area exhibit some traces of recent use, while all excavated sites were occupied in medieval and post-medieval times as well as during far earlier periods. In our view, this activity may have something important to tell us about the attitude of people in Western Scotland to natural shelters, both in prehistoric and more recent times.

For example, at the most basic level the requirements of shelter, warmth and light were the same for cave dwellers sixty years ago as they were 6,000 years ago. Similarly, caves very rarely change shape and the same constraints of space were imposed on all occupants. Also, caves never move, and if their use at one time articulated with subsistence patterns and the extraction of locally available resources, this may well have been the case at other times as well. Consideration of these general issues led to consultation between the authors and this paper brings together some of the preliminary results of their combined research into cave dwelling in Scotland.

CAVE USE IN SCOTLAND: THE ETHNOHISTORICAL EVIDENCE

The ethnology and ethnohistory of Western Scotland are rich in records of cave use spanning more than three centuries. We are dealing not only with the accounts of

travellers such as Martin Martin who journeyed through the Hebrides in the 1690s (Martin 1703), or rather later Thomas Pennant (Pennant 1772), but also records of cave use and cave dwelling feature in official government papers such as the Statistical Accounts and the Census Returns, while a series of government studies of travelling people each draw attention to the continued use of natural shelters (Gentleman and Swift 1971; *Report* 1918). Poor Law Returns and local newspapers are further important sources of evidence, but the most important of all, and the most difficult to gain access to, is the surviving oral tradition.

Research must amount to more than the mere collection of anecdotes and we have tried to approach the material in a systematic way. Firstly, it is necessary to categorise the kinds of evidence available. It is convenient to use four broad categories:

(i) *Myth and Legend*: Tales of legendary or mythological cavemen are numerous throughout Scotland and range from the almost ubiquitous lost piper to Sawney Bean, the cave-dwelling cannibal (Homes 1985), and the 'kerwachs', said to be naked wild men who lived in caves (Campbell 1860-62, 49), and who possibly represent a distant folk memory of a prehistoric cave-dwelling population.

(ii) *Tradition:* There are also many traditional accounts of cave dwelling by individuals, particularly hermits and holy men such as Ciaran in Kintyre or Columba in Knapdale; fugitives such as Bruce, Wallace and Prince Charles Edward Stuart (Forbes 1895, 321-54; 1896, 375-83). Less specific, there are numerous traditions of fugitive Jacobites, criminals on the run and smugglers and 'poachers' (Campbell and Sandeman 1964, 7 (no. 23))

(iii) *Documented accounts:* The main documentary sources have already been mentioned briefly but the following examples illustrate the kind of evidence available.

(a) The *First Statistical Account* for the Oban area[1] records that in 1690 a local cave was used to detain the crew of a ship who, having come ashore, were found to be infested with a pestilence.

(b) In 1772 Pennant (1772, 195-6) recorded that St Ciaran's Cave was in his day used by sailors who landed in order to 'dress (cook) their victuals beneath the shelter' . . . while an 'ancient pair' had not long before made the cave their home.

(c) The Census Returns for 1881[2] record that the Keil Cave in Kintyre was the home of John McFee, aged twenty-two, a tinsmith, Margaret his wife, aged twenty-one, and their one-year-old son Andrew. They shared the cave with John McFee's cousin Alex McCallum, aged forty-five, a basket-

maker, Mary his wife and Bella their daughter.

(d) In 1885 the *Campbeltown Courier* (Martin 1986, 122-3) printed an obituary to Esther Houston, described as an agricultural outworker, fisherwoman and 'wilk-gatherer' who had lived in a cave at Southend, Mull of Kintyre, with her natural son.

(e) In March 1915, under the Defence of the Realm Act, cave dwelling was declared strictly prohibited and a warning was issued by the Chief Constable of Argyll to persons 'dwelling in or using as an habitual abode caves or hollows along the shore'—presumably because cave fires might have attracted enemy submarines. The newspaper reported that as cave dwellers were still numerous in Argyll many families were rendered homeless (Martin 1986, 125).

(f) In 1917 an attempt was made to carry out a census of travelling people in Scotland. Of those recorded 2 per cent, or fifty-five individuals, were still living in caves (*Report* 1918).

(g) In the Minutes of Evidence of the 1917 Royal Commission Report on Housing (*Report* 1917), reference is made by Dr George Dick to a Caithness cave that provided accommodation for twenty-five to thirty persons. These were separate families of tinkers, and under cross-examination Dr Dick provided some surprising answers:

> Would you concur in the opinion of the Local Government Board Inspector, who considers that the caves he visited were infinitely more superior from the sanitary point of view to many of the houses to which the vagrants had been driven?
> *Dr Dick:* Yes; certainly.
> Do they keep their caves in a sanitary state?
> *Dr Dick:* That cave was much cleaner than any house I have ever seen occupied by tinkers.
> How is that?
> *Dr Dick:* It is a residence in common and I expect that if anyone commits a nuisance the others look after him (*Report* 1917; Minutes of Evidence 630 [16, 157-9]).

The cave in question was most likely the one on the south side of Wick Bay, opposite the Old Man of Wick. It extended fully 30 feet in depth with a subsequent tapering off in height. Although the cave mouth was left open to the sea, the several different families had their own portioned-off areas within the cave, much the same as a tenement property.

(h) This same cave and others in the Wick area feature in a number of

individual accounts (e.g. Mitchell 1880, 73). In August 1866 Arthur Mitchell, along with two friends, visited 'the great cave at the south side of Wick Bay'. Mitchell noted that very high tides with north-easterlies meant that the front of the cave had to be vacated for a position at the rear, which was at a higher level than the cave mouth. Exceptionally high seas meant that the cave had to be evacuated[3] and it is remembered locally that on one occasion, while a party of eleven and their donkey were ascending the treacherous cliff-side path, a woman fell and drowned.[4] At the time of Mitchell's visit in 1866 there were twenty-four 'inmates' in residence, comprising four families and their 'numerous and vicious dogs'.

> The beds on which we found these people lying, consisted of straw, grass and bracken, spread upon rock or shingle, and each was supplied with one or two dirty, ragged blankets or pieces of matting. Two of the beds were near the peat fires which were still burning, but the others were further back in the cave where they were better sheltered (Mitchell 1880, 74).

(iv) *Oral tradition:* Oral evidence has helped keep alive tradition surrounding the use of a sea-cave at Slains near Collieston in Aberdeenshire. Recorded in July 1954, Dr Hamish Henderson's informant alleged that he spent the first year of his childhood in the cave at Slains. Up to four families occupied this cave and each family had a different fireplace. No attempt was made to close off the cave mouth or hang sacking for shelter. The original cave dwellers used to help smugglers from Holland unload their kegs of gin, but around 1890 a battle took place for occupancy of the cave and the original occupants were driven out by 'interlopers'. Prior to the cave being 'condemned' around the time the railway reached Cruden Bay in 1902, the cave dwellers are said to have existed by a strict set of rules with a high priority attached to sanitary arrangements.[5]

Known locally as 'The Coves', the Caiplie Caves lie midway between the fishing burghs of Cellardyke and Crail in the East Neuk of Fife, and were another troglodytes' base with their own particular lore. Most of those who inhabited these caves were solitaries, although in the inter-war period the occupants at times comprised parties of travelling folk.[6] St Adrian and his followers reputedly stayed in these caves but the most famous occupant of recent times was a recluse known as Cove Jimmy. For thirteen years he was to make his abode the Mortuary Cave. With a high, narrow entrance, the Mortuary Cave lies furthest back from the sea, being

protected on the west and east by a flange of rock. From the fisher homes of Cellardyke he accumulated odd bits of carpet and linoleum, a table, sideboard, chairs and even a bed. He also installed a pillar-like stove whose flue ran up one wall, across the roof, and out through the top of the cave entrance. Bore-holes in the cave's entrance wall and the remnant of a wooden wedge can be seen to this day. Such was Cove Jimmy's standing that he became akin to a landlord of the caves, regulating the use of the larger Chapel Cave.

At times there existed a self-contained group of tramps and travellers who made light of their surroundings with music and stories. Fresh water was obtained from a spring called the Hermit's Well situated some fifty or sixty yards away on the west side. It was even claimed that one occupant rigged up a primitive shower which consisted of an old bucket with a perforated base.

Other parts of the Scottish coast also had their local celebrities. Near Ardwell, on the western seaboard of the Rhinns of Galloway, William Purves, a former itinerant circus clown, occupied a cave which he equipped with a door and some articles of furniture (*Gallov.* 1909, 63). This second generation clown used to perform in local smiddies before retiring to the life of a pedlar selling small wares and picture postcards of himself.

Indeed packmen and pedlars were a distinctive group of individuals who regularly made use of caves in the seaboard areas of the Western Highlands. In *Ring of Bright Water,* Gavin Maxwell describes a cave-dwelling pedlar named Joe Wilson and his 'cave consort Jeannie'. Wilson, a deserter from the army, had at one time been a professional jockey. According to local oral tradition, Wilson was a well-known character in the Glenelg area:

> He used to come round here collecting rabbit skins, sold onions and things like that. His wife was called Jean, a big heavy woman who sold children's clothes, laces and all these things to women. Joe used to live in a cave right down by the shore, at a place called the Market Stance, where they used to hold the old cattle sales or fairs away back in the early 1900s. It didn't please them so they shifted to a cave further along the coast, quite close to this place called Camusfearna in Gavin Maxwell's book. He lived there for years and used to gather whelks when the tide was suitable.[7]

CAVE USE IN SCOTLAND: A TENTATIVE MODEL

This substantial body of material deals with two broad categories of cave and rock shelter use, one of which may be called 'fugitive lairs'. In point of fact, material of this kind is of little use to the student of cave use in general in that the fugitives in question, for understandable reasons, preferred their lairs to be in remote, inaccessible places. While remoteness is something of a relative concept, accessibility was an important consideration for habitual cave users, and it is records

of such use that are of most interest to the student of cave dwelling in general. The ethnohistory of cave use in Scotland provides evidence on a number of themes of interest to the archaeologist and prehistorian of cave dwelling.

Firstly, we can gain some insights into the importance of cave use in the annual subsistence cycle; whether occupation was year round or seasonal, and if seasonal which seasons? Many caves appear to have been used on a regular, but intermittent basis by travelling people down to about the time of the restrictions imposed during the First World War. Before the widespread advent of motorised transport, travellers tended to confine their movements to traditional, or ancestral areas, and within these, natural shelters were used on a regular basis, particular caves becoming associated with individual families or clans. Cave dwelling was for a few months at a time, and part of the year was also spent in tents. Caves could be used at any season, though one first-hand account refers to their use as a specifically summer activity, tents being preferred in the winter. Permanent occupation always seems to have been something of an exception and usually involved elderly people or loners not part of a regular band. Cave dwelling was not confined to the travelling population; groups, conventionally regarded as 'settled', the so-called 'flatties', also became temporary troglodytes from time to time. For example, fishermen from Colonsay are recorded as having regularly stayed in caves on the west coast of Jura while fishing the inshore waters there and the same is reported of parties going from neighbouring islands to hunt deer (Mercer 1974, 76).

Secondly, we can learn something about the range of uses to which these natural shelters were put which appear to have included both residence and storage, while some were used as workshops. Residence is the most common use, though since many travellers were also itinerant craftsmen, especially tinsmiths and basket-makers, many caves were workshops as well as homes.

Thirdly, we can gain some understanding of the way in which the space available was used and how carefully this was organised. In 1956 Stewart Sanderson recorded the facilities established in a cave in Moidart by a travelling packman (Sanderson 1957, 243-5), consisting of a rudimentary bed, chair and table beside a hearth, and sheltered by a low stone wall. Elements of this level of spatial organisation are a commonplace occurrence and there are frequent references in the ethnohistorical record to rudimentary furnishings, bedding, screens and windbreaks. Hearths are of course ubiquitous. One informant records that a hearth should be near the entrance but to the right so as to light the access to the shelter but, presumably, not impede it. Sanitary arrangements were not provided but no cave dweller would foul the group's living quarters.

Lastly, the ethnohistorical record can allow us to glimpse the kind of social organisation that developed among cave users as a way of minimising conflict over the use of restricted facilities. Some caves were large enough to accommodate several families and curiously enough a figure that recurs is four families or about

twenty people, all usually of the same kin such as McPhees, McNeills, or Williamsons, and a leader or cave 'chief' was appointed to enforce compliance with the unwritten code of cave conduct. Each family had its own hearth and an analogy with a tenement house is made more than once. Families seemed to have had an accepted traditional right to use particular caves but there was a degree of flexibility in that a small group could be expected to give way to a larger band, usually without duress.

CONCLUSION

In this short paper we have drawn attention to the wealth of ethnohistorical information bearing on the topic of cave dwelling in Scotland. We have cited a range of examples which we consider to be representative of the kind of material available. We have also attempted to show ways in which this material can shed light on problems frequently faced by archaeologists who excavate in caves and who are interested in how and why people throughout time have often sought shelter in what, to the modern perception, are such uninviting places.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Angus Martin for allowing us to use unpublished material collected by him and for helpful correspondence during the course of our research. Carol Goodfellow of Inverness Library kindly agreed to the reproduction of the postcard of the Tinker's Cave at Wick. Professor Alexander Fenton, Angus Martin and Dave Kear read the paper in draft and made a number of helpful suggestions as to ways in which it could be improved. Debts of gratitude are also due to the RIBA, the Prehistoric Society, the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and the Committee for Excavation and Field Work of the University of Newcastle for assisting with finance towards the research carried out here.

NOTES

1 Notes made available by Margaret Kay on the Oban entry in the *First Statistical Account* 1794.
2 Notes made available by Angus Martin.
3 Letter from Mrs Elizabeth Jack, Halkirk, Caithness, dated 29 April 1982.
4 Letter from Mrs Isobel Salmon, Stanmore, Middlesex, dated 24 April 1982.
5 School of Scottish Studies Sound Archive *SA 1955/155*, Davy Hutchison recorded by Hamish Henderson at Aberdeen in July 1954.
6 *RWL 15* Eugene D'Espremenil recorded by Roger Leitch at Cellardyke on 12 September 1982.

7 *RWL 13* John MacAskill (born 1900), recorded by Roger Leitch at Glenelg, Inverness-shire, on 24 May 1982.

REFERENCES

CAMPBELL, JOHN FRANCIS
1860-62 *Popular Tales of the West Highlands,* Vol. 3: 49. Edinburgh.

CAMPBELL, MARION and SANDEMAN, MARY L. S.
1964 'Mid Argyll: A Field Survey of the Historic and Prehistoric Monuments.' *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (1961-62), xcv: 1-125.

FORBES, R. (ed.)
1895 *The Lyon in Mourning* (Scottish History Society xx), I: 321-54.

FORBES, R. (ed.)
1896 *The Lyon in Mourning* (Scottish History Society xxii), III: 375-83.

GALLOV.
1909 *The Gallovidian* xi.

GENTLEMAN, HUGH and SWIFT, SUSAN
1971 *Report on Scotland's Travelling People.*

HOMES, RONALD
1985 *The Cannibal Family of Sawney Bean and other Galloway Stories.* Midlothian.

LEITCH, ROGER
1987 'Green Bottle Howffs: A Pilot Study of Inhabited Caves.' *Vernacular Building* II: 15-20.

MARTIN, ANGUS
1986 *Kintyre: The Hidden Past.* Edinburgh.

MARTIN, MARTIN
1703 *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland.* Stirling.

MERCER, JOHN
1974 *Hebridean Islands: Colonsay, Gigha, Jura.* Glasgow and London.

MITCHELL, ARTHUR
1880 *The Past in the Present.* Edinburgh.

PENNANT, THOMAS
1772 *A Tour in Scotland and Voyage in the Hebrides.* Chester.

REPORT
1917 *Report of the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Industrial Population of Scotland, Rural and Urban.* HMSO, Edinburgh.

REPORT
1918 *Report of the Departmental Committee on the Tinkers of Scotland.* HMSO, Edinburgh.

SANDERSON, STEWART
1957 'A Packman's Bivvy in Moidart.' *Scottish Studies* 1, 2: 243-5.