Vale John Dunkley AM
19 March 1943–1 February 2018
Greg Middleton and Andy Spate

John Robert Dunkley passed away on 1 February 2018, aged 74, at peace after several traumatic months for himself and his wife, Jeanette. He was an important figure in Australian speleology and particularly in the development of the Australian Speleological Federation, with which he was involved from the 1960s until 2018.

John attended West Ryde and Eastwood primary schools in Sydney before starting high school at Fort Street High. Later he studied at Sydney University, thanks to a Commonwealth scholarship. He studied economics, though he later conceded it is rightly named “the dismal science” and he taught it for the first ten years of his career. John is reported to have said “I despaired of it [economics] then and I despair of it now. It just doesn’t deliver the answers it appears to promise to the problems facing people” (Ellery 2013).

Originally a member of the NSW teaching service, John switched to teaching geography and later in his career became interested in teaching legal studies. John and his wife, Jeanette, moved from Sydney to Canberra when the ACT teaching service was established in 1974. Over the next 23 years until his retirement in 1997, he taught at almost every high school in the territory including Narrabundah, Weston Creek, Melrose High and Lake Ginninderra College.

Probably the first biographical note on John appeared in Caves of the Nullarbor (1967), of which he was co-editor:

J.R. Dunkley B.Ec., Dip.Ed. (Sydney) a former secretary of Sydney University Speleological Society, and at present Secretary of the Australian Speleological Federation, has participated in several expeditions to the Nullarbor. His particular interests include aspects of cave conservation and historical records.

John published widely in the speleological literature on many subjects (see ‘Published Works’, below) and was a member of a number of ASF-affiliated clubs, most notably Sydney University Speleological Society, Canberra Speleological Society and Highland Caving Group.

In 2013, John recalled “My first real limestone cave was Junction Cave at Wombeyan. It was a tourist cave, quite well lit, with some large chambers and well decorated - it was an attractive cave” and further: “I quickly became blasé about common decorations; there is an awful lot of it. I am most interested in large and impressive caves and the sheer spectacle of chambers such as at Abrakurrie on the Nullarbor.” (Ellery 2013).

Jenolan Caves

John joined the Sydney University Speleological Society (SUSS) in the early 1960s and soon developed a great personal interest in Jenolan which has been a long-term major focus of SUSS. His many trips there led to his writing The exploration and speleogeography of Mammoth Cave, Jenolan with Edward G. Anderson in 1971. This was the first Australian book to document a single cave system in detail. John assisted with a second book focused on Jenolan, The caves of Jenolan 2: The Northern Limestone, written by Bruce Welch in 1976. Both of these books were funded by the Speleological Research Council, a company closely associated with SUSS, and of which John was an active member.

While he subsequently turned his interest to caves further afield, John never lost his fascination with Jenolan and its interesting history. When the Jenolan Caves Historical & Preservation Society (JCH&PS) was established in 1972 he was elected its first treasurer and became vice-president in 1974. In 1986 he wrote Jenolan Caves as they were in the nineteenth century which was published by SRC Ltd and JCH&PS. In 2007 he completely rewrote this as Jenolan Caves: guides, guests and grottoes; it was published jointly by ASF and JCH&PS. He enthusiastically supported the “Science of Jenolan Caves” symposium organized jointly by the Lin-
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nean Society of NSW and ASF in 2013, at which he presented a paper on the history of cave science at Jenolan. A number of the presented papers were subsequently published but he was disappointed that the proceedings were not published as a separate volume.

Nullarbor Plains

John played an active role in Nullarbor trips in the 1960s. He participated in a private trip to Mullamullang in May 1965 with Bill Crowle and Dick Heffernan, during which significant discoveries were made (Hill 1966, p. 8). John was also involved in the CEGSA Dec. 65-Jan. 66 expedition, reporting on it (anonymously) in the SUSS Newsletter of February 1966 (Dunkley 1966). He was also on the January 1966 and August 1966 CEGSA expeditions (Hill 1966, p. 4).

This involvement led to his editing and producing Caves of the Nullarbor with T.M.L. Wigley in 1967. This was probably the most significant book produced by Australian speleologists up to that time. As well as editing, John wrote the introductory chapter “The geographical and historical background”. The book was published by the Speleological Research Council in Sydney and seems to have been the spark that initiated John’s long-term interest in speleological publication.

Australian Speleological Federation, Speleopolitics and Awards

Apart from being an active caver, John was an enthusiastic ‘speleo-politician’, which is really just to say that he was interested in the running of organisations that carry out speleological activities. He became Secretary of SUSS not long after joining, held a number of other committee positions and rose to be Vice-President and President of that society in the period 1970 to 1973. He became Secretary of ASF in 1966-67, was VP 1981-82, 1999-2002, 2005-15 and President 1983-86, 2002-05. He held a number of other positions in ASF, including Convenor of the NSW Coordination Committee, the Commission on International Relations (with Elery Hamilton-Smith), the Commission on Cave & Karst Management and Director of the Karst Conservation Fund. After his involvement in the drawn out, but ultimately successful, Mt Etna Caves conservation
campaign, John was particularly keen to get ASF registered as an Environmental Organisation. This took three years’ work, but was achieved in June 2001. Among other benefits, this gained tax-deductibility, enabling the Karst Conservation Fund to be set up. John was a founding Director and remained on the Management Committee until 2016. The establishment of this fund was probably the personal achievement of which he was most proud.

For his “significant service to the exploration, science and conservation of caves and karsts” John was appointed as a Member of the Order of Australia in 2013. A list of positions John held in speleological organisations (probably not exhaustive) and awards he received, is appended.

Australasian Cave and Karst Management Association

John had a long-term passion for cave conservation and management. When Elery Hamilton-Smith arranged for the First Australian Conference on Cave Tourism in 1973 at Jenolan, John played a major role in its organization and presented a paper on cave tourism and conservation. A further six conferences were organized or encouraged by the ASF Commission on Cave and Karst Management. By the time the 7th conference was held in NSW in May 1987, there was wide agreement that a separate organization for cave and karst management was necessary. The Australian Cave Management Association was formed at Yarrangobilly at the end of that conference. Subsequently ACMA became the Australasian Cave and Karst Management Association (to include New Zealand representation). John could see the need for the creation of ACKMA as a more professional body but was concerned that it moved the management focus away from ASF and he was always keen that the two organisations should work together (Dunkley 1991). He took over from Elery as Convener of ASF’s Cave and Karst Management Commission in 1989 and continued with the commission until it was dissolved in 2003.

Thailand

John first visited Thailand in 1969, noting the limestone outcrops along the Death Railway in Kanchanaburi. His interest in that region had been sparked by a talk given by Elery Hamilton-Smith at the 1968 ASF Conference. However, he did not return until 1981 when, on a trip over Christmas and New Year, he visited Chiang Mai and Lampang in the north, Kanchanaburi and Phang Nga and Krabi in the south. It was on this trip that John first heard rumours of the massive karst in Mae Hong Son in NW Thailand. Researching in the National Library in Canberra in the winter of 1982, he noted the massive dolines in the mountains between Pai and Mae Hong Son and later that year made the acquaintance of John Spies, an Australian trekking guide and author, who was based in Chiang Mai. Spies had had an article published in an airline magazine and
that John had been able to track him down; he proved a most valuable contact.

John made his first reconnaissance expedition to Mae Hong Son in January 1983, followed by further visits in January and May 1984. These small group visits established the huge potential of the area. At the 1984 ASF conference John recruited a team and the first large scale expedition to Mae Hong Son was in the field in May 1985. This first expedition was followed by further expeditions in 1986, 1988, 1990 and 1992. As well as these major expeditions to Mae Hong Son, John also visited various other karst regions throughout Thailand, and in neighbouring Burma and Laos, during this period.

All of his library research and field work was summarised in John’s 1995 book ‘The caves of Thailand’ which listed over 2,500 caves and sites of speleological interest. He added a supplement in 1997.

The 1992 expedition was the last large Australian expedition to Mae Hong Son. John had grown out of the project and had other interests. However, after a break of 15 years his interest in Thailand was rekindled and he started visiting again. Along with nostalgic trips back to Mae Hong Son, he had several road trips through north-east Thailand researching for his new interest in sandstone caves. John’s last caving visit to Thailand was in February 2017 when, as well as touring the north-east, he visited caves in Chiang Mai and Lampang. Among his last writings was “Unusual caves and karst-like features in sandstone and conglomerate in Thailand” with Martin Ellis and Terry Bolger published in Helictite in 2017.

**Bullita Cave, Northern Territory**

John was heavily involved in the exploration of Bullita Cave, Judbarra/Gregory National Park, from 1991 to 2008. He was informed about the likely significance of the area by Keith Oliver (formally with OSS and a guide at Cutta Cutta Caves in the NT). John got the first CSS trip going under Neil Anderson’s leadership. It then became a CSS-TESS project, but as the system grew more cavers became involved from across the country. A cave that was originally thought to be about 6 km long, was eventually found to be over 130 km and the longest in the country.

**Speleological History**

John evidenced a strong interest in Australian cave history and he contributed many papers in this field to a variety of publications. His contribution to his first major speleological publication, *Caves of the Nullarbor* (1967), dealt with the geographical and historical background. In 1976 his contribution to Welch’s *The Caves of Jenolan 2: The Northern Limestone*, was ‘Speleological history of Jenolan’. He subsequently wrote two books on Jenolan history and a number of significant papers on early Australian cave explorers. He presented at the Australian Caves History Seminar at Jenolan in 1985. His contribution to the *Encyclopedia of Caves and Karst Science* (2004) drew on his interest in both Southeast Asian caves and history.

One of his last projects, about which he was most enthusiastic, was to have published an English translation of J.V. Daneš’s *Karst Studies in Australia 1916*. He arranged for John Pickett to prepare the translation which is published in this volume of *Helictite* and, with Bruce Welch, he prepared the paper tracing Daneš’s travels in Australia, also published here. Sadly, he did not live to see these works in print.

John Dunkley made enormous contributions to so many aspects of Australian speleology, particularly in relation to publications, exploration, documentation, conservation and management of caves and karst, and historical studies. His influence and his legacy will be appreciated as long as caves and karst are studied in Australia.
**Awards and Positions Held**

1964-66 Secretary and Editor, SUSS
1966-67 Assistant Secretary, Publicity Officer and Jenolan Area Director, SUSS
1966-67 ASF Secretary
1969-73 Editor, ASF Newsletter [at times with others]
1970, 1973 SUSS Vice-President
1970-73 SUSS President
1972 NSW Coordination Committee Convenor
1972-74 JCH&PS Treasurer
1973 Appointed Life Member of SUSS
1973 Secretary, 1st Australian Conf. on Cave Tourism, Jenolan Caves, July 1973.
1974-82 JCH&PS Vice-President
1980 Awarded Edie Smith Award by ASF
1981-82, 2000-02, 2005-15 ASF Vice-President
1983-85; 2000-02 President, Canberra Speleological Society
1983-86, 2002-05 ASF President
2000-2018 Member, ASF Helictite Commission.
2001-2016 Director, ASF Karst Conservation Fund
2007 Appointed Life Member of ASF
2013 Member of the Order of Australia “For significant service to the exploration, science and conservation of caves and karst.”

**Published Works** (excluding routine trip reports and minor items)

1967 *Caves of the Nullarbor*. SUSS & CEGSA / SRC: Sydney [edited with TML Wigley; author: Geographical and historical background, pp. 1-12]
1971 *The exploration and speleogeography of Mammoth Cave, Jenolan*. Speleological Research Council: Kingsford NSW. 53 + x pp. [assisted by E.G. Anderson]
1973 Commission on International Relations. *ASF NL.*, 59:17 [with E. Hamilton-Smith]


1975 *Master Plan for the development of Jenolan Caves Reserve – Submission from Australian Speleological Federation to NSW Dept. of Lands.* 30 pp. [with others]


1986 *Jenolan Caves as they were in the nineteenth century.* SRC Ltd and JCH&PS. 60 pp.

1986 *Caves of North-West Thailand.* Speleological Research Council, Sydney, 62 pp. [with John Brush]


1987 Caves of Thailand longer than 1000m. *Caves and Caving*, 38: 32.


1988 Caves of Thailand longer than 1000 m. *Caves and Caving*, 38: 32.


1992 *Air quality and visitor comfort in Khao Bin Cave, Ratburi.* A report to the Tourism Authority of Thailand. Canberra. 20 pp. [with Neil Kell]
1999  Reconciliation at Mt Etna.  Australian Caver, 149: 5-6.
2000  Karst of the Central West Catchment: Resources, impacts and management strategies.  ASF: Sydney [edited with Peter Dykes]
2006  Down Under All Over: 50 years of Australian Speleology.  ASF.  [edited with C. Bradley, C. Brown, Jeannette Dunkley and S. White]
2006  Mt Etna.  Caves Australia, 171: 5 [with N. White and P. Berrill].
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2011  Tham Din Phiang, Thailand: an unusual maze cave in sandstone (PowerPoint presentation).  28th Biennial Conference of the Australian Speleological Federation, Chillagoe, Qld.


2013  Music of the caves: Cultural significance of sandstone caves in the Sydney Basin.  *Proc. 29th Biennial Conference, Australian Speleological Federation, Galong, NSW.*

2013  Salt caves of the Atacama Desert, Northern Chile.  *Proc. 29th Biennial Conference, Australian Speleological Federation, Galong, NSW.*


2015  Cave tourism brochures.  *Caves Australia*, 200: 17-21 [with Scott Melton].


2017  Unusual caves and karst-like features in sandstone and conglomerate in Thailand. *Helictite*, 43: 15-31 [with Martin Ellis and Terry Bolger].


Acknowledgement is made of our reference to biographical notes compiled by Bob Dunn and the obituary by Nicholas and Susan White (2018). Terry Bolger and Martin Ellis provided details of John’s Thai exploits. Jeanette Dunkley kindly reviewed the manuscript.

References


Ellery, D. 2013  John’s journeys are all about his passion. For John Dunkley, classrooms and caving have been the essence of life. *The Canberra Times*, 26 January 2013.
