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Fingal's cave: the myth of a cave through its iconography

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Abstract

Fingal is the natural cave that has given rise to what is by far the largest number of images of any other natural cavity. Today it is reasonable to estimate that the number of different representations is well over 300. Probably the largest collection of Fingal's iconographies is that of the Anelli Speleological Documentation Centre of the Italian Speleological Society, which actually hosts more than 200 different images of the cave over a span of time of about 250 years.

Résumé

Fingal's cave, l'iconographie d'une grotte mythique. Fingal est la grotte naturelle qui a sans doute inspiré une production d'images plus riche qu'aucune autre grotte. Aujourd'hui, on peut raisonnablement estimer que plus de 300 images différentes de Fingal ont été produites, et la plus grande collection en est conservée au Centre de documentation spéléologique Anelli de la Société italienne de Spéléologie avec pas moins de 200 images différentes produites sur une durée d'environ 250 ans.

1. Introduction

In centuries past, and indeed right up to the present day, the reasons for a cave becoming a focal point for global attention almost always have nothing to do with that cave's real characteristics and derive instead from motivations often associated with the human psyche. It is not by chance that amongst the most well-known and most-visited caves in the world are two small cavities: the Cave of Lourdes in the Pyrenees, a sacred place for Catholics, and the Cave of Amarnat in the Himalayas, a key site for Hindus. Both of these natural caves are visited every year by millions of people, and there are myriad descriptions of them.

In certain instances, a given cave's fame may have come about as a result of a fortunate series of coincidences that over time exponentially increased its recognition. It is into this category that Fingal's Cave surely falls, thus becoming the cave that generated the largest collection of iconographies in the world and provided inspiration for a substantial number of famous painters, poets, writers and musicians. In truth, Fingal's Cave is just a small sea cavity (a rectilinear gallery around 70 m long, 12 m wide and 20 m tall) similar to – and, indeed, even smaller than – some of the other caves found along the coastline of Staffa, which for their part have been almost totally ignored by cavers, writers and artists alike.

But Fingal gave rise to what is by far the largest number of images of any natural cavity (Fig. 1).

Indeed, since its discovery in the late 18th century, the cave has been reproduced in pictures, prints, books, photographs, postcards, stamps and numerous other media. Today it is reasonable to estimate that the number of different representations is close to 400 (Forti, 2020). This begs the question: why have so many artists decided to celebrate it? Without doubt, the astonishing layer of columnar basalt, excavated over time by the stormy

Atlantic, and the melody created by the squally waves, crashing over them, were important... but not enough to explain the worldwide fascination exerted by this cave ever since its discovery.



Figure 1: Anonymous late 19th-century chromolithograph inspired by the famous watercolour Fingal's Cave by Andrew Nicholl

Its reputation is entirely bound up with the name that a Scotsman had attributed to it in the summer of 1772: Fingal, after its supposed first inhabitant (Finn McCool), a hero of Celtic mythology at the centre of an epic poem that a bard called Ossian – blind like Homer – was said to have written in Gaelic many centuries before...

But in itself this coincidence would certainly not have been sufficient, had the Romantic movement not begun to emerge in that same period.

Thanks to the analysis of the “Fingal’s cave” materials in the “Anelli” speleological library of the Italian Speleological

Society, it has been possible to document how, in the almost 250 years since its discovery, the profile of Fingal’s Cave has never stopped expanding, forever exploiting the latest technologies as soon as they have become available.

2. The “Fingal’s cave” collection within the Anelli library

This collection currently consists of about 200 different objects: mostly engravings and illustrated books, but also daguerreotypes, hyalotypes (Fig. 2), postcards, stamps (Fig. 3) and picture cards, amongst other items – most of the remainder having been produced over the past decade. In global terms, this collection is one of the largest in the world on the iconography of Fingal’s Cave, probably containing over 50% of the printed materials on this topic. Therefore, it allows us to chart step-by-step the development in the iconography of this cavity from the end of the 18th century right up to the present day.

But what is the reason of the existence of such a wide collection in Bologna? The story began in the mid-1970s, when the Speleological Documentation Centre was established by the Italian Institute of Speleology, together with the Italian Speleological Society. At that time, the library’s assets were very limited and the single foreign bookseller supplying materials to the Centre was the Welsh caver Tony Oldham, who, for more than 25 years, would send over speleological journals and books and, from the early ’80s onwards, also cave engravings, most of which depict Fingal’s Cave. As a result, the picture collection of the Centre grew so rapidly that after just ten years, the Italian Speleological Society staged at *Phantaspeleo* (an annual Italian National Speleological Meeting) a small exhibition on Fingal’s Cave, based entirely on its books and engravings. In 2020, when planning the photographic volume on Fingal’s iconography (Forti 2020), it was evident that it would make no sense to print a *catalogue raisonné*, of the whole “Anelli” collection, because the works are sometimes very similar and rather repetitive. The decision was, therefore, taken to limit the number of illustrations to the most significant, with a view to giving a thorough overview of all of the facets of the iconography of Fingal’s Cave. For this reason, the selected material (120 images) has been subdivided in 19 themed sections: within each of them, the different items are arranged in chronological order.



Figure 2: Stained glass by an unknown artist, produced in the mid-19th century for use as a slide in “magic lantern” shows

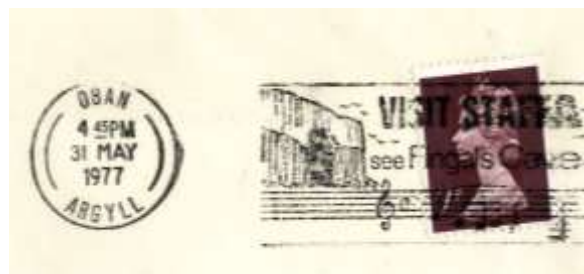


Figure 3: The only celebratory postmark of Fingal’s Cave ever issued by the Royal Mail in 1977

3. The iconography of Fingal’s Cave through the years

Over the course of the past 250 years, the iconography of Fingal’s Cave has been subject to radical changes, due in the main to the advent of new technologies, which have made it possible to deploy an array of different techniques to create images of the cave and its surroundings.

After the first sketch of the cave, drawn by James Miller in 1772, for over half a century, numerous engravings (initially on copper and, later, on steel) were produced with a view to enriching the short reports on trips to Staffa that appeared in journals. Engravings and etchings were subsequently used to illustrate books on natural and science and, later still, for

dedicated guidebooks on Fingal’s Cave and even for fantasy novels.

In 1776 the first engravings were printed by Pennant, together with Banks’s report, in a volume on Scotland and the Hebrides. For that work, the engravers used the sketch made by James Miller as their starting point but reduced the size of the boat and of the men in order to make the entrance of Fingal and the basalt columns look much larger than they actually are. Similar uses of the forced perspective technique were used in many later engravings, always with the aim of impressing those viewing them. In general, the considerable morphological differences that can be

discerned between the various engravings of Fingal's are due to the fact that, for most of the artists, visiting the cave was not an option, and so their depictions were either based on fantastical visions or were simply reworkings of image produced previously by other artists. Although Fingal's Cave makes an appearance in myriad books, very few of them are entirely devoted to Staffa and its most famous geological feature. The very first one, printed by Daniell in 1818 was not a real book, but rather a compilation of 8 watercolour aquatints complete with short descriptions.

In the wake of this first book came several others, an in 1927, Donald B. MacCulloch wrote the first "tourist guide" on Fingal's Cave, making use of all the available information on the history and geology of the cave and the island playing host to it. This book was a great success and was duly expanded and reissued three times (1934, 1956, 1975). After MacCulloch's book, the next publication of this type would not be written until 1993, when Alastair de Wateville – owner of Staffa from 1972 to 1978 – put pen to paper. With the coming of the digital era, printed books became less of a priority due to the easy availability, via the internet, of all the information required to orchestrate independently a visit to Fingal's Cave. As such, no further specific guides on this small island and its famous cave have seen the light of day.

Throughout the entire 19th century, engravings were far and away the most common method used to represent Fingal's Cave. The total number of them produced is not known, but reasonable estimates indicate in excess 200, which constitutes around 50-55 % of the depictions of the cave. Even before the first engraving was produced, from the late 18th century onwards, many artists – both amateur and professional – attempted to portray Fingal's Cave from the outside, amid stormy seas, or from inside, with sailboats on the horizon, using a plethora of painting techniques including oil, watercolour and charcoal. It is impossible to even make a rough guess at the number of these artworks, since most of them have remained in private collections and, as such, have never been recorded. That said, between 40 and 50 of them to be found in public collections, but it is not unreasonable to put their total number at in excess of 100. In any case, at least during the 18th century, many of the artists represented Fingal's Cave without ever setting foot on Staffa. For most of the 20th century, painters ignored Fingal's Cave, in all probability due to the rise of photography. However, at the start of the new millennium, there appeared to be a renewed interest in painting, leading to the creation of a number of works, some fully abstract and other simply less "naturalistic" than previous depictions.

From the middle of the 19th century onwards curious images began to be shown publicly using so-called "magic lanterns" (hyalotypes), and Fingal's Cave was one of the most widely represented images. Initially, these images were painted on sheets of transparent glass mounted on a wooden frame; several decades later, it became possible to print actual photographs directly onto the glass, thus creating the first slides.

After 1860, the first daguerreotypes of Fingal's Cave were produced, which were often used to create double (stereoscopic) images that produced a three-dimensional

effect – something never seen before. In the second half of the 19th century, due to the new technique of chromolithography and the parallel development of the advertising industry, Fingal's Cave was often featured on brochures, flyers and other printed material. A number of years later, at the end of the 19th century, thanks to a hunch on the part of the makers of Knorr stock cubes, collections of picture cards – often including images of Fingal's Cave – became popular across the globe.

Rather curiously, in the first decade of the 19th century, a number of Americans of Irish descent started to insert chromolithographs or colour prints of the entrance to Fingal's Cave into the greetings cards they made each year to celebrate St Patrick's Day (the Patron Saint of Ireland, who is celebrated on 13 March each year). Normally in these greeting cards only the main "Irish symbols" (shamrock, harp, etc.) were used, since they are often associated with well-known Irish landscapes. Evidently, the high profile of Fingal's Cave – together with the fame of the basalt columns of the Giant's Causeway – misled the Irish American community into thinking the cave was in their ancestral homeland, perhaps in part because many of them had never been there in person.

In the same period, a number of daguerreotypes – and later, black & white photos – were used to produce postcards. Visitors to the cave liked to send them to distant friends, out of a desire to share the natural wonder they had been privileged enough to see. Over the course of a century, some 100 different postcards were printed, but in truth a far lower number of photographs were used to produce them.

In Britain between 1900 and 1930 it was fashionable to wear necklaces and bracelets with a number of charms attached to them, and naturally, Fingal's Cave was one of the favourite images reproduced on this type of jewellery (Fig. 4).



Figure 4: 1930-40: Silver pendant for bracelet with polychrome enamel depicting Fingal's Cave

In the '60s, the Caithness Glass company was established in Scotland, specializing in glass paperweights. At the end of the '70s, the factory was moved to Perth, where in the early '80s, thanks to the increasing interest shown by tourists in Staffa, it produced a small series of 3 "millefiori" paperweights, loosely inspired to Fingal's Cave. Within the transparent glass pendant, the flowers create an "arcade" resting on columns to recreate the void of the cave and its basalt columns.

In the early 1970s, a number of stamps were issued (albeit unofficially, not by the Royal Mail) that made sending postcards or letters directly from Staffa – a favourite pursuit of visitors – all the more special. These stamps were used to cover the cost of getting the correspondence from Staffa to the Isle of Mull, where the closest post office was located. It was not long, thought, before postcards declined, with stamps following suit, and by the 1990s postcards were to all intents and purposes a thing of the past, replaced first by the internet and then by social media. For the same reason, with the exception of one-off pieces by modern artists, all existing types of depictions of Fingal's Cave were considered to have reached the end of the road.

Since 2010, new digital printing technologies have made it possible to produce images on just about any type of material (from cotton, plastic and wood to porcelain, glass and steel), giving rise to a renaissance in depictions of Staffa and Fingal's Cave (Fig. 5). Indeed, not only the most famous paintings and engravings but also a number of excellent photos have now reproduced on mobile phone covers, bath towels, coffee mugs, and many other items.

In 2019, a particularly attractive use of a photo of the entrance to Fingal's Cave was made by the Accademia Ciak ASD-Studio Danza, for its annual performance of classical dance that also utilised the famous Fingal's Cave Overture by Mendelssohn.

In mid-2015, Fingal's Cave provided the location for a children's videogame called *Escape from Fingal Cave*, which is available to download for free from the internet. After entering the cave, the player gets lost inside and cannot find a way out. It is necessary to locate a number of items to

solve some easy puzzles in order to escape from the cave in the shortest possible time.



Figure 5: iPhone cover (7.3x14.4 cm) with a reproduction of an 1834-37 watercolour steel engraving from Felix-Edouard Guerin Meneville's *Dictionnaire Pittoresque d'Histoire Naturelle* Paris

In 2018, a 3D model of Fingal's Cave was created using the latest technologies. These models were then leveraged to produce an interactive video in which, for the first time, real and computer-generated images were combined with the acoustic sounds of the cave to allow viewers to appreciate fully the characteristics that make Fingal's Cave like nowhere else on Earth.

Last of all, since the late 20th century, all manner of marketing campaigns has used images of famous people and places in order to publicise objects that have nothing at all to do with them. Naturally, Fingal's Cave has not been immune to this phenomenon: having created back in 1994 a scent named "Fingal's Cave" a prestigious Scottish manufacturer of candles and perfumes, McKelvie Candles, recently decided to create an entire range of products (from standard candles in tins to deodorising, smoke-eating versions) associated with this cave, tapping the latent desire of potential purchasers by giving them the opportunity to "...breathe the fresh, clean, invigorating ocean fragrance of the wonderful Fingal's Cave".

5. Conclusion

While Fingal's Cave is, without any doubt, the most often represented and well-known cave in the world, in truth since it was first discovered two and a half centuries ago, only a relatively small number of people (fewer than 200,000) have had the chance to pay a visit to Fingal's Cave. This figure is very low in comparison to the numbers of tourists visiting

the main tourist-friendly caves around the world, and therefore Fingal must also be considered among the least-visited show caves in the world. The reason for this discrepancy is surely because the storm-prone North Atlantic makes it always difficult to reach the cave and nigh-on for several months of the year.

References

FORTI P. (2021) *Fingal's cave* Società Speleologica Italiana, 80 p. and the references therein