

The Hugh Miller Writing Competition 2019-2020

Under 18 Prose 3rd Prize Smoo Cave: Rebekah Macpherson

The Hugh Miller Writing Competition carries the name of one of Scotland's most endearing geologists, Hugh Miller (1802-1856), and aims to honour his legacy by inspiring new, original prose and poetry on the theme of Scotland's geoheritage. The competition is organised by the Scottish Geodiversity Forum and The Friends of Hugh Miller.

Further details of the competition, and all the winning entries, are available at www.scottishgeology.com/hughmiller/

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Smoo Cave: 'A natural wilderness'

By Rebekah Macpherson

Dark shadows danced and flickered on the rocks, casting their eerie silhouettes on the roof of the cave. Shots of light darted across the damp ceiling before dripping onto the pebbles lining the floor of the cave. Pools of murky water lay still and silent; their glass-like surfaces frozen to the rocks. Only the occasional droplet of water disrupted the silence, making perfect rings on the pool surfaces, and echoes that resounded for what felt like hours. Dark crevasses hid in the shadows, not revealing themselves for fear of the light. Home to whatever unknown horrors might lie waiting in the gloom. Stalagmites and stalactites hung and grew, their presence adding to the ominous and foreboding atmosphere.

Might it have been any other stranger to wander into the cave, they would have been deterred by the dark and despondent appearance. Yet you and I would find its mystic walls inviting and intriguing. We would venture far into the depths of silence, never scared, never hesitant. Perhaps the naivety and audacity of youth is what pushed us forward. Carefree children, diving in where others would not dare.

If we strayed far enough in from the mouth of the cave, we would find a waterfall dashing down the rocks; the white spray of the water soaking our clothes and forcing us to laugh. The deep lagoons of pitch-black water swelling below our feet like an endless abyss. The roar of the fall as deafening as an ocean, and yet the silent spirit of the cave was not drowned out. The fall seemed to come from nowhere. However long and hard we looked we could not see a start to it. I am sure if we were to see it now, there would only be a small stream of water, hardly as majestic as we once thought it was.

The monsters deep in hiding did not frighten us; they were part of the cave, and for you and I we could not imagine the cave without them; not just the cave; our cave.

I remember we used to play around the little stream at the mouth of the cave. Just far enough to be in daylight, but close enough as to see the interior. From there, the immense hollow structure looked unnatural, and almost fantastical. Occasionally on our visits we would walk further from the cave, until completely out of view. There we would find ourselves on a remote and sandy beach. One filled with the calls of gulls, and footprints of the oystercatchers embedded in the wet sand. Whenever one was to take to the air, streaks of black, white and orange added to the murky grey sky. There we would run and play in the sand, our shrieks of laughter the only noise apart from the birds and the sea. A complete natural wilderness.

From above, or from the side where the cave was hidden from sight, it was hard to imagine how it existed there at all. When at last the land was worn and tired of us, as we were of it, we would wave a fond farewell to the cave and return to normality. The choking calls of the herring gulls, the roar of the sea and the deafening silence of the cave still ringing in our ears. Only in the knowledge, and hope that we would return some day.