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V. Book/Journal Article Reviews

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The Land of Prehistory: A Critical History of American archaeology. Alice Beck Kehoe. Routledge, New York, 288 pp.

by

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This book is a very difficult work to read dispassionately, for a variety of reasons, such as difficulties the reader may have with a rather convoluted discussion of Daniel Wilson and the Scottish enlightenment, the categorization of many practicing archaeologists as “petrified puddle ducks”, after a term borrowed from Walter Taylor, and taking a leaf from Taylor, utilization of the term “critical” primarily as “criticism”, so that almost no current significant practicing archaeologist in North America comes out unscathed. The term

“petrified puddle ducks” was employed in several places, perhaps the strongest usage when Kehoe states (p. 183) that “Compared to the political sophistication displayed by so many social anthropologists, mainstream American archaeologists have been petrified puddle ducks.” The term “petrified puddle ducks” had a nice ring to it, but I confess I did not remember the context that Taylor employed it in, so I repaired to the volume to re-educate myself. Taylor’s (1968[1948]:5) use of the term is as follows: “The really important thing is to focus the attention of the archeologists upon the nature of their objectives, their practices, and their conceptual tools. This has been tried before .. but the effort has rolled off the archeologists like water off a petrified puddle duck.” I think it a fair assessment to indicate that by naming names, in a like manner to what Taylor did, that Kehoe is hopeful that her work may have the same impact on students of the history of the discipline as Taylor’s book did on Americanist archaeology.

The first quarter of the volume is a further development of the argument she made in her article “The Invention of Prehistory” (Kehoe 1991), where she contended that Daniel Wilson developed much of our modern ideas on prehistory, including the term itself, but for political reasons, the contributions of Wilson have not been properly acknowledged. Good discussions of the first utilization of the term “prehistory” and its context are also to be found in Chippindale (1988) and Clermont and Smith (1990). Kehoe elects here to focus exclusively upon the contributions of Wilson and his colleagues.

The book starts out trying to assess the reasons for the failure of archaeologists to properly appreciate the contributions of Daniel Wilson (1816–1892). Kehoe attempts to place Wilson in the context of the Scottish enlightenment, but I found her approach of using didactic statements with little documentation, and of reference to philosophical positions without adequate definition to be very difficult to follow. Trigger (1992) dealt with much the same issues, and although it is a much shorter paper, the argumentation style of Trigger more clearly defines the specific socio-political context of the era. Kehoe raises the issue of class several times: for example, stating that early archaeological research was associated with patrician gentlemen, and that “standard histories of archaeology have failed to penetrate the mystification of class domination created by aristocrats’ assumption of leadership”, consequently “failing to realize that prehistoric archaeology is a bourgeois science”(p. xii). Explaining why many historical reviews refer to the contributions of Sir John Lubbock on prehistory, but ignore Wilson, Kehoe tells the reader that Wilson was a tradesman’s son, part of the lower middle class, a member of the Scottish bourgeoisie, whose work thus was doomed to being overlooked because he was a member of a marginalized small north sea consortium of middle class scholars. In contrast, Kehoe refers often to Lubbock as “the baronet”, a member of the English gentry, whose work was accepted because it was supported by the elites in the great capitals of Europe, and provided a scientific-looking validation for dominant class aggrandizement (p. xiii, 14, 21, 22, 38, 57). Because political themes are dominant in her argument, chronological context is often not explicitly covered. For example, although Daniel Wilson serves as Kehoe’s major foil, she refers the reader to other sources to learn the dates and reasons for Wilson moving to Canada and other chronological contextual issues (p. 231, fn. 6).

There is a theme of disenfranchisement that permeates the volume at all levels. Access and recognition of archaeological status has been, and is, limited, in Kehoe’s eyes, on the basis of one’s class, economic status, ethnic status, and gender. The reader is first signaled of this perspective in the first line of text in the book, where Kehoe indicates that she believes that entering graduate school as a married woman with a child, she was excluded from “the social circle of promising young archaeologists and their mentors” and thus forced into a marginalized status (p. ix). This theme is reiterated later in the volume as well. Speaking of the development of the profession between the 1880s and 1920s, she claims: “To be a recognized archaeologist, a person was expected to have graduated from a reputable college and preferably to have earned the doctorate. These criteria excluded persons who could not afford or would not usually be admitted to reputable colleges — lower class, African American, Asian, and Jewish men and nearly all women”, going on to assert that there was a “quota for Jews” at this time (p. 91). Hence, for example, Leslie White’s influence was in part because of his “WASP descent and appearance” (p. 124). She believes that NAGPRA has been the cause of a major shift in the composition of Americanist archaeology personnel; that its implementation “coincided with the great shift among American archaeologists from WASP men, a number of them from

wealthy or very genteel families, to a far broader spectrum including women, Jews and Catholics, working-class, and a few .. African Americans” (pp. 211-212).

After dealing with the 19th century development of archaeology in the United Kingdom, the coverage of the book then shifts to an evaluation of the major figures in American archaeology in the last half of the 20th century. She refers to processual archaeology often credited godfather, Lewis Binford, as reacting in “angry revulsion he felt toward the ostensibly upper-class Robert Braidwood”, she sees previous historians of the development of American archaeology unable to clearly see its roots because they are caught in a “straitjacket of elite Eurocentric history”, and she notes that it is not incidental that influential individuals such as Gordon Willey and Philip Phillips “enjoyed an inherited private income” (p. 111, 115, 192). Thus in part processual archaeology is cast as a “putsch” against the archaeology of the moneyed “eastern establishment”. These class theme arguments are not new with Kehoe. For example, Bruce Trigger argued that archaeology was class-derived, in that a major function of archaeology has been to confirm middle-class notions about history and human nature, and that the appearance of archaeology coincided with the rise to power of the middle class in Europe, with “archaeology expressing the ideology of that class” (1989:14). And Thomas Patterson has made a similar class argument for the U.S., arguing that American archaeology started out as the purview of the landed gentry (eastern establishment), but with the rise of universities defining the locus of social and political reproduction of the middle class, that Americanist archaeology has become a vehicle of expressing middle class ideology (1995:58).

Kehoe is less than enamored with processual archaeology. She argues that the archaeological view of logical positivism upon which it is based is flawed, and sees it linked to a specific evolutionary perspective which she feels is an intellectual dead end. The reader is told that it is no coincidence that Lewis Binford attended Virginia Polytechnical Institute in Blacksburg, subsequently the base of the infamous creationist Henry Morris — scientific creationism and processual archaeology are linked in Binford, in her view, because both uphold an obsolete model of science (p. 119). A number of the proponents of processual archaeology are reviewed rather scathingly in this section as well.

Diffusionism is another area where Kehoe feels that modern archaeologists wear blinders and have been unduly influenced by taboos from based on classism. Kehoe contends that American ideology associated with “Manifest Destiny” resulted not only in mainstream “American archaeology shoulder(ing) the white man’s burden” in their reconstructions of prehistory, but also led Americanist archaeology to relegate to a marginalized periphery any scholar who argued for any pre-A.D. 1000 Trans-Pacific or Trans-Atlantic oceanic contacts (p. 194, 208). This is the basis for her belief that “after mid-century, any archaeologist worried about money or career avoided looking at pre-Columbian contacts across saltwater” (p. 193). She is convinced that the chemist Joseph Needham (Needham and Lu 1985), who as a chemist is therefore a scientist of unimpeachable credentials, but also as a scientist therefore a logical positivist, has provided an argument for diffusion that is irrefutable, that “Needham’s scholarship is a model ... of rigorous testing of interpretations” (p. 202), and should be immediately accepted by fellow logical positivists such as American processual archaeologists. That it is not, she believes, is because of the taboo against raising the issue. From my perspective, most of these diffusionist arguments can be boiled down to the premise that the American Indians were somehow unable to invent or develop many things for themselves, and but instead were forced to rely on some Old World peoples (fill in the blank) to invent an idea and transport it across the ocean, to Amerinds who were waiting for the idea with open arms. I find it hard not to view this position as racist. Thus I see some possible logical conflict or confusion between Kehoe’s argument on diffusionism, and her position that as a feminist she is more supportive of Amerinds than most practicing archaeologists; it seems antithetical to be a strong proponent of diffusionism for so many Amerind traits on one hand, while on the other hand to integrate the position that as a member of a marginalized class, women, she believes she has “been more sensible of that other marginal class, Indians” (p.187).

Readers of Alice Kehoe’s earlier works will not be surprised to find such themes as marginalization, disenfranchisement, classism, and diffusionism emphasized. This volume deals with these ideas in a more explicit fashion, and provides more fully the historical context that Kehoe sees as contributing to the trajectory of development of Americanist archaeology. Her bluntness will offend some. Any serious student of

the history of archaeology, however, will need to thoughtfully reflect on the different perspectives on the “how” and “why” of discipline’s history proposed in this volume.

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VI. Activities of Various Academic Gatherings Related to the History of Archaeology

The symposium “L’expédition d’Égypte, Une Entreprise des Lumières” will convene under the auspices of l’Institute de France et due Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle, Paris, 8-10 Juin 1998.

On Thursday, March 25, 1999, archaeologists gathered to honor the legacy of Dr. Paul S. Martin of the Field Museum of Natural History. Senior scholars reflected on Martin’s place in the history of North American archaeology; junior scholars reported on recent analyses of the Martin Collection. In addition to the papers listed below, Dr. Elaine Bluhm Herold, popular fiction author John Saul, and Dr. Don Fowler provided discussion and reminiscences. After the symposium, 1000 archaeologists gathered for a reception in the grand Stanley Field Hall at the Museum, and a splendid time was had by all!