

VI. Book reviews

Michael A. Morse 2005 *How the Celts Came to Britain*. Tempus: Stroud.
ISBN 0-7524-3339-3

Reviewed by *Tim Murray*

Morse's important book is subtitled: 'Druids, Ancient Skulls and the Birth of Archaeology' which gives some idea of the very wide intellectual terrain he covers. Although there is a predictable (and wholly necessary) focus on linguistic and archaeological matters, Morse takes a broad view and does much to enhance our understanding of the genesis and development of ethnology in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Morse is well aware of the sensitivities of his topic, especially the serious controversy over whether the Celts ever existed (exploring the argument that the Celts were a convenient fiction for 19th century nation-building – or indeed late 20th century dreams of 'European' identity). This controversy gives Morse's careful historical analysis an extra relevance as he leaves little doubt that in this case there is scant distance between the history and contemporary politics of archaeology. Significantly Morse is also well aware of the profound social implications of a Celtic Britain, especially during the 18th and 19th centuries. All those discussions about Druids and their monuments, and the rehearsal of all those jibes against 'silly' antiquaries such as Stukeley, which in the past we have been encouraged to see as slightly embarrassing antiquarian wrong-turnings on the path to archaeology, are set in their context. As a result we can readily see that these were not 'irrational fantasies' about pagans, standing stones and mistletoe. Rather they were more often than not quite coherent and very widely accepted conjectures about the pre-Roman past of Britain.

Morse takes his subject seriously and resists the temptation (unlike Daniel, but not Piggott) to regard the whole thing as being a bit of a joke. Although the canvass is big Morse provides a credible background to Celtic antiquarianism by virtue of a useful survey of field archaeology and the development of studies of monuments and graves. I was impressed by his desire (stemming no doubt from Stocking) to link archaeology, antiquarianism, linguistics, physical anthropology and ethnology to provide a sense of the overarching social and cultural context of his study. Less impressive is the chapter reviewing what he terms the 'birth of archaeology' is very short and hence quite shallow engagement with the complex history of mid-to-late 19th century archaeology. It was here, and in the epilogue where there is a slightly extended discussion of the socio-politics of archaeology, that Morse's unfamiliarity with the broader archaeological literature reduces the value of the earlier chapters where the focus was much more on creating a narrative of how Celtic Britain came about. Lapses in research and scholarship which appear in later chapters are a\largely absent from earlier discussions where I think Morse was on firmer ground.

Notwithstanding these reservations Morse deserves praise for *How the Celts Came to Britain* and I very much hope that it will play a strong part in developing our understanding of the intricacies of 19th century British archaeology.