

The Discovery of the Past, by Alain Schnapp 1997, Abrams, New York, 384pp. ISBN 0-8109-3233-4, Cloth. \$US45

by

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This is the kind of book which can seriously deplete a reviewer's stock of superlatives. Without doubt *The Discovery of the Past* is a major contribution to the history of archaeology, matched only by Trigger's *A History of Archaeological Thought* in its coverage and intellectuality. It is also a very thoughtful addition to what is a very small literature devoted to the historiography of archaeology.

Time was when the history of archaeology was the province of dilettantes and the general public producing worthy accounts of the excavation of Knossos or of the discovery of high human antiquity. In recent years archaeologists have begun to demand a more critical, theoretically engaged history of archaeological practice, and *The Discovery of the Past* is without any doubt the very best example of this new genre. Schnapp's book is a joy which has become justly famous since its publication in French by Editions Carre' some four years ago. The magnificent illustrations and wonderful production values were one of the reasons for its fame, and the British Museum edition has retained these. But the most important reason was the beauty and subtlety of Schnapp's French which so effortlessly supported and enhanced his great scholarship.

The Discovery of the Past is an archaeology of the idea of antiquarianism taking us from classical antiquity through to its professionalisation as the distinct disciplines of archaeology and history in the mid-19th century. Schnapp's erudition is not confined to his area of expertise (he is a classical archaeologist) as he ranges from ancient Mesopotamian and Chinese historical texts, through memory in Medieval Persia, and on to the contemplation of antiquity by Goethe and Schiller in the late 18th century. This in itself is a monumental effort of scholarship crowning over thirty years of research amongst largely forgotten manuscripts. But it is not what makes *The Discovery of the Past* such a marvellous book.

Schnapp never lets his dusty manuscripts, the artefacts, or the site records deflect him from the unifying theme of the book. Unlike most histories of archaeology Schnapp is not concerned with recounting over a millennium of archaeological discovery, his interest is in understanding their impact on European society and culture. *The Discovery of the Past* is more about describing and explaining the continuities in our interrogation of the past, about exploring the significance of what appear to be the fundamentals of any attempt to make the past intelligible. In this sense Schnapp considers the differences between discovering things and making sense of them, and then questions whether the act of discovery is really process of the present conquering the past. The title of the French edition: *La conquete du passe'* more accurately reflects the core of Schnapp's perspective than the English substitution of "discovery" for "conquest".

Notwithstanding my quibbles about the translation of the title, this is brave, enduring work of scholarship. Better still, Schnapp is in such command of his task that he makes the whole journey just as enjoyable for the lay person as it is for the professional. *The Discovery of the Past* is the most intellectually satisfying book published by an archaeologist for over a decade. Every archaeologist, whatever their orientation or predilection should read this book. I say this because not only *The Discovery of the Past* is a beautiful book to look at and (problems with the translation aside) very well written, but that it is also an eloquent testi-

mony of the potential of disciplinary historiography to influence our understanding of the meanings of archaeological knowledge in a positive way.

