

VI. Book/Journal Article Reviews

Fantastic Archaeology: The Wild Side of North American Archaeology, by Stephen Williams, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia. 1991. Illustrations, bibliography, index. \$28.95 (cloth), \$14.95 (Paper) xi + 407 pp. 104

by

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For many years Stephen Williams has taught a course at Harvard University dealing with those aspects of Americanist archaeology that he finds to be based on fantasy rather than on carefully recovered archaeological evidence. He has now published a book based on this course, which provides a history of this archaeology. Much of the strength of this book is derived from Williams' recognition that fantastic archaeology has been an integral part of American archaeology from its earliest days, that the border between the fantastic and the scientific is problematical, and that weird ideas often fill real social needs. At the same time Williams dislikes seeing fakes and frauds masquerading as archaeological truths and is convinced that what straight archaeologists have learned about American prehistory is infinitely more interesting than the lies and delusions of fantastic archaeologists. Like Robert Sharer and Wendy Ashmore, he believes that fantastic archaeologists must be prevented from robbing humanity of the real achievements of past cultures. He also believes that archaeologists have a responsibility to condemn rather than to ignore or try to suppress such nonsense.

Williams' book is notable for its moderation and for his willingness to give probable scoundrels the benefit of the doubt. While it is written for the general reader and many of the stories he tells will be familiar to professional archaeologists, it is a book that professional archaeologists can read with enjoyment and profit. It is a major contribution to a growing literature dealing with the less disciplined side of North American archaeology.

After a brief introduction, Williams moves forward through time chronicling the Moundbuilder debates, the Grave Creek stone, the Cardiff giant, the Davenport tablets, the book of the Walam Olum, "Early Man" controversies, Mu and Atlantis, Mormon origins, the Michigan relics, Viking and other alleged early transcontinental migrations to the Americas, and more recent developments such as Celtomania in New England, Barry Fell, George Carter, and the psychic archaeology of the 1970s. A final chapter outlines for comparison what archaeologists currently believe about the prehistory of North America. Williams documents the sociocultural context of each controversy and stresses ignorance, indifference, prestige, personal gain, chauvinism, and upgrading the status of immigrant groups as motives for fraud and credulity. From an internalist perspective, he also stresses dependence on outmoded ways of thinking, the uncritical recycling of antiquated ideas, and the roguish abandonment of scholarly standards as characteristics of fantastic archaeology.

Williams might have stressed more than he did that the growth of an ever more detailed corpus of data concerning North American prehistory has progressively limited the extent to which the claims of fantastic archaeologists can influence scientific archaeology. In the last century, when little was known and all archaeologists were either amateurs or self-trained professionals, fantastic claims seriously influenced the understanding of the past. Today the scope of such influence is more limited, to the chagrin of fantasizers, such as Barry Fell. As a result, the distinction between the core and the lunatic fringe of archaeology becomes ever clearer. On the other hand, it is indicative of the unprogressive nature of fantastic archaeology that William's critiques of the Grave Creek stone or of unsubstantiated claims of a Viking presence in the United States read very much like Daniel Wilson's treatment of these same problems in his book *Prehistoric Man* in 1862.

While I personally agree with Williams' epistemology, we are living in a period when, rightly or wrongly, many philosophers of science and archaeologists question whether there is a significant distinction between science and other forms of belief. These scholars deny that there is any form of verification that can distinguish between objective knowledge and subjective fantasy and instead offer a theory of knowledge that is dominated by extreme subjectivism and relativism. While Williams is aware that there are significant subjective elements in scientific knowledge, some archaeologists have carried this claim to an unrealistic and nihilistic extreme. It is therefore essential in handling a subject such as fantastic archaeology to address this latter position directly in order to maintain credibility, which is something Williams has not done. Such credibility is all the more desirable for a

work that clearly has so much to offer archaeologists and the general public.

The Life of Harold Sellers Colton: A Philadelphia Brahmin in Flagstaff, by Jimmy H. Miller, Navajo Community College Press, Tsale. 1991. No price given, I-iii, 218 pages (Paper)

by

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Mr. Miller's *The Life of Harold Sellers Colton: A Philadelphia Brahmin in Flagstaff* is an interesting but very general look into the life of one of the most scientifically diverse "archaeologists" in Southwestern archaeology. The life and work of Harold Colton is briefly outlined in Miller's effort and should have been greatly expanded upon, especially noting the source material that he had at his command.

Miller provides the reader with an excellent discussion of Colton's upbringing, his academic career at the University of Pennsylvania, and his eventual professorship in zoology at the same institution. The reader will find a detailed account of Colton's personal and professional life at the University of Pennsylvania and his eventual decision to relocate to Flagstaff, Arizona to take up an interest in Southwestern archaeology. Sadly the chapter "Colton and the Museum of Northern Arizona (1926-1941)", which will be of interest to Southwesternists, is sorely lacking in the treatment of the intellectual climate of Southwestern archaeology in which Colton found himself at Flagstaff. We have discussions of his involvement in the development of the Museum of Northern Arizona. However, Miller's biography lacks detailed discussions of the creation of Colton's personal networks with other Southwestern archaeologists of his time and of the institutional and other professional networks which must have influenced Colton's archaeology in the American Southwest. For the historian of Americanist archaeology, this chapter of Miller's book is a great disappointment. Much more attention should have been given to Colton's "intellectual development" at Flagstaff and to those individuals and institutions who contributed to that development. However the reader will benefit from the discussion of Colton's efforts in the creation of the Museum of Northern Arizona. Miller's discussions provide a unique glimpse into Colton's efforts to bring the Museum of Northern Arizona to fruition.

With the shortcomings of chapter four aside, the reader will find Colton being portrayed by Miller as a kind and giving person who frequently gave of his personal wealth for the benefit of others.

Miller has begun to briefly outline Colton's contributions to Southwestern archaeology. However, much greater detail as to Colton's place in Southwestern archaeology is necessary. But, as a very general source discussing Colton's life, the reader will find this book of worth.

When is a Kiva? And Other Questions About Southwestern Archaeology, by Watson Smith, edited by Raymond H. Thompson, The University of Arizona Press, Tucson. 1990. No Price Given 272 pp. + xii.

by

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Like the career of Watson Smith, *When is a Kiva?* is a bit difficult to describe. Perhaps because this book works so well on so many different levels, it is hard to pinpoint exactly how it should be praised. At its heart is a selected sample of Watson Smith's archaeological writings, comprising a series of lucid essays on some of the knottiest problems of Puebloan prehistory. Beyond this, however, *When is a Kiva?* is Raymond Thompson's affectionate and well-crafted tribute to his long time friend and mentor and one of the great figures in Southwestern archaeology. As such, this work is a nested set of aesthetic triumphs. First, there is the intricacy, logic, and rich symbolism of the Pueblo art and design around which Watson Smith focused so many of his archaeo-