

BOOK REVIEW

## A Review of *World Antiquarianism: Comparative Perspectives*

Edited by Alain Schnapp, with Lothar von Falkenhausen, Peter N. Miller and Tim Murray, Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 464 pages, 2014, ISBN: 9781606061480

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Through a series of seminal papers, the publication of *The Discovery of the Past* in 1994 (*La Découverte du Passé*, 1993) and the fostering the AREA Project, for decades now Alain Schnapp has powerfully advocated for what amounts to the rehabilitation of our understanding of antiquarianism, and that the distinction between it and archaeology was not some absolute Rubicon. In *World Antiquarianism: Comparative Perspectives*, the fruition of a new research initiative supported by the Getty Institute, the scope of ‘the project’ has broadened to truly global dimensions:

The antiquarian is a figure common to all literate cultures. But we also need to address the question of antiquarian behaviour in prehistoric cultures as well as in contemporary hunter-gatherer tribes attempting to deal with their past. ... *From the shaman to the scribe, antiquarianism has had different faces that varied widely across time and space.* (Schnapp, Introduction; emphasis added)

Not only is this a matter of the world-wide ‘past in the past’ – with works by Arnaldo Momigliano (e.g. ‘Ancient History and the Antiquarian’, 1950) and Richard Bradley (*The Past in Prehistoric Societies*, 2002) proving inspirational for some of the contributors – but also the formulation of identities within the ‘ethnographic present’.

Does this expansion of the field of study succeed, though? Citing an online-issued paper, ‘A Puzzling Tradition about the Qibla in the Kafi of Kulayni’, one of the volume’s contributors posits the narrow-perspective argument:

In a recent and somewhat intriguing essay, the well-known Islamologist and world historian Michael A. Cook suggests that, *with the exception of Europe and China, nowhere in the Eurasian world were there any signs of what can be called an ‘antiquarian*

*tradition’ before about 1800.* (Subrahmanyam; emphasis added)

At face-value Cook’s assertion resonates with the balance of the volume’s twenty papers. There are four each concerned with China and Europe; India, Egypt, classical-world Mediterranean, Japanese and Polynesian themes each get two papers; with single entries for Mexico and Mesopotamia. While the book’s scope is ambitious, its omissions – notably anything on sub-Saharan Africa, Russia or North and South America – are a problem for any edited volume that aspires to have ‘world’ in its title.

This opening up of the discourse can only be welcomed and certainly there is much in the book that is stimulating. Begging the question whether various memory-acts are comparable to more formalised modes of study and collections, the volume’s most contentious contributions are probably those that cover contemporary ‘indigenous antiquarianism’. Aside from Murray’s and Kuchler’s papers, this includes Lahiri’s ‘Living Antiquarianism ...’ in which she discusses collections of ancient sculptures in modern-day Indian villages. Often displayed in temples, she convincingly argues that not only has this promoted the conservation of such pieces, but that historically it has aided in the identification of sites and monuments. Once though admitting such activities under the umbrella of a greater antiquarianism, this then highlights a bias within the volume’s ‘missing’.

While ‘casual’ indigenous practices are considered sufficiently respectable for inclusion, what then of non-/sub-academic past collectors/investigators in western cultures? In this capacity we should think, for example, of ley-line hunters, Scandinavian farmers’ ‘home museums’, stamp collectors or historic airfield aficionados. Their omission suggests that, however much broadening the topic, it is here still very much constituted within traditional academia, in which ‘the ethnographic’ is admissible but not western amateur/non-University practitioners. (As outlined below, Murray though does mention the efforts of present-day non-professionals; the volume’s ethnography is equally traditional as it encompasses objects and monuments, but not tribal/ethnic-group web-sites wherein so much forging of indigenous identities now

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occurs.) Arguably, it is unjust to dwell at length on a book's omissions. Yet, once you so vaguely define a topic the problem becomes where do you stop and whether, becoming such a 'broad church', then as an entitlement does 'antiquarianism' still really retain any use-value or integrity?

Some of the papers over-stretch their inclusiveness. Citing Momigliano concerning a nineteenth century transformation of antiquarians into cultural historians, Miller argues for a late-century reassertion of antiquarianism and then, amongst others, alludes to the 'antiquarianism' of Walter Benjamin. As regards 'longing' and the accumulative assemblage of small or 'grey' facts as an 'antiquarianism for life', Nietzsche also looms large in Miller's thesis (as does also Shanks' 'imaginative antiquarianism' and 'archaeological poetics'). However much this might contribute to the understanding of some sort of a generic antiquarian impulse, such approaches do little to further a mainstream appreciation of 'the past in the past'. (By the same token, the claims made by Küchler regarding memory-encoded Cook Islanders' patchwork quilts as mapping complex genealogies and, thereby, amounting to virtual histories, seems rather over-egged.)

These matters aside, the volume's strengths are many. Meir's 'The Medieval and Early Modern World and the Material Past' is fascinating; Rojas' paper is a terrific study of classical Roman antiquarianism and their appreciation of the Lydian past in Anatolia; while Beaulieu provides a finely balanced and nuanced Mesopotamian-context account. Not surprisingly for such a wide-ranging collection, rich insights are to be had from many of the papers. Amongst these is the extent that monument-inscription rubbings underpinned early Chinese antiquarianism. Equally, as outlined by Suzuki, are Japanese procedures.

Drawing widely from the American zoologist, Edward Morse's chronicle, *Japan Day by Day* (1917) – who also discovered and investigated the shell mounds of Omori – Suzuki discusses the era's collectors/antiquarians with whom Morse was familiar, particularly Ninagawa Noritane (1835–82). Amongst the local practices related are a 'guessing party', whose participants (arranged in a circle so as to not instil any hierarchy) each brought a specimen of pottery that were sequentially handed around, with the players writing down their guesses/opinions of what each item was. These were recorded in a book, with the evening's winner having the greatest number of correct attributions. An 1872 account of a two month-long regional 'treasure-hunt'-cum-survey by the nation's Museum Bureau's official antiquarians, involving both rubbings and extensive photography, is also entertaining (the same being true of Meir's discussion of Medieval European fakes).

Given the volume's scope and size, that not all of the papers are of this standard is only to be expected, and its scholarship is somewhat variable. There is also a degree of repetition. Not only does this extend to the personal definitions of antiquarianism offered by some of the authors, but also to subject matter; the latter particularly being a feature of some of the Chinese-related papers.

The book has been organised into two parts. If properly grasping its structure, then the three papers of the first section (plus Schnapp's general introduction) 'The Necessity of Antiquarianism', are meant to serve as 'need thereof' mission-statements and for regional scene-setting. Of these, Falkenhausen's is perhaps the most successful as it provides a straightforward account of the history of 'Antiquarianism in East Asia'. If intended for the above-purposes, then for different reasons Murray and Miller's papers seem rather idiosyncratic. Concerned with European developments, Miller's has been discussed above; generally it is too sprawling and theoretically driven (and 'knowing') to provide much in the way of a reader-useful overview.

Murray's contribution is presumably meant to, if not introduce, then be representative of the volume's 'indigenous/living antiquarianism' papers. It is primarily concerned with post-colonial contexts and the 'Antiquarianism of and in Pre-literate Societies', with issues relating to alternative histories at its core. Charting the rise of prehistoric archaeology in Europe and its encounter with the colonial-world 'other', in contrast with Trigger's accounts he emphasises both the diversity of earlier antiquarianism and its post-mid nineteenth century expression/survival. He argues that, along with anthropology, more antiquarian-informed approaches have a greater ability to engage with 'memory', accredit non-western cultures with temporality/history and, thereby, not just see them as timeless ciphers of prehistoric survival. This is a strong thesis. In his concluding remarks Murray relates it to questions of cultural heritage generally, recognising that for both 'antiquarians' and indigenous communities the making and documenting of histories need not be confined to professionals. Where the contribution goes somewhat awry is the choice of bringing in two indigenous community 'hidden-history' examples. These are concerned with the tomb settings of Tonga and the identification of Australian Aboriginal 'places of attachment'. While both are relevant to the paper's themes, the detail of especially that from Tonga was probably unnecessary and the inclusion of case-studies within only this of the first part's papers somewhat distracts from the section's overall tone. But then, in a volume celebrating diversity, can that really be held a fault?

The book's latter part, 'The Foundation of Antiquarianism', is essentially chronologically arranged. Its seventeen papers can seem rather an eclectic bunch as their sequence-order leaves the reader forever jumping geographically. For most of us, unversed with other region's traditions, the volume's wide coverage would have been more easily dealt with had, for example, the Chinese or Indian papers been grouped together and that there was tighter editorial integration between them. Indeed, with so many editors featuring on the volume's by-line, the lack of a concluding essay for its second portion is striking. Without it the second half of the collection's title – *Comparative Perspectives* – is unfilled, as little *comparison* is actually attempted.

Certainly the book would have been more coherent had shared themes, variously touched upon or more fully developed in that section's contributions, been drawn-out further (i.e. beyond just their 'signposting' within the Introduction). The interrelationship between time, chronology and memory would be one such, with the transmission of antiquarian interests another; the latter not only including colonial India, but also the impact of China upon Japan.

Appropriate to its Getty's sponsorship, the volume boasts a lavish colour section. Yet, as most readers will be unfamiliar with much of its far-flung source-material, generally it is rather under-illustrated and would have benefitted from more figures (one of the great pleasures of *The Discovery of the Past* was its wonderful illustrations). This, moreover, would only be fitting given that the importance of graphic-rendering skills is highlighted by some of the *World Antiquarianism's* participants.

Finally, on reading the book cover-to-cover (something admittedly most will not do) there is a certain sameness to some of the contributions. They essentially follow a selected case-study format with little, if any, 'hard' analysis. The volume has almost anthology-like qualities and, compelling as some of its papers are, the amassed exemplars ultimately left me unconvinced of the project's over-arching aims. One came away with the impression that – harking back to Cook's above-cited pronouncement – there would have been (and still is) a very solid and worthwhile research project to be had just comparing the development of European and Chinese antiquarianism. However partial and fragmentary, attempting to chart the world at large in this format-manner is simultaneously a matter of too much and too little. In fact, with a number of the book's contributors themselves stressing the crucial importance of local context, as a concept 'World Antiquarianism' – like now arguably also 'World Prehistory' – must have questionable validity.

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