

BOOK REVIEW

## A Review of *From Antiquarian to Archaeologist: The History and Philosophy of Archaeology*

By Tim Murray, Barnsley: Pen & Sword Archaeology, 261 pages, 2014, ISBN: 9781783463527

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*From Antiquarian to Archaeologist* brings together fourteen of Tim Murray's papers on the history, philosophy and sociology of archaeology published over two decades. The volume displays many of the common characteristics of collected papers: both strengths such as convenience and the drawing out of common threads, and weaknesses such as overlap and repetition. In volumes of this kind there are inevitably a mixture of well known and less well known papers: Murray's study of the *Ancient Monuments Protection Act* is anthologised and widely cited; whereas his chapter on Archbishop Ussher's chronology has hitherto been buried in Leo Klejn's intimidatingly Cyrillic-heavy festschrift.

There are a number of features that distinguish Murray's work from the bulk of writing in the history of archaeology. This data-rich and theory-poor field where antiquarian mind-sets defiantly endure tends to produce syrupy, dense studies lacking a critical edge. In contrast Murray's works in the intellectual history of (primarily prehistoric) archaeology have been wrecking balls swinging at the feeble foundations of the discipline. By outlining, contextualising and destabilising 'disciplinary fundamentals' he has attempted to create new opportunities for growth – 'possibility spaces' – within what he convincingly argues is still an immature discipline with an identity crisis.

Archaeologists trained in post-processualism may have occasionally felt a vacant sense of epistemic dissatisfaction beneath their warm glow of socio-political rectitude. In the near-absence of convincing, generative dissent from this orthodoxy a handful of scholars stand out, and Murray in particular offers some bracing invective against 'The increasing number of outstanding examples of intellectual vacuity marketed by Anglo-American publishers as the contributions to "theoretical archaeology"' (p. 86), and 'the usual farrago of position taking about the theory dependence of observation, the employment of ill-digested browsings of the literature of the sociology of science, and some (even for archaeology) extraordinarily incoherent

discussions of realist, relativist, and "indigenised" epistemologies.' (p. 83). Stirring stuff, but archaeological theory has never lacked for polemicists promising to tear it all down. What Murray's 'avowedly presentist' (p. 101) studies of archaeology offer instead is a depth of perspective on the ontological and epistemological uniqueness of the discipline as a whole: how arguments and frames of reference are constructed, justified and accepted, at least for a time.

I am drawn again to Chapter 2, Murray's in-depth history of the 1882 *Ancient Monuments Protection Act*, and the earliest published paper in the volume (1990). The combination of historical research from primary sources, a sophisticated (for the time) theoretical framework, and the bold statements of intent make it a vital starting point for the collection of papers, as well as a fascinating study in its own right – remarkable in particular given the dry political and legal subject matter. Murray convincingly ties the history of the Act to a variety of trends: the evolution of archaeological epistemology; and the links between this and other developments and the drive for heritage preservation (p. 15). He argues that the passage of the Act highlights the acceptance of prehistoric archaeology into the intellectual mainstream as well as the impact of emerging ideas of race and nation.

The study of the Act involves a theme that I have struggled with for some time: the roles of public understanding and assent in disciplinary knowledge claims; the degree to which we can study these attitudes retrospectively; and their place within intellectual histories. Murray returns to these themes in Chapter 5 on archaeology and European identity, noting the problem faced by social scientists in questioning concepts such as race and ethnicity that are popularly regarded as natural rather than constructed. As he notes, 'Related to this is the very real question of whether the public authority of the discipline would whither [sic] away if the instability and circularity of archaeological interpretation when it is so far abstracted from the objects of the analysis, became more widely known.' (p. 88). Murray scolds archaeologists for underestimating the ontological and epistemological uniqueness of our subject. I would argue that the public have an instinctive if only partial grasp of this distinctiveness, and

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that it forms part of the basis of popular fascination with the human past and the archaeological process.

Chapter 6 is a reflection on Murray's edited collection of archaeology biographies published in 1999, a multi-volume encyclopaedic work of the kind that feel increasingly redundant in the age of Wikipedia. However this underestimates the intellectual value of a collection whose contributors are almost as distinguished a group as its subjects (a few such as Grahame Clark and Lewis Binford are both). In his epilogue Murray reflects on biography as a strand of research in the history of archaeology: often derided as a poor form of intellectual history, he argues that biography illuminates disciplinary histories of institutions and networks on a human scale, with regard to factors such as friendship, gender and affiliations of various kinds. He also highlights the value of more destructive, critical intellectual biographies in the service of 'disciplinary reformation' (p. 101): standing on the shoulders of giants the better to urinate upon them. Murray's encyclopaedia represents, as he notes, 'the domination of the full-time, professional, mostly male archaeologist' (p. 106) but he argues that in time the 'hidden histories of archaeology' (or rather the hidden archaeologists of history) will become better known as the discipline transforms itself. One might retort that there are a considerable number of prominent and notable women in the history of archaeology who can hardly be considered 'hidden'.

The final chapter in the collection, originally published just two years ago, reflects on both personal and institutional historiographies of archaeology, much of it literature published within the same twenty year period as the papers in this collection (1990–2012). Murray's attempts to link this growth to trends in the history and philosophy of science emphasise the unidirectional nature of the relationship: the history of archaeology has thus far been of strikingly little interest to non-archaeologists, while at least a few historians of archaeology have demonstrated a good grasp of the wider intellectual contexts of their work. Murray closes the chapter and the book as a whole by discussing a 2006 quote from the late Bruce Trigger

lauding the maturing of archaeology into an intellectually vital social science (p. 249). Murray clearly regards this viewpoint as untenably Panglossian but the points that Trigger raises such as the uniqueness of archaeology and the value of historical research in highlighting and exploring it lie at the heart of this collection and provide its animating force.

What has been the impact of the twenty-five years of work in the history of archaeology in this collection? Like the French Revolution, it's arguably too early to tell. The sub-discipline remains small and fragmented, and while there are threads connecting supervisors and groups of students here and there as well as a growing early-career peer network, to date no distinct 'schools' or traditions have emerged. However it would be a mistake to look for the impact of Murray's work solely within the history of archaeology rather than more broadly within archaeological theory and thought. Reading this volume I found myself wondering what would happen if we were to engage with Murray's critiques in any serious depth when creating new archaeologists. What might an introductory undergraduate course in archaeology look like, or for that matter a field school? I still haven't quite made up my mind.

A final note on the book as an object and on publishing in general: at £25 this well-produced hardback book is a bargain by any account, but as an academic publication it's a real treat. I recently acquired a Routledge book that appears to be printed on toilet paper with a 1980s dot-matrix printer, but which retails at £125. Murray's own prohibitively expensive edited volume *Time and Archaeology*, also published by Routledge, has only recently appeared in (relatively) affordable paperback, fifteen years after publication. I have now published two co-edited volumes with Springer at upwards of £85, and have reflected that the resulting inaccessibility to non-Western university-based scholars is practically professional misconduct. For students, independent scholars, impoverished libraries and anybody else with an interest in the subject the appearance of *From Antiquarian to Archaeologist* in so attractive and affordable form is a boon.

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