Dissent With Modification: Human Origins, Palaeolithic Archaeology and Evolutionary Anthropology in Britain 1859-1901 by John McNabb


Dissent With Modification provides a clear, concise and vivid account of the emergence of Palaeolithic Archaeology and Evolutionary Anthropology beginning in the same year as Darwin’s publication of On the Origin of Species (1859) and concluding at the turn of the twentieth century with the end of the Victorian era (1901) in Great Britain. Whilst the book focuses, to a degree, on the archaeological discoveries that stimulated the earliest investigations of human ancestry, this is not its sole focus or aim as the author neatly contextualises the archaeological debate within the emerging understanding of the earth’s antiquity through geological investigation. Frequently, both fields were inseparable in terms of the personalities such as Lubbock, Lyell and Worthington Smith, to name but a few. To the credit of the author he discusses and signposts all the relevant information from each discipline and highlights through excellent figures, tables and text boxes how each new find stimulated new questions but at the same time also appeared to answer others. The book is well researched and the author appears to have done a significant amount of archival research to retrieve original documents. This should be commended and allows for a greater depth of understanding about not only the archaeological finds and theories but the people as well, making this book a unique combination of important Palaeolithic discoveries and an overview of the history of Palaeolithic archaeology and its emergence as a discipline in its own right.

Throughout the book the discoveries made by these earliest researchers are not reported in dry fashion, simply as places and dates, but are enlivened with accounts from personal papers of other autobiographies. This really brings the text alive and makes you feel a sense of excitement and discovery both as a general reader or a more well-read Palaeolithic archaeologist. Throughout the text the author employs the Palaeolithic and geological terminology used by the late-Victorian scholars but frequently discusses this within a modern research framework allowing for a greater understanding of the importance of these finds and how they fit into current schema.

The final strand of the volume concerns the importance of public perception and interpretations of the ‘Palaeolithic Era’. McNabb approaches this through the writings of H. G Wells. He succeeds in drawing interesting and thought-provoking comparisons between the fictional works of Wells and others and the origin debates that were current at the time. It is interesting, and timely, that such debates were conducted especially in relation to the sphere of public opinion. This topic is of great interest and relevance today to modern archaeologists who need to re-engage with the public both in terms of funding and generating interest in research.

Whilst most of the text is accessible, and written in a fluent way, there are passages where the depth of research and the interactions and discussions between the various learned societies become a little inaccessible. Nevertheless, the text is well structured and entertaining and leaves the reader feeling that he has not only understood the significance of these discoveries but also understood or gained insights into the personalities behind them. The text is well illustrated with...
figures and tables that both supplement and provide further background information on some aspects. For example, the emergence of the various London learned societies in the late 19th Century in relation to continuing discovery of Palaeolithic sites and finds. The text-boxes are a good way of allowing the reader to either engage further with the topic or to continue with the narrative. At times however the length and quantity of information in some of these text boxes can break the flow of the overall text.

Overall this book provides a vivid and detailed journey through time and space of the evolution of ideas regarding the emergence of our own species. I would recommend this book to students and researchers in Palaeolithic Archaeology but I also believe that the author has achieved his goal of making the volume accessible to the general reader. Whilst the focus of the book is the intellectual debate that took place in Great Britain I believe the issues, and in particular the historiography of Palaeolithic Archaeology, discussed throughout the book provides wider insights about the beginnings of a study into the origin of our species and hence is of relevance to anybody with an interest in the Palaeolithic and human origins studies.

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