



## Book Reviews

### **CREATING PREHISTORY: DRUIDS, LEY HUNTERS AND ARCHAEOLOGISTS IN PRE-WAR BRITAIN, BY ADAM STOUT**

*Oxford, Blackwell Publishing 2008. 318pp; 33 black and white plates, hb, ISBN 1405155051 (£55) pb, ISBN 978-1-4051-5505-2 (£22.99).*

The past is not, and arguably will never be, fully understood, catalogued or categorised, and yet reading much of what has been said about British prehistory in recent years, one could easily come away with the belief that everything in the playground was well-maintained and ordered, all potential hazards, uncertainties and dangers having been permanently disposed of. Occasionally new discoveries threaten to cause upset, but the Health and Safety Police can swiftly instigate far reaching programmes of damage limitation (referred to as 'editorial boards' or 'panels of referees') and the play-pit becomes secure once more.

The need to 'ask other things' in order to question and, if necessary, demolish complacent orthodoxy has, perhaps rather worryingly, been increasingly absent within 'proper' academic circles for some significant time. Comparatively few archaeologists have dared raise their heads above the parapets of complacency for fear of either being savagely mauled by their colleagues or being branded 'pseudo', 'alternative' or 'fringe'. The radiocarbon revolution of the 1950s rather shocked the archaeological community with stark realisation that all established chronological and social belief-systems were profoundly wrong. There has been, within the past half a century or so, no comparable archaeo-reboot for British prehistory, involving a dramatic and all-embracing shift in perspective and understanding. Perhaps the work currently being undertaken by Alasdair Whittle, Frances Healey and others in the field of re-dating Early Neolithic monuments will deliver a necessary and much needed shock to the system to one aspect of British Prehistory at least. I hope so.

The monuments, artefacts and landscapes that archaeologists regularly encounter within British prehistory do not always fall happily into neat and easily digestible interpretative packages and there are often incongruities and paradoxes which are sadly overlooked. More importantly there are not just gaps in our knowledge of the past, but there are, one could argue, significant issues surrounding our ability or willingness to understand. The perceived failure of the archaeological community to engage in alternative discourse about the past has meant that the 'baton of creativity' has frequently been picked up by those beyond the walls of academia. As a result, this means that there are often two types of Prehistory in existence: the safe, ordered play-pit of orthodoxy and the disordered bear-pit of those unconstrained by academic respectability. It is easy for those protecting the establishment perspective to criticise, deride or ignore the alternative standpoint, although it is interesting, and perhaps rather sobering, to note that the most pertinent and refreshing questions and perspectives have often been generated from the world of the 'fringe' rather than the 'mainstream'.

Adam Stout courageously examines the origins of this curious prehistoric bipolar perspective, attempting to explain not only how we got into this present situation, but also enlightening us as to how it could all have been so very different. Ultimately, so the saying goes, 'our view of the past is shaped by the world within which we live', and nowhere is this more true than in the world of the early archaeologists as they struggled to find order in the murky world of British Prehistory following the horrors of the First World War and all its subsequent social restructuring.

Stout investigates the nature and origins of 'professional' archaeology in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its (often stormy) relationship with Diffusionists, Druids, ley hunters and general seekers of exotic civilisations. Rather like the first Christian Councils in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, when church fathers attempted to fine-tune the theology, doctrine and organisation of belief, so the archaeologists of interwar Britain found they needed to establish exactly what it was they believed in, so as to develop a successful archaeological orthodoxy. The creation of a 'true faith', of course, means that those who either do not believe, or possess their own rather curious ideas, are frequently branded as heretics. It is precisely these early steps towards prehistoric orthodoxy and alternative heresy (believers and deviants) that Stout chronicles, resurrecting the many colourful belief systems and rather forceful personalities of the time.

The book develops themes through a series of discrete, interlinked sections. The first, 'Disciplining the Past', outlines the progressive institutionalisation of British archaeology from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the interwar years of the 20<sup>th</sup>. The fanatics and radicals, those whom O.G.S. Crawford called 'the heroic band' are well chronicled together with the missionary zeal with which they attempted to professionalise Prehistory. Part 2, 'Contesting Utopia' examines progress through the eyes of the Diffusionist creed whilst Part 3 ('The Most Ancient Faith') discusses the rise of the alternative and the clash of belief systems belonging to professional archaeological orthodoxy and the 'heretical' druids. Here 'knowledge' is viewed as part of a social process, more often than not tied to the personalities, social order and institutions of the time, rather than any prehistoric reality. Part 4, 'Order and Civilization' concentrates upon

specifics, detailing the development of mistrust between the varied factions, their response and the evolution of an academic cold war.

Creating Prehistory is a lively and thoroughly engaging read which grabs the reader's attention from the start with its vivid descriptions and entertaining, down-to-earth asides concerning the robust, single-minded and (sometimes) eccentric personalities that shaped our understanding of the distant past. Stout knows his material well and writes with an excellent sense of drama and pace. Particularly memorable is Mortimer Wheeler's description of Maiden Castle hillfort as a monument created by a 'Prehistoric Führer' the sculptured ramparts shouting 'totalitarianism at you – there is nothing democratic about it'. My own particular favourite part of the book details the modern evolution of Stonehenge and the associated development of the Ancient Order of Druids (complete with elaborate turbans – surely more eastern mystics than descendants of a 'Celtic' faith). The views expressed by those fearing the erosion of Stonehenge through the aggressive accumulation of caretakers cottages, turnstiles, an aerodrome and multiple transport cafés is handled well, and the nightmarish predicted landscape (wonderfully depicted in a 1929 cartoon from the *Illustrated London News*) of the monument with 'teashops, charabancs, petrol pumps, industrial units, advertising hoardings and telegraph poles', is wonderfully prescient and beautifully echoes the present state of debate that continues to bedevil the site. What, I wonder, would Wheeler have thought about the ever increasing intrusion of the car into the Stonehenge landscape, to say nothing of the concrete Führerbunker facilities of today?

Stout's excellent work is, of course, more than just a set of entertaining anecdotes; it is informative, illuminating and important. It is also a very timely reminder that there are many difficult questions and troublesome datasets occupying the space we choose to call British prehistory. Meaning and context are not constant, either to those who originally dwelt in the past or to the archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, geographers and geologists who study the period today. In this respect there can never be definitive answers as to the nature of prehistory, but Stout's book helps to remind us that we need to constantly shift our stance and ultimately change the questions that we ask for only then can alternative perspectives be generated, developed and discussed. One thing is certainly clear: if we persist in visualising the past from the same general perspective, instead of questioning even the most fundamental of tenets, then we will only ever come to the same general series of conclusions. It is not true that everybody's view of prehistory is of equal relevance and that that all accounts of the past are valid, and I'm sure that Stout would be the first to agree, but our visualisation of past societies probably tells outsiders more about us, the world that we inhabit and the society we create than any perceived prehistoric 'reality'. An essential read.

*Mile Russell*  
*Centre for Archaeology, Anthropology and Heritage*  
*Bournemouth University*

Review submitted: February 2009

*The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the Reviews Editor*