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## Fifty years on

Warwick Bray

**American Archaeology Past and Future: A Celebration of the Society for American Archaeology 1935-1985.** Edited by David J. Meltzer, Don D. Fowler and Jeremy A. Sabloff. *Smithsonian Institution Press: 1986. Pp. 479. Hbk \$35, £35; pbk \$19.95, £19.75.*

ON 28 December 1934 the Society for American Archaeology came into existence. The following year the initial volume of *American Antiquity* appeared and the first annual meeting of the SAA was held (with 8 papers and 75 participants). *American Antiquity* has since become the leading journal in its field, and many people would argue that the SAA meeting is the major conference of the archaeological year. The present volume is a celebration of the society's 50th birthday — an appropriate age for looking back to the past, taking stock of the present and trying to set the younger generation on the right path for the future.

The 17 contributions are by North American practitioners belonging to the older and middle generations, but representing a range of differing archaeological theologies. They are neither complacent nor self-congratulatory. Cumulatively, the book adds up to a lively, and conspicuously well written, critique of the strengths and weaknesses of archaeology in North America. By sheer weight of numbers, the Americans have played a dominant role in changing the theoretical basis of archaeology (in the non-Communist world, at least), so this study is of more than parochial importance.

The editors divide the volume into three sections. The first looks backwards: it includes a personal reminiscence by Jesse Jennings, and historical surveys of the development of field techniques, the rise of the conservation ethic and the changing employment of the concept of culture. Bruce Trigger examines archaeology as a social phenomenon which reflects the changing interests and prejudices of the society that sponsors and pays for it (as an example, he notes how today's explanatory models reflect "current anxieties in middle-class American society about unchecked population growth, environmental destruction and the depletion of nonrenewable resources"). In similar vein, Don Fowler observes that the roots of the majority of Americans do not lie in the Indian past and, in consequence, there is no strong impulse to identify with and conserve that past. Each generation, it seems, gets the archaeology it deserves.

The middle section of the book consists of state-of-the-art surveys of three major problems: the nature of hunter-gatherer

societies, the origins of food production, and the evolution of civilized states and empires. These papers, though good of their kind, do not treat the issues historically and therefore seriously interrupt the continuity of the book. The main theme returns in the final section on current trends and future prospects (the role of mathematics and formal methods, problems of cultural resource management, how to reconstruct the symbolic and cognitive values of extinct communities, and an evaluation of our long-term intellectual options).

Sections One and Three should be compulsory reading for any one, not only Americanists, interested in the historical development and present health of the discipline. As the editors point out, in 1935 American archaeology was remarkably uniform, with generally agreed goals (historical reconstruction, above all) and universally accepted research methods. That is not true today, and one of the book's many virtues is that the polemics of recent years are not merely described, but also evaluated from a long-term historical perspective. One of the faults of recent Messiahs and their followers is a reluctance to read anything more than 10 years old, and it is good to see Donald Grayson demonstrating that "middle range research" — though not under that jargon title — goes back to the days of the controversy over eoliths, and to read Jennings's casual comment that he had "discovered, studied and discarded" (my italics) the philosophers of science long before Hempel was so uncritically taken up by the New Archaeology. Some scholars, including some of the most innovative, are traditionalists by considered conviction, not through ignorance or lack of imagination.

Without naming names or reopening old wounds, one can recognize from the data in this volume a fairly standard cycle of events. A new movement emerges (generally based on ideas developed in another discipline, and often just as these are beginning to go out of fashion on their home ground), is accepted uncritically by its devotees, fails to deliver the promised goods, gradually loses its adherents and is in turn replaced by another "new wave". The historical view presented in this volume demonstrates that, in the long run, the good (and there is always some) is retained and adopted into the mainstream of archaeology, and the sillinesses — like puberty spots — fade away with maturity. If archaeology is not to stagnate, this kind of intellectual ferment is vital to the well-being of the subject. Like most of the contributors, I look forward to the future with a guarded optimism. □

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