

# Tales of Everyman

Robert Foley

**Encyclopedia of Human Evolution and Prehistory.** Edited by Ian Tattersall, Eric Delson and John Van Couvering. Garland:1988. Pp.603. \$87.50.

AFTER a holiday spent reading detective stories I have come to appreciate a good plot, with all being revealed in the final chapter. In this context the *Encyclopedia of Human Evolution and Prehistory* is a disappointment. By the time Q is reached all of the mystery has been efficiently cross-referenced out of existence; U and V are decidedly thin, and XYZ a hurried anti-climax. Zuttiyeh (cave site, excavated 1925 and 1926, with hominid fossils of modern affinities ante-dating the neanderthals) is no substitute for the criminally inclined butler. But the let-down is predictable after the cracking start one would expect from a book about Archaeology and Anthropology, in which fossils like *Australopithecus* and *Archaic sapiens* from Africa, Asia and Australia are described in the context of their Adaptations and associated Artefacts.

In virtually every other sense, however, this book is anything but a disappointment. The editors have gathered together some leading palaeoanthropologists and pooled their collective knowledge on all aspects of the subject. To be found here are details on all of the principal sites, the fossil hominid specimens, their archaeology, and discussions of their affinities and morphology. For student, researcher and teacher this will form the most complete source of basic information on the subject. Alongside the main entries (which are often illustrated) are more discursive essays on the concepts and methods employed — classification, culture, phylogeny, preadaptation, for example — as well as summaries of related disciplines. Also included are some short biographical entries, for which the qualification is either death or a pension.

Palaeoanthropology is a notoriously controversial subject characterized by shifting opinions and lack of consensus, and it may be argued that it is inappropriate to give an encyclopaedic authority to what might be nothing more than a passing fashion, or an abbreviated certainty to what is still unresolved. This danger is mitigated by the inclusion of short bibliographical notes, and is easily outweighed by the fact that despite the controversial image of the subject there is a fundamental database about which there is general agreement. Much of this has a muddled terminological history, and the editors are to be congratulated on providing easy access to the raw material of palaeoanthropology. A brief introductory frame-

work is provided, but the lack of a storyline rooted in current interpretations should give this book a longer shelf-life than most others on human evolution.

An incidental benefit of a volume such as this is that it allows us to monitor trends in the subject. One such is the increasing tendency to see palaeolithic archaeology and traditional physical anthropology as a single integrated subject (palaeoanthropology), and there is appropriately extensive coverage of many aspects of the archaeology of the hominids. Another is the emphasis not just on the hominids themselves, but on their environmental context. Against this, phylogeny still takes precedence over ecology, behaviour and function. Cladistics, classification, systematics and phylogeny between them rate nearly 12 columns, and the supremacy of cladistics

is shown by its allocation of over two and a half columns against six lines for numerical taxonomy. Ecology gets just over half a column and natural selection has no entry, while selection is cross-referenced to evolution (eight and a half columns). Surprisingly, punctuational evolution is the preferred mode of evolutionary change; the importance of adaptation is minimized and linked spuriously to gradualism. There is no entry for biomechanics or functional anatomy.

Whatever direction the subject is to take, it will be well served by this comprehensive, clearly written and illustrated guide to human evolution. □

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# Off the beaten track

Stuart Sutherland

**Eccentrics: The Scientific Investigation.** By David Joseph Weeks with Kate Ward. Stirling University Press:1988. Pp.259. £27.50.

ALTHOUGH eccentricity should come naturally, it can to some extent be cultivated. There was an Oxford don who used to hide under an upturned bath in the fountain in Tom quad. When anyone tapped it, he would open it a fraction and snarl "Go away. I'm an oyster". There was perhaps too much method in his madness, but both in this and other ways he fulfilled the mark by which you shall know the genuine eccentric: someone who is odd in an interesting and bizarre way.

Dr David Weeks and Ms Kate Ward claim that *Eccentrics* is the first scientific study of the topic. The book has received considerable praise, so it is worth considering why the word 'scientific' should be deleted from the title.

The authors found their eccentric subjects by placing in pubs, launderettes, supermarkets and other public places an advertisement reading, "Eccentric? If you feel that you might be, please contact Dr David Weeks . . .". The advertisement came to the attention of the media and the authors claim that it was seen or heard by 30 million people of whom 130 submitted themselves for investigation. This procedure ensured that no eccentrics who were unaware that they were eccentric were examined. Of more importance, it must have resulted in a very biased sample because those with the time and inclination to submit themselves to Weeks's investigations cannot have been representative. Even more disastrously, there was no control group, although one could easily have been obtained by an advertise-

ment beginning "Not eccentric? If you think you are not eccentric . . .". The absence of such a control group vitiates the whole study. For example, Weeks claims that his subjects were usually garrulous but this may be a characteristic of people who answer advertisements like his rather than of eccentrics.

Having snared his 'eccentrics', Weeks took case histories and gave them questionnaires to answer. Most of the extracts given from the case histories are unremarkable except for their incoherence. Unfortunately, none of the subjects appears to have met the criteria of eccentricity. The use made of personality tests is, to put it mildly, incautious. Such tests tend to reflect not a person's genuine personality, but the personality he would like to persuade the investigator that he has. Moreover, Weeks was dealing with volunteer subjects, who were presumably determined to persuade him that they were unusual, an endeavour in which they were reasonably successful because their results tended to lie at the extreme ends of the different personality continua.

One could go on. Weeks and Ward seem to be unaware that the very concept of a personality trait is in doubt and that everyone behaves in different ways in different situations. They seem to think that creativity is a unitary trait, although in fact it is restricted in everyone to those areas that he or she has mastered. The book contains a great deal of the gobbledygook beloved of social scientists. Few will want to disagree with the statement that "Most of the time language behaviour involves a dyadic relationship between a speaker and a listener".

The authors might perhaps have done better to spend some time in an Oxford Senior Common Room, even at the risk of their scientific integrity. □

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