

America's history in depth

John E. Pfeiffer

Ships and Shipwrecks of the Americas: A History Based on Underwater Archaeology. Edited by George F. Bass. *Thames & Hudson: 1988. Pp.273. £24.95. In the United States distributed by W. W. Norton, \$40.*

MANY great archaeological sites lie submerged, fathoms deep in places that have been inaccessible until quite recently. Archaeologists, having already recorded enough terrestrial sites to keep them and their students busy for a thousand lifetimes, now find themselves on the verge of a new wave of underwater discovery. The latest scuba gear is standard equipment, along with shovel, trowel, dental pick and other familiar excavating tools. In addition there is an impressive array of high-tech paraphernalia developed primarily for military reconnaissance and salvage operations (most notably the *Titanic* expedition of 1985). The list includes side-scan sonar, hand-held caesium magnetometers, manned mini-submersibles, and pilotless surveying and collecting vehicles guided by remote control.

This book views history from a subaqueous perspective, concentrating on New World shipwrecks in American rivers, lakes and coastal waters. A dozen nautical archaeologists describe some of their most memorable exploits, and look ahead to the future of their new discipline. Gordon Watts of East Carolina University was one of the team participating in the search for the Civil War ironclad *USS Monitor*, the "cheesebox on a raft" sunk in 1862 during a storm off Cape Hatteras, and rediscovered more than a century later with the aid of closed-circuit television and a computer-controlled positioning system. Watts recalls the "tremendous excitement" of his first dive in a submersible, seeing the upside-down wreck at a depth of 230 feet, and subsequent work outside the submersible using a hydraulic dredge to remove overburden and a special camera array to provide stereoscopic photographs of excavated areas.

Artefacts recovered from the *Monitor*, which was officially declared a National Marine Sanctuary, include an unusual four-fluked anchor, a brass distress-signal

lamp, and an assortment of bottles and storage jars, all of them on display at the Mariners' Museum in Newport News, Virginia. Kevin Crisman of Vermont's Basin Harbor Museum directed recent excavations of an earlier battleship, Britain's 16-gun sloop *Boscawen*, sunk at its moorings in Lake Champlain after successful engagements during the French and Indian War. Working in "extremely murky" waters, he and his co-workers managed to come up with thousands of items, everything from musket barrels and bayonets to hickory nuts, and seeds of pumpkins and wild grapes. Other investigators report on the continuing search for remains of Columbus's caravels (at least eight lost, none found to date), Spanish galleons, Basque whalers, Mississippi catamarans and side-wheelers, Yankee

to do with anthropology". That was a number of years ago, and unkind cuts from within the profession are generally less frequent and less biting than they once were. But the attitude persists in some quarters, and may influence hiring and tenure-track decisions.

All archaeologists stand together when it comes to looting, an activity that is perhaps a bit more blatant in the New World than in the Old, where tradition is sometimes effective in curbing or at least tempering greed. Bass points out that "all the known wrecks of the Age of Exploration were damaged by modern looters before archaeologists reached them". Plundering for profit continues by people who pay lip service to science and who, upon occasion, are abetted by the courts in the name of free enterprise. But we can look forward to better times ahead, to stricter law enforcement which will help preserve the most important sites for study and sight-seeing by schools of free-swimming, scuba-equipped tourists.

From Ships and Shipwrecks of the Americas



Sorry end — the Canadian steamboat Schwatka lies abandoned at an old shipyard on the Yukon river.

clippers and sundry ironclads that marked the end of the age of sail.

Underwater archaeology is a wide open field with its most significant advances yet to come. There are some problems, however. For one thing, landlubbing investigators have tended to look down on the pioneer efforts of their nautically minded brethren as essentially trivial. George Bass of Texas A&M University, editor of the volume under review, will not soon forget the response one of his grant proposals inspired in an anonymous referee: "Sounds like fun, but has nothing

beneath the seas, inundated hills and valleys where our prehistoric ancestors lived during times when ocean levels were several hundred feet lower than they are today. It is a safe bet that sooner or later deep-diving explorers will be digging sites on the world's continental shelves, using techniques and technologies put to the test by the contributors to this book. □

John E. Pfeiffer, PO Box 273, New Hope, Pennsylvania 18938, USA, is a freelance journalist and author of *The Creative Explosion: An Inquiry into the Origins of Art and Religion* (Harper & Row, 1982).