



NEW ZEALAND  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
ASSOCIATION

## ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND



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## REVIEWS

**Brian M. Fagan.** *Ancient North America: the Archaeology of a Continent.* Second Edition, May 1995. London, Thames and Hudson. ISBN 0-500-27817-2. Paperback. Price: 16.95 Pounds.

This is a revised and expanded paperback version of a book first published in 1991. Obviously aimed at an audience of second year students, it is nevertheless a worthwhile summary of the current state of archaeological knowledge in the United States and Canada. Part One: background deals first with "discovery", by European explorers: Norse settlement at L'Anse au Meadows, Northern New Foundland, Raleigh's Virginia, the search for the Indies and the north-west passage, and finally the Spanish exploration of the south-east. In an era of political correctness, this may seem a provocative opening, but it serves Fagan's purpose of opening up chapters on the history of investigations into the archaeology of the continent ('culture history') and a chapter on theory of culture change. These would have been too abstract and dry an introduction without the excitement of stories well known to a general American readership.

Part Two covers the Paleo-Indian first settlement. Fagan does not accept any evidence for settlement before 15,000 years B.C., but outlines the debate which centres on certain dates for deposits in South American caves for which dates of 30,000 years B.P. have been claimed. Finally clinching his position is not any issue relating to the reliability of chronometric methods but the lack of lithic assemblages from which the Clovis tradition would have evolved had there been occupants of the continent before 15,000 years.

The subsequent parts divide into regions and cover the long chronological perspective from earliest Archaic (12,000 years B.P.) Part Three deals with the Great Plains from the Archaic to the late farming period of the middle Missouri. Part Four covers the far north (Alaska and northern Canada); Five, the west; and Six, the eastern woodlands, including the "Mississippian climax" and the Algonquians and Iroquois of the north-east. This regional arrangement successfully captures a perspective on the overall chronology of the continent by starting with the richer Archaic materials of the West and finishing with the late complex chiefdoms east of the Mississippi. These parts carry balanced keyhole summaries of theoretical matters such as optimal foraging and the extinction of megafauna, the definition and origins of sedentary settlements and the nature of the complex chiefdoms.

A final part "After Columbus" deals with historical archaeology, including the Spanish conquistadores, Spanish missions, Virginia and New England, the

Black experience in archaeology and the archaeology of gardens.

If Fagan was to be classified in Kent Flannery's style in the *The Early Mesoamerican Village*, he would be a Great Synthesiser with a dash of a blandly chilli-flavoured Skeptical Graduate Student. Alas, of the tequila-swilling Real Mesoamerican Archaeologist, there is none - unless it be found in Fagan's excoriation of the grey literature produced by cultural resource management (CRM). Elsewhere he notes that he has not attempted to cover CRM although "it would be folly for this book to be encased within a rigid theoretical doctrine". He is tilting at straw men here. There will be much in this book (unrecognised by Fagan) that arises from the contributions of s. 106 of the U.S. National Historic Preservation Act and the State Historic Preservation Offices. CRM has long since passed the stage where it had limited contribution to make to academic debate, although it is still saddled with the need to report and account for works of routine data-recovery. Fagan seems incapable of recognising this as the source of the problem. All synthesis faces the task of determining relevance of the material presented. The trick is to frame the theory or organising the relevant materials so as to recognise the virtues (and not just deficiencies) of others.

Kevin Jones

**William Noble and Iain Davidson. *Human Evolution, Language and Mind. A Psychological and Archaeological Inquiry*. Cambridge University Press. 1996**  
 xiii + 272 pages. Aust.\$90.00 Hb, Aust.\$36.95 Pb.

Books on the evolutionary origins of language have become a popular item on publishers' lists in the 1990s. William Noble and Iain Davidson, psychologist of perception and archaeologist of the Palaeolithic period, respectively, from the University of New England in New South Wales, join scholars such as Derek Bickerton, Michael Corballis, Steven Pinker, Robin Dunbar, and others in tackling this most fundamental problem of human evolution. The complexity of language and its relevance to all of the human sciences guarantee that investigators will bring varying and sometimes widely divergent perspectives to the study of its origins. Noble and Davidson stake out a patch of ground of their own in this increasingly crowded field. I will say at the outset that, as a biological anthropologist and an interested spectator of the language evolution debates, I find Noble and Davidson's effort to be counter to my own general perspective on the evolution of human behaviour, and in the main I do not find their arguments wholly or even partially convincing. On the other hand, I recommend their book precisely because it forced me to confront some of my own biases, and thus it performed the admirable task of making me less comfortable with my preconceptions. In the end, I became convinced that Noble and Davidson

have an argument that should be heard and considered - not because of any fuzzy-headed relativism on my part - but because they have presented and defended a position cogently and clearly. Although their position is to my way of thinking, extreme, it cannot be dismissed at this time as a possible solution to the "language problem".

In brief, Noble and Davidson propose that language is, in the context of five million years of hominid evolution, a relatively recent invention. They argue (p.214) that language "was a product of behavioural discoveries rather than biological events...The nature of language as a symbolic communication system 'created' the human mind, capable of logistics and planning apt for all environments, of reifying concepts, of distinguishing 'us' from 'them', of the invention of the supernatural, of investigating its own workings and the past". Certainly, biological changes made language possible, but language and linguistic behaviour are not to be considered biological features of the human species. As the quote above indicates, Noble and Davidson emphasize the symbolic nature of linguistic communication, without which "modern human behaviour" would not be possible. Central to modern human behaviour is "forward planning to achieve a goal" (p. 217), which, according to their review, is not evidenced in the archaeological record until about 60,000 years ago. "The evidence in the archaeological record of human evolution of the last 60,000 years is of behaviour undertaken according to plan. The arrival in the Australian region may have been an accident, but it is not one that could have happened in the absence of the use of sea-going vessels constructed according to plan. Archaeologically, this is the earliest evidence of modern human behaviour". Given that it may have taken some time for this behaviour to manifest as the settlement of Australia, Noble and Davidson argue that linguistic behaviour may have originated between 70,000 and 100,000 years ago.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first covers "an evolutionary approach to the mind", and the second reviews hominid origins. Chapters three through five mainly cover philosophical and linguistic issues pertaining to the nature of the mind and symbols. Chapters six through eight place that discussion in the archaeological context. A wealth of material is covered, sometimes too briefly perhaps, but the book is, if nothing else, a potentially valuable reference work.

There are three primary reasons why I disagree with the conclusions of the book and the authors' methodological approach. First, they employ a "top-down" rather than a "bottom-up" approach. While it would be unfair to call their approach anthropocentric, they clearly believe that there has been a qualitative change between "us" (people who act like modern humans) and "them" (all those animals, which include all hominids before us). This is reflected in their review of chimpanzee behaviour, which appears to serve

only to emphasize the ways in which chimpanzee behaviour is different from human behaviour. Of course, chimpanzee behaviour *is* different from human behaviour, but how different is a matter of perspective. In a discussion (pp. 127-129) of the ability of chimpanzees to make internal representations of external objects and events ("advanced" behaviour from a linguistic perspective), Noble and Davidson first concede that there may be something to these experimental results. They then discuss the ability of pigeons to produce similar behaviours, although (of course) they are not suggesting that chimps are like pigeons. After a bit more discussion, however, they conclude (p.129): "Like dogs, chimpanzees under (more or less) natural conditions have no known means of representing things to themselves at a conceptual level". So once again, the differences between us and the most similar of them are emphasized. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with top-down approaches, but they are prone to progressive fallacies, which with their emphasis on finished products leads us to potentially fundamental errors in interpreting intermediate forms.

This leads to my second point, which involves the "finished artefact fallacy" (pp 197-200). Noble and Davidson argue that stone "tools" made before 60,000 years ago, especially Acheulean bifacial handaxes, are not really "tools" at all representing foresight and planning in their execution, but rather that "the classic handaxe shape represents a core near the end of its useful life". Handaxes are recognized and counted by archaeologists only when they look like handaxes; other cores get other names. This could be a reasonable point (in some cases), although I would guess that the majority of archaeologists would go along with the traditional view and see a bit more intentionality in design. My problem here is that it seems to me that Noble and Davidson are making a finished artefact fallacy error in advocating a recent and distinct emergence of language over the past 60,000 years. Rather than seeing language as the product of two million years of morphological and behavioural evolution, "real language" is demarcated according to narrow criteria circumscribed by the ability of archaeologists to discern symbolled and planned behaviour in the archaeological record. If I am to believe that archaeologists cannot properly recognize tools in the prehistoric record, why should I believe that they would be any better at recognizing language?

My third point is that the theory outlined by Noble and Davidson demands a "closed" interpretation of the evidence at hand. In other words, I would be much less certain about interpreting the hominid fossil record than they appear to be, and do expect that there is much to learn about functional aspects of the brain and language that may ultimately shed light on how we should interpret their evolution. With reference to the fossil record, Noble and Davidson are rightfully critical of premature phylogenetic interpretations, etc., yet seem all too willing to accept ideas about "prime movers" in hominid

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evolution (e.g., scavenging, thermoregulation) that really should be considered somewhat more critically. This closed perspective is also seen in the example above about internal representations in chimpanzees: although there is "no known means" of how they could do such a thing, the experimental evidence indicates that they can do it. The top-down approach doesn't see this as a very interesting problem, whereas a more bottom-up approach would see this as a potentially rich field for increasing our knowledge about the evolution of cognition and communication in the great apes, including ourselves.

Language origins is a large, diverse and critically important topic. Although I have some fundamental disagreements with their approach, I believe that Noble and Davidson offer a perspective that should be considered by anyone interested in language evolution.

John S. Allen  
Department of Anthropology  
University of Auckland