

The British Lower Palaeolithic – Stones in Contention

John McNabb

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This book is a very rich volume and is actually two or even three books within a single book—one presenting general background, data and interpretations about the Lower Paleolithic; one discussing the specific issue of the significance of the “Clactonian;” and, one illustrating the evolution of scholarly ideas about the Clactonian in their historical context over more than 100 years. Indeed, the book was written not to provide definitive statements about the Lower Paleolithic in Great Britain but rather to help readers think about the issues and “make their own minds up, at least about what the most significant questions should be,” as McNabb states on page 4. The main title of the book thus refers to the textbook aspect of the volume, while the subtitle, “stones in contention,” certainly aims to illustrate McNabb’s effort to contribute to the debate about the significance of the Clactonian, as well as his efforts to engage the reader in thinking along the lines of potentially unexplored paths. Each goal is perfectly achieved thanks to meticulous reporting and discussion of data.

The book is divided into two parts. The first one, “Clactonian in its broader context,” focuses on the general background needed to approach the specific question addressed in the second part of the book. For instance, Chapter 2 provides geological and other frameworks useful in understanding the Lower Paleolithic of Britain. Chapter 3 is a review of Clactonian sites in their physical context. Chapters 4 to 7 offer a wide and precise panorama of the British Lower and early Middle Paleolithic. In each of these chapters, the industry and the geological setting of each site are precisely described and analyzed. These chapters serve as a very good illustration of the state of the art of knowledge about archaic human group behavior in relation to the changing status of Great Britain, which alternated from being a separate island to a continental cul-de-sac. Chapter 8 offers a synthesis of non-handaxe industries across continental Europe from the post-Anglian up to MIS 6. Of course, recent discoveries and studies carried out at key sites for the first colonization of Europe (e.g., Parffit et al. 2005, 2010) would now have to be added to Chapter 4. Yet, these chapters do make a perfect handbook for “the Lower Paleolithic of Britain” and the synthesis laid out here will be useful to students and scholars for a long time to come.

The second part of the volume starts with two chapters (Chapters 10 and 11) about the history of the definition and interpretation of the Clactonian throughout the twentieth

century. Interestingly, the author provides his own analysis of the influence of the academic, social, and historical context on the interpretation of the Clactonian. He concludes by stating that “the power of history to influence the supposedly more objective interpretations of the twenty-first century appears as strong as it ever was” (p. 303).

The last part of this book (Chapters 12 and 13) is an essay on the “cultural” nature of the Clactonian and the impossibility of demonstrating it; according to McNabb, the cultural nature of contemporaneous handaxes industries would be easier to demonstrate. Because the author addresses the question, “what is it about these artefact assemblages that warrants them being thought of as a separate culture?” (p. 3) in detail, he overcomes the simplistic opposition between culture and nurture. More than that, using work by Dunbar, Stringer, and others, McNabb notes that “evidence for archaeological traditions or lineages of socially transferable knowledge existed in the Middle Pleistocene hominin society,” even if the Clactonian cannot be interpreted “as a body of culturally transmitted knowledge” (p. 373).

In the introduction to the book, the author writes that he senses “the pendulum is beginning to swing back towards more traditional cultural interpretations” (p. 2), and he wants to “set the record straight as to what the Clactonian is, and more especially what it is not” (p. 3). After having demonstrated why the Clactonian is not cultural, the author eventually concludes that “it is clear that *Homo heidelbergensis* was a cultural animal which could perpetuate a number of lineages of knowledge within core groups, and larger parent groups, but proving that in the Clactonian seems, for the moment, to be impossible” (p. 373). This conclusion can appear to be a little paradoxical. Yet, McNabb adds in the epilogue of the book that “simple either/or dichotomies and cultural interpretations that we inherit from the founders of the discipline will not help us to unravel [the] complexity [of Middle Pleistocene *Homo*’s today life]” (p. 375). One can indeed wonder if this book itself is not a good testimony to the evolution of McNabb’s thought after 20 years of studies concerning the British Lower Paleolithic, as well as a testimony to the on-going change of perspective within the academic community in general with regard research on archaic human history. Is that why the author wrote in the introduction that he will not provide an answer to the Clactonian question, but will try to help the

reader find out what the most significant questions should be? Is searching for the cultural or the pre-cultural nature of archaic human behavior from now on a dead-issue, and is exploring ancient hominid social behavior variability a growing issue?

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