provides opportunity and motive for the adoption of a food-producing economy by acculturation over a long period. This does rely, however, upon the veracity of the radiocarbon dates from the Irish Early Neolithic. From this time onwards the evidence fades away and we have a single paltry page on the Later Neolithic, in spite of suggestions that it is this period which sees the emergence of a long-lived social organisation (see, for example, Whittle 1981 or Bradley 1984).

'The Metal Users' (Chapter 3) or what might be the second movement, continues to feel its way tentatively through the phases and cadences of the archaeological record -- settlement, economy, trade and ritual behaviour -- which are brought together into a coherent image of one later prehistoric lifestyle on only one occasion (pp. 132-4) in a style of which more might have been made in summaries of the complex text.

Suddenly, the third movement takes over and the orchestra of different forms of evidence wakes up and begins to play more confidently. We are, after all, on the conductor's home ground now; the written word has arrived. No longer do the questions of an historian struggle to harmonise with the ratiocination melody of the evidence, particularly in the realm of population dynamics (note, for example, the climatically-induced 85). Immediately we are thrown into the minuets of tribal boundaries (which may have been fluid anyway) and political history. Immediately too, the text becomes fluent and Higham allows himself more room to interject. References are, ironically, too few in the section entitled 'The Roman Interlude' and all too often one is left to query the dating evidence employed without reference to town development in the second and third centuries. The section on religion and burial in third and fourth centuries, however, is brief and to the point.

The final movement deals with the Dark Ages under the title 'The Return to Tribalism' and with the invasions of the Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians up to AD 1000. The core of the kingdoms which were to vie for power in northern England and southern Scotland over the 300 years after the decline of Roman influence are charted. Archaeology contributes little, apart from the case of Yeavering, and it is the familiar Gildas and Bede who provide much of the evidence. Place-names become increasingly important as a source of evidence, partnering land charters as the only instruments with which Higham has tried to call the tune.

A work of this kind can be judged both by its content and by its organisation. On the plus side, Higham has generally managed to escape from culture histories, but instead proposes genetic continuity throughout the early (prehistoric) period. Amongst the at times euphonious narrative and recurrent ecological theme are, however, a number of jarring chords. The use of radiocarbon dates is a major case in point. Standard deviations and laboratory numbers are very dated and contexts are simply ignored, resulting in an unacceptably unrigourous use of the available dates. There are also one or two major gaffes, most noticeably for me in the explanation of microliths (pp. 19-20).

In general it can be said that the author fails to distinguish sufficiently between date and interpretation, for example with reference to social organisation (p. 116).

On the organisational side, the use of frequent sub-headings breaks up the text usefully, but it is the quality of the illustrations and overall appearance of the book which let it down. Behind an attractive cover are a series of second-rate line drawings (for example, Figure 6.3) which show a distinct 'felt-tip' feel to them, many of which are often less than useful (for example, Figure 6.3) and photographs whose relevance is dubious, but whose presence seems to be justified by lengthy annotations in lieu of references in the text.

There are too many mistakes in references and spellings to escape mention here (take, for example, the unfortunate sex-change of Mr. F. Buckley on p. 19, or the confusion in referring to Bonsall's work at Ewmeals, p. 21-22). Higham has made a brave attempt to handle an enormous task; but even in the counties whose history is relatively poorly known, the challenge is too great. I await with interest the outcome of the levisham tasks of Cumlife and Manks by dealing with Wessex and Yorkshire to AD 1000.

Overall, this book is more of a cacophony than a symphony and it misses sadly the contribution of Professor G. Jobey (see note 1, p. 234). I can't recommend Northern Counties to those working specifically on the North, who will find the bibliography comprehensive and useful. Of course, reach for it from the literary shelf to familiarise yourself with the major sites of the northern counties, but if you don't know the North, be sure to reach, with the other hand, for a good map.

References


Reviewed by Isabel Richardson

Due to the intricacies of the post-glacial formation of this unique area, the history of the Somerset Levels begins in the Early Neolithic period. The latest traces of human activity preserved there were originally demonstrated by the Iron Age excavations of Arthur Boulton and N. G. S. Gray almost a century ago. The authors briefly describe this early archaeological work, also the detailed environmental studies of Sir Harry Godwin, and acknowledge the importance of this and other previous work in the Levels.

John Coles had already gained ten years experience in the area, and Bryony three, when the Somerset Levels Project was set up in 1973. The major part of this book deals with the Project's discoveries in a
small area of the Levels between the Polden Hills and Wedmore. The trackways uncovered are described in a chronological framework, so that the Early Neolithic and the Sweet Track (named after Ray Sweet, the neat worker who discovered it), occupy chapter 3. In the ensuing text the rest of the Neolithic evidence and that of the Bronze Age is considered, with a chapter on experimental archaeology and wood conservation. The only settlement evidence available so far is that of the Iron Age sites at Glastonbury and Meare. Besides offering a resume of the excavation methods available, the authors briefly discuss the interpretations offered by Professor Trotman and Dr. D. Clarke of the organisation of these settlements. While disagreeing with major points of both authors, they suggest that the original excavator, Bulleid, was perhaps nearer the truth in his conclusions.

There is no general introduction to this book, so it has to be assumed that it is aimed at "enthusiasts...with no special knowledge, but a lively interest as are other books in the same series. One expects also that it is in fact hoped that many dryland archaeologists will read it as a general introduction to wetland work, and the complementary nature of the artefacts and structures found is fully emphasised in the final chapter.

The information given is clearly and concisely expressed, with welcome touches of humour, but the style of writing sometimes irritates (as in the somewhat conscious use of "we" and the patently clumsy "one of us [J.M.C.]""). The illustrations are excellent throughout, nearly all the sixteen colour plates being carefully used to illuminate points that the monochrome photographs could not demonstrate so well. The odd one out is the illustration of a peat-cutting machine, which could have been replaced with advantage by a colour plate of a settlement. The black and white photographs are also reproduced clearly. Particularly delightful are the early twentieth century ones of peat-stacking and of the Bulleid and Gray excavations, a strong contrast to the present-day techniques, which have been developed to suit excavation in peat. It is a pity that the necessary emphasis in the text on the importance of environmental work is barely reflected in the illustrations, neither macro nor micro plant remains being represented. The line drawings are very clear and the reconstructions imaginative, being firmly based on the available evidence. It would be helpful to have a scale on all the drawings -- the details of size are hidden in the text in some cases. Rather oddly, the illustrations are listed at the end of the book with the bibliography; suggestions for further reading and the index. The exhaustive.

This book then is a well-illustrated and full account of specialised archaeological work on a small area of the Somerset Levels. If it is aimed, as I presume it is, at the enthusiastic amateur or the dryland archaeologist, then it will be a good introduction to the prehistory of our rapidly diminishing wetlands.

Reference