

The Archaeology of Bruce Trigger: Theoretical Empiricism, edited by Ronald F. Williamson & Michael S. Bisson, 2006. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press; ISBN-13 978-0-7735-3127-7 hardback £51.30 & US\$80; ISBN-13 978-0-7735-3161-1 paperback £17.09 & US\$29.95; xiv+304 pp., 9 figs., 2 tables

A History of Archaeological Thought, by Bruce G. Trigger, 2006. 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; ISBN-13 978-0-521-84076-7 hardback £50 & US\$90; ISBN-13 978-0-521-60049-1 paperback £19.99 & US\$31.99; xx+710 pp., 50 figs.

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Bruce Trigger, fine mentor, steadfast friend and brilliant social theorist, archaeologist and ethnohistorian, died leaving 'the world a smaller and saddened place' (M. Latta pers. comm. 2007). His wife, Barbara Welch, less known but an equally sophisticated thinker, died soon after. In 2004, two years before Bruce Trigger's death, a successful symposium was run at the Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archaeology to 'identify the fundamental importance of the intellectual contributions of Bruce Trigger' (Williamson & Bisson, p. xi). Hundreds attended. Trigger was deeply touched; with characteristic modesty, he occasionally expressed gentle disbelief at the size of the overflowing, appreciative crowd. The resulting Festschrift, *The Archaeology of Bruce Trigger*, analyses his contributions and celebrates his renaissance intellect. Williamson & Bisson (p. xiv) hope to provide future archaeologists with a 'nuanced understanding of Bruce's work' and inspire them to embrace, as Trigger did, a responsibility 'to make our world a better place'. With an autobiographical, reflective analysis by Trigger himself and contributions from 22 authors, this volume easily succeeds as an introduction to Trigger's career and legacy. Some of the essays are light but each offers insight.

Canadian authors, for example, see Trigger as an 'architect of Canadian archaeology', a scholar who had a deep and profound influence in his homeland (E. Yellowhorn pers. comm. 2007; a former student of Trigger's and contributor to the Festschrift, Yellowhorn is a pioneer of 'internalist' archaeology, of, by and for the First Nations peoples). As Ron Williamson, co-editor, has stated (pers. comm. 2007), 'He had a very real impact ... in terms of understanding the power of archaeological knowledge', 'teaching us to



Figure 1. H.E. Rt. Hon. Michaëlle Jean in a Montreal hospital presenting Bruce Trigger with the Order of Canada. (Photograph courtesy of Dr Rosalyn Trigger.)

face the social responsibilities of our subject, making us aware all the time of whose history we were studying'. The anthropologist, Toby Morantz, explicating Trigger's ethnohistorical methodologies, remembers that Trigger supported the First Nations boycott of the *Spirit Sings* exhibition in Calgary, in 1988. This, wrote Trigger, 'underlined my increasing awareness of the economic, social, and political problems facing indigenous people' (Williamson & Bisson, p. 249). After the publication of *The Children of Aataentsic* (Trigger 1976), two volumes which treat the Huron as active, creative historical agents, Trigger was adopted as an honorary member of the Great Turtle Clan of the Wendat Confederacy.

Other papers clearly demonstrate that Trigger's influence stretched beyond national and disciplinary boundaries. As a young researcher in England, Ian Hodder found support in Trigger's publications for aspects of the post-processual agenda. He was impressed that Trigger was 'not daunted by theoretical fragmentation', 'holding that the diversity leads to more holistic and fruitful interpretations of archaeological data' (Williamson & Bisson, p. 20). Alison Wylie observes that Trigger was remarkably consistent and optimistic in his strategy 'to take the measure of our own epistemic strengths and limitations and to use this reflexive insight to generate' a more objective archaeological understanding of the past (Williamson & Bisson, p. 34). Lynn Meskell notes that Trigger pioneered the archaeology of social life: his work on the Huron in 1969

still resonates today, tackling some of the big issues in social archaeology: power, domestic life, notions of the self, belief, treatments of the dead, bodies and souls, and conceptions of the afterlife (Williamson & Bisson, p. 55).

Based on my close reading of Trigger's work, I would suggest that Randall McGuire, in 'Marx, Childe, and Trigger', over-estimates Trigger's commitment to Marxist thought; nevertheless, McGuire clearly understands that Trigger had become increasingly concerned about the 'capitalist system [as] the most dynamic and ruthless transforming force in human history' (van Reybrouck 1995, 167).

This concern motivated Trigger to re-write *A History of Archaeological Thought*. He was hopeful that an historical perspective on archaeological knowledge, combined with information from other disciplines, could guide social planning and help to avoid doomsday scenarios.

A History of Archaeological Thought, first published in 1989, is 'Cambridge University Press's all-time best-seller in archaeology' (Williamson & Bisson, p. 5). In keeping with Trigger's goals, and as Alain Schnapp (1990, 956) noted in his review of the first edition, the space allotted to the analysis of contemporary archaeology remains broadly equal to that devoted to the whole world history 'from its beginnings' of what we today identify as archaeological investigation. This stress upon relevant, historically informed analysis of contemporary epistemic issues rather than historical research only, is no surprise to the Festschrift's authors. As Stephen Chrisomalis states (pers. comm. 2007), 'HAT is a work of history designed to be read by archaeologists to improve their practice'.

Thus Trigger begins the new edition (p. 2) with the statement that his 'primary goal ... is to survey the intellectual history of archaeology in an attempt to evaluate the claims of three [current] alternative epistemologies': positivists maintain that society and culture exert no significant influence on the development of archaeology; extreme relativists argue that interpretation is so influenced by social, gendered and political contingencies that objective knowledge is impossible; and moderate relativists, he continues, such as Trigger himself, concede that 'archaeological interpretations are influenced by society, culture and self-interest but maintain that archaeological evidence constrains speculation'.

Trigger states that he was opposed to presentistic explanations: following standard historical practice, he held that past developments must be understood in relation to the context in which they occurred. Nevertheless, his methodological emphasis on grand sweeps and his use of formalized categories and quasi-historical stages is questionable. As Schnapp (1990, 960) argued, 18 years ago,

Trigger loses in depth what he gains in scope. The history of archaeology is convincing when it is

substantive but it is threatened by formalism when it becomes descriptive.

Although mega-narrative offers the benefit of overview, Trigger's narrative does not substantiate many of his oft-repeated historical generalizations. It is not clear why or how archaeological pursuits arose from the middle classes and how archaeology can be examined as an expression of the ideology of the middle classes. Certainly such generalizations are very interesting but they are not explanations. Such statements demand investigation and explication in order to be explained.

Historical exceptions to such generalized proposals abound. During the early twentieth century in British archaeology, for example, Alexander Keiller, then Mortimer Wheeler's rival, was certainly not a man of the middle classes; nor was his foreman, Will Young, who determined the course of many excavations. Young was, for example, in charge of Thurstan Shaw, Eileen Fox and Mary Leakey at Hembury Fort in the early 1930s. All described him as a practical genius who gave them state-of-the-art training and an education which they then exported to Cambridge, Africa, Wales and New Zealand. If we jettison the working-class 'Youngs' from our histories of the production of archaeology, we impoverish our understanding and over-empower the role of the middle classes in the formation of disciplinary knowledge.

It is also arguable that stage-type categories, such as 'cultural-historical', 'evolutionary' and, or, 'processual', still used heuristically by Trigger and many others, obfuscate rather than facilitate historical investigation. Fortunately, an increasing number of young historians of archaeology are turning away from grand summaries of secondary, published material; they prefer the methodological alternative of producing 'thick description', fine-grained, historical 'situated' studies based on unpublished and, or, unarchived resources. This research demonstrates that, in the 1920s and 1930s, many archaeologists would

not have associated themselves with the few German Catholic priests who were indeed practising cultural-historical research (Kluckhohn 1936).

Despite such problems with Trigger's specific historical analyses, *The History of Archaeological Thought* remains the very best macro-history available. Directed as it was by a 'powerful moral compass' (S. Chrisomalis pers. comm. 2007), Trigger ends (pp. 547–8) with the following observation. The fact that archaeology can provide a growing number of insights suggests that it may constitute an effective basis for understanding social change and also may serve as an

effective guide for further development . . . by helping citizens make more informed choices. In a world that, as a result of increasingly powerful technologies, has become too dangerous . . . to rely to any considerable extent on trial and error, knowledge derived from archaeology may be important for human survival.

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