Grahame Clark: An Intellectual Biography of an Archaeologist

Biographies of prominent scientists can be written to glorify heroes or to simply recount the activities and thoughts of influential figures. Biography can also be employed to explore broad historical changes in a discipline by showing how a single individual’s career contributed to and reflected important intellectual, social, and institutional developments over a given period of time. Brian Fagan’s intellectual biography of Grahame Clark aspires to the latter. It is widely held that Clark was one of the most influential archaeologists of the twentieth century; thus a biography focusing on his research and his contributions to modern archaeology would be valuable in its own right. But the nature of Clark’s career is such that it can be used to investigate the transformation of archaeology as a science during the twentieth century.

Given this focus to the book, Fagan devotes only slight attention to Clark’s youth and early education, focusing on how he came to study archaeology at Cambridge University and what the state of archaeological theory and practice was in the early decades of the last century. Fagan quickly proceeds to discuss Clark’s early studies of the British Mesolithic, which dominated much of his career. The formation of the Fenland Research Committee in 1932, which brought together scientists from such disparate fields as archaeology, biology, geology, and geography to cooperate on excavations, is presented as a major innovation in archaeological practice that had lasting consequences. These early excavations of British Mesolithic sites also marked the beginning, according to Fagan, of Clark’s lifelong interest in examining prehistoric societies within their environmental and ecological context and his development of techniques for reconstructing ancient environments and understanding how they shaped the ways peoples lived in prehistory.

Clark’s affiliation with various scientific institutions allows Fagan to examine just how important these institutions were, not only in Clark’s career, but to British archaeology generally. Clark became an active member of the Prehistoric Society of East Anglia (later renamed the Prehistoric Society) in the 1930s and was the influential editor of its Proceedings for decades. As a member of the Prehistoric Society and later as the Disney professor of archaeology at Cambridge University, Clark played an influential role in the professionalization and institutionalization of archaeology in Great Britain. Fagan explores how Clark promoted a global perspective in archaeological research by advocating the study of world prehistory both in his own writings and by encouraging his students to conduct research and assume academic positions abroad.

This is a well-written, thoroughly researched, informative biography. It does have noticeable weaknesses, however, some of which Fagan himself discusses in his preface. The book is largely constructed around Clark’s major publications. Many parts of the book do discuss Clark’s research activities, interactions with other archaeologists, and the development of his ideas. But
large sections of the book are essentially extended
descriptions of the contents of particular works.
This does allow Fagan to comment on Clark’s
major ideas, how his research interests changed,
and what impact he had on his generation, but at
times the reader is left feeling that we are reading
about books rather than the life of an archaeologist.

More serious is Fagan’s approach to research-
ing and presenting Clark’s intellectual career. A
great deal of attention is given to Clark’s work, his
influence on those around him, and the lasting
impact of his work for the discipline of archaeol-
ogy. Much less attention is given to the influences
acting upon Clark. Just as he shaped the in-
tellectual, professional, and institutional world of
archaeology, it is equally important to investigate
how those same factors made Clark’s work
possible, how they influenced the formation of
his ideas, and how they helped or hindered the
acceptance of his ideas. The reader would have
come away with a greater understanding of Clark’s
research and career if Fagan had traced more of
the connections that bound Clark to the broader
community of archaeologists, and to the social and
intellectual contexts that inevitably have such
a profound influence upon a scientist. Fagan has,
however, presented us with an interesting and
useful account of Clark’s life as an archaeologist.

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