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Review of Robert Van de Noort and Aidan O’Sullivan, *Rethinking Wetland Archaeology*. Gerald Duckworth: Duckworth Debates in Archaeology 2007, Pp 167, 13 Figures. ISBN 9780715634387 (PB) Price £11.99.

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The stated aims of this tightly argued and engaging book are to contextualise the results and objectives of wetlands studies. In line with other titles in the series the book pulls no punches, stating from the outset that wetland archaeology is long over due for a rethink. The authors – both wetland archaeologists of some note – grasp the nettle by making the accusation that wetland archaeology is isolated from the wider discipline, theoretically out of date and somewhat uncontroversial in its approach. These are damning criticisms and the authors know they must present a strong case to back them up. But they are also aware that there is increasing agreement on this point and that many sense that the time is ripe for such a change in orientation that is mutually beneficial to wetland and non-wetland archaeologies.

This is the central point of the book – wetland archaeology’s separation from the wider discipline frustrates the exchange of ideas and information that ought to flow across the whole archaeological project and abstracts wet landscapes in a way that people of the past may not have done (p. 11-13). This is a view that has long been voiced by Francis Pryor of the Flag Fen Heritage Centre in Peterborough. Van de Noort and O’Sullivan relate that Pryor has found that the archaeology of the Neolithic and Bronze Age fen-edge only made sense in terms of the people’s appreciation of the wider region and its differing environments (p. 18). However, such approaches, although admired, have not been explicitly taken-up, even when a volume of work containing a highly critical paper by Pryor, within its covers, was recently produced. As Van de Noort recently noted, Pryor’s comments were not referenced by the editors of the book either in the introductory paper or their reflection (Van de Noort 2007).

The process of this kind of isolation (or insulation) is put into context in chapter 1 with an historical background which helps to explain a state of affairs in which the dominance of functionalist interpretations of data emerged alongside more progressive trends in the wider discipline and in which the context for research in wetland projects remained environmental

and the human perspective one of an economic-subsistence focus. The format of the book is basically a critique of wetland archaeology that introduces a number of ‘rethought’ (but increasingly familiar) themes to the empirical, science-orientated approaches of the wetland sciences (Chapters 2-5). The chapter specific themes are ‘wetland landscapes’ (rethought as taskscapes), ‘people of the wetlands’ (recast as wetland social identities), ‘wetland material culture’ (as objects with biographies), and the particular politics and practices of study in wetland situations. Chapter 6 presents conclusions and makes recommendations/directions, and the whole book takes an enthusiastic and constructive approach, attempting to engage and seduce rather than cajole and accuse. The book is, in fact, strikingly up to date in terms of referencing wetland projects, something that adds weight to the argument, and examples extend from the early prehistoric to early modern periods of Europe and at times draw upon wider anthropological examples. This makes the volume a handy reference guide and introduction to a number of wetland archaeological projects, as well as a kind of resume of the most up-to-date theoretical concerns.

‘The aim of this book is to rethink wetland archaeology so that it becomes fully integrated with mainstream archaeological debate, without losing the characteristics and benefits of working in different landscapes that have the ability to preserve organic remains’ (p. 146) and this is convincingly achieved. Each chapter is compelling and enlightening in its own way, but it is in chapter 2 that the most work has to be done in convincing the reader. As the authors make clear, wetland as a definition ‘forms and appropriate entity only in the sense that anoxic environments have caused the preservation of organic archaeological and palaeoenvironmental remains that require specialist methods and techniques during recovery and analysis’ and that ‘people never thought about wetlands in the landscape generally, but instead considered the values, merits and dangers of specific types of wetlands’ (p. 38). Wetland archaeology is thus redefined as the archaeology of wetland cultural landscapes rather than only the techniques of wetland science. This shift presents a powerful and rich manner of interpretation that will appeal to landscape orientated archaeologists. However, the argument must also be attractive to wetland archaeologists and this is where the real battles will take place. Van de Noort and O’Sullivan’s tactic is to bombard the reader with well thought-out examples of wetlands rethought. That is to say, they demonstrate just what an isolated wetland archaeology might be missing in terms of results.

The Humber wetlands (North-east England) and North Holland (Netherlands) make good examples here of some of the many ways in which ‘wetlands’ have been appreciated. The first example warns against automatic division of wetlands as either high-yielding grazing zones or marginal wastelands, two ways in which wetlands are short-sightedly contrasted against ‘dry’ landscapes. Place name analysis of the Humber region demonstrates that the area resounds with subtle cultural values of two principle kinds: those associated with (potentially) productive wetlands, called ‘sands’, ‘levels’, or ‘carrs’ and the less productive peatlands which were distinguished as ‘moors’ and ‘wastes’. All of these areas could have been subsumed under the title ‘wetland’ and much of their cultural significance hidden as a result. Such variety in response to the region’s wet environment attests to the great number of ways in which landscapes are encultured internally through people’s active engagement with their surroundings.

The second example demonstrates that these kinds of values are open to change and that landscapes are subject to historical, as well as environmental, processes. The study of social and political factors in the Netherlands during the ninth century AD demonstrates how a former ‘wilderness’ became an attractive place to live precisely because of its marginality from the centres of feudal power (p. 41-2). What the place lacked in productivity, due to post-Roman period peat formation, it more than made up for in ‘tax breaks’.

Other chapters maintain this blending of forthright archaeological theory and the results of wetland projects. Chapter 3 concerns social identity and wetlands, and discusses those for whom a wetland landscape is self-consciously a part of their social and political being. Examples here include the pursuit of social ranking in Early Medieval crannogs (p. 69-75) and the divergent identities of the Shannon estuary foreshore fishers and their Anglo-Norman lords of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries AD (p. 83-87). Chapter 4 deals with wetland material culture striking-out beyond the wow-factor of artefact preservation to encourage a focus upon the biographies of sites and artefacts at the scale of lifecycles and seasonal activities. Chapter 5 poses some tough questions towards the ‘politically reluctant’ wetland archaeology (p. 123) – what role, if any, do wetland archaeologists have in preserving wetlands as habitats or in protecting wetland communities’ welfare or heritage rights? And how have archaeologists dealt with the contradictions and failures of such attempts? The rescue project of Seahenge is treated to a tactful post-mortem here (p. 123-7), but some of the more successful projects are justifiably highlighted in this chapter (p. 128-139).

At the beginning of this review I suggested that many sense the time is ripe for a change in orientation – just how many is unknown. To some it must seem as though, with every conference and monograph that reaches publication, wetland archaeology as a sub-discipline of archaeology becomes more justified. However, Van de Noort and O’Sullivan have shown why this view is mistaken and that, conversely, every wetland project that ignores the wider discipline threatens to be yet further out of touch. The authors will certainly have contributed to increasing the number of dissenters with this book. Perhaps another judgement on the success of their project will be the level of participation and support that they receive at next year’s World Archaeological Congress at which they continue to pursue these themes further (see O’Sullivan and Van de Noort 2007). This reviewer wishes them good luck, but they certainly have all the right arguments in this slim volume.

Bibliography

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