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Ray Mears and Gordon Hillman, *Wild Food*. Hodder & Stoughton, 20 Sept 2007.

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As any first year undergraduate student of archaeology can tell us, the people of Mesolithic Britain lived solely on a diet of shellfish, hazelnuts, crab apples and red deer, with the odd additional large mammal, such as seal, boar or auroch, thrown in for good measure on high days and holidays. At least this is the picture that we might perceive based solely upon the archaeological record. But as ethnographic studies show: hunter-gatherer-fisher communities often have a wide and varied diet of plants and animals which, being organic in nature, would rarely have survived for long in the archaeological record. Mears, aided by Gordon Hillman, seeks to explore the possibilities that the British Mesolithic landscape might have offered by considering the flora and fauna available and how they might be used as food stuffs.

It should be made clear from the outset that the authors make no pretensions that this is an academic work aimed at the archaeological community. It is certainly an educational work but is intended for the interested public and written as an accompaniment to the Mears' successful television programme. However, as a resource for archaeologists who study pre-agricultural societies this book may be of interest.

The first section of the book starts, by way of introduction, with a potted account of the development of homo sapiens in Britain. This leads us into the Mesolithic which is claimed as the 'zenith of British hunter-gatherer technology' (p. 19) and thus is the main period considered, although the material covered might be equally applicable to aspects of Neolithic life. Steven Mithen's work on Oronsay and Colonsay, and the low survival rate of biological material found there, is cited as an example of why archaeology can only go so far in understanding past foodways. The authors use what little evidence these sites offer to recreate the Mesolithic processing methods for making hazelnuts more edible and for increasing the period for which they could be stored. Although Mears likes to suggest that what he is doing is taking up where

archaeology has had to leave off using his wealth of wilderness survival experience and interactions with modern hunter-gatherer peoples to understand how Mesolithic people processed foods, what he is actually doing is little more than experimental archaeology to reproduce the evidence from the archaeological record: a reinvention of middle-range-theory. This is not a criticism of Mears as his work can have great value by opening up new ways of considering old evidence. However, one must always bear in mind that such techniques only produce 'might have' possibilities rather than 'did' solutions: just because Mears produces an end result that replicates the archaeological record does not prove that he has identified the process by which an object entered the record. And, indeed, Mears accepts this within the text when discussing the differences between what might have been edible and what was actually used as food.

Perhaps the most interesting section for archaeologists is the one which the authors entitle 'A Foot in Both Worlds'. Here Mears examines a modern indigenous people's cultural attitudes to food, focussing upon Aboriginal Australians. Recently the study of the British Mesolithic has undergone a change in theoretical approach. Inspired by recent changes in the Neolithic studies, emphasis has moved from procurement strategies, carrying capacities of land and technologies, and instead is more concerned with how people engaged with landscape in a social way, how they gave and derived from it cultural meaning, and how mobility and food concerned much more than just resource acquisition and calorie intake. Mears outlines how the Aboriginal relationship with food is also a relationship with the past and with ancestors, how the myth concerning each food type is unique and guides the people in how they get on in the world. He also touches upon how these people are reacting to the introduction of a modern western diet, and how trips into the bush are thus seen in a new way: these returns to the traditional food sources acting as a 'detox' for their bodies, and presumably their identities. This last point might suggest a further way of viewing the introduction of domesticates in the early British Neolithic and the suggestions that these new food sources acted as special, status foods that were consumed in different contexts to the traditional wild foods.

However, there are two problems with this part of the book. The first is simply that it is too short. Mears' wealth of interactions with modern hunter-gatherer communities

might have been used to add much more detail to how people relate in a social sense to their food; one suspects that Mears has far more to offer in this area. The second problem is that Mears is not a trained anthropologist. When one enters an active community in order to observe, one's presence is always going to impact upon those observations. Although anthropologists will try to lessen this impact they will still acknowledge that it exists and (hopefully) take it into account in their work. Mears, not being trained in this field, and having an obvious emotional investment with hunter-gatherer groups, may not recognise the biases generated in his work to the same extent. But at the same time, in Mears' favour he brings something that many anthropologists lack: the practical knowledge and abilities to survive in these environments; he can apply this skill set through the medium of his own bodily experiences rather than just relating to it by third party observation. Thus one might consider that Mears' approach is not necessarily inferior to formal anthropology, but rather that it offers different opportunities to connect with the subject.

The next section of the book is dedicated to foraging, hunting and cooking techniques. This examines methods that might have been common in the Mesolithic. The archaeological literature commonly talks of the food types used in the past, where and when they were acquired, and what they might have meant to the people using them, but it less frequently delves into the processes of gaining and processing that food. Mears' descriptions of collecting wild foods help to put people and their actions back into our view of the past rather than just regarding all action as the result of the abstracted 'actor'. Again this section could have been longer, although there is good coverage of seashore resources, reflecting the bias in the archaeological record no doubt, the hunting side is a little thin. It does though go beyond the product of hunting, the food, and touches on what the action and ritual of hunting means to the community, as well as the links between hunter and prey.

The final section of the book is the gazetteer: 'Plants by family'. This section demonstrates just how large the natural larder on offer in the Mesolithic might have been, taking up as it does the majority of the book. Indeed, the authors have had to reduce the range covered in order to make it a more manageable selection. Each plant type has a brief description containing details of where and when it can be found and how it can be used. Of course, the plant distribution details are more

based upon the modern British environment than the thickly forested Mesolithic, and one or two of the plants, as the authors admit, were not available in the Mesolithic. Nonetheless, this section serves well to demonstrate that the Mesolithic forager had abundant choices and further refutes the theories that this period was governed by environmental determination.

To summarise, the book is firmly aimed at the interested layperson but still has much to offer the archaeologist who approaches it with an open mind. It is not an academic work and as such is not referenced although there is a reasonable bibliography included. Overall the book is well written in a very easy to follow style that keeps the reader interested. Indeed, the style is not unlike that used by Francis Pryor in *Seahenge* (2001) and *Britain BC* (2003) or Mark Edmonds in *Ancestral Geographies of the Neolithic* (1999), and it might be of benefit to archaeology if more works were written in this way: a style that is well informed and not afraid to tackle current issues in detail, but at the same time is accessible to those without a formal archaeological training, does not suffer from the stuffiness of some academic works and does not rely on creating its own language to exclude the masses from participation in discussion. To this end Mears is much more successful in communicating knowledge of the Mesolithic than many specialist archaeologists.