



## A Primer on Modern-World Archaeology

James R. Dixon

To cite this article: James R. Dixon (2015) A Primer on Modern-World Archaeology, Post-Medieval Archaeology, 49:3, 427-428, DOI: [10.1080/00794236.2015.1138055](https://doi.org/10.1080/00794236.2015.1138055)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00794236.2015.1138055>



Published online: 27 Apr 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 14



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

beginning. The thematic structure of McAtackney's monograph opens up the methodology, so that the narrative is logical and follows through. Both studies contribute a great deal to scholarship on archaeological approaches to institutions, and both provide valuable insights into how hitherto accepted institutions — the state and the state-run prison — can be reinterpreted, whether by academics or by interested parties. Both books could be read by archaeologists of any time period or methodological specialism, and crucially by non-archaeologists, which is perhaps the biggest selling point for both volumes.

Sheffield

KATHERINE FENNELLY

*A Primer on Modern-World Archaeology*. By Charles E. Orser, Jr. ix, 182 pages, illustrated. New York: Eliot Werner Publications, Inc., 2014. ISBN 978-0-9898249-2-7. GBP£20.00 (pbk).

*Exploring Atlantic Transitions: Archaeologies of Transience and Permanence in New Found Lands*. The Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology Monograph Series. Edited by Peter E. Pope with Shannon Lewis-Simpson. xix, 384 pages, illustrated. Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2013. ISBN 978-1-8438-0059-7. GBPE30.00 (hbk).

Charles Orser's *Primer* revisits his familiar 'four haunts' thesis of the last 20 years in the form of a book aimed directly at those in their formative years of archaeological study. It is the first of a new series, 'Principles of Archaeology', from Eliot Werner Publications. As such, the format of the book is directed towards study, with the text of the book interspersed with essay/discussion questions and the book's bibliographies containing some very valuable pointers for introductory background reading on the various topics Orser encounters. It includes a number of figures, the majority of which illustrate points or modes of thought rather than adding to the discussion in their own right, but they will no doubt be of use to the book's intended readership, even if only as *aides-mémoire* for exam revision.

The book offers a little less to those more well versed in Orser's work, although his general interpretations of the theory and practice of archaeology remain interesting and broadly attractive. The main point of contention will, I suspect, be Orser's discussion of the difference between historical archaeology and modern world archaeology. Here, modern world archaeology is that work which takes account of the four haunts (capitalism, colonialism, eurocentrism and racialization) in its interpretation, while historical archaeology deals with less than all four of these themes, often only one or none of them, and commonly concerns itself with the excavation and description of single sites. This idea is fine, but in the *Primer* it comes across as being somewhat forced, although I suspect it is laboured as it is because of the self-imposed teaching remit of the book.

An example of the problem of strict division comes with the mention in one of the bibliographies of Rachael Kiddey and John Schofield's paper 'Embrace the Margins' (2011) as 'An archaeological study of homelessness in Bristol, England. Helps demonstrate how historical archaeology is maturing as a serious discipline'. Within the context of this book, that means that it is a good example of archaeological practice, but it fails to consider the themes that define modern world archaeology. This raises a few questions. I think anyone familiar with the archaeology of homelessness whether in the UK or the US, would not hesitate to say that it regularly engages with capitalism as an interpretive theme. It also regularly deals with eurocentrism, insofar as it uses engagement with homeless individuals to question behavioural and societal norms in Western society. Colonialism is covered, too, as we see micro-studies of the ways in which humans are forced into movement around cities by imposed cultural development. Lastly, we see overt consideration of racialization although with that term recast as the stigmatization of poverty, mental illness and a number of other aspects of homeless archaeology.

Three reasons for this disparity spring to mind: either modern world archaeology is only applicable in certain parts of the world or certain time periods, or it is inflexible to the kinds of adaptation of its central terms I have employed above, or Orser's categorization refers to that one paper (which is concerned with describing a public archaeology project) and not to the wider projects of any of the archaeologists working on contemporary homelessness. All of these possibilities are problematic to the modern world archaeology thesis, but could be addressed by not forcing projects into categories of either counting as modern world archaeology or not.

Perhaps this just means that the subject remains dynamic with many of its central terms open to debate. I hope so. The *Primer* is certainly a valuable publication, very readable and with the essay questions fun to consider even for those who no longer find themselves in the position to do coursework. I am sure it will be at the centre of many a debate and I hope it finds audiences beyond American historical archaeology (I use that term in its disciplinary sense!).

*Exploring Atlantic Transitions* is an edited volume emanating from the SPMA conference in St John's, Newfoundland during 2010. The papers collected show an extraordinary breadth of subject matter and cover sites and archaeology across most of the Atlantic world. Within such a large volume, it seems wrong to highlight individual papers, but those by Evan Jones on the research of Alwyn Ruddock, and by Audrey Horning on 'unwanted histories' stood out as being particularly interesting and different to the rest of the volume. As a whole, though, the book is an excellent demonstration of a healthy field and will find satisfied readers in post-medieval and historical archaeologists, generalists and students alike.

## REFERENCE

Kiddey R, Schofield J. 2011, 'Embrace the margins: Adventures in archaeology and homelessness', *Public Archaeol.* **10**:14–22.

*London*

JAMES R. DIXON