

## BOOK NOTICES

*Prehistoric Britain : an illustrated survey*, by Keith Branigan (Spurbooks Ltd., 1976), 144pp., 51 photographs, 38 line drawings, 2 end maps, £5.00

'It has long been apparent to both students and teachers that a general, up-to-date survey of the history of Britain up to the time of the Roman conquest was needed, and this book is an attempt to provide such a survey. It is not intended as a text-book for the student but rather as a framework into which he or she can fit their more detailed studies, and from which the general reader can obtain an idea of how human society developed in these islands up until the time when it was dragged by conquerors into realms of written history . . . Prehistory . . . is even more concerned with processes than is History, and for this reason it is difficult to divide it up into meaningful periods in the same way as we do with History. Nevertheless this is what I have attempted to do, identifying eight major phases in the history of Britain prior to the Roman period.'

This long quotation from the Preface (p. 13) gives us the ambitious but very specific brief Dr. Branigan set himself and the criteria by which he presumably wishes the book to be assessed. He has certainly succeeded in providing a general—very general—and up-to-date survey of the *archaeology* of Britain to the Claudian invasion but whether he has written a History or even a Prehistory of Britain to that time is open to debate. As the author says, the book is not a student textbook, yet it succeeds as intended in providing in workmanlike if unexciting prose a cultural and chronological framework for roughly the last 250,000 years B.C. in Britain; but again, it is debatable whether readers will gain 'an idea of how human *society* developed'. Perhaps significantly, 'society' does not appear in the short index.

Disregarding the overt coat-trailing in the next two clauses of the above quotation, we then turn to the 'eight major phases', precisely identified for us by the Chapter heads: 250,000 - 4,000; 4,000 - 2,700; 2,700 - 2,200; 2,200 - 1,700; 1,700 - 1,300; 1,300 - 650; 650 - 150; and 150 B.C. - A.D. 43. Although absolutely sympathising with Dr. Branigan's attempt 'to break away from the shackles imposed by' (p. 13) the period nomenclature of the old-style technological model of prehistory, it must nevertheless be remarked that his eight phases correspond exactly with the time-honoured 'periods', like the Early Bronze Age, of conventional British prehistory. In other words, he has not broken away from the shackles he felt bound by: he has substituted numbers for words but has not altered the basic 'model'.

Two reasons can be adduced from internal evidence for this conceptual weakness at the core of the book. Firstly, as we have already implied, the book is an archaeology, not a prehistory—there is indeed a conflict between the sub-title and the Preface. Essentially the book is a description of things, not of peoples and processes, and while this is a limitation of the archaeological method of studying the past rather than personal to Dr. Branigan, it can be transcended, as is exemplified by Piggott's *Ancient Europe* so admirably referred to on p. 142. Secondly, having boldly made the decision to write a narrative based on a C-14 chronology, the author, perhaps correctly but somewhat cautiously, opts for 'the improved half-life of 5730 years' (p. 14) and therefore denies himself the temporal flexibility, e.g. over alternative cultural correlations, perfectly proper in current discussions of prehistory. Of course chronology is a vexed question at the moment, but why pretend otherwise? Further, the book appears to pretend to a (non-existent) chronological exactitude by printing all the dates B.C. when, improved half-life or not, they remain estimates, uncalibrated with the solar calendar and therefore, by international convention, more properly expressed in terms bc.

These basic issues apart, this reviewer would disagree with Dr. Branigan's prehistoric Britain on points of detail; but they are of little import since the interesting

and stimulating fact about British prehistory at this moment is the fluid nature of its study in the absence of a received canon of objectives and results. In attempting now so bravely to fashion as a piece of reportage a clear-cut, historical narrative of Britain before the Romans, without discussion, without references, apparently without very good proof-reading and manifestly without an artist or designer, Dr. Branigan can be credited with an interesting essay, now available in the Society's library.

P. J. FOWLER

*Somerset Levels Papers, Number 2*, ed. by Dr. John Coles (Somerset Levels Project, 1976), 79pp., illustrated, £1.80.

Dr. Coles has now been working on the prehistoric wooden trackway sites in the Somerset Levels for over ten years. Built over a period of 3,000 years, beginning in the 4th Millennium B.C., these trackways, preserved in the waterlogged conditions, are being excavated in advance of peat extraction. As the results of field work increase, the members of the Somerset Levels Project have begun their own publication. This is the second Paper in the series and contains reports by nine contributors on two recent trackway excavations: the Abbot's Way, dating to c. 2,000 B.C., and the Sweet Track, c. 3500 B.C. They provide an interesting contrast. While the Abbot's Way consists of little more than planks and branches laid side by side directly on the peat, the Sweet Track is a single plank raised above the level of the marsh by longitudinal timbers and pegs and is marked by a high degree of sophistication in construction and carpentry.

Both papers follow the same form, with a detailed report on the excavations and discoveries followed by a number of specialist reports on the dendrochronological analysis of the timbers, pollen analysis and a study of the fossil coleoptera. Between them they demonstrate a number of changes in the environment, some at least reflecting land clearance by man.

Comment must be made on the large number and high quality of the illustrations, both drawings and photographs. The format has been designed specifically for the needs of the trackway reports. The wide pages allow large scale drawings of the excavations and pollen diagrams to be included without the need for inconvenient folding pages.

The excavations on the Levels are providing a rare insight into the life of prehistoric man. A stable and settled way of life was needed to allow such structures to be built, and in the case of the Sweet Track this was obviously the situation from very early on in the Neolithic. There must have been some form of inter-community co-operation: the various processes in the construction of the trackways (surveying the route, selection of timber, felling, preparing, transporting, laying, pegging and maintenance) would have required more than a single family to complete.

Dr. Coles' work has already added much to our knowledge of prehistoric man, and as new trackways continue to be discovered we can expect more. I look forward to further numbers in this series of Somerset Levels Papers.

STEPHEN MINNITT

*Christianity in Somerset*, edited by R. W. Dunning (Somerset County Council, 1976), 132pp., illustrated, £1.60.

In 1973 Somerset County Council published *Aspects of Somerset History* by T. J. Hunt and R. R. Sellman, and the Council has now sponsored another publication which makes an important contribution to an understanding of the history of the 'old' Somerset (the book is not limited to the new county created by recent local

government reorganization). The inspiration for this publication came from Miss Edna Hall, who has been closely concerned with Religious Education in the county, and the text has been written by a team of contributors and edited by Dr. R. W. Dunning. Initial reaction to this book in the press and on television has focused attention on Dr. Dunning's claim, in the first chapter, that the Glastonbury legends concerning Joseph of Arimathea, King Arthur and the Holy Grail were a publicity stunt designed to raise money for the rebuilding of the abbey after a disastrous fire in 1184; but this is only the initial point (although very effective in arousing public interest) in a volume which covers an immense amount of ground. Thus the contents include accounts of church and monastic life in the Middle Ages, the upheavals of the Reformation, the growth of Nonconformity and friction with the Anglican Church in the 17th and 18th centuries, Anglican revival and the continued development of Nonconformity in the 19th century, and the oecumenical movement and the problems facing the Churches in the present century. The scope of the book is also very wide in that it attempts to explain not only differing forms of church organization, doctrine and worship, but also the involvement of the Church in the social life of the community and in welfare and educational activities.

One of the problems of producing a work of such wide scope written by a number of contributors is that the end result can be rather disjointed, but in this case the various contributions have been effectively integrated into an overall framework. The book also succeeds in achieving a balance between general statements and local examples: Robin Bush, for example, who has written the section on 'Anglican inertia, 1662-1800', quotes from the diary of John Cannon, a Somerset schoolmaster, in order to provide insights into the place of the church in the life of the common man in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, whilst the diary of the Rev. James Woodforde provides evidence of the attitudes and day-to-day life of an 18th-century clergyman. Mr. Bush also makes the point that certain diocesan records may give a misleading impression of clerical neglect during this period, for 'the deeds of those clergy who ministered faithfully have invariably gone unrecorded'. Another contributor is Mr. W. MacDonald Wigfield, who has written several excellent sections on the history of Nonconformity in Somerset; and Prebendary H. L. Franklin has contributed sections on education and the role of the cathedral. Dr. Dunning has himself written the chapters on the Middle Ages and the Reformation, and the other members of a worthy team of contributors are Mrs. P. J. Byrne, the Rev. A. G. Clarkson, Miss K. Holland, and the late Prebendary M. E. Roynon. The book also includes a note on sources which may encourage the interested reader to carry out his own researches.

With regard to the technical quality of this publication, not everyone will approve of the small type-size (which also applies to the section headings within the chapters) or the absence of a justified line. On the other hand the format of the book makes it easy to handle (which is appropriate to its use in school) and it is admirably illustrated with numerous figures and photographs which draw attention to the wealth of surviving visual evidence of religious activity in Somerset: the illustrations include not only the splendours of Wells Cathedral and the parish church of Huish Episcopi, but humbler buildings like the Friends' meeting-house at Long Sutton, as well as the barrel organ at Mulchelney church, the cartoon of a monk at Cleeve Abbey, and even (although very appropriately) a Death Watch beetle! At a time of high printing costs the book is excellent value at £1.60; and although it is debatable whether younger or less able schoolchildren will find it easy to use, their teachers should certainly find it a valuable source of information. Indeed, *Christianity in Somerset* should be regarded as essential reading for anyone with a real interest in the life of the county, both past and present.

*Education in the West of England 1066-1548*, by Nicholas Orme (University of Leicester, 1976), xiii + 239pp., 7 maps.

Nicholas Orme's earlier volume, *English Schools in the Middle Ages*, covering substantially the same period as this, has already established itself as an authoritative and standard account. The present work, which concentrates on the counties of Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Somerset and Wiltshire, cites all the evidence accumulated after patient, industrious research, of the 120 schools which are known to have existed in this area at some time during the period 1066-1548.

An important introductory chapter gathers together the threads of the varied accounts available, all inevitably incomplete, and some scanty indeed, but all are effectively used to describe as fully as possible the origin, constitution, continuity and local significance of each school. In a number of cases the account is embellished by the inclusion of biographical details of the school's benefactors, masters and pupils. In themselves these details must possess particular interest for residents in the Western counties. Comparisons are facilitated by the clear presentation of the histories classified in comparable groups by types of school. Four categories appear:-

1. Schools of the five contemporary principal cities: Bristol, Exeter, Gloucester, Salisbury, Wells.
2. Fee-paying schools, public or private, in other towns or villages.
3. Endowed and chantry schools, prominent in the 14th century.
4. Educational activities of the monasteries and religious houses, together with alms and song and cloister schools.

The introductory chapter helps to relate these references, so often indicative rather than wholly established, to the broader perspective of medieval English education. The appreciation is subtly fostered that elements of organized education were more widely dispersed in England during this period than had appeared probable before such documentary evidence had been collated. Despite the many gaps in the evidence, it points, too, to the schools exerting a considerable social impact. Though the risk of misinterpretation may be high, the case of Bishop Stapledon is eminently quotable. Upon entering the Exeter diocese in 1308 he ordained an army of over a thousand clerks upon one occasion — 'half of them from Cornwall!' It is deeply interesting that no Cornish schools have an established existence at that time. Yet we may accept that schools here, as elsewhere, provided the region with its clergy and administrators and, as time advanced, with literate businessmen and others. In the later years the approval of the schools' existence by the well-to-do led to an increasing flow of benefactions, culminating in land endowments which frequently ensured the schools' long continuity.

Though the glimpses of school curricula that appear suggest that, by modern appraisal, limited educational objectives existed, that amenities were few, books scarce and working conditions painfully demanding, yet the type of professional career sought was often achieved. While more complete historical and social records are desirable to identify with conviction what educational ideals permeated the school efforts and how, if at all, they were modified through the Middle Ages, at least it seems established that those characteristic of religious orders sought to prepare literate persons for a society they wished to perpetuate.

The awareness that, from the 12th century onwards, schools were, in sizable towns, as characteristic as hospitals, friaries or guildhalls, virtually ensures that they possessed significance socially, culturally and, if to a more limited extent, economically. This thoroughly documented volume could well re-stimulate local historians to check their own sources of local school records and, especially if fresh or unexpected facts emerge, carefully reevaluate the schools' contribution to the history of their local communities. Somerset readers will appreciate that the county is represented in each school category considered, with Wells as one of the five



major cities, and with eight entries in Group 2, two in Group 3, and ten in Group 4. All who are stimulated by this will readily recognize that this volume provides a necessary background, and that it is well-written, admirably edited and produced, and provides a shrewdly selected bibliography for further consultation.

P.C.DAVEY

*Light in Selwood*, by Michael McGarvie (Frome Society for Local Study, 1976), 80pp., price not stated.

Our member Mr. McGarvie and the Frome Society have made yet another substantial contribution to the history of their own town in this 'short history of St. John's Church . . . with an account of the hereditary right of the Lords of Orchardleigh to appoint the sexton'. The church has a long and fascinating history, but Mr. McGarvie concentrates most of his attention on the development of the fabric, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries, during which the building was first seriously neglected, then remodelled by Wyatville and virtually destroyed with the encouragement of its best known vicar, W. J. E. Bennett.

There is disappointingly little in this book, as in the fabric itself, of what was obviously an important medieval church. Its development from the mission centre of Selwood — hence the creation of the later deanery of Frome — to a richly endowed and furnished centre of worship of a thriving medieval town is swamped by a welter of chantries and descents of property. Mr. McGarvie is much more at home in a later period. There he can chide a curate for having 'literary inclinations with a passion for genealogy' and glory in the intimate detail of Victorian restoration, while himself emulating the curate and writing (and illustrating) the history of the church as the best Victorian might have done. In these days of increased knowledge of sources, it is not enough to study the papers of the gentry and the contents of parish archive collections, however voluminous they may be.

A second edition might well include the antipathetic, though very graphic, account of a service at St. John's in the late 1870s by the *Church Rambler* (volume 2, pp. 165-74) — if only to introduce religion into the matter; a table of contents; and surely a plan, without which the history of the fabric of such a complicated church must be difficult to understand.

R.W.D.

ALSO RECEIVED. *The Birds of Exmoor*, by N. V. Allen (The Exmoor Press, revised edition 1976. Microstudy A4), 63pp., illustrated, 90p.