

# A life in books

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How to choose five books from the so many that punctuate and distil an academic's life? In approaching the task, I found myself selecting books that had two characteristics. First, they are texts that I have returned to again and again, for changing reasons. They are books initially read and understood in one way that later I have returned to in order to dig out some half-remembered idea that had new meaning in a new context of research. Second, they are books that are exemplars of a whole category, invidiously chosen from all their peers.

The impact on me of reading Collingwood's *An autobiography* (1939) (as well as his *The idea of history*, 1946) was strong because I had earlier been very influenced by reading A.J. Ayer's *Language, truth, and logic* (1936) at a much too impressionable age and I had started my career influenced by Peter Haggett (1965) and the quantification and statistical revolutions in geography and in archaeology (especially David Clarke's *Analytical archaeology*, 1968). Collingwood became a champion for me in his critique of Hempel, methodological unity, and nomological explanation, especially since the latter had been so thoroughly embraced by processual archaeology in its early years. I never understood Collingwood as an idealist in any simple sense; I read him more as trying to understand agency and its historical embeddedness. His focus on action as context-specific, a matter of 'improvising, as best you can, a method of handling the situation in which you find yourself' (1939: 105), seemed best able to account for the results of my ethnoarchaeological research on material culture in action (Hodder 1982) as well as providing a bridge into contemporary theories of social practice. Later I returned to Collingwood when

reading Gadamer (who had been influenced by Collingwood) as part of an attempt to describe the archaeological method as hermeneutic. It seemed to me that the archaeological process of excavation could best be described in hermeneutic terms. I had always spent much time digging and had been intrigued by the process of making sense of what appeared to be mute remains. It seemed to me that Collingwood was the only one thinking really carefully and thoughtfully, philosophically, about what happens when one digs, even if he made some appalling blunders during his own excavations (Hodder 1995). His descriptions of what happens as one uncovers traces in the ground, and of what is behind a simple statement that 'this is a defensive ditch', were both full of good common sense, and yet theoretically illuminating. To me it was a revelation and a relief to find that the process of moving the trowel over the ground could be explored intellectually, enough for it to be called philosophy. I tried to emulate this exploration of the archaeological process (Hodder 1999), and in discussions of interpretation at the trowel's edge (Hodder 1997), although others have done it better than me (e.g. Lucas 2002). At another level, I admired Collingwood for being both a philosopher and a specialist in the archaeology of Roman Britain. His example suggested that an archaeologist could aspire to participate in wider debates and take part in contemporary intellectual life.

My second book is Gordon Childe's *Man makes himself* (1936). It was Childe who for me was the great towering figure of the history of archaeology. Yet he was also somehow an intimate figure, as I daily brushed by his bronze bust in the Institute of Archaeology in London as a student. His shadow loomed over the intellectual life of the Institute, and in those days I became steeped in his ideas of culture, read the most recent editions of *The dawn of European civilization* (1925), and grew to love the intricate details

of cultural change and spread that comprised Childe's archaeological contribution. The synthesis he produced of European prehistory remains breathtaking in its scope and scholarship, and I suppose it was partly his influence that led me to make a small attempt at a synthetic account of the diffusion of ideas and practices associated with the spread of farming across Europe in *The domestication of Europe* (Hodder 1990). It was when I read his more theoretical and interpretative work that I became most hooked, including the late writings on social worlds of knowledge (Childe 1949) and his posthumous 'Retrospect' (Childe 1958). *Man makes himself* had an indelible impact and I have often returned to it. The writing style was impressive, so clear and apparently simple and yet so powerful. It was not just that Childe had managed to write an incredibly popular book for a mass general audience, but also that he managed to express his social anger through archaeology. In clear, concise language he railed against child labour, slums, oppression, fascism, poison gas. He saw archaeology as the study of long-term history and of iniquities and the systems that produced them. The book foregrounds the toil of labourers cutting dykes, opening fields, constructing monuments, as well as the inequalities such labourers endured.

Childe built his arguments about past social iniquities through a careful thinking through of material practices and of the ways in which they transformed human experience. The discovery of fire is described as changing human cognitive abilities. The Neolithic Revolution is described in terms of the everyday life of coping with domesticated plants and animals, leading to the production of surplus and its social effects. New social systems arose from within the interstices of hoes and soils and grains and sheep. The emergence of pottery technology had great significance for human thought and the development of science. In his account of how humans had to adjust their ideas of substance as they developed metal technologies, Childe seems not only to explore social form through technology, but also to anticipate much recent work on materiality. I found myself returning to the book while writing *Entangled* (Hodder 2012). Following Childe, I described humans and things as coproducing each other so that 'man makes himself'. Such a great title for a book (or at least its modern equivalent, 'Humans make themselves'); I just wish he had not already used it.

In my view, Childe largely misunderstood Collingwood; certainly they were very different thinkers and reconciling their perspectives was an important challenge. Strangely I got some help on this from a very different source: Paul Willis's *Learning to labor: how working class kids get working class jobs* (1977), which is my third choice. The book looked at twelve boys – the 'lads' – in their last two years at a

school in the West Midlands in England in the 1970s. Willis managed, in a way that Collingwood might have admired, to get into the thought processes of these young boys as they made the decisions that would set them on one path or other in their lives. (How successful he was in this is not entirely clear, though. At the end of the book, Willis disarmingly includes comments back from the boys, one of whom says, 'I think we got to dislike you eventually ... Truthfully I was a bit fed up of yer' [1977: 195].) The boys were creative, defiant, thoughtful, belligerent, and very aware of the decisions they were making, articulate and humorous. They were undoubtedly strong and masterful agents. They were powerful young men. And yet they made decisions that re-created their working-class category. They reproduced their own subordination. In reacting against the establishment, they made choices, such as not doing well in school, spending time in the pub, that made sense to them but which ensured the reproduction of their own conditions of existence.

When I first read Willis's book, I saw it as being about agency, exemplifying ideas in the work of Bourdieu (1977) and Giddens (1979) that were so influential in archaeology at the time. Later I reread it as showing how the boys had few alternatives, how they seemed stuck or entrapped in the entangled practical choices of their lives. Willis wrote of the irreversibility of choices made, of the double entrapment of the boys' circumstances, the 'turning of the screw' of their subordination (1977: 107–8). The book also came to inform my ideas about 'fittingness', a notion that seemed a better way of talking about human culture than some form of neo-Darwinian 'fitness' (Hodder 2012). Willis showed how a whole range of jobs, from building work to furnace work or deep-sea fishing, involved exacting physical tasks that resonated with cultural ideas of strength, masculinity, and reputation (1977: 53). As a member of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham, Willis was of course interested in the production of culture, and his grounding of cultural practices within a critical materialism made sense to an archaeologist steeped in Childe. He talked of 'the visceral inseparability of forms of oppression and their associated discourses of meaning and feeling in society' (1977: 207). It was precisely this sense that I tried to capture, however clumsily, in notions of affordance, bodily resonance, and abstraction within the fittingness of entanglements.

My arguments about the components of entanglement were more directly influenced by Sidney Mintz's impressive *Sweetness and power* (1985), my fourth choice. Scholarship of such broad scope has the ability to transform our perspectives on daily taken-for-granted. The isolated and individual task of having a cup of tea or a piece of cake become

suddenly layered, connected to far-flung corners, intricately caught up in a global swathe of humans and things. A cup of tea in Europe mixed sugar from the Caribbean with tea from estates in India, and in doing so it assembled a global heterogeneity of ships, slaves, sugar cane, boiling houses, mills, bankers, refiners, grocers, and government regulators. The parallels with Actor-Network-Theory are obvious, but Mintz (a reader of Childe) takes a ruggedly historical and technological view, exposing the asymmetries and iniquities of the sugar trade. The consumption of sugar-rich foods consumed in ten-minute breaks in factories in Britain allowed more labour to be extracted. More generally, the organization of industrial labour in Europe could be seen as derivative from the Caribbean sugar factories. Like Childe and Willis, Mintz is also interested in the ways in which culture is produced and resonates within material and bodily practices. He suggests that sugar satisfies a possibly universal desire for sweetness, but 'it also seems, in so doing, to awaken that desire anew' (1985: xxv). The English already had a sweet tooth (as seen in their consumption of mead and candied wine) before the arrival of sugar from the Caribbean. As sugar became more available, the British added it to tea, coffee, chocolate, and to puddings, jams, and cakes. These products changed social habits such as high tea in the afternoon, and ultimately 'refined sugar ... became a symbol of the modern and industrial' (1985: 193).

*Sweetness and power* is a wonderful example of the entanglements of humans and things. It shows how even the smallest of materials, like a cube of sugar or a cup of tea, gather (in Heidegger's terms) vast empires of humans and things. One of my favourite books has always been James Deetz's *In small things forgotten* (1977). Archaeologists are used to the idea that small things can have large significance or can lead historically to large-scale change. An anthropological/historical example that I found especially useful was Marshall Sahlins's (1981) account of Cook's arrival on, departure from, and return to Hawaii, where a series of conjunctural events had unintended consequences that channelled long-term change. Such books have drawn me into a fascination with the practical daily details and entanglements that comprise and channel broad sweeps of history. Other examples include Timothy Mitchell's *Rule of experts* (2002), and the novels and fictionalized histories of Amitav Ghosh (*The glass palace*, 2002; *In an antique land*, 2011) or Michael Ondaatje (*The cat's table*, 2011).

The Annales school held a long fascination for me in this regard, and it is for this reason that I have chosen Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou* (1978) as my fifth book.

Perhaps all archaeologists dream that they could excavate a site that would allow such detailed

reconstruction of past ways of life that one could almost 'be there', touch the past, get a real sense of what it was like to live daily in deep time. *Montaillou* is not an archaeology, but it is the most remarkable insight into a medieval world. It describes the lives of inhabitants of a French village in the Pyrenees between 1294 and 1324, and is based on the written records of interrogations during the Inquisition. While the book recounts *événements* in relation to longer-term structures in the Annales tradition, Le Roy Ladurie also refers to Bourdieu, and the book can be seen as contributing to understanding of practice and agency. For me it also resonated with Norbert Elias's *History of manners* (1969) in that it showed how small-scale bodily practices (spitting in Elias's case, delousing in Le Roy Ladurie's) could be part of large-scale effects.

It was from *Montaillou* that I got the idea of the *domus* as something much more than a group of people living in a house, but as an interlinked set of economic, social, religious, and identity functions. In the medieval Pyrenees, the *domus* was a moral entity that held rights, based around a dead ancestor. It seemed to me that in the Neolithic of the Middle East and Europe, the house played a similar role (Hodder 1990). Much more than a household of co-operating individuals, the Neolithic *domus* had economic, social, and religious dimensions, and could further be seen as a mechanism and metaphor for domesticating human relations as they adopted domestic plants and animals. Later, Le Roy Ladurie's account in *Montaillou* came to be an ideal to strive towards as I started excavating at Çatalhöyük, a Neolithic site in central Turkey. Çatalhöyük is remarkably well preserved in that it has multiple micro-layers that record almost monthly events during the 2,000 years of occupation. Here, if anywhere, it might be possible for an archaeologist to write a prehistoric *Montaillou*. I have made a start at that (Hodder 2006), but there is a long way to go in drawing together the results of a large international team of researchers as they piece together the daily practices of life 9,000 years ago from the smallest forensic traces. I remain convinced, however, that a Neolithic *Montaillou* can be achieved, if in rather different and indeed more complete terms than even a historian can attain (Rosaldo 1986, Tilly 1978). But it is also the style of Le Roy Ladurie's writing that warrants attention. Rather than separating and abstracting theoretical argument, his book integrates theoretical debate into the detailed accounts of the inhabitants of the village. Notions of time and temporality, ideas of space and place, are all explored, but seamlessly within detailed accounts of daily lives – something to strive for if I ever get to write a *Montaillou*-like Çatalhöyük.

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