



## Book Reviews

### **IRELAND'S FIRST SETTLERS: TIME AND THE MESOLITHIC BY PETER WOODMAN**

*Oxbow Books, Oxford. 2015. 366pp, 212 illus incl B/W plates, 32 col plates, 13 tables ISBN 978-1-78297-778-0, hb, £50.00*

*Ireland's First Settlers* is a wide reaching and ambitious book which looks to tell the story of the Irish Mesolithic – both in the history of its research and our current understanding of the period itself. It is structured over five sections, containing a total of 12 chapters which deal with the environmental context of the Irish Early Holocene, a review of the material record, the chronology of human settlement throughout the Irish Mesolithic, human lifeways during the period, and questions for future research.

Reviewing this book has posed somewhat a challenge for me. Although published in 2015, I began this review in late 2016, and during this process I received the sad news, in January 2017, that Peter Woodman had passed away. As such, attempts to see the content of the book in isolation from Woodman's life and extraordinary career become futile, and inevitably this becomes a review which considers the poignancy of the publication and role that it plays in his personal contribution to European prehistory.

Peter Woodman was, quite frankly, a Goliath of Mesolithic archaeology. The fieldwork and archival research carried out by Woodman in the 1970s led to a series of definitive publications on the Irish Mesolithic; bringing together the evidence for this enigmatic period of Irish prehistory in a way never attempted before. A huge presence on the academic conference circuit, Woodman worked tirelessly throughout his career to promote the Irish Mesolithic within the broader prehistoric narrative; both at home and abroad. He sought, publicly, to draw critical lessons from the difficulties encountered in defining the Mesolithic in Ireland for the greater benefit of prehistoric archaeologists around the world.

The imprint of Woodman's high academic profile and unmistakable voice runs throughout this book. His status as a senior figure within European prehistory is directly reflected in the structure and content of each of these chapters, which draw in a wide breadth of knowledge acquired over the course of a career spent studying Ireland's Early Holocene archaeology. Consequently, these chapters often take on the feel of key note lectures; working across a rich and eclectic understanding of different forms of palaeoenvironmental, climatic, sedimentological and archaeological forms of evidence, and bringing the understanding of a wide range of colleagues to bear on specific issues or questions. Anyone familiar with Woodman's delivery style will instantly recognise the meticulous examination of the implications of different forms of data, and careful consideration of the strengths and limitations of each type of evidence for answering specific archaeological questions. For those unfamiliar with Woodman's work, this style may initially take some getting used to, but it is remarkably effective in illustrating the complexity of the task faced by archaeologists working through the challenges of the Early Holocene. It goes a long way towards emphasising one of the recurrent themes throughout the book; the current limits of our archaeological understanding of the period, which Woodman goes to great lengths to define and highlight.

These limitations come in many forms are repeatedly emphasised throughout the book; the geological and sedimentological factors influencing the survival and exposure of Early Holocene deposits, the historical biases in the recognition of Mesolithic sites, the differential loss of coastal areas due to sea level changes, the impact of

excavation methodologies upon our understanding of Mesolithic archaeology, the differential preservation of various forms of archaeological and palaeoenvironmental data. At times, Woodman's tendency to return to these can feel overly negative, particularly for those unfamiliar with the challenges faced by early prehistoric research more generally. Yet these are important points which have direct implications for the ways in which we can interpret the archaeological record, and as such they bear repetition.

One particularly striking aspect of *Ireland's First Settlers* is the explicit focus placed on archaeological materials. Woodman draws on his extensive experience in working with the material record of human occupation throughout Irish prehistory in defining, at length, the material culture repertoire of the Mesolithic in Ireland. There is a clear attempt here to go beyond the current consensus on diagnostic forms of lithics and examine the potential Mesolithic affinities of these lesser studied types. This is approached critically, discussing contextual data wherever available, and explicitly acknowledging the strength of dating evidence on a case-by-case basis. This approach is admirable, allowing for discussions to extend beyond the norm and include material which is often overlooked as our Mesolithic chronologies become increasingly more refined. There is a key issue at stake here; whereby artefacts which cannot be linked to our developing prehistoric chronologies cease to be discussed in print, and consequently become forgotten within collections to all but a select few archaeologists and curators who have studied them first hand. In taking such a broad reaching approach, Woodman tackles this head on, and brings the full weight of his extensive career to bear on the issue of defining Mesolithic material culture in a constructive manner. There is a trade off in terms of structure (with an occasionally overwhelming level of detail and anecdotal evidence which detracts from the overall clarity of the writing), but we so seldom get the opportunity to see a discussion of this scale in print that this can be argued to be merited.

The book also leaves a lot of questions open ended. This is, now, a particularly poignant point, as it emphasises the lost opportunities for further discussion in these areas with a man who understood the issues involved from a uniquely informed perspective. Archaeological understandings, when built up over the course of a career spanning more than 40 years, are precious resources in themselves, and we have now lost the opportunity to draw on these when facing the challenges identified by Woodman within *Ireland's First Settlers*. The opportunity for dialogue is also now lost; the space for critical reflection on the research questions Woodman identifies to get to the core of *why* questions of technology and economy are so important to pushing forward Irish Mesolithic Studies, no longer exists. There are frequent references within the book to a database of Irish Mesolithic sites (upon which much of the analysis is drawn) and whilst this remains unpublished, further questions surround its fascinating content and structure which we may never have an opportunity to answer. However, these issues now become the focus of a new generation of Irish Mesolithic scholars; who now have their own opportunity to address these, and in doing so build up an understanding of the period which matches the standards set by Woodman.

The sad circumstances under which this review has been written prevent me from being able to see *Ireland's First Settlers* as a comprehensive and methodical review of the Irish Mesolithic, and more a series of final thoughts from Woodman on the period he was so embedded within. As such, the insights and arguments presented by Woodman on various facets of the Irish Mesolithic record are thought provoking and keenly observed, but perhaps lack the cohesion or structure required for use of this book as a key text for teaching purposes. For those unfamiliar with the Irish Mesolithic, this book might not be the best place to start. Instead, *Ireland's First Settlers* is an essential researchers' tool – a poignant, final opportunity to hear the thoughts of a period-defining authority on his most-loved academic subject.

*Ben Elliott*

*Research Associate, University of York*

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