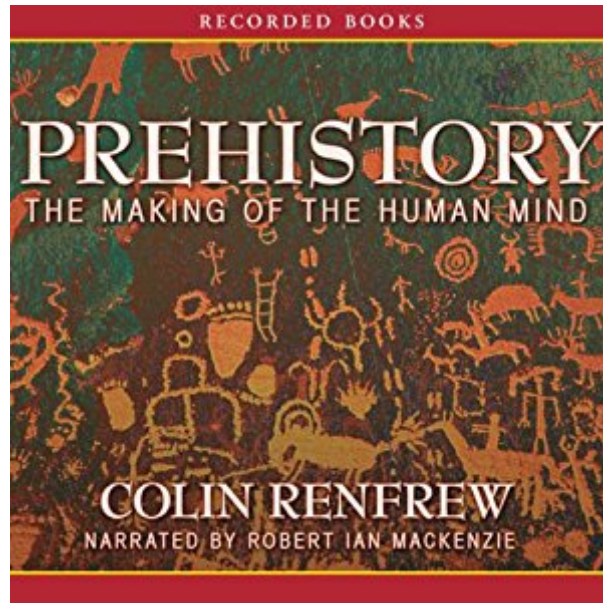


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Prehistory: Making Of The Human Mind



Synopsis

In *Prehistory*, the award-winning archaeologist and renowned scholar Colin Renfrew covers human existence before the advent of written records—“which is to say, the overwhelming majority of our time here on earth. But Renfrew also opens up to discussion, and even debate, the term —prehistory— itself, giving an incisive, concise, and lively survey of the past, and how scholars and scientists labor to bring it to light. Renfrew begins by looking at prehistory as a discipline, particularly how developments of the past century and a half—“advances in archaeology and geology; Darwin’s ideas of evolution; discoveries of artifacts and fossil evidence of our human ancestors; and even more enlightened museum and collection curatorship—“have fueled continuous growth in our knowledge of prehistory. He details how breakthroughs such as radiocarbon dating and DNA analysis have helped us to define humankind’s past—“how things have changed—“much more clearly than was possible just a half century ago. Answers for why things have changed, however, continue to elude us, so Renfrew discusses some of the issues and challenges past and present that confront the study of prehistory and its investigators. In the book’s second part, Renfrew shifts the narrative focus, offering a summary of human prehistory from early hominids to the rise of literate civilization that is refreshingly free from conventional wisdom and grand —unified— theories. The author’s own case studies encompass a vast geographical and chronological range—the Orkney Islands, the Balkans, the Indus Valley, Peru, Ireland, and China—and help to explain the formation and development of agriculture and centralized societies. He concludes with a fascinating chapter on early writing systems, —From Prehistory to History.— In this invaluable, brief account of human development prior to the last four millennia, Colin Renfrew delivers a meticulously researched and passionately argued chronicle about our life on earth, and our ongoing quest to understand it. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Combining a long career in the field with a fine narrative style, Renfrew provides a succinct summary of human origins. In a brief overview, the author manages to trace the beginnings of humanity in Africa and how we learned to follow its track across the planet. Well formulated for the reader new to the various research tools that have helped this process, it's also an excellent reference for those conversant with the basics to enlarge their view. Relying on a global perspective, his account stretches from African beginnings through Asia and Europe and to Mesoamerica. His expansive view allows him to address the question of "how we came to be" with deep insight. "Prehistory", he reminds us, is a term difficult to define. We're accustomed, he says, to view anything prior to written records - even clay ones - as prehistory. That leads to an over-focussed view of areas like Mesopotamia and Egypt. Renfrew opens the book by demonstrating how that approach should be modified. There are other forms of records and other conclusions to be drawn by understanding them. Renfrew stresses that there are few global patterns to rely on and each region must be considered through the available evidence. Among the many ways of doing this, he pays special attention to radiometric dating, a technique he helped foster in the UK. Another significant method, following shortly after the introduction to isotopic analysis is that of reading DNA. Together, these two analytical techniques overturned many previously held misconceptions. The explanation on what constitutes prehistory and the rise of analytical technology requires less than a third of the book. The remainder is dedicated to a discussion of what makes humanity special in the animal kingdom.

I do recommend this book, but certainly not as highly as I had hoped to. This is partly because it did not meet certain expectations. I had very high hopes indeed of uploading a lifetime's worth of synthetic insight into human prehistory from a famous name in the field. That hope was largely disappointed by this book. Perhaps I should have seen it coming, the book is only 240 pages long, certainly not space enough for a detailed treatise on prehistory (for that I have turned to Steven Mithen's 600 page "After the Ice: A global human history 20,000-5,000 B.C."). Instead, I should have paid more attention to Renfrew's glinting subtitle "The making of the human mind." In fact I did see

this, and was intrigued, but unfortunately, in the end found Renfrew's thesis on that subject to be based on a dichotomy that I don't believe exists. This book is composed of two parts. The first part is Renfrew's history of Prehistory, as a field of academic endeavor. This is in itself interesting tale. From a history of science perspective, there is always much to be learned from examination of successive emancipations from past biases and technological boundaries, and how those two factors feedback on each other. However, there follows an odd disconnect from that story, it seemed to me, with the second part of the book. Renfrew periodically hypes up the worth of paradigmatic technologies of radioisotopes, and, most recently DNA methods. The big anticlimax for me was that in the second half of the book, the curtain was finally drawn, and the DNA evidence was brought out to bear in overwhelmingly in support of the "out-of-Africa" scenario and soundly damning the longstanding alternative, the "multi-regional hypothesis.

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