The Great Journey:
The Peopling of Ancient America

By Brian M. Fagan.


A Journey to a New Land

Barbara J. Winter, Janice Graf, and M. Craig Rust, editors.


Companion website at: http://www sfu museum /.

It has become popular to refer to the dispersal of anatomically modern humans from our African place of origin as a "journey." This implies a purposeful and active undertaking resulting in the peopling of the world's other continents. The two books presently reviewed are similar in that they use this "journey" metaphor to present the current state of knowledge about the first settlement of the Americas to a mainly senior secondary and junior post-secondary audience. However, this is no easy task considering the almost daily new discoveries in the field, and the two books are, in fact, very different in their specifics.

Let us start with Brian Fagan's updated edition of The Great Journey: The Peopling of Ancient America, a book that originally appeared in 1987. Professor Fagan is possibly the most prolific writer of anthropology textbooks today, and most students of An- glyphone archaeology will likely recognise his name. I read two of his textbooks during my undergraduate studies, and I have to admit that my expectations of The Great Journey were high. Therefore, it was a little disappointing to find out that we’re dealing here with an exact reprint of the 1987 first edition, complete with original typographical errors; only a short, preface-like “Update of the 2004 Edition” is new.

Fagan’s book is divided into five parts consisting of two or three chapters each, preceded by the already mentioned Update and by the introduction to the original edition. The Update makes an ambitious recap of everything that has gone on since 1987, while the introduction explains the “archaeological drama” metaphor that Fagan employs in organising the main body of The Great Journey into a series of acts (parts) and scenes (chapters). Part One reviews the history of (Euro-American) scholarly interest in the origins of the Native Americans, from the racist and
religion-fundamentalist musings during the conquest to the later 20th century search for a pre-Clovis presence. Part Two (Act One) then puts the peopling of the Americas into a global context by reviewing the evolutionary history of hominids, culminating in the dispersal of anatomically modern humans during the Late Pleistocene. The crossing through Beringia into what is now Alaska and Yukon takes place in Part Three (Act Two), while Part Four (Act Three) has the actors move south of the Late Wisconsinan ice sheets. The different routes possibly taken by these south-moving humans are weighed in Chapter 7 (Interlude); the evidence for pre-Clovis settlement is scrutinised in Chapter 8 (Act 3, Scene 1); and the Clovis culture is discussed in Chapter 9 (Act 3, Scene 2). Finally, Part Five again places the peopling of the Americas into perspective, but this time from the vantage point of later developments in (North) American prehistory.

In critiquing this book, I have to consider that the original edition must have been received to great acclaim back in 1987. It was well researched by a more-than-competent outsider to the subject; it presented the available information clearly and, I think, even-handedly; the writing-style was appropriate for its intended audience; annotated guides to further reading for each chapter allowed for the verification of ideas and facts as presented; and the author made well-argued recommendations for future research. On the other hand, it is a bit of a stretch to claim, as Fagan does in the Update of the 2004 Edition (p. ix), that the book was the first to place the peopling of the Americas into a broad, global context (consider, for example, Macgowan and Hester 1962). However, it is true that Fagan may have been among the most explicit to argue systematically and consistently for understanding the peopling of the Americas within the context of the dispersion of anatomically modern humans in the Late Pleistocene, and this is, indeed, the genius of his work.

Now, as far as the 17-page Update to the new edition is concerned, it almost has a written-at-the-last-moment, tacked-on quality to it. The Update stands clearly apart from the main body of the book, in which discussion of discoveries made in “the present decade” (p. 54) actually refers to the 1980s, and in which we still find invaluable references to the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Lapplanders, and the Eskimo. In the end, it was always going to be an uphill battle to summarise everything that has happened in First Americans research (and beyond) over the last 15 to 20 years; hats off to Fagan, though, for even finding space to mention that the Cold War had concluded in the meantime, thus creating new opportunities for North American investigators to search for the probable ancestors of the First Americans in northeastern Siberia.

Fagan also attempts to divorce Clovis-the-time-period from Clovis-the-culture: his argument is that Clovis-the-time-period is still the best designation for the earliest inhabitants of the Americas, but that the traditional interpretation of Clovis-the-culture as a big-game hunting society cannot and must not be applied to all the First Americans. This argument, as presented in the Update, lacks the expected Fagan-esque clarity; moreover, it goes very much against the arguments presented in the main body of the book. Of course, this idea is extremely important—so much so that it should have warranted a complete rewriting of Fagan’s original work.

The Update may not have entirely achieved its ambitious goal, but it did provide references to useful stepping stones for more detailed information, the most important of which are the scholarly articles in Nina Jablonski’s edited volume, The First Americans: The Pleistocene Colonization of the New World (Jablonski 2002), erroneously listed seven times as published in 2000. (It is somewhat sad that most typographical errors and misprints occur precisely in the Further Readings bibliographies—in my opinion the most important sections of the book.) The only new addition I would make to the bibliography is Vivian Scheinsohn’s (2003) review of hunter-gatherer archaeology in South America, in which she discusses problems pertinent to the peopling of the Americas.

Perhaps Fagan’s biggest problem area is the Northwest Coast. He refers to Prince Rupert as being on the mainland (p. 233) and the Ozette mudslide as occurring 500 years ago (p. 234). His treatment of the costal route theory is critical but rather weak, and in the Update he had to recant his earlier affirmation of the existence of an ice-free corridor throughout the entirety of the Late Wisconsinan glaciation. Luckily for us, the other book presently reviewed—the volume from SFU’s Archaeology Press—provides a nice contrast, having, as it does, the Northwest Coast as its strong point.

A Journey to a New Land, edited by a team of scholars and educators from Simon Fraser University, is a hard copy of material publicly available on the website of SFU’s Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology as part of the Virtual Museum of Canada. The website was designed with the explicit purpose of serving as an educational tool for the general public, from primary to post-secondary level. It was the brainchild of Dr. Barbara Winter, Director of SFU’s Museum, in collaboration with the Learning and Instructional Development Centre, also of SFU. The book itself contains material aimed at the secondary and post-secondary
different traces in the archaeological record. Neither Fagan nor
the need to consider different strategies of human dispersion, migra­tion, and finally colonisation—the different strategies may leave
are important because there’s more than a scientific component
the Americas can be employed to validate certain mentalities
of North America.
In conclusion, I think that both Fagan’s Great Journey and
SFU’s Journey to a New Land are good reads. Though both have
their flaws, taken together they provide a solid synthesis of the
state of research into the peopling of the Americas at the begin­
ing of the third millennium. The former puts the First Americans
into context, while the latter is packed with information pertinent
to British Columbia. I would recommend both books to educators,
but more as teaching tools and reference guides, rather than as
textbooks.

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