

MEDIA REVIEWS

Encyclopedia of Human Evolution and Prehistory

Review of *Encyclopedia of Human Evolution and Prehistory, Second Edition* edited by Eric Delson, Ian Tattersall, John A. Van Couvering, and Alison S. Brooks. New York, Garland Publishing, 2000, xiv + 753 pp, maps, charts, tables, drawings, photos, \$175.

If your personal or institutional library could have only one reference book on human and primate evolution, this is it. It is current up to 1999. It is authoritative, with 54 experts. It is comprehensive, with nearly 800 topic headings, including entries on all living and fossil primates (even the Yeti!).

The entries are of uniformly high quality, and are often written by the original scholar of the topic. For example, when the news media proclaims the discovery of the earliest hominid from Tugen Hills, look up the site in the index and find the article by Andrew Hill, who has been working there for decades. When a new book appears on the evolution of consciousness, go to “brain” and read what Ralph Holloway has to say. When memory fades on the details of primate taxonomy, turn to pages xxiii–xxvii for a definite answer, or to the dozens of separate entries within the body of the text.

The first edition was a gem, but in this age of exploding information, it is wonderful to have this update. The addition of Alison Brooks to the old editorial triumvirate of Delson, Tattersall, and Van Couvering is welcome. She brings an encyclopedic knowledge of archaeology to the volume, and a lot of wisdom about what is most important about our prehistoric roots.

It is a quick reference for basic facts, but it is often as good or better than going to original journal articles and monographs because every entry provides context and is usually written by someone who has done original research on the topic. Although one would encourage students to go to the original scientific literature for information, in many cases the best original article might be an entry in this volume. I would not recommend allowing students to cite as sole authority entries in the book without first knowing the author’s role in the subject, however. Web search engines can find sites with information about many of the topics covered here, but with no assurance of scientific accuracy. Obviously, one would rather read Tim White’s assessment of *Ardipithecus* than all the nonsense available on the web. Rich Kay is a better source about the Late Eocene/Early Oligocene Parapithecidae than anything found by the Google search engine. One can trust what Eric Delson says about the evolution of Cercopithecinae, or what John Van Couvering details about the Pleistocene.

The index is the key to quick discovery. It is particularly helpful because most topics include other topics. Information about lorises, for example, can be found in the article on Lorisidae, but also in the entry on Cheirogaleidae and Diet. *Macaca* appears in a splendid essay on Anthropoidea in a section entitled “Macroevolutionary Patterns in Catarrhines and Platyrrhines”; in a section under Asia, Eastern and Southern, called “Nonhuman Primate History in Eastern Asia”; and under Cercopithecinae, Cercopithecoidae, China, France, and Sahabi. Even obscure subjects, such as McHenry, can be found in the index.

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Any reference book of this magnitude will have some unevenness. Human evolution is a contentious field. The editors had to choose their authorities carefully and try to avoid bias as much as possible. This inevitably led to some exclusions of authorities who have made major contributions. There is, for example, a strong northeastern United States flavor, with 43% of the contributors from New York and 13% from Washington, D.C. The editors, of course, are from New York and Washington. Three of the editors are from the American Museum of Natural History and share enthusiasm for a cladistics approach to evolutionary biology. But there are also contributors from Japan, Australia, South Africa, England, and 10 other states, and no one who knows the New Yorkers would accuse them of being of one mindset. Some of the contributors have a healthy skepticism about how cladistics has been applied in paleoanthropology.

It is expensive, and I shied from buying it immediately. Do not make my mistake if you value accurate, up-to-date, and precise information on all topics related to human evolution, archaeology, and primates. At least follow my example and demand that your institutional library order it. Students, staff, and colleagues will be grateful.

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