

Introduction

Captain Robert Falcon Scott and the members of his second expedition to the South Pole established a base camp on the Antarctic coast in January 1911. Twenty-five men lived for the next year in a prefabricated building whose interior walls were made from crates bearing the names of iconic Edwardian manufacturers – Fry’s Cocoa, Huntley and Palmer’s Biscuits, Lyle’s Golden Syrup, Tate’s Sugar, Sunlight Soap, Bovril, Oxo and Heinz. After caching stores and supplies along the route that would be used for the springtime trek to the Pole, the men waited out the winter darkness. Chores consumed most of their time, though they also held football matches in the snow, attended lectures and lantern slide shows, read through an extensive library, played tunes on a pianola and produced a comic newspaper. Scott recorded in his diary that amid this comradely activity, after dinner each night ‘the gramophone is usually started by some kindly disposed person’.¹ The Gramophone Company had donated the machine along with hundreds of recordings, ranging from the patriotic strains of the National Anthem and military airs to the Norse heroism evoked by Richard Wagner’s ‘Ride of the Valkyries’ and the levity of operettas and music hall favourites.

As another member of the expedition noted, out of all these choices, ‘[George] Robey on “Golf” and the “Prehistoric man” are very popular.’² The latter was a short sketch about a cave man’s amorous misadventures that Robey, one of the era’s most popular comedians, had toured since 1902. We can imagine Robey’s voice emerging through the ethereal cackle of early recordings to evoke comforting memories of home as much as the labels on the boxes that surrounded Scott’s men. Robey would also have conjured up the comic cave men that had been commonly seen in cartoons, stories, songs, plays, pageants, parades and poems since the

mid-1890s. These scruffy prehistoric humans inhabited a fanciful historical epoch, depicted as an archaic version of contemporary Britain. The explorers, who hailed from the centre of the British Empire as well as its Australian, Canadian and Caribbean peripheries, would have known about this vision of Britain's most distant past, thanks to the way in which it had been exported throughout the globe. The men may have joked about how their sun- and wind-marked faces, ragged hair and heavy fur, leather and wool garments made them look prehistoric. They may also have smiled that they had created an archaic approximation of the Royal Navy, one of Britain's most venerable and venerated institutions, in a timber hut at the bottom of the earth: walls of crates demarcated the officer's quarters from those of the men, and Scott dined at the head of the table, though everyone used enamelled metal plates and mugs and sat beneath the bulky equipment that hung from the rafters. The gramophone, whose gleaming horn of inlaid wood exemplified middle-class domesticity, must have looked conspicuously out of place.

In early 1912, a party led by Scott reached the Pole, only to die on the homeward journey. Scott's diary, which rang with fortitude, duty and courage, enshrined him as one of the Edwardian era's greatest heroes and inured him to post-imperial reappraisals. Robey on the other hand never successfully adapted to film as it emerged in the 1920s, and so he has been consigned to the world of specialist collectors. Though Robey's 'Prehistoric man' sketch was one of the most popular and influential music hall turns ever devised, his biographers have paid it scant attention.³ Such is the oblivion into which it has fallen that photographs of Robey in costume are believed to show him in the role of Robinson Crusoe (see Figure 1).⁴

Robey's obscurity reflects a wider ignorance about the history of prehistoric characters in mass culture, even though modern audiences are just as enrapt with clumsy and unintelligent cave men as Scott's explorers had been. These prehistoric humans comically confront archaic versions of the contemporary world as a way of satirising its institutions, ideals and beliefs. It is a fundamentally unscientific vision in which dinosaurs and humans coexist, though they were actually separated by aeons. Yet it is an extremely influential view of the distant past. Satellite communications make it hard to imagine a twenty-first-century group being as isolated as Scott's expedition. But a modern expedition is just as likely to pack music, films and television programmes. Such a collection might well include *The Croods*, the hugely successful 2013 Hollywood prehistoric cartoon. Much



George Robey as the prehistoric man, c. 1902.

I

as Robey's sketch had, the film would provide the isolated party with a comforting reminder of urban life. Their response to *The Croods* would be conditioned, just as that of Scott's men had been, by long exposure to prehistoric comedies featuring archaic technology like foot-powered cars and domesticated dinosaurs. Robey epitomised this world to the Edwardians,

while modern explorers might point to *The Flintstones*, one of the most successful animated television series of all time.

Like virtually all twenty-first-century viewers, the explorers would be unaware that the show's protagonist, Fred Flintstone, descends directly from Robey's cave man. The comic view of the deep past that inspired both characters is an enduring conceit in global mass culture and has been more influential in shaping popular ideas about prehistory than scientific theories, cave art and the fossil remains of ancient hominids. Constance Areson Clark has argued that 'people learn a lot of things about evolution from cartoons, and they know some of these things without thinking much about them – because they learned them from cartoons'.⁵ A fair amount has been written about pictorial and literary attempts to scientifically recreate prehistory, and a great deal about dinosaurs, but only the most basic history of cave man characters has been sketched.⁶ This oversight is odd, because from the time when proto-human fossils were first discovered in the mid-nineteenth century, writers, illustrators and performers imaginatively recreated the world these creatures had inhabited. Prehistoric humans were initially depicted with explicitly simian features, encapsulating the evolutionary threat that consanguinity with apes posed to Victorian social, religious and racial ideals. Popular visual and stage representations of prehistoric creatures were more simple than scientific or literary ones, but they were not simplistic. They incorporated commonly understood, though often bowdlerised, ideas about human prehistory that had been spread through politically radical magazines, lectures at mechanics' institutes, fairgrounds and popular theatres. As Bernard Lightman argued, such popular activity 'can actively produce its own indigenous science, or can transform the products of elite culture'.⁷ In this case, by the end of the century, recognisably modern cave men had emerged, while the scientific context in which they were first depicted had been leavened with historical knowledge of Britain's most distant past.

Robey's cave man sketch was the apotheosis of these broad, popular evocations of evolutionary themes – from gorillas and simian missing links to quasi-human cave men. The frequency with which they were incorporated in print, song, images, theatre and music hall had been amplified by the publication of Charles Darwin's evolutionary treatise *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. Few books have been so heavily scrutinised. The centenary of *Origin*'s publication prompted scholars to assess Darwin's place in evolutionary debates, spawning an academic industry that continues

unabated more than fifty years later. A broad consensus now contextualises *Origin* within a long series of evolutionary revelations, attributing its pre-eminence to the efforts of well-placed champions and to the ways in which science was popularised for a mass public. Without attempting to reassert Darwin's ascendancy, this book builds on Alvar Ellegård's early and important investigation of 'how information and opinions concerning [*Origin*] spread throughout the social fabric of mid-Victorian Britain'.⁸ It does so by charting a stream flowing through the heart of popular culture, whose headwaters – an appropriate metaphor for a story that begins during the great age of exploration – are located in the clamorous debates that greeted the book.

As we shall see, prehistoric characters evolved – readers should brace for the odd, almost unavoidable evolutionary pun in this book – from aggressive beasts, whose existence threatened mid-Victorian social, scientific and religious beliefs, into recognisably modern humans depicted in situations that poked fun at the contemporary world. Interest was initially generated by showmen attempting to profit from scientific discoveries, especially when professionals argued in public over the importance of a new find or theory. Changes in the way in which prehistoric characters were portrayed reflected the pressures on amateur and professional showmen, artistes and illustrators to constantly update their works. Public fascination peaked with each new find, while the subsequent troughs were filled by stubborn performers, writers and illustrators who eked diminished livings from their unchanging prehistoric allusions. As a result, the public encountered popular manifestations of prehistory throughout the rest of the century, showing how deeply evolutionary ideas had penetrated the mass imagination.

One of the most evocative concepts in human prehistory is that of the 'missing link', the extremely ancient species at the junction where ape and human lines diverged. Scientists have long since dropped the idea that the missing link was a single creature, as the branches on the evolutionary tree have become ever more numerous and dense. It is similarly reductive to identify an exact moment at which the modern cave man was created, because mass culture casually and continuously melded high and low ideas in a complex tangle of printed texts, images, music and theatre. However, the role of missing link is played in this book by the immensely popular series of cartoons entitled 'Prehistoric peeps' that first appeared in the comic magazine *Punch* in December 1893. They were drawn by Edward Tennyson Reed, who is memorialised in *The Dictionary of National*

Biography rather preciously as ‘probably the originator of antediluvian pictorial fun’.⁹ Reed was not the first artist to depict the prehistoric world, but his drawings marked the point at which its inhabitants forever ceased being the threatening, simian products of an evolutionary nightmare and became the creatures we know today: comic, club-wielding modern humans with dishevelled hair and rough hide clothing, whose world is an archaic version of our own. Reed’s vision of prehistoric Britain was soon being recreated in rival publications, in fiction, on stage and in the historical pageants and parades that proliferated at the turn of the twentieth century. These accorded the ‘peeps’, as Reed’s prehistoric humans were known, a status akin to Britannia and John Bull as imaginative evocations of the British national character, and the epoch in which they lived became a popularly recognised episode in British history. Reed’s aesthetic and sense of humour also migrated from London across the globe, either interbreeding with or displacing localised evocations of the ancient past.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Reed’s idea was also taken up by American cartoonists, who recalibrated its comic sensibilities for their audiences. They did so as the United States emerged as the cultural centre of the English-speaking world, thereby expanding and consolidating cave men in the global consciousness. The cave man took so long to establish itself in America for two reasons. Firstly, Americans had been enthralled by the giant, ancient extinct mammoths and dinosaurs that had first been discovered and displayed there in the colonial period. The animals had been coupled to a nationalist political narrative as evidence of the continent’s physical grandeur and exceptionalism. More importantly, *Origin* was published in New York amid increasingly angry and violent disputes about the ongoing existence of slavery; a context that made suggestions that humans had descended from African apes explosive. Inhabitants of the industrialising north-east felt slavery was a repugnant anachronism, while southerners argued that their agrarian economy would founder without it. Political, physical and moral battles culminated in the 1860 presidential election, in which Abraham Lincoln, whose Republican Party had been founded less than a decade before on an anti-slavery platform, was elected despite virtually no southern support. This precipitated the start of the Civil War in April 1861. Peace brought decades of national reconstruction in which academics and theologians struggled to find an accommodation between religion and science. Nonetheless, by about 1900, American illustrators, inspired by but not slavishly imitating British models, had begun drawing

the innocuous comic cave man character that is familiar to contemporary audiences.

I refer to the denizens of this comic world as ‘cave men’ for two reasons. Firstly, the term has no precise scientific meaning, despite having been coined by the archaeologist Sir John Lubbock in 1865 to identify the ancient humans whose remains, tools and art had been found across Europe intermixed with the bones of extinct mammals.¹⁰ In this book, the term denotes a creature that fancifully incorporates palaeontological evidence, Classical depictions of hide-clad, club-swinging wild men and broader Western artistic visions of the ancient past. As such, these cave men reside in the popular imagination, rather than in scientific texts or museum exhibits. They are also overwhelmingly male, inhabiting a world that is virtually always a conservative projection of contemporary society in which gender roles are unchallenged. Cave women are most commonly secondary characters, depicted as shrewish wives or eye-batting and increasingly hyper-sexualised objects of lust. While I am conscious that employing an explicitly masculine term risks replicating twenty-first-century linguistic gender norms, it seems to my ear to be the most evocative way of identifying the characters – male and female, old and young – that are the subjects of this study.

This book draws together references to prehistoric creatures – ranging from the scientifically sound to the satirical – from a broad range of newspapers, magazines and other publications from throughout Britain, the empire and the United States. Allusions appeared frequently and prominently in some publications and almost never, or only as tiny asides, in others. These are traceable because huge numbers of historic newspapers, magazines and books have been digitised and are full-text searchable. The superabundant sources are overwhelming, making it impossible to claim that the widespread evocations of prehistory presented in this book are definitive or exhaustive. Such a job is best left to particularly determined indexers and bibliographers.¹¹ However, the sources show that interest in the prehistoric ancestors of modern humans was expressed through an increasingly standardised set of references and visual iconography. The absolute wealth of material has also made it difficult to select images. In every instance, I have endeavoured to include ones that illustrate particularly important points or that represent broader ideas or artistic genres. Readers wishing to see any other images discussed in this book should be able to find them in the same ever-expanding databases.

Like every missing link unearthed on Java, Ethiopia, the Olduvai Gorge or the Sterkfontein, my evidence may eventually be displaced by researchers fossicking through newly digitised collections. They may discover a slightly older and more compelling comic vision of prehistory in Jarrow, Etchingam, Oldham, Stepney or some other understudied locality. Nonetheless, I am confident that any new evidence will demonstrate that the modern global cave man descends from simian forebears who emerged in the mid-Victorian popular imagination and roamed, at least metaphorically, throughout Britain and beyond, displacing earlier visions as they did. So I present this book in the spirit of a palaeontologist, aware that further discoveries may shift and complexify the origins and evolution of the modern cave man, while leaving the overall path of its descent intact.

Notes

- 1 Captain Robert Falcon Scott's journal for 19 June 1911, as published in Peter King (ed.), *Scott's Last Journey* (London: Harper Collins, 1999), p. 103.
- 2 As quoted in Carolyn Strange, 'Reconsidering the "tragic" Scott expedition: cheerful masculine home-making in Antarctica, 1910–1913', *Journal of Social History*, 46:1 (2012), p. 76.
- 3 Images of Robey in prehistoric costume appear in George Robey, *My Life up till Now* (London: Greening, 1908); and *Looking Back on Life* (London: Constable, 1933). The sketch is treated briefly in Peter Cotes, *George Robey: The Darling of the Halls* (London: Cassell, 1972), pp. 51–2.
- 4 Photographs of Robey in his prehistoric costume are labelled this way in the catalogue of the National Portrait Gallery, Ax160322, Ax160323, and Ax160324, <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections.php> (last accessed 18 January 2016).
- 5 Constance Areson Clark, "'You are here": missing links, chains of being and the language of cartoons', *Isis*, 100:3 (2009), p. 572.
- 6 See for instance Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Gowan Dawson, *Darwin, Literature and Victorian Respectability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Nadja Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2009); Jane R. Goodall, *Performance and Evolution in the Age of Darwin: Out of the Natural Order* (London: Routledge, 2002); Stephanie Moser, *Ancestral Images: The Iconography of Human Origins* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Nicholas Ruddick, *The Fire in the Stone: Prehistoric Fiction from Charles Darwin to Jean M. Auel* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2009); and Martin J.S. Rudwick, *Scenes from*

- Deep Time: Early Pictorial Representations of the Prehistoric World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
- 7 The quotation is from Bernard Lightman, *Victorian Popularizers of Science: Designing Nature for New Audiences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 14. See also Geoffrey Cantor et al., *Science in the Nineteenth Century Periodical: Reading the Magazine of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 93; and James G. Paradis, 'Satire and science in Victorian culture', in Bernard Lightman (ed.), *Victorian Science in Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 147–8.
 - 8 Alvar Ellegård, *Darwin and the General Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 5.
 - 9 'Edward Tennyson Reed', in L.G. Wickham Legg (ed.), *The Dictionary of National Biography, 1931–1940* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 730.
 - 10 John Lubbock, *Pre-historic Times* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1865), pp. 237–67.
 - 11 See for instance Michael Klossner, *Prehistoric Humans in Film and Television: 581 Dramas, Comedies and Documentaries, 1905–2004* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2006).