Neanderthals rehabilitated

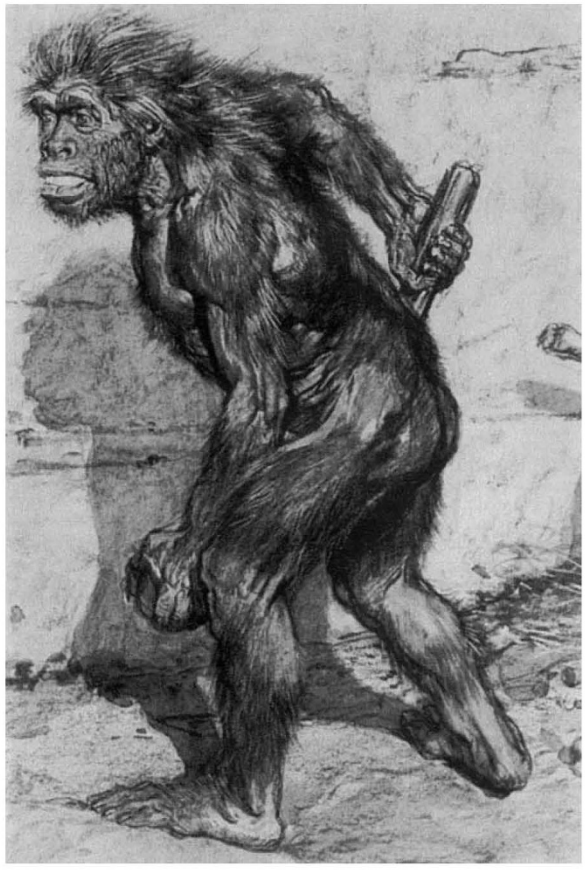
Ian Tattersall

In Search of the Neanderthals: Solving the Puzzle of Human Origins. By Christopher Stringer and Clive Gamble. *Thames and Hudson: 1993. Pp. 247. £18.95, $29.95.*
The Neandertals: Changing the Image of Mankind. By Erik Trinkaus and Pat Shipman. *Knopf/Jonathan Cape: 1993. Pp. 452. $30, £20.*

NEANDERTHAL. There's probably no more evocative word in the lexicon of science, and certainly none that's more redolent in the public mind of brutish benightedness. This undeserved reputation is the price that the Neanderthals have paid for being the first extinct human relatives to be discovered, and it's particularly unfair because these now-vanished people clearly resembled their relative *Homo sapiens* more closely than any other extinct human species we know of. But perhaps there's hope, for two leading specialists have now taken it upon themselves to rehabilitate the public image of the Neanderthals in books that are aimed at a general readership but which will also, in very different ways, be of value to professional palaeoanthropologists.

In this laudable effort, each has conscripted a coauthor. Chris Stringer, the best-known exponent of the 'replacement hypothesis' of modern human origins, has joined forces with the Palaeolithic archaeologist Clive Gamble. Erik Trinkaus, whose interests lie principally in Neanderthal functional anatomy, has teamed up with the taphonomist and science writer Pat Shipman, whose journalistic skills are evident in a highly readable end result. The books are largely complementary, and could hardly be more different (the two teams even disagree on the spelling of 'Neanderthal', Stringer and Gamble evidently stressing, rightly, that the term had become part of the English language long before the Germans dropped the 'h').

Trinkaus and Shipman take a strictly historical approach, proceeding chronologically from the discovery of the original Neanderthaler in 1856 up to the present day, with digressions back to the earliest intimations of human antiquity and the roots of geological and evolutionary thought in the late eighteenth century. Their account not only provides a more or less complete history of the interpretation(s) of the accumulating human fossil record, but it effectively places changing views in the context of evolving political and social circumstances. Although it contains scattered minor inaccuracies, this is an authoritative record, and particularly useful in bringing the story more up to date than any previous effort. It's also diplomatic. The potted biographies of important figures with which the narrative is peppered become more hagiographical as we approach the present day: there will be few ruffled feathers among the featured members of the "gifted generation" of Neanderthal experts that is currently in full squabble, although certain absent noses may be put a little out of joint.



Brutish benightedness — Kupka's 1909 reconstruction of a Neanderthal, based on Marcellin Boule's scientific study of the Chapelle-aux-Saints skeleton and published in *L'Illustration*.

Curiously enough, even though Trinkaus's own mini-biography describes him as distinguished from the crowd by his concentration on the lives rather than the fate of the Neanderthals, the matter of Neanderthal behaviour and lifestyle is broached systematically only in the last half-dozen pages of his book. If you want to know in detail what it was like to be a Neanderthal, you have to turn to Stringer and Gamble. Their volume is altogether tougher sledding, but it will richly reward your concentration. History is skipped over lightly (although not so lightly that the sources of the historical burden borne by the Neanderthals don't become apparent); instead, the book targets a set of particular issues: models of human evolution, late Pleistocene chronologies and environments, Neanderthal origins, biology, technology and behaviour, the origin and spread of *Homo sapiens*, and so forth.

The breadth of the resulting picture of the Neanderthals is a dramatic testimony to how valuable — indeed, essential — is close collaboration between palaeoanthropology and archaeology in reconstructing the lives and histories of our toolmaking precursors. General readers may find the discussion rather hard going, while specialists may wish for more detail in some areas (despite a spectacularly useful if eye-straining chronological appendix of sites); but this is an unprecedentedly well-rounded portrait of an extinct human species, and one that gains enormously from a detailed comparison of inferred Neanderthal behaviours and capacities with those of the early moderns who replaced them. Not everyone will agree with all of the inferences made here, but at the very least the appropriate questions get a much-needed airing.

So — to get to the inevitable question — what did happen to the Neanderthals? Stringer and Gamble are pretty categorical that "Neanderthals did not evolve into modern Europeans", while Trinkaus and Shipman prefer to talk more vaguely about a "mosaic of local evolution, migration, admixture, absorption or local extinction . . . over at least 10,000 years". No agreement here (and none likely soon).

Yet this is the least of the differences between these two books, which are essentially not in competition with each other. If you want to learn a great deal about how palaeoanthropology got to where it is today, read Trinkaus and Shipman. If your interest is in knowing what can reasonably be said about Neanderthal origins, biology and behaviour, consult Stringer and Gamble. Better still, read both. □

Ian Tattersall is in the Department of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, New York, New York 10024-5192, USA.