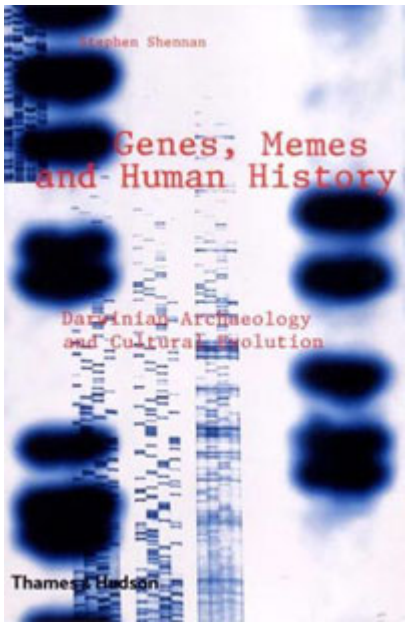
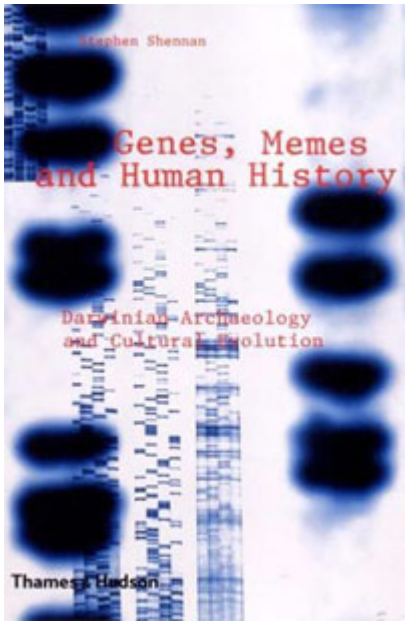
FROM BEN CULLEN TO STEPHEN SHENNAN ON MEMES



On the anniversary of the death of Ben Cullen.

His parents visited us this summer. Richard (Cullen) has taken up archaeology himself. It was a very poignant afternoon – lunch in our garden here in Stanford, talking of Ben in Wales and Australia. Ben would have been forty. Molly (six) and our own Ben (three) were running around in the California sunshine.

Steve Shennan's book Genes, memes and human history was published this year.



I remember talking to him about Ben Cullen soon after his death. He expressed his interest in taking up some of Ben's ideas.

But the book is something of a disappointment.

Steve has taken a backward step. We need to take seriously the co-evolution of biology and culture. That is, we need to overcome the old separation of culture and biology.

We have to combine the two in our thinking. It seems a no-brainer to me. We are an animal species and indebted to our biology – of course. And we are also cultural beings – we live in worlds of values, traditions, cultural meanings.

But Steve yet again emphaisizes the primacy of biology, perpetuating the same old straw men and false polarization of thinking – biology radically separate from culture. And the foolish common sense that biology must come first – because people have to feed themselves and reproduce. For Steve, so much of what seems important to us in the way of our social experience and cultural values is dismissed as irrelevant to history.

Ben thought differently. His cultural virus theory was meant to reconcile biology and culture, actually bypassing the distinction.

I cannot help but think of Ben's profound insights into the viral as a paradigm of the undecidable – in Derrida's sense [Link]. Viruses are not simply biological

phenomena.They don’t fit into our easy distinctions.

Hence Ben’s interest.

Whereas Steve, Professor of Theoretical Archaeology at the Institute of Archaeology in London, is reiterating the tired distinctions between culture and nature, rehashing our nineteenth century archaeological inheritance.

We need to move on.