

‘Fairest of them all’: the truly viable heritage

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That much is amiss with how the British heritage is seen and used is widely surmised¹. To see why, let us review what is felt to be unique about British modes of celebrating the past. From a comparative perspective, two quintessential ‘British’ heritage traits emerge: its overwhelmingly national emphasis, and its venerable continuity.

The primacy of the national level reflects two prevalent habits. One is the tendency to value collective above individual legacies. When I came to Britain in the early 1960s, I found that few of my colleagues had any idea who their great-grandparents were – some did not know the names even of their grandparents. Told that most Americans had a pretty good idea of all their forebears back to their arrival in the New World, they responded, ‘Well, we don’t need all those family details; we have a secure *national* identity’. Perhaps the ensuing erosion of national pride helps to account for the recent upsurge of genealogical concern with forebears.

But the nation remains signally paramount, as chauvinist stress on the British component in the history curriculum currently attests. The past that Britons recognize, proclaim, and protect is above all the *national* past. Global or continental pasts are ignored; regional or local ones get short shrift. Hence the salient architectural past is seen predominantly through National Trust and English Heritage rather than local lenses. And archaeological artefacts gravitate to central national institutions, with London the heavily favoured repository; relatively little goes to local or provincial museums.

Heritage here is generally viewed in a centrist guise that ignores or traduces peripheral regions: ‘national’ is normally understood to mean ‘English’. References to ‘English Heritage’ and to ‘the National Trust’ universally imply that these agencies are nation-wide. It is a staple of Little Englandism that, until recent Asian and West Indian incursions, the nation was remarkably homogeneous. How untrue this is the Welsh and the Scots and the Jews and the Huguenots well know; and as late as 1861 a parliamentary inquiry into coal-miners’ conditions in Northumbria needed an interpreter². But the mystique of a Westminster-centred, essentially Anglo-Saxon homogeneity is widely accepted.

In the Scottish context the equivalence of ‘national’ with ‘English’ heritage is especially irksome. Almost two centuries ago, when castigating Lord Elgin for gutting the Parthenon, Byron (himself Scottish-born) reminded the world that it was not an Englishman but a *Scot* who committed this outrage³. Ever since, the Scots have been portrayed as heedless of their own heritage and as greedy plunderers of that of others. Anti-Scottish stereotypes still pervade English heritage thought: on achieving World Heritage status, Durham Cathedral and Castle celebrated their origins as Norman bulwarks against raiders from Scotland⁴.

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Antiquity and coherence are likewise seen as distinctive features of British heritage. Remarkable continuities are held to have blessed the British past since time immemorial (meaning no one quite remembers when things weren't like this, but the phrase gives an impression of hoary antiquity). In most other countries, perceptions of the national past seem far less consensual, either because that past is relatively brief or because it is alien to most inhabitants.

Typical accolades for British antiquity and continuity come from Bernard Levin:

The most noticeable thing about our history is that we have more of it than any other country. Of course, Rome is older, but Italy is a 19th century upstart. . . . The length of time, the depth and richness of our island story, gives us a claim to preeminence⁵.

Charles Moore, former editor of *The Spectator*:

In Britain we have the good luck to possess a long and rich and important history. It is famous, sometimes notorious, for the strength and oddity of its traditions. To live with these traditions is not to become stuffy or hidebound . . . but to understand more and to feel more deeply and even to have more fun. [And] once you understand tradition, you can start inventing it⁶.

From Sir Herbert Butterfield, the famed debunker of Whig history, but here echoing Carlyle:

English institutions have century upon century of the past, lying fold upon fold within them. . . . Because we English have maintained the threads between past and present we do not, like some younger states, have to go hunting for our own personalities. We do not have to set about the deliberate manufacture of a national consciousness, or to strain ourselves, like the Irish, . . . to create a 'nationalism' out of the broken fragments of tradition, out of the ruins of a tragic past. . . . [The Irish have become the *sans-culottes de nos jours*.] Our history is here and active, giving meaning to the present⁷.

From Norman Tebbit:

As different as our Continental neighbours are from each other, we are even more different from each of them. . . . These fundamental differences have developed from, and in turn fostered, a sense of nationality and social cohesion that has saved us not only from foreign conquest but violent revolution and civil strife too. Our nationalism is of a different kind to much of that on the Continent, although it has to be said that Scottish and Welsh nationalism (not to mention that in the island of Ireland) have more in common with the Continental variety⁸.

Here again Scots are seen as deficient in those traits that make the British heritage gloriously incomparable.

The title of this conference – 'The Heritage Industry: A New Distorting Mirror?' – implies other flaws in the way heritage is celebrated¹. Does the heritage industry distort the past? If so, is this a 'new' phenomenon, unknown or uncommon in the past? And are British distortions more corrupt or culpable than others?

Rancorous criticism of the heritage industry is now rife⁹. Four particular charges figure in the litany of complaints. One is that it should be an 'industry' at all – that anyone should make a business, let alone a profit, out of something so sacred to the national identity. Putting Britishers into glass cases for people to gawp at, in a Welsh museum director's phrase, or forcing them to dress up in clogs and shawls, is cultural prostitution¹⁰. Heritage marketing is readily satirized:

'Get your ancestors here! Get your ancestors here!' The cry came from a raggedy old man, pushing his barrow up the Bayswater Road . . . 'Get your ancestors here! Lovely, fresh ancestors! . . . Cross my palm with travellers' cheques and I'll find you an ancestry you'll be proud of for the rest of your life . . . By the greatest good fortune I have a piece of the old family tapestry here.' . . . He blew his nose on it and offered it to me, together with the title deeds to a disused railway line in Clackman-

nanshire. 'You are now Honorary Lord of the Station of Newtonmuir, and Porter Extraordinary of Gaskhorn. God bless you, Sire! That will be 75 guineas.' 'You're a grand old fraud', I said, flashing my Ancestry Fraud Squad badge. 'I must ask you to accompany me to the station. I believe you are the Mr Big we have been looking for.'

The moral: 'Don't be like Mr Big of that ilk – leave the selling of our heritage to the appropriate government department'¹¹. But the satire conceals genuine distress. Thus the sale of titles to manorial lordships is vilified as the 'perfect manifestation' of a heritage industry 'which taints, falsifies and undermines genuine institutions and traditions . . . for trivial commercial reasons'¹².

The second complaint is that the current cult of the past has made 'heritage' all-inclusive, hence incapable of definition or discrimination. It has proliferated so far and so fast as to debase the very term. Heritage may still be the best term for the manifold benefits and responsibilities we inherit from the past, but over-use now smudges its meaning. So automatically is it rated a good thing that no one inquires too closely into its nature. Indeed, *lack* of explicit meaning endears it to its chief custodians. No set definition guides the National Heritage Memorial Fund in allocating support among claimants ranging from the communion-bread holder of Mary Queen of Scots to a colony of Greater Horseshoe bats to Malcolm Campbell's *Bluebird*. And since our preferred legacy is admittedly always in flux, heritage is just left to go on redefining itself¹³.

The third complaint is that heritage is monopolized by an elite – the landed gentry whose power and privilege it validates. We may cope with a heritage seen as vague, indeterminate, and historically fluid; to reckon with its political and social implications is another matter. Conservative agencies control most heritage assets; the Great and the Good own or lease most of the nation's country house legacy¹⁴; Establishment values pervade English Heritage and the National Trust; Tories mainly decide what is preserved and displayed, why and how heritage should be admired. The linkage between conservation and conservative is not just British: the American Heritage Foundation is a bastion of reaction, and the American material heritage still remains a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant preserve. But Tory and Establishment resonances make heritage doubly suspect in class-conscious Britain.

The fourth charge stems from the others: those who own or control heritage have been seduced by mass visitation and market forces to cater for vulgar and philistine versions of the past, turning historic sites, museums, and television docudramas into plastic Disneyland. Into the gap left by the limited visions of the antiquarian, the aesthete, and the social historian, in a museum director's phrase, have stepped the rogues and mountebanks with their exploitative entertainments. Jorvik's 'chocolate-box picture of history in reverse' ends in a 10th-century Viking village smelling 'not of dead fish or human sweat, but of Cox's apples going slightly ripe'¹⁵. As Sue Clayton put it in 'Theme Park Britons', 'I had to have four showers when I got back from Jorvik Viking Centre. I felt I smelled of theme park'¹⁶.

Each of these circumstances is held to deform the past; collectively they are blamed for making heritage erroneous and offensive. 'History', Clayton added, 'is too important to be left to the heritage experts.' The unstated premise is that heritage thus manipulated demeans some unsullied past that is our *true* legacy.

These complaints are mainly singular to Britain. Other countries may deplore heritage abuse and tourist debasement. But elsewhere one seldom hears that heritage itself is a mistake or an evil, that it is monopolized by an elite, or even that it distorts the past. Some of these things may be true, but they are rarely felt to tarnish the heritage idea or to diminish its reality.

I recently brought the former head of Australia's National Trust to a heritage discussion run by History Workshop. The reiterated coupling of heritage with elitism finally made him burst out, 'But what makes you think heritage is right-wing? In Australia it is the creature of the labour unions!' (The

left-wing gathering dismissed this cross-cultural challenge on the ground that only privileged globe-trotters witnessed such anomalies.) Perhaps other lands still luxuriate in some happy prehistory of heritage thinking. Even nostalgia has not yet become a term of abuse: at a heritage conference in Helsinki all the Finnish participants begged museums and conservers for *more* nostalgia¹⁷.

Each of these four complaints has lengthy antecedents. States and individuals have long capitalized on heritage to bolster their own self-image and enforce it on others. Heritage control generally accompanies power and privilege: it is elites that have usually possessed, controlled access to, and set the public image of heritage. They have long sold it as well: the peddling of patriotic and religious relics antedates the nation-state, let alone Lord Gowrie of Sotheby's. Heritage today may embrace a wider range of material goods than ever, but Roman property law embodied the most inclusive concept, *damnosa hereditas* – the legacy one would rather not have to accept. Finally, complaints that popularization vulgarizes and falsifies heritage date back at least to the Renaissance.

What is novel is the mistaken view that these abuses are new and hence intolerable. Heritage critics lack historical perspective. Not only are they unaware that heritage is always manipulated, they also cling to a quaint vision of an ideal, untampered-with history that we could have if we chose. Romanticizing the truly objective past waiting to be found in archives and artefacts, they rubbish heritage readings of it they find antipathetic.

But no such pristine past exists; *every* historical account is filtered through blinkered eyes and partisan minds. Though the bias may seem more blatant, heritage versions of the past are no more misguided than any others. Much about the past is widely agreed; but most of it can be only partly retrieved and remains perpetually disputed. And all of it is bound to be interpreted and narrated in anachronistic perspectives. The problem is that growing historical knowledge and skills in displaying retrieved pasts have reanimated a false faith in our own objectivity. We are victims of the historians' new holy grail: the cult of authenticity.

Like the grail, the authentic past always disappoints its devotees. No heritage presentation can replicate the past as it was for those who lived it as their present. We meticulously revive bygone times; but we do not engage with them as natives or re-create their original auras. 'Writing my books about the Edwardian period', says a character in Peter Dickinson's *Death of a Unicorn*, 'I mark each page with some pungent signal – a brand name, song, form of speech, public person or event in the news – to bring the odour of the period to life. Cheating, of course. Few people living in a period notice such things. Their real sense of their time is as unrecapturable as the momentary pose of a child'¹⁸.

Authentic early music is a case in point. However saturated in the music of another epoch, we cannot replicate how a contemporary performer related to a language he absorbed unconsciously and encoded into his very way of thinking, hearing, and speaking¹⁹. Nor can we ever see the spinning wheel in the museum as those who used it did. For us it is not a new tool, but a *former* tool, left stranded in the present by the tides of industrial change. Its proper role today is as an antique or an 'authentic' reproduction in some deliberately atavized decor. For people to see spinning wheels as they were once seen, the whole history of spinning jennies, Crompton mules, and so forth would have to be unknown to them²⁰.

Heritage viewers are of our own time; current creations and modern viewing habits shape what we make of what we see. We may say, 'this is the actual sword or spoon made or used by' someone 500 years ago, but we can never claim 'you are seeing it just as it was seen by its maker' or first user. Anyone who professes to see things with the eyes or mind of the past is self-deceived. This is the chief error committed at Jorvik Viking Centre, which advertises that visitors 'can experience in sight, sound and smell exactly what it was like to live and work in the Viking City of Jorvik'²¹.

This brings me to the point of my title. History was long conceived as an ideally truthful pursuit,

displaying the past exactly as it was, in Ranke's famous phrase, without the chronicler's interposition; the good historian simply effaced himself. Hence the metaphor of the mirror, countless retold since the Greek satirist Lucian in the second century AD: the historian's mind should be a true and unclouded mirror, reflecting events just as he saw them, 'in no way distorted, discoloured, or varying'. (Herodotus was among the historical liars in Hades who, Lucian claimed, were being punished more severely than any other sinners²².) Well into the 18th century history remained a *speculum vitae humanae*, an 'impartial mirror' of men's duties and obligations, or 'a mirror for virtues and vices' in which past experience showed 'what one should do and what should be left undone'²³.

What cracked Lucian's mirror was the dawning recognition that the past was a foreign country. The loss of a divinely ordained history, the rise of faith in progress, the awareness of unexampled change, and the apprehension of its increasing acceleration undermined the past's traditional pedagogic role in four ways: one could never learn the whole truth; one could only tell *any* truth by shaping evidence according to one's own lights; since each past was unique, no lessons could be drawn from it; and accounts of the past had to be perpetually recast. 'In the same town', as Goethe put it, 'one will hear in the evening an account of a significant event different from that heard in the morning'; one version is not necessarily truer than the other, but temporal distance is bound to make the same past *look* different²⁴.

Hence the fairy-tale legend of the mirror. What does the wicked queen expect to see? Not simply herself just as she is. She needs to look again and again to avert her growing doubts that she still is the fairest of them all. The mirror reflects an amalgam of what she wants to be, of what she fears she might be, and of her nemesis; in the mirror, Snow White becomes her alter ego. (The ancient Greeks dipped mirrors into wells to cure the sick or bring back the dead; the retrieved mirror revealed the face of the ill or the deceased.)

Much as the queen viewed herself, we view our cultural heritage with lingering faith in its naked truth, pride in its unique beauty and vanity about its worth, anxiety lest it tarnish or be taken from us, and dread lest it prove chimerical or fraudulent. Like the queen's anxious gaze, our use of the mirror is obsessive. So conscious are we of the worth of the past, so aware of the benefits and costs of displaying it, that we risk not just the queen's fate but that of Narcissus, destined to perish perusing our own image.

What then might a 'truly viable heritage' be? One that we realize is not fixed for all time, but is refashioned by each generation from its own present as well as from others' pasts. A legacy flexible enough to accommodate uncertainty and tolerate conflict. A heritage that does not demand absolute truth, but lives and breathes fiction too, sometimes even fraud. That is what the public truly wants and needs. Sampling reactions to Shakespeare's birthplace in a salutary short story, Henry James suggested that visitors bring to this most improbable past an 'immense assumption of veracities and sanctities, of the general soundness of the legend'; they eagerly accept the 'extraneous, preposterous stuffing' of the Bard's empty reliquary shell:

Across that threshold He habitually passed; through those low windows, in childhood, He peered out into the world He was to make so much happier by the gift of His genius; over the boards of this floor – that is over *some* of them, for we mustn't be carried away! – his little feet often pattered. In this old chimney corner – just there – is the very angle, where His little stool was placed, and where, I dare say, if we could look close enough, we should find the hearthstone scraped with His little feet²⁵.

The *raison d'être* of Peter Shaffer's *Lettice and Lovage*, whose eponymous heroine electrifies historic-house visitors with her wildly inventive flights of fancy, is to show how a truly fantastic past gains immediacy²⁶. Fantasy is a staple of Olde England guides who tell coach tours the spa at Bath was founded when King Lear's father, who suffered from leprosy, saw pigs rolling in the mud there to cure

their itch²⁷. Next to this fabulated English past, David Milsted's 'Highland Clearance Participation Show', with family parties being evicted by holograms of leading TV personalities dressed as bailiffs, makes the Scottish heritage seem sanely authentic²⁸.

NOTES

- 1 This paper was initially prepared for the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland's conference, 'The Heritage Industry: A New Distorting Mirror?' Edinburgh, 21 October 1989.
- 2 Raphael Samuel, 'History's battle for a new past', *Guardian*, 21 January 1989, p 23.
- 3 Daughter of Jove! in Britain's injured name,
A true-born Briton may the deed disclaim.
Frown not on England; England owns him not:
Athena, no! thy plunderer was a Scot.
The Curse of Minerva (1815)
- 4 David Lowenthal, 'Durham: perils and promises of a heritage', *Durham University Journal*, 82 (1989), 185–190.
- 5 Bernard Levin, 'Shakespeare – the History Man', *The Times*, 18 September 1989, p 16.
- 6 Charles Moore, 'A Britain fit for dullards', *Daily Telegraph*, 3 February 1990, p 19.
- 7 Herbert Butterfield, *The Englishman and His History* (Cambridge, 1945), pp 114, 116–17.
- 8 Norman Tebbit, 'Time we learned to be insular', *The Field*, 272 (May 1990), 76–8.
- 9 Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London, 1985); Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London, 1987).
- 10 Geraint Jenkins cited in Liz Gill, 'Presenting the past imperfect', *The Times*, 4 October 1989, p 23.
- 11 Miles Kington, 'Windfalls from the family tree', *The Times*, 29 April 1985, p 12.
- 12 John Martin Robinson, 'Mind your Manors!', *Spectator*, 9 June 1990, pp 19–20.
- 13 Gordon Marsden, 'Imagining history', *History Today*, 38 (June 1988), 2; Lord Charteris of Amisfield, 'The work of the National Heritage Memorial Fund', *J Roy Soc Arts*, 132 (1984), 325–38; David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985), p 37.
- 14 Leslie Geddes-Brown, 'The heritage network: a paying guest's guide to the Great and the Good who help to make a profit out of the past', *Sunday Times*, 16 November 1988, p 53.
- 15 Julian Spalding, 'Art galleries: church or funfair? Museums in a democracy', *J Roy Soc Arts*, 137 (1989), 577–87, reference on p 581.
- 16 Quoted in Liz Gill, 'Presenting the past imperfect', *The Times*, 4 October 1989, p 23.
- 17 'Nostalgiaa', *Museo* (Suomen museoliiton julkaisu), 2/1990.
- 18 Peter Dickinson, *Death of a Unicorn* (New York, 1984), p 25.
- 19 Robert P Morgan, 'Tradition, anxiety, and the current musical scene', in Nicholas Kenyon (ed), *Authenticity and Early Music* (London, 1988), pp 57–82.
- 20 Arthur C Danto, 'The problem of other periods', *J Philosophy*, 63 (1966), 566–77.
- 21 Jorvik Viking Centre, School Party Booking Information brochure, 1990.
- 22 Lucian, 'The way to write history', p 132, and 'The true history', p 166, in his *Works*, ed H W and F G Fowler (Oxford, 1905).
- 23 J T Jablonski, *Allgemeines Lexikon der Künste und Wissenschaften* (1748), quoted in Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge, Mass, 1985), p 200.
- 24 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 'Schreiben an Ludwig I von Bayern vom. 17. Dez. 1829', *Gesamtausgabe*, 24:316, quoted in Koselleck, *Futures Past*, p 216.
- 25 Henry James, 'The Birthplace' [1903], in his *Selected Tales* (London, 1982), pp 304, 307, 325.
- 26 Peter Shaffer, *Lettice and Lovage* (London, 1988).
- 27 Stephen Pile, 'The past is another load of old cobblers', *Sunday Times*, 20 March 1988, p A13.
- 28 David Milsted, *Market Forces* (Edinburgh, 1989), p 70.