



On Raphael Samuel's *Theatres of Memory*

by Patrick Wright

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UNTIL contact was lost a few years ago, I would occasionally pick up my phone to hear a soft-spoken man addressing me as 'Comrade' and wanting to speak about things that happened in another age.

Sometimes Raphael Samuel was only pursuing a footnote or a photocopy; but I also remember a delightful conversation about Bridport in West Dorset. We considered the town's rope-making industry, the harbour and street pattern, the Quakers and communists who had lived there; and I was amazed when my telephonic inquirer, who dialed from a sparingly modernised Georgian house in the heart of Spitalfields, mentioned in passing that he had never actually been to the place whose story he knew in such detail. His considerable knowledge of Bridport came from the archive, and the fact that people were driving motor cars through its historical streets even as we spoke seemed a strangely irrelevant afterthought.

Theatres of Memory was first announced several years ago. The long-delayed project has grown vastly, and this weighty tome is now published as the first of three. This may be a large project, but it is certainly not a grand one of the sort associated with other historians of the left. Eric Hobsbawm might sweep with great mastery through the whole modern age, elucidating broad patterns, and insisting that, in our time of dwindling historical understanding, it is the urgent responsibility of the historian to 'remember what others forget'. Yet Samuel, who is a long-standing 'people's historian' and a founder of *History Workshop Journal*, admits to no such problem. He argues that we live in a vibrant historical culture, and that the rise of 'heritage' testifies to an expanding sense of history that is both wider and more 'democratic' than anything we have seen before.

The late E P Thompson may have set out to rescue the working class from the condescension of posterity, but with Samuel, the whole argument is apparently now shifted over onto the heritage trail. Those he wants to rescue from condescension are the metal detectorists and historical re-enactors, the steam engine freaks and the 'living history' audience.



There are still caricatured baddies in his picture, but in place of the old class enemy, we find the academic historian who arrogantly presumes to a higher truth than the popular enthusiast or theme-park designer, and almost everyone who has had the nerve to criticise the British heritage industry.

As for the leading role of the vanguard party, now that history is a matter of old bricks and period fittings, we are informed that it is the estate agents and stripped-pine merchants who lead the way.

Samuel sets out to map the rise of conservation as a force in British life, and many of his loosely-connected chapters follow a recognisable formula. The method is to posit a generality — 'retro-chic', 'resurrectionism', 'retro-fitting' etc. — and then to launch into a vast, self-constituting inventory of its manifestations. These chapters, which are simply heaving with information and previously unheard-of inaugural dates, tend to be stronger on accumulation than analysis. Samuel describes them as genealogies, but each one actually resembles a field of disturbed rabbits — all belting off in different directions, while Samuel drags his readers in pursuit, stuffing their heads into every thicket and intriguing hole on the patch.

It is a little surprising that someone who is prepared to tell other historians what to think should allow himself to make basic errors. The collapse of Ronan Point killed five people, not the 33 claimed here, and a brief trip to the Victoria and Albert Museum would have informed Samuel that the artists of the war-time 'Recording Britain' scheme did paint country houses, even though this fact doesn't suit his argument. And it is surely strange to find a self-described socialist commending Westminster council's early interest in litter bins, street furniture and historical facades, without considering the connection between this aesthetic strategy and Shirley Porter's alleged gerrymandering. Most of these are correctable mistakes, which is more than can be said for Samuel's travesty of the arguments of those he dismisses — in the most tendentious and demagogic fashion — as 'heritage-baiters'.

There was one night in the entire history of the universe when two television programmes about the heritage industry were broadcast, but Samuel quotes the full listing as if it were happening every night of the week. He suggests that it is misogynistic to criticise the pomander and lavender-bag culture of the heritage shop, a remark that might be taken to imply its own denigration of womankind and which is made on the spurious assumption that it is only men who have ventured such an objection. He insinuates that those who have criticised the



post-war cult of the country house are somehow responsible for the government's under-funding of environmental initiatives. He suggests that it is only financial opportunism that motivates those who have criticised the rise of heritage, leaving no doubt that his own long-standing position as tutor at Ruskin College is vastly superior to anybody else's journalistic trade.

Though diplomatic in his criticism of Eric Hobsbawm and Raymond Williams, Samuel is quick to dismiss younger critics as 'metropolitan literati' who hate the masses and despise their enthusiasms. He seems incensed by the very thought of Neal Ascherson, who criticised the 'vulgar English nationalism' of some heritage displays and suggested that there might be some difference between heritage spectacle and true historical understanding. This proves to Samuel that Ascherson is a literary snob who loathes 'colour television', the ultimate sin for this socialist, turned toff-hunter, who himself still writes quaintly of 'the wireless' and derides one Scottish commentator as a 'Late Show presenter'.

My own attempts to cast light on the rise of heritage are less severely dismissed. After silently incorporated my few good points into his own argument and wagging his finger about the lessons we 'heritage critics' should learn from 'chronology', he uses his own superior powers as a 'people's historian' to withdraw my book *On Living in An Old-Country* (which I had always thought was published in 1985), and reissue it two years later so that he can squeeze it into the same dustbin as Robert Hewison's 1987 'squib', *The Heritage Industry*.

We sceptics have always feared that heritage might become the handmaiden of oblivion, and this book only confirms the suspicion. For while Samuel has developed a peerless knowledge of heritage ephemera in recent years, he has also suffered a severe lapse of memory about his own recent past. Until a few years ago, he was among the most uncompromising and stylish of 'heritage-baiters'. He has written blistering denunciations of phony Georgian tradition. He has excoriated the Liberal council that had the nerve to fit fake Victorian lampposts into his own ancient street in Spitalfields, and described conservation as a mimesis doomed to fail. As for Hewison's now contemptuously dismissed book, Samuel wrote a far from unappreciative review for this paper.

What, we may reasonably wonder, has caused such a turn-around? A dramatic reversal like this surely merits some explanation, especially when it is made by a writer who stands so heavily on his own moral authority. Yet Samuel leaves his reader to speculate.



Can it be that that a certain academicism is at work here? Some of us have already drawn attention to the rise of the country house as a reactionary social symbol during the years of the welfare state. So, according to the painting-by-numbers system by which 'positions' are developed in the Humanities, Samuel has to colour in the trees, the little cottages and the passing steam engine too. Perhaps Samuel is playing to the grumps in his gallery. There have long been a few people associated with *History Workshop Journal* for whom all criticism of 'heritage' smacks of heresy, and a similarly bunkered view is held by some of his more recent acquaintances among Prince Charles's architectural advisers too. Perhaps Samuel's scorn for critics of a social democratic orientation who never bought into the Marxist scenario may reflect the animus of one who has seen so much of the old socialist project sliding away since 1989.

There can be little doubt that Samuel is genuinely and, I think, rightly disturbed that conservationism — a cause that was once closely tied to neighbourhood activism, adult education and 'people's history' — should have come under such wholesale attack. He is plainly enraged by the permissions granted to Peter Palumbo to demolish the Victorian buildings at No. 1 Poultry in the City of London, and by the largely specious arguments used by many cultural figures to justify this influential art-patron's bulldozing obsession. There is a case to be made here but Samuel has not helped it by allowing his concern for a truly popular interest to disintegrate into the sour populism that disfigures this book, or by joining those who have adopted John Carey's 'brilliant' study, *The Intellectual and the Masses*, as a convenient way of dismissing all criticism as foul mass-hating snobbery.

Samuel fulminates against what he terms high-mindedness, but there are too many places where his argument is marked less by the principled low-mindedness his readers have come to expect, than by a timorousness about any moral or political judgment at all. He can't bring himself to commend the middle-class conservationists who opposed ribbon development before the war. But in the end even he can't look at another Crab-tree & Evelyn product without describing it as 'bogus-traditional', which he would denounce as a well-bred sneer coming from anyone else. No doubt too much sneering has been going on. But when Samuel starts condemning those who have dared to suggest that education and commercial display may not always be the same thing, he comes far too close to joining those whose sold-out message to the people is, in the phrase of Richard Hoggart (also ritually scolded),



'Stay as sweet as you are'.

It is surely a little surprising to find this founder of *History Workshop Journal* defending market values rather in the style of the *Modern Review*, and commending John Major's references to warm beer and invincible green suburbs, as proof that he is a brave man facing down 'literary and social disdain' in the name of popular taste. By these criteria, people like Ewan McColl and Joan Littlewood, whom Samuel has remembered with respect, would have been presumptuous toffs, and their endeavour to educate popular audiences through their Theatre Workshop productions would have been disgraceful exercises in elitist condescension.

Some of Samuel's essays are both interesting and useful, but the rhetorical premise organising his book should be rejected as a diversion. It is true that snobbery is a bad thing. Yet on the other side of Samuel's unnecessary polarization, it should be insisted with some force that critical argument has its place in this field. Heritage may be 'peoples' history' in one manifestation, but it is also quango-culture, and tourism paraded as an alternative for industrial policy. It may be about New Age travellers or saving old buildings and landscapes from road developments and property barons, but it can also be retrograde arts policy, cowering architectural pastiche, and reactionary social polemic recoiling on any progressive development.

Conservation is certainly not responsible for Britain's relative economic decline, but in the public symbolism of recent decades, a partial and backward-looking conception of heritage has been squared off against modernisation in a manner that has constrained our ability to imagine a future, and that, contrary to Samuel's assertions, can reasonably be connected to the question of decline. It is inadequate, after all the discussion of the past ten years, to publish 450 closely printed pages on conservation without giving serious recognition to the fact that 'heritage' has morbid manifestations too, like *This England*, a toxic publication with a huge print run, which is devoted to hurling its own ancestrally purified idea of English heritage against a hated multi-racial society.

The job of the critic is to differentiate these strands, not just to roll them all up together to produce the longest toff-whacking implement in the history of print. Let us hope that Samuel rethinks these matters before he completes Volume 2.



(The text above is as published in the *Guardian*, but with a few minor editorial abridgements restored)



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