



# Sneering at the Theme Parks An Encounter with the Heritage Industry

**Patrick Wright**  
**In conversation with**  
**Tim Putnam**

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*TP: After the recent Council of Europe Conference on Heritage and Urban Regeneration at Halifax, Robert Hewison led off a public debate with the observation that the enemy of heritage was the heritage industry. This was not an easy line of argument to sustain in the face of such formidable figures as Peter Addyman from the Yorkshire Archaeological Trust, creators of Jorvik. Addyman was easily able to show that Jorvik provided an effective way of extending their programme of archaeological research. Hewison was forced to retreat into conjuring up an image of a decadent country dotted with Jorvik clones, which didn't go down very well in an old industrial area where conjuring with heritage has brought new jobs and increased investment, reversing decades of decline and outmigration. It all made one wonder what was really at stake in the debate which has circled round the notion of 'heritage industry.'*

PW: There is more than one issue in play here. To begin with, we are seeing an apparent rise of interest in questions of tradition - in old buildings, in the way things were. So we've got all that going on, which is obviously mixed up with remembering colonial forms and imperial dramas. Yet this interest in the past is also a response to modern disruptions about which one can't simply be disdainful. It can't just be dismissed as backward hankering, put it that way.

We've then got the different question of the nationalisation of those feelings and meanings, which also seems to be going on - a clear movement towards the manipulation of those concerns. In other words the sense of history can be produced, and deflected and used. There's surely no doubt about that. We've seen it at work in the curious kind of nationalism that came up during the second phase of Thatcher government.

But finally you've also got this crucially important question which is actually the whole curatorial agenda - a legitimate area of activity for museums - and that seems to me to have been vaporised and ignored in the recent critique, just as much as what it is that actually drives and defines people's interest in the past, whether it be strictly true or accurate or not.

*With such a tangle of issues, what should we expect criticism to do?*

We need critical argument here for two reasons. First, it is vital to be able to differentiate within any cultural practice, and there is no shortage of developments in the heritage area which should be robustly opposed. Take the case in Avebury where the new, and decidedly nouveau, owner of the manor house is proposing to open an Elizabethan theme park right next to those massive stones.

This is just one example of a kind of private development which, for all its invocation of 'heritage' and 'public access', would actually over-exploit and destroy a place and atmosphere that is already under public protection. Other examples come immediately to mind. Not so long ago, a 'wild west' theme park was proposed for the Rhondda Valley and justified, most insultingly, as the answer to the employment problems of the area. Meanwhile, over in Bow you've got the old Bryant and May factory being themed up and marketed as the 'Bow Quarter.' The brochure, which compared this estate agent's invention with the Latin Quarter of Paris, stresses the stylistic attractions of the designer flats which are now available where Annie Besant helped organise the famous matchgirls' strike a hundred years ago. If enough historians protest, Annie Besant might even get a statue as the development continues, but the main attraction will remain what the brochure, in an absurd gesture towards lower Manhattan, calls those 'lofty' apartments. They're about three yards square and the ceiling is about a hundred yards up. At least three dados have been fitted courtesy of the Next Collection . . . So, we have to be able to make critical comments in this field, first, to define and promote better practice. In the end, though, it's not good enough just to crack easy jokes and sneer. If that's Addyman's point, I accept it.

*In this respect, the publication of Hewison's The Heritage Industry has muddied the water in the way that it criticizes important developments such as Wigan or Ironbridge. While there are quite a lot of things which could be said in criticism of*

*either, it needs to be recognised that such institutions were pioneers and are still leaders in their field. They are exemplary, not typical. To discuss them as though they are symptoms of some general malaise mocks any attempt to raise standards of interpretation, and makes intervention within it impossible. No wonder it makes people like Peter Addyman mad.*

*At the same time, contemporary characterisations of heritage often do seem to be symptomatic of processes beyond curatorial practice.*

Yes. Critical discussion is also vital here because the whole heritage agenda has become mixed up in a much wider symbolic and, indeed, polemical drama. It is significant, for example, that such a major national debate about Britain and its post-war history should have been conducted in terms of architecture. The 'heritage' has become a national theme, partly because it is the bearer of wider, and often less explicit, arguments about what the nation is and what the legitimacy of the state may be. Archaeologists, conservationists, planners and museum curators sometimes express irritation at the difficulties this additional metaphorical dimension brings to their work. I'm not surprised they get impatient with commentators who have scarcely even bothered to find out what their day to day practice involves. But even so, this wider dimension is there, and its part of what has caused the increased popularity of the cultural heritage. It also demands a broader kind of discussion than many of the curatorial professions are accustomed to.

*There is more to this larger dimension than the 'wallowing in nostalgia' which some papers tell you is 'stopping us going forward from modernism.' Accounts like Fiona McCarthy's in the Guardian assume everyone knows what nostalgia is, but they actually confuse various kinds of historical reference.*

A lot of this talk of 'nostalgia' is hopelessly general. It conflates any number of different impulses, and it also seems to assume that the desirable state for a society is to be untroubled by any sort of historical awareness at all. As for the idea that heritage-obsession is a symptom - or rather a cause - of economic decline, this is in Hewison, but only because he took it from Martin Wiener's *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit*. I don't think this idea is sustainable. In the last few years it has become quite obvious that 'heritage' and 'conservation' are fundamentally involved in various programmes of urban regeneration and economic restructuring.

Of course, everything depends on what you mean by 'decline' and what you think of as renewal. For most of the post-war period British culture has featured a persistent opposition between the imagery of the traditional nation and the modernising imagery of reform - Brideshead and the tower blocks, as I've put it. In this opposition, 'heritage' has been asserted against modernisation. Its rise as a national theme may certainly have contributed to 'decline' -of the welfare state, not the 'industrial spirit' Wiener writes about. His book put Raymond Williams - or a gloss of Williams' idea of culture - onto the curriculum of the business schools. It was also taken to justify Thatcher's assault on the public institutions of culture, from universities through to the public museums. There is a partial convergence between this argument and some attacks on the 'heritage industry' -not just Hewison's either . . .

*But it's not making enterprise with heritage that would have upset Wiener (or his Thatcherite followers) but the appeal to 'heritage values' to shield us from change and risk. Hewison's attack on the former is actually an example of the decline that Wiener laments. The scope of this mythic opposition between 'culture' and 'enterprise' has become so vast that it can contain its own negation. As with most polemics, the self-evidence of Wiener's argument has been rapidly eroded, and it makes better evidence of late twentieth century decadence-obsession than it provides of late nineteenth century decline. The slippery Weberian concepts and casual assumptions about what evidence texts provide about culture don't provide much of a foundation for work in this area, either.*

*In your view, what kind of theoretical framework is needed to support the lines of critical argument we have been talking about?*

I remember finding current theories of culture distinctly unhelpful when I started to write about these issues. There was endless overelaborate talk about how culture wasn't natural, how meanings were 'constructed', how subjectivity was the effect of texts, but there seemed to be very little engagement with the world beyond the theorist's cinema where people still insist on getting up out of their seats and putting what they think into action. I was trying to produce an analysis which was able to address the politics of nationalised tradition but was also able base that critique in a sensitivity towards peoples involvement in those ideas of nationhood and tradition. This can't be done merely within an ideology-spotting mode, and it also demands some respect for the policy issues involved in the conservation and administration of tradition. Meanings may well be constructed, but we only gain from saying this if we use the observation as a starting point rather than a conclusion. Some recent writing



about the 'heritage industry' seems to assume that if a meaning or tradition is 'constructed' then there is nothing more to say about it except that it is also false. End of story, start of sneer.

It's not as if we haven't been here before, either. This, or something very like it, was J H Plumb's position in the sixties. In *The Death of the Past* he described 'the past' as a created ideology with a purpose, an area of complete illusion and mystification. He claimed that the task of the historian was to come up with superior knowledge (those were confident days), and then, by some sort of process of argument that he never fully explained, dispel the clouds of popular misapprehension . . .

*rather than making them thicker . . .*

which is indeed what often seems to have happened. Now this idea of history and the past certainly has convenience and simplicity on its side. Everything that isn't approved and date-stamped by the proper authorities, in this case the historian, is simply written off as rubbish. And who really needs to discriminate between one pile of rubbish and the next? The same kind of generalisation is assumed in Hewison's book. In his perspective it doesn't really matter whether we're dealing with a Labour council in the North trying to do something about a run-down industrial area, or some sleazy hotel group in the South who have realised in a cynical way that if you put a bit more historical patina on your building you can make that much more money out of it. The difference between, say, Beamish and the 'Bow Quarter,' is of no interest from this viewpoint. Indeed, the only difference that seems to matter in the end is the one that comes between the 'heritage culture', which Hewison generalises as backward, manipulated and sentimental, and the 'critical culture' which he invokes as superior but leaves almost entirely unspecified.

*And this involves the heritage critic in a dubious and quixotic pursuit of 'authenticity', which turns out to be rather self-referring. Criticism risks becoming just a privileged taste, and is thus easily outflanked by the populist Government line on heritage, exemplified by the Conservative minister Virginia Bottomley's speech at Halifax: 'heritage is not just for toffs', that is, no longer safe to be left to publicly-funded cultural cognoscenti.*

Yes, it looks suspiciously like another 'them and us' job to me. We are back at sneering at the theme park, and at the dupes who are seduced by it. We're back

in the worst traditions of educated snobbery. There should be a moratorium on this sort of writing, which is now becoming commonplace in papers like the *Guardian*. In its place there should be some decent visitor research to find out how people actually use these places and what they actually think about them. This would provide a much sounder foundation for a critical response to the 'heritage industry.'

For example, there has been a very precise and, I'm bound to say, classically organic critique of the heritage industry which has escaped notice, and that has gone on in the world of the metal detector enthusiasts. It's quite an intriguing story this, as far as I've been able trace it out. There were mine detectors in use in this country after the war, but they were great cumbersome things and not very effective, but then in the Sixties quite refined portable metal detectors were on the market in the USA and imported into this country through US Air Force bases: USAF personnel are coming out at the weekends or at night and wandering around Essex or wherever digging things up. By the late seventies, there is a very large network of people using portable metal detectors. The practitioners will deny this absolutely, but it looks to me as though it's a pretty exclusively male working class activity. The practitioners will admit its male—they're trying to do things about that, to get more women involved, but they're deeply, deeply resistant to the idea that it's working class, partly I think because once that is said about them they've basically been written off as ignorant twits.

*This concept of the metal detectorist would probably have been invented by the archaeologists in any case.*

That's true. But in fact, the metal detector fraternity, and that's precisely what it is, supports 162 federated clubs throughout the country and two national magazines which come out on a monthly basis, which are fairly glossy; one has to say that's a pretty good comparison to *History Workshop*. We're dealing here with something that is quite major, and if you look at those magazines you'll see intriguing signs of development: in the original ones most of the articles are made up of bits of plagiarised academic writing. They aren't very knowledgeable, to put it crudely; they are the works of people sort of expressing their initial enthusiasm. But, five years in, there's a qualitative change and the kind of material that's coming out is very impressive.

If you go to the metal detectorists' clubs, you'll find a discussion that reflects a disciplined and often very knowledgeable appreciation of history through the found object. Of course the archaeologists' response to this was completely panic-ridden. In the early eighties there was an anti-detectorist campaign coordinated by the Council of British Archaeology with the museum professional. One of the most interesting county archaeologists [Tony Gregory] who had worked in this area suffered a motion of no confidence passed by his professional body because he had co-operated with detectorists. These people were seen as vandals. They were seen as land pirates. There were enough people looting historical sites with these machines to justify professional concern, but the archaeologists' attempt to close down the hobby, by trying to get legislative change, backfired. The detectorists defended themselves very interestingly. They claimed to be the inheritors of old rights of common. They argued very strongly that, while private land is private, municipal parks should be absolutely open to detectorists to do exactly what they wanted - after all, that is common land. I suspect their culture also links them quite explicitly to poaching.

The detectorists have done very well in this argument. They were being accused of being big business. Because three people got together and started manufacturing detectors in this country, capitalism was moving in, this was literally how the archaeologists were phrasing it, and the counter accusation, which was launched in the pages of *Farmers' Weekly* was about how the CBA is run by Dr Henry Cleere, who was alleged to be an East European-style Marxist. The way they got to him was by associating him with the New Archaeology. They went through all the archaeological journals of the seventies - you know, Althusser and the trowel, that kind of thing - and they found articles about the New Archaeology and its roots in Marxism. They got Dr Henry Cleere to repeat this argument, which is of course about methodology, its about how archaeologists don't dig for objects but in order to refine hypotheses. They're more interested in stains left by rotted sill beams than in treasure or gold coins.

The detectorists didn't believe a word of this and started making coarse remarks about the site archaeologist's preference for broad brimmed wellies (good coin catchers). They considered the archaeological profession an embodiment of the usurping state, the overweening state that is crushing native Brits' rights of common, and they actually seem to have done quite well, in the early eighties, in preventing any reform of the treasure trove laws. So what one sees there is a powerful 'organic' critique which is confused, which is

messy, and about which no-one could take a simple stand, because while there is a legitimate issue raised by the archaeologists - and there is a question of regulation of archaeological sites in the face of this new portable technology - at the same time the demonology launched against the detectorists was so excessive that it just made the necessary co-operation between these two parties more difficult.

*If you stand back from that polarisation you could say that the difference between the professional archaeologists and the detectorists is really less important than the difference between those who are reading books and watching television, on the one hand, and those who actually go to find something out, on the other. From that point of view, the stance of the archaeologists was wasteful in spurning new sources of enthusiasm and interest.*

I think that's right. What is extremely interesting about the metal detectorists is that historically, they came at the very point where the heritage professions - the museum people, the curators, the archaeologist, were being strapped, squeezed from above financially and were being encouraged to turn against the idea of their collections. (The left intellectuals were in this too, saying nothing is worse than the object in itself, nothing is worse than to go to a museum full of boring glass cases with bits and pieces inside). The museums were running from that: they were into contextualisation, they were using audio-visual techniques and all sorts of special effects to get away from their object-oriented collections. At the same time the detectorists were actually reinventing the high cultural styles of appreciation, in other words they were entering into the object itself. Their collections were a reproduction of the old cabinet of curiosities. In many ways, their sense of historical knowledge is like that of the 18th century museum. So much for popularization!

In a sense what we are seeing is the reinvention of field archaeology. You can see the problem this poses for professional archaeologists, and it has to be a legitimate problem: how do you get these people in line? They spent a hundred years disciplining their own amateurs who were county-based and middle or, indeed, upper class. . .

*No easy task, especially when they're on their own land!*

Yes, they've just got them incorporated into the procedures of the discipline when these wild characters come along. So the response is that the metal



detector is evil, we mustn't use it, it's a piece of technology with no apparent use to archaeologists - a completely crazy situation to be in. The only conceivable way of regulating that activity and of knowing what is coming out of the ground is for museums and archaeologists to be in touch with those people, and to be assisting them by giving them knowledge and defining what they are finding and helping build connections so at least they can register what's coming up where.

*The polemic which The Heritage Industry launched is not going to help us to overcome that sort of problem.*

Quite. There are two reasons why that book is worrying - well, there are several, but two which concern me: one is, that we've heard a lot about the collapse of history and this present situation in which the left's theories of history are in disarray. Now, I'm quite sure that the teleologies are genuinely in disarray but it's not the fault of curators and heritage entrepreneurs.

If you look at the background of the conservation organisations you find yourself repeatedly facing a kind of social reform tendency. We are not talking about communist organizations, obviously, but we are often talking about Victorian liberal reform campaigns, which have very clear roots in attempting to democratise, in attempting to establish the public interest in areas where private property has ruled before. We've also got the fact that the most significant cultural theories on the left or even of the centre has been deeply concerned with a sense of history, with a sense of the useable past. To be a critical thinker is in its own way to be a curator of history.

All that disappears, the minute you allow the argument of *The Heritage Industry*; you're basically vaporising that field under a crude definition of ideology, and you're probably also blaming a collection of rather surprised museum professionals for the collapse of your own theory of history. That seems to me to be the hidden implication.

*Museum professionals say things like: here we've been, working away to in a field of limited interest, involving local government because of the potential of doing something with totally undervalued assets, and we've put this together into something fundable, which has revalued neglected assets, which is attracting people to somewhere where no one ever though people would want to go, and everyone is having a good time and then along comes this jerk who says it's degrading and a fake. What to you want us to do?*



*The first Director of Wigan Pier, set up as a theatre of inauthenticity in Hewison's book, has sensed that there is a weakness in the attack, and asked what so-called 'cultural historians' think they're doing with history. But as he's addressed his remarks chiefly to fellow museum professionals, he's not really expecting a reply.*

So that's one difficulty. The other is that if you actually look at the way in which the forms and methods of the 'heritage industry' got assembled, it really isn't good enough to say that these techniques of display and of simulation are manipulative con tricks. If you look at the pioneers of the open air museum, for example, you are looking at people whose intention is extremely worthy. It's a democratic intention, connected with adult education, it's about reaching new constituencies, its about giving people a way of thinking about what had previously been the domain of exclusive professions. And the same applies, it seems to me, to the National Trust. Within the Trust, there's a house which marks very precisely the paradigm shift, a house called Erdigg, on the Welsh border, which is a house which you now enter through the kitchen, through the service rooms . . .

*And you encounter not only the 'workings' of a big house, but an extraordinary document of its paternalistic social relations in the portraits and verse which generations of the family commissioned and composed about their servants.*

When that house came into the Trust, there was a significant argument internally about how you administer the visitors going through them. Advocates of the art historical paradigm claimed that these mansions are places with grand rooms and you go in through the front door, properly, and look at the grand rooms and the paintings and furniture. Others said, no they're not, they're social institutions. You can see, in a way, its the Mark Girouard argument, its the arrival of social history, which moves here into the practice of display. Many of the developments that are being written off as spurious and 'heritagey' are, if you look where they come from, produced by people arguing from such positions -from social history through to History Workshop. So there is a real problem about this, if you're actually dismissing the whole thing, you're really not doing anything better than those old sods sneering at Coronation Street.

*Yet the discussion of heritage at the most recent History Workshop was preoccupied with the commercial and political 'misuse' of history rather than examining the nature*

*of public involvement in heritage questions. It was as if Hewison had provoked a knee-jerk reaction against the industry which would turn your heritage into trifles.*

A bit of history might help here too. You go to Exeter Exchange in London in 1790 and look at what's going on there. You look at the panoramas. It's not as though gaudy display is something that's been invented in the last few years

*Certainly not, and one is entitled to ask questions about where such moral aesthetics come from with their proprietorial stance towards 'the past.' What people in the History Workshop context seemed to be missing was the extent to which the phenomena and paraphernalia, such as they are, designated by the term 'heritage industry' have been drawn out very important quasi-political amateur popular movements over some time, but the last twenty five or thirty years in particular. Metal detectorists form one strand of this, and another is drawn from the serried ranks of the railway enthusiasts, the architectural preservationists, the industrial archaeologists, the oral historians, and the original project of History Workshop. The confluence of these quite distinct currents in the 1970s created a new kind amenity politics in which conservation was the focus, and in the 1980s, in a changed field of public responsibility and governmental initiative, they have actually become things to conjure with. They have made it possible to contemplate investment on a speculative basis, and in that sense, they justify the phrase, literally, of 'heritage industry.' Whatever issues must be faced now about the effects of commercial forms and practices in this area, we need to remember who has created, and what sustains, the basis of interest and involvement*

The first time I came across the phrase 'heritage industry' was with Colin Ward, who uses the phrase very much from inside those movements you're talking about. He was closely involved in the arguments in the sixties and early seventies to do with interpretation and interpretative technique, where again what you're seeing is a whole set of people figuring out how to enable people of a diverse background, people who are not of an academic orientation or of any given set of skills or qualification, to appropriate in their own terms or in terms that they can at least make sense of, a particular given landscape or industrial site or whatever. So when Colin Ward talks critically about 'the heritage industry' he is concerned about the way in which public statutory policy has since come along and lumped all this stuff together.

*And, equally, the transformation of aspects of heritage into a kind of business also needs to be closely studied because both have implications for the choices being made now. Museums which are being pressed to follow a commercial paradigm have somehow to*

*make imaginative design decisions which don't put their fundamental cultural assets and messages at risk, and they're not getting much of the right kind of help. Equally, the sort of market or audience research that is appropriate to their very sophisticated offerings isn't provided off the peg, at a price they can afford. Pertinent assistance could help avert the drift towards a uniform, plastic fronted, heritage industry which is the surest solvent of public enthusiasm and involvement in their own history.*

*But the external critique which finds 'heritage' a problem itself arises from a set of transformations, a kind of banalisation of cultural studies.*

Yes, some of the critical arguments that are made about developments in the heritage field are produced almost entirely at the level of ideology. They're following fairly tired methodologies which are to do with deconstructing meaning. The thesis about the 'invention of tradition', for example, has been cheapened to the point where the minute you can prove that any tradition is constructed - an expression which is over-used - you've falsified it. Well this is just completely ridiculous. First of all there is no tradition which isn't constantly under reproduction, which isn't being re-synthesised if you like. And secondly, the important questions begin after that initial and rather banal observation and you go on to ask: by whom, and for whom, and what are its potentials as a synthesised tradition?

To take another example, it's been quite clear for the last five years in this country that heritage, rather like avant-garde artists and gay communities, can play a crucial role in urban regeneration. The shrewd estate agents follow the gays into areas and the market moves after them because basically they're the beachhead marines - they go to areas where no one else would choose to live. They start reclaiming old buildings; they start developing forms of life that eventually become tradeable. Now it's quite clear that preservationists have done that sort of thing in various places. The most obvious example in East London is in Spitalfields where you have those early Georgian houses which ten years ago you couldn't have raised a bean on and were empty and rotting. Now they are coming onto the market at £400,000 a year and the bankers have started to move in. All of this seems to justify an argument which says that the whole preservationist thing is just a sop for redevelopment. Having said that, however, and agreed with the strengths of its assertion - this is the process that Sharon Zukin spotted in New York with Manhattan loft development - you still have this genuine set of questions, which is concerned with what you might do with endangered early Georgian buildings.



*Having gone through various levels of analysis you have to return to the question of the range of choice available in the context, given this or that horizon of possibility and level of contingency.*

Absolutely. And where it may be going.

*That would place heritage within a grounded perspective of cultural policy and the management of cultural resources in a practical sense. For example, take any area which has seen a form of property cycle. The alternative to some sort of revaluation of the existing premises because of change in the estimation of their cultural potential and possible use is going to be piecemeal or comprehensive redevelopment, whatever the regime of property or planning control.*

So what one regrets is first that the revaluation may be purely monetary and secondly that it only applies to certain limited numbers of buildings. I remember feeling this very strongly, when I went to Brick Lane for the ten year celebratory meeting of the Spitalfields Trust and I noticed that not a single person of any of the cultural minority populations or post-immigrant populations of the area were present. Now I don't say that lightly, because clearly it is difficult to establish links between communities that may indeed have very different interests. You're coming along trying to preserve historical buildings while others are trying to preserve footholds in the area: these are different interests and there are difficulties there. What one regretted was not that the conservationists' agenda - to the extent that one existed - was caught up with property valuations, but that it was exclusively framed in architectural language, that there didn't seem to be a policy for the area beyond its selected buildings.

*There have been similar problems where that agenda hasn't been framed exclusively in architectural terms. In the case of Ironbridge for example, there has been an editing process which is more than architectural but still privileges a particular notion and particular periods of history, to make a story which could be retailed outside the Gorge more than within it. Historians have pointed out that in some respects the story as presented doesn't make sense, but arguably the more important problem is the very considerable amount of the history of the Gorge which isn't validated - there are virtually no connections, for example, with living memory, and this dispossesses both new and old residents.*

The whole area was going through a massive process of redevelopment as a New Town. The making of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum was part of the making of the myth of the new community.

*Indeed, and it was part of the initial studies for the New Town that there should be a recreational and historic zone in the Gorge. This made a more complex context for heritage management than that at Williamsburg, for example, where hundreds of post-1800 buildings were simply removed in the restoration of the colonial settlement. In Ironbridge there was an interesting relationship between redevelopment and conservation. Tower blocks were at one point proposed right in the Gorge; what did take place was a destruction of large numbers of dwellings in the historic area as well as huge tracts of existing settlement in those parts which were not considered historic and the simultaneous building of new housing estates, though not high rise estates. So the heritage dimension was part of comprehensive redevelopment from the start and not a reaction to it, as one is generally led to think.*

*This leads to something you have written about: how it was made to appear as though there had been previously a kind of polarisation where aspects of heritage which had been rediscovered through housing history for example had been set against the terrible social democratic mistakes that we made.*

That re-establishment of the preserved English country house is certainly where some of the simplification took place. This polarity exists within a single memorial span, from the Second World War to the present. One only has to look at the present iconography of the war, with its endless references to traditional values that were proved then, and have since been upset or lost or are being recovered. The revivalist speeches of Prince Charles have recently put a gloss on that for us. The whole repertoire of heritage as we know it now has been shaped in this broad opposition which has been proliferating in the national culture since the forties.

It has always seemed interesting to me that Evelyn Waugh has a Georgian Group in *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) and what they're complaining about is old buildings being demolished to make way for modern luxury flats. The 'modernist' threat isn't yet expressed in terms of council housing; we're talking about events near Mayfair, perhaps, I don't know.

It's interesting to talk to someone like James Lees-Milne. In his imagination, as expressed in his autobiography *Another Self*, the English country house was

lined up against the thought of Communism. A polarizing imagery is in play, and in the post-war years it seems to me to quite overwhelm the actual problems of the country house. The real threats get understated and even ignored as the polemical metaphors take over. Of course you turn over the coin and you're looking at the tower block, and while it is clear that Labour authorities were far from innocent of these developments, as Jules Lubbock has suggested, it is still the case, I think, that the metaphors have taken over. Stephen Haseler writes of 'Fabian' tower blocks of the East End, Witold Rybczinski has spoken of post-war Labour councils 'grasping the high rise', which of course is a gross oversimplification of what happened. . .

*They ignore the role, for example, of Keith Joseph.*

I believe he inherited the Bovis fortune . . . So that opposition [between Brideshead and the tower blocks] which became a commonplace, we can't rest with its definition of cultural themes. The main thing I'm concerned with now is to see the whole conservationist terrain, with its increasing linkage through to ecological questions, pulled away from the polemical formations which have shaped up around it since the war. What I fear is that a lot of the discussion has only been interested in the polemic.

*This problem hasn't really been taken up by much of what's been written about the 'heritage industry'. Case studies such as Bob West's about Ironbridge in The Museum Time Machine (ed. R. Lumley) are more concerned with placing the phenomena in an ideological firmament than with the sort of repositioning you're talking about. There's a sense of distance rather than involvement, and in Bob's case that certainly doesn't arise from lack of knowledge.*

I have some recollection of that moment where you walk into a museum or, these days, a hotel, and you think 'this is all a fix, it's all terribly fake.' Now this is an initial perception and we're all familiar with it. Bob West's article seemed to me to be rooted in that perception. But having made that observation you have to move very fast, because if you rest with it you build arguments which are turned in on themselves and you vaporise the field in which important issues have to be decided.

*It is a problem to decide what the object of West's critique of Ironbridge is: is it a particular practice of museology, historical representation at all, or 'late' capitalism?*



*The contextualisation is out of control, and there is a loss of actuality as a result. This may be a problem of method, but it's also one of address.*

The big gap in the most such work is that if you're sitting in a library, you're producing arguments from that basis. What is badly needed to take these arguments forward for those who are particularly concerned with the museum question, is some kind of analysis of what people are doing when they go and visit these places.

Now I simply don't believe that they are gulled, that the people who visit the National Trust are all involved in the ceremony of lamentation and mournfulness which is part of the interpretative script of so many of those buildings. Somebody should put some research together - somebody with a budget. After fifty years of the country house scheme, the National Trust should go out there and investigate what use people actually make of those places. It's the same with Ironbridge; you can make the point, and Bob West does this well, about MSC [Manpower Services Commission – a quango responsible for running youth employment schemes] slaves and staging the revival of forms of misery we should be pleased to abolish, but I don't believe visitors to Ironbridge are all dying to revive work practices from the early industrial revolution. So little of what is happening when people visit that place is actually about the consumption of representations of history. It's that wrctched film theory scenario again: people constructed out of representations.

*We certainly oughtn't to assume that any of the phenomena associated with heritage necessarily arise out of or lead back to some central relationship with history. I recently heard a group of adult education tutors analysing what their people got out of visiting the Blists Hill open air museum at Ironbridge, and history of any sort hardly came into it. I'd agree with what you're saying about the National Trust. Whatever criticisms one might make of the country house programme, It's continued to move and change and the use which people make of it will continue to move and change.*

It's very interesting, that. The history of the country houses scheme is very alive now and one has to be careful that the critique of the Brideshead cult doesn't feed exactly the wrong end of the debate. There has been a definite change of agenda from the beginning when these big buildings were in trouble. A number of the founding figures, including James Lees Milne, were closely connected with Mosley and the New Party in the thirties. There's a curious circle of people which includes Harold Nicholson and Lord Lothian, of course,

who gave Blickling to the Trust during the war. Basically these characters were saying that these houses are going to go down, they are already going down; there are problems with taxation, there are problems with labour supply - all the rest of it. There are problems of owners not wanting to maintain them: the modern luxury dwelling was beginning to look pretty attractive to a lot of people in the thirties.

You then have the whole movement which defends the buildings, which takes the Trust away from its previous concerns with landscape and small buildings. The journalism about the Trust in the forties doesn't see that as a dichotomy, but it becomes one, and you get this art historical discourse developing around the country house which is quite interesting – along with the attempt, by Vita Sackville West among others, to establish what makes a house distinct from a public museum. What you're effectively seeing with the country houses scheme is the state, not the state literally, but the Trust as a statutory body, doing everything it can to preserve things while at the same time effacing its own presence. We act to preserve your house, Lord and Lady whoever, as a public body, but what we most like about it is that it's not a public institution, and we're going to make sure that it retains that distinction. We're going to make sure that it's not clinical, that it's not museum-like, we're going to keep you in residence, even if it's not in the style to which you are accustomed.

*. . . a kind of simulacrum . . .*

Now what seems to me to have happened is that the thing comes forward into the seventies and you get a very strong politicization. It is evident that the Attlee government of 1945 was the first one fully committed to the Trust, and perhaps there is some truth in the idea that they took the Trust seriously, because they intended that the old world should only remain in scattered fragments preserved by these rather crusty and eccentric characters. Anyway that gave the Trust far more than they had from any other government. By the time you get into the late sixties the conservationist lobby as it is formed up around the country house is entirely horrified at the post war scene. The mythologies of the tower block have come in, we're no longer protesting against property development and mindless speculative profiteering, we're ideologising against the state, against egalitarianism. Those arguments that people like David Watkin eventually use: you criticise the modernist Zeitgeist and then you put the classical revivalist one in its place; it's a completely disgraceful development that.



Having had that polarisation and the country house having become the emblem of everything that the post-war settlement was meant to have destroyed, we now have a situation where those of us who have criticised the way the preserved country house has been interpreted have been placed in a new quandary. We've been sitting there saying that the National Trust has been taking on the values of the private aristocratic ancestralised home all too sincerely and all too fully but our criticisms have also been joined by others who would like the Trust to get out of the country house for very different reasons indeed.

But we can't rest with that curious kind of reversal, because the latest phase is altogether more worrying. The Trust has started to be attacked in its dealings with country houses, from all sorts of unexpected quarters. Recent issues of *Country Life* have claimed that the officers of the Trust behave like barons, that they're insolent, and make decisions about the management of properties that are aesthetically ignorant. We've had the *Daily Mail* sniffing repeatedly around the mortgage arrangements of the Trust's finance director. Every sign suggests that the post-war consensus about the worth of the National Trust is breaking up. We've got Roger Scruton writing, in 1984, that the Trust has extinguished, one by one, the little fires of our national inheritance by plunging them into the ice-cold waters of the bureaucratic state and we've got the *Spectator* publishing articles praising very fulsomely the work of James Lees-Milne and celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the country houses scheme but leaving no doubt that the Trust is no longer needed and that these houses are capable of looking after themselves again: i.e. a return to private ownership.

So what is going on at the moment is a process of de-legitimization and an attack on the values that supported the trust and sustained it and enabled people to feel that it was a generally acceptable good thing. Interestingly, it is James Lees-Milne who is now the most vehement advocate of the Trust's continuing involvement in country houses. He is arguing with a lot of people on the right in the *Sunday Telegraph*, defending the public interest in these houses which others, like Scruton, would apparently reprivatise.

*Because in that respect, what the Trust has done, for whatever reasons, with whatever terms of reference, is to have taken these things and made them accessible to the general public.*

Yes, though some have tried to establish these buildings as weapons of imperial nostalgia. Others did not, of course, and in any case the public has been able find its own uses for them.

*Yes, we come back to the question of what do people make of these things. I think it's clear from observing people visiting the National Trust properties that you would need a fairly complicated checklist to describe their range of enjoyments.*

Indeed. How many people are going there in reverence to the cult set up by some of the Trust's historical advisors? The answer is, I think, very few. The Trust's reluctance to establish guided tours may initially have been based on the assumption that its visiting public could rely on its cultural instincts to see it down the hallways, but it also means that these houses are remarkably open to diverse use and interpretation.

*In any event, what a museum can do is affected more by changes in its audience than by its own interpretive programme.*

It has to be a key priority to take on that question of audience and use. The problem is that the analysis that has been produced so far has simply been read out of the display and its representations. If one doesn't go further it is difficult to ground a critical discussion in anything other than disdain. What we need now is to differentiate and move beyond the refusal which says it's all fake, its all constructed, and get into a situation where the arguments are based on the ability to support and develop the kinds of practice which are valuable while also consistently de-polemicising where necessary. One can't do that by sneering at every theme park that comes up as one drives down the motorway, tempted as one may certainly be.

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