Book Reviews
Re-imagining Heritage Interpretation: Enchanting the past-future

Russell Staiff,
Ashgate, 2014
ISBN 9781409455509

I came to this book with high expectations (how could you not be intrigued by a title that will re-imagine heritage interpretation and enchant the ‘Past-Future’?) I also came to the book with the view that heritage interpretation really does need some re-imagining; that there is a vast opportunity for better and different and innovative ways to interpret heritage sites in particular. But until now I had only really thought of this in terms of critiquing a particular heritage experience or text panel, etc., rather than looking at it in a holistic way.

My first observation is a bit prosaic: for a book about interpretation (which usually relies heavily on the use of images) I note that there are no pictures/examples of any of the places mentioned in the book. This I imagine may have something to do with maintaining a style and ‘look’ consistent with other monographs by the same publisher. I think it is also a challenge (deliberate or otherwise). One of the concerns of the book is the relationship between heritage and digital media, so at the end of the prologue Russell Staiff urges the reader to read the book with a search engine open, to google the many places, sites, objects, cities and towns, etc. featured in the book. For those (like me) that don’t fully accept this challenge and opportunity, there is also one’s imagination. So the reader can also translate places and ideas in the book to other, more familiar places and experiences.

I brought to my review of this book some specific questions:

1. Will this book radically change my conception of heritage interpretation?
2. Will it make me look at heritage interpretation in new and different ways, both in the practice of heritage interpretation and as a ‘consumer’ of heritage ‘experiences’ and interpretation?
3. Can I apply concepts, philosophies and ideas from this book to my own current projects: static interpretative panels at railway heritage places in New South Wales? Does the book validate my existing approach to such projects, and/or challenge me to do something different?
4. Does it validate or challenge my attitude and reactions to, and conceptions of, effective heritage interpretation?

So I navigate the book with some particular concerns, but mostly with a strong curiosity (and even a slight skepticism); How do we ‘re-imagine’ heritage interpretation and ‘enchant the past-future’?
While the book is theoretical and wide-ranging (and global in its focus) it is also very readable and accessible; and, like the title, the chapters and headings are intriguing. In chapter 1, Staiff begins with a series of anecdotes and observations, from a selection of personal experiences, at heritage / tourist sites / evocative places / museums in Australia, Thailand and Europe, and also observations as a consumer of other cultural pursuits (television, music). Here and throughout the book the reader is given personal insights from the many and varied experiences of the author, including some intangible or less ‘mainstream’ heritage experiences. These observations (or critiques), seemingly random but thematically connected, are engaging and pertinent: reminding the reader of their own similar experiences, if not at the same places, but experiences that we can relate to and that may have had the same affect. So chapter 1 is a meditation on interpretation, including the infinite and intangible nature of heritage experiences and heritage interpretation.

In chapter 2 (Tilden: Beyond resurrection) the temperature is turned up. Here, Staiff more than critiques the work of the ‘father of interpretation’ Freeman Tilden, he intellectually and philosophically disembowels Tilden (for example; ‘Does Tilden really make any sense?’) Given some of the examples provided, this is not before time.

Chapter 3 explores The Somatic and the Aesthetic: Embodied heritage experiences. Here, Staiff continues to rally against the orthodoxy of heritage interpretation to argue for the ‘broadening out of our thinking that goes way beyond the educational paradigm and acknowledges the embodied relationships of the object/place/monument with the visitor who ‘creates’ such places in motion, in play’. Chapter 4 examines Visual Cultures: Imagining and knowing through looking, chapter 5 Narratives and Narrativity: The story is the thing, chapter 6 Digital media and social networking, chapter 7 Conversing across cultures, and the final chapter: Enchantment, Wonder and Other Raptures: Imaginings outside didacticism.

Staiff’s book is filled with discursive analyses, intellectual hand grenades, compelling theories and concepts, meditations and observations on heritage interpretation and the broader heritage ‘world’, and some memorable turns of phrase, too numerous to discuss in a short review (you’ll have to read the book!).

So back to the questions I asked at the beginning of this review; To questions 1 & 2 – Yes, absolutely. My conception and my vocabulary of heritage interpretation is much richer from reading the book, and I find myself thinking differently about heritage places that I visit and help to manage. To questions 3 & 4; while reviewing this book I am contributing to interpretative projects at several railway heritage precincts in NSW – projects constrained by resources, by their geographic location, and by other limitations. Can I take something from this book to each project? The answer is definitely yes, but not in the sense that I can easily or quickly translate the wisdom in this book to my work. I need to fully digest and re-read some sections first, but it is certainly transferable, I think, to any location or project.

To give one example where Staiff discusses ‘imaginative engagement’ I imagine Captains Flat and Tumut and other railway heritage locations as active railway stations, yards or depots. (This seems obvious really, but when we create interpretative content how often or to what extent do we immerse – imagine – ourselves in a ‘real’ historical ‘world’, perhaps moving from one historical phase in the life of a place to another, and use such an approach to inform interpretative planning and content?). I reflect that I do tend to picture a place based primarily on what is in front of me – the extant physical remains and a grouping of selected images and words (as important as they are), but not always imagining the place as it might have been. So if I, as an interpreter, am not doing this (or not to its fullest potential) then perhaps nor is the reader/visitor?

The theoretical and philosophical thrust of the book takes me out of my ‘comfort zone’, challenging me to look at heritage interpretation in a new way. But the book is also logical and intuitive, offers solutions, and is populated with engaging examples of recent scholarship, so the path to a new paradigm is already partly formed. The book also promotes and ignites some interesting debates (for example; to what extent is there still an important place for orthodox static interpretation, done well; and are new digital media and more traditional
forms of interpretation mutually exclusive? Also, can we still ‘enchant the past-future’ in projects with significant limitations, be they financial, physical, or limited by the expectations of stakeholders, etc.?"

This is a book that brings together a multi-disciplinary focus on heritage interpretation (from history, art history, philosophy, tourism, etc.) infused with the author’s passion, insight, and oblique perspectives on heritage interpretation in its many forms. It is simultaneously a reference book, a discursive inquiry into the failings or unfulfilled potential of heritage interpretation as it is practiced now, and a portal to new paradigms in heritage interpretation. The book explicitly challenges the orthodoxy of heritage interpretation and throws into focus the many possibilities and challenges for heritage interpretation in the 21st century. It should be essential reading for academics, students and practitioners involved in heritage management and heritage interpretation.

David Ward
Heritage Officer
John Holland Rail Pty Ltd
Country Regional Network