THE DEBATE OVER TRUTH:
Problems of over-popularity and authenticity

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If there is one thing more hateful than another it is being told what to admire and having objects pointed out to one with a stick. Of all noxious animals too the most noxious is a tourist.

Reverend Francis Kilvert

Introduction

Our title 'The debate over truth' is a quote from David Lowenthal's closing address at the Second World Congress on Heritage Presentation held at Warwick, England, in September 1988. We may pose the question differently and ask, can the truth be economically viable? and Neil Cossons asks more explicitly: '...can truth survive the pressures of the disposable income economy and the power of the tourism industry?' Marc Laenen believes that it cannot:

Economic exploitation of heritage is not often very compatible with historical veracity, authenticity and integrity. One of the most fundamental problems is the subjective and often inaccurate interpretation and presentation of the past.

In a similar vein, David Lowenthal complains of a '...loss of immediacy and ambience at heritage sites owing to over-visitation and over-interpretation. concluding ...the more popular and successful interpretation becomes, the more it sacrifices historical realities for heritage images, truth for illusion'.

The aim of this paper, however, is not to address the question of economics directly, but to analyse Lowenthal’s phrase, ‘the debate over truth’. in more detail. The paper is divided into three main parts: the first considers some general definitions and is a brief introduction to the concept of interpretation, together with some case studies. The second part surveys the polarities of truth and myth, considering further the relativeness of history and the different perspectives that define one’s cultural heritage. The third section will conclude with a fuller definition of interpretation and understanding of our roles as heritage interpreters.

Definitions

The meaning of interpretation, common throughout much of the literature, is to provide understanding. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary gives as its second definition 'an explanation given: a way of explaining: a comment'. In 1957 Freeman Tilden wrote in his now classic Interpreting Our Heritage that ‘interpretation is revelation based on information’. Peter Rumble writes that interpretation has been defined as 'the attempt to create understanding'. And referring specifically to the interpretation of a site, Don Aldridge explains that it is '...the art of explaining the significance of a place to the people who visit it, with the object of pointing a conservation message'. There is thus a suggestion, especially in this last quote, that interpretation is not simply the communication of facts, but has an objective, a message to convey.

David Uzzell, however, widens the meaning significantly. Interpretation is understanding, but it is also communication over time and across cultures; in encouraging appreciation and conservation, it has a definite role to play:

... story telling and the passing on of shared histories to succeeding generations can be seen as part of the interpretive tradition of making the significant meaningful, instilling appreciation, enhancing understanding and encouraging conservation in its broadest sense ... interpretation, far from being a new phenomenon, is one of the oldest practices for cultural transference in existence.

To assist us in our understanding of interpretation at a more practical level we might ask what it comprises? The answer is broad ranging. We begin with the preparation of signage, leaflets, guidebooks, museum displays and exhibition panels, house museum re-creations, audio-visual displays, the training of guides and the organisation of pro-active activities. Living history presentations may be based at an authentic site, combine restored and recreated buildings or be completely fabricated. Interpretation also includes the physical planning of property estates and natural sites - for example, the creation of footpaths, the siting of car parks and the building of visitor centres. And finally there is the more nebulous process of interpretive planning which consists of 'knowing who the visitors are,
their interests and knowledge, and encouraging interpretive techniques appropriate to the audience, situation and interpretive subject matter.  

Three local case studies illustrate this diversity and highlight some of the problems arising from the different interpretive techniques.

As a prehistoric site, Uluru National Park in the Northern Territory suggests the difficulties inherent in cross cultural interpretation. F. Gale and J.M. Jacobs, who have prepared a sensitive analysis of the impact of tourists on Aboriginal sacred sites and rock art at Uluru, are particularly concerned about the misrepresentation of Aboriginal culture by non-Aboriginal guides. They observed that:

Even on issues where there is widely acknowledged ambiguity the guides tended to provide clear-cut answers rather than highlight some of these interpretive problems. The information of most concern was that given by Uluru guides about Aboriginal culture. Generally it was exaggerated, sensational and, at worst, racist. No doubt it is far easier for guides to satisfy their parties by building on these existing misconceptions rather than undermining them.  

Susannah Place in the Rocks, Sydney, is a working-class house museum. Here the problem of interpreting the terraces is complicated by the decision to conserve the building’s present fabric with minimal intervention. In respecting this physical evidence, certain compromises are needed in the presentation of the period interiors in order to convey an adequate representation of the social history of its inhabitants. The historical recreation is by necessity based on both fact and fancy.  

Finally, Sovereign Hill in Victoria, a re-creation of colonial life in an old gold mining town, is a living history presentation - or ‘heritage feelie’, as one writer so eloquently describes the genre. The more removed these presentations are from original fabric and circumstance, the freer and less relevant their interpretation becomes. Straddling history and theatre, this type of recreation is the most prone to criticism.  

Several problems emerge from these few examples. The first is the perspective of the heritage interpreter, and the perception of the public that they are being told ‘the truth’. Another is the difficulty of enlivening a physical relic to provide some sense of its historical context; in fabricating such a context we must beware of mistaking its original function. We then ask, is the public able to distinguish between the original object and any recreated context? Can the public distinguish between the real and the fake and the different levels of interpretation? Does the distinction between truth and myth break down the more sophisticated our interpretative techniques become? Finally, and returning to our first observation, does the audience become more passive and believing as our techniques become more sophisticated?  

### Truth and myth

The obvious question arising from the foregoing discussion is what is ‘truth’? Where do we draw the line between fact and fiction? What is the relationship between truth and myth? The two concepts may be polarised further to include, on the one hand, knowledge that is real and authentic and, on the other, an attractive and entertaining fake which is theatre. Does this antithesis extend to history and heritage? Can we isolate the aims of historians seeking historical accuracy and those of heritage interpreters charged with making an attractive product out of history? Are these distinctions valid and, if so, are they mutually exclusive? Is there room for compatibility and potential for balance?

### History is relative

In answer to these questions it would be naïve not to acknowledge that history is, and will always remain, relative: it is dependent upon an historian’s perspective and knowledge at any given point in time. As David Uzelle writes:

Whose view of the world are we presenting and re-presenting? Stories are told and relationships are revealed as if they are objectively true, as if there is only one way of understanding an issue, place or event. History is continually being re-presented, re-worked and re-interpreted.  

An inevitable process of selection occurs when deciding which parts are relevant and which are unnecessary to historical narrative. David Lowenthal observes:

... no historical account can recover the totality of any past events, because their content is virtually infinite. The most detailed historical narrative incorporates only a minute fraction of even the relevant past: the sheer pastness of the past precludes its total reconstruction.  

Don Aldridge cleverly draws a parallel with this process of selection and the aesthetic of the picturesque.

Every time you frame an object in the viewfinder of a camera you are doing what Gilpin taught us to do.... The same selection process affects the exhibition designer, the guide, the researcher and, of course, the interpreter: there is no escape from romanticism.  

There is a further concept of the ‘excluded past’ or that which we choose to forget. Expressing particular concern about educational curriculums, Peter Stone and Robert Mackenzie forewarn: ‘What we choose to teach, interpret and present, and equally what we do not choose to teach, interpret and present, is a fundamental dilemma common to all of those empowered to communicate about the past.’
As Lowenthal writes, 'We all bend history a bit'. An organiser of 'Fire over England', one of the Armada spectacles, quoted in The Times in 1988, used very similar words: 'If you get something to sell, then package it up and sell it, and what's history if you can't bend it a bit?' His meaning, however, it quite different. Understanding that history depends upon a point of view is not the same thing as assuming that history is there to be bent for a particular purpose.

Nonetheless this argument for the relativeness of history might be reversed. At the same time as the equation of history with truth becomes less certain, so too do concepts such as myth gain strength by their association with history. Robert Hewison describes a sequence of dependencies, of myth on history and of cultural identity on myth:

...myth... does not necessarily mean that it is untrue. Simply, that it is true in a special sense, in that it has truth for a great many people, and this general belief gives it a contemporary validity. It may contain elements that are unhistorical, or ahistorical, but it adds up to a cultural truth. It may indeed contain a great deal of historically accurate and factually testable material, but this is transformed into a touchstone of national, local, even individual, identity. Returning to our example of the interpretation of Aboriginal culture by non-Aboriginal Australians, we discover that different perspectives affect our understanding not only of artefacts and sites, but of more fundamental cultural concepts. For Aborigines, the myth is all pervasive and European concepts of history and time have little relevance in the understanding of their culture.

**Interpretation and cultural heritage**

It is clear that interpretation plays an important role in understanding both one's own and another's cultural identity. As Marc Laenen observes: 'history and its expression in heritage must be recognised as a basic resource for asserting and further developing cultural heritage.' Although prone to oversimplification, contrasting the approach of British and non-interpreters is instructive and builds on our previous discussion of the relativeness of history.

The criticism most often leveled at the British is a lack of passion in their interpretation of the past. Merlin Waterson comments: 'the British have a natural reticence which prejudices them against any too intrusive interpretation'. David Uzzell cites an extreme case of the interpretation of Clifford's Tower in York. In 1190, the tower was the site of a mass suicide and massacre of almost the entire Jewish population of York. But the information currently available to tourists at the site does not dwell on this bloody episode in its history, focusing instead on the ownership of the tower, its architecture and its use over nine centuries.

One may, however, read this reticence differently. As our introductory quote acknowledges, there are many of us who want to, in the first instance, appreciate an object, a building, a site or view without the interference of additional knowledge.

For non-Anglo interpreters, on the other hand, 'History... is more often a burning issue, historical identity bound up with issues of immediate import'. Uzzell develops an argument for 'hot interpretation', that is, interpretation that is designed with the full intention of evoking a response in the public. Using cases of devastating violence and desolation caused by World War II in Europe, he believes: 'If interpretation is to be a source of social good then it must recognise the continuity of history and alert us to the future through the past.' While these views might seem justified by the writer's examples, it is nonetheless interpretation as a tool, as a means to an end.

This gives rise to another point that the greater the need to establish a cultural identity, the more history is interpreted. Although less relevant to society in Britain today, Herbert Butterfield made the following observation in 1944: 'Because we in England 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.'

Consider, for example, the prominence of the mythology of the bush in Australian history - when this country is one of the most urbanised in the world: consider further the extent to which this mythology is still endorsed in present day advertising.

**The influence of present perspectives**

One of the most powerful influences upon the interpretation of history and our cultural heritage is the present. We cannot lay to rest the cultural baggage of this century, this decade, this year and this point in time without enormous effort. Implicit in the title of his book The Past is a Foreign Country David Lowenthal eloquently pursues this theme on a number of occasions:

> The past is a foreign country whose features are shaped by today's predilections, its strangeness domesticated by our own preservation of its vestiges.

> The past is... largely an artifact of the present. However faithfully we preserve, however authentically we restore, however deeply we immerse ourselves in bygone times, life back then was based on ways of being and believing incommensurable with our own... we cannot help but view and celebrate it through present-day lenses.
In a similar vein David Uzzell writes: ‘We cannot re-create the past or provide a truly authentic atmosphere; since visitor’s perceptions of the past will always be influenced by their present-day attitudes and values’. And Peter Fowler elaborates further: ‘The past per se ... is emotionally neutral. It is neither exciting nor dull, good not bad, worthwhile nor worthless, without our intercession. These value laden attributes come not from what has happened in or survived from the past; they come solely from our contemporary minds’.

Fowler’s quote, however, needs qualification: while our perceptions of the past are, to adopt Lowenthal’s words, shaped by the present, so too is the present shaped by events in the past. That is the importance of understanding history. A good example is Giorgio Vasari’s Lives of the Florentine Painters: his concept of the progressive development of Florentine painting towards realism has influenced the whole writing of art history. It is well nigh impossible to detach present days accounts of art history from the premise of a growth towards, or a reaction against realism. Vasari’s source was also historical: as a Renaissance man he turned to the classical authors. Moonis Raza’s words provide a poetic conclusion: ‘The modern is not generated in a vacuum, it grows in the womb of tradition’.

Conclusion

Too often the success of heritage interpretation is judged solely in terms of the number of people who visit a site or the amount of money that people spend there. Extracting ourselves from the economics of tourism and focusing our discussion on a closer analysis of the concept of interpretation, we can arrive at a more sensitive understanding of our aim as heritage interpreters.

Don Aldridge provides a convenient starting point to our conclusion. Borrowing from hermeneutical philosophy, he identifies three elements in environmental interpretation:

1. Environmental perception which means recognising a stimulus (as when an image or sound makes an impact on our senses before we pose any cognitive questions);

2. Environmental understanding which means grasping in a cognitive sense the facts about the stimulus (such as identifying it);

3. Environmental appreciation which means going beyond mere perception and mere understanding to develop a concern for values (for example, by determining the significance, meaning and context of a place).

Working with this model, however, we would define the aim of interpretation more broadly under the following three headings.

1. Understanding or knowledge - to include both the non-cognitive and cognitive processes identified by Aldridge.

2. Appreciation - extending Aldridge’s definition to include enjoyment, and meaning appreciation and enjoyment that is based on both instinctive and cognitive responses.

3. Provocation - in the sense of Freeman Tilden’s often quoted line ‘the chief aim of interpretation is not instruction but provocation’, but accepting Aldridge’s qualification that is clear from later chapters in Interpreting Our Heritage that the author was not intending to impose his own solutions to political and social problems and neither should interpreters.

Qualifying this need for provocation, and remembering David Uzzell’s argument for ‘hot interpretation’, the two extremes consist of an objective heritage interpreter and a subjective one. But an unmotivated interpreter is potentially disinterested in their subject and will be unable to elicit any interest from their audience. On the other hand, a highly motivated interpreter will only be interested in eliciting a single response from their audience, and will promote what to others may appear as propaganda. Rather than directing a response, surely an interpreter’s role is to encourage their audience into thinking for themselves? As Don Aldridge observes: ‘... interpretation is about encouraging people to think for themselves, not about telling them to think, or setting society’s objectives’.

The three terms ‘understanding’, ‘appreciation’ and ‘provocation’ are interdependent. The heritage interpreter is responsible for unlocking the visitor’s imagination through knowledge and appreciation. Truth and history must remain relative. Inevitably the historian or heritage interpreter selects their facts, but their primary function is to encourage people to think for themselves.

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Endnotes

2 Robert Hewison quotes ‘Can the truth be commercially viable?’ as one of the sub-themes circulated in the preliminary papers for the conference. Uzzell, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 22.
7 Quoted in Uzzell, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 9.
8 Ibid, vol. 1, p. 27.
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*Ibid., vol. 1, p. 64.*

*Ibid., vol. 1, p. 2.*

*Ibid., vol. 1, p. 12.*


*Ibid., vol. 1, p. 92.*

*Ibid., vol. 1, p. 49.*


*Ibid., vol. 1, p. 46.*

Quoted by David Lowenthal, *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 214

This paper does not have the scope to consider the role of the media in the interpretation of cultural heritage, but it is important to bear in mind the strength of this influence.


*Ibid., p. xvi.*

Uzzell, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 44.

*Ibid., vol. 1, p. 60.*


Uzzell, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 84.

*Ibid., vol. 1, p. 85.*

*Ibid., vol. 1, p. 86.*

**Bibliography**


