

Independent Museums, Heritage, and the Shape of Museum Studies

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Abstract:

Reflecting on the British heritage debates of the 1980s and 1990s, Robert Lumley asserted that they continue to influence Anglo-American definitions and perceptions of that subject. This article suggests that they had a correlative impact upon the parameters of museum studies.

The museums founded during the 1980s were mainly small scale enterprises and they were devoted to many different topics, but commentators almost exclusively focused on the large independent organisations concerned with the recent industrial past. In doing so they associated the independent sector with 'heritage' rather than with established public museums. I maintain that this remains the case. Recent scholarship either considers independent museums in relation to the conceptual framework of the period or in terms of 'community', a discourse that is closely linked to recent developments in heritage studies. They are rarely, if ever, mentioned in analyses of architecture, professional practice, contemporary display or the role of museums. This omission effectively ascribes expertise and knowledge to public rather than independent institutions, maintains ingrained structures of social and cultural exclusion, and homogenises museum studies, limiting its concerns and scope.

Key words: heritage, museum studies, community, independent

'In England the heritage debate that began to come to the fore from the mid-1980s has left a legacy in Anglo-American literature that has influenced how heritage has been defined or perceived over the past two decades' (Lumley 2005: 15).

In retrospect, the 1980s heritage debates seem parochial and fixated upon questions of nostalgia, inauthenticity and commercialism. Since then, the study of heritage has grown in reach and sophistication to encompass sites in Africa, Australasia, and the Americas, and to address themes including identity, trauma, reconciliation, community, inclusion and exclusion. Yet despite these expansive multi-disciplinary approaches, Robert Lumley asserted that the 1980s Anglo-American debates continue to influence definitions and perceptions of heritage. This article suggests that they had a correlative impact upon the parameters of museum studies.¹

Museum studies and heritage studies can be construed as two separate fields that have overlapping trajectories and shared areas of interest. The former began to emerge at the beginning of the twentieth century and was mainly concerned with the technical aspects of the profession. This preoccupation with methods later came under question and in 1988 Peter Vergo diagnosed a widespread dissatisfaction with the 'old museologies'. He argued in favour of a theoretical and humanistic approach to museums, which examined their purpose, politics, values, and histories (Vergo 1989: 3). His call resonated and the following decade saw a flood of literature on these topics.

The interest in new museologies was linked to the intellectual developments of the period, perhaps most notably social history and cultural studies, and to a rising interest in

questions of power and knowledge (Macdonald 2006: 3). It was also connected to a massive increase in the number of museums. At the beginning of the twentieth century there were 530 museums in Britain, mostly funded by the national government or by local authorities (Miers 1928: 14).² By the mid-1960s there were 900 and this figure rose to 2,500 in the late 1980s (Museums & Gallery Commission 1988: 10), prompting commentators to claim that they were opening at the rate of one every fortnight (Lumley 1988: 1), one per week (Hewison 1987: 9), or even three a week (Boylan 2006: 415). Worldwide, some ninety-five per cent of museums were founded after World War II (Lowenthal 1998: 16).

Noting that there was a simultaneous boom in museums and in museum studies, the historian Randolph Starn wondered if the literature was a discursive shadow of institutional success; a place where critical responses and anxieties could be played out (Starn 2005: 18). These reactions concerned the character of the new museums as well as their numbers. The majority of the new venues were established by private individuals, special interest groups, or businesses, and they largely operated independently of the public sector. They had relatively low budgets, small numbers of staff, and concentrated on non-academic subjects as diverse as pasta, whisky, wurlitzers, barbed wire, and immigration. Kenneth Hudson thought that the ensuing changes in style and subject matter had such an impact that it amounted 'to a revolution – the word is not an exaggeration – in museum philosophy and its practical application' (Hudson 2004: 90).

By challenging existing practices, the new independent venues generated debate about the role and character of museums. They were also the subject of analysis, most notably in the 1980s heritage debates which Lumley participated in and referred to in the quote above. Other contributors included journalists, historians, cultural theorists, and arts practitioners, and their opinions were principally aired in the national newspapers and books designed to reach a wide audience. At the same time, academic forms of heritage studies were also beginning to take shape. By the mid-1990s British universities offered over twenty degree courses in the area (Howard 1994: 3) and in 1994 the *International Journal of Heritage Studies* was launched, heralding the arrival of a new discipline which covered landscape, buildings, theme parks, attractions, and intangible cultural practices as well as museums.

Where the new museology took its lead from history, social histories of art, literary theory, and post-structuralism, heritage studies looked to archaeology and geography. Both areas also drew from architecture, cultural studies, social history, and social science, among others, to generate rich multidisciplinary fields. As such, they cannot be easily encapsulated and this article does not attempt to do so. Rather, it considers how Anglo-American debates situated the independent museums that were founded during the late-twentieth century. My contention is that they were, and still are, allied to 'heritage' and that this has implications for the make-up of museum studies.

The first part of this paper, therefore, considers how 1980s commentators focused on particular museums and themes and, in doing so, associated the independent sector with 'heritage' rather than with their established public sector counterparts. The second part of the paper examines how independent organisations are still linked to heritage studies, both in its early and more recent forms.

Then: The 1980s heritage debates

Robert Hewison was one of the main contributors to the heritage debates and his polemical book *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* encapsulated the reasons why the 'heritage industry' became a pejorative term. The book opens with Hewison invoking the rising numbers of museums and stating that the new independent museums were manufacturing heritage rather than the goods upon which the country's economy depended.

Taking Wigan Pier Heritage Centre as one of his primary subjects, Hewison outlined the collapse of industry within the area. Between 1911 and 1970 the number of collieries fell from 400 to eleven, over 1,000 textile mills had closed since 1950, and the canal traffic was long gone. As a result, over thirty per cent of the town was classed as derelict and, by 1983, unemployment stood at over eighteen per cent, although it was as high as ninety per cent on some estates. Hewison suggests that the past was 'virtually all' Wigan had left, but that the Wigan Pier Heritage Centre gave that past a problematic gloss.

When it came to assigning blame for catastrophes and hardship, Hewison thought that the displays were studiously neutral and, by locating the exhibition in 1900 when Wigan was still relatively prosperous, rather than the 1930s when George Orwell visited, it avoided confronting some of the harder truths of twentieth-century working life. Hewison described the stage-set coal-mine, nail-making and tinsmiths' shops all populated by 'sweating' dummies, and explained that actors interacted with the public. He recounted how 'Kitty', opened the back door to her cottage and 'in assumed Wigan accents' asked if the visitors had come to pay their respects to her dead father. Although 'an actress mourning by a coffin may do her best to evoke the hardships of working class life in 1900,' wrote Hewison, 'her performance is an entertainment that helps to make the past seem picturesque and pleasing' (Hewison 1987: 81).

Hewison's supposition that Kitty's accent was assumed, which seems unlikely given that the Centre employed local people, was a way of emphasising the pretence he saw before him and he pursued this theme in several ways. Some original buildings had been demolished, the canal side landscaped, a wooden canal walk has been built to provide access and the pier now faced a car park and floating restaurant. Hewison implied that the changes created an inauthentic environment, although it is hard to imagine how visitors could have negotiated their way around the original derelict site without some alterations taking place, or why they would have wanted to. Continuing his list of complaints, Hewison wrote that the audience passed effortlessly 'from the bar of the Park Hotel in the Heritage Centre to the Orwell pub, with its fake Tiffany lamps and genuine space invaders, from the 1900 grocer's store to the Pier Shop, where we can buy 'Mr Hunter's range of Victorian perfumes, soaps and medications, Wigan Pier Humbugs, ... model miner's lamps ... and copies of the *Road to Wigan Pier*' (1987: 21). The Park Hotel had been a grand Victorian pub, whereas the Orwell was a new and functioning pub that had been retro-fitted to appear older. Again, Hewison's objection is not spelt out, but the suggestion is that the 'real' and the re-creation blur into one another. Ultimately, he thought the 'main purpose of Wigan Pier is to create, not so much an informative, as an emotional experience, a symbolic recovery of the past' and, for him, this amounted to an inaccurate representation, even a 'bogus history' (1987: 21, 144).

Developing these points with reference to the Beamish Open Air Museum, Hewison suggested that 'the height of historic invention' was achieved by placing workings for a deep mine over a non-existent shaft and next to a pit heap that was manufactured for the site. The point, however, was much the same: that like Wigan Pier, Beamish presented a rose-coloured picture that bore no relation to reality but to what visitors apparently liked to imagine. The purpose of creating this ersatz representation of the past, Hewison argued, was partly economic. In 1985/6 fifty-eight million visits were made to museums and forty-eight million to historic houses, while the total earnings from overseas visitors to Britain were in the region of £5000 million. Hewison also maintained that the development of the heritage industry spoke to 'a profound cultural need' (1987: 28). Visitors longed to step back into the past, to find roots when all was changing quickly, and to recreate those aspects of their former lives that had been lost in the process of deindustrialisation. Nostalgia, Hewison opined, had 'reached fever point' (1987: 10), although the sickness must have been quickly remedied because the Wigan Pier Heritage Centre closed ten years after opening.

For Hewison, Wigan Pier Heritage Centre, the Beamish Open Air Museum, and their ilk had no place in the category of museums. Instead, they were belonged in the nebulous zone of 'heritage' and, as such, were bracketed with *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady*, *Brideshead Revisited*, Catherine Cookson Country, and a former piano salesman playing 'As Time Goes By' on a glass piano in a Wigan wine-bar. In contrast, Hewison declared that museums (rather than 'heritage centres') upheld worthy civic values, 'provide the symbols through which a nation and a culture understands itself' and are 'objects of pride and prestige' (1987: 84). Hewison continued stating that museums 'sanction the creation of commodities that have immaterial, rather than material values. The objects that hold those values are a source of aesthetic pleasure, emotional response, historical knowledge, but above all, of cultural meaning' (1987: 85). The collections 'represent a society's significance, and as such they are priceless' (1987: 85).

The relation of new, independent museums to 'heritage', rather than to traditional museums, was reinforced by journalists who stressed and exaggerated the features that

differentiated them from the established sector. Writing about Wigan Pier Heritage Centre for *The Observer* Neil Ascherson remarked that 'you can pay to crawl through a model coal mine', when in fact visitors walked through full-height galleries, but then the comment was made for effect not accuracy (Ascherson 1987). Effect rather than interest, curiosity, or empathy, similarly seemed to motivate *Flogging a Dead Horse*, Paul Reas' series of photographs which depicted overweight women in period dress, numerous 'heritage' gift shops and a compilation of ageing, badly dressed, or tattooed visitors. The accompanying text by Stuart Cosgrove referred to 'coal mines for tourists, miniature pit ponies for the kids, and literature trails for those who want to tour around in yesterday's metaphors' (Reas & Cosgrove 1993: unpaginated).

The distinction between new independent and traditional museums was also maintained by commentators who celebrated heritage, the most notable of whom was the historian Raphael Samuel. Taking a very different line on heritage from Hewison, Ascherson, or Cosgrove, Samuel argued that the rise of independent museums was not a symptom of deindustrialisation. He contended that the foundation of rural museums was linked to the mechanisation of agriculture, that steam preservation organisations began when diesel trains were introduced, and industrial collections were first conceived in the 1950s and 1960s, which was a time of full employment (Samuel 1999: 243). Instead of providing evidence of nostalgic urges, Samuel argued that collecting could be forward-looking. For example, the interest in the first steel-framed building connected the achievements of the past to the skyscrapers of the present and to the buildings of the future (1999: 220).

Samuel also interpreted independent museums as positive evidence of the growing democratisation of history. He wrote that 'history in the hands of professional historian is apt to present itself as an esoteric form of knowledge. It fetishizes archive-based research', 'encourages inbreeding (and) introspection', and its 'academic papers are addressed to a relatively narrow circle of fellow-practitioners' (1999: 3). According to Samuel, these experts considered local history parochial, biography too literary, oral history dubious and naive, while historical romances or popular history books were completely beyond the institutional pale. Along with children's theatricals, TV sagas, metal-detecting, and historical re-enactments, Samuel argued that small, independent museums were all forms of do-it-yourself historical retrieval; a social form of knowledge, the work of a thousand different hands and should be appreciated as such. For Samuel, the large institutions were on the side of the dry-as-dust professional historians whereas 'the multiplication of do-it-yourself curators and mini-museums' was 'one of the most remarkable additions to the ranks of Britain's memory keepers – or a notable augmentation of them' (1999: 27).

Raphael Samuel, Neil Ascherson, and others regularly engaged in some harsh mutual criticism on the subject of heritage. Samuel called his contemporaries 'heritage baiters' and accused them of being metropolitan snobs who were envious of the popularity that accrued to new independent museums and heritage projects (Samuel 1995: 23). There certainly was snobbery and it is noticeable how many times commentators remarked on visitors wearing anoraks (as opposed to wool overcoats one supposes), while the accompanying photographs almost invariably focused on working class audiences with strained expressions or awkward postures. Even so, Samuel's analysis prompted Patrick Wright to write a scathing rebuttal. Wright thought that Samuel was stronger on accumulation of information than its analysis, that he was insufficiently critical of the ways in which 'heritage' could be used instrumentally by government or business and, when it suited his argument, was somewhat cavalier with the facts (Wright 1995: 29). Wright also suggested that Samuel had lifted some of his best ideas, a point that was reiterated by Ascherson (1995: 20).

Despite being nominated a 'heritage baiter', Wright had also been critical of his fellows. While he praised Bob West's detailed analysis of labour conditions at Ironbridge Gorge, Wright observed that his account, like many others, rested on a perception of fakery and tended to assume that visitors were gulled. What was needed, he thought, was a discussion of what people were actually doing when they went to the new independent museums (Wright 1989/2009: 252). He also insisted on discriminating between projects, remarking that, from Hewison's perspective, 'it doesn't really matter if 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' (Wright 1989/2009: 239). If Samuel was overly quick to

dismiss objections to heritage as reprehensible snobbery and West assumed that the visitors were passive consumers, then Hewison over-generalised.

With hindsight, it is relatively easy to see why commentators fought so bitterly on the subject of heritage and independent museums. In *Flogging a Dead Horse*, Cosgrove echoed widely held sentiments that 'heritage museums are very much a phenomena of the '80s, a curious by-product of Margaret Thatcher's market triumphalism and the desire to make the past directly relevant to the cultural and financial realities of the present. If all our social yesterdays had any value at all, it was commercial and regenerative, something that people might spend money to remember' (Reas & Cosgrove 1993: unpaginated). It is important to understand the connections with Thatcherism because this was a major factor in how new independent museums were perceived, interpreted, and portrayed.

On gaining power in 1979, the Conservative government employed deflationary strategies, which resulted in a two-year recession and unemployment doubled from one million under the previous Labour administration to two million by 1981. By 1983, unemployment had soared, reaching an official figure of 3.6 million — although the criteria for defining who was unemployed were amended allowing some to estimate that it was actually as high as five million. (Lewis & Townsend 1989: 1; Jack, 1997: 1). The scale of deindustrialisation was vast and rapidly effected; coal mining, shipbuilding, the potteries, and the steel and car industries were all decimated, and their loss devastated communities whose economic livelihood had been predicated on one major industry.

In order to re-start the economy the Conservative government introduced a number of schemes and reforms, which were explicitly designed to promote small business or what was claimed to be an 'enterprise culture'. They cut basic rates of tax, abolished restrictions on bank loans, and removed various bureaucratic procedures that had been involved in setting up businesses. They broke monopolies and created twenty-five enterprise zones (mainly in areas of high unemployment) where firms were exempted from commercial rates and received some capital allowances. There were also a series of expansion schemes that encouraged investment by providing tax incentives, loan guarantee schemes, enterprise allowance scheme to enable the unemployed to set up on their own (£40 per week for a year for unemployed people starting a business), local enterprise agencies to provide advice and stimulate the setting up of new companies, and development initiatives covering design, marketing, planning, finance and information systems (Riddell 1989: 73). In short, there were clear incentives to start small businesses and museums were among them.

Many of these new museums also benefited from links with the Manpower Services Commission, which was established by Edward Heath's government in 1973 but became closely associated with the unpopular Youth Training Scheme (YTS), which ran from 1983 until 1987. The YTS was intended to offer work experience to unemployed 16-19 year olds who were paid £35 per week (and were not eligible for any housing costs), while the employer received subsidies for providing training. The scheme institutionalised cheap labour and it often left young people with no further qualifications or skill-base, but museums participated nonetheless. Ironbridge Gorge Museum used Manpower funding to set up the Jackfield Tile Workshop and Training centre for the renovation of old tiles and the production of new ones from old moulds. By 1980, it had access to Manpower funds of £743,000 and it relied on a subsidized labour force of almost two hundred 'employees' (West 1988: 44). There was a harsh irony in paying unemployed youth less than a living wage to work in the grim conditions of a reproduction nineteenth-century candlemakers and, as Bob West pointed out, the Ironbridge Gorge both 'reaped the benefits and contributed towards the policing of the crisis of youth employment' (1988: 44).

In this context, then, heritage was understood to be symptomatic of deindustrialisation, of an individualistic enterprise culture, and to be involved in the exploitation of young unemployed people. It is no wonder that the critics attacked their target, but equally it is understandable that Samuel wanted to preserve some sense of agency — that heritage could and did belong to the people, that it could articulate democratic ideals and a shared social history, even if it was sometimes co-opted or invented by the Right. Likewise, it is understandable that both detractors and supporters would want to establish some distance between new and established forms of heritage, and between the independent and the traditional public-sector

museums. Although most academics would now be sceptical about Hewison's claims that 'proper' museums were the exponents of intangible, immaterial values, 'historical knowledge' and 'cultural meaning', it is clear that, at the time, they functioned as a safe reserve from the vicissitudes of a right-wing 'loadsamoney' culture. Conversely, for Samuel, traditional museums represented the establishment and, therefore, had to be distinguished from the new 'mini-museums' if the latter were to be held to be an instance of grass-roots popular history.

Various themes and types of organisations fell out of this attempt to drive a strategic wedge between proper and new independent museums. Although the heritage debaters invariably cited the massive expansion of independent museums as a precursor to their arguments, they almost exclusively concentrated upon the Wigan Pier Heritage Centre, Beamish Open Air Museum, and Ironbridge Gorge, which were all museums of the recent industrial past located in areas of deindustrialisation. This focus allowed them to develop their thesis of manufacturing nostalgic heritage in place of goods. Yet while there were many museums that commemorated defunct industrial sites and practices, there were also numerous museums that related to thriving businesses and extant skills. The Pencil Museum in Keswick and the Vacuum museum in Chard, Somerset (which is attached to a factory that still produces 4,500 units a day) were clearly not established to replace dying industries or out of nostalgia for past technologies or communities. Their, and similar, histories remained unexamined by both critics and advocates. There were also numerous independent museums that had no explicit relationship or only tangential links to industries. The de-industrialisation argument is not immediately applicable to, say, the Cars of the Stars Museum, which is located in rural Keswick and was founded by a dentist.

In addition, Wigan Pier Heritage Centre, Beamish Open Air Museum, and Ironbridge Gorge were large-scale museums and, as Tim Putnam pointed out, 'it needs to be recognised that such institutions were pioneers and are still leaders in their field. They are exemplary not typical' (Wright 1989/2009: 239). Reporting on the new independent sector in 1990, the UK Association of Independent Museums (AIM) divided the museums into five categories that were ranked according to annual visitor numbers and revenue. They found that only fifteen museums attracted over 200,000 visitors and earned in excess of £350,000. Ninety per cent of the 930 museums surveyed fell into the bottom two brackets and attracted fewer than 30,000 visitors a year and earned less than £50,000. Of these, the vast majority were in the lowest category and well over half of the total numbers of independent museums were visited by less than 5,000 people and generated an annual income of less than £7,500 (Middleton 1990: 15). These small-scale museums could not hire actors, recreate street scenes, import buildings, build dioramas or innovate in ways that were open to their wealthier counterparts. Instead, they predominantly adopted the techniques that were common to traditional museums and put objects on display. Concentrating on the relatively well-established innovators, rather than the small-scale independent museums, further reinforced the distinction between new independent and established, public-sector museums.

Then and Now

Hewison and his contemporaries presented a homogenised version of the new independent museums in order to express their disapprobation of social changes within Britain. Yet since then the political, economic and cultural conditions have changed and, as a result, the gap between large independent and public sector institutions has narrowed. I will outline three of the reasons why this happened.

By the mid-1980s, public sector museums were under massive pressure to become more economically viable. Stephen Deuchar, who was director of Tate Britain before moving to the Art Fund, remembers that the Thatcher government 'began to squeeze public funding for the arts' while simultaneously demanding greater 'tangible outputs in terms of the work rate and the effectiveness of those receiving and spending it'. 'Partly in response' he continued 'there arose a more overtly populist and commercially driven approach to display and exhibition making' (Deuchar 2002: 4). This included a flurry of blockbuster shows and the evolution of experience-centred initiatives. Museums opened or expanded their gift shops, cafes, restaurants and other money-making enterprises and in some instances introduced entrance fees.

Since then, public museums have become increasingly commercially-minded and with the latest round of funding cuts they can no longer count on public subsidy. In 2010, eight museums including the Horniman, the Geffrye, and the Museum of Working Class History, all of which had been funded directly by the Department of Culture Media and Sport, were told that their grants were to be revoked. In future, they were to apply for funds from their local authorities (who also had their funding cut), turn to philanthropists for support, and increase their commercial activities. New 'public-sector' museums now assume that they will have to generate income and have had to follow the lead of the more business-minded large independent organisations. Cafes, corporate hire, and gift shops are no longer the signs of vulgarity but of survival.

Policy changes in the 1990s and 2000s also changed attitudes. When New Labour came to power in 1997, they eschewed the hard-nosed commercialism of the 1980 and 1990s cultural sector, dropped entrance fees, and raised levels of funding for public sector museums. This generosity came with conditions. Funding agreements drawn up by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to cover the period 2003-6 show that the eighteen museums they directly funded were required to attract more visitors from ethnic minorities and increase the number of children that visited their exhibitions by a total of seven million (Burrell 2003). DCMS funded museums also had to raise their numbers of C2DE visitors by eight per cent on the previous financial year.³ The working class visitors who were often an implicit target in the heritage debates now had to be courted.

In order to attract these new audiences, public-sector museums needed to become more user-friendly. Recognising that audiences did not necessarily have prior knowledge of the collections, they developed explanatory wall texts and pamphlets. Extensive education programmes were devised with the intention of making collections more accessible to diverse audiences. Curators began to make provision for children, for people with disabilities, and those with other particular needs while multimedia resources offered visitors the opportunity to pursue their own interests in greater depth. In the course of this transformation, public museums also adopted some of the techniques pioneered by the independents. The Museum of London now offers 'Gladiator Games', an opportunity to 'step back in time to witness an epic clash of the titans in Guildhall Yard, the site of London's only Roman amphitheatre' and invites prospective visitors to 'Hear the roar of the crowd and imagine the sand of the arena beneath your feet as fearsome gladiators dramatically reconstruct games once held in ancient Londinium'. The V&A introduced dressing up boxes for children (and adults, if they wish) and even the grand old patriarch, the British Museum, provides Roman soldier costumes for school groups, holds tea-tasting events, and runs mega-mummy animation workshops.

Alongside this change in the character of public museums, there was a growing recognition that they were not as neutral as they might have once have appeared. Writing in 1988, Gaby Porter described how the dioramas and displays in social and local history museums almost invariably depicted women engaged in lacemaking, needlework, and other ladylike pursuits or, less frequently, doing the laundry or cooking. She remarked that visitors might be forgiven for thinking that women only ventured outside the home to work as domestic servants (Porter 1988: 105). Elizabeth Carnegie agreed and added that museums had rarely collected items that were made by women or pertained to their lives and Kath Davies echoed the theme saying that Welsh museums conveyed the impression of a nation populated by men at their leisure (Carnegie 1996: 55; Davies 1996: 105). Lawrence Fitzgerald picked up on this later point and commented that curators usually presented information from the viewpoint of the boss rather than the workers (Fitzgerald 1996: 116).

There was also a growing awareness that museums helped construct national identities, that they were inseparable from a history of imperialism, and that their narratives had real ramifications for colonised peoples (B. Anderson 1991; Clunas, 1998; Mitchell, 2004). Some authors examined the ways that museums had educated and civilised their subjects, turning them into productive citizens (Duncan 1995; Bennett 2006), while others considered their links to capitalism (Haacke 1987; Cummings & Lewandowska 2000). Many museums responded to these criticisms by staging exhibitions that acknowledged previously marginalised histories of women's achievements, working class lives, disability, minority cultures, and links between the West and East (Haan 2006). In short, the proposition that public museums were exponents of

immaterial values, authoritative historical knowledge, and definitive cultural meaning, as Hewison had supposed, was subject to stringent criticism both inside and outside of the profession.

Like independent and public museums, the academic spheres of museum and heritage studies have gradually become less polarised. While inflammatory rhetoric may have been permissible in 1980s newspapers, it was less acceptable within academe and arguments were tempered as heritage studies began to cohere into a discipline. In the first issue of the *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, its editor, Peter Howard, maintained that there was considerable common ground between the two categories. Characterising museums as one type of heritage organisation among many, he suggested that certain topics cut across disciplines and that archaeologists, landscape conservators, zoo-keepers, and curators might share a common interest in issues of conservation, display, interpretation, policy, and management (Howard 1994: 3).

Subsequent authors also conceived of museums and heritage as being inter-related. In the anthology *Heritage, Museums and Galleries*, Gerald Corsane suggested that 'discourses on heritage, museums and galleries have become a massive, complex and organic network of often loosely articulated understandings, issues and ways of perceiving things. A network that is fluid, dynamic and constantly reconfiguring itself' (Corsane 2005: 1). More recently, Laurajane Smith's reworking of 'heritage' implicitly includes museums and their study. In the introduction to her four-volume anthology *Cultural Heritage: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies* (2007) she eschews definitions of heritage as a type of site or object. Explaining that places, items, or events are not inherently meaningful, Smith argues that some things take on cultural significance because of the role they play in negotiating cultural and social values and identities (Smith 2007: 4). These things are designated 'heritage' and museums are one of the places where this form of cultural process takes place.

The conceptualisation of heritage as a specific form of cultural process excludes some conventional museological accounts such as histories of institutions, exhibition design, display techniques, and architecture. Nonetheless, there is also some interchange between these branches of museum studies and the subjects that are more usually associated with heritage. For example, as public museums have started to employ the dramatic and immersive apparatus that were initially pioneered by the independent museums and heritage venues, museologists have started to rethink the importance of subjective experience. Instead of dismissing it, authors have argued that the visitors' embodied emotional responses can help them to engage more deeply with the exhibitions (Dudley 2010: 2).

Given these different points of synchrony, it is instructive to see how independent museums are situated within recent academic discourse and, in this respect, it is useful to turn to a series of anthologies published over the last decade. Although editors routinely recognise the limits of their endeavour, 'readers' are an attempt to survey an area at a given moment, and that mapping illustrates current priorities and matters of interest.

Sharon Macdonald's *Companion to Museum Studies* does include references to independent museums, but these are almost entirely concentrated in a single essay entitled 'Heritage' by Stephen Hoelscher. He argues that 1980s critics failed to 'distinguish between scholarly museums and heritage sites, on the one hand, and amusement parks that utilize historic motifs, on the other' (Hoelscher 2006: 209). This position succeeds in defending some independent museums but only on the basis that they subscribe to the tenets of established institutions.

Even writing that is not so explicitly allied to heritage remains close to themes articulated in the 1980s. Martin Hall's essay 'The Reappearance of the Authentic' in *Museum Frictions* published in 2006, presents the now orthodox view that the Beamish 'is more sentiment than history' and substantiates his point by listing the events that they routinely offer: sweet-making, 'clippy' mat making, a recreation of the May Festivities with a Queen, Maypole dancing and Morris dancers, a national traction engine rally, vintage car rallies, demonstrations of traditional crafts of north country quilting and patchwork, lace-making, a ploughing match, a prize leek show, bee skep making, traditional pole-lathing, and the list goes on. The majority of people who visit, he continues, are locals and given the contrast between this sanitized history and the ravages of industrialisation, few of them 'will believe that life in a colliery town was maypole dancing' (Hall 2006: 83). Why then, he asks, has Beamish continued to be so popular?

Hall's explanation is two-fold. Eschewing 'the visitor is gulled' hypothesis, he argues that it offers 'entertainment, advanced simulation, and valued mementoes in a secure and controlled environment' (2006: 83). The visitors know that the exhibits are not real but admire the artifice in bringing together fifteen gleaming traction engines or the attention to detail of military re-enactments. Secondly, Hall observes, the Beamish is self-exoticizing in that it turns 'the past into another country'. The coalmines, pit houses, and nineteenth and early twentieth-century working class culture are framed and re-packaged as photo opportunities and memorable cameos. These props are then used as prompts by the 'retired participants in the north-east's decimated industrial economy', who reminisce 'about the past to children and grandchildren' (2006: 84). Beamish 'offers closure on the past' and 'a way of converting Tyneside's industrial economy into nostalgia and participatory entertainment'.

Hall writes about simulation rather than inauthenticity, but otherwise he stays loyal to themes of nostalgia, loss, and so forth. These terms have become so expected and so naturalised by the ongoing heritage debates that it can be difficult to grasp how limiting they are and so it is instructive to compare Hall's reading of Beamish with that of independent museums outside the West. The same anthology has a section titled 'Tactical Museologies', which includes a chapter on a group of community museums in Oaxaca, Mexico who hold exhibitions of folk art, basketry and weaving, organise children's workshops in traditional dance, medicine, music, cooking, and language, and provide demonstrations of artisanal practices and cooking for tourists. The authors, Cuautémoc Camarena and Teresa Morales acknowledge that there have been problems with individuals trying to make personal gains, with committee members who have spent funds fraudulently, and more generally with the way that the running of the union replicates patterns of exclusion evident in the wider community. Nonetheless, they argue that the museums are a means of strengthening cultural bonds, of affirming the richness and value of their culture, a way of re-possessing material heritage that has been expropriated by private or public agents and a means for communities to control their future (Camarena & Morales 2006). Far from being considered 'sentimental', demonstrating traditional arts for tourists and for local people is seen as an important aspect of keeping the culture alive.

Another chapter in 'Tactical Museologies' outlines the foundation and development of the District Six Museum in South Africa. Until it was declared a 'white space', the area had been 'a melting pot of class, race and culture'. The museum documents life in the area prior to the forced removals of black residents in the 1970s and early 1980s and the social upheaval that followed. Describing an exhibition of photographs of District Six that was held in 1992 the author, Ciraj Rassool, comments that:

Former residents assembled in the pews of the old District Six church to exclaim their recollections as a powerful body of photographs and the enlarged images of projected slides and old film footage sent them back into their pasts in the district. (Rassool 2006: 388)

Instead of being cited as evidence of a 'foreclosure' of the past, reminiscence is considered to be a means of preserving memory and building cultural solidarity.

I am not positing the Beamish, Ironbridge, or Wigan Pier as English counterparts to either of these museums, which have been established and now run under very different conditions, but I am suggesting that museologists view non-Western independent museums dedicated to particular ethnic groups much more positively than Western independent museums concerned with working-class culture. When museum volunteers in South Africa document and celebrate cultures that have been shattered by oppressive regimes, they are not perceived as clinging insecurely to a time long gone. If indigenous Mexicans perform traditional dances for tourists it is not automatically dismissed as fake, it is understood as a strategic way of perpetuating traditional practices.

Why is the demonstration of English folk practices considered to be sentimental, or reminiscence deemed an act of closure? They can equally be construed as a means of keeping traditions, practices and ideas alive. Rather than labelling May Day dances and the like as nostalgic, they could be interpreted as evidence of immense resilience. Instead of being thought commercial or ersatz, these museums could be considered instances of a collective refusal to forget while their founders, workforces, and volunteers might be credited with having sense to

realise that hard hitting social commentary was unlikely to garner many visitors. Why is the ongoing, albeit reduced, presence of industry and its associated cultures ignored?

Conceptualising independent museums in the terms established by the 1980s heritage debates does a disservice to their staff and to those who visit, but these pejorative views have been challenged. In *Heritage, Place and Community* Bella Dicks' investigation of Rhondda Heritage Park, its associated museum, and its relationship with the nearby villages, showed that working-class residents felt excluded from decision-making processes concerning the display of 'their' heritage (Dicks 2000). Other writers have shifted their focus beyond large museums of the recent industrial past to consider smaller independent organisations. For instance, Sharon Macdonald's 'On Old Things: The fetishization of past everyday life', republished in Smith's *Cultural Heritage* collection draws on anthropological notions of the gift to consider the popularity of exhibitions of 'life gone by' and to explain why local people so regularly leave objects at the Skye Museum of Island Life (Macdonald, 2007). Shelia Watson's essay 'History museums, community identities and a sense of place' examined perceptions of the Great Yarmouth fishing industry and how it took precedence over other types of labour in the planning and construction of a town museum (Watson 2007), while Elizabeth Crooke takes the Apprentice Boys Museum in Londonderry as a case study in her book *Museums and Community* (Crooke 2007).

These texts re-think prevalent accounts of independent museums but, interestingly, they still have much in common with heritage debates and heritage studies. The museums under analysis are characterised as sites of cultural process – although audiences are now perceived to negotiate their local identities rather than satiate their nostalgia – and as being germane to particular audiences. In texts above, the museums are discussed in relation to communities – specifically, Welsh ex-miners and their descendents, Hebridean islanders, residents of an impoverished coastal town, and Northern Irish Protestants.

Pointing to continuities between heritage studies and current research on community is not intended to suggest any faults in the later. Rather, the issue is that independent museums and the people associated with them are apportioned to specific debates. While they appear in discussions of heritage or 'community', they do not feature in analyses concerned with the idea of the institution (Preziosi & Farago 2004), museum architecture (Giebelhausen 2003), display (Cherry & Cullen 2008), or professional practice (G. Anderson 2004). This omission implies that museums dedicated to particular communities or to the recent industrial and rural past have little or nothing to contribute to wider discussions. The assumption is that such organisations are neither technically nor conceptually innovative, or offer any material for further museological study. Noticeably, museums devoted to particular types of objects; the collections of pasta, wurlitzers, and whisky that Hudson applauded are not considered in any academic context.

Discounting or marginalising independent museums effectively attributes expertise and knowledge to the established public institutions. Many museological accounts highlight the fact that minority ethnic, working and lower-middle class people have been marshalled into productive self-improvement or are excluded from major museums. However, they do not consider those organisations that were founded and are visited by those same people unless it is to examine questions of community. It is as if these authors do not believe that independent museums and their 'communities' can be relevant beyond their immediate locale.

This disciplinary partiality maintains ingrained structures of social and cultural exclusion, but it also homogenises museum studies, limiting its concerns and scope. Many independent museums do function in similar ways to public-sector institutions: an educational ethos is assumed, professional levels of security, conservation, and collections management are taken for granted, as is a commitment to posterity. Yet, if one bears in mind that the majority of the new independent museums are small venues, often run on a low income by enthusiasts, groups, or private collectors, the academic bias towards national and larger organisations means that potential areas of enquiry are ignored. For instance, does a museum's setting influence interpretations of a collection? Is visiting a museum in a village, at the seaside, or in suburbia qualitatively different from going to one in a regional or national centre? What are the implications of housing a museum in a private residence, temple or pub? What forms of interaction does that location stymie or enable? What are the extents and restrictions of professionalism? How is humour used in exhibitions? How might one conceptualise displays of innumerable objects of the same type?

It is ironic that the museums that were instrumental in the formation of modern critical museum studies should have been sidelined. Addressing them in terms beyond those of heritage and community has the potential to refine existing museological debates and to open up new areas of enquiry. Museums of barbed wire or barometers, shipping or straw-work can present scholars with a political and an intellectual challenge.

Received: 21 September 2011

Finally Accepted: 2 May 2012

Notes

- ¹ I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.
- ² The figures in Miers' report also included Southern Ireland.
- ³ C2DE are social grades used in a UK system of demographic classification where C2 refers to skilled working class, D to semi skilled or unskilled working class and E to casual or lowest grade workers, pensioners and others who depend on the welfare state for their income.

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