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978-0-521-63562-2 - The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History

David Lowenthal

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Heritage has burgeoned over the past quarter of a century from a small élite preoccupation into a major popular crusade. Everything from Disneyland to the Holocaust Museum, from the Balkan wars to the Northern Irish Troubles, from Elvis memorabilia to the Elgin Marbles bears the marks of the cult of heritage. In this acclaimed book David Lowenthal explains the rise of this new obsession with the past and examines its power for both good and evil.

DAVID LOWENTHAL is Emeritus Professor of Geography and Honorary Research Fellow at University College London, and Visiting Professor of Heritage Studies at St Mary's University College, Strawberry Hill, Twickenham. He is the author of *The Past Is a Foreign Country*.

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For Mary Alice

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“The free-ranging master of Heritage Studies . . . has managed to coax an extraordinary inventory of heritage pathology into a coherent, lucid argument.”

Patrick Wright, *THE INDEPENDENT*

“David Lowenthal has done us a service by demystifying the new religion of the past, the cult of heritage, second only to health as the great moral absolute of our time.”

Clive Aslet, *LITERARY REVIEW*

“Wry and hugely learned analysis . . . Will surely provoke changes of attitude, and deeper self-knowledge, in all who read it.” Jill Paton Walsh, *Books of the Year, THE TABLET*

“Perceptive and provocative . . . explores the many perversities of the heritage cult – and its absolute irresistibility.”

Michael Kerrigan, *THE SCOTSMAN*

“*The Past Is a Foreign Country* is a wild and magnificent book; *The Heritage Crusade* is its equally glorious successor . . . a keen eye for what is often comical in the pretensions of ‘patrimonialists’.”

Jo Tollebeek, *DE VOLKSKRANT* (Amsterdam)

“Absorbing book . . . spectacular demolition job on the cult of heritage . . . highly recommended.”

Frank McLynn, *GLASGOW HERALD*

“Lowenthal’s entertaining and enthralling study succeeds brilliantly. It deserves to be placed on the shelves of every olde gifte shoppe in the kingdom.”

Ben Pimlott, *THE GUARDIAN*

“Steeped in wit and sensitivity . . . [T]his acute savant’s tone, at once severe and benevolent, with an irony devoid of venom and spite, on every page reminds me of Montaigne.”

Charles Edouard Racine, *LA DISTINCTION* (Lausanne)

“*The Heritage Crusade* and *The Past Is a Foreign Country* together provide the intellectual underpinning and wider context that any understanding of preservation’s meaning and direction requires.”

Robert Wilson, *PRESERVATION* (U.S. National Trust)

“David Lowenthal knows more about the uses and abuses of the past than anyone I know . . . It is the strength of Lowenthal’s book that he shows us how heritage is deeply antithetical to history, yet inseparable from it.”

John R. Gillis, *REVIEWS IN AMERICAN HISTORY*

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PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION, 1998

TO PEN A NEW PREFACE FOR A BOOK less than two years old is a privilege granted few authors. Yet it is symptomatic of my topic that even this brief lapse of time commends a new look at how we engage with the past—or rather our manifold pasts. For each person, each group, each nation has its own views, views traditionally rooted yet also in ceaseless flux, of its particular past and, by extension, of history in general.

It is fitting that this paperback edition is issued by Cambridge University Press, which thirteen years ago published my forerunner. Having *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* under the same publishing roof as *The Past is a Foreign Country* prompts me to stress today's craving to domesticate that past: face to face with the past's foreignness, we are apt to wonder how we and our world could ever have come from so strange a place. My earlier book traced how historians had jettisoned assumptions that human nature was everywhere and always the same; comparative scrutiny showed that denizens of other times thought and acted in ways and for reasons unlike our own. But this insight is not shared by most cultures, nor widely accepted even in the West. We mainly idealize or demonize the past not as a foreign country, but as close kin to our own present-day homeland.

Three conjoined aims led me to write *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*. One was to assess and account for the growth, exponential in pace and global in sweep, of current obsessions with the past, above all with what we enjoy or endure as patrimonial legacies. Our ever more magnified attachments to heritage have myriad consequences, some lauded as life-enhancing, others detested as lamentable or even lethal, still others viewed askance as a *mélange* of good and evil. Britain's Millennium

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Dome at Greenwich, intended as a “lasting legacy” to the arts of our age, is just as apt, some fear, to become a lasting legacy to the environmental harm caused by the plastic dome’s ozone-destructive emissions. Heritage displays untold similar instances of benefits commingled with ill effects. How should we judge a realm at once so beneficial and so harmful?

My second aim was to explore the tensions generated by heightened patrimonial concerns. Rival claimants seem hell-bent on aggrandizing their own heritage goods and virtues, to the exclusion or detriment of all others. Disputes about who should own and interpret heritage are endemic, tarnishing many legacies with acquisitive greed. Heritage is mainly sought and treasured as our own; we strive to keep it out of the clutches of others we suspect, often with good reason, of aiming to steal it or to spoil it. Indeed, heritage stewardship is intrinsically possessive: only those pledged to their clients’ exclusive cause can be relied on as stewards. An heir must be sure his trustees acts solely on his behalf, a state that national custodians will yield no part of the domain. No wonder global stewardship of culture and environment makes but glacial headway against entrenched interests, private and corporate.

My third aim was to distinguish between heritage and history. These two routes to the past are habitually confused with each other, yet they are also defined as antithetical. Heritage is apt to be labeled as false, deceitful, sleazy, presentist, chauvinist, self-serving—as indeed it often is. But such charges, I suggest in this book, are usually leveled on the mistaken assumption that heritage is “bad” history. In fact, heritage is not history at all; while it borrows from and enlivens historical study, heritage is not an inquiry into the past but a celebration of it, not an effort to know what actually happened but a profession of faith in a past tailored to present-day purposes.

My third aim has notably vexed many readers. Surely, they rejoin, I exaggerate the gulf between heritage and history. Instead of the exclusive dichotomy I posit, do not these two realms continually merge and interact along a continuum of everyday experience? Are we not all sometimes heritage-mongers, at other times historians, at still others both at once?

My critics are right. No aspect of heritage is wholly devoid of historical reality; no historian’s view is wholly free of heritage bias. As I myself stress, just as yesterday’s heritage becomes today’s history, so we in turn embrace as heritage what our precursors took as history. At this moment,

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the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, is transforming a history into a heritage. Yet history too is a heritage. The history we normally accept without demur stems from seldom-tested faith in the cumulative probity of historians, even when we know their chronicles were forged—often trumpeted—in the crucible of self-interest.

Rather than stressing the gulf that divides history and heritage, my critics want partisans of both enterprises to acknowledge that, despite their differences, theirs is truly a common cause. We need at one and the same time to know the past as truth and as faith, as enlightened reality and as amazed inspiration. But can heritage managers negotiate the manifold fictions integral to mass entertainment, without being castigated for historical *lèse-majesté*? And can historians come to terms with the reality that most of the history we learn—including that authoritatively taught in schools and textbooks—is gleaned from heritage sources? Indeed, to purge heritage from what is taught as history would be impossible, perhaps inconceivable, certainly self-defeating. To paraphrase Caroline Walker Bynum's 1997 American Historical Association presidential address, teachers of history must above all strive to astonish, students aspire to be astonished.

All the more reason, in my view, to underscore distinctions between aims proper to heritage and those proper to history. The two enterprises are inextricably conjoined. But it is crucial to underscore their dissimilar intents. The historian, however blinkered and presentist and self-deceived, seeks to convey a past consensually known, open to inspection and proof, continually revised and eroded as time and hindsight outdate its truths. The heritage fashioner, however historically scrupulous, seeks to design a past that will fix the identity and enhance the well-being of some chosen individual or folk. History cannot be wholly dispassionate, or it will not be felt worth learning or conveying; heritage cannot totally disregard history, or it will seem too incredible to command fealty. But the aims that animate these two enterprises, and their modes of persuasion, are contrary to each other. To avoid confusion and unwarranted censure, it is vital to bear that opposition in mind.

History and heritage are both here to stay, despite recurrent forecasts of their demise and crusades to expunge them from public life. In Britain the cult of heritage seems such an incubus that the new government jettisons the old name of the Department of National Heritage—the word

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“heritage” is now too backward looking. But at the same time Britain rejoins UNESCO, which cherishes the global heritage of culture and nature. “That’s history,” say Americans dismissively, hoping they can get the past off their backs. Yet at the same time America is riven by disputes over whether to commemorate Little Bighorn as Custer’s Last Stand or as Indian slaughter, whether to memorialize Franklin D. Roosevelt as a cigarette-smoking cripple, and whether to proffer a national apology for black slavery.

Ancestral iniquities are nowadays everywhere retracted, as if Salisbury’s anguished cry in Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, “O, call back yesterday—bid time return,” might actually be achieved. The Papacy rehabilitates Galileo, Britain’s prime minister apologizes for the Irish Famine, Japanese schoolbooks regret long-denied wartime atrocities, Sweden condemns the last generation’s eugenic sterilizations as indefensibly “barbaric.” It is ever more common to hold figures from the past accountable for not thinking and acting as right-minded people do today. But the current habit of chastising ancestral villains, no less than traditional chauvinist glory in ancestral virtues, disserves history and heritage alike. Legacies become more useful and more bearable when we refrain from saddling their begetters with our own views, and cease invoking ancestral myths to justify present ends.

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ALL AT ONCE HERITAGE IS EVERYWHERE—in the news, in the movies, in the marketplace—in everything from galaxies to genes. It is the chief focus of patriotism and a prime lure of tourism. One can barely move without bumping into a heritage site. Every legacy is cherished. From ethnic roots to history theme parks, Hollywood to the Holocaust, the whole world is busy lauding—or lamenting—some past, be it fact or fiction.

To neglect heritage is a cardinal sin, to invoke it a national duty. Even as I write, American presidential aspirant Pat Buchanan champions the flag of the southern Confederacy because “everyone should stand up for their heritage.” And in early 1996 British Defense Secretary Michael Portillo, pilloried for want of “pride in our national heritage,” was forced to rescind a proposed sale of Aston Webb’s majestic but now moribund and otiose 1910 Admiralty Arch.

Why this rash of backward-looking concern? What makes heritage so crucial in a world beset by poverty and hunger, enmity and strife? We seek comfort in past bequests partly to allay these griefs. In recoiling from grievous loss or fending off a fearsome future, people the world over revert to ancestral legacies. As hopes of progress fade, heritage consoles us with tradition. Against what’s dreadful and dreaded today, heritage is *good*—indeed, the first known use of the term is Psalm 16’s “goodly heritage.”

Yet much that we inherit is far from “goodly,” some of it downright diabolical. Heritage brings manifold benefits: it links us with ancestors and offspring, bonds neighbors and patriots, certifies identity, roots us in time-honored ways. But heritage is also oppressive, defeatist, decadent.

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Miring us in the obsolete, the cult of heritage allegedly immures life within museums and monuments. Breeding xenophobic hate, it becomes a byword for bellicose discord. Debasing the “true” past for greedy or chauvinist ends, heritage is accused of undermining historical truth with twisted myth. Exalting rooted faith over critical reason, it stymies social action and sanctions passive acceptance of preordained fate.

With its benefits hyped and its perils exaggerated, heritage by its very nature excites partisan extremes. Ready recourse to patrimony fills many vital needs. But it also glamorizes narrow nationalism. Vainglory vindicates victors and solaces the vanquished, justifying jingoism and inflaming partisan zeal.

Three sets of aims animate this book. One is to see why heritage is now such a growth industry and to clarify the problems its popularity generates. A second is to assess what we expect from history and heritage and to show where these linked enterprises fulfill (or fail) our hopes. The third is to understand why possessive rivalry cripples cooperation, subverting our will and thwarting our ability to care for common global legacies.

Heritage passions impact myriad realms of life today. They play a vital role in national and ethnic conflict, in racism and resurgent genetic determinism, in museum and commemorative policy, in global theft, illicit trade, and rising demands for repatriating art and antiquities. Decisions about what to conserve and what to jettison, about parenthood and adoption, about killing or converting or cossetting those of rival faiths all invoke heritage to explain how we feel and to validate how we act.

A decade ago, my *The Past Is a Foreign Country* traced changing perceptions of the past. Initially, people had thought human nature universal and changeless; past motives and events were explained in the same terms as those of today. But the last two centuries of turmoil have revolutionized historical awareness. Denizens of the past now seem to inhabit alien worlds, to act in ways and for reasons other than our own. The past has become a foreign and exotic place where people did things differently. And despite advances in science and scholarship that tell us more than ever about former times, the past frustrates understanding: its events seem unfathomable, its denizens inscrutable. However much we know *about* the past, we can never really know *how* it was for those who lived back then.

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This is what historians now tell us. But how many really share their doubts? I suspect few take historians' cautions to heart; so alien a past is too hard to bear, especially when we treasure it as our own possession. The precursors we conjure up continue to seem folk much like ourselves. Probably most people, most of the time, view the past not as a foreign but a deeply domestic realm.

In domesticating the past we enlist it for present causes. Legends of origin and endurance, of victory or calamity, project the present back, the past forward; they align us with forebears whose virtues we share and whose vices we shun. We are apt to call such communion history, but it is actually heritage. The distinction is vital. History explores and explains pasts grown ever more opaque over time; heritage clarifies pasts so as to infuse them with present purposes.

Critics who confuse the two enterprises condemn heritage as a worthless sham, its credos as fallacious, even perverse. But heritage, no less than history, is essential to knowing and acting. Its many faults are inseparable from heritage's essential role in husbanding community, identity, continuity, indeed history itself. If for one Australian historian "heritage is the cuckoo in the historian's nest," another prizes heritage as the fount of historical evidence.¹ In trying to explain why this is so, I seek to resolve the conundrums that encumber heritage when it is misconceived as history. Because heritage concerns are passionately partisan, they are also seamed with paradox.

Thus we mourn worlds known to be irrevocably lost—yet more vividly felt, more lucid, more real than the murky and ambiguous present. We yearn for rooted legacies that enrich the paltry here and now with ancestral echoes, yet also encumber us with outworn relics and obsolete customs. We see what has happened as inalterable (not even God can change the past) and cleave to timeless tradition, yet we ever reshape what we inherit for current needs. Treasuring heritage as authentic history, we blind ourselves to our own legacy's biased limits. We acclaim heritage as a universal requisite, yet disdain and derogate legacies that differ from or compete with our own. We avow concern for the sanctity of all heritage, yet strip it of context and debase its meaning. Devoted inheritors, we kill the legator and cripple our legacy.

The relics of time help us both to know the past and to bend it to our own uses. Such remains, on the ground and in the mind, are more and

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more extracted and enjoyed. Under the rubric of heritage ever more is revered in theory and ruined in practice. Stewardship saves the past from decay—and robs it of majesty and mystery. Heritage aims to convert historical residues into witnesses that attest our own ancestral virtues. The past thus coerced renders up the spoils of history on untold altars of aggrandizement. History not effaced is despoiled.

The spoils of history lie all around us—in developers' debris, in the sacked remains of prehistoric tombs, in the ravaged ruins of Mostar and Sarajevo, in the fetishes of restorers and reenactors, in the paraphernalia of cultural tourism. They proliferate too in patriotic credos and self-serving anachronisms, in the certitudes of school history, in the delusory dreams of Disney, in the squabbles of rival claimants to relics and emblems.

Such feuds make heritage a menacing minefield as well as a nourishing marvel. We need to understand what impulses drive us, heritage crusaders all, to ravage the past in the very act of revering it and to censure others for faults equally our own. Yet we should also realize that in thus corrupting we also enhance the spoils of history, breathing new life into them for ourselves and our inheritors by fabricating heritage anew.

One such fabrication, described by the historian Patrick Geary, illuminates my point and sets my stage. In 1162, Milan fell to Frederick Barbarossa. As a reward for his help in the conquest, archbishop-elect Rainald of Cologne pillaged Milan's relics. Rainald's most notable coup was the remains of the Magi, legendarily brought to Milan from Constantinople (with Constantine's consent) by St. Eustorgio in an oxcart in 314.

Now the Magi were on the move again. Though waylaid en route by minions of Pope Alexander III, the three coffins with their sacred booty reached Cologne unharmed. In Nicolas of Verdun's splendid golden shrine (c. 1200) they become Cologne's main patrons. By the 13th century the Three Kings were a royal cult, emperors coming to venerate them after being crowned in Aachen. Otto IV of Brunswick had himself portrayed on the reliquary as the Fourth King. Belatedly, the Milanese lamented the theft. The 16th-century Archbishop St. Carlo Borromeo campaigned for their return; in 1909 a few Magi fragments were actually sent from Cologne to Milan.

But they were *not* sent *back*; they had never been in Milan. The whole story—Constantine, Eustorgio, removal to Cologne—had been

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fabricated by Rainald. Every mention of the Magi in Milan traces to the archbishop's own self-serving account. No wonder the Milanese were tardy in recognizing the theft; only in the late 13th century did Rainald's tale reach them. Milan then mourned the loss of relics it had never had.

Rainald's purpose was clear: to promote the power of the emperor and the glory of Cologne. Relics of the Savior were the most precious the Franks got from Italy and the Holy Land. As symbols of Christ's lordship and of divine kingship, the Magi trumped vestiges of Church Fathers and Roman martyrs. But they needed a pedigree; a legacy of veneration was vital to their efficacy in Cologne. Hence Constantine, the oxcart, stewardship in Milan, their incorruptible state en route. And it worked. It worked even in Milan, where Visconti patronage of the lamented Magi helped scuttle both republicanism and Torriani family rivals accused of exposing the Magis' hiding place to Frederick Barbarossa.²

This fabrication was multiply worthy. It confirmed the Holy Roman Empire's sacred roots. It updated and enlarged a useful biblical legend (little before was known of the Magi, even how many they were). It became an exemplar of other sacred translations—fragments of bone and dust that were easy to fake, easy to steal, easy to move, easy to reassign to new saints as needed. It begot great value from wishful fantasy. It destroyed nothing, not even faith when the fake was found out.

Today things are different. We still steal, forge, and invent much of our heritage. But we are no longer confident it is right to do so. That the legacies we cherish, whether inherited or re-created, are so pliable and corruptible seems to us sacrilegious. We yearn instead for fixed verities.

At its best, heritage fabrication is both creative art and act of faith. By means of it we tell ourselves who we are, where we came from, and to what we belong. Ancestral loyalties rest on fraud as well as truth and foment peril along with pride. We cannot escape dependency on this motley and peccable heritage. But we can learn to face its fictions and forgive its flaws as integral to its strengths.

