INTRODUCTION

> Operationally defined, a culture is a constantly recurring assemblage of artefacts. To present the culture as a system, it is useful to consider not only the preserved artefacts, but the members of the society that produced them, the natural environment they inhabited and other artefacts (including the non-material ones such as language and projective systems) which they made or used. Colin Renfrew

> Every culture, every era exploits some few out of a great number of possibilities. Changes may be very disquieting, and involve great losses, but this is due to the difficulty of change itself, not to the fact that our age and country has hit upon the one possible motivation under which human life can be conducted. Ruth Benedict

'Culture' is a word with many shades of meaning, all of them deriving in some way from its Latin root, *cultus*. Whether as a noun or as an adjective, *cultus* implied cultivation and a sense of growth, and, however used, 'culture' has always suggested a degree of sophistication and refinement. Today it can be taken to indicate people of education and taste as well as an assemblage of pots and artefacts from a prehistoric site. In the context of this book it is used to denote *the body of ideas which a people holds about itself and its environment, together with the tools and artefacts by means of which its members relate to one another and to the world which they inhabit.*

'Material culture', which was the subject of an earlier book,[1] denotes only the latter aspect, but it is a mistake, though one that is frequently made, to draw a distinction between them. It is impossible to separate a people's world, its *mentalité*, from the houses it built, the fields it cultivated and the rites it practised to ensure both that crops matured and the house remained secure. Culture denotes a spectrum of objects, artefacts, customs, rituals and beliefs, all interconnected, but in ways not always apparent either to the observer today or to those who lived their lives in the midst of that culture.

This book is concerned almost exclusively with traditional culture. This seems to be a convenient term for those cultures which prevailed in these islands before that sequence of events which is conventionally known as the Industrial Revolution. One cannot easily date the transition from pre-industrial cultures to post-industrial. That it began in the eighteenth century is probable, and most students would claim

Table I.1   *A schema of popular culture*

The imperatives of nature	Cultural response
1 Eating and drinking	a Types of food b methods of preparation c Rituals of eating d Forbidden foods
2 Shelter and relaxation	a Types of shelter b Domestic furnishing c Festivals and holidays
3 Communication	a Spoken language, dialect b Signs and gestures c Dress and costume d Story-telling, myth e Ritual
4 Sexual behaviour	a Courtship and marriage b Relations with family and kin
5 Birth and death	a Birth and child-rearing b Education, formal and informal c Treatment of sick and aged d Death and burial rites
6 Social and anti-social instincts	a Mutual assistance b Carnival and celebration c Aggression and modes of curbing it d Crime and punishment
7 Sickness and disease	a Folk medicine b Care of the sick
8 Religion and world view	a Animism and attitudes to the supernatural b Ritual and magic

that over much of this country traditional culture had either disappeared or was in retreat by the mid-nineteenth. All peoples share fundamental physical and emotional needs, and have broadly similar ways of satisfying them. We all, whatever our colour or creed and however far back in time we go, feel the need to eat, to sleep, to communicate, to defecate, to seek shelter from the elements. We all have sexual urges and aggressive instincts, and we feel the need for some 'rational' explanation of the world around us. This is part of our 'natural' behaviour. But the ways in which we satisfy these needs and compulsions differ from one society to another, and are part of our 'culture'. This relationship of 'nature' to 'culture' can be represented by a diagram (Table I.1).

This book is not concerned, except marginally, with the *natural* aspects of culture. They are not peculiar to any one people or society; they are common to

humanity. It is the non-natural aspects of behaviour which distinguish one people, one culture from another. These are social in origin, and they are transmitted and perpetuated socially, and, like all social institutions, they can change both spatially and through time. The list of aspects of non-natural or cultural behaviour given above is not thought of as exhaustive, and each group is capable of endless extension, subdivision and refinement, but in a rough way it defines the scope of popular culture as conceived within the context of this book. Nor must the categories of cultural behaviour as listed here be seen as independent and mutually exclusive. They overlap, and, by and large, they constitute an interlinked whole, a rudimentary system. One communicates, not only in the modes listed in 3a–d, but also in the style of one's house, in the food one is seen to eat, the books one reads, and in one's familial behaviour. Sexual behaviour involves spoken language, gesture and dress and, to some extent, aggression. Sickness brings with it a multitude of folk-remedies, charms and magical rites, and the rituals once performed to ensure a bountiful harvest are interwoven with the physical need for relaxation and the urge to eat and drink more than the community could afford or the body needs.

Even within a culture not all individuals will be found to react in precisely the same way to any of the 'natural' urges, though intra-cultural differences will be slight compared with those between one culture and another. Members of a single family or of a particular community will be found to have more in common with one another than with members of different families and other communities. To some extent these similarities result from imitation, deliberate or otherwise. To a large extent they form part of the social inheritance which occurs within the home, the mother being most often the chief vehicle for the transmission of minor cultural idiosyncrasies. We can recognise localised cultural traits in styles of building and decoration, in costume and in dialect. Bernard Shaw's Professor Higgins was able to ascribe a certain speech pattern to Lissom Grove.[2] Few linguists, however, would claim such expertise, nor, indeed, would Shaw have expected it of them; he was only demonstrating with Shavian exaggeration how narrowly circumscribed, both socially and spatially, are cultural traits.

For convenience of exposition, culture is here divided into the material and the non-material. The division is, as has been suggested, arbitrary and unrealistic. There is a grey area within which objects were created — sculptures, standing stones, graffiti, even churches — as symbols of emotions and intellectual concepts. Figure 11.4 shows a sculptured boss found in an English parish church. What does it signify? Of course, it served as a keystone in a vault, but this purpose could have been served no less well if it had been left as a plain piece of stone. Clearly its sculpture was not functional; it was not used in the course of everyday life. But was it something more than the product of an artist who allowed free play to his imagination? Was it a symbol of some influence, benevolent or malign, or was it placed in the church for protection, just as a skull was set at the entrance to an Iron Age fort? Or did it represent the powers of evil which the church was called upon to resist and to overcome? Twentieth-century rational man, brought up on the concept

that nothing should be accepted unless it can be verified, finds it difficult to adjust to traditional modes of reasoning.[3] The latter invents explanations and causes for phenomena, which thus become intelligible only as the consequences of its own a priori assumptions. We are continually meeting in traditional culture with modes of thought different from and often contrary to our own, but each having its own internal logic.[4] In no field is this more apparent than in medicine, for which a coherent system was devised with its own internal logic, but predicated on entirely erroneous premises. It is this which makes traditional patterns of thought so difficult for people of today to understand. Nevertheless, an attempt has to be made to get inside these earlier thought patterns, because, whatever we in this modern, scientific age may think, we have not entirely outgrown them. The debris of past systems of thought still lie strewn like archaisms through our patterns of thought and behaviour today.

Traditional cultures were always in process of change. They were transmitted orally or by physical exemplars. But what has been learned verbally is readily forgotten or remembered only in part. Physical goods decay, perish and have to be replaced. At each retelling and at every rebuilding, modifications, sometimes deliberate, more often unconscious, creep in, and the folktale, the myth, the ceremony, the artefact is slowly changed over the centuries. Distinct from such internal modifications of culture are the more radical and at times more revolutionary changes which arise from the impact of another culture. Changes may be imposed; old practices may be banned and new introduced as a result of cultural conquest. One thinks of the ways in which certain aspects of Indian or African cultures were banished at the will of their western conquerors. More often the impact of other cultures is slower and more subtle. Trade and travel make people aware of other ways of doing things and of different beliefs and customs. But rarely, perhaps never, does a society abandon one set of assumptions or one pattern of living for another. The human mind does not readily make such transitions.[5] More often the new is superimposed on the old; sometimes it is accepted only by one segment or 'class' of the society, and where the 'fit' is less than satisfactory, one is tailored to adjust it more or less to the other. This is the process of acculturation, which has been practised throughout history and never more so than today. The best example in the cultural history of Britain and, indeed, of most of western Europe, is the way in which Christianity adapted to, assimilated, or was absorbed by pagan Celtic beliefs and practices. Celtic spirits became or were assimilated to the saintly patrons of Christianity; pagan sites were adopted for churches; calendar rites, like the rituals of midsummer and midwinter, were given a Christian veneer, and continued to be celebrated in much the same way.[6]

Even in physical artefacts and structures, such as the house and its furnishings, there has always been change and development as need or opportunity arose. There was a random element, the consequence of some unforeseen happening or the free play of a craftsman as he worked with his materials. The grotesque may have no meaning beyond the expression of what went through the mind of an individual as

he worked. What relationship his mental images bore to the culture within which he lived probably not even the craftsman himself knew. It is a mistake to read too much into the imagery and motifs employed, for example, by a medieval sculptor or artist. The erotic imagery which is frequently found in medieval churches and church furnishings must not too readily be accepted as 'fertility symbols', and accommodated to our own contemporary thought patterns as if this gave a kind of retrospective respectability to it. It may be no more than the simple result of a young man allowing his too fertile imagination to dwell on sexual fantasies.

But at the same time it would be wrong to deny that such imagery, whether carved, sculpted or painted, is devoid of meaning. It is a form of language, and the craftsman was attempting to communicate. He doubtless assumed that whoever looked at his handiwork received some kind of a message. Much of what he attempted to show diverged from the accepted or normative. It was intended to shock or to produce some kind of – perhaps pleasurable – excitement. The urge to shock or to send a frisson of excitement through the minds of others is part of our mental composition; it springs from our aggressive tendencies, which continue to find expression today. No longer can corbels, gargoyles and misericords be used to thumb the nose at society. Instead, the urge finds outlets on the inner sides of toilet doors, on blank walls, or in the London Underground. All cultures have, almost by definition, a very long history. they derive, changed though they may have been by internal mutations and by external acculturation, from their medieval and prehistoric past. Any culture can best be seen as consisting of superimposed cultural levels, a kind of 'layer-cake' in which the oldest cultural strata are also the lowest, surviving, disguised if not almost obliterated, in material structures or in the depths of the 'collective unconscious', as Jung termed it.[7] Here and there some element of the oldest cultural stratum rises to the surface and becomes visible, like a maypole raised in spring surrounded by the culture of modern suburbia, or the fires lighted in early November or on the eve of St John the Baptist, the longest day of the year.

Some fifty years ago Sir Cyril Fox published one of the most seminal books in the history of British archaeology and culture, *The Personality of Britain*.[8] In it he distinguished two parts of these islands, a 'highland' zone and a 'lowland' sone, with a boundary between them which ran from County Durham to Lyme Bay on the south coast (Fig. I.1). This line separated a predominantly hilly region of Palaeozoic rocks from a gentler region of Secondary and later rocks. These two regions, he argued, corresponded with two differing modes of cultural evolution. Simply expressed, his argument was that the bearers of outside cultural influences reached the Highland Zone often by sea and almost always in small numbers. Their impact was never sufficient to blanket or submerge the indigenous cultures. Instead they became assimilated. Elements of older cultures are today not only present, but conspicuously so in Highland Britain. Lowland Britain, by contrast, lay at the receiving end of a long series of invasions, from those who walked across the land-bridge which once existed with Europe to the more recent invasions of Anglo-Saxons, Vikings and Normans. Each wave was powerful enough to impress its own
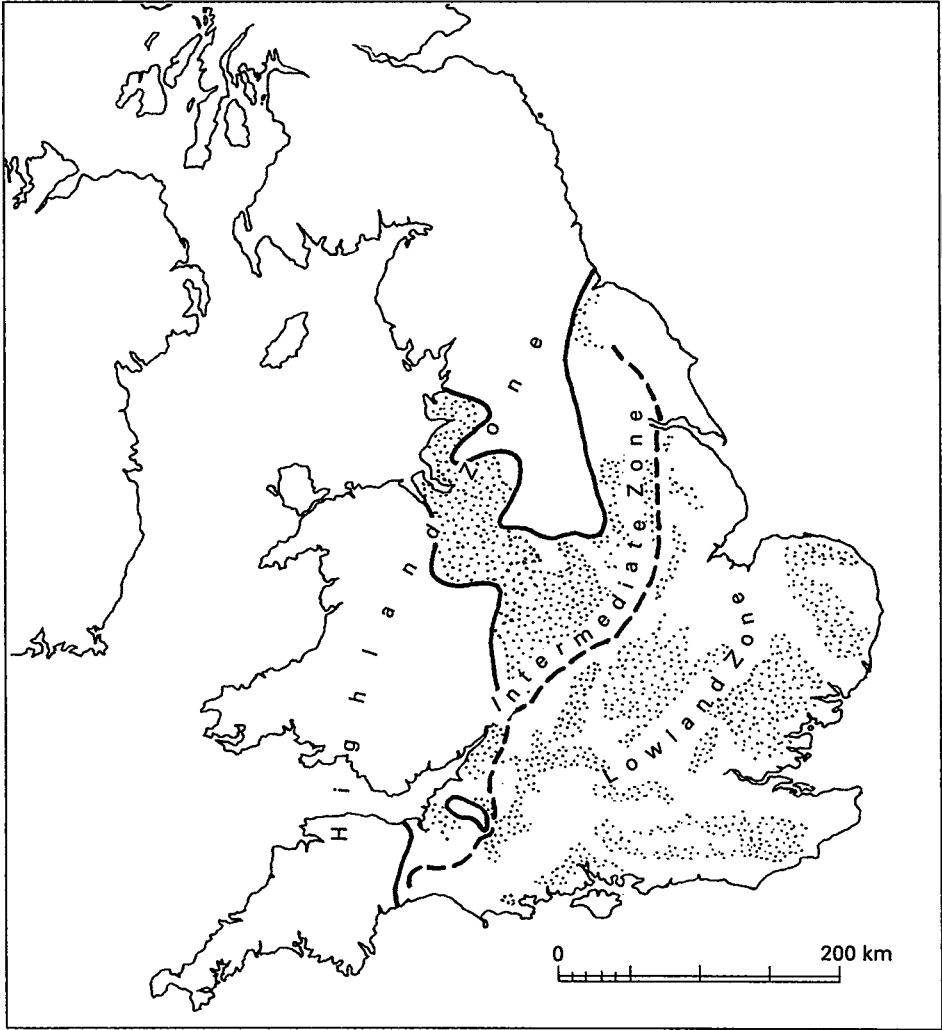
I.1 Highland and Lowland Britain, as defined by Sir Cyril Fox, with intermediate Midland Zone
added. Stippled areas were heavily wooded.

culture, and thus to mask or to destroy pre-existing cultures. Fox commented on the
relative ease with which new civilizations are established in the Lowland Zone,
repressing without necessarily obliterating those which had prevailed before. 'There
is [thus] greater unity of culture in the Lowland Zone, but greater continuity in the
Highland Zone.'[9]

   The Fox model has not been without its critics. Some, including the present
writer, would interpose a third zone covering the basically claylands of the English
Midlands, between the Highland and the Lowland, with its own distinctive cultural
history. But, however modified, the Fox model has been of incalculable importance

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to a cultural history of these islands. It gives a rational explanation for a phenomenon which will recur in the pages of this book, namely the persistence of early cultural traits in the Celtic west and north, and the greater degree of cultural homogeneity in the lowlands of the south and east.

Categories of material culture

The preconditions of human existence are, apart from procreation, a supply of food and the availability of shelter, and it is around these imperatives that much of popular culture has been shaped. In both there has been change and, one assumes, development. But change has not always been linear. There have been periods when culture lost something of its fine edge and sank back – during the late Roman and post-Roman periods, for example – only to make advances later and to regain the ground it had lost. But overall, there has been progress on a monumental scale during the past 2500 years. This is implicit in a comparison of the first and the last chapters of this book. But in traditional society there was little or no concept of progress as such; material things, it was supposed, were as they had always been and would continue to be (p. 408). The concept of progress was probably never entertained at a philosophical level before the time of Descartes or even of Condorcet, and it could not have reached ordinary people before it was thrust upon them by the rapid and fundamental changes of the nineteenth century.[10] Change, of course, they knew, but they probably conceived of it, if they paused to think at all, as fluctuations on one side or the other of a vaguely sensed norm, just as the harvest varied from good to indifferent to bad. The addition of a room to a cottage or the removal of the fire from the middle of the hall to a fireplace with a chimney built against the wall, a change of fundamental social importance, was not seen as progress; it was a simple alteration in domestic arrangements, necessitated by, perhaps, a growing family or a feeling that the central hearth was unsafe. It was progress because the change proved irreversible. But the peasant lacked any historical perspective that would have allowed him to perceive how different was his present from the past, and to project this change into the future.

The categories of material culture into which much of this book will be fitted can be summarised as:

1 Food production

Anthropologists distinguish three phases in the development of food production: primitive hunting and collecting, pastoralism, and arable husbandry. The first was without question the oldest, but the others should not be regarded as sequential forms. Though some societies in the past and even today pursued only one, most have practised all three in varying combinations. In Britain collecting survived into modern times, institutionalised as gleaning after harvest, and hunting, from being a fundamental form of food production, has survived only as a number of atavistic pastimes of negligible economic importance.

All societies have their traditional combinations both of foodstuffs and of the methods of preserving and preparing them. These may bear absolutely no relationship to food values and, often enough, little to the economy of labour. The long survival in England of the open-field system exemplifies this conservatism in traditional societies. This unwillingness to make changes may be due to an innate inability to make the mental adjustments that would be required, but it also springs from the fact that each aspect of food production was so integrated with other aspects of culture that change could not be accomplished without knock-on effects which society could not tolerate. There was, for example, resistance to new crops, like the potato, primarily because it could not be accommodated within existing agricultural systems.

2 Food preservation and consumption

Few foodstuffs, apart from fresh fruit, can be consumed in their natural state, and most occur seasonally and have to be preserved to supply out-of-season needs, just as a dog buries a bone and a squirrel accumulates nuts against the hardships of winter. Foodstuffs and the ways of conserving them are legion, and many were maintained even though agricultural and technical advances had made them superfluous. In no aspect of popular culture is conservatism more strongly marked than in the taste for food. The large number of regional and calendar foods still popular today is evidence of this.

3 Shelter

No climate is so benign that shelter from the elements is unnecessary. How protection was constructed must in the first instance have been constrained by the local availability of materials. The earliest forms of shelter in Britain must have been mainly of wood, since this was the most abundant and in some areas the only material available. Stone and brick then began to supplement and locally to replace timber. This may have been due in part to a growing shortage of timber, but in one of those developments without any firm basis in logic or economy, masonry came to have a prestige value, so that the more visible parts of a building might be in masonry and the rest timber-framed (p. 101).

The form or ground plan of a house was determined by social requirements, but once a satisfactory house-plan had been arrived at, it tended to be repeated on larger or smaller scale and with little functional change for up to a thousand years. In the eighteenth century the 'hall' house was gradually replaced by the symmetrical corridor plan, more suited to new aesthetic standards and social requirements (p. 107). The changes made in the traditional house were in the direction of greater comfort and privacy, and they reflected, by and large, an increasing level of real wealth and improving material standards. In the history of the vernacular house we can trace a kind of conflict between the desire to introduce new amenities without at the same time modifying its traditional plan.

INTRODUCTION

4   *Domestic furnishings*

Even the most primitive forms of shelter required some kind of furnishing. At the least there had to be bedding, and by the end of the Middle Ages, when evidence first becomes fairly abundant, the equipment of an ordinary house included a bed, a table and some form of stool or seat. In the course of nearly a thousand years the whole pattern of domestic furnishing developed in line with the increase in wealth and the growing demand for comfort and privacy. But the forms assumed by furniture had been established at an early date, and, despite great improvements in quality and an increase it its volume and range, we have never wholly abandoned those adopted during the early Middle Ages. This persistence of form, despite changing material and an increasing elaboration of detail, is characteristic not only of furnishings but of many other aspects of material culture.

   At the same time the appointments of the house – from cutlery to cushions – improved in line with the growing refinement of society. Glass supplemented or replaced window shutters; floor carpets were spread instead of straw, itself bringing about a change in manners, unless the carpet was to be fouled beyond use. The rough walls were hung with tapestries at the higher social levels and with painted cloths at the lower, until these were in turn replaced with wallpaper. In both plan and furnishings the house was, over the centuries, made into a home, a place where the family would desire to sit, to eat, to converse, not merely a place which offered a brief respite from work in the field or factory.

5   *Tools of the trades*

An ability to make tools in order to ease the tasks of producing food and building and furnishing homes had been demonstrated during the earliest phases of human existence. Man is a tool-using animal, and in this differs from the rest of the animal world. Indeed, the broad lines of human history can be traced only by the tools that were devised and used. The use of stone – in Britain chiefly flint and chert – was replaced, if only to a limited degree, by that of copper, then by bronze, and subsequently by soft or malleable iron and steel. A narrow range of tools, suited for working in wood and stone, had been invented by the late pre-Roman Iron Age, and remained in use with little modification until the Industrial Revolution. Figure 2.6 shows a number of tools in used in Roman Britain. One has no difficulty in recognising their shapes in the ironmonger's shop at the present day. The modern handtool differs from that of two thousand years ago chiefly in the material from which it is made. The replacement of soft iron by steel, and of carbon steel by alloy steels has created a revolution in the effectiveness of tools. But this revolution, if so slow a process can be so called, began early. Steel must have been an accidental product as a smith manipulated a bloom of soft iron on his hearth, alternately exposing it to a blast of air from his bellows and covering it with glowing charcoal. The act of discovery was the recognition that he had achieved something new and of value, and its repetition under what may be termed controlled conditions. An

innovation of this kind might become widely adopted, or, on the other hand it might be ignored and its significance might go unrecognised, only to be rediscovered at a later date. 'Innovation remains', wrote Colin Renfrew, 'the least understood phenomenon in European prehistory, perhaps in culture history in general.'[11] Traditional society was not, in general, receptive to innovation, because it was so structured that it could not adapt to the social changes that would result.

Categories of non-material culture

Non-material culture consists of a body of belief, of attitudes to society and to the world, and of customs and practices which may have taken place at fixed intervals or at certain times of the year or even spontaneously. They were interrelated in so far as calendar customs were linked with religious belief, and social institutions like the family and the kindred were underpinned by practices which were overtly religious. Furthermore, as has already been pointed out, much of this non-material culture found symbolic expression in material objects. The symbolism met with in church planning and decoration and, to a lesser extent, in domestic, bridge the gap between the two aspects of non-material culture.

Non-material culture is an obscure area in so far as much of it never received any literary expression or explanation. In consequence its meaning has to be inferred from sculptured imagery or behavioural patterns, and much of it still remains obscure. This aspect of popular culture first gained widespread recognition in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when it received extravagant attention from the reformers and Puritans. In their hostility they misunderstood and distorted the culture of the populace, effacing much of its visual representation. Elements of this can be projected back to the Middle Ages and even earlier, but the tendency was always to simplify and to conflate the elements of folk culture, so that a folk custom of early modern times may represent only a *Gleichschaltung* of rites which were at one time very much more complex:

One cannot speak of the origin of popular culture any more than one can of the origin of *Homo sapiens*. There was no point of origin; no time at which they sprang into existence, fully formed like Athene from the head of Zeus.[12]

In looking at the evidences of past cultures one is apt to interpret them in the light of both modern stereotypes and of a modern *Weltanschauung*. The *sheela-na-gig* carved on a corbel in the parish church of Kilpeck (Hereford.) has been described as a 'fertility symbol'. By ascribing to it this more or less respectable function, Victorian prudery was able to gloss over the pure eroticism present in the sculpture itself (p. 391). It is highly unlikely that this was its connotation to those who created it in the twelfth century, but what it and others like it meant to their creators and to the people who used the church we have no clue. Whatever interpretations we may choose to give them, the manifestations of non-material culture may be grouped, if only for the convenience of discussion, under five heads.