

Chapter 1

HERITAGE ASCENDANT

THE WORLD REJOICES IN A NEWLY POPULAR FAITH: the cult of heritage. To be sure, heritage is as old as humanity. Prehistoric peoples bequeathed goods and goals; legacies benign and malign suffuse Homeric tales, the Old Testament, and Confucian precepts. But only in our time has heritage become a self-conscious creed, whose shrines and icons daily multiply and whose praise suffuses public discourse.

Regard for roots and recollection permeates the Western world and pervades the rest. Nostalgia for things old and outworn supplants dreams of progress and development. A century or even fifty years ago the untrammled future was all the rage; today we laud legacies bequeathed by has-beens. Once the term patrimony implied provincial backwardness or musty antiquarianism; now it denotes nurturance and stewardship.

Devotion to heritage is a spiritual calling “like nursing or being in Holy Orders,” as James Lees-Milne termed his own career of rescuing historic English country houses for the National Trust. A successor’s verbal slip as he spoke with me, “When I joined the Church—I mean, the Trust,” echoed the analogy. The Trust’s supreme tidiness recalls those Victorian restorers who scraped medieval churches and cathedrals clean of the debris of time and neglect, so as to perfect their divinity. The English, however, are not the only such devotees; heritage awakens piety the world over. Australians are said to “spend more of their spiritual energy” in quests for enshrined symbols of identity than in any other pursuit; “worship of the past in Australia [is] one of the great secular religions.”¹

The creed of heritage answers needs for ritual devotion, especially

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where other formal faith has become perfunctory or mainly political. Like religious causes, heritage fosters exhilarating fealties. For no other commitment do peoples so readily take up arms. Once a dilettante pastime, the pursuit and defense of patrimonial legacies is now likened to the Crusades—bitter, protracted, and ruthless.

The religious analogy extends to modes of belief: heritage relies on revealed faith rather than rational proof. We elect and exalt our legacy not by weighing its claims to truth, but in feeling that it *must* be right. The mainstay is not mental effort but moral zeal. “You can’t be taught jazz,” says American singer Cassandra Wilson, “it’s a legacy.”

As doctrine, heritage is mandatory. It comes to us willy-nilly and cannot be shed, however shaming it may be. To share a legacy is to belong to a family, a community, a race, a nation. What each inherits is in some measure unique, but common commitments bind us to others within our group. Inheritors are fellow countrymen—not just patriots but *compatriots*. Mutual identity demands mutual allegiance. Those deprived of a legacy are rootless and bereaved; those who seek to reject one are unnatural ingrates. Nations bereft of birthrights today lament their loss much as Esau did in the book of Genesis. Whatever its burdens, a heritage ought never be denied: self-respect requires us to accept, husband, and transmit it.

The traits that align heritage with religion help explain its potent pull, but they also pose serious risks. A dogma of roots and origins that must be accepted on faith denies the role of reason, forecloses compromise, and numbs willpower. Credence in a mythic past crafted for some present cause suppresses history’s impartial complexity. Touting our own heritage as uniquely splendid sanctions narrow-minded ignorance and breeds belligerent bigotry.

Benign and baneful consequences are alike manifold, and heritage vice is inseparable from heritage virtue. This is little understood, though; because few realize how heritage actually functions, most are content either to admire or traduce it. Devotees ignore or slight its threats, while detractors deny its virtues and suppose that simply cursing heritage can excise its ills.

The current craze for heritage seems to me likely to last and hence essential to understand. Its potential for both good and evil is huge. On the one hand, it offers a rationale for self-respecting stewardship of all

we hold dear; on the other, it signals an eclipse of reason and a regression to embattled tribalism. I aim to show how and why heritage has come to matter so much, to caution that heritage credos are by their very nature manipulative, and to counsel that we learn to control heritage lest it control us.

HERITAGE RAMPANT

Heritage is not our sole link with the past. History, tradition, memory, myth, and memoir variously join us with what has passed, with forebears, with our own earlier selves. But the lure of heritage now outpaces other modes of retrieval. If our era heralds the end of history, as pundits like Francis Fukuyama contend, perhaps the eclipse of history heralds the rise of heritage. Heritage may be heir to the “continuous nourishing tradition” that the historian Carl Schorske, by no means alone, fears history has abdicated.²

Yet these diverse routes to the past are neither fixed nor firmly bounded; they overlap and shift their focus. Much that was once termed history or tradition is now heritage, as shown in Chapter 5. But neither history nor tradition ever commanded the ubiquitous reach that heritage has today.

Never before have so many been so engaged with so many different pasts. Spanning the centuries from prehistory to last night, heritage melds Mesozoic monsters with Marilyn Monroe, Egyptian pyramids with Elvis Presley. Memorials and monuments multiply, cities and scenes are restored, historic exploits are reenacted, flea-market kitsch is elevated into antiques. Retro-fashion rages and camcorders memorialize yesterday. Historic sites multiply from thousands to millions; 95 percent of existing museums postdate the Second World War. Budapest, for instance, boasts museums of everyday life that enshrine the telephone and the tram, pastries and pharmaceuticals, advertising and animal husbandry; nothing seems too recent or trivial to commemorate. Invoking heritage justifies any collector’s obsession. “I do love pigs,” a self-styled fanatic in England defends his rare-breeds hobby, “but after all pigs are part of our heritage.”

Fifty years back, book titles and indexes suggest, heritage dwelt mainly on heredity, probate law, and taxation; it now features antiquities,

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roots, identity, belonging. The French near-equivalent “patrimony” shows the same shift: the Larousse definition of *patrimoine* has expanded from “goods inherited from parents” to embrace bequests from remote forebears and cultural legacies in general. “We derive all we possess as an inheritance from our forefathers,” held Edmund Burke two centuries ago; these days that inheritance determines our very selves. Prior possession once primarily legitimated title to land or lucre; today it sanctions claims to sites and relics. Stressing traditions that are especially our own, heritage magnifies self-esteem and bolsters communal ardor.

Modern preoccupation with heritage dates from about 1980, alike in Reagan’s America, Thatcher’s Britain, and Pompidou’s France. In France, 1978’s Year of the Woman and 1979’s Year of the Child made a Year of Patrimony in 1980 a logical successor. Nostalgia was everywhere: in 1975 Hélias’s *The Horse of Pride*, an elegy for rural Brittany, and Le Roy Ladurie’s *Montaillou*, an intimate glimpse of a medieval Languedoc village, won these scholars popular fame; the annals of the hitherto unsung spread fast and far. Patrimony graduated from construing the civil code to celebrating the national estate.³

The pull of the past differs from place to place, and each tongue has its own nuance—French *patrimoine* is more personal than English *heritage*, German *Erbgut* more patriotic than Italian *lascito*. Each people supposes their newly inflated heritage concerns to be unique, reflecting some trait of character or circumstance, some spirit of veneration or revenge that is peculiarly their own. Some impute these concerns to patriotic ardor, some to nostalgic fancy, others to specific needs for mourning or celebrating. Vaunting our own legacy, we are unaware how strikingly concurrent it often is with those of our neighbors. Here is a typical list of unique heritage goodies from a 1994 Canadian travel brochure:

Chestnut canoes . . . O Canada! . . . Emily Carr . . . golden wheat fields of the prairies . . . Blackfoot medicine wheels . . . moss-covered Haida totem poles . . . fishing villages such as Joe Batt’s Arm on Fogo Island . . . donning skates on a crisp winter’s morning . . . Northern Lights . . . Anne of Green Gables . . . soapstone carvings . . . loons . . . igloos . . . toboggans . . . maple syrup . . .

These items are Canadian, to be sure. But the resonant words and the stress on wilderness, ethnicity, and childhood typify heritage anywhere.

Maxims current in Manchester and Minneapolis, Madagascar and the

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Marquesas stress similar communal concerns. “If wealth is lost, nothing is lost,” says Sikhs; “if health is lost, something is lost. If character is lost, much is lost. If *heritage* is lost, *you* are lost.” To a Cameroon diplomat heritage is “beyond price, beyond value; it unifies the tribe [and] is the spirit of the nation, what holds us together.” Canada’s Inuits and Indians, like France’s Minister of Culture, claim that “everything is part of our heritage.” UNESCO protocols enthrone heritage as the sovereign core of collective identity and self-respect, a nutriment as necessary as food and drink.⁴

Global popularity homogenizes heritage. Its aims and traits are assessed in similar terms in Bergen and Beirut, Tonga and Toronto. The same concerns with precedence and antiquity, continuity and coherence, heroism and sacrifice surface again and again, nurturing family bonds, strengthening fealty, and stressing stewardship. Most heritage is amassed by particular groups, but media diffusion and global networks make these hoards ever more common coin.

Heritage care and conveyance conjoin the stewardship of relics of nature and culture unique to Australia or Amazonia, New Mexico or New Guinea. Display and tourism layer diverse legacies with common facades. The same multinationals finance restoration in Prague and Peru, using techniques devised in Rome and London. Legacies of nature, prehistory, art, and architecture are hyped in terms ever more alike. Exotic dragonflies and endangered dialects are not yet priced alongside Old Master paintings in Sotheby’s salesbooks, but their collectors and protectors talk the same legacy lingo.

The language of heritage that suffuses the world is mainly Western. The first historic monuments meeting in 1931 engaged Europeans alone; Tunisia, Mexico, and Peru joined in 1964; in 1979 eighty nations from all continents crafted the World Heritage Convention.⁵ The remotest village in Vanuatu may vaunt Sotheby’s auction schedule. Swedish, Japanese, and German firms built the “living” Shona village and replica of Old Bulawayo at Zimbabwe’s Heritage Centre. Under the aegis of national patrimony looms a multinational enterprise.

CAUSES OF MODERN HERITAGE CONCERN

Why does heritage loom so large today? Answers differ from place to place. Heritage in Britain is said to reflect nostalgia for imperial self

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esteem and other bygone benisons, in America to requite economic and social angst and lost community, in France to redress wartime disgrace, in Australia to replace the curse of recency to forge indigenous pride.⁶ But no explanation specific to one people can account for a trend so contagious. What is involved is a cluster of trends whose premises, promises, and problems are truly global.

These trends engender isolation and dislocation of self from family, family from neighborhood, neighborhood from nation, and even oneself from one's former selves. Such changes reflect manifold aspects of life—increasing longevity, family dissolution, the loss of familiar surroundings, quickened obsolescence, genocide and wholesale migration, and a growing fear of technology. They erode future expectations, heighten past awareness, and instill among millions the view that they need and are owed a heritage.

Dismay at massive change stokes demands for heritage. Market forces swiftly outdate most things now made or built; migration uproots millions from familiar locales; technology transforms familiar scenes at shocking speed. The intricate texture of downtown Boston visible in 1930s photos is today totally effaced by packing-crate office blocks; the old Massachusetts State House, a minuscule survivor among overgrown monsters, becomes an ornamental snuff box in a museum case. Landscape itself is replaced ever sooner: London's trees, the mighty oaks and majestic limes Victorians planted to endure, give way to fast-growing, short-lived species.

Beleaguered by loss and change, we keep our bearings only by clinging to remnants of stability. Hence preservers' aversion to letting anything go, postmodern manias for period styles, cults of prehistory at megalithic sites. Mourning past neglect, we cherish islands of security in seas of change. "In a throwaway society where everything is ephemeral," a London College of Arms spokesman explains the rise of ancestor hunts, people "begin to look for something more lasting." The passing of close-knit families spurs such searches. Since "grandparents no longer take the youngsters on their knee and tell them about *their* grandparents," noted an American genealogist in 1974, youngsters have had to find them for themselves.⁷

Legacies at risk are cherished for their very fragility. The heritage of rural life is exalted because everywhere at risk, if not already lost. So

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rapid is French scenic and social decay that tourists were urged in 1993 to “see France while it is still there.” Landscape is Britain’s archetypal legacy; two centuries of city celebrants made country life a metaphor for the national soul, yearning to “win back a share in the common heritage filched from them with Enclosure and the Industrial Revolution.” The historian Herbert Butterfield lauded Englishmen’s “inescapable heritage” of Whig history as “part of the landscape of English life, like our country lanes or our November mists or historic inns.” The glossy magazine *Heritage* is subtitled “British Life and *Countryside*.” Landscape-as-heritage stresses time-honored verities at risk.⁸

Modern genocide and iconoclasm magnify needs for legacies to outlast ourselves. Doomed Jews resolved to leave witnesses attesting to the Holocaust. Along with human slaughter we mourn art that cannot be replaced: Harold Nicolson in 1944 would have sacrificed himself to save Giotto’s frescoes and would have given up his sons sooner than St. Mark’s, Venice.⁹ The ruin of Mostar’s bridge built to outlast the centuries, or of a minaret’s poignant reach toward eternity, truncates our own lives as well.

Such losses now seem graver than ever before. A pace of change “peculiar to our times,” declared UNESCO in 1972, menaced mankind’s cultural and natural heritage and mandated its protection. English curriculum caretakers in 1993 lauded time-honored lore as a “cultural link with the long-valued past [essential] in these turbulent times.”

Yet horror at upheaval is not new; each generation since the French Revolution has felt buffeted by turbulent times. Marx’s 1848 *Communist Manifesto* noted the “constant revolution of productions, the uninterrupted disturbance of all social relations, ideas becoming obsolete before they can ossify.” Our great-great-grandparents were more severed from their past than are we—heirs to two centuries of change, schooled to expect and until recently even to welcome innovation.

After Napoleon, by contrast, many felt stranded between a past when life had been much the same from eon to eon and a present that sundered each year from the last. They were the first to mourn the recent as beyond recall and to limn a childhood unimaginable to their own children. This total rupture of experience was just what the Jacobins intended: a new order expunging all the old, from priests and patricians to customary practices. Discontinuity was their deliberate bequest to the

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next generation, savagely disjoining them, as many attested, from any familiar past.¹⁰

It is a common belief that technical invention has soared without precedent in recent decades. But is it true? Have television, computers, nuclear power, and space flights altered life more in our time than did the auto, telephone, electric light, airplane, radio, and cinema between 1900 and 1950? Or the railroads, gaslights, steamships, telegraph, factory-made clothing, and household goods that transformed the Western world between 1800 and 1860?¹¹ No one from the 1750s could have imagined the new world of 1800; in contrast, no one from the 1950s would find most present-day scenes unfamiliar—"blink, today, and you could *be* in the 1950s," wrote a journalist in 1992. While the 1890s seemed like the Dark Ages in 1945, fifty years later 1945 seems like only yesterday, laptop computers and seatbelts aside.

Our precursors were no less estranged by novelty, rueing lost familiar vistas just as we do. But they were less ceaselessly reminded of their loss. Nor did a socially certified nostalgia sanction their yearnings; on the contrary, they were enjoined to praise the new and take change in their stride. They suffered change more violent than ours, but we *perceive* ourselves to be its unexampled victims.

Modern media magnify the past's remoteness. We digest and domesticate written accounts as we read them, but even recent visual images (street scenes, home decor, hairstyles, and clothing) at once strike us as anachronistic. Everything in the 1940s movie *Brief Encounter*—morals, fashion, etiquette, and language—is staggeringly different from its 1985 renewal *Falling in Love*. Old photos, posed in studios, seem inconceivably remote. Our great-grandparents look more like foreigners than forebears; they resemble Jonathan Raban's ancestral portraits of people who "might have been anyone's distant relations. They certainly didn't look related to *us*."¹²

Growing longevity cuts us off even from our own pasts. Many who reach ninety are "punished for their great age," a columnist suggests, "by being reminded that they are out of touch with the world." Bereft of familiar scenes and companions, their memories grow unrecognizable. "If you age a lot, there is finally almost nobody left who shared your vast experience" of a bygone world. You look around for "*anyone* of the older generation . . . to satisfy your curiosity about some detail of

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the landscape of the past. There is no longer any older generation. You have become it, while your mind was mostly on other matters,” notes William Maxwell.¹³ “I went to the kitchen to fix a cup of coffee when I was 59,” goes the tale; “when I came out I suddenly found I was 84.”

Those poised between two worlds, two ways of thinking and acting, find heritage of crucial import. “My Breton-speaking contemporaries will perhaps be the very last people to have spoken Breton on their mothers’ laps,” says the folklorist Hélias. Hence their stewardship duty transcends that of their predecessors and successors. “The former were not much concerned with the fate of their idiom”; the latter will condemn us for failing to protect their heritage.¹⁴ Thus we feel uniquely accountable. Previous generations likewise looked back to a congenial world just gone, but their laments were formulaic; ours harden into heritage doctrine.

Massive migration also sharpens nostalgia. This century’s diaspora have suffered incomparable displacement. Fleeing violence, hatred, and hunger, tens of millions seek refuge in lands not their own. Mass exodus has many precedents, to be sure; famine made exile and emigration customary in Ireland 150 years ago, when more Irish lived outside their country than in it. But refugee exodus, up tenfold in twenty years, is now a global commonplace. Over half of all Palestinians, Liberians, Rwandans, and Bosnians, one in three Lebanese, one in four Poles, Mozambicans, Eritreans, and Afghans mourn lost homes. So do billions of rural folk forced into cities. “Displaced persons are displaced not just in space but in time; they have been cut off from their own pasts,” writes Penelope Lively, severed from her own Egyptian childhood by removal to England. “If you cannot revisit your own origins—reach out and touch them from time to time—you are for ever in some crucial sense untethered.”¹⁵

Quests for roots reflect this trauma; heritage is invoked to requite displacement. Provincial newcomers to French cities haunt archival registers for family links, and tame alien milieus with rural furnishings and old farm tools. “The more people are on the move,” observes a columnist, “the more they will grasp at tangible memorials of their collective past.”¹⁶ Much as bereft parents enshrine the rooms of departed children, so mementos of bygone lifestyles console those torn from native scenes.

Diaspora are notably heritage-hungry. Five out of six ancestry

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searches in Italy are made by Italian-Americans. Dublin is deluged with inquiries from Sons of Erin abroad, some seeking a long-lost legacy or an heir on whom to bestow one, others just hoping to find someone who remembers Uncle Seamus. So many Jews today seek memories of *shtetl* forebears that East Europeans call them “roots people.”

Emigrés are also vital in sustaining ancestral heritage. West Indian, Hebridean, Dodecanese, and Polynesian islanders abroad nourish homeland traditions. Armenia’s diaspora celebrate the ancient nation’s past glories and bewail its griefs. The most ardent patriots are returned exiles; Fresno-born foreign minister Rafi Hovannisian is termed “the best Armenian in the world.”¹⁷ Diaspora nostalgia refreshes heritage for those at home. Returnees from North America reanimate traditional Ukrainian *bandura* music that is close to dying out. Remittance-dependent Ithacans revive obsolete folkways to give visiting American kinsfolk a nostalgic “taste of home.”

To identify a past as heritage one need not have known it firsthand. “I come from Rotuma,” says a Fijian who has never been in Rotuma; home is where the ancestors came from. Up to the 1950s, fourth-generation New Zealanders spoke of Britain as “home” with no intention of ever living there. Descendants of Southern planters who fled with their slaves to Brazil still cleave to ancestral Dixieland ways: “Preserving our heritage helps us pass cherished values on to future generations.”¹⁸

Heritage is also nurtured by technophobia: an idealized past replaces a discredited future. The horrors of fascism, the failure of Marxism, the threat of nuclear and biological catastrophe, and the rise of factional animus have put paid to the ideology of progress. Many doubt their leaders’ vision or ability to sustain a livable globe; dismayed by technology, they hark back to a simpler past whose virtues they inflate and whose vices they ignore. We show chronic affection for anything apart from the present, clutching at the outworn and the obsolete.

Those who express such dismay are newly legion. Heritage expands especially because more people now have a share in it. In times past, only a small minority sought forebears, amassed antiquities, enjoyed Old Masters, or toured museums and historic sites. Such pursuits now lure the multitude. No longer are only aristocrats ancestry-obsessed, only the super-rich antique collectors, only academics antiquarians,