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## Introduction

The past is everywhere. All around us lie features with more or less familiar antecedents. Relics, histories, memories suffuse human experience. Most past traces ultimately perish, and all that remain are altered. But they are collectively enduring. Noticed or ignored, cherished or spurned, the past is omnipresent. ‘What is once done can never be undone . . . Everything remains forever’, wrote Václav Havel, ‘somewhere *here*’.<sup>1</sup> The past is not simply what has been saved; it ‘lives and breathes . . . in every corner of the world’, adds a historian.<sup>2</sup> A mass of memories and records, of relics and replicas, of monuments and memorabilia, sustains our being. We efface traces of tradition to assert our autonomy and expunge our errors, but the past inheres in all we do and think. Residues of bygone lives and locales ceaselessly enrich and inhibit our own. Awareness of things past comes less from fact finding than from feeling time’s impact on traits and traces, words and deeds of both our precursors and ourselves. To know we are ephemeral lessees of age-old hopes and dreams that have animated generations of endeavour secures our place – now to rejoice, now to regret – in the scheme of things.

Ever more of the past, from the exceptional to the ordinary, from remote antiquity to barely yesterday, from the collective to the personal, is nowadays filtered by self-conscious appropriation. Such all-embracing heritage is scarcely distinguishable from past totality. It includes not only what we like or admire but also what we fear or abominate. Besides its conscious legacies, the past’s manifold residues are embedded in our minds and muscles, our genes and genres de vie. Of passionate concern to all, the ‘goodly heritage’ of Psalm 16 becomes ‘the cuckoo in the historian’s nest’, purloining the progeny of Clio, the muse of history.<sup>3</sup>

None of the past definitively eludes our intense involvement. What we are now indifferent to once meant much or may later do so. That being so, I survey the past not only through lenses of memory and history but also through present-day perspectives – impassioned views of right and wrong, good and evil, ownership and alienation, identity and entitlement. We descry the past both for its sake and for our sake. Neither historian nor layman is ever aloof or detached from it. To know is to care, to care is to use, to use is to transform the past. Continually refashioned, the remade past continuously remoulds us.

Embraced or rejected, lauded or lamented, remembered or forgotten, the whole past is always with us. No one has not ‘said things, or lived a life, the memory of which is so unpleasant to him that he would gladly expunge it’. And yet one learns wisdom only by

<sup>1</sup> Václav Havel, *To the Castle and Back*, (Knopf, 2007), 330 (my emphasis).

<sup>2</sup> Constantin Fasolt, *The Limits of History* (Chicago, 2004), 16.

<sup>3</sup> Graeme Davison, *The Uses and Abuses of the Past* (Allen & Unwin, 2000), 9–14, 110–30.

passing through ‘all the fatuous or unwholesome incarnations’, says Proust’s painter Elstir. ‘The picture of what we were . . . may not be recognisable and cannot, certainly, be pleasing to contemplate in later life. But we must not repudiate it, for it is a proof that we have really lived.’ Indeed, however you try, ‘you can’t put the past behind you’, concludes a scion of slavery. ‘It’s buried in you; it’s turned your flesh into its own cupboard.’<sup>4</sup> We inherit a legacy no less inalienable when obscure or obnoxious. To be is to have been, and to project our messy, malleable past into our unknown future.

### An authorial credo

Relations with the past can neither be prescribed nor proscribed, for they infuse all our ideas and institutions. Asked to add to a batch of historical manifestos, I demurred that ‘historians should disdain manifestos; they are contradictions in terms. To issue proclamations and thunder denunciations is the duty of prelates and politicians. Our calling is not to moralise or preach but to discern and reveal – to make manifest (from the Italian *manifestare*) what deserves being evident’.<sup>5</sup> But I could not resist the urge to pontificate, avowing concern for the communal past and deploring its evisceration and domestication.

Having previously vilified populist history, I was accused of ‘weeping in [my] beard’ for lost academic felicity. For my faith in empirical objectivity I was taken to task as a ‘bittersweet’ nostalgist.<sup>6</sup> I do affirm the existence of historical truth and laud its disclosure. I do regret the modernist and postmodern breach with classical and biblical legacies. Like Mary Beard, I hold these legacies inextricably integral to Western culture, its horrors along with its glories.<sup>7</sup> I do share Gordon Wood’s cheer that most historians still adhere to coherent and causally related narrative.<sup>8</sup> But I also consider invented heritage, no less than revealed history, both inescapable and indispensable. In fabricating the past ‘we tell ourselves who we are, where we came from, and to what we belong’.<sup>9</sup>

I have not exhaustively studied most of the topics this book surveys. Instead I have sought to fashion a plausible synthesis out of extremely heterogeneous materials. Trespassing beyond my own expertise, I am bound often to have misinterpreted the art and architectural historians, psychologists and psychoanalysts, archaeologists and theologians, medievalists and Renaissance scholars on whose research I rely. For this I beg their pardon and readers’ forbearance. Apart from a few realms – nineteenth-century American history, landscape perceptions, science fiction, historic preservation – my citations reflect no comprehensive sampling, but selections whose aptness authorities generally attest.

<sup>4</sup> Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913–27; Penguin, 1983), 1: 923–4; Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis, MN, Graywolf 2014).

<sup>5</sup> See my ‘The past of the future: from the foreign to the undiscovered country’, in Keith Jenkins et al., eds., *Manifestos for History* (Routledge, 2007), 205–19 at 205.

<sup>6</sup> David Harlan, ‘Historical fiction and the future of academic history’, 108–30 at 120, and Hayden White, ‘Afterword: manifesto time’, 220–31 at 231, both in Jenkins et al., eds., *Manifestos for History*.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Beard, ‘Do the classics have a future?’ *NYRB*, 12 Jan. 2012: 54.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon S. Wood, *The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History* (Penguin, 2008), 40–61.

<sup>9</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge, 1998), xvii.

Reversion to original sources reflects my well-founded suspicion of secondary sources, need to reconcile variant readings, and efforts to ensure contextual accuracy.<sup>10</sup>

My syntheses tap the collective takes on the past of many disciplines. Save for unlettered antiquity and recent popular culture, such insights are heavily weighted towards literate elites who troubled to record their views and were most inclined to speculate about the past. ‘The wisest men in every age . . . possess and profit by the constantly increasing accumulation of the ideas of all ages’, noted John Stuart Mill, ‘but the multitude . . . have the ideas of their own age, and no others’.<sup>11</sup> My own conclusions inevitably rely mainly on that influential minority, present and past. It is this knowledgeable fraction to whom my ‘we’ and ‘our’ generally refers.

Present attitudes and those of our immediate forebears dominate this study, but exploring them often led me back to ancient times. Quality of evidence, confidence in sources, and comprehension of alien realms and cultures decline as the past recedes, but I perforce move back and forth across centuries with what may seem casual disregard for such differences. Spatially and culturally my conclusions are also parochial. Although I focus broadly on Western culture and rely on pan-European classical and subsequent scholarship, notably French, German, and Italian, I rely most heavily on anglophone literature. For non-European cultures equivalent studies would reach radically different conclusions.

A final caveat: I adduce such heterogeneous evidence – fiction, religious tracts, psychological treatises, interviews, autobiographies, heritage marketing, the history of ideas, polemics on preservation and restoration – as to seem wantonly eclectic or absurdly disparate. I do so not because I suppose all these sources analogous or of equal evidential value, but to make cogent what otherwise goes unnoted. Gleaned from things recalled and culled over a lifetime, my trove resembles Henry James’s grab-bag of memory more than J. H. Hexter’s coherence of history.<sup>12</sup>

### How my past became foreign

‘The past is a foreign country’, begins L. P. Hartley’s *The Go-Between*; ‘they do things differently there’. From his 1950s’ memory of 1900, he sought to convey the ‘illusion of stability . . . the confidence in life, the belief that all’s well with the world’. That seemingly pervasive belief would soon be shattered by slaughter in the trenches and tumultuous change in civil society.<sup>13</sup>

That they did indeed do things differently is a quite recent perception. During most of history scholars scarcely differentiated past from present, referring even to remote events,

<sup>10</sup> See my ‘The frailty of historical truth: learning why historians inevitably err’, *AHA Perspectives on History* 51:3 (March 2013): 25–6.

<sup>11</sup> John Stuart Mill, ‘The spirit of the age, I’, *Examiner*, Jan.–May 1831, nos. I, IV, in *CW* (Toronto, 1963–91), 22: 227–34 at 234.

<sup>12</sup> Henry James, *The American Scene* (1907; Indiana, 1968), 410; J. H. Hexter, ‘The rhetoric of history’, *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (Macmillan, 1968), 6: 368–94.

<sup>13</sup> L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (1953; NYRB Classics, 1962, repr. 2002), 17, and ‘Author’s introduction’ (1962 edn), 7–15 at 8–10.

if at all, as though just then occurring. Up to the nineteenth century the historical past was generally thought much like the present. To be sure, history recorded major changes of life and landscape, gains and losses, but human nature supposedly remained constant, events actuated by unchanging passions and prejudices. Even when ennobled by nostalgia or deprecated by partisans of progress, the past seemed not a foreign country but part of their own. And chroniclers portrayed bygone times with an immediacy and intimacy that reflected the supposed likeness.<sup>14</sup>

This outlook had two particular consequences. Past departures from present standards were praised as virtuous or condemned as depraved. And since past circumstances seemed comparable and hence relevant to present concerns, history served as a source of useful exemplars. A past explained in terms similar to the present also suited common views of *why* things happened as they had. Whether unfolding in accordance with the Creator's grand design or with nature's cyclical laws, towards decline or towards progress, history's pattern was immutable and universal.

From time to time, prescient observers realized that historical change made present unlike past circumstances. But awareness of anachronism ran counter to prevailing needs and perspectives. Only in the late eighteenth century did Europeans begin to conceive the past as different, not just another country but a congeries of foreign lands shaped by unique histories and personalities. This new past gradually ceased to provide comparative lessons. Instead it became cherished for validating and exalting the present. This aroused urges to preserve and restore monuments and memories as emblems of communal identity, continuity, and aspiration.

During early-modern times archetypes of antiquity had dominated learning and law, informed the arts, and suffused European culture. Antiquity was exemplary, beneficial, and beautiful. Yet its physical remains were in the main neglected or demolished. Architects and sculptors were more apt to mine classical vestiges for their own works than to protect them against pillage and loss; patrons gave less thought to collecting antique fragments than to commissioning new works modelled on their virtues. Only in the nineteenth century did preservation evolve from an antiquarian, quirky, personal pursuit into sustained national programmes. Only in the late twentieth did every country seek to secure its own heritage against despoliation and decay.

Recognizing the past's difference promoted its preservation; the act of preserving accentuated that difference. Venerated as a fount of communal identity, cherished as an endangered legacy, yesterday became less and less like today. Yet its relics and residues are increasingly stamped with today's lineaments. We fancy an exotic past by contrast with a humdrum or unhappy present, but we forge it with modern tools. The past is a foreign country reshaped by today, its strangeness domesticated by our own modes of caring for its vestiges.

The past also accrues intentional new evocations. When I conceived this book's precursor in the 1970s the American scene was already steeped in pastness – mansarded and half-timbered shopping plazas, exposed brick and butcher-block historic precincts,

<sup>14</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Resuscitations in Western Art* (1960; Paladin, 1970), 108–13; Zachary Sayre Schiffman, *The Birth of the Past* (Johns Hopkins, 2011).

heritage villages, urban preservation. Previously confined to a handful of museums and antique shops, the trappings of history festooned the whole country. All memorabilia were cherished, from relics of the Revolution to teacups from the *Titanic*. Antiques embraced even yesterday's ephemera. Genealogical zeal ranged from Alex Haley's *Roots* to the retrospective conversion of Mormon ancestors. Newly unsure of the future, Americans *en masse* took comfort in looking back. Historic villages and districts became familiar and reassuring home towns.

As an American then transplanted to Britain I espied similar trends in a nation more secure in its older collective identity. While disdaining a Disneyfied history, British conservationists mounted guard on everything from old churches to hoary hedgerows, deplored the drain of heritage across the Atlantic, and solaced present discontents with past glories. Presaging the 2010s TV series *Downton Abbey*, the quasi-feudal country house remained an icon of national identity even as death duties impoverish its chatelains. 'Millions knew who they were by reference to it. Hundreds of thousands look back to it, and not only grieve for its passing but still depend on it . . . to tell them who they are', wrote Nigel Dennis. 'Thousands who never knew it . . . cherish its memory.'<sup>15</sup> When the European Parliament suggested renaming Waterloo Station, then Eurostar's rail terminus, because it perpetuated divisive memories of the Napoleonic Wars, Britons retorted that it was 'salutary for the French to be constantly reminded of Wellington's great victory'.<sup>16</sup> Fashions for old films, old clothes, old music, old recipes were ubiquitous; revivals dominated architecture and the arts; schoolchildren delved into local history and grandparental recollections; historical romances and tales of olden days deluged the media. Bygones of every kind were salvaged with 'techniques of preservation that would have dumbfounded our forefathers', commented Dennis's fictional nostalgist. So expert was our 'taxidermy that there is now virtually nothing that is not considerably more lively after death than it was before'.<sup>17</sup>

### Finding the foreign country

This book has multiple points of departure and destination. The past bewitches all historians. My enthralment stems from a study, begun in 1949, of the American polymath George Perkins Marsh (1801–82), who chronicled landscape history from the debris of nature and the relics of human impact. Paralleling recent deforestation in his native Vermont with earlier Mediterranean denudation and subsequent erosion by Alpine torrents, Marsh gained unique insight into how humans had deranged – largely unintentionally, often disastrously – the habitable Earth. Marsh's apocalyptic warning that 'another era of equal human crime and human improvidence' would so impoverish the Earth 'as to threaten the depravation, barbarism, and perhaps even extinction of the species', made his 1864 *Man and Nature* the fountainhead of the conservation movement.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Nigel Dennis, *Cards of Identity* (1955; Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974), 119.

<sup>16</sup> John de Courcy Ling quoted in 'British refighting Battle of Waterloo', *IHT*, 29–30 Sept. 1984: 1.

<sup>17</sup> Dennis, *Cards of Identity*, 136.

<sup>18</sup> George P. Marsh, *Man and Nature* (1864; Harvard, 1965), 43. See my *George Perkins Marsh: Versatile Vermonter* (Columbia, 1958) and *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation* (Washington, 2000).

Marsh sought to protect history as well as nature, to preserve artefacts of everyday life along with great monuments of antiquity. Not the accoutrements of princes and prelates, but the tools of field and workshop, the household implements and customary trappings of their own forebears, would remind Americans of their antecedents. Linked with the Romantic nationalism rooted in folklore and vernacular languages, Marsh's concern with common material vestiges bore fruition a generation later in Artur Hazelius's Skansen in Sweden, precursor of today's farm and industrial museums.<sup>19</sup> Marsh's stress on the workaday past prefigured today's heritage populism.

Moving between the New World and the Old in the 1960s, I saw how differently peoples depicted and reshaped communal legacies. English locales seemed permeated by fondness for the old and traditional. All the arts and the whole built environment reflected this bias. Delight in continuity and cumulation was integral to English appreciation of *genius loci*, the enduring idiosyncrasies that lend places their essential identity.<sup>20</sup> For Americans the past seemed both less intimate and less consequential. Far from venerating inherited vestiges, they traditionally derogated them as reminders of decadence and dependency. Admired relic features were either safely distant in Europe, sanitized by patriotic purpose as at Mount Vernon and Williamsburg, or debased by hucksters. Only a handful of wistful WASPs esteemed ancestry and antiques; to most Americans the past was musty, irrelevant, corrupt.<sup>21</sup>

The early 1970s turned attention to historical preservation on both sides of the Atlantic. The erosion of older city cores by urban redevelopment, the surge of nostalgia in the wake of post-war social and ecological debacles, the mounting pillage of antiquities for rapacious collectors led me to postulate that these trends had common roots and common outcomes. Present needs reshaped tangible remains in ways strikingly analogous to revisions of memory and history, as in Freud's archaeological metaphors for psychoanalytic excavation (Chapter 7 below).

Celebration of ethnic and national roots next engaged me. In the mid-1970s American bicentennial memorabilia and re-enactments reshaped the Revolutionary past to present desires. I traced the ways appreciation and protection transformed valued relics and locales. I studied how and why age and wear affected viewers in ways unlike historical antiquity. Dwelling abroad led me to compare Caribbean and Australian orientations with North American. Each of these New World realms had shaped diverse ways of defining, vaunting, and rejecting their various pasts.

Historic preservation, now a popular calling, next drew my attention. Sojourns among preservation programmes in Vermont, Kansas, and Tennessee revealed the primacy of architectural salvage and ensuing problems of gentrification. To learn what people cared

<sup>19</sup> Edward P. Alexander, *Museum Masters: Their Museums, and Their Influence* (AASLH, 1983), 239–75; Karin Belent et al., eds., *Skansen* (Stockholm: Sandvikens Tryckeri, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> David Lowenthal and Hugh C. Prince, 'The English landscape' and 'English landscape tastes', *Geographical Review* 54 (1964): 309–46 and 55 (1965): 186–222.

<sup>21</sup> See my 'The American scene', *Geographical Review* 58 (1968): 61–88.

to save, Marcus Binney of SAVE Britain's Heritage and I held a London symposium in 1979, followed by an Anglo-American conference on heritage management and legislation. Practitioners joined academics in discussing motives for saving everything from heirlooms to hatpins and related problems of provenance, stewardship, public entitlement, and the corrosive effects of popularity on fabric and ambience.<sup>22</sup>

The rage for time-travel fantasy led me to review imaginative journeys in science fiction, folklore, and children's literature. Their venturers yearned for and coped with visits to remote or recent pasts. Not unlike time travellers, legacy-seeking nations craved relics and records of fancied pasts. Formerly subjugated peoples deprived of precious patrimony highlighted issues of ownership, restitution, safety, conservation, and exhibition. The Elgin Marbles conflict was a prime instance of political passions aroused. A 1981 lecture of mine on heritage restitution figured in the confrontation between Greek culture minister Melina Mercouri and the British Museum over the return of the Parthenon frieze.

National efforts to fashion praiseworthy pasts resembled individual needs to construct viable life histories. Students of nationalism, psychoanalysis, and literature realized that states like persons confront competing pulls of dependence and autonomy, tradition and innovation. Similar metaphors for managing both supportive and burdensome pasts resounded across manifold disciplines and epochs. Attitudes towards the past, and reasons for preserving and altering its residues, reflected predispositions common to history, to memory, and to relics.

Publication of *The Past Is a Foreign Country* in 1985 led me to address curatorial dilemmas among archaeologists and art historians at the British, the Victoria and Albert, the Science, and Ironbridge Gorge museums. The historian Peter Burke and I led three years of seminars on 'The Uses of the Past' at the Warburg Institute and University College London. Growing concern over heritage authenticity and legitimacy was central to the British Museum's 1990 exhibition 'Fake? The Art of Deception', which I helped Mark Jones to curate. And as post-imperial critique began to query Western domination in archaeology, with Peter Ucko, Peter Gathercole, and others I helped mount the First World Archaeology Congress in Southampton in 1986.

Growing global participation likewise broadened UNESCO's World Heritage Site designations, while cosmopolitanism spurred revision of the canonical 1964 Venice Charter. That document had accorded prime value to western Europe's surviving marble monuments and stone and brick buildings. Less durable wooden architecture predominant in Norway and Japan led conservators to focus on rebuilt form rather than original substance; I joined the 1990s Bergen workshop and the Nara conference that rewrote criteria of authenticity accordingly. A decade later other cultural differences in heritage fuelled a similar drive to celebrate and protect intangible heritage. Where structures and artefacts soon decayed or were customarily replaced by new creations, what truly mattered was the maintenance of traditional skills and crafts, arts, and genres de vie.

<sup>22</sup> David Lowenthal and Marcus Binney, eds., *Our Past before Us: Why Do We Save It?* (Temple Smith, 1981); David Lowenthal, 'Conserving the heritage: Anglo-American comparisons', in John Patten, ed., *The Expanding City: Essays in Honour of Jean Gottmann* (Academic Press, 1983), 225–76.

Publication of my earlier book intensified my own involvement in challenging new approaches to history and heritage. In unifying Europe, felt needs for a consensual historical memory coexisted uneasily with resurgent national and regional identities. I addressed these history and heritage conflicts in advisory roles at the Council of Europe and Europa Nostra and in Poland, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, and France. Pierre Nora, whose *Lieux de mémoire* began to appear at the same time as my book, and I held discussions at French universities on cultural and linguistic impediments to trans-national understanding of the past.

Growing globalization of history texts, heritage concerns, antiquities' issues and cultural tourism animated efforts to understand the past on a sounder philosophical basis. History remained overwhelmingly nationalistic, heritage traditionally crisis driven, its concerns dormant until activated by actual or threatened loss or damage. Various academic initiatives – at UNESCO, ICCROM, the Getty Conservation Institute, and elsewhere – foundered for want of institutional support, in a budgetary climate that confined past-related benefits to immediate economic payoffs.

The dawn of the new millennium saw the erosion of heritage enterprise, including my own teaching programmes at West Dean and Strawberry Hill, England. Meanwhile, rising tribal and subaltern demands to return human remains and artefacts beleaguered museums, nation-states, and international agencies. Restitution and repatriation concerns and mounting antiquities theft and plunder made management of the past a moral and legal minefield. Meanwhile the surge of traumatic memory and reconciliation issues in the wake of the Holocaust, apartheid, and other crimes against humanity transformed how the past was understood, blamed, and atoned for. This impelled my own return to consequences of slavery and racism that had been my Caribbean concerns half a century earlier. Together with the US National Park Service and colleagues in Norway, Italy, Malta, Greece, and Turkey I sought to bridge stewardship of past and future, nature and culture, protection and restoration in history, landscape, the arts and politics.

### Frequenting the foreign country

'Your book is twenty years old. Update it!' my editor bade me in 2004. The idea was alluring. I'd recently revised my nearly fifty-year-old biography *George Perkins Marsh: Versatile Vermonter*. Two decades seemed a comparative snap.

Rereading sapped my euphoria. It's one thing to update a life, especially one long gone. It is quite another to modernize a book dealing with views of the past. Where to begin and end? In 2002 my Russian translator asked me what certain early '80s news items meant. For many I could recall nothing. Should ancient trivia be ditched for fresh ephemera? Some illustrations – notably the cartoons – seemed bizarrely outdated. Nothing fades faster than humour.

Updating, moreover, demanded more than replacing old anecdotes and not-so-current events. It meant recasting the book entirely, given the spate of recent work on history and memory, bias and objectivity, artefacts and monuments, facts and fakes, identity and authenticity, remorse and contrition. Much had changed in how the past was envisioned. Previously I had dealt with postmodernism only in its architectural context, with



restitution and repatriation hardly at all, and was wholly unprepared for the ensuing spurt in everyday-memory studies and concomitant apologies for past crimes and evils. Other newly salient stances towards the past included the shift from written to visual portrayal, the rise of multi-vocal, reflexive narrative, polychronic flashbacks, Internet and website effects, online quests for genetic, personal, family, and tribal pasts. A properly comprehensive revision threatened to take the rest of my life. Ten years on, it has almost done so.

Updating also risked surfeit. *The Past Is a Foreign Country* struck some as all too much like the past itself – messy, inchoate, ‘just one damned thing after another’. One reviewer faintly praised it as ‘a fantastic treasure-house, a Calke Abbey of a book’ – referring to the English National Trust mansion acquired from Sir Harpur Vauncey-Crewe, who had filled room after room with stuffed birds, seashells, rocks, swords, butterflies, baubles, and gewgaws. My verbally inflated cabinet of curiosities resembled the Derbyshire baronet’s obsessive amassing. ‘What could be alien’ to Lowenthal? my critic wondered. ‘Ballet? Brewing? Bionics? Bee-keeping?’<sup>23</sup>

I had already penned a book that took off from where *The Past Is a Foreign Country* ended.<sup>24</sup> In it I distinguished the rising cult of heritage – partisan manipulations of the past – from historians’ impartial and consensual efforts to understand it. Appropriating the past for *parti pris* purposes, heritage purged its foreignness. The past’s growing domestication now threatened to subvert this book’s premise. I weighed retitling in the past tense. But *The Past Was a Foreign Country* lacked felicity. ‘What a great title’, said many – often implying they had read no further. Yet for all the renown of Hartley’s riveting phrase, it is often mangled. Reviewers with the book in their hands misnamed it *The Past Is Another*, a *Distant*, *Different*, *Strange*, *Lonely*, even a *Weird Country*.

‘Well, Emmeline, what’s new?’ Tobey’s interlocutor asks her by-gones-burdened hostess in the 1976 cartoon (Fig.1). ‘We can be certain’, wrote one of my reviewers, ‘that the 1980s will come to be seen as the “good old days”’. The 1980s don’t yet have the appeal of the 1950s, which ‘the extreme reaches of the Right, confirmed bachelors of a certain vintage, drag queens and couturiers . . . wish had never ended’.<sup>25</sup>

So what else is new? Like nostalgia, the past ain’t what it used to be. Thirty years have scuppered many previous outlooks. Mere passage of time made this inevitable. The ’80s now moulder in the graveyard of the long-ago. What then seemed portentous or fateful, helter-skelter or baffling, today seems obvious or trivial, blinkered and blind-sided. Yesteryear’s consuming concern – the Cold War – is now passé, overtaken by events and succeeded by anxieties then undreamt.

Many witnesses to that earlier past are now gone, and its survivors are a lot older: age renders some forgetful, others more sceptical, less sanguine. The lengthened recollections of retired baby-boomers merge with the collectively chronicled stream, memory

<sup>23</sup> A. H. Halsey, ‘Past perfect?’ *History Today* (Mar. 1986): 54; Colin Welch, ‘Gone before but not lost’, *Spectator*, 23 Nov. 1985: 27; Martin Drury, ‘The restoration of Calke Abbey’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 136 (1988): 490–9.

<sup>24</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, (Cambridge, 1998).

<sup>25</sup> Lincoln Allison, ‘Spirit of the eighties’, *New Society*, 25 Apr. 1986: 24; Lisa Armstrong, ‘Goodbye hippie chic as Galliano turns hourglass back to the 50s’, *Times*, 7 July 2004.



*“Well, Emmeline, what’s new?”*

Figure 1 The past all-pervasive: ‘Well, Emmeline, what’s new?’  
(Barney Tobey, *New Yorker*, 25/10/1976, p. 37)