CHAPTER 1

Introduction

> [T]he past is where we come from . . . Yet we can no more slip back to the past than leap forward to the future. Save in imaginative reconstruction, yesterday is forever barred to us; we have only attenuated memories and fragmentary chronicles of prior experience and can only dream of escaping the confines of the present. But in recent years, such nostalgic dreams have become almost habitual, if not epidemic.
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> (David Lowenthal, 1985)[1]

> World-withdrawal and world-decay can never be undone. The works are no longer the same as they once were. It is they themselves, to be sure, that we encounter there, but they themselves are gone by.
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> (Martin Heidegger, mid-1930s)[2]

Everyone is interested in the past, or at least everyone old enough to have begun to reflect on their own past. The interest may take almost any form. We can all fill in different details of the scenario. Here are mine. I have a friend in his mid-fifties, a keen surfer when he was younger, who collects surfboards, some going back decades to pre-fibreglass days and made of wood. He has developed a way of mounting them on the walls of his garage. They are gradually infiltrating the house. He can talk knowledgeably about the changes in their technology over the years. And he has ridden all of them.

Everyone knows someone, a friend or uncle, who restores old machinery, steam trains perhaps or vintage cars, or who deliberately drives a restored sedan such as he or she drove when younger, despite having to double-clutch when changing gears. *Or*, who would like to do so but has chosen instead to buy a so-called *retro* vehicle, a new Mini Cooper or Volkswagen Beetle perhaps, that picks up the design style of the earlier (and therefore authentic) vehicle from the 1950s or 1960s but has all the latest gadgetry in the engine compartment. The authentic starts yesterday, it seems, and only improves as it works backwards in time. The past must have some

pastness about it. But, failing that, an alluring aesthetic of the past may serve as well.

But whatever our vehicle, we will probably have found ourselves driving through villages or country towns and being surprised to discover that some nondescript, otherwise unremarkable place has established a museum for itself, recording and celebrating its own history. Its contents will probably be miscellaneous and will have been contributed by the townsfolk. There has, in all likelihood, as yet been no professional curatorship applied to the collection. But there is perhaps a grant application going in soon to some ministry of heritage and culture. Private pasts are one thing, but the past that is held in common must, the townsfolk generally feel, be looked after, be secured.

No matter how far away or how desperate the job might be, the conservation must be done. In November 2006 the *Canberra Times* reported that a 'team of carpenters and conservators planning to restore the historic Mawson's Huts in Antarctica has reached Cape Denison in winds over 100 km/h, a temperature of minus 20 and visibility of just 30 m'. And why? 'Mawson's Huts are the only physical connection back to the period of pioneering Australian Antarctic exploration during the Heroic Era, that is 1911 to 1914.'[3] Recognition of the past brings anxiety with it: to let the physical connection go and to rely only on historical accounts of it is unthinkable to many people (to the Australian Government's Antarctic Division and the Mawson's Huts Foundation, in this case). A memorable past, tangibly preserved, increases the density of the present and proposes a long and somehow more real future, a satisfying continuity. Because we live in bodies, because we are not digital objects, this desire for a physical reassurance of the past is understandable.

Conservation has a similar rationale in the semi-desert. Driving back recently overland the thousand kilometres from Adelaide on the coast in South Australia to Canberra in the mountains south of Sydney, I passed through the now desperately barren Mallee district in northern Victoria. Farming by Europeans has been carried on there since the mid-nineteenth century, but it has always been a risky affair. The soil is generally poor and the rains unreliable. Very big farms were just viable. After World War I large extents of the Mallee were made available for returning soldier-settlers to take up, but generally in allotments that proved too small. The settlements at first grew into small townships. But when most of these new farms gradually failed the townships dwindled; some disappeared entirely; and the remainder have been struggling for some decades. Some are virtually ghost towns now. There has been a drought in this region for several years,

Figure 1.1 Sofala, old gold-mining town, New South Wales, 2007.

and farmers are said to be just walking off the valueless land. The landscape is all shades of brown, and the prevailing winds sweep the surface soils away.

Travellers like me mostly hurry through this massive area aiming to get somewhere else as fast as possible. The roads are straight and flat, and the scenery monotonous. The only things left to attract or divert the traveller are the spring flowers and the history of the place. Brochures have been prepared and are liberally distributed in cafés and petrol stations. They trumpet early, local innovations in various kinds of farming and irrigating machinery. And, of course, the old buildings. At Torrita on the Mallee Highway there is a 'small, corrugated iron hall [that] is National Trust listed', as the brochure says. That is all there is worth looking at in Torrita, a tiny settlement. I only glanced at it as I drove by. I did not stop: I have seen any number of corrugated iron buildings in the smaller country towns, where, often lacking money for new investments that would reshape the town, preservation comes for free. What has been built is not removed unless it falls down, and sometimes not even then. (See Figure 1.1.) Underbool has a 'Pioneer Memorial, a Mallee Roller

Figure 1.2 Kow Plains Station, Cowangie, Victoria, 2006.

and the replica of the train once used to cart salt from the Pink Lakes. The cemetery gates are a real point of interest.' One's heart sinks. But I did stop at Cowangie: its Kow Plains Station, a farm first leased from the Crown in 1859, has been the subject of a recent restoration. (See Figure 1.2.)

One does not pay to go in at a turnstile, for there is no-one to pay. The property is not locked. There is no-one there. It is utterly windswept. One struggles to orient oneself to the non-existent aesthetic of the place. The buildings are of a drop-log construction: cypress pine logs have been dropped into slots formed from pairs of sturdy vertical beams rammed at intervals into the earth. The homestead is said to be one of the few remaining ones in this rough pioneering style still standing on its original site. Victorian government Public Heritage Grants in 2001 and 2002 paid for the building to be reroofed and the exterior and interior walls to be restored, as well as the collapsed cookhouse to be rebuilt, mainly from original materials (see Figure 1.3). There is, as yet, almost nothing *in* the buildings and without full-time custodians there cannot be. The buildings have no ceilings, nor are the interior timber walls lined with plaster or packed with mud. Such as it is and preserved for the future,

Figure 1.3 Kow Plains Station outbuilding: cookhouse interior. Kow Plains Station, Cowangie, Victoria, 2006.

Kow Plains Station simply stands – that is all – silent testimony to a long, ultimately failed effort to sustain a farming life in a hostile Mallee landscape.

Living history

Let us change continents: the scale changes with it, there are some thousands of people present, and the past has become what is called living history.[4] The scene is Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia. The tourist infrastructure here is extensive and well oiled. One pays to go in. On offer is a series of little dramatic re-enactments by actors in period costume in rooms of buildings mostly recreated in the 1930s. Little tricks of language supplement those of dress to encourage visitors to 'see' the scene in 1774, scored by the history lessons of the guides, so that the reality of the buildings as a 1930s recreation (which is what the precinct *is*) is left behind. Patriotic piety hangs heavy, and the day comes to a stirring end with fifes, drums and cannon, heavily saluting America's presidents, one by one.

There is very little emphasis, as one tours the precinct, on whether a recreated building is original: that would, if dwelt upon, interfere with or complicate the 'historical' playlet on offer, in which the visitor, despite modern clothing, is occasionally an actor. It is not that an attempt is made to hide the unoriginality, but that it gradually comes not to matter.

In the Bruton parish church (established in 1715 and continuously in use since then) a wigged and costumed actor plays preacher, giving a Bible reading from the King James version – a complex bit of prose from 2 Corinthians on the day I attended. Then he reads an authentic eighteenth-century sermon whose balanced and often periodic sentences defeat parts of the congregation with their unfamiliar orotundity. Prior to the reading, another actor with a good voice sings each line of an old hymn and pauses for the response – a repetition of the line by the congregation. Later, heads drop among the congregation (if that is what we are) as prayers are intoned: there is devoutness here.

And yet it is not a real church service. Everyone present knows it is an act, a playlet: but yet some or many of us are willing participants. Nobody gets up and walks out during the long sermon. Is this a religious experience in an unfamiliar idiom from the past? Or is it make-believe? Or worse, an elaborate joke?

Down the street from the church is the Governor's Palace, built in 1934. It is a painstaking recreation of the original one, which was built on the same spot in the early eighteenth century. An actor is doing a very fair job of impersonating 'Mr' Jefferson (as he is invariably called), giving a political speech, revealing 'his' opinions, and then bravely answering questions from the audience in an antique parlance. The audience restricts its questions to things he could have known about or had opinions on in 1774: this they do without being told, although they cannot affect the same speech patterns.

Another kind of impersonation has been carried on at Colonial Williamsburg in its brief past in some book and pamphlet publications. In 1941, after the decade or so of recreating Colonial Williamsburg was mainly finished, a history of the place appeared. But which place? Colonial Williamsburg of the 1930s or colonial Williamsburg of the eighteenth century in the period leading up to the Revolution of 1776? The prose runs the two together. In physical appearance and in diction, the book gives a strong impression of having been written and printed in the eighteenth century.[5] (See Figures 1.4 and 1.5.) The Caslon font, the orthography (note the capitalised nouns and the use of the long *s*), the meandering periodic sentences and the elaborate courtesies of address indicate that a knowing pretence

A Likeneſs of His Majeſty King William III. in whose Honour the City of Williamſburg in Virginia was named. Now newly made by E. Jones after an ancient Engraving.

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Williamſburg
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Being an Account of the moſt important Occurrences in that Place from its firſt Beginning to the preſent Time.

TO which is added an Appendix compoſed of Records and Works from which this Account is drawn; with Copies of the Acts for building the Capitol and the City of *Williamſburg*, and its Charter.

By *RUTHERFOORD GOODWIN*,
An Inhabitant *of the* Place.

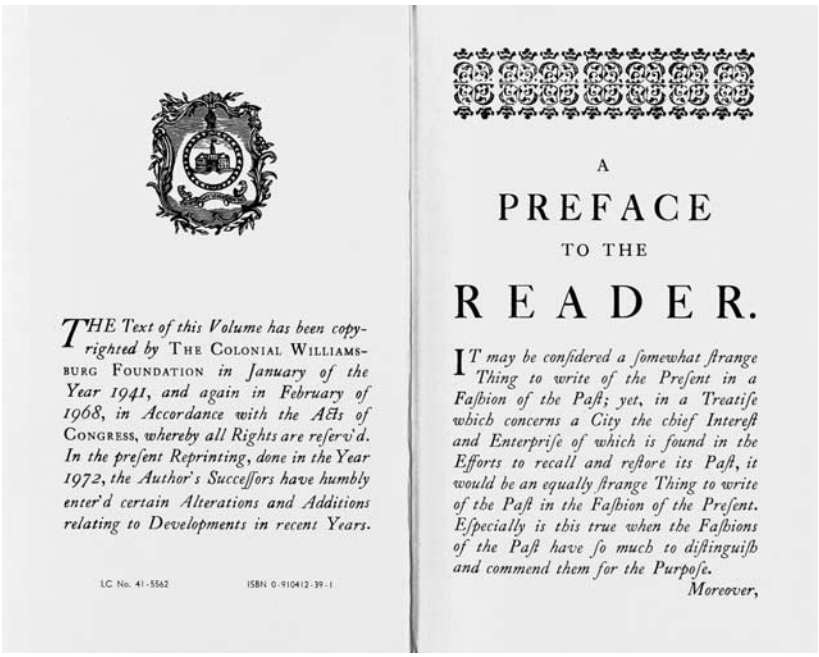
A third Edition reviſ'd & enlarg'd by the Author. Reiſſued now with ſome ſmall Alterations.

WILLIAMSBURG:
Printed for the *Colonial Williamſburg* Foundation, by *Auguſt* and *Charles Dietz* on their Preſs in *Cary* Street at *Richmond, Virginia*. MCM, LXXII.

Figure 1.4 Frontispiece and title-page, Rutherfoord Goodwin, *A Brief and True Report Concerning Williamsburg in Virginia* (3rd edn, 1972).

of authenticity based on imitation has been executed with extraordinary diligence. It is a game, yes, but one the author is in love with, one that is half-believed to be real. 'Mr' Jefferson's speechmaking at the Governor's Palace and the church service have bibliographic forebears in capital C Colonial Williamsburg.

The illustrations reproduced here come from a revised printing of 1972; even the copyright page has been antiqued but legal requirements apparently required some concessions in font. This 1972 production is therefore not a fake: it is a would-be facsimile of a fake that simultaneously confesses what it is up to. As a bibliographical object, it is a strange fish. Both object and text raise questions about the ways in which the past may be legitimately addressed, legitimately presented in public: this, in general terms, is the subject matter of the present book. It is not about the *writing* of history but about its retrieval through one form of restoration or another. In particular it is about the forms of it that we trust trained professionals to carry out on our behalf: the restoration of buildings and paintings, and the editing of works of classic literature.



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PREFACE

TO THE

READER.

IT may be considered a somewhat strange Thing to write of the Present in a Fashion of the Past; yet, in a Treatise which concerns a City the chief Interest and Enterprise of which is found in the Efforts to recall and restore its Past, it would be an equally strange Thing to write of the Past in the Fashion of the Present. Especially is this true when the Fashions of the Past have so much to distinguish and commend them for the Purpose.

Moreover,

Figure 1.5 Copyright page and Preface, Rutherfoord Goodwin, *A Brief and True Report Concerning Williamsburg in Virginia* (3rd edn, 1972).

The authenticity of these undertakings, of the pasts they present, is a complex and curious matter. This book deals with the question of what authenticity is, as well as with the associated questions of what forgery and fakery are: how they may be distinguished from the real thing. And the question of authorship, a highly contested one in recent decades, raises its head. The roles of agency and time loom large in the answers this book has to offer. But its central subject is the kind of history that restorers offer us. This book is about how we might better understand it and about how the restorers might better understand the philosophies behind what they do.

The revival of the past

I have presented the examples above of preservation and restoration in the form of anecdotes for a good reason. In the 1980s and 1990s a number of remarkable studies appeared that took the past, and contemporary fascination with it, as their subject. David Lowenthal's *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (1985), Raphael Samuels's *Theatres of Memory* (1994) and Tom

Griffiths's *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia* (1996) were among the most notable.[6] In one way or another, implicitly or explicitly, each rejected J. H. Plumb's famous thesis from the late 1960s: *The Death of the Past*. Partly these studies were made possible by the broadening of the kinds of documentary evidence that historians had gradually come to see as legitimate (including photographs, oral histories, films, even historic villages). Partly, post-1968 literary and cultural theory had questioned the very existence of historical fact as a securely objective thing standing over and apart from the historian. It was being seen instead as created by or implicated in the historian's framing discourses.[7] This had the effect of putting popular and professional forms of interest in the past on an equal footing – as being themselves, proper objects of historical enquiry. Suddenly, the whole world – in looking back at its past, both now and in previous ages – was the historian's oyster.

Lowenthal's and Samuels's marvellous panoramas of past-directed activity opened up a fertile field. Lowenthal's sources are eclectic, and he is tolerant of what he sees. But his failure to adjudicate the adequacy or truth-telling capacity of the historical endeavours and positions he surveys leaves underlying questions naggingly unanswered. The present book takes its cue from this absence.

Fascination with the past is both popular and professional. I happen to live in both camps, which makes it difficult to find a reliable position outside what Lowenthal shows to be a general scramble to secure the past. The past is all around us: so anecdote is unavoidable. But it is not enough, though for a long while it has been made to seem so. And I am not expert in all the areas this book has to cover. Inevitably I must stray outside my field if I am to address the subject at all as one held in common. I believe the risk is worth it.

This is the first book to bring the arts of restoration together to examine their linked, underlying philosophies.[8] Some practitioners would deny the existence of a philosophy underlying what they do at all, thinking it better to keep their head down and simply get on with the job of restoration in hand, preferring to solve the technical difficulties by reference to the traditions of their professional practice. But even when the professional pursuits are considered reflectively and critically, they are normally considered from within their own narrow cells. This book proposes to end that insularity, to open up some communicating corridors.[9]

To that end, it brings right out into the open a continuing paradox that is normally shuffled under the carpet: the mutual incompatibility of, on the one hand, traditional methodologies of restoration and, on the

other, postmodern theories of culture. Awareness of the mediated nature of knowledge, including knowledge of the past, was one of the great breakthroughs of the post-'68 theory movement. It helped to clarify how we *make* sense of things. It helped us see how knowledge is implicated in the making, and vice versa. The allied fact of the cultural relativity of knowledge was brought home by the emergence of multicultural societies during the 1990s in most Western countries. However, the thoroughgoing scepticism about the objectivity of knowledge – about the possibility of it – which results from taking these related awarenesses to heart can disable the taking of action, can render helpless those charged with the professional presentation of the past.

Accordingly, this book works through a commentary on examples of restoration in the three fields where accepted methodologies have been challenged by a crisis of one kind or another. Failures in and contradictions between the fundamental positions about the nature of the thing being restored emerge. Tracking down the nature of the problem at the level of theory leads me, in the final chapter, back to the source. I propose there a solution: a revival through adaptation of the concept of the work that was displaced, post-'68, in favour of *text* and *discourse*. Incorporating the dimensions of agency and time into the concept via the negative dialectics of Theodor Adorno and the semiotics of C. S. Peirce provides the basis of the approach. It will, I believe, afford a clarifying grounding for practices of restoration that profess to tell the truth about – to present – the past.

This book is interested, then, in historical witness, especially that offered by physical objects from the past, about which precise questions can be fairly asked. It starts with broader fields of historical endeavour – the conservation and curation of historic churches and houses – whose witness is often intensely felt by visitors but is quite generalised. It is important to analyse it at the practical and also at the philosophical level so that the authenticity that visitors yearn for, and the options of conservators and curators, can be better understood. The book then moves to the more finely honed – the conservation and attribution of paintings and, finally, to the scholarly editing of literary and historical documents – where knowledge of the past is highly focussed by concepts of authorship, authenticity and textual authority. None of these concepts is simple or uncontested. Crises, scandals and shifts in paradigm have dogged each of them since the 1980s. Reviewing these intellectual flashpoints comparatively, in the light of one another rather than exclusively from within their own areas of study, reconfigures the representing of the past, acknowledges the tinge of anxiety that *securing* it always has.