

Fabricating Heritage*

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Fabrication has two common meanings. One is to construct with divine artifice, like James Howell's "Almighty fabricator of the universe" of 1645. This positive usage, now rare save in archaeology and book-binding, goes back to Caxton in the fifteenth century. Only in the eighteenth century does fabricate appear in what the *OED* calls a "bad sense"—forging, falsifying, making up. To "make up" as in build or compose is at least Chaucerian; the current use, making something up, telling lies and tall stories, dates only from the 1850s. From the start, anti-Catholic slurs abound—Henry Hallam's "every saint had his legend, fabricated to enrich the churches under his protection" (1818); Macaulay's "numerous lies fabricated by priests" (1855).

One such priestly fabrication sets the stage and the tone for this paper. Milan in 1162 had just fallen to Frederick Barbarossa. As a reward for his help in the conquest, archbishop-elect Rainald of Cologne pillages Milan's relics. Rainald's most notable coup is the remains of the Magi, legendarily brought from Constantinople with Constantine's consent by St. Eustorgio in an ox-cart in 314. Now they are on the move again. Though waylaid en route by minions of Pope Alexander III, the three coffins with their sacred booty reach Cologne unharmed. In Nicolas of Verdun's splendid golden shrine (c. 1200) they become Cologne's main patrons.

The Three Kings by the thirteenth century were a royal cult, emperors coming to venerate the Magi after being crowned in Aachen. Otto IV of Brunswick had himself portrayed on the reliquary as the Fourth King. Belatedly the Milanese lamented the theft. The sixteenth-

century Archbishop St. Carlo Borromeo campaigned for their return; in 1909 a few Magi fragments were actually sent from Cologne to Milan.

But they were *not* sent *back*; they had never been in Milan. The whole story—Constantine, Eustorgio, removal to Cologne—had been fabricated by Rainald. Every mention of the Magi in Milan traces to the archbishop's own account. No wonder the Milanese were tardy in recognizing the theft; only in the late thirteenth century did Rainald's tale reach them. Then Milan mourned the loss of relics it had never had.

Rainald's purpose was clear: to promote the power of the emperor and the glory of Cologne. Relics of the Savior were the most precious the Franks got from Italy and the Holy Land. As symbols of Christ's lordship and of divine kingship, the Magi trumped vestiges of Church Fathers and Roman martyrs. But they needed a pedigree; a legacy of veneration was vital to their efficacy in Cologne. Hence Constantine, the ox-cart, stewardship in Milan, their incorruptible state en route. And it worked. It worked even in Milan, where Visconti patronage of the lamented Magi helped scuttle both republicanism and Torriani family rivals accused of exposing the Magis' hiding place to Frederick Barbarossa.¹

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

The fabrication of the Magi underscores the moral of this paper. Like the medieval cult of relics, heritage today is a popular cult, almost a religious faith. 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 England's National Trust.² Talking with me, a successor's verbal slip echoed the analogy: "When I joined the Church—I mean, the Trust." 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.³ The English 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.”⁴

The creed of heritage answers needs for ritual devotion, especially 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,” as the singer Cassandra Wilson says; “it’s a legacy.”⁵

Attachment to legacy is also blamed for many evils—chauvinist excess, elitist reaction, vainglory and vulgarity, above all warping history. I argue here that heritage’s gravest supposed sin—fabrication—is no vice but a virtue. I touch on six points: how heritage differs from history; why it needs error and invention; how heritage reshapes the past; public approval of fabrication; autobiographical analogies; and the need to own our own heritage.

HERITAGE IS NOT HISTORY

Heritage should not be confused with history. History seeks to convince by truth, and succumbs to falsehood. Heritage exaggerates and omits, candidly invents and frankly forgets, and thrives on ignorance and error. Time and hindsight alter history, too. But historians’ revisions must conform with accepted tenets of evidence. Heritage is more flexibly emended. Historians ignore at professional peril the whole corpus of past knowledge that heritage can airily transgress.

Heritage uses historical traces and tells historical tales. But these tales and traces are stitched into fables closed to critical scrutiny. Heritage is immune to criticism because it is not erudition but catechism—not checkable fact but credulous allegiance. Heritage is not a

testable or even plausible version of our past; it is a *declaration of faith* in that past. Loyalty and bonding demand uncritical endorsement and preclude dissent. Deviance is banned because group success, even survival, depend on all pulling together. Thus for Finnish patriots the *Kalevala* though “a clear counterfeit” is nonetheless a holy book that reflects their deepest being; “if a Finn ridicules the *Kalevala* ... that is a sin against the Holy Ghost.”⁶

Hence it is futile to vilify heritage as biased. Prejudiced pride in the past is not the sorry upshot of heritage but its essential aim. Heritage attests our identity and affirms our worth. When the patriot upholds “my country, right or wrong,” heritage tells him it is always right. Swamped by bogus tales of wartime heroics, Richard Cobb concluded that historians ought to make it a rule “to assume that our country is *always* wrong.”⁷ “Monuments, festivals, mottoes, oratory ... never help history,” warned the sociologist William Graham Sumner; “they protect errors and sanctify prejudice.”⁸ Heritage diverges from history not in being biased but in its view of bias. Historians aim to reduce bias; heritage sanctions and strengthens it.

FABRICATION ESSENTIAL TO FEALTY

History is for all, heritage for us alone. History is not perfectly open—scholars hoard sources, archives get locked away, critics are denied access, misdeeds are erased. But most historians condemn concealment. In contrast, heritage restricts messages to an elect group whose private property it is. History tells all who will listen what has happened and how things came to be as they are. Heritage passes on exclusive myths of origin and endurance, endowing us alone with prestige and purpose. It benefits us by being withheld from others. Sharing or even showing a legacy to outsiders vitiates its value and power.

Heritage keeps outsiders at bay by baffling and offensive claims of superiority. Being clannish is essential to group survival and well-being. Bonding within and exclusion beyond the group stem from faith not reason: we exalt heritage not because it *is* true but because it *ought* to be. To exclude others, heritage cannot be universally true; to those beyond the pale its tenets must defy reason. Empirical error and irrational

argument render our heritage opaque or useless to others, clear and tenable only to us.

From some legendary seed each group grows delusory faiths—faiths nutritive not despite but due to their flaws. A “mountain of false information” sustains all societies.⁹ The bad effects of wrong beliefs are more than compensated by the bonding a legacy confers and by the barriers it erects. Shared misinformation excludes those whose own legacy encodes other catechisms. “Correct” knowledge could not so serve, because it is open to all. Only “false” knowledge can become a gauge of exclusion.¹⁰ Heritage mandates *misreadings* of the past.

Such misreadings become cherished myth. The civic value of “noble lies” is explained in Plato’s *Republic*. For the general good, Socrates contrives “a poetic fairy story, a magnificent myth” that will make men “think of the land as their mother and protect her if she is attacked.” Few would at first believe this fabrication, but it would “succeed with later generations.”¹¹ Sacred origins sanction like myths today. You are asked if you “believe in the Monroe Doctrine,” in Sumner’s example. “You do not dare to say you do not know what it is, because every good American is bound to believe in” it.¹² “To tamper with the received story of any people’s past is dangerous,” notes a modern historian, “because it disturbs the sanctified version that makes the present bearable.”¹³

Heritage everywhere thrives on persisting error. “Getting its history wrong is crucial for the creation of a nation,” Renan comforted his fellow French.¹⁴ English historians praise precursors’ muddled thought as a national virtue. “We made our peace with the Middle Ages by misconstruing them; ‘wrong’ history was one of our assets,” exulted Butterfield. “Precisely because they did *not* know the Middle Ages, historians gave the seventeenth century just the type of anachronism” it needed—they mistook England’s new constitution for a restoration of ancient liberties. Useful *because* mistaken, this fable became a pillar of the national heritage; “whatever it may have done to our history, it had a wonderful effect on English politics.”¹⁵ To this day the British revere Whig unreason. Opposing a House of Lords bill to let daughters inherit titles, the historian Trevor-Roper (Lord Dacre) lauds male primogeniture as traditionally “irrational.”¹⁶

Swiss heritage too sets myth above truth. Since history was “a school of patriotism,” its texts should be corrected with caution, warned

an 1870s educator. To destroy faith in traditions that “symbolize liberty and republican virtues” would corrode patriotism.¹⁷ William Tell’s defiance of the Hapsburg oppressor is a notorious fiction, but the infallible archer, the apple and the cap are too pivotal to Swiss identity to give up. A 1994 exhibit in Lausanne that debunked Tell and other props of Swiss virtue as “pseudo-historical” was subjected to savage abuse.¹⁸

The epic of Ireland’s quest for freedom is “a beneficent legacy, its wrongness notwithstanding.” Heritage champion Brendan Bradshaw terms the tale of tribulations crucial to Irish identity. “They all know it’s not true,” says an Ulster Catholic of one saga of Protestant infamy, “but that won’t stop them believing it. In a few years it will be gospel.”¹⁹ It is a Greek credo that secret schools run by monks kept Hellenic culture alive under Turkish oppressors. In fact, Greek schooling was largely tolerated during Ottoman rule. But it is forbidden to say so. “Even if [it] was a myth,” explains a prominent Greek, “it should still be propagated, for such myths are essential to the national identity.”²⁰

Fiction resists fact to persist as heritage. Parson Weems’s fables about George Washington have been “shattered again and again,” scholars note, “but they live on in the popular mind, and nothing can extirpate them.” The saga of Rhondda Valley miners shot down by army troops in 1910 is an outrage the Welsh will never forget; yet “every single man who was there knew the story was nonsense,” in Josephine Tey’s words.²¹ The “ancient” Breton folklore classic *Barzaz-Breiz*, long exposed as a nineteenth-century pastiche, is still accepted as the authentic voice of the Breton people because six generations have used it to express that voice.²²

Commending error as heritage is the theme of Joseph Roth’s *Radetsky March*, whose hero rescues Emperor Franz Joseph at the battle of Solferino in 1859. Years later, he reads a gushy version of the rescue in his son’s school text. “It’s a pack of lies,” he yells. “Captain, you’re taking it too seriously,” says a friend. “All historical events are modified for consumption in schools. And quite right, too. Children need examples they can understand, which impress them. They can learn later what actually occurred.” The Emperor too rejects literal truth. “It’s a bit awkward,” he admits, but “neither of us shows up too badly in the story. Forget it.”²³

We routinely purge traits repugnant to group pride. “I don’t want 16-year-olds walking out of there thinking badly of the United States,” a Massachusetts congressman explained his opposition to the Smithsonian’s abortive *Enola Gay* exhibition. Representative Sam Johnson, a new Smithsonian Regent, was still more forthright: “We’ve got to get patriotism back into the Smithsonian. We want the Smithsonian to reflect real America and not something that a historian dreamed up.”²⁴

The “real” America of patriotic dreams has long dominated school history texts. Shoing “national heroes in an uncomplimentary fashion [even] though factually accurate [is] offensive” to American school boards. Civic allegiance remains the main aim of most school history. Publishers expunge anything awkward or even debatable. “Are you going to tell kds that Thomas Jefferson didn’t believe in Jesus?” a textbook editor asked a history teacher. “Not me!”²⁵ “If there’s something that’s controversial, it’s better to take it out.” To avoid any offense, one publisher would omit “controversial” past notables like Roosevelt and Nixon, along with any “living people who might possibly become infamous.”²⁶ The dubious future is ditched along with the suspect past.

History lessons that encourage skepticism about British heroes and heroines, sullyng the reputations of Florence Nightingale, Lord Nelson and Alfred the Great, are similarly suspect. “We were taught in history class that the French Empire was all about spreading civilization,” a French official reacts to *Waterloo*. “We aren’t going to make movies to call that into question, evenif we know that what really happened was profoundly different.”²⁷ The desire to rewrite the past to conform with group pride is too universal to be dismissed as a conspiracy, historians concede, “nor is it sinister to want to manipulate national history, as we all do with our own lives.”²⁸

In sum, heritage everywhere not only tolerates but thrives on historical error. Falsified legacies are integral to group identity and uniqueness. Those who seek a past as sound as a bell forget that bells *need* built-in imperfections to bring out their individual resonances.

MODES OF FABRICATION

What kinds of imperfections are these? Space precludes more than a summary list of a half dozen common ways in which heritage alters the past.²⁹ Briefly, it *upgrades*, making the past better than it was (or worse, to attract sympathy). It *updates*, anachronistically reading back from the present qualities we want to see in past icons and heroes or “restoring” paintings in line with modern preferences for a Michelangelo to look like a Matisse. It *jumbles* the past in a synchronic undifferentiated Dumpster, so that the Gauls come close to de Gaulle, Elizabeth I joins Elizabeth II, witchcraft and pseudomemories of satanic abuse tread the same American stage. It *selectively forgets* the evil or indecorous or incomprehensible in acts of oblivion and bowdlerizing.³⁰ It *contrives genealogies* to satisfy mystiques of lineage, as with medieval kings who traced themselves to Troy and revolutionaries who bolstered claims with classical prototypes. It *claims precedence* as a bona fide of possession, superiority or virtue, as with primogeniture, Piltdown Man, and today’s First Nation peoples. (These modes of contrivance have much in common with cinema, through which many if not most people derive compelling notions of the past.)³¹

Several such fabrications merge at Plymouth, Massachusetts. Two centuries after the Pilgrim landing in 1620, heritage celebrants found a suitable Rock on which *Mayflower* passengers ought to have stepped ashore, and put it on the harbor front under a bizarre classical canopy. That Plymouth is abundantly mythic is clear from common tourist queries at the site: “Why doesn’t the rock say ‘1492?’” some wonder; others ask, “Where is the sword?” The nearby *Mayflower* replica reinforces the mystique: “Where are the *Nina* and the *Pinta*?” ask visitors. And best of all: “How did he get all those animals on that little boat?”³² All the past is made one, the Planting of New England merged with the Discovery of America, medieval legend and biblical lore. As history this is absurd; as heritage it’s hugely symbolic. The Rock and the *Mayflower* stand for all beginnings, all voyages to new worlds, all paths to new ways.

PUBLIC ENDORSEMENT

Celebrating some bits and forgetting others, heritage reshapes a past made easy to embrace. And just as heritage practitioners take pride in creating artifice, the public enjoys consuming it. Departures from history distress only a handful of highbrows. Most neither seek historical veracity nor mind its absence. Echoing Washington Irving's indulgence of spurious Shakespeare relics at Stratford in 1815, they are "ever willing to be deceived, where the deceit is pleasant and costs nothing. What is it to us, whether these stories be true or false, so long as we can persuade ourselves into the belief of them?"³³

To be sure, heritage consumers are readily duped; producers happily connive to gull them. Like Magritte and Dali, they exult in deception. An English hobbyist built a full-scale "Hursley" railway station complete with tarnish and soot; he was elated when a visitor said, "Do you know, my grandfather used to work in that very signal-box?"³⁴

Legacy promoters feel obliged to confirm popular error. "Medieval" performers play Renaissance music on sixteenth-century shawms and regals because these later sounds and instruments exemplify what hearers mistake for medieval. Adolph Zukor's 1934 film of Catherine the Great, *The Scarlet Empress*, replaced St Petersburg's elegant classical palaces with neo-Gothic monstrosities, and the delicacies of Baroque harpsichord and strings with lush Wagner and Tchaikovsky, because these were what "palaces" and "Russia" conjured up in the popular mind.³⁵

A BBC play shows Vita Sackville-West dining alone with her mother at Knole, the family seat, in 1910.

They were both in full evening dress, sitting at opposite ends of a long table. Two footmen in livery and a butler in tails stood impassively along one side of the table while Vita and her mother discussed sex.

But "in 1910 mothers didn't discuss sex with their daughters, let alone in front of the servants," objected Vita's son Nigel Nicolson; "they would not be wearing evening dress, nor the footmen livery; they would be sitting side by side at a much smaller table." The director was

unregenerate: “the scene needed highlighting in a way that the audience expected. It was more truthful than actuality.”³⁶

An adviser who disputed invented episodes in the 1970 film *Cromwell* was “told that most people wouldn’t know that such events hadn’t happened, so it wouldn’t matter.”³⁷ It wouldn’t have mattered if they had known; finding that revered tradition is recent invention leaves most people unfazed. From the Donation of Constantine to the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, biases that induced fakes in the first place sustain faith in them long after their exposure. Indeed, dubious origins enhance many a tradition. Exposing “Ossian” as James Macpherson’s forgery inflamed the Scottish nationalism it had ignited. Merely querying the authenticity of the “medieval” manuscripts “found” in Bohemia in 1818 kindled Czech nationalism; philologist Václav Hanka was even more acclaimed as their forger than their finder.³⁸ Piltdown Man gained enduring fame as a fake.

Israel still deploys the Dead Sea fortress of Masada as a national symbol, though all evidence discredits the myth of first-century mass suicide—“rather than be taken as slaves, 967 zealots killed themselves; only one survived to tell the tale.” Masada became a ritual mecca; scouts intoned poet Yitzhak Lamdan’s “Masada Shall Not Fall Again” round campfires while guides read aloud the speech the Roman Jewish historian Josephus invented for the last survivor. Today visitors come to Masada not for tangible evidence of the ancient legend, but for a modern passion play of national rebirth.³⁹

Sites willfully contrived often serve heritage better than those faithfully preserved. A visitor to Beatrix Potter’s Hilltop Farm in the Lake District exclaims, “This is how I always imagined” Peter Rabbit-land!⁴⁰ But Scotland, not the Lake District, inspired Peter Rabbit; hers was the fulfillment not of fact but of fancy. We demand of heritage an imagined, not an actual, past.

What is media-fabricated may seem more real, because more familiar, than the original. Visitors thronged the Alamo when its memorial mural replaced the actual heroes with Hollywood actors from the 1960 film; Davy Crockett is better known as John Wayne than with his own face. The *Spirit of Saint Louis* that Lindbergh flew across the Atlantic, enshrined at the Smithsonian, awes fewer than the plane in Dearborn’s Ford Museum that Jimmy Stewart “flew” in the movie; it

was the Hollywood plane that people “*saw* crossing the ocean.”⁴¹ The legacy of Mark Twain’s boyhood Hannibal, Missouri, attests the force of fictive truth. When the home of Twain’s old sweetheart Laura Hawkins became “Becky Thatcher’s” house, the elderly Laura “embraced this fictional identity” and had “BT” inscribed on her headstone.⁴²

Faked heritage can be felicitous. In 1993 six missing Haydn sonatas were unearthed—and then exposed as modern. The Haydn expert Robbins Landon had vouched for their authenticity; he was unrepentant. “It’s the most brilliant fraud,” he said. “I don’t mind being taken in by music this good. [It’s] what Haydn would have written in this key at this time.”⁴³ A tour guide leading a group of nuns in Christ’s footsteps in Jerusalem says, “This isn’t the way He actually came. But it’s a more interesting route”; the guide isn’t mocking the sacred past, he is offering a more accessible Via Dolorosa.⁴⁴

He is also following the lead of Henry James’s Shakespearean “Birthplace” curator, who succumbs to hype to raise receipts:

We stand here in the old living-room. Through those low windows, in childhood, He peered out into the world that He was to make so much happier by the gift of His genius; over the boards of this floor—that is over *some* of them, for we mustn’t be carried away!—His little feet often pattered. In this old chimney corner—just there [is the very] angle, where His little stool was placed; if we could look close enough, we should find the hearth-stone scraped with His little feet.

Visitors adore it. “Don’t they want *any* truth?—none even for the mere look of it?” asks an appalled crony. “The look of it,” says the curator, “is what I give!”⁴⁵

Blatant deceit is the *raison d’être* of Peter Shaffer’s play *Lettice and Lovage*. His tour guide thrills visitors with flights of fancy that bring Fustian Hall to life as bald facts fail to do. “Enlarge—enliven—enlighten” is her maxim; “fantasy floods in where fact leaves a vacuum.” We *need* fantasy. Gluttons for false facts, we bring to the most improbable past an “immense assumption of [sacred truths], of the general soundness of the legend,” notes James; like Otto at Cologne and Irving at Stratford, we swallow the reliquary shell’s “preposterous stuffing”

almost whole. But not *quite* whole; we know we're being fed by partisans. As playwright Alan Bennett says, "scepticism about one's heritage is an essential part of that heritage."⁴⁶

HERITAGE AND LIFE HISTORY

Autobiography offers striking parallels. Heritage and life history are similarly updated and upgraded. As shown above, historians admit the analogy.⁴⁷ Autobiography like heritage defies history's rules. Self-chroniclers alter facts and use fictions that would ban historians from academe.⁴⁸ As with heritage, life histories become coherent and credible only by invention, often in defiance of known fact. They persuade us not as *vero* but *ben trovato*. "You don't even think of your own past as quite real," John Fowles muses; "you dress it up, you gild it or blacken it, censor it, tinker with it—in a word, fictionalize it."⁴⁹

The need to reshape our own past is evident to every autobiographer and analyst. Like medieval chroniclers limning exemplary lives, today's memoirists aim to impose their own moral versions of the past. "We choose to remember mistakenly what we *need* to remember," comments a historian, "to preserve our individual and collective identities."⁵⁰ We achieve a false sense of consistency by updating memories to accord with our present views, remaining unaware how much our attitudes have changed over time. Such "mistakes" become fixed articles of faith. Freud noted that like individuals, "mankind as a whole has developed delusions inaccessible to logical criticism and which contradict reality."⁵¹

Time makes liars of us all: a famed analyst cites the 25-year-old who said he had been third in his class; at 50 he recalled being second; at 75 he was sure he had come first. To become heroes of "a life worth remembering, a drama worth having lived for," oldsters retool their pasts.⁵² However erratic our recall, it is at least our own. If we cannot wholly expunge what once vexed or shamed us, we can tell our own tale better than anyone else. "It's an excellent biography of someone else," said the writer Robertson Davies, of Judith Skelton Grant's new life of him. "But I've really lived inside myself, and she can't get in there."⁵³ A line in the song "Killing Me Softly" runs "Telling my whole life in his

words”; but we really want to tell our life in our *own* words. Hence would-be biographers are often thwarted; not being us, they’re bound to get things wrong.

Like stewards who keep heritage impenetrable to outsiders, subjects may *want* biographers to get things wrong—impugning their motives like Freud, evading them like Pyncheon and Salinger, being cryptic or equivocal like Beckett and Nabokov, crafting a luminously impenetrable autobiography like James, or, like Compton-Burnett, setting rival chroniclers at each other’s throats.⁵⁴ The classic case is Thomas Hardy, who spent years ghost-writing his biography and, with his wife’s collusion, passing it off as her own, an impersonation that one critic felt deserved the title “*The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy by Florence Hardy, by Thomas Hardy.*”⁵⁵

Since self-chronicles rely on recall to which others lack access, they are not open to correction. A sole survivor is a privileged witness. Chided for omitting from *Notes of a Son and Brother* parts of a letter from his brother William, Henry James explained that he “instinctively regard[ed] it at last as all *my* truth, to do what I would with.” The brothers’ letters were for James not “mere merciless transcript” but “*imaginative* record.” Mamie Garvin Fields is outraged to find that her memoirist granddaughter checked her stories in the local archives—going behind her back, violating her trust. Even events we cannot possibly remember, like our birth, are not subject to question. Autobiographers treat “their birth like a piece of property or a diploma,” writes Philippe Lejeune. “This grounds their entire narrative on an irrefutable beginning.”⁵⁶

Salman Rushdie’s “clear memory of having been in India during the China War” in 1962, contrary to the facts, shows the tenacity of delusive recall:

I “remember” how frightened we all were, I “recall” people making nervy little jokes about needing to buy themselves a Chinese phrase book ... I also know that I couldn’t have been in India at that time. Yet *even after I found out that my memory was playing tricks* my brain simply refused to unscramble itself. It clung to the false memory.

So Rushdie's protagonist in *Midnight's Children* clings to known error. "It's memory's truth, he insists, and only a madman would prefer someone else's version to his own."⁵⁷

Heritage shares with life history immunity to correction even by ourselves. Once we have consigned our childhood to print it is hard to remember in any other way; transcribing fixes that account as our only memory and condemns us, like John Dean after Watergate, to formulaic repetition. So with heritage: what is celebrated becomes immune to conscious revision. Collective heritage sources range far beyond personal recall, but these sources too resist correction by others. Since we alone understand our legacy, we are free, or maybe bound, to construe it as we feel it ought to be. Those who share a communal legacy must accept some agreed notion of its nature. But each sharer treats that corporate bequest as his own. Like personal memory, it is meant to be opaque to outsiders.⁵⁸

Fiction is not the opposite of fact but its complement, giving our lives a more lasting shape. To "locate our own private stories within a larger collective narrative," notes a historian, we embrace "true" lies, credible falsehoods. That myths are batty and irrational does not spoil their worth. Camelot and the Grail lack historical integrity but carry psychological weight; like the *Mayflower* saga, these rooted myths lend cosmic meaning to our own quests.⁵⁹ As the presenter of Alex Haley's flagrantly anachronistic *Roots* said, "There you have it, some of it true, and some of it fiction, but all of it true, in the true meaning of the word."⁶⁰

WHY HERITAGE MUST BE "OURS"

Heritage like life history must above all be our very own. Only a heritage that is clearly ours is worth having. "The issue is ownership and control," says a civil-rights veteran battling both Hollywood and the National Park Service for interpretive stewardship of the movement and its sites. "If we don't tell the story or control the telling, then it's no longer about us."⁶¹ Egyptians most of whose antiquities have ended up in Europe, Jamaicans whose beaches are fenced off for exclusive tourist use, cannot suppose these legacies their own.

The signal value of heritage possession was the point made by soldier-scholar-mythmaker Yigael Yadin to Israeli army recruits sworn in at Masada:

When Napoleon stood among his troops next to the pyramids of Egypt, he declared: “Four thousand years of history look down upon you.” But what would he not have given to be able to say: “Four thousand years of *your own* history look down upon you.”⁶²

The point of heritage, avers a Scottish custodian, is “not that the public should learn something but that they should *become* something.” Choices are constrained, to be sure; heritage comes already selected and labeled by precursors. But just to inherit is not enough; people must realize they are “heirs to the past, heirs to the collections they own, free to decide for themselves what they are going to do with the past, what it means for them now and what it may mean for them in the future.”⁶³ We must feel sure the past’s legacies have become our very own.

As a living force the past is ever remade. Heritage cannot be stored in a vault or an attic; the true steward adds his own stamp to his predecessors’. It is our felt duty to augment what we bequeath; the legacy must gain new resonance while in our care.⁶⁴ Only a heritage ever reanimated stays relevant. It is thanks to modern care that classical splendor still suffuses Greece, say patriots. “When you are born,” said Melina Mercouri, “they talk to you about the Parthenon, the Acropolis. Everyone in Greece thinks they have built it with their own hands.”⁶⁵ To keep the legacy alive, Greeks build amphitheaters, cherish ancient names, launch replica triremes, copy classical facades. Faith that if you spoke like Plato you might also begin to think like him spurs use of the ancient tongue.

To reshape is as vital as to preserve. As Orwell bluntly warned those English he saw mired in compliant reaction, “we must add to our heritage or lose it.”⁶⁶ Like Rainald, Haley and others, we add by fabricating.

NOTES

* Inaugural Heritage Lecture, St Mary's University College, Strawberry Hill, Twickenham, England, 7 Dec. 1995.

1. Patrick J. Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY, 1994), 251–55; Timothy Raison, “The Magi in Legend,” in *We Three Kings: The Magi in Art and Legend*, exhibition catalog, Buckinghamshire County Museum (Aylesbury, 1995), 7–10.

2. James Lees-Milne, *People and Places: Country House Donors and the National Trust* (London, 1992), 5.

3. Adam Nicolson, “Tidiness and the Trust,” *National Trust Magazine*, no. 58 (Autumn 1989): 37–39.

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