
The past is the latest thing. Whether as slick pastiche or marketed nostalgia, we are surrounded now by a multiplicity of references back, so that the Zeitgeist of the 1980s is an amalgamation and plundering of earlier identities. Dominant among these is a mythicized Edwardianism - the world of country diaries and country kitchens; Mr Kipling’s cakes and White’s lemonade (‘let the real memories come pouring back’); *A Room with a View* and *The Way We Were*. This sunny weekend between Victorian horrors and 1930s memories offers an image of a more settled, consensual, natural way of life than the divided, bewildering present. This is the version of the past with which Hewison opens his critique of the present. He takes the exhibition *The Way We Were* at the Wigan Pier Heritage Centre as characteristic of the institutionalized nostalgia that pervades contemporary British culture and society. It is worth noting, though, that other pasts (and the pasts of other cultures) are also current - for example, 1950s America in the Levi 501 ads, 1960s revivalism in mini-skirts and popular music, *belle epoque* wine bars and Elizabethan banquets. This range of appropriations suggests an imaginative and creative bankruptcy - as Hewison argues - but it also points to something more than what ‘nostalgia’ generally implies. There is a widespread preference for some other reality than that of this island now. Certainly, it often takes the form of a fantasy of another, earlier England, but Golden Age retrospects are nothing new: indeed, they have been summoned up periodically since the beginnings of industrialization. What we have now involves not only a reiteration of insularity, but also a challenge to it, in the predilection for otherness, foreignness, in many forms. One implication of this is, as Hewison points out, a colonization of the past with the corollary that it’s better to be anywhere than to be in Britain in the 1980s. Who wouldn’t want to escape from the ‘climate of decline’ that he charts in his second chapter? But it is also possible to see, embedded in retro styles and exotic entertainments, a dissatisfaction and a desire that are not inevitably negative; an awareness of other possibilities, other roles whose mobilization need not be, are not essentially, reactionary and conservative. Although Hewison is right to argue that ‘heritage is not history’ (p. 10), it might also be true to say that heritage is not the whole story.

*The Heritage Industry* is quite different from Hewison’s previous books on British culture and the arts since 1939. Its frame of reference is wider, its argument more engaged and immediate - as the extensive use of events and
publications from the last two years indicates. He reserves his most virulent criticism for the ideologists and practitioners of the New Right, whose fetishization of the past for their own political ends is quite a different enterprise from the salvage operations at Beamish or Wigan. Nevertheless, Hewison sees an underlying pattern: he sees neo-Georgian (or neo-classical) architecture a sharing the same fundamental retreat from engagement with the present as the growth of industrial archaeology and heritage centres. But I think there are important distinctions to be made. Hewison’s impassioned and wide-ranging argument is very persuasive, but the range of reference tends to efface certain crucial differences: differences to do with history itself, with the politics of formations of class and regions, with the specific cultural construction of the audiences for and consumers of the different phenomena to which the book refers. Visitors to Wigan Pier are not the same people who commission Quinlan Terry to design their country houses; and Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council is politically and financially worlds apart from the Country Landowners’ Association. Therefore, the productive insights arising from Hewison’s broad survey are to some extent weakened by the elision of differences. For him, the heritage industry is both a symptom and a cause of ‘Britain in a climate of decline’. The mythologizing of the past is a consequence of the decline of manufacturing industry (with the social decay and division he vividly and sympathetically describes) but it is also, rather curiously, responsible for that decline. Perhaps the reason for this sweeping and somewhat circular argument is that Hewison’s underlying concern is not with popular culture, the New Right, or government policies but with minority culture, ‘the Arts’. In this book, the arts have a relatively marginal place. They are, nevertheless, crucial to his project since his argument about the current obsession with the past is predicated on a concern for the arts in the present. The proliferation of museums, and the activities of such organizations as the National Trust, English Heritage, and the Arts Council, are seen as directly responsible for ‘the imaginative death of this country’ (p. 9). Their patronage of the past represents a neglect of and hostility towards an active and critical artistic culture. As a result, the book begins and ends with an explicit concern for ‘a new art’, but its central discussion is devoted to a critique of the agencies that collectively militate against the emergence of just such an art. Consequently, a range of very different contemporary cultural forms and institutions are brought together under the label ‘heritage’, and their specific functions, audiences, and modes of address are not fully examined. Hewison engages very impressively with the present crisis, but his argument is informed by a traditional lament for the high art of a minority culture. What we have in The Heritage Industry is the latest stage in the long-running ‘culture and society’ tradition; a sequel to Arnold, Ruskin, Eliot, Leavis, and Hoggart. It is, of course, a particular 1980s inflection of that debate and Hewison demonstrates both more radical sympathies and a sharper sense of history than his predecessors. But there are some ironic reversals. For example, the ‘industry’ of the title is distasteful because it isn’t real industry but rather the manufacture of a false past which is replacing ‘the real industry on which the country’s economy depends’ (p. 9). Whereas Hewison’s predecessors resisted industrialism as a threat to the imagination and
to community, he (like some of the museums he discusses) registers the loss of a thriving industrial past. While deploring unemployment and economic decline, he reveals an oddly nostalgic tendency in his reference to ‘a so-called industrial state of small garages, garment factories, tyre centres, carpet warehouses and the inevitable DIY superstore’ (p. 19).

The explanation for this apparent contradiction is that, ultimately, Hewison is not concerned with industry (‘real’ or ‘so-called’) but with what the condition of England has to do with (or to) the true role of the individual artist-creator. Art it seems, cannot nourish because of the pervasive sense of decline and the compensatory preference for ‘living in a museum’. Whilst Hewison makes the legitimate point that he is identifying the disease rather than prescribing the cure, he does, at the end of his book, identify some examples of contemporary artistic production that satisfy his criteria of a critical and forward-looking art. His list includes writers for film and TV, novelists, playwrights, and performance artists. Now, whilst the supine or hostile policies of national agencies such as the Arts Council, subsidized galleries and theatres, and government may be legitimately criticized, Hewison also blames a wide range of leisure, entertainment and popular cultural forms for the ‘neglect of contemporary artists’ (p. 144). Lurking behind this is a traditional view of minority culture threatened by mass civilization, a view that could have been expressed at any time in the last two hundred years. As a historian of culture, one might have expected Hewison to be more alert to the interpenetrations between ‘high culture’ and ‘popular culture’. The dilemma for the individual artist is not a unique phenomenon of the 1980s but a characteristic feature of late capitalist societies. The organization of ‘mass culture’ may now take the form of visits to industrial museums, heritage centres, and stately homes, but it was equally organized (and ‘commercialized’) when it took the form of music-hall, cinema, football matches, dancing, and the pub. Moreover, there is now a curiosity about the past - especially about local, family, or regional history - that cannot be dismissed as fantasy or nostalgia. And there is a dimension of the history of popular entertainment missing from this book; there is also an absence of an international dimension which might suggest that Britain is not unique in its concern for preserving and even reconstituting the past. The Marais in Paris has been ‘cleaned up’ in much the same way as Covent Garden; in the USA (in Savannah, Ga and Richmond, Va) cotton and tobacco warehouses, on the wharves where slaves disembarked, have been converted into shops, restaurants, and cocktail bars. Some of the features of pastiche and preservation which Hewison identifies in Wigan, Liverpool, and York have parallels in the USA and in other Western European cultures (Tiffany lamps, brass fittings, plush sofas, old advertisements, sepia photographs, and so on). There is a more complex international export-import of culture going on than can be deduced from a concentration on the peculiarities of the English. This additional context might be more help to us in understanding aspects of the heritage industry than the high culture, metropolitan perspective of Hewison’s book.

Following Patrick Wright, Donald Home, M. J. Wiener, and other cultural historians, Robert Hewison has produced a compelling indictment of nostalgia and the ideology of conservation. However, where I think some
greater qualification needs to be made is in his ‘reading’ of the new museums. For Hewison, they are doubly false: they are not real museums and they constitute a new industry that is not real industry. Is the conclusion, then, that rather than visiting Beamish or Wigan Pier ‘we’ should be manufacturing goods? He actually opposes the ‘manufacture of heritage’ to the ‘manufacture of goods’, and underlying this opposition is not only an idealization of (other people’s) real work, but also an old-style distaste for consumerism (‘It is now possible to buy the past off the shelf - p. 139). Postmodernism, with its pastiche and parody of history, is identified with post-industrialism, where redundant factories and coal-mines become our heritage. But who is the ‘we’ summoned by Hewison? Is the same collective experience constituted by the idea of a national trust (preserving the houses of the privileged) and by the preservation of the northern industrial past in Wigan’s ‘The Way We Were’? These questions are raised by the fact that Hewison generalizes from the existence of a range of cultural and social phenomena. He reads off their assumed ideologies and effects from their formal arrangement and from his own response to them. This may be a justifiable enterprise in the case of the reverence for the stately home - a learned response for English people which, in any case, has a longer history than that of the present crisis. But can Hewison speak with equal assurance for the effects on and assumptions of the different audiences for some of the new heritage centres?

Taking Hewison’s own key instance of the exhibition at Wigan Pier, I would like to suggest some different interpretations and implications for this particular approach to history. It is significant that Hewison identifies his journey to Wigan with that of George Orwell, beginning his book with a pastiche of the opening of The Road to Wigan Pier. They share a crucially external standpoint: travelling from a metropolitan, middle-class, and high cultural milieu to observe the culture and society of the working-class north. There is the same impressive sympathy, but also the same assumption of a shared class and national position; shared, that is, by writer and readers. Might not the ‘we’ in The Way We Were be addressing a different community, a shared experience that is not ‘national’ and spuriously unifying, and that is not so readily incorporated for reactionary political ends?

The Way We Were is an exhibition in a converted canal warehouse, part of the Wigan Pier leisure complex. The area had been semi-derelict before development by Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council and now includes a concert hall, an exhibition and conference centre (in a disused cotton mill, alongside a renovated mill engine and machinery hall), canal-boat trips, a souvenir shop, and a pub called ‘The Orwell’. The celebrated pier - a small jetty for unloading coal wagons on to barges - has been reconstructed, with an explanatory plaque. The whole enterprise is typical in several ways of recent developments: the inclusion of industrial/technological history in the construction of the national past; the extension of the definition of ‘heritage’ to include a sort of everyday, people’s history; the recovery of the relics of industrial decline and devastation as monuments and museums; the translation of places of work and production into places of entertainment and consumption; and the attribution of meaning - via particular concepts of ‘the past’ - to an unremarkable collection of buildings.
in a town previously off the tourist trail. The title of this review suggests some of the central issues raised by the exhibition, not least whether such recent phenomena as industrial museums and heritage centres mark an end or a beginning; a monument to decline, a way forward in desperate times, or just another example of the familiar (and doomed?) shift from production to consumerism. But there are other connotations too.

First, this exhibition starts from jokes and visual/verbal puns and utilizes them throughout. The self-consciousness of this enterprise places it in a different relation to its subject-matter than, say, the reverential contemplation of country-house treasures or the travel-through-time dimension of 'higher-brow theme parks'. Wigan Pier, as the organizers stress, originated as a joke, reputedly in 1891 'when a train taking miners to a demonstration in Southport was delayed at Pagefield Signal Box, close to a long wooden coal gantry. . . . One of the miners asked the signalman, "Where the bloody hell are we, mate?" and was told "Wigan Pier!'" The conjunction of Wigan and Southport (cf. 'Worktown' and Blackpool) as the two incompatible worlds of struggle and pleasure is the basis for the (continuing) joke. And the joke moved into the music-halls and the seaside piers with George Formby Sr, to be revived three decades later by George Orwell. The self-ironizing tendency and the popular origins of the 'myth' are fundamental to the exhibition in the 1980s. Throughout, there is a mixture of self-mockery, entertainment, and a serious attempt to speak of the working and leisure lives of working-class people at the turn of the century. And it is in this mingling of tone and modes of address that the pleasures (and contradictions) of the exhibition lie. In many respects the exhibition is more of a 'show' than a museum. This refers not only to its tone (see above) but also to the style of presentation, the emphasis on multimedia displays, spectator participation, and the use of actors to bring the past to life. The 'show' is constructed to give the visitor/audience a range of experiences through a variety of sensations (sound, sight, movement) and emotions (laughter, amusement, surprise, sympathy, anger). The invitation is to 'Enter the World of The Way We Were and step back into the year 1900' and this 'show' has obvious dramatic elements: for example, a visit to the collier's cottage involves listening to the 'widow's' account of an accident at the colliery and visitors are summoned by the 'schoolmaster' to take part in education 1900-style. As Hewison points out, there is a danger that this approach can result in a kind of TV costume-drama. And it should be admitted that given the dominant conception of history offered to the popular audience in films, television, bestsellers, advertisements, consumer goods, and so forth, the reconstruction of this past is very difficult territory to negotiate.

Nevertheless, we should be careful not to 'read off the reception of such cultural forms from their organization, financing, and presentation. The specific project of The Way We Were is to connect past with present by stimulating local and personal memory and involvement. The title itself may indicate how far such memories are themselves structured by national meanings and agencies. And whilst the 'we' may create a sense of Wiganers' collective past, it is also part of the ways in which the past and 'England' are produced and reproduced in contemporary Britain. For Hewison and for many left culturalists, this title
evokes negative associations - the reactionary populism of Thatcher's speeches or the distracting nostalgia for a golden age. Nevertheless there are crucial differences between the nationally promoted, tourist-oriented Jorvik centre which reconstructs a very distant past, and an enterprise like The Way We Were with its local orientation and funding and concern with a (recent) past that is known (albeit in a variety of ways”) by the people to whom it is addressed. The community has some purchase on this history - through memory and family stories, through its visible persistence in the surrounding area, and through the parallels between Wigan in 1900, in the 1930s (as mediated by Orwell), and in the present crisis. Wigan Pier does attempt to help reinvigorate the local economy but it is also concerned with a revival of community awareness and local pride. Although it is possible to see it as 'cashing in' on 'heritage', this is not 'National Heritage' and a spuriously unifying 'Englishness'. Rather, it is a product of the divisions in contemporary Britain; an assertion of a distinctive, shared identity for local working-class people in the face of deindustrialization, the north-south divide, attacks on (Labour) local government, and an undisguised contempt for the northern unemployed. Despite the dangers of American hyper-realism, and the absence of clear political focus, the exhibition at Wigan Pier should not be dismissed as mere spectacle or ideological recuperation. There is an attempt to show the totality of the lives of the people and, through various kinds of participation, to experience them as involvement, not as voyeurism or archaeology. Compared with stately homes, cathedrals, thatched cottages, pressed flowers, and horse-brasses, the iconography of northern industrial towns has not yet achieved mythical status. Still, as The Heritage Industry shows, as the Conservative Government deindustrializes and international capital disinvests, even these areas are increasingly open to the promotion of nostalgia via brass bands, Lowry's paintings, cloth caps, clogs, and real beer. In the face of such current representations in the culture as a whole (through TV, advertisements, and so on), the danger is that 'the way we were' pushes struggle, exploitation, and hardship into a long-gone period. A particular view and version of this past is constructed as buildings are cleaned, cobbledstones laid, bridges painted, and gardens planted. Essential elements of the way it was to live and work in those towns are elided, in favour of the bright colours of TV history and Hovis ads. And there is a danger that in a few years' time the whole corridor from Liverpool to Leeds will survive only as a vast museum, a memorial to a redundant heritage.

It is, however, important to remember that this exhibition is about Wigan and for the locality; for people who know from their own continuing experience, as well as from memory, that 'heritage' is not rose-tinted when it comes to mining accidents, outside lavatories, women's hard labour, and a brief, compensatory holiday in Blackpool (all represented in the exhibition). The 'narrative' of the museum takes the visitor round in the footsteps of an earlier generation, recognizing that the brief trip to 'pleasure' is contained by the rigours of work and everyday survival in an impoverished environment. The stark contrast between the two worlds is clearly registered and one is reminded that the Wigan Pier joke itself acts as a bridging device for the exhibition and as an index of the functions of humour (and pleasure) within the culture of working-class
communities, in 1988 as much as in 1900. 'Life itself, or the feel of it, is central to the aims of the Wigan exhibition which is always working on the borderline between entertainment and history, exploring the dualism of the pier and the pit. Despite clean-air acts and urban renewal, this view of the 'reality' of Wigan is still sufficiently accurate to enable connections between past and present to be made, and to resist sentimentality - especially for the local visitors, for whom the exhibition is designed. The danger of a Disneyland effect has been noted by the organizers (as well as by cultural critics) but they consider it a risk worth taking to add a lively and pleasurable dimension to an investigation of local, people's history. The temptation to sneer at the waxworks and the 'consumerism' itself derives from a specific kind of educational and class experience. And it is a characteristic response to popular entertainment that has little to do with the distortion of history and anxiety about national decline. It is the old bourgeois embarrassment or outrage when faced by 'vulgarity'. Moreover, nostalgia for cobbles, clogs, and cotton mills, for walking days and temperance bars, has more appeal for exiles in the south, or for advertisers and regional tourist authorities. The Way We Were offers different positions to different 'readers', both in its openness as a 'text' and in its emphasis on prompting memory and enabling a variety of responses. Perhaps for local people the exhibition is too close to their lives for either idealization (the good old days) or irony (a postmodernist pastiche of Workers' Playtime). If there is an element of nostalgia, it is in the greater precision of a sense of loss, an excessive longing for home, not the mystifications of the Heritage business. In contrast to such 'local' readings, the middle-class outsider may have a very different sense of the exhibition, varying, according to his/her politics, from 'historical tourism' to a postmodernist Fun House. In the former reading, The Way We Were is a kind of failed museum of labour history, drawing on some elements of 'people's history' (history seen from below, local in emphasis, concerned with everyday life and with people's experience at its centre) but omitting crucial elements of working-class politics and forms of resistance. The theatrical and 'play' elements are thus perceived as constructing a trip back in time, a spectacle sealed off from the present. And indeed the connections we are invited to make are primarily at the emotional rather than the intellectual level: make 'em laugh, make 'em cry but make 'em think} (And as for changing people's thinking; . .)

Despite this problem, as I have been arguing, it is impossible to be sure how an exhibition such as The Way We Were is perceived and used by its majority audience. Perhaps we should put more trust in the potentiality for critical understanding that may be generated when people visit their own history (as opposed to other people's history in the great museums and stately homes). There are dangers in attributing a kind of 'authorship' to commercial imperatives or Thatcherite policies, with the result that the new museums are assumed to have unified - and inevitably reactionary - effects. We are not all Orwells, journeying to an alien place and people, and returning with shocking revelations. The solution is not to close down the museums and let 'Art' flourish, but to politicize the museums by making them (even more) historical.
NOTES

4 J. Tagg, 'Should art historians know their place?', *New Formations* 1 (Spring 1987), 95-
The end-of-the-pier show became a tradition. As holidays have moved on, the end-of-the-pier show and the piers themselves have become much less popular. Various attempts have been made to preserve them and there are a few still in existence, e.g. this one in Cromer (Norfolk). So, the expression End of the pier show just refers to any light entertainment that is intended for pure amusement. 