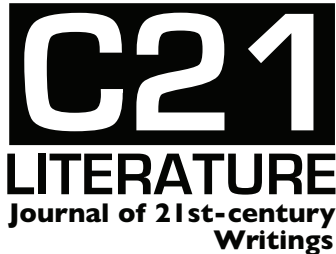




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Review

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REVIEW

Trimm, Ryan. *Heritage and the Legacy of the Past in Contemporary Britain*. Routledge. 2018

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The footnote to the Preface of Ryan Trimm’s rich and rewarding book acknowledges a resonant omission. Space restrictions dictate that Trimm focus on “British governmental policies and English examples” at the expense of “the particularities of Welsh and Scottish *heritage*.” (Note that Trimm insists on italicizing his key term throughout the book, the better to emphasise its figurative nature.) Leaving aside the unclaimed lacuna here – that is, Northern Irish heritage – the focus on English case studies, whatever the reasons for it, makes a certain kind of sense in 2019. Critics in both the popular media and the academy have located at the heart of the Brexit narrative a dominant vision of English nationhood or, as Satnam Virdee and Brendan McGeever express it, “a politicization of Englishness.” Voters’ motivations to leave the EU were varied and complex, of course, but there is little doubt the romantic, reactionary idea of an England that, in David Marquand’s words, “is a special, exemplary, even providential nation, set apart from others” exerted a powerful pull. And what a temporal mess we got ourselves into: widespread dissatisfaction with the present led to a vision of a glorious future reliant upon nostalgia for a mythical past. Watching the news just before the vote, I found particularly striking, not to mention depressing, the comments of two pensioners from my home county of Essex: “It’ll be like the good old days.”

Against this background, a monograph on political and cultural representations of British (primarily English) heritage feels not only timely but vital. “Brexit” is a slippery signifier, connected in myriad ways to perceptions of the past in terms dictated

by multiple subject positions within the present. For Trimm, “heritage,” likewise, is “a mobile metaphor,” productively overdetermined and yet ubiquitous enough for its metaphorical nature often to go unnoticed, one which connotes what the past bequeaths to the present and what we choose to treasure from the past, but also tells us about ideologies of nation and culture in the present through the value we choose to attribute to selected elements from the past. Thus “*heritage* is far more an active process of the present, a striking of relation with some particular past,” and Trimm’s fascinating study “a history of the present through an articulation of a particular line of relation to the past.” Communities self-articulate through the cataloguing of both material and intangible elements from the past – thatched cottages, cathedrals, the smell of bread, or a fondly-remembered mist rising above a country stream. What these elements add up to, Trimm argues, is *heritage*, which is itself ineffable, consisting of auras and affects rather than anything clearly definable.

Paying due attention to its mobility, and thus its political usefulness, Trimm convincingly argues that heritage has been an especially powerful idea since the 1970s. In chapters 6 and 7 he shows that it has variously functioned as a conservative bulwark against postwar social changes, and thus as a marker of a glorious past imperiled; as a commodity or “economic engine,” ripe for privatization under the Major government, and thus as a driver for one of Britain’s most successful industries – tourism. Trimm’s analysis, lucid and informed throughout, is especially revealing in chapters 8 and 9 when it comes to the evolution of heritage under New Labour. While quite happy to continue yoking heritage to profit, Blair’s government proposed, in a bid to dissociate itself from the backward-looking Conservative years, a vision of British culture that looked to the future and was defined by innovation and youthful enterprise. Unsurprisingly, it was a vision riddled with inconsistencies: a Demos report published in 1997 hailed the “brand equity” enabled by British “tradition.” Heritage, in Trimm’s terms a “metacultural” concept which “emphasizes culture as culture,” is about cataloguing and preservation, but also about marketing a constructed sense of a shared national identity (and this is perhaps where the dominance of *Englishness* in such constructions is especially egregious). So when New

Labour pushed a supposedly more inclusive vision of a multicultural, palimpsestic “historic environment,” as opposed to a “heritage landscape,” slippage between the terms inevitably still occurred, despite efforts to avoid the “disinheritances leveled by heritage rhetoric.” The continued desire to market that environment led to implied hierarchies: some areas were simply more marketable than others, and yet all relied on reductive notions of a homogenous group character. Trimm demonstrates that a supposedly shared identity can be characterized both by tradition and innovation, by the ancient and the modern, and that it relies to a great degree on ideological blindness to the inequities and divisions within it.

What makes Trimm’s arguments so interesting and ultimately so persuasive is the range of texts he examines. Alongside his astute analysis of government documents and reports by English Heritage and various conservation groups, he pays close attention to cultural productions such as the 1981 television adaptation of *Brideshead Revisited*, the 1993 Merchant Ivory production of *The Remains of the Day*, Julian Barnes’ 1988 novel *England, England* and, in connection with New Labour’s attempted transformations of heritage in a multicultural Britain, Zadie Smith’s 2000 novel *White Teeth*. In so doing, Trimm shows how cultural texts sometimes reproduce and frequently resist dominant political and economic constructions of heritage and also, importantly, how they come to be regarded as elements of heritage themselves, whatever their political orientations.

Though it is conceptually dense and follows a deconstructive logic which is occasionally challenging, *Heritage and the Legacy of the Past* is beautifully written, as well as demonstrating an outstanding grasp of its materials and offering a compelling account of how heritage, long a powerful driver of policy and culture, has changed over time. Above all, it is timely: as the United Kingdom lurches toward an uncertain future, one wonders what the Brexit legacy will be and what uses our past will be put to when the future finally arrives.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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