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The meaning of heritage.

Heritage always requires interpretation.

Interpretation is the practice of explanation of cultural and heritage production whether objects, places or representations. It is about the production of meaning.

Interpretation is central to arts, cultural and heritage practices

The meaning of heritage; be it cultural practices, art, national monuments; heritage always required to be interpreted and communicated. Meaning has always to be given, it is not inherent. This meaning is always problematic and inherently controversial. It will be, and ought to be, contested.

Interpretation, therefore, is central to managing heritage resources.

This talk will give an historical overview of the modern concept of heritage, and what meaning has been attached to that concept.

Heritage originally a part of the aristocratic lifestyle. Heritage meant inheritance and wills and the law and taxation. It also meant an inherited collection of ancestors and all that they left behind in the form of buildings, paintings, archives, furniture.

The French Revolution is the origin for the modern concept of heritage.

Joseph Lakanal (1762-1845)

Elected to the National Convention of the French Republic 1792.

Member of the Committee of Public Instruction.

The Louvre Palace held the royal art collection, which included the art collection of Charles 1 of England, acquired by Louis XIV after his execution in the English Civil Wars.

The Louvre was threatened by a wave of iconoclasm sweeping across Paris, and also by mounting levels of theft as collectors snapped up masterpieces. In medieval rebellion the objective was to destroy the records and houses of the aristocracy, and this was now happening in France.

Lakanal, in June 1793, denounced this iconoclastic fury and demanded that the State protect art as a national heritage and use it as a resource for patriotic education. Lakanal was already working on what became the first system of state-funded national education and remains the basis of the French education system to today.

The revolution confiscated the chateaux and paintings and furniture of the King, of the church and of the aristocracy as they were executed; ownership was transferred from royalty, the Church and the aristocracy, to the Nation. With the transfer of ownership came a new meaning that was now mediated by the revolutionary state: the hated symbols of dominance by the church and aristocracy were turned into a national heritage and the state became the patron and protector of that heritage. Icons of privilege became icons of national patrimony. Something that the French should love and take a pride in.

The Louvre Palace was turned into the Muséum Central des Arts de la République. A National Museum should be a sanctuary where people come to elevate their understanding of beauty. Museums are sites where they would learn to become virtuous citizens.

Museums became fundamental institution of the modern state, their meaning is to educate, to display and interpret national heritage, and to express national identity. Cultural heritage that formerly expressed aristocratic taste was now transformed into an expression of national consciousness. The State controlled that transformation and interpretation. It claimed to be the custodian and provider of official historical content to the public. When the trophies of the Napoleonic Empire were added the Louvre became also an expression of French imperialism, in

which exotic objects were interpreted as evidence of French grandeur and as the conquests of the French nation.

As the universalist ideology and slogans of the French revolution came into Ireland their meaning was transformed and localised; Liberty meant liberty from English rule, Equality meant equality for Catholics and Fraternity meant the brotherhood of Catholic Protestant and Dissenter. In the aftermath of 1798 the Act of Union incorporated Ireland into the British State. It was expected that Ireland would, in time, become assimilated into, and identify with, British culture.

Nineteenth century Irish nationalism developed in resistance to this cultural assimilation that promoted Britishness as a civilizing process. The ownership and interpretation of Irish history and heritage would be central to this resistance. In fact, as Eugene Kamenka as noted, ‘historical consciousness formed the basis of all modern nationalism’. Young Ireland accused the British of deliberately erasing Irish history in an act of imperial dominance, and that the task was to ‘foster a public opinion in Ireland and make it racy of the soil’. Exemplified by the Young Ireland group and promoted in the pages of their newspaper the Nation, the objective was to cultivate an Irish historical consciousness based on a narrative of resistance and endurance from the first arrival of the anglo-Normans. The claim to independence was to be based on cultural and historic arguments rather than the Universalist arguments of the French revolution.

The Nation newspaper popularised the work of the Irish Archaeological Society, founded in 1840, that proved that Ireland before the arrival of the Anglo-Normans, was a highly developed civilization and not in a state of savagery.

They founded in 1845 the Celtic Society ‘to preserve the evidence and landmarks of a distinct nationality by means of a more enlarged cultivation of the language, history, antiquities, etc., of Ireland.

The centrality of early Christian Ireland to Irish heritage and identity was established in his period. Reference High Crosses, The Tara Brooch, Ardagh Chalice, Broighter Hoard (1890s) as symbols of Irish Nationality. The National Museum, opened in 1890, displays and interprets a national identity.

1869: Church Disestablishment created the category of national monument”
Glendalough, Clonmacnoise, Cashel, Monasterboice.

Nineteenth-century Irish nationalism, therefore, demanded to an extreme degree a thorough knowledge and appreciation of Irish history as an affirmation of patriotism. A political context gives meaning to heritage: Educate-That You May Be Free.

The political role of the past is woven through the 1916 Proclamation and carried into the new independent state.

Department of Education Notes for History teachers, 1937.

In an Irish school in which History is properly taught, the pupils will learn that they are citizens of no mean country, that they belong to a race that has a noble tradition of heroism and persistent loyalty to ideals. In such a school no formal exhortation should be necessary to bring home to every pupil the worth of good faith, courage and endurance, and that a race that has survived a millennium of grievous struggle and persecution must possess qualities that are a guarantee of a great future.

It may have seemed therefore that the history of Ireland had now realised its meaning in an independent state. The need for a past that is useable meant that the independent state required a new history and one fitted to the job of state-building. What was required was a history that celebrated the new 26-county state as the achievement of our national identity.

The result was a state-sponsored official history, where partition was irrelevant and the 26-county state and Ireland are the same, and national identity is with that State. State sponsored modes of remembering gave 1916 a meaning shaped by an ideology of legitimacy. Commemoration of 1916 were military displays and happened at the behest of the state.

This was not without opposition and was always problematic. The civil war made the heritage of 1916 divisive. Its meaning was bitterly contested and is never straightforward. It is only with difficulty could it be accepted that the Irish Free State be the embodiment of the National Purpose and as the realisation of National Values. The State meanwhile looked on any autonomous expression of Nationalism with suspicion. In 1926 Anti-Treaty republicans staged their own commemoration in Glasnevin Cemetery, in 1935 the Fianna Fail government did not invite the Cumann na nGaedheal opposition to the ceremony of the unveiling of the Cuchulainn statue in the GPO, meanwhile the IRA continued to hold its own commemorations in Glasnevin. That we have some of the material culture of 1916 on display in the National Museum is thanks to Helen Gifford-Donnelly, and not the state.

Between 1971 and 2006 the commemorations of 1916 were muted, embarrassed even.

As an aside: when we categorise something as Heritage it has two consequences:

Where arts and heritage are budgeted together, by deciding to commit spending to heritage preservation we reduce funding to art creation.

Secondly, we assume that the future generations will be grateful that we have preserved this inheritance, which will require continuous commitment to its maintenance. Heritage is always added to, it is never reduced (nothing is ever “unheritaged”).

What did the medieval world think to preserve from its past?

Relics of saints and of kings. Icons. Sources of miraculous power. Certainly not buildings or artefacts. Rome and roman Europe was left to decay. Much of this heritage of the medieval period was lost in the Reformation.

But in 1500 the 1200 year old basilica of St Peter built by the Emperor Constantine was demolished to clear the ground for the building of the modern St Peters. 1200 years of Christian heritage swept aside.

A well-established way in which States also claims ownership and control of the meaning of history is through monuments and marking buildings in the urban landscape. Thus, Dublin under the Union acquired an imperial urban streetscape through monuments. Displacing, or removing such monuments is an exercise in giving a new national meaning to the urban streetscape. Uncertainty at the meaning of 1916 is reflected in the passivity of the government to the meaning of the urban streetscape. We do not see a determined de-colonisation in street names, in symbols.

King William (1701) bombed repeatedly, but the Fusiliers Arch on Stephens Green (1907) has been accepted. O’Connell street, dominated by the Nelson Column, was nationalised and given new meanings by the monuments to O’Connell, Parnell, and Larkin. (Joshua Dawson 1660-1725) Dawson street, Anne Street, Duke street 1705-6.

2016: An interesting shift in the meaning of 1916:

The state as custodian and provider of official historical content, reliant on academic validation, was less important than the way that lots of people, animated by an intense historical awareness, constructed new meanings for 1916: locality, children, women, workers, the local experience beyond Dublin. This democratisation of history is to be welcomed as it reflects an engagement by the people to how history is told and the determination within social groups and communities to take control of interpretation and to debate the meaning of 1916 and all that followed. History becomes what it ought to be, a field of unresolved struggle for meaning.

Where does Moore Street fit in?

Sites of 1916:

1st Batt., The Four Courts & Mendicity Institution.

2nd Batt., Jacob's biscuit factory.

3rd Batt., Bolands Bakery. (Clanwilliam House)

4th Batt South Dublin Union.

Irish Citizen Army, Stephens Green.

HQ, The GPO. (we have the GPO, Richmond Barracks, Kilmainham, Arbour Hill)

The story of Moore street, a market, where does it fit in?

I suggest the story of ordinary Dubliners in the middle of revolution and suppression:

Quote Pearse surrender message: In order to prevent the further slaughter of the civil population....