

## ***Exploring the boundaries – what do we mean by the historic environment today?***

**Ruth Wishart**

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I'd like to start by apologising for not being able to appear today on video. I hope you'll forgive me for having to turn up in person. Seriously, I'd like to begin with a look at two rather different contemporary events.

The first, last week, saw five thousand people turn out in a typically dreich Scottish September Day to watch a large number of men in fancy dress. Some of them were with horses which were rather more modestly attired. The men in question were enthusiasts of battle re-enactments and they were putting on a public re-run of the battle of Bannockburn. It wasn't, by all accounts, your all singing all dancing Mel Gibson number. And there were one or two snags at this event not apparent in 1314. In the original, Robert the Bruce and his horsebox mercifully failed to get struck in motorway traffic. This time round The Bruce managed to make the main event though not the dress rehearsal. Just as well perhaps. He sounds like the kind of chap who might have picked up a pre game injury. But for the fearless five thousand spectators it was a special chunk of their national history worth commemorating, not least since it was one of those rare occasions when the Scots team saw off a representative line up from them down there. Quite clearly Bannockburn still has a resonance for contemporary Scots within striking distance of its 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Who says this nation ever gives up on its grudge matches.

Like most countries we suffer from advanced selective amnesia in such matters, recalling with chest swelling pride the derring do of our ancestry, while drawing a discreet veil over those historical reverses painstakingly researched by Professor Smout and his colleagues, and just as painstakingly airbrushed out of our communal folk memories. (For those kinds of reasons you will find Scottish based broadcasting organisations able to lay their hands at a moments notice on clips from the salient portions of Scotland v England at Wembley in 1967 the year in which, as all Scots learn at the parental knee, Scotland became world champions by dint of thrashing the 1966 world cup winners 3 goals to two).

The other event I want to highlight takes place just over two weeks from now when the Queen will return to Edinburgh formally to open the Enric Miralles building now to be the home of the Holyrood parliament. You may just have noticed an occasional small reference to the cost of this building in the national press. You may just have noticed that this extraordinary slice of the contemporary built environment has enjoyed the benefit of Scotland's other national sport in full flight – world class serial girning. Were it an Olympic event we would surely have added to the gold medal tally from Athens.

It is my fervent hope that October 9<sup>th</sup> will mark a watershed in how this country views its new parliament. I had the privilege of touring this building when it was still in mid construction. I thought then that it would be a wonderful legacy for generations to come and that conviction has only been reinforced as the Miralles vision finally emerged from the building site. Now Scotland's capital has a Royal Mile triumphantly flanked by an ancient castle and a modern seat of government.

My prediction is that the latter will prove as enduring an attraction to visitors as the castle continues to be.

It's interesting to reflect that this last weekend 1000 visitors came every day to see the Holyrood building, even although the tours have not yet started and they were only able to see the visitors centre and look inside the main chamber. This is hopefully just a taste of the interest levels to come. And how much more acceptable for Scots to burst with pride at housing one of the most remarkable new buildings in the world, than to continue a high pitched whine about the manner in which it came into being. It is given to very few generations in very few countries to be godparents to a national parliament building and so far as this journalist is concerned October the 9<sup>th</sup> is the day to put away the vinegar and wheel out the champagne.

So, An old battle, and a new parliament building ... two bookends, if you like, encompassing the vast range of that complicated and contentious business we call our heritage. Two emblems of what the past has bequeathed us, and what we can bequeath the future.

The endlessly replayed 14<sup>th</sup> century battle is part of what, for good or ill, has shaped our identity and our destiny. One of those seminal moments which, rightly or wrongly, contributes to our collective sense of ourselves. This visionary building, with luck, will also shape the nation we can become, bringing confidence and architectural chutzpah to a landscape often marred by small mindedness and insularity.

For cherishing our heritage surely must engage us in looking forward as well as back. In a country with a superb engineering pedigree it was hugely exciting to see the construction of the Falkirk Wheel, in its peerless ingenuity a modern echo of the native skills which rendered the Forth rail bridge one of the wonders of the technical world.

Yet equally, celebrating native innovation, means a duty of care to those industries whose time has been. Ensuring they are not forgotten in the rush to tomorrow's world. I very much doubt that in 2150 anyone will find it necessary to set up a memorial to the call centre or the drive through burger bar.

So when we talk about our heritage we are talking about where we came from, what made us who we are, our social history as well as the physical evidence of our dwelling spaces and our public architecture.

It is essential that our children learn how mining and our fast shrinking fishing communities offered not just a very particular and courageous way of harvesting Scotland's natural assets, but how that shared experience also shaped communal values and gave rise to a very positive brand of inter dependence. It's important that the children from the age of screen based design are given a proper sense of just why Clydebuilt, for generations, became synonymous with world class shipbuilding.

Part of their inheritance is the story of how the Clyde became the gold standard, in terms of creating liners which would imperiously cross the oceans. Building those seaborne icons which quite literally became the flagships for Scottish craftsmanship. The legacy of those days also illuminates how those very specially gifted people in the Clydeside yards were themselves crafted. Made from girders, and just as durable.

Clydebank, the town which has suffered direct hits from both the Luftwaffe and market forces is a fine example of a part of Scotland which doesn't want to wallow in its past, but understands that need to celebrate and interpret it. The need to tell its children that while they will dream different dreams from those who watched the majestic results of their special skills race down the slipway, they can still imbibe

the creative excitement of those days. Still inherit the legacy as a foundation stone for pursuing the ambitions of a different age. One prospective plan under consideration in Clydebank will see the names of these ships etched in a public square, an echo of the recent past incorporated in the everyday lives of the present.

It is important of course that we find ways of honouring these contributions without allowing backward glances to impede our view of future imperatives. Yet sometimes the best of the newly built environment finds ways of marrying contemporary innovation to the desire to acknowledge the contributions of the past. Scotland's architects are increasingly confident as marriage brokers of ancient and modern, as witness buildings like the Kilncraigs Mills in Alloa with its imposing glass atrium fronting the traditional interior.

The need of local communities to touch their roots in this way must, in my view, remain an integral part of determining the historic environment. For local roots and local achievements often have a bigger story to tell the wider world.

Just at the moment, as a very mature student in the Open University, I'm studying a course including the work of social pioneer Robert Owen. How much more alive that vision of Owen's has become in being able to visit the world heritage site at New Lanark, and how gratifying to learn that there has been new funding made available for building maintenance so that the children of the 21<sup>st</sup> century might learn that until the intervention of men like Owen and Wilberforce very young children were merely cheap labour in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>.

Yet in the harsh fiscal realities of the modern market place, the historic environment must constantly find new ways to thrive and survive. I mourn the loss of the museum not many miles from here where the story was told of the pivotal role the Springburn community played in the development of the railway network. And I suspect very many people here are unaware that among the heritage centres within a short commuting distance from this city is Summerlea in Coatbridge, a means by which the children of that community can learn how central their slice of Scotland was to the steel trade.

Social history, of course, is just one aspect of the task we face in determining how Scotland interprets its past and builds for its future. Social history complements other imperatives: the need to cherish and preserve what is architecturally or historically unique in our built environment.

And it's essential, of course it is, to look at the merits of some 1300 plus buildings which have become endangered through neglect or decline. But we have to look at the case for them in the context of a country which already boasts seven and a half thousand monuments considered of national significance and almost 50 thousand listed buildings.

We have to look at them too, through the eyes of all Scotland's communities and listen to the stated priorities of people who may well need professional advice about their built heritage in the academic and technical sense, but want no lectures from well meaning strangers about what they should consider important and what they should want to preserve.

For the historic environment of today is not only iconic or architecturally important buildings, as HEACS itself acknowledges, extending the definition of heritage beyond seminal ancient monuments and archaeologically vital sites to all manner of other landscapes not excluding contents and moveable objects. And the definition encompasses that part of our heritage which nourishes Scotland's soul; that part which allows us to celebrate the linguistic, literary and musical treasure troves we are fortunate enough to have on our doorstep.

Some of these are well established. Ayrshire's Burns trail now with a flourishing annual festival as the cherry on that cultural cake.

Some of these are only partially exploited in terms of allowing visitors to explore the hinterland of towering figures like Scott and Mackintosh.

Some of these are yet to be taken full advantage of the sense of place which inspired other later poetic giants like George Mackay Brown, Norman McCaig and Iain Chrichton Smith.

The awesome scenery of this country which fuelled the creativity of artists across the generations as diverse as the Glasgow Boys and Girls and the Scottish Colourists. Those parts of Scotland which had a particular resonance for Turner, McCullough and McTaggart, Melville and Eardley.

Research into tourism suggests that two out of three visitors who come here have two or three historical sites on their lists. Their journey begins with a desire to make a personal connection with particular places. And in a sporting context, golfers who come here certainly have two or three historical sites on their list.

Why not then expand the cultural infrastructure so that we marry the story of our creativity to the spaces and places which have provided the vital spark of inspiration. Why not extend that environmental audit to explore the full potential of the men and women who pioneered scientific, medical and technological innovation and invention. The Bells and the Logie Bairds, the Kelvins and the Garret Andersons. Do we really give our visitors a fully accessible insight into how and where they worked and why they mattered.

Tourism, of course, brings its own tensions. Too many in the wrong place for the wrong length of time can threaten the very ecology of the building or landscape which first attracted them. With modern marketing must come careful husbandry. As with all things what matters is balance. The need to preserve and protect the great homes of Scotland must be balanced with the requirement to base such claims on evidence not just of need, but of uniqueness and longer term sustainability.

One of the reasons the Heritage Lottery Fund took a long hard look at both their criteria and wider involvement, was I suspect because it wanted to stamp on the widespread suspicion in some quarters that it was principally running a home improvement scheme for toffs. But then such simplistic perceptions only survive and thrive when an organisation fails to engage its public in conversation or put in place the right degree of transparency. Or when one or two less than honourable applicants are thought to have taken advantage of the public purse for entirely private benefit.

From time to time in Scotland we have fevered debates about the imperatives to save certain buildings from terminal decay, or to preserve those already beyond habitation as footprints in national history. These are important debates to have, in that they make us think through what is truly valuable, and on what basis we determine that value. They're important because honest discussion is healthy: putting information into the public domain is healthy.

Looking at likely outcomes of investment is healthy because any organisation wants to make the best possible use of funds which will always be dwarfed by demand. But sometimes there is a feeling that the debate is taking place not exactly behind doors closed to public scrutiny, but among a small and largely self selecting cast list.

Debates about the historic environment need professional and expert input. But professionals and experts need to know that the wider community has a locus in

that debate too, and a right of access to them just as important as any right to roam in the physical sense.

I imagine that HEACS is not entirely unhappy that their role is to think strategically, rather than to plead for or reject individual campaigns for specific projects. But it's always useful to remind ourselves that people look at buildings and the case for their retention and renewal through the prism of personal experience. People whose families once dined in style at an historic mansion now in need of protective care will have a different brand of nostalgia to those whose forebears lit the fires at 6am and polished the dining room table.

This is not a plea for some kind of class warfare to be inserted into the heritage debate, just a pragmatic acceptance that one man's historical priority may be another's comparative irrelevance. So when we look at what we could and should preserve we have to take a rounded view. A view of historical significance, a view of architectural merit; a view of whether the project in question offers a unique piece of Scotland's jigsaw. A view of the level of esteem in which the building or landmark is held, not just by those who once owned it, but by those in the wider community in which it stands. Only a barbarian would let the old rot in order to fund the new, but a not dissimilar sin is to view antiquity as having intrinsically superior merit regardless of the property and regardless of its role in our social and national history.

A couple of years ago I was privileged to take part in the exercise to choose which British city would be the UK nominee for European Capital of Culture in 2008. I took particular pleasure in joining the judging panel as a Glaswegian, and someone therefore who had already revelled in their home town being a title holder. But as we went round the cities and regions concerned I was forcibly struck by the number of church buildings which had undergone a radical transformation and acquired a secular persona. At one point I did have the irreverent thought that there must be a niche market book entitled 101 uses for a dead church. But in fact these churches were not dead. They were indoor climbing facilities, art galleries, concert halls, and, in one spectacular example in Bristol, a circus school. They were all still giving service to the community in which they were housed. Sometimes the most useful tool in preservation and regeneration is a talent for lateral thought.

I come here today, very obviously, as an outsider. Someone who lacks the professional and academic experience to make a rounded judgement for instance on the question of listed buildings. But I have to tell you that my ignorance is widespread. Many people would like to understand more about why one building is considered inherently superior to another. Many people might wonder if the cause of aestheticism is best served by preserving facades destined for a lonely life as a frontage for years on end before a suitable marriage partner emerges. And it's important that we do more to put information about that kind of thing into the public domain. Otherwise people will assume the whole business is some kind of private club where only the members know the rules, and application forms for joining are not readily available.

We need to tell people more precisely what is available in grants, and from whom, and try to work towards a one stop shop where people can understand quite clearly who gives what and why, and how to become eligible. We need to bring together everyone who has a locus in celebrating and protecting our heritage, especially those in the voluntary sector whose main currency is often passion and commitment.

Sometimes many of us in the media can be quite sniffy about organisations set up to protect and cherish the built environment. Sometimes there are occasions when we suspect they don't much care for anything that arrived after 1900. Sometimes some societies can give the impression that they're the folks who like to say NO.

But one of the most chilling books I ever read was an account of how Glasgow let its Victorian heritage be vandalised because the perceived needs of traffic movement were allowed to take precedence over an irreplaceable architectural heritage. When I think of that. When I drive through Charing Cross under a flyover housing one of the ugliest structures in Christendom on top, I remind myself that there is a crucial role for voluntary sector bodies who will stand up and shout the odds when it matters. They too need to be part of the debate, and part of the decision making process.

What links all of these issues is the continuing relevance of a sense of place and history to the people of Scotland as a whole; not just to those who toil on their administrative behalf, or those who ultimately make and take the decisions which will impact on the legacy we leave tomorrow.

Sometimes that sense of place will be most vividly represented by a building, and sometimes that building may not be what we think of as a conventional monument.

Sometimes it will be conveyed by a public recognition of a community's role in the changing industrial and commercial landscape of Scotland...the skills learned and sometimes lost, the sacrifices made, the pride taken in the fact that your part of Scotland made a unique contribution to the planet of which it is such a tiny part.

Of course all of us are to some extent hybrids, but that only makes our roots the more interesting. I grew up in this city in a house with the name Kennoway on the gate. It came from the small village in Fife whence my paternal grandfather had come when he emigrated to the wild west to find his fortune. That nameplate took me to Fife as a young woman, anxious to see the village whose memories had been transplanted but not extinguished. It gave me an understanding of another facet of my Scottish culture, and a second sense of time and place.

Because ultimately all heritage is intensely personal. When the Canadian writer Michael Ignatieff travelled to the land of his forebears...Lithuania, he made the journey as a man impatient with those who dwelt too lovingly, as he saw it, in that other country which is the past. And then he stood by his grandfather's grave. And suddenly he understood with an involuntary rush of emotion why who we are is inextricably bound up in where we came from.

The title of this conference, exploring the boundaries, asks us to examine what we mean by the historic environment today. I think we have come to understand the huge complexity of that tapestry, into which are woven the family strands of a nation with a richly diverse cultural and social heritage. But there is one common thread which binds those who live here to those prompted to visit here: the historic environment is that to which we look the better to understand ourselves.

It may be the most wonderful new parliament building celebrating the return of an ancient legislature interrupted by history. Or it may be an interpretation of an ancient battle wrapped in as much popular mythology as historical accuracy. If it touches us. If it teaches us. If it involves us, then it does its job.