

Cultural Studies Review
volume 16 number 2 September 2010
<http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/csrij/index>
pp. 290–313
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‘A Kind of Critique that Works by Allegorising’

An Interview with Patrick Wright¹

NOEL KING

MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY

NOEL KING: Could we start by having you say something about the book you’ve just completed?² I gather it’s, at least in part, a history of ‘the iron curtain’.

PATRICK WRIGHT: I began with the idea of investigating the Iron Curtain as a political metaphor that had shaped the second half of the twentieth century. I started out believing, like Donald Rumsfeld, Tony Blair and almost everyone else, that this grimly symbolic apparatus was first lowered into the world in 1946 and then lifted with comparable suddenness when the Berlin Wall was breached in 1989. So I went to the assumed place of origin, Fulton in Missouri, where Churchill gave his famous speech, and the plot started to unravel from there.

Fulton is a fairly typical small town in the Midwest: you can get at least halfway there by imagining a brick-paved Main Street and a courthouse, paling fences and wide-porched timber houses, some of them considerable mansions on large, tree-covered plots. Yet it turned out also to be a place of memorialisation and international pilgrimage, devoted to the considerable cult that has since been made of Churchill’s fleeting visit. It’s got a fairly predictable collection of statues, plaques

and an 'English' memorial garden too, but it also boasts larger structures. The town's most prominent building is a large seventeenth-century church by Christopher Wren, shipped there as a blitzed ruin from London in the 1960s. Close by stands a stretch of the Berlin Wall, imported, reassembled and converted into an artwork by Churchill's granddaughter at a later date.

Looking at these unlikely presences, and reading the speeches of the various leaders who have come to Fulton to speak out in Churchill's wake—Thatcher, Reagan, Walesa, Gorbachev—I found myself wondering what was going on. The Iron Curtain may well have been among the most influential political metaphors of the twentieth century but, as I investigated the speech and its reception, it became abundantly clear that it was only in Cold War mythology that Churchill's 'oration' could be seen as the beginning of the story. For more than forty years it suited both sides to believe this—for Stalin, the idea that the Iron Curtain was launched in Fulton made it a product of Western aggression, while in the West this 'origin' supported a symmetrical ideological accusation. I went to Fulton intending to write a book that would open with Churchill's 1946 'oration' and then proceed towards the present on a more or less chronological basis, but the inadequacy of this approach quickly became obvious. Instead, I've placed Churchill's Iron Curtain in a longer history, which suggests different questions about the Cold War decades. Rather than coming forward from Fulton, I've gone back to the eighteenth-century theatre, where 'iron curtains' were first introduced as anti-fire devices. The political metaphor emerges in 1914, launched by members of the British anti-war movement who'd once had the Liberal Party in common with Winston Churchill. These internationalists used the term to condemn the war between Britain and Germany, and then went on to apply it to the Allied blockade of Soviet Russia in 1920. So I've been writing a book about the way in which this political metaphor functioned over a longer period—it's a history that is connected to a wider theatricalisation of international politics in the twentieth century—before coming back to question the widely held belief that the 'Iron Curtain' disappeared with the Berlin Wall, with which it did indeed become so closely identified in the 1960s and '70s.

NK: What did you think of Peter Wollen's review of *Tank* in the *London Review of Books*?³ It was a piece that conveyed praise and enthusiasm, he said your book was 'fascinating', but also seemed to imply a slightly distanced disagreement.

PW: I thought it was agreeably odd, and, of course, not really a 'review' at all. When we met a year or two after his article was published, he commended the stained glass tanks in my book—the ones that are to be found in memorial windows installed in British churches at the end of World War I. I couldn't figure out whether he was really interested in the wider project.

I opened with the well-known image from Beijing, 1989—the moment immediately after the massacre in Tiananmen Square, when a single Chinese protestor heroically arrested a whole column of tanks by standing in front of them as they tried to pass along Cangan Boulevard. I did so because I wanted to investigate the symbolic powers of this normally overwhelming machine, and to establish that these were neither a matter only of prehistory and the largely fictional inspiration of the very early prototypes, nor of a secondary 'reading' in which the tank is exploited as an 'image' or sign. Writing with a civilian's eye, I wanted to investigate how the tank had come to exist as a terrifying representative of state power that, as I found out, was first engineered out of Edwardian British fantasy. But I also wanted to show how the so-called 'moral effect' of the tank on onlookers remained an essential part of its military utility throughout its history, and surely not just in the early years when the machine was still technologically primitive and had little more than its forceful and unexpected appearance to go on.

I wrote the book at the end of the Cold War and in a period when people were still talking of beating swords into ploughshares. I remember being impressed by the sight of a scrap yard full of old tanks in what is now Slovakia and, a year or so later in 1993, visiting the tank gunnery ranges at Lulworth in Dorset to watch the British army blowing up surplus tanks in front of Russian observers, in accordance with the new Conventional Armed Forces in Europe treaty. I suppose my book was also informed by that optimistic climate—a post-Cold War attempt to dismantle the tank, or to 'convert' it back into its cultural components.

NK: What specific problems did you encounter getting this argument into print?

PW: The project was quite hard to grasp. I remember a Polish former general looking at me quizzically and saying that, surely, a tank has nothing to do with culture, which he took to be my proper concern. Some, who had read my earlier books, thought I had gone astray, as if to write about such a machine was inevitably

to submit to macho fascination and technological pornography. Meanwhile, the hardware freaks found their own ways of being appalled by the result. Editors were torn between their own appreciation of the project and a resigned conviction that the only likely market lay firmly in the 'guns 'n ammo' camp. I had to fight quite hard to keep the chapters arguing that J.F.C. Fuller, a British pioneer of the strategy that latter became known as the blitzkrieg, was actually rephrasing his earlier description of the poetics of Aleister Crowley, the poet, occultist and scandal-ridden advocate of 'sex magic'.

NK: Did any review prove critical to the book's reception, and sales?

PW: In Britain *Tank* was assaulted early—you can often spot the spoilers by the fact that they come out before the publication date in an attempt to influence other reviewers. It got hit in the *TLS* [*Times Literary Supplement*] by the conservative military historian, John Keegan, who is the right person to have as an enemy as far as I'm concerned. While writing the book, I had phoned him to ask what he thought of the Tiananmen Square image, and he abruptly dismissed it as being 'of no military significance'.

So in a sense the book was written against that outlook and the idea that the tank is only a matter of rivets and gun tubes and clean-cut manoeuvres of the kind that military historians like to represent as sweeping arrows on maps. No room in this mentality for the tank as a dictator's podium, an emblem of state power, a raiser and breaker of morale, a crusher of civilians, a silent 'peace-keeper' or, for that matter, for the historical fact that some of the most significant tank campaigns of World War I were actually fund-raising operations conducted on the home front, in which the tank served as a travelling 'bank', using its considerable powers of compulsion as a 'patriot tank' to encourage working-class investors to buy war bonds and so on.

As an affronted gatekeeper, who would later tell me that the problem with 'culture' is that it licenses anyone to write about anything at all, John Keegan was full of irritated contempt. Indeed, he suggested it was a disgrace that Faber had seen fit to publish the book. The *Guardian* gave it to a military rivet-counter who also missed the sound of 'squealing sprockets', as I remember. But there were more intelligent reviews, including one by General Sir Michael Rose, the British soldier who had been

in charge of United Nations peace-keeping operations in Bosnia in 1994. He welcomed the book as a useful source of ammunition for anyone involved in trying to reform the military.

I was very lucky in the United States, where it came out in 2002. The *New York Times* sent it to a Canadian named Bruce McCall, a slightly surreal cartoonist who used to work for *Mad*, and who also does *New Yorker* covers, and he loved it. McCall has produced a wonderful series of drawings showing hypothetical vehicles from the 1950s—he calls them ‘the cars Detroit forgot to build’—and he understood that it was neither by accident nor incompetence that the book did not consist of hormonally driven battle narratives. He wrote a very enthusiastic review and the day it came out, I was phoned by the publisher’s publicity people who asked me about the book as if the review was the first time they had ever heard of it. As I understand it, the entire hardback edition sold in a few days: nine thousand copies went out. Then came 9/11, and the paperback, which appeared shortly afterwards, sold less than the hardback.

NK: What were your employment circumstances when you were writing your first book, *On Living in an Old Country*? You weren’t in university work, you had returned to England after doing a master’s degree in Vancouver, and I gather from some of your other publications around this time that you were working for various charities and cultural organisations. It was around this time you published *What a Way to Run a Railroad*.⁴

PW: *On Living in an Old Country* really started off as a collection of essays written in the early 1980s, when I was also working full time, mostly in the voluntary sector. I had come back to England from Canada in 1979 with absolutely no sense of what I could do, completely detached from any sort of coherent employment possibility. The book might have been a PhD dissertation had I been able to get funding. I was at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham for a year in 1979–80. I had applied there after reading *Policing the Crisis* while still in Canada, but I was in no position to sustain that connection and, although I kept in touch with the ‘popular memory’ group there for a little longer, I took my own project in different directions. We had these radical transformations going on under Margaret Thatcher, and I had dropped out of university. I’d taught English 100 courses in Canada, and I remember

thinking that there's one thing I know I can do, I can teach writing. So I was soon making a living by teaching communication skills in workplaces up and down the country.

To begin with I worked with a management training charity called the Industrial Society, since dismembered to create an endowed base for the journalist Will Hutton. I got pulled into the voluntary sector from there. At that time, I was one of the few people in the country who, by sheer accident, could combine some experience of management training with at least some familiarity with the values of mutual aid and campaigning groups. The National Council of Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) set up a management development unit, and I was asked to be the head of it.

It wasn't just a managerial indoctrination job. We were trying to clarify what the desirable organisational culture and procedures were for 'not for profit' agencies that were increasingly being drawn into state programs under the rubric of 'welfare pluralism' or, in Thatcherite language, of 'rolling back' the state. We aimed to develop an organisational culture in the voluntary sector, which enabled agencies to be both effective and in control of their relationship with state funding. A lot of organisations at that time would get involved in youth training schemes, say, and then they would rapidly become service-providing bodies and they would lose all their genuinely voluntary qualities: they would become low-cost—sometimes actually quite good but sometimes not—runners of youth employment schemes.

I did that for about five years, and while doing it I wrote *On Living in an Old Country*. The NCVO office was in Bedford Square, which happens to be conveniently placed for both the British Library, then still in the British Museum, and the University of London Library at Senate House, so the two sides of my life were quite easily reconciled in those years. *What a Way to Run a Railroad* was a provocatively incomplete pamphlet in which I, Charles Landry and others connected to Comedia (formerly the Minority Press Group), tried to argue against the often deliberate blindness that oppositional projects and publications at that time often showed to matters of management and organisation.

NK. Do you see yourself as a practitioner of 'cultural studies'?

PW: In a limited sense, yes, but only if we get over the idea that 'cultural studies' was invented at the University of Birmingham in the 1960s and '70s, and then transmitted to the American academy from there. There are other tributaries that are surely worth remembering. When I was working on the Iron Curtain, for example, I came across the work of three women who were writing in Britain during and after World War I: Vernon Lee, who, as it happens, took the iron curtain from the theatre and turned it into a political metaphor on Christmas Eve 1914, her friend Irene Cooper Willis, and their follower Caroline E. Playne. Writing as active members of the anti-war movement (they were all connected to the Union of Democratic Control), these three offered an uncompromisingly critical analysis of the ways in which the belligerent states occupied and manipulated the minds of their peoples. They paid close attention to the machinery of censorship and state propaganda, the exploitation of jingoistic forms of national patriotism, the war-sustaining closure of thought imposed through press, pulpit and other agencies. They also tried to show how liberal ideals were used to prolong the war, by turning it into a 'holy' war to end all wars.

There are all sorts of things to argue about in the various books these three published in the 1920s, but theirs was a cultural analysis of the public mind in the broad sense of that term and one that can be linked, I think, to the movement for 'clear thinking' that emerged in educational circles after World War I—a time when various individuals and groups tried to establish ways of freeing the citizenry from often nationalistically expressed distortions. Much of this drive for public enlightenment is, of course, nowadays too easily dismissed as so much 'elitism' even though it was far more an argument against distortion and manipulation than an attempt to impose meaning on the masses.

NK: How did you come to place your first book, *On Living in an Old Country*, with Verso?

PW: That happened after I wrote a short article on the archaeological recovery of Henry VII's flagship, the *Mary Rose*, which was lifted from the bed of the Solent in 1982, and how, in media rhetoric at least, it seemed curiously to coincide with Margaret Thatcher's military recovery of the Falkland Islands. I wrote the piece as a Sunday lecture for the South Place Ethical Society (SPES), at Conway Hall, and

afterwards sent the text, already published in SPES's bulletin, the *Ethical Record*, to *New Left Review*. Robin Blackburn, who was then editor of *New Left Review*, suggested that we might produce a book, and handed me over to Neil Belton at Verso; I think it was probably one of Neil's first books there.

I was writing those essays at night or on weekends, and also at a guarded distance from the culture I was describing. I had the eye of an ex-Canadian returnee, a bibliography dominated by the Hungarian émigré philosopher, Agnes Heller, and the freely given assistance of my friend Andrzej Krauze, a Polish cartoonist who had worked for Solidarity publications, and whom I had first met in 1982, when he and his family were still living out of a couple of suitcases in London and struggling to convince newspaper editors that his drawings were really not too harsh, unsettling and alien for English taste.

I used to argue with Raphael Samuel, of *History Workshop*, about my perspective in that book. I think he thought that the phraseology in some parts of *On Living in an Old Country* reflected a distance from British ideas of tradition and history that was more my problem than anyone else's. There was certainly some truth in that, yet there can surely also be no doubt as to the necessity of maintaining a critical perspective in this field. The book was provisional and no doubt also flawed in many ways, but I was at least trying to deepen the theme, not destroy it, and to indicate how much, besides old timber, bricks and mortar, could be at stake in these public invocations of history and 'heritage'.

On Living in an Old Country was partly stimulated by the archaic and weirdly disconnected ideas of Englishness I had seen entrenched in Canadian culture, but that wasn't the only way in which it developed as a dialogue between British and North American perspectives.

Take the writer Mary Butts. I first came across her work through the interest of Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser and other West Coast poets, and in my chapter on her I was reading her work back into its English contexts: a move that meant confronting the organicism and also the anti-Semitic narrative that Butts engaged in her defensive portrayal of the since militarised landscape of the Isle of Purbeck in Dorset. This dimension is still entirely and, I think, systematically ignored by the North American and feminist readings of Butts, even though it surely makes her a far more interesting writer to consider nowadays.

As for the book's essayistic approach, in part that reflected the fact that I did not have the time to pursue a more unified perspective. But I guess it also shows my impatience with the combined political dogma and abstract theoreticism governing so much academic discussion of culture at that time. I sidestepped that aspect of the academic apparatus and worked by picking up sometimes fragmentary actualities and stories, and interpreting them. It suited me to work on the assumption that even fleeting realities could come alive given that kind of attention.

NK: Your master's degree is from Simon Fraser University, and you spent five years in Vancouver. How did you come to fetch up there? But first, how did you get there from undergraduate study at Kent?

PW: Well that's a story of its time. For me, the University of Kent was a very good place to be. I was there from 1970 to 1973, having arrived after a school career defined more, as I only found out later, by tuberculosis than by anything resembling academic achievement. The place was only five years old, and the Humanities Faculty was interdisciplinary, and really ambitious in that regard. The university then was a new world—many of its buildings were still under construction—on a hillside overlooking Canterbury. Anyone who studied English or American literature there in their first year was asked to read one book before they arrived, Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*.

Well, that's clever isn't it? You read this book with all these founding arguments of the twentieth century, set in this TB hospital on a Swiss mountain, and then you end up in this new and not just geographically isolated campus on a windswept hill with carefully placed windows framing views of the old world, represented by Canterbury Cathedral a few miles away. Everyone in the humanities started with a two-term course titled 'Britain and the Contemporary World': whether you studied English, history, modern languages, philosophy or film, you all worked on the same range of courses for the first four terms. So when I later heard about this interdisciplinary approach called 'cultural studies', I was inclined to wonder what the fuss was about.

I still feel that I learnt a lot at Kent about how to think about modern culture—how to pose a question and then pursue it through various fields of enquiry. Many of the best lecturers at Canterbury at that time had, of course, come

from Oxford and Cambridge. They brought certain rituals with them, and also the collegiate and tutorial system, but they also devised some genuinely new perspectives. I knew someone who went to read English at Oxford the same year I went to Kent, and the contrast between the two approaches was striking. I guess it was always clear that I would not be the one who ended up working on the *Times Literary Supplement*, but I was never in any doubt which was the most desirable route: we were reading Orwell, Sartre, Pavese and Robbe-Grillet while he was still embarking on the chronological assault from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf.

So we were in this new space, which was already under pressure. Academics were already retreating back into Oxford and Cambridge as opportunities arose—returning to their disciplines as well as to colleges with proper wine cellars and so on. And a wider sense of denigration was in the air. I can't remember whether Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* was already running on TV, but disconcerted reactionaries were certainly muttering that higher education should never have been expanded beyond the traditional elite: 'the more the worse' as the curmudgeonly Kingsley Amis was railing at the time.

I understand that the interdisciplinary focus has since been scaled back but in the early 1970s, Kent was ambitiously open in its approach, and I'm sure the same was true of other new universities in Britain at that time. You could go there without having proved yourself a brilliant student, you could be taken on as someone who'd made nothing but a mess of his school years, and then you could re-orient yourself. I think I still owe a lot to the interdisciplinarity of that period—a time before the so-called 'moment of theory', although I recall being excited by Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* and also by Peter Wollen's *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema*: arguments that seemed brilliantly suggestive before they were institutionalised. It was certainly there that I realised that contemporary prose did not have to abide by the inherited categories still used by publishers and booksellers, with their ossified division between fiction and non-fiction.

And then there was Canterbury itself. For the last two years I was in Kent, I lived in a house at 5 St Radigund Street with a group of people from the university and the art college. We were still quite counter-cultural in our thinking then, and the house was full of the usual distractions of student life in that period. It also had strong musical connections, having been a hub for the so-called Canterbury scene,

with members of the bands Spirogyra, Caravan and others on the early Virgin circuit, including Hatfield and the North. As for my own demeanour, I can say that I was not among those who wore a Mao jacket in honour of the Cultural Revolution, and I never mistook myself for a hobbit on acid either. Both options were available, as I remember.

We had a vast poster from the Labour Party's 1970 general election campaign on the wall going up the stairs—the one that showed the Tory leadership as hideous little mannequins dubbed 'Yesterday's Men' (it was a harsh image that Harold Wilson would later blame for his defeat). But politics was not our strong point. I remember marching against Enoch Powell and going to the mining village of Aylesham in search of common cause but I'm afraid the student radicalism of that period always seemed to me too theatrical and herd-like (you didn't have to be a feminist to dislike the cult of male revolutionary leadership), too detached from wider reality and too much inclined to mimicry of the real sixties, which already seemed long gone.

We shared an alternative, more or less conservationist outlook. I remember reading Theodore Roszak's *Where the Wasteland Ends*, the Don Juan fictions of Carlos Castaneda (which, like so many people at that time, we read as real documentaries), and also Charles A. Reich's *The Greening of America*, but I wasn't interested in joining the hippies who lived in the woods, foraging for what Richard Mabey described, in his bestseller of the period, as 'Food for Free'. As for the Trotskyists who used occasionally to come round and warn us that, nice enough as we were, we would surely be going up against the wall when the revolution came, I suspect they have long since converted themselves into management consultants and New Labour policy advisers. We carried on while the coalminers struck, and the electricity came and went. It was that period of acute crisis that was quite interesting, but also pressing. When we graduated in 1973 or so it was obvious that things were going to have to change. The university seemed to me spectacularly disconnected from mainstream reality. There were some routes into employment—a lot of people I knew went into public sector administration, social work and teaching.

At that time the pressure to find work was eased by the existence of since cancelled forms of benefit. Students today can't claim anything, but we could go

down to the Labour Exchange and draw unemployment benefit in the vacations: Easter, Christmas and Summer too if you wanted. The minute your term ended, you could sign on. Once you had a degree you could even put your name on something called the Professional and Executive Register, which obliged the authorities to make some show at least of seeking appropriate employment for you: I knew one person who wrote 'I want to be the editor of a literary magazine' on his form, and was then allowed to draw benefit for many months in the utterly predictable absence of any offers.

After the oil crisis of 1973–74, it became obvious that this wasn't going to be enough. I remember looking at the sky from an orchard—we did a lot of fairly addled sky-gazing in those years (and Kent still had a lot of orchards, many of them since grubbed up in line with European Community agricultural policy)—and deciding that the way out of this situation would have to involve aeroplanes. I had an American friend who, thanks to the Cold War, had been in Germany as a G.I. He was from Los Angeles, and he said, why don't you come over to the US this summer? So I did. He met me in Denver with a 1942 Dodge pick-up truck and, together with some West German friends, we drove for months and ended up in this juniper forest near Mt Shasta in northern California, where he had a little shack. From there I applied to graduate school in Vancouver. I started at the University of British Columbia, where I did not like the English Department at all, so I shifted to Simon Fraser, which was, I suppose, a bit like the University of Kent at that time: another new campus, although this time the mountain beneath it was altogether more formidable and on many days of the year you really did have to drive up through clouds to reach the place.

NK: You would have been at Simon Fraser when Anthony Wilden was writing his Lacanian work and eventually writing his book, *The Imaginary Canadian*.

PW: I did a seminar on communication theory with Tony Wilden, who had indeed published *The Language of the Self*, although he was then teaching from his later book *System and Structure*. It was pretty delirious stuff, but Wilden was very interesting, as I remember, on Gregory Bateson's idea of the doublebind and on the power of framing and contextualisation. He had also begun to turn his back on the abstracted nature of academic writing and was beginning to engage with Canadian reality, 'imaginary' and otherwise.

I worked with the poet Robin Blaser eventually too. There were some very good people there, some of them having moved to British Columbia from the United States during, or in response to, the Vietnam War. I knew I had nothing going in England and in hindsight I suppose I exploited Canada as a preferable limbo—a largely congenial way of not being a permanent supply teacher in Kent. People used to say that in Vancouver the 1960s had never really ended. Certainly, it was an interesting place to be. The university was fairly informal in its orientation and its attitudes, there was a big writing scene in the city, and, with generously renewable teaching assistantships, you could spend your time more or less as you wished. I did the longest MA anybody could imagine, five years!

In the end, though, I didn't find a way of staying in Canada. There was no sign of work beyond the student visa, and I really didn't want to be an expat. I'd read Wyndham Lewis's bleak and misanthropic book about his own years in Canada, *Self Condemned* (politely kept in print by the Canadian publisher McClelland and Stewart). I had seen enough bitter ex-Brits in Canadian universities, some of whom had a horribly patronising attitude towards their students, and I certainly couldn't engage with the antiquated tea ceremonies still associated with such Anglo outposts as the Empress Hotel in Victoria. So, when my life there came undone, I fell back to England.

In Canada I had started thinking about national culture in its English and expatriate British variants. I was later pleased to read Benedict Anderson and his insistence that if you want to understand modern nationalism, you should start anywhere but in Europe. Yet I was interested in the problem of English nationalism as it had been posed by Tom Nairn and others. Hobsbawm and Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* also came out before I really got busy in the field, as did Zygmunt Bauman's brilliant and, I think, still insufficiently registered study *Memories of Class*. But Canada is where the trail began for me: Wilden's *The Imaginary Canadian* certainly, but also the warning that nationalism could be alarmingly small-minded in its claimed collectivity, which for me was provided by the Canadian literary polemicist Robin Mathews, who was constantly condemning foreign influences in Canadian life, as I believe he still is to this day.

NK: What models inform your modes of cultural analysis? Which writers do you admire?

PW: I gave the George Orwell Lecture at Birkbeck College a few years ago, and afterwards Paul Hirst, who had introduced me, stood up and told the audience, with a certain smile, that they had seen my 'method' in action. He himself had long since broken with his Althusserian past, but I've no doubt that he was teasing me when he suggested that this 'method' consisted of pulling at a loose thread and then gleefully exhibiting all the weird and unpredictable clobber that comes out with it.

I like to think that I practise a kind of cultural critique that is open to discovery and finds significant dynamics even in apparently marginal realities. As someone who has never been a fulltime academic, I guess I write more out of a sense, vague as it may sometimes be, of citizenship rather than professional discourse, and I've also learned a lot from literary poetics. In Canada, I was much taken by Charles Olson's ideas of archaeology, of space as the fruitful dimension of enquiry rather than time (which Olson saw as the axis of war and state power), and his suggestion, made in the bibliography on America that he compiled for Ed Dorn, that what matters is less your choice of object than the way you dig into it.

And I suppose that, like many people at that time, I was mindful of writers like Walter Benjamin and the Adorno of *Minima Moralia*. I also became very interested by Agnes Heller's arguments about historical consciousness as something that exists in everyday life rather than just the professionalised methodologies of historians. I ended up aspiring to a kind of critique that works by allegorising, that constitutes the territory of its enquiry as it goes along, that dramatises cultural pathologies in order to undo them or to make them more explicit, and that is open to taking itself by surprise. For me, that has meant a prose of collection, quotation and arrangement as well as of argument: one that is, I hope, not embarrassed sometimes to fall through the floor of its own inadequate presuppositions. I also use archives a lot, not just as repositories of detail that can be lined up as evidence to justify preconceived conclusions, but as a way of defamiliarising and questioning present conformities. Raymond Williams and George Orwell were part of my background too.

NK: Christopher Hitchens published a piece on Orwell in *Critical Quarterly* a few years ago and now his book on Orwell has appeared, *Orwell's Victory*.

PW: After 9/11 I was horrified to see an apparent queue of ex-radicals, leaping in to play the Orwell card—claiming that the left was blinded by its own hatred of Western life, and would rather fellow-travel with al-Qaeda than modify its visceral anti-Americanism. No doubt this tendency does exist: Fred Halliday has rightly condemned those on the left who would prefer to imagine the future emerging from the backstreets of Fallujah than to identify their aspirations with any aspect of Western society.

I've subsequently talked to Hitchens about Orwell for a radio program. I like much of what he says about Orwell, and I like what he likes about Orwell—including the anti-Stalinism and the contempt for show trial connoisseurs such as that 'hired liar', the barrister D.N. Pritt—but I still think that his mobilisation of Orwell was a hedge for dire inadequacies in his own view of the 'war on terror'.

I re-read Orwell recently because I had some students who wanted to talk about the 'England your England' section of *The Lion and the Unicorn*. It's been an interesting text to reconsider during this recent government-stirred debate about Britishness, which has entailed yet another round of searching for a list of essential British values, this time fired by a desire to contain devolution as well as by the combined shock of domestic Islamism and large scale immigration from Eastern Europe. The list Orwell drew up in 1940 is altogether more English than British, but it is thrown remarkably wide, compared with the more conservative versions that preceded it. His inventory of 'characteristic fragments' includes the Labour Exchange queue, and it embraces the northern industrial town as well as the urban working class.

Despite the maiden aunt cycling to communion, he actually makes few concessions to the reactionary Tory pastiche left over from Stanley Baldwin, Arthur Bryant and the rest. His list has still got all the problems of being a list of characteristic national traits—a set of future clichés in the making as subsequent attempts to recycle it have proved—but he did try, and not just in that wartime moment, to encompass a wider society, and he also insisted that you can't have a 'heritage' without it being open to additions in the present and future. Much 'Little England' thinking in the 1930s, especially that framed in the Chestertonian tradition, was all about being innocent of the Empire. With Orwell, as Paul Gilroy has recently pointed out, the Empire and its responsibilities are still in the picture.

In this respect, Orwell is weathering well, I think. He repeatedly offended the left wing orthodoxy of his time, but I don't imagine him looking forward to the bombs falling on Iraq, or promising, as Christopher Hitchens did, that he would soon be sitting in Baghdad raising another glass with his liberated Iraqi friends. I suspect he might also have some interesting things to say about the ex-Marxist commentators who, since 1989, have gone along with an already established tendency to identify the British welfare state with its totalitarian Soviet equivalent, thereby collaborating in the situation where both disintegrating systems have been dragged to the market together.

NK: Speaking of Chesterton, I see you published a longish piece dealing with him in the *Guardian* recently, where you quote that poem 'The Secret People', which I hadn't come across.

PW: I was very keen to track that poem down and to review its persistence as the informal credo of a certain kind of Englishness—it's the one in which Chesterton hymns 'the people of England, that never have spoken yet' and it was published in *The Flying Inn*, just before World War I. The *Guardian* published my piece as 'Last Orders', whereas the original version, which was written for a conference and website organised by English Heritage, was 'Last Orders for the English Aborigine'. The *Guardian* sat on the piece for several months, and by the time it finally appeared I had revised it as a contribution to the debate surrounding the ongoing general election of 2005. I noticed in the run-up to this campaign that the old question was coming out, 'what is Britain?' It was mostly the Labour Party producing it actually, saying 'we need a new Britishness'. And then our disgraced former home secretary, David Blunkett, came out and said 'we need a new Englishness' too.

However, it was Michael Howard who led the Conservative Party with a campaign that seemed unhealthily preoccupied with metaphors of organic belonging and threatened corruption. His campaign was, it seemed to me, alarmingly reliant on tacit appeals to semi-articulate instincts that might have been more appropriate to the British National Party. I had already been thinking about the way in which Englishness is so often defined as an organic inheritance threatened by various modern encroachments.

I don't think it's the dominant culture but it still lurks in the shadows of our political discourse, a habit of seeing Englishness as a historically constituted and largely closed identity that has to be defended against myriad forces that threaten to dilute or change it. The English elegy can be a soft and gentle lament for the passing of an old way of life, but it can also cover for vicious acts of aggression against people who, in Sartre's memorable image (in *Anti-Semite and Jew*), might be able to claim legal ownership of a wood but will never be able to lay claim to the more 'authentic' kind of cultural proprietorship of those who have been to that wood to carve their name on a tree in childhood and then gone back to see their initials enlarged decades later.

So I was trying to make the connection again between the political temptations of that moment in 2005, where we had a Conservative Party led by the son of a Romanian-Jewish immigrant, which was appealing, more or less explicitly, to these potent fears of contamination. Whether it was asylum seekers, foot and mouth disease, anti-biotic resistant bacteria in National Health Service hospitals, the alleged 'Scottish Raj' in the British Labour Party, or the rules and procedures of the European Community, there was a sense of symbolic excess about the Conservative articulation of these issues: one that overshadowed whole areas of policy with an ambient sense of alarm and even panic.

I thought this was reprehensible, when you consider that we're sitting in one of the richest countries in the world, and we're not in crisis and there are political questions to address, and they're not even in the frame. So that was why I started trying to get hold of the roots of this tendency. It was, in a sense, a return to the territory of my first book, *On Living in an Old Country*. Chesterton is one of the figures I missed. I had never really read him, and yet I now think he stands close to the source of this particular idea of Englishness, he and Hilaire Belloc. Chesterton's beleaguered England is touched with the memory of guild socialism and Magna Carta, and I suspect it draws something from William Morris too. In the first years of the twentieth century, it was shaped by opposition to the Fabian idea of the centralised and expert-led reforming state. It includes a defence of beer against interfering state-empowered teetotalism, and of representational art against modernist distortion.

However, it also draws on the English radical impulse that says the British elite is corrupt and expropriating. It is fuelled by anti-imperialism as well, and by a determination, evident in Chesterton's argument with Rudyard Kipling, to separate English virtues out from the policies of the British Empire as enacted during the Boer War. You can follow this strand of thought into later thinkers of the left: it's surely a thread in the radical Englishry of the Communist historian A.L. Morton, and I suspect E.P. Thompson picks it up here and there too.

So these are not innately Tory ideas at all, but they do, I think, still represent a problematic way of thinking about modern society. Many politicians and commentators have since cited Chesterton's lines about the 'secret people' who 'never have spoken yet' but hardly anyone quotes the later line in which the 'cringing Jew' is hauled in, along with his accomplice the 'staggering lawyer', and I'm afraid that is a point that needs to be faced. If you define your nationality as an inherited organic identity, then you are going to be susceptible to these dramas of encroachment and contamination, and that, rather than any particular political slant, is the issue that I keep trying to address. In that *Guardian* piece I was reviewing that way of seeing Englishness as a sort of violated realm, and suggesting that it was not simply a rational response to present-day problems of border control, devolution or whatever, and to suggest that this semi-instinctive structure of feeling is not an adequate basis for a renewed English culture and politics in Britain today. I suppose this is connected to the wider discussion we have been having about 'heritage' in Britain over the last two decades.

NK: Was it around this time that you became involved with the *History Workshop* project?

PW: I went to a number of *History Workshop* conferences in the early 1980s. They were very impressive gatherings, with enough people to fill the Pavilion in Brighton or that huge, redundant church St Paul's, just along the road from Ruskin College in Oxford, where I remember E.P. Thompson delivering his famously savage assault on Althusserian cultural studies at the end of 1979. *History Workshop* wasn't just a more or less academic journal in those years: it was this wonderful wandering argument and discussion, which had factions, projects and improvised venues up and down the country.

I started talking with Raphael Samuel in those meetings, especially over the Patriotism Conference of 1984 where I first presented my reading of Mary Butts, but there was always a sense of awkwardness when it came to *History Workshop Journal*. I can't remember whether it was two or three of the articles that eventually went into *On Living in an Old Country* that were solicited by Raphael. They duly went to the editorial collective, and then months would pass before either Raphael or Michael Ignatieff would write or phone up and say that they had been rejected. Of course, this is what academic editorial committees are like, but I was irritated at the time and suspected that I had encountered some undeclared law of trespass. I'm quite sure my various pieces could have been better but, looking back, I still think that some members of the collective did not find it at all easy to accept that this kind of critical argument should be applied to public awareness of history. The *History Workshop* project, after all, had been to build and articulate popular historical consciousness, as part of creating solidarity, awareness, movement.

I was sympathetic to that, yet it was also increasingly obvious that, in the wider culture of the 1980s, ideas of history were being manipulated for political ends, and that this had to be addressed more directly. Ideas of national tradition and 'heritage in danger' were being phrased in racist terms, and the conservationist agenda had become increasingly overshadowed by social polemic in which the allegedly superior past was invoked against the failing efforts of post-war social democracy. There were also some bad architectural and planning initiatives which suggested that 'heritage' might sometimes amount to little better than a system of place-annulling environmental exploitation.

When I sat down to finish *On Living in an Old Country* as a book, the whole premise I had in mind was to find a way of establishing a critical argument about this field of activity, because it was susceptible to toxic variations and instrumental manipulations done by political elites or whoever. The challenge was to find and develop a critical argument without moving into disdain or contempt for non-academic forms of interest in history. This was why, for example, I took my distance from J.H. Plumb, with his idea, expressed in *The Death of the Past*, of the historian as a bearer of superior truth whose mission is to dissolve 'the past', conceived as the manipulated illusions about history entertained by everyone else—that is, by people who hadn't had the benefit of a Cambridge education.

Years later, when Raphael produced *Theatres of Memory* in 1994, he included this chapter called 'Heritage-baiting', which really annoyed me, and not just for its title's apparent recycling of anti-McCarthyite language. I felt that it threw us back to the very beginning, that we were once again in the situation of not being able to establish a critical voice in the whole territory of historical consciousness without being accused of elitism. I was, of course, annoyed to be included in Raphael's list of offenders, partly because I had previously expressed my own reservations about the tone of some mockery of open air museums—'sneering at the theme parks', as I had called it (in an article in *Block* that Raphael was certainly aware of, since I had sent him a copy some years earlier).

I had also questioned the manner in which the Plumbian historian David Cannadine seemed to dismiss conservation as nothing more than a stately home owner's ruse in his book *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (1990), and I didn't like being so closely identified with Robert Hewison's un-nuanced denunciations. So I wrote a negative review of *Theatres of Memory* for the *Guardian*, saying, if I remember, that while this book is full of interesting stuff it is also seriously flawed in its rejection of critical perspective.

In fact, there are some really exceptional things in that extraordinary repository of a book, and there is no better account of the emergence of conservation as a popular cause during the 1960s and '70s—territory Raphael covered from steam engines to pearly queens and the popularity of brick. However, I still think that, in gathering up this vast array of detail, Raphael was inclined to overlook the political freight carried by some invocations of 'national heritage' in those post-war decades.

In *A Journey Through Ruins* I had tried to identify this drama under the name 'Brideshead and the tower blocks': a battle between architectural symbols that extended from the late 1940s right into the early 1980s, and dramatised the decline and defeat of the post-war settlement with its ideas of state-led social reform. The fact that people were also concerned with railway history, industrial archaeology and family genealogy does not, I still think, invalidate this point.

It is often assumed that the argument linking 'heritage' with 'decline' was directly about the economy—and that it can be satisfactorily dismissed with the simple observation that conservation and tourism can actually serve the interest of

economic regeneration. As I saw it, however, the decline was not counted in money alone but also in the sense of political possibility that had accompanied the social democratic idea of the state. The culture that supported it in the post-war decades involved a polarisation between old and new ideas of national identity, which acted as a closure of thought, limiting what was conceivable in the public imagination. You surely only have to read Prince Charles's utterances on this matter to see that the question of 'heritage', conservation and 'classicism' as represented by the revivalist architecture of Quinlan Terry, John Simpson and others, became closely involved in this wider political drama.

Raphael construed his 'heritage-baiters' as metropolitan literary snobs mocking the idea of conservation from outside. There had indeed been some dubious expressions of disdain, and yet it seems to me that the critical impulse has actually always been part of the movement itself, and that this perspective became curiously lost from view in that chapter of *Theatres of Memory*. William Morris started the Society for the Protection of Ancient Monuments in order to protect historical buildings against bad restoration: it was an 'anti-scrape' campaign, intended to prevent the Church of England and its advisors scraping away all the features of a church that did not conform to their idea of proper 'period' style. Douglas Goldring, who founded the Georgian Group in the 1930s, did so in order to oppose destructive property development in the name of the public interest. He was a patriotic radical, formerly a romantic admirer of Bolshevism and an anti-war campaigner who was also much concerned about the defence of civil liberties. He had no sooner formed the Georgian Group than he left in disgust at the disdainful aristocrats who quickly took over his committee and started treating him as their unpaid servant.

And so it would go on into the 1980s. For some reason, it is now widely believed that the phrase 'heritage industry' was coined by Robert Hewison when he produced his book of that title in 1987. In truth, however, it too emerged as a critical term from within the conservation movement. It was used by Colin Ward (about whom Raphael wrote marvellously, incidentally), and others connected with the Town and Country Planning Association and also the Civic Trust. They had been trying to develop 'urban studies' for inner city schools, in an attempt to avoid the rural bias built into the idea of field studies. They got some centres up and running

in various cities, and then during the preparations for European Architectural Heritage Year (1975), their far from past-orientated activities were bureaucratically reorganised under the name of 'heritage', a categorisation that threatened to obscure the whole point of their initiative. I once pointed out to Raphael that the whole *History Workshop* project was a critical intervention of the sort I have just mentioned, and that he himself had previously said some particularly critical things about, say, the 'Georgianising' of Spitalfields or certain attempts to film novels by Dickens. He told me, simply enough, that he had changed his mind. I remember thinking at the time that Raphael may have succumbed to a kind of defensive, more or less Marxist sentimentality. I speculated that he couldn't bear the erosion of certain socialist frameworks, which of course was a hurt for many people at that time, and that this left him just generally warm about all forms of popular involvement with history.

I also wondered whether Raphael's turn might have something to do with his sometimes uneasy proximity to Oxford University. It interested me, for example, that Raphael approved of John Carey's *The Intellectuals and the Masses*. I was suspicious of that book. I knew that English intellectuals could be culpably idiotic, and also that snobbery was an abiding sin of the caste. It is, of course, perfectly reasonable to point that out. Yet it seemed to me that this argument, which was extended through Carey's reviews in the *Sunday Times*, was actually being delivered in the interests of a Thatcherism that had its own quite different reasons for pouring contempt on intellectuals. Having talked to someone who attended the Oxford lectures from which that book was derived, I was inclined to suspect that Carey was actually peddling a smart kind of cynicism that was all too well adjusted to the times. So I wondered whether being jammed up against all those patrician attitudes makes one peculiarly and in some senses perhaps excessively sensitive about 'elitism'. But who knows? Raphael was much engaged in defending the school history curriculum at that time, and he may just have felt that the time for taking things apart had gone. He used to talk about the weakness of the 'cultural studies' approach, which stood outside the object of its analysis, and saw deconstruction as its main purpose. This was, I now think, generally a useful caution.

Anyway, our argument came to an end when Raphael died in 1996. I like to think we might be in agreement by now had he lived, but there was only limited sign

of that at the time. When he was really very ill, he came to a conference at Lancaster, where I then had a temporary toehold at the university. I remember him wagging an accusing finger at Robert Hewison and repeating the charge that he was a 'metropolitan literary snob'. Turning to me, he read out a marvellous list of the many ways in which the recovery of the *Mary Rose* had since added to historical understanding of its period—it was fair comment even though it didn't seem to me entirely to invalidate the question I had raised before any of these investigations began.

He definitely saw what he called 'the mark of the convict' on me, declaring that *On Living in an Old Country* was the reason Blair's New Labour party was so dismissive of history. I'm quite sure this considerably overestimated the influence of a book that has never sold more than about four thousand, five hundred copies, and which was certainly not in Blair's pocket when he entered Downing Street the following year. We met once more after that, and he kindly wrote me a letter suggesting that we should argue more often for the pleasure of making up. He was really a great loss, and a whole world seems to have ended with his passing.

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Noel King teaches in the Department of Media, Music, Communication, and Cultural Studies at Macquarie University, Sydney. His current research focuses on Don DeLillo and film, and Richard Hugo and film. He is also working on the 'road movie' aspects of contemporary American photography. Recent publications include "'The Truth is in the Work": Interview with Barry Gifford', in Barry Gifford, *The Imagination of the Heart* (2009); a number of co-authored articles (with Toby Miller) on Alfred Hitchcock; a piece on Robert Adams and a conversation with Frish Brandt of the Fraenkel gallery in San Francisco, in *jacket 38* (2009) and the regular publishing of interviews from the Australian Film Theory and Criticism Project he is undertaking with Deane Williams and Con Verevis of Monash University.

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¹ This interview is based on a conversation recorded on 5 May 2005 at Birkbeck College, London. It was revised and rewritten in May 2007.

² Patrick Wright, *Iron Curtain: From Stage to Cold War*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007.

³ Patrick Wright, *Tank: The Progress of a Monstrous War Machine*, Faber, London, 2000. Peter Wollen, Tankishness, *London Review of Books*, vol. 22, no. 22, 2 November 2000, <www.lrb.co.uk/v22/n22/woll01_.html>, later collected in Peter Wollen, *Paris/Manhattan: Writings on Art*, Verso, London, 2004.

⁴ Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*, Verso, London, 1985; Charles Landry, David Morley, Russell Southwood and Patrick Wright, *What a Way to Run a Railroad: An Analysis of Radical Failure*, Comedia Pub. Group, London, 1985.