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Framing the past: time, space and the politics of heritage tourism in Ireland

Nuala C. Johnson*

School of Geography, Queen's University of Belfast, Belfast BT7 1NN, Northern Ireland, UK

Abstract

Recent work has emphasised that heritage tourism is not just a set of commercial transactions, but the ideological framing of history and identity. While some commentators celebrate heritage as a complementary or alternative way of mediating the past to popular audiences, others regard it as little more than bogus history. Through an examination of a planning strategy devised by Bord Fáilte, the state's tourism board, this paper addresses the relationship between time and space in the development of heritage attractions in Ireland, and emphasises the mechanisms through which space is privileged over time in a manner that loses sight of the complexities of localised historical processes. This argument is illustrated through the example of an open-air museum which focuses on the display of material culture independent of the historical contingencies of its creation. By contrast, an examination of a stately home, opened to the public by an independent trust, demonstrates how the past can be provocatively explored to a mass audience by being anchored in local historical geography and eschewing an approach that reifies local events into national processes. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Introduction

The globalization of tourism destinations over the past few decades and the large revenues it generates for individual states is now well-documented (Williams and Shaw, 1988). With an annual world-wide growth rate of five to six percent per

* Tel.: + 44-1232-273358; E-mail: n.johnson@qub.ac.uk

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annum, it is estimated that tourism will become the largest employer by the turn of the millennium. This new pattern of tourist activity has been linked to a number of factors: to the changing circumstances of the workplace where conventional distinctions between work time and leisure time are increasingly blurred (Urry, 1990); to the rise of a new service class rich in cultural capital; and to rapidly changing technologies which have accelerated a sense of time–space compression (Bourdieu, 1977, Harvey, 1989; Soja, 1988). Coupled with these changes is the socially and geographically selective nature of sites of tourism production and consumption. While access to leisure time and the capital resources necessary to travel are unevenly distributed at a global scale, the pattern of fashionable destinations is also differentially distributed and subject to rapid transformations. McCannell (McCannell, 1992, 1) notes, however, that tourism cannot be reduced solely to commercial transactions since 'it is an ideological framing of history, nature and tradition; a framing that has the power to reshape culture and nature to its own needs'. The framing of history and its relationship with narratives of national identity have assumed increased importance with the appreciable expansion of heritage tourism (or 'gazing on the past', Urry, 1990).

While heritage tourism forms a distinct niche market, Ashworth (Ashworth, 1994, 21) suggests that heritage is intrinsically a place-based activity 'whether or not heritage is deliberately designed to achieve pre-set spatio–political goals, place identities at various spatial scales are likely to be shaped or reinforced by heritage planning'. Shields (1991) outlines the manner in which specific spatial arrangements and cultural practices become appropriate for particular types of activities, and together constitute a place-myth which is undergirded by a suite of core place-images, both symbolic and material. Geographers have long recognised the importance of place-promotion in evoking and disseminating powerful place images (see, for example, Burgess and Gold, 1985; Kearns and Philo, 1993; Gold, 1994; Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996). Particular rural and urban landscapes, for instance, can play a central role in the heritage industry's 'recovery' of the past. The 'regal' landscape of the West End of London, the Mall in Washington DC, the sharecroppers' houses in Tuscany all somehow come to represent the quintessential mirrors of a culture's collective past, and their reinvention for tourist consumption fixes them spatially in the historical imagination and helps to ensure their future protection. Analyses of postcards, tourist brochures and advertising literature have in various ways begun to deconstruct the influential images of place traded to tourists (Selwyn, 1990, 1996; Cohen, 1995; Crang, 1996). The significance of these representations, however, does not reside solely in identifying whether they are effective or authentic expositions of place, more particularly it is their role as part of a larger network of circulated ideas about the nature of place and the past which is of import. In this context Britton (1991, 475) suggests that the tourism imaginary is a 'lesson in the political economy of the social construction of "reality" and the social construction of place and people, whether from the point of view of the visitors, the host communities, or the state'. Some commentators have suggested that tourism sites '. . . are centres of physical and emotional sensation from which temporal and spatial continuities have been abolished' (Selwyn, 1990, 24). This may be to overstate the case, however, as there

is no necessary imperative for the eradication of the historical imagination at tourism sites (Samuel, 1995 provides a host of useful examples where popular representations of the past are effectively executed). The intellectual focus on the imaginary of place and the consequent reading of the text of place using the insights of semiotics has tended to overshadow the demarcation and understanding of time in the representational practices of sites of tourist consumption. While heritage is grounded in particular spaces, it is the relationship between space and time—the awarding of space a past—that is central to heritage tourism planning. If, as Sorenson (1989, 65) suggests, theme parks are 'visits to time's past', questions about the representation of historical knowledge are of equal importance to the representation of space. This issue will be addressed in the subsequent section of this paper.

The substantial expansion of the Irish heritage industry and the increased number of tourist visits over the past two decades has generated increased scholarly attention, particularly in relation to the economic consequences of this growth (see Breathnach, 1994). The cultural and political implications of transforming the Irish landscape from a predominantly agricultural one to a tourist one are just beginning to be addressed (O'Connor and Cronin, 1993). Although in a European context Ireland may be no exception in its drive to increase tourist activity, what may be of significance is the postcolonial context from which such attempts are being articulated. Thus Ireland may share some of the contradictions faced by non-European postcolonial states in exploiting their past for the consumption of the mainly European and North American visitor (Kiberd, 1995). The role of the state, local government, the intelligentsia and local communities in commodifying the past for tourists, and the relationship between these processes and narratives of local, regional and national identity, for instance, still require unravelling. In this paper, then, I wish to address two interrelated themes in the production of Irish tourist landscapes. First I wish to explore the relationship between history (time) and geography (space) as it has been articulated by the Irish Tourist Board in their planning strategies for the 1990s. This discussion indicates, at least from the point of the state, the conception of time underlying its strategic framework. Second, through an analysis of an open-air museum produced under the auspices of the state, and a country house opened to the public by an independent trust, I wish to emphasise how historical knowledge is mediated in radically different ways to popular audiences. Taking these themes together I will suggest that the state's tourism policy is re-shaping popular understandings of the Irish past in ways that challenge orthodox chronological approaches but that may simultaneously lose sight of the complexity of historical interpretation.

Where is the history in heritage?

The relationship between heritage, history and memory has been subject to much debate recently among geographers, historians and cultural critics (Lowenthal, 1996; Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996). Conventionally a rigid line of demarcation ran

between the past as narrated by professional historians on the one hand, and by the heritage industry on the other. Heritage, as a concept, begins with the highly individualised notion of personal inheritance or bequest (e.g. through family wills and legacies). We are more concerned here, however, with collective notions of heritage which link a group to a shared inheritance. The basis of this group identification varies in time and in space and can be based on allegiance derived from a communal religious tradition, a class formation, geographical propinquity, or a national grouping. Indeed it is with respect to the 'imagined community' of nationhood that heritage is often most frequently connected (Anderson, 1983).

While the origins of the nation-state may be relatively recent, ideas of nationhood are often based on the assumption that group identity derives from a collective inheritance that spans centuries and at times millennia. National states attempt to maintain this identity by highlighting the historical trajectory of the cultural group through preservation of elements of the built environment, through spectacle and parade, through art and craft, through museum and monument (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). The heritage industry, then, has often been viewed as a mechanism for reinscribing nationalist narratives in the popular imagination (Wright, 1985). Lowenthal (1994, 43), claims that 'heritage distils the past into icons of identity, bonding us with precursors and progenitors, with our own earlier selves, and with promised successors'. As such, the historical narratives transmitted through heritage are seen to be selective, partial and distorting. They offer a 'bogus' history which ignores complex historical processes and relationships, and sanitizes the less savoury dimensions of the past. This contrasts with the work of professional historians where 'testable truth is [the] chief hallmark [and] . . . historians' credibility depends on their sources being open to scrutiny' (Lowenthal, 1996, 120).

The distinction between true history and false heritage, however, may be more illusory than actual when viewed from the perspective of the deconstructionist and postmodern turn within the social sciences. Making the claim that all historical narration is interpretative, deconstructivist accounts make problematic the distinction between representation and reality, between fake heritage and genuine history. Postmodernism involves 'dissolving of boundaries, not only between high and low cultures, but also between different cultural forms, such as tourism, art, music, sport, shopping and architecture' (Urry, 1990, 82). Drawing from the insights of semiotics it suggests that signs are all that we consume and that we do so knowingly (Baudrillard, 1988). The signs which represent episodes from the past can be found in historians' scholarly texts as well as at heritage sites. The treatment of time and historical explanation, though, may be significantly different between heritage sites and works of professional 'scientific' history. For the latter historical sequence (e.g. ancient, medieval, early modern, modern) structures the narration, without chronology history would be rendered a series of random events taking place outside of the strictures of time or context. Thus, although the past that is mediated through heritage may be only one element in a whole suite of historical representations, its handling of time is of significance in the conjugation of the historical narrative.

Promoting Ireland as a tourism space

The last decade has witnessed an increased push towards transforming the Irish countryside from a predominantly working agricultural one to a tourism landscape where Irish history can be retailed to the overseas visitor and local (for a discussion of the distinction between 'working country' and landscape see Williams, 1973). The expansion in the number of heritage centres, historic trails, nature reserves and interpretative centres has hastened the remapping of Ireland from a peripheral European state specialising in the export of agricultural products (Cullen, 1972; Daly, 1981; Ó Gráda, 1994), to a 'pleasure periphery' designed to retail and retell historical narratives to an ever-increasing volume of travellers visiting the island (O'Connor and Cronin, 1993, Breathnach, 1994). In common with trends in eastern European economies, promoting tourism has been seen as an alternative strategy to endogenous industrial growth (Kockel, 1994). Although there are difficulties in measuring the precise economic effect of tourism, contributions to GDP rose from 5.7% in 1985 to 7.3% in 1991 (Gilmor, 1994). The number of overseas tourists who entered the country in 1991 was 3.5 million and this increased to 5.2 million in 1997. In employment terms tourism represents 7.1% of total employment returns and 12.6% of service sector employment, although the gendered, unskilled and seasonal nature of the employment profile has been highlighted by Breathnach (1994).

While historically it has been the rural environment which has been most vigorously promoted, Irish cities have increasingly become part of the tourism package, frequently acting as entrepôts for overseas tourists. Dublin, in particular, has marketed itself effectively in a drive to increase tourism revenue, especially since it became European City of Culture 1991 (Clohessy, 1994). While Dublin houses some of the most popular Irish heritage attractions, e.g. Book of Kells, the influence of modernist developers has resulted in much of the historic fabric of the city being razed (Lincoln, 1993). In the 1990s therefore the city has attempted to present itself not so much as a place to see but as a place to experience, combining its historical features with more contemporary ones.

Travelling to Ireland and associated travel writing, however, is not a recent activity. Indeed Cronin (1993, 52) observes that 'From the *iomramh* [voyages] to the *navigatio* to the Tour, travellers in search of salvation, instruction or the godsend of novelty have either left the island or landed on it, tracking the signs of specificity'. What is relatively new is the increased volume of visitors to Ireland, the expanding number of travel books published on Ireland since 1945 and the increased role of the state in the promotion of Ireland as a tourist destination. Through advertising, dominant images of place are represented and analyses of tourist brochures suggest that Ireland offers the promise of 'empty space'—space that is uninhabited—and in this respect they are reminiscent of colonial accounts of overseas territories ripe for European settlement (Pratt, 1992). Visual representations picture Irish 'natives' as predominantly working in agriculture and implicitly suggest that an organic relationship between people and their natural environment is to be found in Ireland (Gallagher, 1989; Gibbons, 1988; Quinn, 1991). Concomitant with depictions which evoke 'empty space', tourist literature similarly conveys Ireland as occupying 'empty

time'—where today is like yesterday and yesterday is like tomorrow. In his analysis of academic anthropology Fabian (1983) suggests that the discipline emerged as an allochronic discourse: the science of studying other people in another time. This practice, he claims, was inevitably political as anthropologists positioned themselves in relation to the society under study along spatial and temporal co-ordinates. Remote places at the 'uttermost ends of the earth' frequently proved to be fertile ground for the advancement of evolutionary theories of human societies (Gamble, 1992). Paradoxically the proximity of Ireland to the centre of western intellectual thought, coupled with a pattern of colonial relationships between itself and its nearest neighbour, has rendered it a transitional space, neither exclusively traditional nor exclusively modern *vis-à-vis* progressivist analyses of the past (Graham, 1997). Tourist images and travel writing about Ireland have adopted similar representational practices where Ireland is placed 'behind' modern time. The tourist text mimics colonial antecedents which undergirded a particular historical narration of Ireland (Kiberd, 1995). In his analysis of travel writing Cronin (Cronin, 1993, 61) observes that 'the hegemony of linear, unidirectional time in the post-Renaissance West, is subverted by the digressive, anarchic disrespect for its imperatives in daily life in Ireland'. The intellectual collapsing of time into space where the binary distinctions—tradition and modernity—are positioned as geographical rather than temporal categories (Agnew, 1996), are used instrumentally by Irish tourism organisations to promote the country to overseas visitors, whom they assume are also schooled within these frames of reference. Time, then ceases to exist except as a space in which degrees of modernity can be calibrated. Over the past decade the Irish state has published a variety of strategy documents outlining its approach to the development of heritage tourism attractions. The following section focuses on the most influential of these.

Planning a tourism landscape: from chronology to themed spaces

In 1992 Bord Fáilte, the Irish Tourist Board, published a document which would form the basis for the development of heritage attractions in Ireland. The introductory section of the report claimed that 'History and culture are fundamental to the core Irish tourism product, as perceived by potential (overseas) tourists . . . Irish history, due to the influence of many peoples, cultures and conflicts, is not easily understood by visitors' (Bord Fáilte, 1992, 1–2). To overcome this difficulty it was proposed that a chronological approach be discarded in favour of a thematic one, because chronologies are problematic to represent and are poorly understood by visitors (Bord Fáilte, 1992). Cronin (1993) noted a similar absence of chronology in travel accounts and he connected this with the discursive strategies of the genre itself. Travel writers comment on time being ordered differently in Ireland, running counter to the 'chronocracy' of Western conceptions of time, and this facilitates a strategy which attempts to convey a unique sense of time and place. The travel writer seeks digressions where 'the peripeteia of incident are paralleled by the wanderings of narrative, shifting between description, comment and speculation' (Cronin, 1993, 62). Similarly Ashworth and Larkham (Ashworth, 1994) have observed a reciprocal link between heritage and place, where place is sacralized by its general historical associations.

The Tourist Board's desire to structure the Irish past, not around chronological time but around 'themed spaces' borrows some of the techniques employed by travel writers. In tourism planning then the plot of the past is loosely arranged around a series of themes acted out in spaces but the sequencing of events, which may inform academic historians' structuring of the past, is displaced. The marketing initiative of Bord Fáilte broadly reflects this diagnosis where 'emotional experience [is at] its core positioning' (Bord Fáilte, 1997, 3).

Specifically the Tourist Board proposed that the Irish past be mediated through a series of 'interpretative gateways'. These are arranged under five broad themes, and each theme is to be explored through a series of 'storylines'. The five themes comprise: live landscapes, making a living, saints and religion, building a nation and the spirit of Ireland, with each supported by specific subthemes (Table 1). Live landscapes, for instance, include what we might conventionally call nature, with story-

Table 1
The interpretative gateways and accompanying storylines designed by Bord Fáilte

Theme	Storylines
Live landscapes	Land and sea
	Mountain and moorland
	Cliffs and caves
	Bogs and wetlands
	River and lakeland
	Wildlife and nature
Making a living	Emigration and famine
	Working with the sea
	Industry, transport and power
	Inventions, transport and power
	Lifestyles through the ages
	Farming heritage
Saints and religion	Pagan Ireland
	Early Christianity
	Saints and scholars
	Missionary spirit
	Religious upheaval
	The living faith
Building a nation	Celts and high kings
	Invasion and conquest
	War and rebellion
	The Anglo-Irish
	People and places
	Ireland's story
The spirit of Ireland	Literary Ireland
	Language, folklore and legend
	Ireland entertains
	Art in Ireland
	Irish games and sport
	Famous personalities

Source: Bord Fáilte, Heritage and Tourism.

lines consisting of land and sea, mountain and moorland (Table 1). This themed strategy seeks to avoid replication of the product and to enable the tourism package to be *regionalized* (fixed in space) in a coherent manner. This approach is not guided by a desire to explicate the interconnections between times and spaces, it is based on a principle of sound economic management, where what Urry (1990) refers to as the 'prefiguratively postmodern' character of travel could be exploited. Under the theme, making a living, for instance, is the storyline emigration and famine. The explicit omission of any reference to time masks the fact that Ireland has experienced periodic emigration and famines over the past two millennia. Implicitly this category is making reference to the nineteenth century and while famine and emigration were important processes in accounting for changing patterns of land tenureship and settlement in that century, and with cultural transformations associated with the decline of the Irish language and the re-organisation of the Catholic Church (Ó Gráda, 1988), their incorporation under the theme 'making a living' appears unintentionally ironic. The regionalisation of the famine theme to ports of departure (e.g. Cobh in Co. Cork) or to workhouses in the west of Ireland, disguises the effect of the famine on political, economic and social processes elsewhere in the country.

Ideally, for the Tourist Board, each heritage site in the state should be accommodated under one of these themes and it should market itself accordingly. Moreover, each site must avoid 'copying the storyline of an existing attraction' (Bord Fáilte, 1992, 1–4). While the immediate experience of the Great Famine in Ireland was socially and spatially selective (Whelan, 1986; Ó Gráda, 1989) this policy suggests that two adjacent heritage sites should not publicly represent their history of the famine because to do so would be copying one another's storyline. The static conception of place, implied here, allows none of the spatial or temporal dynamics of the famine to be represented. The impact of the famine in 1845, for instance, was different to its effect by 1847. Tourism planning then can be likened to a literary text—a series of short stories—which can be read independently of each other by the tourist. While the text metaphor has been popular in landscape interpretation (Barnes and Duncan, 1991) especially with its emphasis on intertextuality (the relationships between different texts), the Tourist Board's approach is underscored by a narrative of place-exceptionalism. Time is obliterated by place as heritage mapping becomes a reference guide to spatialized storylines rather than to a series of localised yet interdependent histories. Consequently, as Agnew (1996, 28) has noted, time and space have suffered 'by expressing one in the reductionist terms of the other'. Moreover, for the consumer this strategy conveys a random sense of time where '[p]eople's lives . . . are experienced as a succession of discontinuous events' (Urry, 1990, 92).

In Ireland where interpretations of the past have been heatedly debated over recent decades toppling what has been regarded as a nationalist historiographical canon (Brady, 1994), the interpretative gateway approach to heritage planning has relevance to the wider debate in academic history (Graham, 1994). The historian Foster (1993, xvi) has suggested that ' . . . cultural diversity and cross-channel borrowing are implicit in Irish history, and cannot be denied with piety or suppressed by violence'. This diverse cultural inheritance, alluded to by Foster, may not be facilitated by the

storyline approach adopted by Bord Fáilte. The overlapping of different interpretations of the past, suggested by historical revisionism, is hindered by a themed framework, where avoidance of repetition or overlap on a site-basis constrains the possibility for multivocal representations. Unlike some analyses of the British heritage industry where nostalgia for the past has been linked to economic decline (Hewison, 1987; Wright, 1985), in Ireland it is precisely the pressures to reject older interpretations of the past which generate a crisis of representation in the heritage sector. In the late 1990s, for instance, visits to Buckingham Palace or the Eiffel Tower could be construed as apolitical activities in neutral spaces—sites of entertainment—unconnected with current political issues: in Dublin a visit to Kilmainham gaol is difficult to divorce from the independence movement of the early twentieth century and thus to the constitutional legitimacy of the state itself. The themed framework adopted by Bord Fáilte may enhance the marketing of Ireland as a tourism destination and may render it comprehensible for European Union grant-aid, but the privileging of a themed framework of heritage management underestimates the potential for heritage sites to mediate the past in different but by no means antithetical ways to academic history. The following two examples will illustrate the limitations of adopting a themed avenue to interpretation as proposed by the state, and the advantages of developing a heritage site which anchors the narrative in local historical geography and eschews an approach that reifies local events into national political and cultural processes. The rationale for selecting these two sites is that they were both established and opened in 1987 when the push towards the development of heritage attractions was gathering pace. Secondly, both are located in rural areas remote from the conventional sites of historic interest and do not necessarily benefit from proximity to an existing popular attraction (e.g. Newgrange passage grave). Thirdly, both sites employed academic expertise to guide their interpretation and visual representation. Nevertheless, their approaches are radically different and this is partly a consequence of the conception of the past employed by the curatorial staff at each site.

Irish National Heritage Park: an open-air museum?

The Irish National Heritage Park in County Wexford, designed and opened in 1987 under the auspices of the local authority Wexford County Council, falls within Bord Fáilte's theme—building a nation—and the storyline—Ireland's story. The site was developed to achieve the twin aims of attracting tourists to south-eastern Ireland and educating the public in field monuments (Interview, 1993a). Historic theme parks have a long history, and Sorenson (1989) draws a distinction between those that have evolved *in situ* from existing archaeological sites and those that are total re-creations. While the distinction may be best thought of as a continuum, the park in Wexford is largely re-created. Drawing from professional archaeological expertise the park presents examples of field monuments from the Mesolithic period (7000 BC) to the Norman period (1500 AD). The site is comprised of exact replicas of field monuments based on academic research. Using Urry (1990)'s tripartite division of heritage sites—Wexford is designed for the collective gaze, it is historic and

inauthentic. The park is not specifically designed to offer a history of settlement in Ireland over several thousand years, it is by contrast devised to convey something of 'everyday life'—the ways in which earlier peoples produced, used and consumed objects and tools of manufacture (Interview, 1993a). The tourist has the opportunity to view, for example, a Stone Age house, a Viking ship or a Medieval castle (Fig. 1).

Although the map of the site suggests that the visitor tours the park in a roughly chronological order, beginning with the pre-historic monuments, there is no necessity to do so. In a carefully landscaped setting the tourist can pick and mix at a micro-scale (Fig. 2). There is little explanation of how location, context, social and economic parameters informed the development of specific aspects of the material culture represented in the park. Material culture just is, it does not become. As in other theme parks 'Death and decay, are, it seems, denied' (Sorenson, 1989, 65). Hoyau's claim (1988, 29) of French heritage sites that '. . . dead labour is restaged, with the violence done to the producers and the environment spirited away in a search for lived experience and past forms of social life' also applies at Wexford. The focus on material culture alone creates a static experience of life in the past. While Ashworth (1994, 20) argues that 'It is the interpretation that is traded [at heritage sites], not its various physical resources', in Wexford the role of physical material resources cannot be underestimated, as visitors regularly climb into the Viking ship, operate an early milling machine or touch a standing stone. But much attention is focused on the visual representation and the interpretation is consistently implicit rather than explicit. The beholding eye of the tourist is naturalised as a cogent observer of the world, making sense of a visual display which is logical and rational. Crang (1997) has recently reminded us, though, of the necessity of querying these conventional assumptions about the practices of visualising.

In addition, the park's cut-off point of the sixteenth century suggests that the Irish 'nation' produced little of value since then, or that the history of the island becomes messier and less amenable to the neat categorisations employed in the park. While historians have generally located the emergence of ideas of nationhood in the last two centuries (Anderson, 1983), the park's displays suggest that nationhood can be situated in the early antiquities of the island. In line with nationalist discourse nations exist from time immemorial and thus are constituted outside the usual conventions of time. While a case can be made for the popular representation of field monuments particularly where original examples no longer exist, in Wexford the irony is '. . . that even as a fake Norman motte and bailey was under construction there, a real Norman motte and bailey was bulldozed by a farmer near Kells, Co. Kilkenny' (McDonald, 1992, 3). The commitment of the state to fund a simulacrum of archaeological monuments to attract tourists can be contrasted with a notably flimsier commitment to preserving archaeological remains.

In the context of any museum display, Lumley (1988, 13) contends that '. . . the museum text needs also to manifest the metatext, so that the very ability to read and make sense, as well as the choices leading to a particular display, are visible to the public'. In Wexford the metatext is obscured in an effort to produce accurate replicas of field monuments. The fact that the monuments represented at the site would rarely be found in the field at such close proximity to each other is not sufficiently exposed.

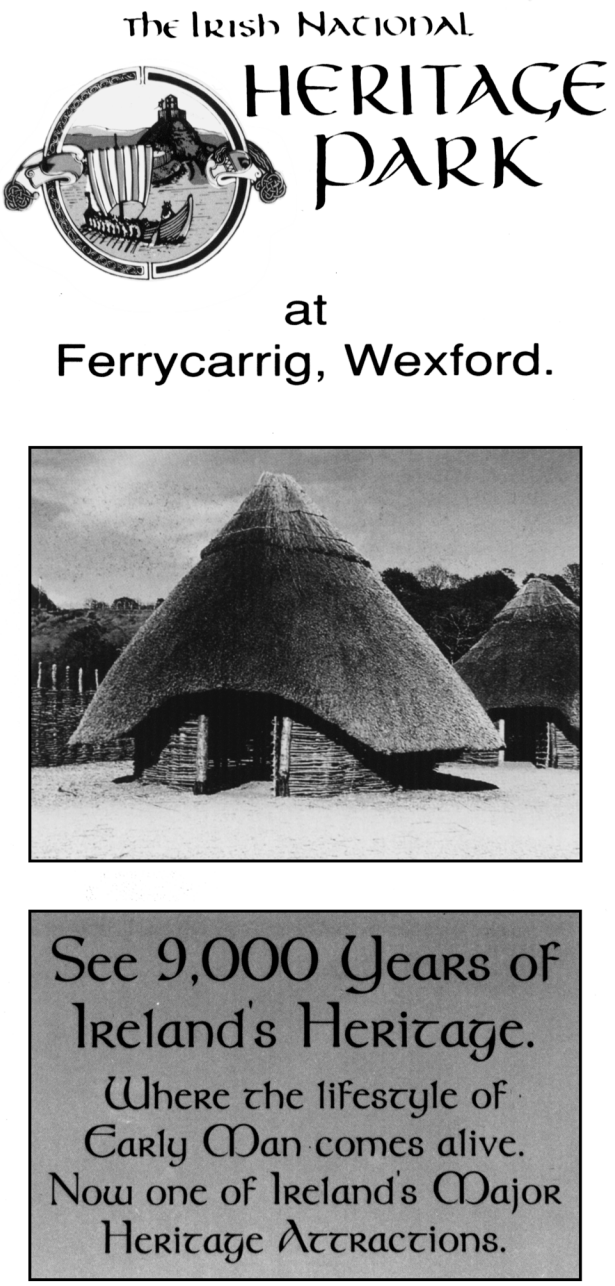

Fig. 1. The advertising brochure for the Irish National Heritage Park at Ferrycarrig in Wexford. The brochure emphasises that 9,000 years of Ireland's heritage is represented in the park. (Courtesy of the Irish National Heritage Park.)

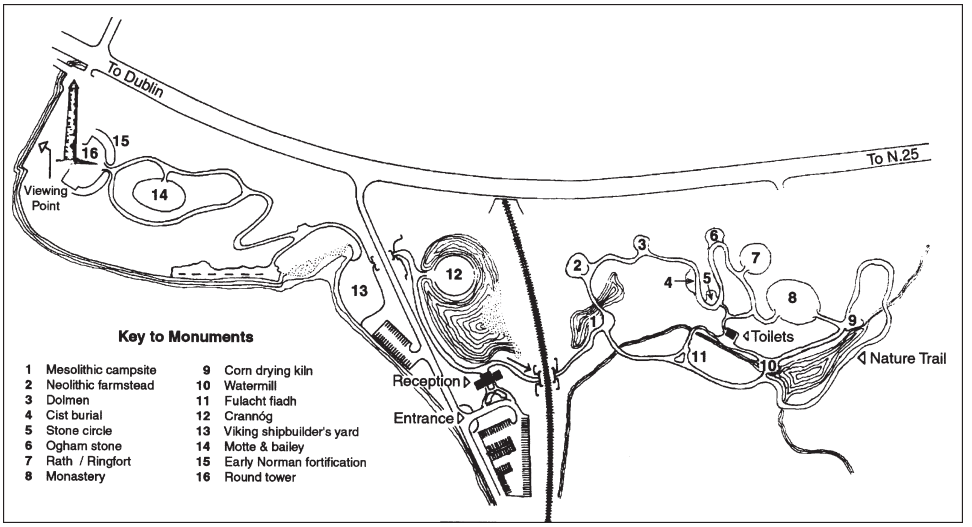

Fig. 2. The map of the Irish National Heritage Park presented to tourists to guide them around the park. Although there is a chronological order to the map the tourist does not necessarily have to follow the viewing order suggested. (Courtesy of the Irish National Heritage Park.)

The functional and ideological links between the periods represented (e.g. Mesolithic and Neolithic) at the park, and the rationale for adopting Bord Fáilte's category—building a nation—are not adequately developed. The round tower erected to commemorate Wexford men killed during the Crimean War 1854–55, for instance, is a nineteenth-century reproduction of an Early Christian tower. The reasons why there was a revival of interest in Early Christian architectural forms in the middle of the nineteenth century and how this is connected with a nationalist discourse is not elucidated (Sheedy, 1981). Consequently, the reader is given the impression that there is no difference whatsoever between the original and the reproduction, and thus the consumer has no context from which to understand the cultural politics underlying the use of the round tower in commemorative activity in the nineteenth century. While the park offers students and visitors with some information on the fundamental characteristics of field monuments and the reproductions are well executed, the claim to be a 'national' heritage park is misleading. The heritage exposed in this park is of an archaeological and architectural variety, giving priority to the built form independent of the context of its construction. By contrast, the following example of an estate house, suggests that the past can be mediated effectively to a popular audience when the site treats time and space as central to the narrative through emphasising the local historical geographies and their connections to larger processes.

Elite landscapes made popular: Strokestown Park House?

Tours of stately homes conventionally focus on the architecture and design of the house, accompanied by a brief history of the owners of an estate, their taste in interior decoration, furnishings, artwork and the planning of the estate demesne and gardens. Frequently presented from the point of view of the ruling class, the preservation of country homes is often connected with the desire to represent the prestige of a community's past or of its most successful landowners. In a British context, the stately home and its estate has been linked to the evolution of a distinctly English landscape tradition and an historical identity which has been preserved particularly by the National Trust. Lowenthal (1991, 220) claims, however, that regularly 'the country house door—along with the countryside itself—is kept firmly shut'. The preservation of the stately home in Ireland, however, has had a more fractured history. In the example I am using here, however, the site originated independent of national tourism policy and consequently its has not been dependent on conforming to the strictures of Bord Fáilte's guidelines.

After the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922, many houses of the gentry were either destroyed, abandoned or neglected. Not regarded as either an architectural or cultural icon worthy of preservation 'the destruction of the Big House was an ideal means through which the Free State could symbolically be seen to break with the past' (Dodd, 1992, 10). In the early years of Irish independence the stately home was viewed as a representation of the coloniser's cultural landscape and thus unworthy of state aid or public memory.

In recent decades some 'Big Houses' have been preserved by the state and independent trusts. The example of Strokestown Park House, County Roscommon, opened to the public in 1987, illustrates how the past can be represented multivocally. Located ninety miles from Dublin the house is presented in its local geographical context but is also connected to regional, national and international historical geographies. The strength of this approach is that it underlines the significance of the local space but it does not use the house as an exemplar of general historical processes made local. In their analysis of museum culture Sherman and Rogoff (1994) suggest four conceptual keystones in the arch of museum politics and practices which will help to throw light on how representation works at Strokestown. First, museums are comprised of a series of objects, which are ordered and classified in a specific sequence to offer a coherent meaning to the display. Second, these sequences of objects are woven into an external narrative which may relate, for instance, to local history, class relations or the nation. Third, museums are designed to serve a specified public and exhibits are structured to disclose the story to that public. Finally, the audience's response to a display becomes an integral part of the design process.

The house at Strokestown was built on lands granted to a certain Nicholas Mahon in the 1650s. The house itself was built in the 1740s in the Palladian style, with the wings adjoining the central block being added later (Fig. 3). At the beginning of the nineteenth century the Mahons were the most significant gentry family in the area

Fig. 3. The facade of Strokestown Park House. (Courtesy of Strokestown Park House.)

with an estate exceeding 30,000 acres. The owners of Strokestown established a planned estate village adjacent to the demesne. Its exceptionally wide main street underlines a principle of linearity popular among the gentry of the time, with an Anglican church at the western end of the town and the Georgian Gothic triple arch at the eastern end, forming the entrance to the Strokestown Park House (Hood, 1995). While the house serves as the centre for the estate's public display, the morphology of the demesne and town constitute the backdrop to the discussion of Strokestown's past (Fig. 4).

The house at Strokestown is presented to the public through a guided tour lasting approximately forty-five minutes. While John Urry suggests (Urry, 1990, 112) that 'heritage history is distorted because of the predominant emphasis on visualisation, on presenting visitors with an array of artefacts, including buildings (either "real" or "manufactured"), and then trying to visualise the patterns of life that would have emerged in them', at Strokestown, the visual and the verbal are united into a coherent narrative where the 'tour is structured to use the house as a vehicle to explain social history' (Dodd, 1993). This is made possible by the availability of detailed records on the house's management and also by the internal geography of the house itself. The tour visits the main reception rooms of the house, the first floor living quarters and the kitchen. While the architecture of the house dictates, to some extent, the sequence of the tour, it is also arranged according to the type of history it seeks to tell. A typical tour is arranged in four parts: (a) economic and architectural history of the early estate; (b) the house during the years of the Great Famine; (c) gender

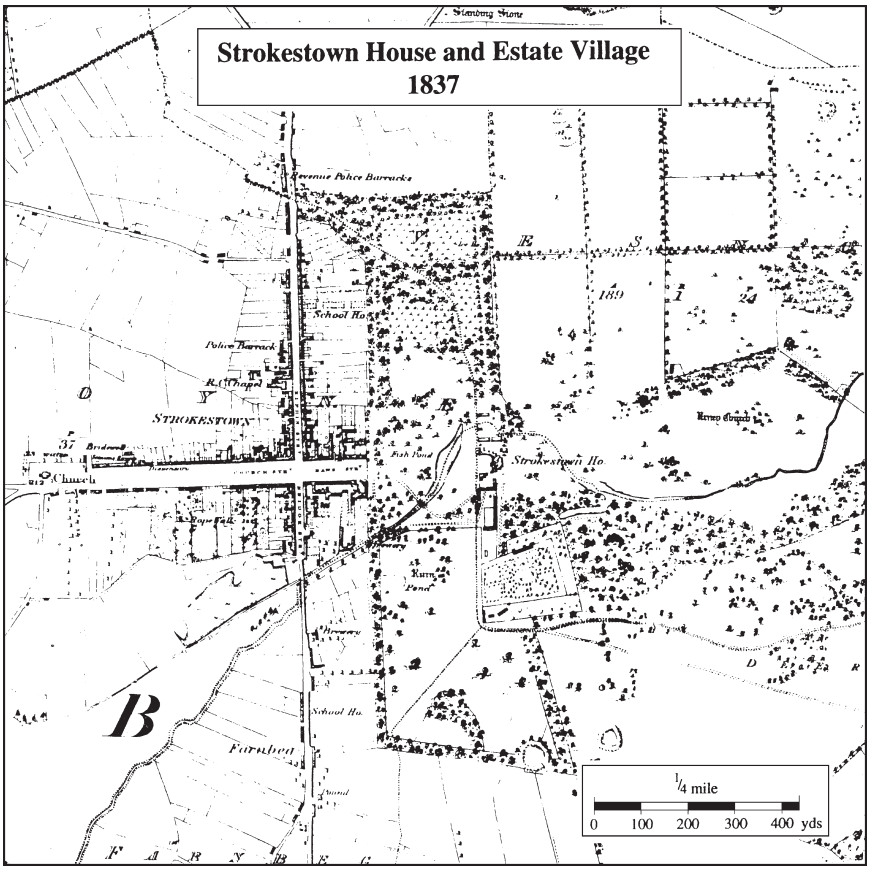

Fig. 4. An 1837 six-inch-to-one-mile Ordnance Survey map of Strokestown and the estate. The house is located east of the town about 100 yards from the main street. The map illustrates the cruciform design of the town and the expansive main street.

relations and family history; (d) social relations between the gentry and the servant classes.

The tour begins with a discussion of the early acquisition and architectural evolution of the house. In the main reception room and ballroom the early economic history of the estate, the injection of new money into the estate in the 1800s and the pastimes of the owners are emphasised. The spatial division of labour between the landlord and servant classes is highlighted through a discussion of the invisible underground passageways built to disguise the routes taken by the servants in the administration of the house and demesne. In the study of the house the guides offer an extensive discussion of the role of Strokestown House during the time of the Famine. Thanks to the large volume of archival papers dealing with this period, the tour reconstructs the role of Denis Mahon (the landlord) in the administration of his

estate during these years and tallies up the effects of the famine which shrunk the estate's population of around 11,000 people by about 88 percent.

While much of the literature on heritage tourism focuses on the authenticity of past narratives and the tendency for popular histories to sanitize the past, in Strokestown the tour narrative presents the famine as a critical moment in nineteenth-century Irish history, but the story is contextualized in the local geographical setting, an area severely affected by the potato blight of the 1840s. At this juncture in the narrative the local, national and international are interwoven. Equally impressive is the tour's handling of the *contested* nature of historical interpretation (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996). In the case of the assassination of the landlord in 1847 the guides offer several different documented versions of his death, which amplifies for the audience the equivocal nature of historical evidence and it illustrates how interpretation can be coloured by systems of belief. In the upper floors of the house, comprising the family's quarters (bedrooms, children's playroom and school room), the narrative shifts to the themes of gender relations among the gentry, child–parent relationships and the spaces occupied by children. The tone of the tour is lighter here also, where objects move into the foreground. For instance, the role of the governess/tutor in the social relations of a mansion of this type is discussed.

The final section of the tour is set in the dining room and galleried kitchen. The spatial and social distances maintained between the servants and landlords is reinforced through a discussion of the architectural practices and spaces occupied by each group. The galleried kitchen (the only remaining one in Irish country houses) serves as a poignant social metaphor for the hierarchical social relations cultivated through a system of domestic management (Fig. 5). The adjoining subterranean passageways ensured the invisibility of the servant class as they carried out their daily duties. Ironically it is the very existence of these passageways today which enables visitors to visualise those people whom the landlords sought to hide from public view. The kitchen was the servant class's central demesne, linked geographically to the house but socially separated from it (Johnson, 1996).

So what is the relationship between heritage and history as it is represented at Strokestown Park House? The presentation differs from other sites in several important ways. First, the house is currently occupied and thus it is not presented solely as a window to the past. Historical and contemporary material items are woven together in the house. Time, then, is not fixed at Strokestown but the house and its representation are undergoing constant revision. Second, the house does not adopt a 'museumification' approach to preservation. There are no barriers or warning signs in the house. Visitors can freely touch objects and even though there are many items on display of high monetary value, these are not presented in a way that distances them from the viewer. Similarly unlike many other country houses which are approached through the back door or some discreet entrance, the visitors to Strokestown enter the house through the main front door. This avoids 'perpetuating the class division that [the house] was made to represent' (Dodd, 1993). Visitors are encouraged to see the house as part of their own past, one in which their ancestors may have played an active role. Moreover the vocabulary used in the tour eschews an

Fig. 5. The galleried kitchen in Strokestown Park House. The kitchen, located in the north wing of the house, retains its original balustraded gallery which allowed the lady of the house to deliver menus without having to enter directly the space of the servant class. (Courtesy of Strokestown Park House.)

elite perspective by minimising reference to the minutia of Palladian architecture and portraiture.

Visitors to the house have noted the different approach used at Strokestown. A Dublin woman who visited the house and had already visited several other houses open to the public observed that 'This was the first time we were able to sense the atmosphere of what life was really like in such a house. This was due in large part to the excellent lecture by the guide' (Interview, 1993b). The curator has emphasised that '. . . everyone who does a tour here does a different tour' (Dodd, 1993), thus the narrative is not heavily pre-scripted. Guides are not employed just as 'school leavers, they are people who come with a specific interest in the place for whatever reason' (Dodd, 1993). While each guide is provided with a list of issues that might be tackled in the tour, not every detail is adjudged to be critical. For instance, when training guides Dodd does not bother telling them about the house's art collection, especially the allegorical paintings because, in his view, '. . . most people who visit the house are not interested in that' (Dodd, 1993).

The visitors interviewed at the house were aware that the 'other side of the story' was part of the exposition in Strokestown. An Irish doctor observed that the other houses he had visited presented a 'more glossy magazine' version of the past and were not 'as politically correct' (Interview, 1993b). A female visitor, on a more defensive note, commented that '. . . in attempting to highlight the plight of the ordinary people, and rightly so, you [the guide] painted a very negative picture of

the family . . . all aristocrats from Russia to France had no consideration for the peasants' (Interview, 1993b). Thus while Strokestown's radical perspective on the past is explicit, the spirit of the interpretations allows tourists to make their own critical judgements of the tale narrated. As Brett (1993) has noted in his discussion of heritage sites, if readers are clear on the premises underlying the ordering of a display or the sequence of the narrative, they are then enabled to arrive at their own critical conclusions. And although this may not be equivalent to scholar's text, at Strokestown an attempt is made to offer a few alternative renderings of the past.

Concluding comments

Geographers are increasingly concerned with the representation of landscapes, but it is only recently that they have paid attention to heritage landscapes and how they represent the past. Criticisms of the heritage industry's attempts to narrate the past as little more than bogus history are often overdrawn. Rather than focusing on whether heritage conveys inaccurate history, the more interesting questions for geographers relate to examining the manner in which the spaces of heritage translate complex cultural, political and symbolic processes to popular audiences. In the case of Ireland, this paper has emphasised that the state's framework for heritage tourism planning, through interpretative gateways, structures the Irish past around space rather than time. The replacement of a chronology with broad themes overlooks the significance of time in the transformation of landscapes. Consequently tourism planning employs techniques more associated with the production of literary texts, where the past is loosely plotted around a series of themes acted out in space. Some of the weaknesses of this approach are highlighted in the Irish National Heritage Park in Wexford. A static conception of space and the fossilizing of the past through the reproduction of material culture underlines how the dynamism of historical processes can be reduced. By contrast, Strokestown Park House in Roscommon provides an interesting example of how the history of a landed estate can be provocatively explored in a manner which elides an elite perspective and situates the representation within its local geographical setting, and where the meanings of the past are mediated by the interplay of object, narrative and audience. Rather than viewing heritage as a form of 'bogus history' retailed solely for entertainment, this paper has treated heritage sites as part of a broader suite of representational practices that raise important and diverse questions about how the past is mediated in the late twentieth century.

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