

Arts, Culture and the National Agenda

Chapter 3 American Legacies and National Memories

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PUBLIC ACCESS TO THE NATIONAL HERITAGE:

WHO PAYS THE PIPER?

Public discussion of the national historical heritage has burst into prominence with the onset of the widely proclaimed new millennium. With the United States entering this new era as the most powerful nation in the world and experiencing a period of unparalleled economic prosperity, a variety of players have raised the banner of the national heritage. Most prominently, the Clinton administration and the First Lady began a Millennium initiative focusing on the preservation of cherished objects, the built environment, the natural environment and the historical record. This initiative received an uncharacteristically warm response from the Republican Congress, and significant funds have been allocated to it. Both the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities have emphasized those of their own programs that support the idea of the national heritage, as have such agencies as the Library of

Congress and the Smithsonian Institution. A few major individual donors and philanthropic foundations have also risen to the challenge.

The historical legacy is an idea that has wide appeal, and is proving to be one that is congenial to the rapidly emerging concept of government/private sector financial partnership in the funding of cultural projects. The commercial sector, after all, shares the sense of national pride that has welled up over the past decade or so. A wide variety of regional and local arts and cultural institutions and service organizations have also jumped on the band wagon. And why not? What's good for business is good for America, and the national heritage is apparently good for both.

Alas, however, in this most pragmatic of cultures, the loudest argument for the historical heritage is that it is good for business. The buzz term for this concept is "cultural tourism," and the idea is quite simple. If we preserve and refurbish historical sites, conserve the natural beauty of the nation's physical splendor and present the most popular forms of artistic expression, then folks will travel to visit them. More important, they will pay for their pleasure. "Preserve it and they will come" is the watchword of the day. At one level, who can object? It is clearly an inherently good thing to finance and promote the national physical and historical heritage. At worst such activities make the country a superficially more attractive place; at best, they add to the nation's cultural storehouse.

At another level, however, there is a serious problem. Even in the present vibrant economic times there is not enough money to do everything we want to do to preserve

and present the nation's historical culture. Choices have to be made, and, as Aristotle said, "everything that is necessary is necessary upon some hypothesis." What is the hypothesis of historical heritage policy? If it is that the national culture should serve commerce, then the past is in trouble. We owe more to our culture than to use it simply as a program for economic development. I recognize that few proponents of cultural tourism would want to limit the aims of heritage programming so narrowly, but the danger in politics (as in life) is that we are frequently condemned to live the consequences of our utilitarian arguments.

A second problem is that much of the current rhetoric (and programming) concerning the national memory is triumphalist. Good history is not merely the history of the winners. At any given point in time, after all, it is not clear to those who are living what the historical outcomes of their actions will be. Some very good people, institutions and ideas are historical losers. They deserve to be a part of the heritage, though, both because the historical record needs to be complete and accurate, and because there are no predetermined outcomes in history. The definition of "winners," after all, is in the hands of those in the future who interpret the past for us. For those of us who make such determinations, the moral burden of honesty is onerous -- we have to be prepared to make judgements that will not necessarily be popular.

If we are to do as well by the heritage as by the economy, we must broaden the scope of our hypothesis about why the historical heritage matters. This means, in my view, taking history more seriously. It means using history to interrogate the meaning of

our national experience, rather than exclusively to celebrate it. It means supporting institutions, activities, and ideas that are complex, hard to present to popular audiences and sometimes even threatening to our political peace of mind. This is a plea, then, both for tough-minded honesty in making policy to preserve and present the historical heritage, and for a generosity in defining the scope of such policy. We must reach out to preserve all significant aspects of the culture, not merely those that are politically and aesthetically appealing

Take the challenge of preserving the heritage of daily life in this country. We must be made aware of the character of the mundane aspects of life throughout our history – housing, clothing, education, sport, work, reading and the like. We need to be confronted with the ordinary manifestations of these activities rather than just their spectacular manifestations – from this point of view, tenement housing is as important as Monticello or Falling Waters, dime novels as important as the greatest works of literature, knowledge of diet as important as study of *haute cuisine*. We have institutions such as our great historical societies that do a superb job in many of these areas, but on the whole historical societies in this country are poorly supported, and find it difficult to fund their less spectacular collections and exhibitions. And the same is true for many other aspects of the preservation of the heritage. The “blockbuster show” has become an economic imperative across the range of cultural institutions. And even when spectacular presentations succeed, they depend on much more mundane activities such as conservation, cataloguing, and decent HVAC systems. Funders will pay for the exhibits but not for all the necessary behind the scenes infrastructural support.

An example, close to my heart, of the challenges created by the failure of the public to appreciate the importance of the underlying historical heritage is the difficulty of financing the publication of the papers of the most significant individuals in American history. This country has the largest and most diverse group of historical editing projects of any country in the world. We have developed an entire profession of trained historical editors who are doing a magnificent job of collecting, editing and publishing the papers of our ancestors. These range from the obvious suspects (George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Woodrow Wilson, Eleanor Roosevelt) to the not so obvious, such as the heroic edition of papers of African-Americans after the Civil War (the Freedmen and Southern Society Project) or the Papers of Margaret Sanger. Both the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Historical Records and Publications Commission have supported such editorial work generously in the past, but federal funding has declined at NEH and has not risen in many years at NHPRC. Like other federal funders, these now stress the need to match federal funds with private sector donations. But, with a few exceptions, it has been hard to make the case to foundations and individual donors that serious annotated editions of the papers of important figures in American history are essential components of the preservation of our historical heritage. Yet we surely cannot understand the past without such evidence. But we will not be able to continue essential work on such significant heritage activities if we have to make short-term utilitarian justifications for them.

There is a related problem that needs to be placed near the head of our mission to preserve the historical heritage – how to employ information technology fully. We are all aware of the explosive growth of the internet, and of the dramatic struggle for the acquisition of content for sites on the World Wide Web. Of course, it has not escaped notice that the nation’s past is a vast repository of potential “content.” The History Channel and a wide variety of other sites present many sorts of historical material, however weak they may be intellectually, but the viewing public gets most of its sense of history by watching old movies. To be sure, NEH and the Public Broadcasting system, along with several philanthropic foundations and business corporations, have funded serious documentary videos, but even these presentations tend to the lowest common denominator – and funding for them has sharply diminished in recent years.

We have, that is, begun to make such content available through the use of information technology and telecommunications to preserve and present the American memory to the public. But we have only just begun, and the task that confronts all American institutions maintaining collections of cultural materials is how to pay for the digitization of all or significant parts of their collections. That is to say, we now have the opportunity to convert text, image and sound into electronic files that can be stored and transmitted. When such files are placed on the World Wide Web, they are accessible (frequently at no cost) to any user in the world who can connect to the Web. But digitization is slow and horrifically expensive. There are a few notable examples of large corporate donations to nonprofit or public libraries or museums for such purposes – the Ameritech gift to the Library of Congress for its American Memory Project is a

distinguished example. But there are not many, and if our cultural institutions are to digitize their collections (for reasons both of preservation and public access), we have to find ways to channel large sums of public monies to them. The task is huge, for we must not only digitize cultural heritage materials, but we must also preserve of materials that have been digitized, and arrange for preservation of and access to materials that are “born digital,” such as databases.

The alternatives seem to be two – either we proceed at a snail’s pace with digitization, or we commercialize nonprofit institutions in order to raise funds for digitization. And, in the latter case, the danger is that the funders will impose preferences that are in tension with the public purposes of the museums and libraries with which they partner. There is, after all, an obvious tension between those whose main motive is to increase the size of audiences, and those (professionals and others) whose primary concern is to display the range and depth of their materials in a manner that challenges audiences intellectually. What stands in the way of responsible programming, we should recognize, is not simply external pressure, but the failure of leadership of board and staff in too many cultural institutions. What is clear is that if we are both to save the heritage and make it freely available to the American public, we will have to pay the piper. I doubt that the current trend to commercial partnership can succeed in preserving vast quantities of cultural material – or to present it in the way the public deserves and desires. The larger point is that both the “real” and the “virtual” heritage has to be preserved and presented fully, thoughtfully and as something other than entertainment.

The impact of information technology on both preservation of and access to the historical heritage is dependent not only upon money, but upon law. Few controversies in the public arena are harder to follow than that over the adaptation of the law of intellectual property (copyright, for the most part) to the digital environment. Both the federal government (the Democrats and Republicans seem in substantial agreement here) and the titans of digital commerce view the strengthening and protection of ownership rights to be at the core of the new economy in the United States. But what is good for Viacom and Microsoft and the Gross Domestic Product is not necessarily good for the users (here read “consumers”) of intellectual property. The challenge in this exciting new environment is to maintain the traditional balance in copyright law – protecting property in order to create incentives for intellectual creativity, while limiting that protection to some extent to permit adequate public access to the works created. At the moment, that balance is exceedingly precarious, and it threatens to tilt decisively in the direction of the rightsholders. If the trend continues, the public will find itself paying the piper very handsomely – sometimes even for works that have been created by government agencies, such as the publications of the General Printing Offices and special services of the Library of Congress.

I could give many comparable examples of the tension between commercialism and fidelity to the record of the historical experience in the United States, but my point is fundamentally simple. It is that preserving the historical heritage of the United States in a responsible fashion requires a more thoughtful and nuanced approach than we have currently developed. It requires a broader definition of what the heritage is, and how it

should be interpreted. It requires the courage to present the story in all of its contradiction and complexity. And it requires the government (at all levels) to be the lead funder of the preservation and presentation of the heritage, lest we sell our heritage for a mess of potage.