



Figure 1. Christchurch street display
Canterbury Museum

Witnessing social history

The artefact, the visitor and the new museology

by Paul Eggert

Abstract

In this essay I trace some changes in museum practices from the 1960s, especially the ways museums have come to capture social history. A gradual shift in museum practices from the 1970s towards incorporating the visitor-viewer into the dynamics of display is noticeable. This shift has latterly taken self-conscious and sophisticated forms, reflecting shifts in theoretical awareness. But what has in many ways been an advance has

also been attended by little-recognised costs. To bring them to light, I explore what I call the production-consumption spectrum in the presentation of the past in museums, museum villages, 'living history' and historical re-enactments. As there is no easily available position outside this spectrum, my own experiences as a 'consumer' form a springboard for some of the commentary. I argue that there is a need for a rebalancing of museums' twin obligations towards

artefacts and the visitor. I argue that museum professionals need to place a renewed emphasis upon the originating or production end of the spectrum, and that theorists of museology need to reflect more fundamentally on the nature and importance of the historical witness of the artefacts themselves.

Museums, exhibits and the visitor: From the 1960s to the postmodern

During 1962 and 1963 as a child, I went monthly with a school group to the Australian Museum in College Street, Sydney. The museum's organisation of its exhibits reflected the divisions of scientific, archaeological and anthropological knowledge. Our business was to look and learn. Exhibits were mostly in glass cases and we young viewers were positioned outside them as supposedly neutral onlookers. There was, admittedly, an element of theatre — such as the use of ultra-violet light in special booths to show the colouring of some minerals to their best advantage (a recent advance), and the accidental advantage taken of our diminutive bodily presences to give scale to the size of the dinosaur skeletons on display.

As in most museums of the time, some use was made of large-scale dioramas, an early twentieth-century introduction to museum practice.¹ Advances in taxidermy continued to lend dioramas an impressive quality, at least to the young mind. They are old-fashioned now, affording museological interest in themselves. They arrange the scene on perspectival lines in relation to the privileged position of the spectator in front of them. Some of the most successfully achieved examples, I subsequently discovered, are in the African wildlife

exhibition, dating from the 1940s, in the Museum of Natural History at Central Park, New York. Nowadays, as I observed in 2001, children run past, scarcely seeing them. Why would they stop? — given the advantage they enjoy of more or less *Walking with Dinosaurs*, as the 1999 fake-documentary for television was called. It used computer simulation and animatronic puppetry — the new televisual taxidermy — to visualise the rather bouncily unnatural movements of apparently weighty dinosaurs through real landscapes. In 1999 it was early days for this kind of technological fakery of the past, but the authoritative and seductive tones of Kenneth Branagh's voice-over helped to calm doubts. Knowledge comes in different forms nowadays, but the factor of theatrical wonder seems to be a constant.²

By keeping nature's prehistoric monsters, as the object of our gaze, safely behind the television screen, *Walking with Dinosaurs* shares a basic impulse with the exhibits I saw in the 1960s. The anthropological ones showed the way of living of Aboriginal people, for example, from a European perspective in the then-present. We were encouraged to take an interest in the so-called primitive, which, if quaint or curious or repellent, was always Other. The display was not designed to challenge our *position* of knowing, for that was literally unthinkable at the time. Even if the museum did make concessions to the theatricality of display, knowledge was knowledge. Scientific truth was the encompassing frame that the museum's exhibits rendered in great and sometimes fascinating detail.

By the early 1980s, however, the cultural relativism with which anthropology had always been half in love had been strengthened by poststructuralist attacks on centred positions of knowing. A European perspective no longer stood above the rest but only in equivalent relation to them.

Condescension towards the primitive was transformed, didactically and piously at first, into respect for other knowledge-systems. This was fuelled by guilt for the excesses of Christian missionising and for the other heavy footprints of European expansion, in the nineteenth century especially. In a memorable exhibit ('Into the heart of Africa') at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto in 1990, the European activity of collecting artefacts of primitive cultures was itself on display and, as it were, under interrogation. The interior of a Victorian collector's house with its innumerable trophies on the wall and in cabinets was one of the displays, surrounded by artefacts of African and American Indian tribal cultures. A didactic commentary on the exhibit labelling enacted the new curatorial self-consciousness — one that was meant to transfer to the viewer.³

Incorporating the viewer

Museums are collecting institutions. Generally not being on the original sites they can only re-create settings (rather than restore or reconstruct them) as appropriate contexts for their collections. From the 1980s, museums around the world created within their walls the equivalents of heritage villages as settings for their collections of once-common utensils and appurtenances of everyday life. I have walked through many of them.⁴ These high-street or main-street displays are often set around the turn of the twentieth century. They are a doggedly literal appeal to realism. The various shops are, of course, fakes — as became all too obvious once the technique became debased by repetition. But the intriguing collections of items likely to have been in shopfront windows, offices, saloons and parlours are real and of the period. Instead of the glass cabinets of the

1960s at which my schoolmates and I gazed, museums since the 1980s have given us, in their social-history exhibitions, a three-dimensional chronological cabinet — or fake time-capsule — whose otherness we can physically walk through but never actually enter. The street may be of real cobblestones, and we can perhaps walk into some of the mock buildings and even see the cigarette stubs and half-drunk glasses of beer, as if the people had all just suddenly left. It is like a form of theatre in which we might have had walk-on parts, except that the play finished just before we arrived at the backstage entrance: it 'is', after all, the past. Our presence is belated. These displays have a fairly constant expository line: each consists of the street itself (literally a line) and its variety. The message is always the same: how very different life used to be in a recognisably modern, 'olden days'.

New forms of museology emerged in the 1990s that would seek to enmesh or incorporate the viewer in the realisation of the exhibition more centrally than these fake streets could do. A good example was *Whales: The Enduring Legacy*, a temporary exhibition on whales at the Royal British Columbia Museum at Victoria, Canada, in 1997. This did not seem promising to me in advance. I expected exhibits in glass cases (shades of the 1960s) or some didactic environmentalism. In fact, the experience was more like a three-dimensional hypertext that the visitor completes rather than inspects by following a given narrative line. Though each stopping-point served as an eloquent node in itself, there was no clear didactic pathway. Nor was there even an obvious place to start. Instead, a wide variety of exhibits from across European and American Indian cultures was presented. There were clips of films, documentaries or stills on whaling projected onto sails slung from ceiling and walls, written documents

illustrating the craft and history of whaling in western Canada, early twentieth-century adventure novels for children about whaling, blown-up photographs of whaling stations, skeletons of a huge right whale and of a sea lion, accounts and exhibits of what whales eat, harpoons and explosive darts and cannons used variously and historically for whaling by Indians and Europeans, a large Indian canoe used for the same purpose and artefacts used for spiritual preparation for the hazardous pursuit.

So you moved from one culture's practices to the other and back again, from the animal world to the human, through a 100-year span of modern whaling, from curiosity as to its technology to a pleasure that its barbarities finished in Canada in 1967. But everywhere without censoriousness. Physically, your movements were from any one exhibit to

any other. There was no logic to follow, only serendipitous browsing. You were, of course, limited by what the curators had chosen to put on display and how the exhibition designers had realised those choices. But this limitation aside, you were, in a sense, *in* the glass cabinet — which is the museum — and not viewing the contents from outside. The dynamics of the display denied you a safe external position.

What you *did* feel the need to be secure about, however, was the status of the exhibits. As far as I could ascertain, none was fake. Their provenance or production was carefully rehearsed in the labelling and depended on foregoing research: this was the crucial prerequisite. Otherwise your activity in realising the display would have been a waste of time: you would have felt conned. But the meanings were not delimited and contained as in the case of the streetscapes. Three curators — an anthropologist, a mammologist and a historian — had worked well together.

The postmodern transfer

This sort of postmodern museology does not always work. Another 1990s creation, the Museum of Sydney, has been controversial. It is situated on the site of the first Government House at Sydney Cove, built in the early years of the convict settlement after its establishment there in 1788. The decision not to reconstruct that building was deliberately made. Instead, foundations of the house are picked out in modern stone on the pavement outside. As you enter, you go along the edge of a cluster of poles or columns on the pavement, most of wood, some of stone or steel. Closer inspection (for those who stop to look) shows that they are inscribed with the names of the local tribes gradually displaced by European invasion,



Figure 2. Entrance to Museum of Sydney, and *Edge of the Trees* sculptural installation by Janet Laurence and Fiona Foley
photograph by Leo Rocker, Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales



Figure 3. Archaeological display of the early port of Sydney
photograph by Jenni Carter
Museum of Sydney, Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales

but what artefactual significance the poles may have is not clear at first; I discuss this further, below. The glass entrance-doors have more writings on them (unexplained) and there is a rumble of voices as you pass through this glass entry cube (also unexplained). You begin to realise that you have work to do: but what kind of work, exactly, is this museum calling on you to perform? An actual archaeological dig is exposed just inside, revealing foundations, a drain and odd details of life in the house in its early years. You ascend stairs wondering in what special sense this is going to be a museum 'of Sydney'? One thing seems clear enough from the outset: it will be no act of homage to the colonial roots of the modern nation.

Audiovisual displays activated by your presence served, in the original installation, to usher you into aspects of Sydney's past. At the top of the stairs, voices — official, commercial and convict — apparently of the early port could be heard. The actors' images would appear mysteriously inside a glass cabinet, but it was not clear whether they were reading contemporary documents or a modern semi-dramatised adaptation. The bits and pieces of nautical and counting-house equipment also in the cabinet seemed accidental, like stage-props: they were in fact artefacts unearthed during archaeological digs from 1820s worksites.

That this display was self-consciously rather than unavoidably a glass cabinet was suggested by the chests of sparkingly clean,



Figure 4. *Specimen Cases* installation by Narelle Jubelin
photograph by Leo Rocker
Museum of Sydney, Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales

stainless-steel specimen drawers immediately opposite. Two of the original three chests are still there. They have been made in the manner of an antiquary–entomologist’s cabinet of butterflies. You open the drawers one by one. Each is separately lit from within as the drawer opens. You look through the glass on the top of the drawer at the specimens beneath. There are bits of bone, rock tools, broken bits of crockery from archaeological digs, letters Home to relatives in Britain, and a page or two of contemporary documents (some are only photographic copies). Indeed, whatever may be linked to early Sydney, whether Aboriginal or European, seems relevant. Making sense of each drawer soon becomes a tiresome business, however, even after you realise that the glass you look through has an account of the provenance and type of each object printed on it translucently.

This postmodern conception of curation transfers responsibility for synthesising the fragmentary information on offer back onto you as the viewer, positioning you as an antiquary ‘making it up’ almost from scratch, with little of the advantage of the apparatus of learning created in the last two centuries. There is something clinical in this museological approach. It is as if a deliberate de-skilling has gone on, while at the same time the display’s fragmentation has been achieved with a dentist’s precision. The theory of incorporating the viewer into the semiotic of the exhibition has been taken to a self-conscious endpoint.

It *might* have worked, but the fragments needed to be richer, for this viewer at least, to think it worth the effort. It was as if, in their continuing journey through time, the artefacts had caught the wrong bus. At least in the 1960s there was a system and

body of knowledge — a highly developed Eurocentric perspective behind the displays and the labelling — that gave fragments an amplitude and reach, however inspiring or uninspiring in themselves they might have been, however complicit the result in an exoticising of the Other.

In the 1950s and 1960s, science was the modern world's engine of progress. Botany, biology, zoology, palaeontology, archaeology, geology, anthropology: museums saw themselves as accepting the categories, displaying the new (and old) knowledge and explaining its results to thousands of school-groups like mine. Emphasis was on the disciplined *production* of meaning — scientifically systematised or historically contextualised meaning — and less on what we have since come to call its consumption: even though the dawning of new understanding in the visitor was, in effect, a significant goal. True, glass cases (or some of them) gave way to dioramas and other concessions to theatricality, rendering the viewer an onlooker. But what was on view was calculated to heighten the experience and to whet the appetite for the scientific knowledge. Since the 1960s, museums have gone from a gradual to an increasingly sophisticated recognition of the role of the visitor-viewer in 'realising' the exhibition. The fake-realism of main-street heritage exhibits, drawing on the contemporary fascination with 'living history' experiences, surrounded the viewer with authentic paraphernalia in spaces without windows, cutting off awareness of the world outside. The visitor was on the stage, but aware that that was what it was. The postmodern form seeks to dispense with the frame, to present fragments only. The viewer-enactor does the best she can. Multiple frames are suggested, but none is allowed to dominate. No grand narrative emerges. The whales exhibition in British Columbia was in this general

mode. Despite the shift in model from the production to the consumption end of the epistemological spectrum, the specimens and artefacts themselves finally support the show. Their origin and relationships to other aspects of material culture beg 'production' explanations, although nowadays they do not necessarily get it.

Postmodern presentation of the object in museums is often an actively self-conscious and deliberate attempt to mould the reception of meanings by visitors. The problem, as I see it, with the Museum of Sydney was, and to some extent still is, that it goes too far with this. One could diagnose the problem using terms offered by Stephen Greenblatt in 1990. He put forward a distinction between the effects on visitors to museums that aim either to evoke the *resonance* of the objects on display (deriving from the explanation of their significance in historical context, however poor or fragmentary their material condition may be) or their *wonder* (more typical of beautiful objects held up for aesthetic contemplation in an art museum).⁵ While Greenblatt acknowledged that most museums will have elements of both orientations, the Museum of Sydney, one could say, was tilted too far towards wonder and too far away from the expected aim of a social-history museum: historical resonance. This reversal of traditional expectations might nevertheless have worked, had the artefacts been able to sustain it.

This explanation is suggestive, but I would put the problem in somewhat different terms. The inaugural installation in 1995 was designed to pre-receive the meanings of the fragmentary artefacts in the collection. This would be done by employing artists to render the artefacts

and their potential historical meanings into another medium, to do the interpreting in advance, aesthetically.⁶ That in fact is the origin of the exhibits I described above. The impressive installation of poles by the entrance is sculpture rather than artefact, a collaboration of Janet Laurence and Aboriginal artist Fiona Foley that is meant to symbolise the original meeting of cultures at the *Edge of the Trees*, as the sculpture is called. Low voices come from the poles: ‘remnant words of Aboriginal languages, [and the] names of colonists’.⁷ The specimen cases are also an artwork, a creative response to the artefacts, by Narelle Jubelin. Another exhibit — a rather gimmicky one — called *Bond Store Tales*, developed by Ross Gibson but dismantled in 2002, drew visitors into a darkened area towards lit artefacts, triggering holographic images of early Sydney residents to appear and tell stories. The stories were fictional but based upon (i.e. a creative response to) historical archives. Similarly, the indistinct conversation at the entrance is a sound installation, entitled *The Calling To Come*, by Paul Carter. It is an imagined conversation between an Englishman and an Aboriginal woman, loosely based on the diary of William Dawes, an officer in the First Fleet to Sydney Cove.

For the museum’s inaugural curator, Peter Emmett, a museum space should offer a ‘sensory and sensual experience ... Its meanings are revealed through the physical experience of moving through it’.⁸ But what is the experience an experience *of*? The curatorial playfulness sets the artefacts at one extra, mediated remove from the visitor who is given no option but to experience them through the filter of art practices whose historical standards (of adequacy, factual correctness, fairness with context: in short, *reliability*) the visitor cannot know in advance. By refusing the visitor the consolation (or active assistance) of a

historical narrative to anchor the artefacts, their meanings are just ‘set ... adrift’ in the minds of visitors, as Andrea Witcomb puts it.⁹ In a very 1990s way, the museum went about liberating story — stories of many kinds and from many sources — but without offering an adjudication of their reliability. Such authoritative explanation is, indeed, the very thing that the museum sought to put into question; it displaced it with an aesthetics that turned the perplexed visitor into a disempowered consumer of image and sound.

A combination of 1990s dramatic presentations, sculptures, video and sound installations, the Museum of Sydney emerged as a sort of social-history variety show. The subject of the exhibits is transferred from the artefacts and archives themselves to their aestheticised receptions: *that* was, and to some extent remains, the experience on offer.¹⁰ It is, to be sure, a genre shift in museology that brought together many enviable skills: but to what end? with what effect? When art displaces artefact so completely, historical understanding in the museum is not well served.

The heritage movement and museum villages: Colonial Williamsburg

The post-1960s heritage movement has, in its presentation of the past, also taken the shift to a consumption model very much to heart, if often with less sophistication. As Raphael Samuels points out, the confident modernism of the 1950s and 1960s in Britain, with the tearing down of Victorian slums and the lust for modern housing and up-to-date gadgetry, gave way at speed to a democratised worship of the past, and often the recent past rather than the heroics of Trafalgar and earlier centuries. Slums,

canals and disused factories were suddenly recognised as possessing heritage value. Industrial and other museums sprang up in their hundreds in the 1980s, as did heritage walks and town-trails. Historic precincts within towns and villages were campaigned for, often successfully, and below-stairs rooms in historic houses became as popular as the presentation of the grander life above. This was the decade of the screening of *Brideshead Revisited*, which rendered nostalgia almost a communicable disease for audiences around the world who had played no part in the Brideshead world that was lost. *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady* had appeared in 1977 and, by virtue of astute marketing, tapped a different strain of the same sentiment for the next few years.¹¹

The people were — or felt they were — taking over the past. In the United States by 1966, one half of the buildings recorded in the 1930s by the Historic American Building Survey (a Franklin Roosevelt initiative to give work to unemployed architects) had been demolished in favour of modernisation. A reaction in the 1960s and 1970s saw the establishment of a great many museums celebrating local forms of heritage.¹² The Green Bans by the Builders' Labourers Federation in the early 1970s in Sydney successfully prevented the demolition of historic buildings in the Rocks area near the harbour in central Sydney and averted the threatened displacement of their working-class inhabitants into the city's west. The precedent was so powerful that pro-redevelopment governments spared no efforts to bring about, step by step, the deregistration of the union. Nevertheless, the change in consciousness had been effected, just as it had in other countries and at much the same time. All were riding the same wave. Genealogists in Britain were encouraged to find and celebrate ordinary forebears rather than searching

for aristocratic links, and in Australia it became fashionable to find a convict among one's ancestors rather than hiding the previously shameful fact. The number of listed buildings in Britain has approached half a million. In 1945 the National Trust (established in 1895) owned 17 major houses. By 1990 it had 87, and by 2007 it boasted 300.¹³ The changing attitude to the past tracks the change in Britain from the expansion of the post-war socialist State, its economic eclipse, to the rise of the Right in the late 1970s with its sacrifice, in the name of globalising economic forces, of previously State-run industries. The ways of life that they had supported but had now cut adrift were suddenly felt to need preserving.

A related movement can be precisely mapped in Australia. It took many forms. In country towns, as Tom Griffiths has pointed out, the demolition of verandah-posts and verandahs from premises in the main streets — seen as a hangover from the nineteenth century — reflected a 1950s urge to modernise. By the late 1960s a counter-movement had sprung up to save them, partly on the grounds of the tourist potential of their by-now 'historic' appearance. Historic towns began to be designated from the 1960s. The National Trust of Australia was established in 1965, although the movement itself had begun 20 years earlier. By 1984 it owned or managed over 300 properties (houses, homesteads and other places) and had 80,000 members.¹⁴ Both numbers were unchanged in 2007.

The first designated historic house in the United States opened in 1850 (George Washington's revolutionary headquarters in Newburgh, New York). Mount Vernon (his house in Virginia) was saved in 1859, and in the 1890s under the influence of newly established ancestral societies and historical associations, a great many new ones were opened. There were 100 by 1910. Michael



Figure 5. Duke of Gloucester Street, Williamsburg, Virginia, about 1890

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

Wallace explains it as a response, amidst these decades of triumphant consolidation of American corporate capitalism, to widespread anxieties about the waves of alien immigration: ‘The bourgeoisie’, he comments, ‘buckled History around themselves like moral armor.’¹⁵ In other words, the historic houses movement was not simply an innocent or pious expression of a newfound sense of respect for the past. There was a politics of the past, in this case one of Americanisation, which transmuted into a violent form in ‘the crushing of strikes, the raids on radical parties, the incarceration or deportation of critics’ in the 1917–19 period. If historic houses cannot be held responsible for this, the history they tell is nevertheless susceptible of being appropriated by larger agendas.

John D Rockefeller, Jr was a member of the Sons of the American Revolution

(established in 1889). He was easily persuaded to finance the restoration of Williamsburg in Virginia, the site of important episodes in the revolutionary period. Many eighteenth-century buildings remained in this town, which had become a backwater. From 1926, Rockefeller acquired most of the town. The chosen cut-off date was the 1790s. Later buildings were demolished, 88 were restored and another 340 or so were built in the same style on existing foundations discovered as the result of archaeological research. By the mid-1930s most of the work had been completed.

As a hymn to the American past, it inspired and mutely sang the praises of those who continued its values. Or at least that is the way it (and lesser examples) are usually seen. It was used in the 1950s as an entry point for foreign dignitaries en route to Washington. A 1980s travel guide



Figure 6. Owens Garage, corner of Duke of Gloucester and North Henry Streets, Williamsburg, Virginia, 1920s
The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

to museum villages in the United States describes over 40 of the best examples in the country as offering ‘many rewarding trips to America’s past’:

Visiting a museum village is a way of discovering our roots as Americans ... Unlike a visit to a typical museum, where the exhibits are protected in glass cases, the exploration of a historic village enables you to be a time-traveler, nearly an active participant in the past. It offers the opportunity to step out of the hurried pace of modern life and to recapture life in an earlier time.¹⁶

Colonial Williamsburg has thrived as a very popular tourist destination. Its advertising refers to it as a ‘living history museum’: costumed attendants take guided tours and perform traditional artisanal skills.

The majority of its buildings, including its most important ones, are modern

reconstructions, so that the nature of the historical experience on offer is heavily dependent on architectural and curatorial mediation. Despite the painstaking accuracy of the work and its strenuous reliance on historical and archaeological evidence — including an overall observing of the 1699 street plan — the place has, inevitably, an early or mid twentieth-century feel about it. Going there is like stepping into a well-researched 1930s novel about the eighteenth century. Daniel Boorstin described the buildings in 1960 ‘as neat and well painted as the houses in a new suburb’; they ‘will never have the shabbiness that many of them must have shown in the colonial era’.¹⁷ Nor does the historic precinct show traces of the changes in the town after 1800: photographs from the 1890s till 1926 show a town, a backwater perhaps but with a mixture of styles, the natural adaptation of

a town to the passing decades (see Figures 5 and 6). Being mostly wooden structures, the eighteenth-century buildings were readily adaptable to changing needs. The restoration policy meant that this evidence was removed.

All of this raises a question as to the nature of the historical witness that is provided by Colonial Williamsburg. On one of the occasions I visited, I attended a service in the Bruton parish church (established in 1715 and continuously in use since then). A wigged and costumed actor played preacher (or *was* he a real preacher?), giving a Bible reading, from the King James version naturally, then an authentic eighteenth-century sermon whose balanced and often periodic sentences evidently defeated parts of the congregation with their unfamiliar orotundity. Prior to the reading, another actor with a good voice sang each line of an old hymn and paused for the response — a repetition of the line by the congregation. Later, heads dropped among the congregation (if that is what we were) as prayers were intoned.

And yet it was not a ‘real’ church service. Everyone present knew it was a playlet: but yet some or many of us were willing participants. Nobody walked out during the long sermon, as one guiltlessly can at any time from a museum exhibition. Was this a religious experience in an unfamiliar idiom from the past? Or make-believe? or, worse still, an elaborate joke?

Looking for the security of a straightforward chronological account of the buildings I was visiting, I got no further. In its popular mode, exemplified by the travel guide quoted above, an at first unobjectionable description typically gives way to a straight-faced and seemingly unconscious conflation of past and present, of real and fake:

The Capitol, one of the major landmarks, is a careful recreation of the first building that served as Virginia’s capitol from 1704 until it was destroyed by fire in 1747. A second Capitol was completed in 1753, which incorporated the surviving walls of the first Capitol but was a different architectural style ... Under the supervision of Henry Cary, a leading colonial architect, the foundations of the [first] Capitol were laid in 1701, and construction was completed in 1705. The architecture is a simplified version of the Renaissance style. Note the round and arched windows and cupola. Since the Capitol was built during Queen Anne’s reign, her coat of arms is emblazoned on its tower ... A costumed guide notes that burgesses met in a rather austere setting that contrasts with the more elegant Council Chamber.

Be sure to see the portraits [i.e. actual eighteenth-century paintings].¹⁸

Let us hear our guide say that again: *the* (which?) Capitol was built during the reign of Anne? the one we are presently standing in? It is *her* coat of arms (in what sense hers?). The Council Chamber was (*is*?) the standard of elegance? And what was the *date* of ‘the round and arched windows’ we are asked to note: 1705 or 1930s? This is a game of illusions: the sense in which historic buildings (unlike, say, works of literature) are solidly ‘there’ is not quite as unarguable as at first it seems.

Scholarly accounts of Colonial Williamsburg do not find chronology easy going either. Consider the case of the Governor’s Palace, built 1706–10, ready for occupation in 1715, renovated and extended during 1751–52, but which burnt down in 1781 — only seven years before the construction of the cottage, soon enlarged, that would serve as Government House, Sydney, until 1845. Unlike the latter’s postmodern metamorphosis into



Figure 7. Demolition of Matthew Whaley School, Williamsburg, Virginia, to make way for the reconstructed Governor's Palace, early 1930s

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

the Museum of Sydney, the Governor's Palace in Virginia would be reconstructed (in the 1930s) after an archaeological dig of its original foundations confirmed the dimensions given in a measured drawing made by Thomas Jefferson and also revealed numerous aspects of wall detailing. The reconstruction necessitated the demolition of the existing Matthew Whaley School so that the palace could be rebuilt on its original foundations (see Figure 7).

When the colony's popular governor Norborne Berkeley, Baron de Botetourt, died in office in 1770 a very complete and methodical inventory of all the contents of the then palace's rooms was compiled. Graham Hood's social history *The Governor's Palace in Williamsburg: A Cultural Study* (1991) examines the inventory, with a microscopic attention, for what it can yield

about the codes and patterns of living in the building. In inspiration, the decorous behaviour of the inhabitants was largely British. The governor represented British standards in his own person, hospitality and in his conduct of official duties. Hood deliberately does not deal with 'the architectural detailing within those given spaces since they are all now reconstructed'.¹⁹ Rather, as a social historian, he is working from genuine historical documentation both at Williamsburg and, for the sake of comparison, from elsewhere.

Some of the objects in the reconstructed palace are the actual ones listed in the inventory. The bulk of the rest have provenance to the region or the period. So Hood's analysis is, as he says, 'reinforced' by their presence 'as such inventories rarely are'.²⁰ The relationship between the two



Figure 8. Exterior of Governor's Palace, June 2005
The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

kinds of historical evidence is a curious one, however. The present rooms with their historical objects are in effect, for the purposes of Hood's book, stagings of the inventory. *It* is the tangible link to the past. What visitors see — the 1930s building and its eighteenth-century contents — offer a way of understanding the inventory. But this (intellectually defensible) way of putting it reverses the actual experience of nearly all visitors.

Hood's textual reconstruction is an openly acknowledged interpretation of the evidence. He feels his way, very properly, towards conclusions. In his book, the functions of each room within each working day are interpreted, and the evidence from this and other houses is sifted, with some surprising results. At every step Hood's interpretation of the furnishing yields a subtle cross-over between the refinement that the colonists yearned for, displaced as

they were from the centre of culture, and the governor's power that the ornamentation also encoded.

Hood nicely articulates the reading practices of eighteenth-century visitors. He is eloquent about what the use of damask on the chairs in the central room downstairs meant, what large glass globe-lamps said about the seat of power, what the cleverly geometrical arrangement of weapons on the walls downstairs, which all visitors walked past, *said* without anyone's actually having to say it. He explains why it was natural for the governor to conduct business in his dressing room of a morning, given that he needed to make himself 'visible' to his subjects while reminding them of his position and what it represented.

The soon-to-be-rebellious colonial gentry accepted the decorum and the ideals that lay behind all of this. They saw themselves essentially as English provincials whose

standards derived from elsewhere — from ‘Home’ in fact: ‘the colonies looked on themselves inherently as provinces of the English nation, integral elements in an imperial cultural system which, in fact, constituted their patrimony’.²¹ In these and many other ways Hood expertly makes the inventory work hard. This is good history.

But now let us start again, this time looking at Hood’s study as a book, a material object. The dust jacket has a colour photograph of the front of the palace with gentleman and footman in eighteenth-century dress at the front steps. This illustration was unavailable for reproduction, but Figure 8 conveys a similar effect. Together with the blurb, the illustration issues us into Hood’s study. Yet neither acknowledges the reconstructed make-believe. The palace is not stated to be a reconstruction till page 37. The photography till then, and throughout, is uniformly beguiling, atmospheric, beautiful. *When* do the objects and scenes in the illustrations date from? Those actors on the front cover keep appearing, disrupting one’s sense of time and of time passing, and questioning one’s assumption that this book is a reliable history. The photographs perform a visual rhetoric, reinforced by their captions, that slips and slides between the eighteenth-century past and the present, between the reproduction and the real.²² It is as if the present palace’s physical existence is sufficient to absorb and guarantee the photographs’ testimony. The building’s reconstructed condition can, apparently, be overlooked. Hood’s social history — the text of it — acknowledges the passage of time. But the photographs are of the present building itself, which bears time’s imprint only from the 1930s and is not the period Hood is discussing.

This history, as a book — and this book, as a history — is replete with careful and

insightful commentary. But it very nearly crosses the Rubicon from authenticity into facticity, or, more accurately, wobbles this way and that *at* the crossing. This is the High scholarly Road of Colonial Williamsburg. The Low Road (the travel guides, the church service, the eighteenth-century trades being plied in various shops by costumed attendants and in which visitors can join) is far less defensive. Paradox is everywhere at Colonial Williamsburg once you start to see it. The site’s historical witness is both too closely and lovingly attended, and systematically exploited, at the same time.

The paradox of living history

The situation reminds me of the Pole whose story ER Chamberlin recounts in *Preserving the Past* (1979). The man returns to his destroyed, but now re-created, house in central Warsaw. The inner city was reconstructed painstakingly after the Second World War from 1930s photographs and plans, as a recuperative protest against the Nazi occupation:

‘In a way, it’s almost a metaphysical problem,’ Tsiolkowski remarked. ‘The house I was born in was destroyed violently thirty-six years ago — but I can go into the bedroom I had as a boy, look out of the exact same window at the exact same house across the courtyard. There’s even a lamp bracket with a curious twist in it hanging in the same place. It’s unnerving, when you come to think of it. Is it “real” or isn’t it?’²³

There is no consistently clear differentiation or labelling at Colonial Williamsburg of what is eighteenth century and what is reproduction. There are no editorial square brackets. Things have been smoothed out, ordered into a historical

aesthetic that relaxes the conventional curatorial dichotomy between a building's fabric and interpretation of it, so that the two seem to be continuous with one another. The Williamsburg experience is something like the cheap, practical edition of a literary work intended for students, drawn from the corresponding scholarly edition but lacking its apparatus. Except at Colonial Williamsburg, liberties have been taken with the reading text to modernise, even bowdlerise it, so as to simplify things for the young reader–visitor.

The official *Visitor's Companion* calls the town 'a rewarding way to experience America's past'. But as the curatorial effort transfers onto the 'experience', onto the consumption rather than production end of the spectrum, the buildings and village become, strictly speaking, only a pretext and backdrop. The distinction (which ought to be a robust one) between Colonial Williamsburg and Disneyland becomes blurred. This is the cost of popularising the place as a tourist attraction, but without the cutting edge of self-consciously postmodern presentation — as in the Museum of Sydney, especially in its inaugural, mid-1990s presentation. It is as if, at Williamsburg, the museum main-streets of the 1980s had suddenly ballooned in proportions, flown out of their enclosing museums and fallen, magically, into exactly the places they used to occupy. So: the real thing? or not?

If a museum village cannot fail to feel just a bit like a costume-drama movie set, that is partly because we have all been schooled in the conventions of the silver screen and instinctively read it that way. But it is also partly because it *is* a staging and a framing. The village is a physical or material staging, except that the director–curator and producer–archaeologist are absent, hovering behind the scenes perhaps, or long gone. Most of us are, nevertheless,

happy consumers. We play along — as the authors of the travel guide, with their mixed chronologies, do. And it probably does no good to carp when there is a popular appetite for the experience, although this will fluctuate over time.

Clarifying the extent to which a 'historic' experience is, however, actually on offer is a different matter. Blurring the line between scholarship and entertainment is potentially dangerous when it turns the past into something that can be nostalgically consumed, giving it a rosy glow. If the capacity to take action in the present is based on reliable knowledge of the past, then the museum village is an irrelevance, or worse still a distraction. 'Attempting to improve on the original, or to make up for memory's silences', comments Samuels, "‘living history’ goes further than mere inference' — to which the conventional historian is constrained — 'in piecing together fragments.'²⁴

Historical re-enactments

The contemporary appetite for re-enactments of historic battles, or of ordinary life in the Middle Ages, demonstrates this. Its practitioners also think of it as living history. Their donning of scrupulously, even obsessively authentic uniforms or other clothing and their activating of authentic weaponry or machinery gives them a connection in the body, they feel, to history as it was actually lived. This is especially vivid if the re-enactment can occur on the same site as the original event. In the historical re-enactment, experience replaces detached analysis as the intervening time between the actual past and its re-created present is magically collapsed.

The popular appetite for this fantasising has been widened via recent filmic re-

enactments of history in television series such as *The 1900s House* (1999), *The Ship* (2002), *The Edwardian Country House* (2003) and *Outback House* (2005). Since the late 1990s directors have gone further than their historical-documentary predecessors by adding ‘reality TV’ techniques, placing amateur actors back into the re-created past and forcing them to live by the constraints and inconveniences of the period.²⁵

Whatever the approach, filmic *representation* is unavoidably substituted for what non-televised re-enactors actually do: they see what they do as unmediated *re-presentation*. Film usually requires the shaping of narrative situations, the editing of sequences to respect the pre-ordained shape, or the taking advantage of the unpredicted and preferably emotional reactions to the theatrical hothouse the amateur actors find themselves in. Such televisual re-enactments are not *about* the past but about people, with whom the audience is implicitly invited to identify, pretending to be in it. The novelty of this kind of identification is probably the source of the genre’s success.

Unlike actors, re-enactors wish to take away some part of the role with them. It becomes part of their lives, and in some cases they wear the scars of the experience on their bodies.²⁶ Those insights that re-enactment affords (e.g. the dietary sufferings and other dangers of ordinary sailors on eighteenth-century long voyages in *The Ship*, to which the re-enactors were directly awakened) tend, obviously, to be anecdotal and incidental rather than new. Accordingly, the emphasis of academic commentators on the phenomenon of re-enactment tends, somewhat like the new museologists discussed above, to fall upon the experience, the *performance* of history by the re-enactors, their ‘multi-sensory immersion’ in their re-created past-in-the-present.²⁷ Alexander Cook points to their pedagogic value,

arguing that ‘reenactments at least invite participants and audiences to take seriously the challenge of considering historical actors as human beings rather than as incidental by-products of material conditions, the bearers of some abstract historical spirit, or as passive vehicles for the self-articulation of discourse’.²⁸ Commentators from the political Left, on the other hand, are apt to complain, after Trevelyan, that this is social history but with the politics left out: this is ‘history as entertainment ... the past as theatre’.²⁹

The lack of constraints in historical re-creations can gloss over whatever is unpalatable to modern sensibilities. As Robert Hewison has commented of living-history museums:

There is always the pressure to be more entertaining and present the past as reassuring. When they dress up in mob caps to work butter-churns, the fact that they are healthy 1990s people who have never suffered rickets or lost their teeth creates an unavoidable distortion straight away. I don’t say that the whole thing is flawed but the projection of our industrial past needs to be much more critical.³⁰

Touchier subjects tend to be avoided by re-enactors too, perhaps because of the temporary abandonment of intellectual distance that the activity demands. So re-enactors in a postcolonial, settler country such as Australia seem to prefer to relive medieval moments from elsewhere rather than the country’s own colonial past — presumably, in part, because of the impossibility of guiltlessly re-enacting black–white relations.³¹ ‘[A]vowedly apolitical’ and ‘ethically unencumbered’,³² re-enactment scenes also tend to involve clear, unproblematised gender roles for the participants: why so many battles, after all? In the case of Colonial Williamsburg —

a never-ending story of professional re-enactment — the decision to restore to a 1790s cut-off date rendered the town static. It eliminated the witness of the intervening century and a half. It revoked the agency of time. Rockefeller wrote in 1937 that the restoration ‘offered an opportunity to restore a complete area and free it entirely from alien or inharmonious surroundings’.³³ The aesthetic motivation is clear, and the political is not far behind. For Rockefeller beautiful equals original, and original equals the ideals of the Revolution. It was a form of historical sanitising, even though carried out for pious, patriotic reasons.³⁴ Until the 1970s when new forms of political liberation forced the issue, the role of the black population of Williamsburg (half the town had been black slaves in the eighteenth century) had not been architecturally witnessed and thus was, in effect, silenced.³⁵ David Lowenthal commented in 1966: ‘[T]he American past is not permitted to coexist with the present. It is always in quotation marks and fancy dress ... an isolated object of reverence and pleasure ... detached, remote, and essentially lifeless’.³⁶

Conclusion

The obligation of museums

Despite the profit motive behind televisual and living-history museum re-enactments (Colonial Williamsburg is a corporation whose viability depends, at the end of the day, on visitor numbers and the hotel accommodation on offer); *despite* the typical sidelining of politics in favour of popular spectacle in the potpourri of the national past on offer; *despite* the probably superficial motives of most visitors to historic houses and villages (their curiosity readily satisfied by identification with those below-stairs, or their need for a sense of ‘meaning’ supplied

by an only partially represented past); *despite* the cynicism that these considerations so irresistibly conjure up, one responsibility remains. That is the responsibility to the actual *objects* from that past, to the building fabric and the grounds. These things continue to beg urgent and important questions of those who have to conserve and curate them, day by day.

Their dealings with the objects — dealings that render them as artefacts — have theoretical implications that finally cannot be escaped: how should we conceive of ‘objects’? what relation to us do they have? I will be exploring these questions in a companion essay to the present one. But, as I hope has become sufficiently clear already, the historical witness of artefacts and buildings as objects imposes obligations of preservation and explanation on their carers and interpreters. Professionals responding to changing styles of museology and of theorising about it need, I suggest, to remain in touch with *this* imperative — and not predominantly with ‘consumption’ — lest their approach be speedily consigned to the dustbin of fashions past, with half of their job undone or not properly done.

For all the criticisms one must urge of Colonial Williamsburg, it is comforting to know that, despite them, the site’s moment of contemporary production has had a real saving grace, its underlying scholarship:

Rockefeller took to spending two months each year in Williamsburg. Ruler in hand, he was all over the site, insisting on scrupulous accuracy, regardless of cost. When architects discovered they had reconstructed a house six feet from where new research showed it had actually been, he immediately provided the money to move it. ‘No scholar,’ he said, ‘must ever be able to come to us and say we have made a mistake.’³⁷

Despite its conflicting visual rhetoric, Graham Hood's social history of a building benefited deeply from the research, both original and continuing, which underlies the three-dimensional displays that make up Colonial Williamsburg. Although the curatorial urge to involve the visitor in the performance of their meanings takes a specially professionalised form there, it ultimately belongs to the same category-shift as those other museum displays I have been discussing in this essay: a shift in perceived curatorial responsibility towards the consumption end of the spectrum.

The confusing of the historical witness of artefacts that arises from over-enacting or under-informing, or substituting artistic reception for informed historical narrative, is a danger that we need to be more alert to — not only in practice but also in theory. Museums by the 1980s had come to be seen theoretically as complicit in the forms of knowledge-creation they embody, or complicit by virtue of the political realities from the past that they glide over. In this situation, it felt natural, even if paradoxical, to take the next step and understand museums as having to shift (or, increasingly, as having shifted) from 'being *about* something to being *for* somebody'.³⁸ Playing this 'consumption' card in the cultural and cultural-policy theory that has grown up in tandem with the new museology has been a consequence of the paradox. However willing or however gritted-teeth one's acceptance of the inevitability of the theoretical move is, it is hard to ignore its tendency to downgrade the importance of the underlying science and the research. It tends to sideline the historical witness of the artefacts in favour of curators' or visitors' 'performance' of their meanings. And it positively invites the interpretation that publicly funded museums are primarily arms of government, intended to illustrate or to

promote to visitors the official policies of the day. That this is a dangerous situation for museums was something we became amply aware of in Australia during the Howard years.

Is it not time, then, for theorists and practitioners to find new ways of refreshing or adapting the old truism, that the business of museums is or should be, fundamentally, about understanding their own collections more knowledgeably and revealing that knowledge to the public — a knowledge that potentially then goes on to form the basis of further research and investigation? A better-based appreciation of this tri-fold obligation of museums might flow from a more deliberate embrace of the production–consumption model I have been canvassing in this essay: particularly the obligation that, at the production end, the artefacts themselves so imperatively call up. Let us attend to their siren call.

This paper has been independently peer-reviewed.³⁹

Notes

- 1 Invented in 1822 by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre (inventor also of the daguerrotype).
- 2 In January 2007 the same Australian team that had created the model dinosaurs for BBC Worldwide — they were in fact small — scaled them up and returned them to the stage, to the terror and delight of Sydney's children. The show, directed by Scott Faris, went on to tour internationally in 2007 and 2008.
- 3 The exhibit, curated by Jeanne Canizzo, became the source of bitter public argument because she 'attempted to document the cultural arrogance of Canadian soldiers and evangelists in Africa, and to demonstrate the contradictions involved in "collecting" culture': Julie Cruikshank, 'Oral tradition and material culture: Multiplying meanings of "words" and "things"', *Anthropology Today*, vol. 8, 1992, 5–9 (p. 6).

- 4 For example, at the Burke Museum at Beechworth, Victoria; the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch, New Zealand; Newarke Houses Museum in Leicester, UK; and the Royal British Columbia Museum at Victoria, Canada.
- 5 Stephen Greenblatt, 'Resonance and wonder', *Bulletin of the American Academy of the Arts and Sciences*, vol. 43, no. 4, January 1990, 11–34.
- 6 This criticism is different from but not inconsistent with Grace Karskens's objection that archaeology and history have been separated rather than working in unison at the Museum of Sydney, whose obligation should be not only to present but also to explain the social significance of each artefact: 'Engaging artefacts: Urban archaeology, museums and the origins of Sydney', *Humanities Research*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2002, 36–56.
- 7 For a fuller description see Julie Marcus, *A Dark Smudge upon the Sand*, LhR Press, Canada Bay, NSW, 1999, pp. 45–7 (p. 46). This is part of a chapter, 'Erotics and the Museum of Sydney' (pp. 37–50), which offers a strong critique of the Museum. Marcus sees 'the pleasure of [this] museum ... [as] always intellectual' (p. 48), unable to engage politically with questions of race and gender because of the conservatising effects of its postmodern aesthetics: the Museum's substitution of fragmentariness and quotation for narrative interpretation and guidance. Good museum displays, she argues, create 'flashes of understanding which bring in to light an unseen order with a bearing on daily life' (p. 38). The whales exhibition engendered such an experience for me. The Museum of Sydney did not.
- 8 Quoted in Andrea Witcomb, 'How style came to matter: Do we need to move beyond the politics of representation?', in Chris Healy & Andrea Witcomb (eds), *South Pacific Museums: Experiments in Culture*, Monash University ePress, Clayton, Vic., 2006, p. 21.4. DOI:10.2104/spm06020.
- 9 *ibid.*, p. 21.4.
- 10 Changes in presentation since 1995 have of course occurred. In a personal communication, the museum's head curator Caroline Butler-Bowdon explains that 'changes in the Museum have been part of a concerted effort to progressively make the museum more engaging for our visitors' and describes 'a continual refinement of purpose for what was then a very new museum and a broadening and strengthening of the stories that we are able and willing to tell'. The museum remains committed to working with artists to provide forms of commentary, especially in temporary exhibitions.
- 11 Edith Holden, author of *Country Diary*, was 'a Birmingham socialist, and an artist, somewhat akin, in origins, occupation and outlook to the Miriam of DH Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*': Raphael Samuels, *Theatres of Memory: Volume I: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, Verso, London, 1994, p. 299.
- 12 Michael Wallace, 'Visiting the past: History museums in the United States', *Radical History Review*, vol. 25, 1981, 63–96 (pp. 79, 85).
- 13 For the 2007 number, see www.nationaltrust.org.uk, accessed 11 June 2007.
- 14 See Australian Council of National Trusts, *Historic Buildings*, Reed Books, Frenchs Forest, NSW, 1984, p. 7, and www.nationaltrust.org.au, accessed 11 June 2007.
- 15 Wallace, 'Visiting the past', p. 68.
- 16 Gerald and Patricia Gutek, *Experiencing America's Past: A Travel Guide to Museum Villages*, John Wiley and Sons, New York, 1986, p. 1. For an account of the town's genesis and growth, see ER Chamberlin, *Preserving the Past*, Dent, London, 1979, pp. 159–65.
- 17 Daniel Boorstin, *America and the Image of Europe: Reflections on American Thought*, Meridian, New York, 1960, pp. 93–4: quoted by David Lowenthal, who comments that 'Most who return to the past in imagination like to see it as "new" as it seemed to those who lived in it ... Marks of wear and tear were deliberately expunged from artifacts in the Smithsonian Institution's 1976 Bicentennial exhibition, a reproduction of the Philadelphia Centennial': *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985, p. 145.
- 18 Gutek, *Experiencing America's Past*, pp. 153–4.
- 19 Graham Hood, *The Governor's Palace in Williamsburg: A Cultural Study*, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, Va., 1991, p. 37.
- 20 *ibid.*
- 21 *ibid.*, p. 68.

- 22 A caption beneath one of the photos reads: 'Reproduction globe lamp and shade of brass and glass. Grand in size (their overall height is 36")', there were sixteen of these imposing lighting devices along the path of parade from the hall to the middle room upstairs. Nothing resembling this conspicuous display of wealth and sophistication existed anywhere else in the colony'. (ibid., p. 90.) What do 'these ... devices' and 'this ... display' refer to again?
- 23 Chamberlin, *Preserving the Past*, pp. 8–9.
- 24 Samuels, *Theatres of Memory*, pp. 197–8.
- 25 *The 1900s House* (UK Channel 4, 1999), *The Ship* (BBC, 2002), *The Edwardian Country House* (Channel 4, 2003) and *Outback House* (ABC, 2005). Contrast Channel 4's *No 57: The History of a House* (2003), which successfully traced the occupants of an actual house over 200 years. It showed the ways in which their uses of rooms changed, how those uses reflected wider social and economic changes, and how the house's fabric was altered to reflect the changed uses and new services. Interviews were used but reality-TV techniques were not.
- 26 According to re-enactor and commentator Toby Haggirth in a paper given at the Humanities Research Centre, Canberra, 22 May 2007.
- 27 For example, see Stephen Gapps, 'Authenticity matters: Historical re-enactment and Australian attitudes to the past', *Australian Cultural History*, 23, 2003, 105–16. See also Sarah Randles, 'Re-building the Middle Ages: Medievalism in Australian architecture', in *Medievalism and the Gothic in Australian Culture*, ed. Stephanie Trigg, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2006, pp. 147–70.
- 28 Alexander Cook, 'The use and abuse of historical reenactment: Thoughts on recent trends in public history', *Criticism*, 46, 2004, 487–96 (p. 491).
- 29 Tristram Hunt, 'Reality, identity and empathy: The changing face of social history television', *Journal of Social History*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2006, 843–58 (p. 856).
- 30 Quoted in George Hill, 'Are we forging our history', *The Times*, 12 March 1992 (Features section). See also Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline*, Methuen, London, 1987. The heritage movement has also been attacked on Marxist grounds as a commodification or fetishisation of the past, a Tory-nationalist project trafficking in history without challenging dominant market-values: see Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*, Verso, London, 1985, p. 53; and n. 12, above.
- 31 See Gapps, 'Authenticity matters', p. 106. The Society for Creative Anachronism, which concentrates on the medieval period, has by far the largest membership of the 268 re-enactment groups in Australia that Gapps identified.
- 32 Vanessa Agnew, 'Introduction: What is reenactment?', *Criticism*, vol. 46, 2004, 327–39 (p. 334): this (46.3) is a special issue on re-enactment.
- 33 Quoted in Wallace, 'Visiting the past', p. 78.
- 34 Cf. Wallace: 'In these same years Mussolini was tearing up the streets of Rome and demolishing two millennia's worth of construction to get at and resurrect the splendor of Imperial Rome, the better to support Fascism's claim to be its proper heir' (ibid., p. 94, n. 35).
- 35 For an analysis of the changing curatorial orientations, see Richard Handler & Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 1997, chapters 3–5.
- 36 David Lowenthal, 'The American way of history', *Columbia University Forum*, vol. 9, no. 3, Summer 1966, 27–32 (pp. 27, 32).
- 37 Quoted in Wallace, 'Visiting the past', p. 77.
- 38 See Kylie Message's thoughtful review article, 'Meeting the challenges of the future?: Museums and the public good', *reCollections: Journal of the National Museum of Australia*, vol. 2, 2007, 71–93. The quotation (on p. 84) is from Stephen Weil, 'From being about something to being for somebody: The ongoing transformation of the American museum', *Daedalus*, vol. 128, 1999, 229–58.
- 39 I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers of this essay and the editors of *reCollections* for their helpful criticisms and comments.

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