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WHAT IS PUBLIC HISTORY? PUBLICS AND THEIR PASTS, MEANINGS AND PRACTICES

by Jill Liddington

What are the broad meanings of 'public history', and how is it used by practitioners and by academics? Here, I track the way different meanings have developed – first in the United States, then in Australia, and most recently in Britain. I explore the keyword 'public', seeing whether social or cultural theorists can help; and finally consider how theoretical concerns help practising public historians - citing examples of good practice.

ABSTRACT

KEYWORDS:
Public history;
heritage;
public sphere

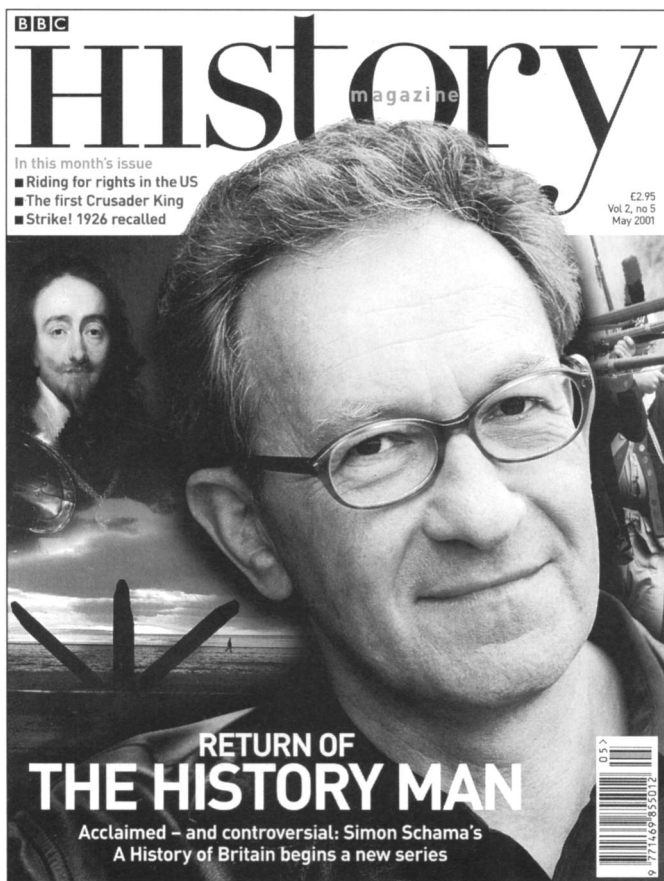
What is Public History – and what do public historians *do*? There has recently been an audible explosion of popular presentations of the past. It has become almost impossible to switch on the television without encountering Simon Schama's prime-time series *A History of Britain*, or Steven Spielberg's dramatized documentary *Band of Brothers*;¹ or to turn on the radio without eavesdropping into a discussion about memory and remembering. Enthusiasm for 'living history' grips the nation: *The 1940s House* series, with a contemporary family volunteering to 'relive' rationing and the blitz, was wildly popular. So much so that the Imperial War Museum's '1940s House' exhibition, in which '17 Braemar Gardens, West Wickham' was reconstructed in all its suburban ordinariness – to the delight of large parties of young school-pupils – has been extended twice, to mid-2002.² Meanwhile, the *BBC History magazine*, offering 'History to go' and 'History on the Net', sells over 50,000 copies a month.

Yes, 'the past is a foreign country'; they still 'do things differently there'.³ But increasingly, whether it is Schama's drum-and-trumpet

history or the Imperial War Museum's 'The Trench Experience',⁴ the popular past is presented as if it is just down the road, merely round the corner, just a finger-tip away. No need for passport or troublesome travel; you can just flick the TV switch, click on your mouse, browse on the History Channel,⁵ and you are instantly – frequently, pleasurably – *there*.

The past, or at least its popular presentations, surrounds us now. The past means business. Radio producers scour their contacts for appropriate historians who can sum up current research in a few crisp sentences. Even elite academic associations debate 'Historians and their Publics'.⁶ Pioneering Ruskin College, Oxford offers an MA in Public History, while other institutions run courses in applied history or heritage studies with a public history component.⁷ And of course the *Oral History* journal, committed to a broad readership, now has its own Public History section.

So: are we all public historians now? Is everyone who works on the past with members of the public (whether they be museum visitors, television viewers or parties of school pupils) a



BBC History magazine, May 2001, 'Return of the History Man'

'public historian'? Is 'public history' so hospitable an umbrella to offer shelter to *all* forms of 'popular' history – whether oral history or 'people's history', 'applied history' or 'heritage studies'? The answer is probably a generous 'yes': let a thousand flowers bloom. And certainly, at recent conferences, a wide range of practitioners – oral historians, adult educators, senior archivists – are heard to claim, slightly mystified, 'Until I heard the phrase "public historian", I hadn't realized I'd been doing it all my life. Now I've got a label'.

Yet 'public history' is a slippery concept. And the challenge of an ecumenical thousand-flowers approach is, I feel, that the phrase is used in such a wide range of senses – both in Britain and internationally, by practitioners and academics – as to be baffling. And if 'public history' is merely a re-titling of what we were doing anyway, may we not lose the chance to think about what we *mean* by 'public', and so forfeit the opportunity to sharpen our own practice?

What I want to do here therefore is to explore broad meanings and usages of 'public history', both by practitioners and academics, initially by comparison with oral history; then

to track how these different meanings have developed – first in the United States, then Australia and finally in Britain.⁸ Then I want to explore what we mean by the keyword 'public' (as opposed to, say, 'the people', 'society' or 'the masses'), seeing whether social and cultural theorists can help; and finally to consider how such theory helps *practising* public historians – citing examples of good practice that have come my way.

ORAL HISTORY, PUBLIC HISTORY

Mention 'oral history' and most people envisage an interview, a tape recorder and perhaps eventually a transcript: usually an older person will 'remember' and then these 'memories' will be used in a range of settings – 'yesterday's witness' booklets, BBC Radio's 'Archive Hour' or a reminiscence session in a nursing home. People now 'understand' the practice of oral history. However as a subject of study in higher education, this becomes somewhat more challenging. If we take one well-established graduate course we see that it explores 'the ethical and epistemological issues posed by the relationship between narrator and researcher... [and] between memories, narratives and identities'.⁹ Clearly, students face more complex objectives.

And so it is, I suggest, with Public History – though much less well-rooted in this country than oral history. When 'public history' is mentioned people still wrinkle their nose at the unfamiliarity. Offered a one-sentence definition, they then nod (and tell you enthusiastically all about the Spielberg episode they have just watched or museum they visited). So, to keep this academic-practitioner distinction clear in our minds, we may take Public History *practice* to be about the popular presentation of the past to a range of audiences – through museums and heritage sites, film and historical fiction. But, as with oral history, if we then turn to what students in a 'public history' course might *learn*, it too grows more complex. Taking one respected graduate course, students look at 'public history and identity', 'reading museums: genres and histories', the 'economics of heritage'.¹⁰ Again, we are somewhere far more challenging than just clicking on the History Channel. So the study of Public History is concerned with how we acquire our sense of the past – through memory and landscape, archives and archaeology (and then, of course, of how those pasts are presented publicly).

I have made these distinctions, not I hope too laboriously, because conversations about public history so quickly dissolve into 'but what do you mean by...?' perplexities. For what public history 'means' seems to shift, depend-

ing on the setting – practitioner or academic. Increasingly these two worlds are, in Britain anyway, sadly thrust asunder – as I explore later. (Though *Oral History* has managed – against the odds – to retain both groups of readers: general practitioners and academics-students). So here I write consciously for both, for practitioners *and* public-historian academics – conscious that, as with oral history, the usages are slightly different. And, writing mainly for oral historians, I want to suggest that, given increasing specialization, oral history needs to understand public history.

THE ORIGINS OF PUBLIC HISTORY: UNITED STATES

Oral history, of course, long pre-dates tape recorders and oral history associations. The same goes for public history, ‘the new name for the oldest history of all’. Here however, rather than a detailed genealogy, we need just to remind ourselves briefly that the origins of ‘public history’ can be traced back to the mid-1970s and graduate unemployment – and in particular to the University of California at Santa Barbara.¹¹ Here, declared the founding historian, ‘Public History refers to the employment of historians and the historical method outside of academia... Public historians are at work whenever, in their professional capacity, they are part of the public process’.¹² So the emphasis is on professionals and their employment in public; and *The Public Historian* journal, also springing from Santa Barbara, helped by a Rockefeller grant and sponsored by a new National Council on Public History, had an editorial board including not only elite universities and the Oral History Institute, libraries and museums, but *also* the US Department of State Office of the Historian, Wells Fargo Bank and the US Army Centre of Military History. Government, capitalism, the military: scarcely a grassroots agenda that *Oral History* readers would recognize. And indeed, in America itself, this corporatist perspective was soon under attack – by for instance oral historian Ron Grele who stated angrily:

‘Public history’... is not *de novo*. It is moving into fields long occupied by practising non-academic historians... [like] community history projects... Because the public history movement has ignored these debates, it seems to have accepted a much narrower idea of the profession... To be a historian seems to mean to hold a job, to earn a living, to carve out a safe haven... [Public History] promises us a society in which a broad public participates in the construction of its own history... [Other-



wise] it will..., at worst, divert our energies into hucksterism for the status quo.¹³

Radio Times,
29.9–5.10.2001,
'France, 1944'.

Indeed 'Public History' soon became hotly contested territory in America. The Vietnam generation of radicals challenged old white, elite claims to exclusive possession of the past; and criticized the nostalgic 'museum villages' funded by private capital (like Rockefeller's colonial Williamsburg or Henry Ford's Greenfield Village) which 'distorted the past, mystified the way the present had emerged, and thus helped to inhibit political action in future'.¹⁴ Rather than the new public history movement, such historians looked further back – to Franklin Roosevelt's 1930s New Deal initiatives. Roosevelt, mockingly reminding the Daughters of the American Revolution that they too were descendants of immigrants, challenged elite claims to the past by looking to the federal state for 'an approach to public history that expanded the definition of the historic...[and] could compete with private capital as guardians of the public memory'. The state proved itself powerful. Over a thousand unemployed architects were hired by the

Historic American Building Survey to measure and photograph buildings – ‘rooted in local memories and traditions’, unconnected to famous founding fathers. The Works Progress Administration set writers and historians to work, uncovering legacies of struggle of ordinary people (though this populist public history would scarce survive the subsequent Cold War).¹⁹ Those radical historians, who criticized ‘private-capital’ public history, also argued against producing ‘images of the past for our passive consumption’ rather than projects about ‘what to do with memories to make them active and alive’¹⁶ – a theme of participatory history I return to later.

So how does public history now stand in post-millennium America? Vocationally, it is well organized within universities; the National Council on Public History (NCPH) can list over fifty graduate programmes – usually with core courses in History and Public Policy, and with options like Oral History, Archives Administration, City Planning and Environmental History. Internships (ie student placements) include a catholic cultural range: Howard University in Washington offers the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History, while the Middle Tennessee State University near Nashville offers both the Country Music Foundation and Graceland, Memphis. Placements (jobs obtained by trained graduates) include the giant National Park Service (NPS) and Smithsonian Institution, the US Senate Historical Office, as well as Wells Fargo Bank, the Gene Autry Museum and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York.¹⁷ And recently enterprising University of Maryland students set up a Public History Resource Centre website.¹⁸

Some American academics remain cynical about public history, seeing it as a dumbing-down or as opportunistic.¹⁹ But the public history movement does provide excellent examples of creative practitioner-academic collaboration. NPS (which is not unlike our English Heritage) manages both landscape sites (for example the Grand Canyon) and historic buildings (such as the White House), and has developed ways of working with academics – including a system whereby commissioned historians visit a NPS site and write an independent evaluative report.²⁰ Similarly, the NCPH – whose membership includes oral historians and museum interpreters, business and government historians – organizes joint conferences with the Organization of American Historians (OAH).²¹ Meanwhile veteran journal *Radical History Review* developed a Public History section, with discussion of ‘Sitios de Memoria’ (memory sites) in Pinochet’s Chile,

and of how ‘changing publics’ now means that even slave-holding George Washington’s ‘Monticello ain’t what it used to be’.²² Indeed, public history is alive and well in the US. A broad church, it spans a wide political spectrum, ranging from those vastly powerful private capital monuments like Williamsburg,²³ through great federal agencies like the NPS, to the grassroots projects. The US may be somewhat isolationist, too uncritical of what exporting Hollywood-as-history means globally, and we may find its buyer/seller model somewhat commercialized; but it does offer inspiring examples of historians working publicly that Britain urgently needs to note.

PUBLIC HISTORY, AUSTRALIAN-STYLE

Ironically it was not from America but from Australia that the key radical inspiration and crispest thinking about Public History in Britain flowed. ‘Public History, Australian-style’ developed slightly later than, and partly as a critique of, the US public history movement²⁴ (though sharing its concern for employment and vocational issues). It was energetic, sometimes with a rather in-your-face critique of university historians luxuriating in their tenure-induced langour. ‘History has entered the market place as never before. Freelance historians operate of necessity like small business people’, reported the *Australian Historical Studies* sympathetically – citing ‘Phyllis Phame, Girl Historian’, the whimsical alter ego of a newly-formed Professional Historians’ Association (PHA). Phyllis was intrepid, out earning an independent living by exercising her historical training, selling her skills to the public, making a career.²⁵ And in 1992 PHA launched its *Public History Review*, fresh and stropopy, aligning public history with community history.²⁶

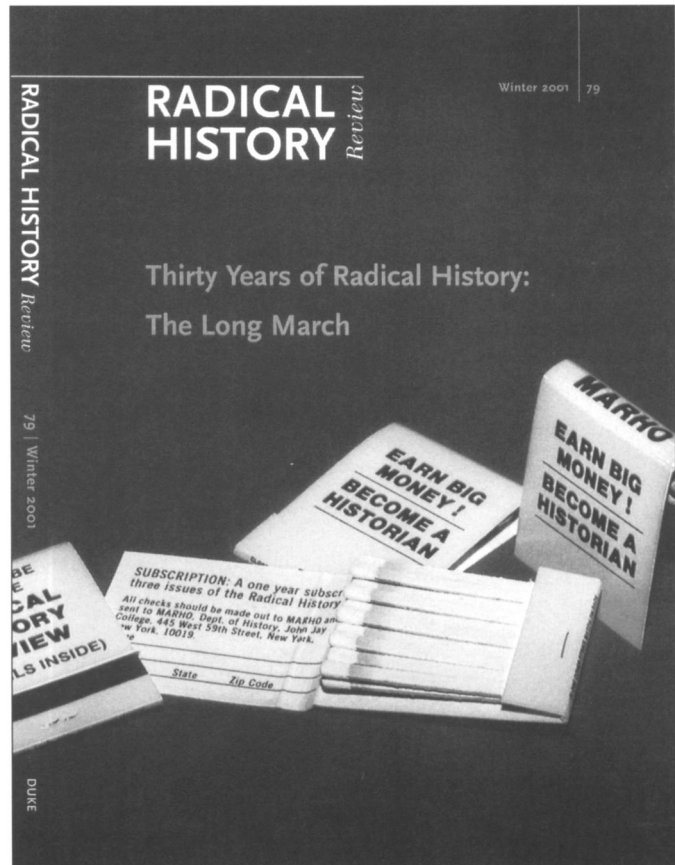
Public History in Australia was engaged, both politically and practically, fighting community battles – most controversially as ‘historians-on-the-waterfront’ in Sydney, entering the courtroom, fearlessly stepping into the witness box, submitting themselves to cross-examination by city-developers’ vulpine QC, to defend and preserve traditional working-class industrial suburbs – literally on the waterfront.²⁷ And, finally of course, Australia has had to rethink its own history – from seeing 1788, when the First Fleeters arrived from Plymouth at Sydney Cove as settlers, to seeing Europeans as invaders – of the land of the native Australians.²⁸ Though the stress remains on training-for-employment, ‘Public History, Australian-style’, with its intellectual and political energy, all added up to something inspirational for heritage-bedraggled Britain of a decade ago.

BRITAIN: HERITAGE AND MEMORY

The noisiest debates in Britain then about *our* sense of the past were not around 'public history' but about national heritage and memory – led by a new breed of landscape historians, historical geographers and cultural theorists. *The Past is a Foreign Country* (1985) by David Lowenthal, a Proustian historian-geographer, brilliantly (though often idiosyncratically) asked how we know about the past. 'The simple answer is', he answered provocatively, 'that we remember things, read or hear stories and chronicles, and live among relics of previous times'.²⁹ Of these, he suggested, memory is particularly complex: we even revise our own memories 'to fit the collectively remembered past, and gradually cease to distinguish between them' – seeking rather 'to link our personal past with collective memory and public history'. He concluded, 'the prime function of memory, then, is not to preserve the past but to adapt it so as to enrich and manipulate the present'.³⁰ Significantly, Lowenthal, occupying a richly mid-Atlantic literary realm, is neither an oral historian nor a public historian – and is indeed as far removed as possible from community history.³¹

More controversially, argument over heritage had been particularly triggered by perceived mid-1970s 'socialist' threats to stately homes. Country-landowner 'Heritage in Danger' campaigns then exploded in imaginative intellectual debate a decade later. Patrick Wright's *On Living in an Old Country* (1985), written as he returned to Thatcher's Britain fresh-eyed from living abroad, marvelled at the national nostalgia for ancestral past-ness. Few tensions, he suggested, were so fraught as those between private capital's interests and those of heritage site preservation – and he took aim at the National Trust, one of Britain's largest landowners, which, 'when it comes to politics rather than national-historical reverie, merely snores'.³² Yet more critical and controversial was Robert Hewison's pessimistic *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (1987): 'as the past begins to loom above the present and darken the paths to the future, one word in particular suggests an image around which other ideas of the past cluster: heritage'. Hewison also attacked the National Trust, so long 'the fiefdom of "the amenity earls"'; and he made a brave stab at unravelling the interlocking 'politics of patronage' within the heritage 'industry' and the Thatcherite politicization of the culture establishment after 1979.³³

Rescuing 'the people's heritage' from these 'heritage bashers', Raphael Samuel sprang forth as an unexpected defender. His affectionately eclectic *Theatres of Memory* (1994) celebrated



'unofficial knowledge' and popular memory against 'reactionary chic' Wright and 'aristocratic plot' Hewison. Samuel traced the roots of 'heritage' back to 1930s socialist 'March of History' pageants and the Attlee government's National Parks.³⁴ Heritage, he argued, had less to do with country houses and more to do with humble country cottages, preserving old artisanal skills (for example steam railway societies) and plebian entrepreneurs (such as 'retro-chic' flea-markets stallholders). He attacked condescending heritage-baiters as misogynist literary snobs, and instead looked (albeit briefly) for inspiration to public history in the US and Australia.³⁵

PUBLIC HISTORY IN BRITAIN: AUTOBIOGRAPHY

However, rather than 'public history', what emerged from Britain was English Heritage (the government-funded quango created in 1983).³⁶ Attempts to introduce 'public history' from America had never taken root. *History Workshop Journal*, with a long interest in history on film, for instance, had started a section in 1995 featuring museums, comic strips and on-line history – but called it 'History at Large'.

Radical History Review, Winter 2001. Courtesy of MARHO, the Radical Historians' Organization Inc.



The 1940s House, Imperial War Museum.

More persuasive was the raw energy reaching Britain from Australia by the mid-1990s. So *Oral History* itself launched in 1997 a new Public History section focusing on 'public uses and representation of oral history in a wide variety of media', offering news from the US and Australia, and emphasizing global issues like migration and new technologies like websites (though with readers allowed to remain somewhat hazy about was 'public history' was).³⁷ Another early pioneer was, of course, the late Raphael Samuel's own Ruskin College (significantly, a college for adult students), which from 1996 offered a part-time MA in Public History. Its programme includes study of popular memory and visual history – alongside a Public History discussion group aimed at 'bridging the gap between academic study and the real world'.³⁸ From 2000 Ruskin has also run successful Public History conferences based on participative workshops, which attracted adult students and family historians, heritage organizers and university teachers. Certainly this is what brought *me* in to public history.

My original job was as a BBC researcher; it was only after leaving journalism behind and

moving north in 1974 that I first became involved with the Oral History Society – when Paul Thompson and Raphael Samuel encouraged Jill Norris and myself in our recording suffrage testimony.³⁹ Since then, working in adult education across West Yorkshire, I became involved in community history projects – writing booklets with older learners, organizing local exhibitions, working collaboratively with museums and libraries.

Then, in 1999, I was invited by the local Labour Women's Council, with which I was loosely linked, to help celebrate its centenary. In 1950 its half-centenary had been marked with a pageant. Would I write another one? After demurring that 'I don't do dialogue, I can't do pageants', I eventually suggested compiling an exhibition. A few meetings later, it became clear I would do most of the time-consuming production in my spare time – for such a project no longer fitted universities' Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) requirements. 'The Vanishing Century' exhibition was successfully launched in Halifax Library on International Women's Day 2000, and then toured district libraries. However, with sustained assaults on the broad labour movement, the process was very challenging: how to give a new generation access to this disappearing world of intense local identities and laborious meetings in draughty halls.

It was precisely at this point that I encountered a poster announcing Ruskin College's conference on Public History ('bridging the gap between the ivory tower and the real world'). For me, it was timely indeed. 'Public History' seemed to offer a welcome framework (in the way that 'heritage' did not) for the many projects I had long been involved with. I talked at Ruskin about the exhibition,⁴⁰ and returned the following year to speak on 'Placing Public History?'

So here at Ruskin and in *Oral History*, is a democratic, inclusive public history agenda, with the stress not on 'purchasing' a few historians' professionalism, but on the *many* having access to their own histories, with historians (where they have a role) helping by 'giving people back their own history'.

HISTORIANS AND THEIR PUBLICS

More recently, academic historians have at last begun to sit up and take note too – an entrée into 'fortress history' indeed. Here one historian particularly stands out: Ludmilla Jordanova has helped put Public History on the map. Her *History in Practice* (2000), introducing students to the newest developments in the discipline of history, includes a key chapter on 'Public History' – about 'usable pasts', genres

and audiences, public history and politics.⁴¹

This was followed by the 'Historians and their Publics' conference at York University, run in collaboration with – and this is what made it particularly significant – the Royal Historical Society (RHS), perhaps the most exclusively traditional of historians' professional associations.⁴² Jordanova set out the agenda, arguing that Public History was of concern to all historians (and that the differing definitions were appropriate for their different contexts.) Also speaking were Ian Kershaw and Laurence Rees of the BBC who together collaborated on the very successful *Nazis: a warning from history* (1997).

So Jordanova and the RHS suggest another form of practice, whereby a professional elite – not merely 'trained' but highly rigorous scholars, regularly conversing with each other through their publications and conferences – is able (in collaboration with broadcasting companies, publishers, museums) to reach a wide public, far wider than that which reads their narrower RAE-bound monographs. Thus Kershaw talked of reaching thirty to thirty-five million viewers worldwide with his *Nazis* series. Is this access to excellence – the 'most' reading, listening, watching, visiting, consuming 'the best'? Critics of this approach talk about 'the Hitlerization of history'. So, if it is merely history-as-entertainment, should we lament the passivity of the watching millions?

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

So, from even this briefest of surveys of Public History, it is immediately clear that there is no one single answer to the question 'what is Public History?' or even 'what do Public Historians do?' Indeed, even to ask 'what is a historian?' reveals a wide difference between, on the one hand, the RHS and Jordanova's emphasis on an academic critical discipline with scholarly networking; and on the other Raphael Samuel's Ruskinite stress on democratization of history: 'everyone a historian' indeed.

The word 'public' is perhaps even more slippery. If we think for a moment of all its usages as an adjective, the complications become clear: 'public relations' and public-ity, but also the 'public opinion', 'public interest', 'public service', and Roosevelt's Public Works Administration. (Indeed Americans surround the word 'public' with special meanings springing from an ideal of citizenship embedded in their Constitution and Bill of Rights.⁴³)

Can we turn to *cultural* theorists for help? Raymond Williams gave more attention in *Keywords* (1976) to the 'masses' than to 'public';⁴⁴ gender historians have of course written extensively on the masculine 'public

sphere' and feminine 'private' one – but focus on the 'separate spheres' debate rather than on public history.⁴⁵

To help me out, I have turned to the Frankfurt sociologist Jürgen Habermas – though he seems scarcely mentioned in the public history literature.⁴⁶ His key text here, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, was published in German in 1962 (though not available in English until 1989) and so has a slightly remote feel to it. But it is succinctly written and well translated – and has stood the test of time. Habermas is one of the few social theorists to discuss the changing meanings attached to the word 'public' – and so remains helpful for assessing the current popular (but often passive) consumption of the past.

Habermas starts with the classic Greek city-state's 'public sphere' of free male citizens – resting of course upon the domestic 'private sphere', in which women reproduced life and serviced men, and slaves laboured.⁴⁷ In eighteenth-century Britain, bourgeois men, informed by news-sheets and meeting convivially in coffee houses, could and did form 'public opinion' – by conducting rational *critical* debate on public issues, both political or literary. But, argued Habermas, the democratic widening of the 'public sphere' in the nineteenth century to embrace previously excluded social groups (notably women and working-class men) did *not* lead to an increase in rational, critical public discourse. Rather, the development of mass media and mass culture (especially American television, advertising and PR industries which he observed around 1960) led to the *degeneration* of the public sphere – with the old liberal public sphere being 'replaced by the pseudo-public or sham-private world of cultural consumption', a 'mass public of cultural consumers'.⁴⁸ Habermas describes this pointedly:

The new media curtail the reactions of their recipients in a peculiar way... They deprive it of the opportunity to say something and to disagree. The critical discussion of a reading public tends to give way to 'exchanges about tastes and preferences' between consumers.⁴⁹

For Habermas, 'the great mass of consumers whose receptiveness [to mass culture] is public [-] but uncritical',⁵⁰ are left merely with staged displays, with 'representative publicity', to which the public may only respond either by acclamation *or* by withholding acclamation, a plebiscitary cultural democracy – rather than the active reasoned critical discourse characterizing the old public sphere.⁵¹

Of course, Habermas, writing in an end-of-ideology context of forty years ago, left himself open to criticism – though has recently revised some of his more rigid and pessimistic statements about ‘degeneration’. He now acknowledges working-class ‘agency’, the gendered nature of the public sphere, and the power to resist of these more pluralistic publics.⁵² Unsurprising then that Habermas remains a key writer for a subtle analysis of participative democracy – which he argues has the emancipatory potential to redeem the passive consumption of mass ‘display’.⁵³

So Habermas helps us re-appraise what ‘public history’ can mean – in terms of how the public’s sense of its own pasts may be actively consumed and critically debated. He helps us consider whether the millions of us sitting in darkened front rooms passively watching television – Schama’s latest men-on-horseback battles or a *I love 1978* trawl through archive film footage – are part of an active public or merely a plebiscitary ‘pseudo-public’: real participants or just privatized history-consumers.

Commentators have largely fought shy of stating about public history what is its implied opposite, ‘private history’. Why? Anyone teaching in higher education in Britain recognizes what constitutes ‘private history’: much of what is written in the current proliferation of highly specialist journals, a result largely – but not entirely – of the accumulative pressures of the RAE, a fixed hierarchy of writing with at its apex ‘refereed’ journals, and most other publications occupying a no-woman’s-land far below. More footnotes than readers: but no matter.⁵⁴

But, I suggest, academics by no means have a monopoly over ‘private history’. There are other varieties. Some public historians are surely just ‘private historians’ in cunning disguise: may not writing a commissioned history for a private corporation be nearer ‘public relations’ than ‘public history’?⁵⁵ And (most controversially) may ‘private history’ not include genealogists, some family or local historians, whose work not only starts from a personal interest but emerges as just that – the private history of a member of the public, still with little awareness of the needs of wider audiences or context? (This remains a contentious area here. Who are the more *public* historians: publicly-funded, publicly-accountable academic historians or enthusiastic grassroots practitioners?)⁵⁶

PUBLIC HISTORIANS, GOOD PRACTICES

We probably now have a good idea of what might be taught on a public history course:

heritage, museums, memory. But I feel our understanding of public history as *practice* still remains hazy. For sure, public history is (and arguably should remain) a broad, tolerant church. However, I want to finish by considering how these theoretical debates can help practising public historians – illustrating these points by examples of good practice that have come my way.

We must surely place *audience* centre-stage. Public – as opposed to private – historians will be aware of audience – and will probably, from the beginning of an idea or project, want to have an eye to widened audiences or readerships, in order to increase public *access* to the past. One approach is to see how a local or personal story illuminates the more general picture (which is how I attempted to structure my ‘Vanishing Century’ exhibition) that *private* historians need care less about. But it will not be wider-audiences-at-any-cost, but rather an awareness of communicating appropriately to ‘the public’. Examples of good practice might include *Oral History* itself: despite all the RAE pressures, it still welcomes ‘a variety of approaches from people... from different backgrounds’; and the BBC *History magazine* which combines an unashamedly populist journalism with, say, informed debate on the Schama series.⁵⁷

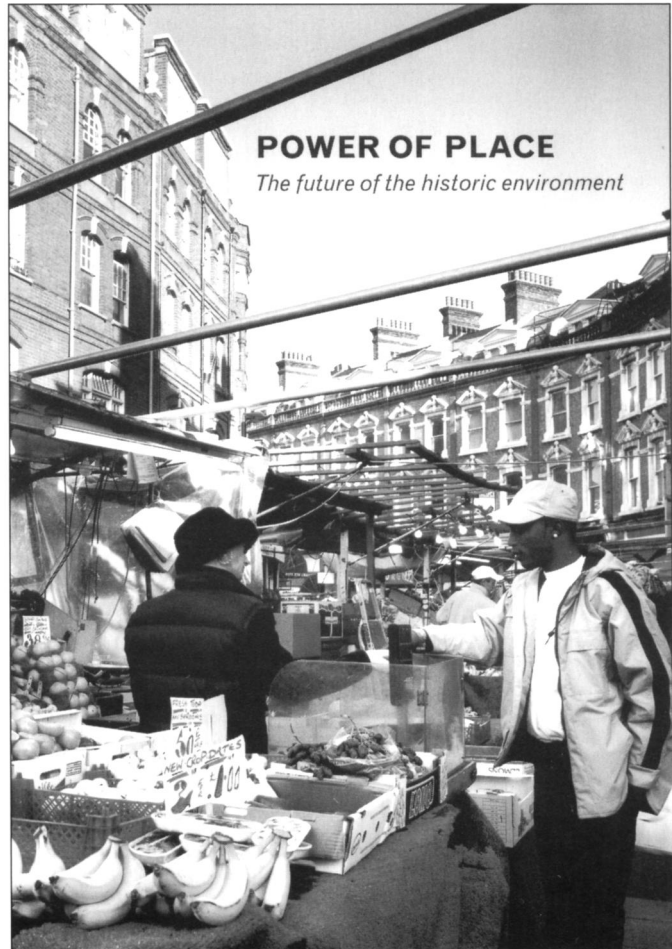
Public historians will also often want to work collaboratively. So, one American historian who worked on a BBC/APB television series on the First World War, even went so far as to proclaim: ‘Public History is almost always collective, in that it deals with issues too large for one lone scholar to master, express, and explain’ – in contrast to scholarly historians for whom the individual ‘authorial voice’ is the core of their enterprise.⁵⁸ Perhaps this is a little too dogmatic: fine for a prime-time world-war series; but most of us are involved in more modest local or regional projects. Yet I think it invaluable for historians where they can to work in partnership with other professionals – local studies librarians or archivists, journalists or web-page designers. The latter gain access to crucial academic expertise: of a theme or period. What historians gain include enhanced production skills and wider public reach. What they lose is control over the piece of work, becoming caught up in other people’s agendas, funding, timescales, arguments. My current experience of working collaboratively with some *very* different partners has suggested to me: the importance of respecting other people’s professional skills (so refreshingly different from your own); and yet retaining a bottom line (patience, arguments, yes, of course; but there may be a point at which ‘public’ becomes ‘popularization’ becomes distortion).⁵⁹

Third, public historians will probably want to ensure their work can be consumed actively and participatively. Habermas reminds us of critical citizenship, so that 'the public' is not reduced to merely passive mass-culture consumers. So where does that leave popular series like *A History of Britain*? 'Nowhere much' suggests at least one public historian: watching history on television is no substitute for doing it, especially if Schama tells us little of his sources ('at least Alan Titmarsh tells you where his plants come from'). Television channels can schedule *I Love 1978* followed by *Top Ten: 1977*, with the viewer little wiser at the end about the recent past.⁶⁰ Others will think it impracticable to consider plugging history-as-entertainment's electronic information dyke, and see television as a wonderful starting point.⁶¹ Though in how much television inspires the public's 'doing it', perhaps the jury is still out, awaiting further aid from cultural theorists.

Fourth, public historians may well be aware of the commercial market-place, but will probably not just want to grab a large slice of the viewing or reading public in a market-economy context shaped by advertisers and shareholders. Examples abound. One is *Heritage*, a magazine endearingly subtitled 'Britain's History & Countryside', featuring Stratford's thatched cottages, with scarce a hint of industrialization (or foot and mouth), with classified advertisements for acquiring 'Lord and Ladyship of the Manor Titles'. Yes, a wide readership; but, if not completely passive consumers, then surely this is scarcely about public access or participative democracy.

Fifth, public historians will, I believe, want to maintain the highest standards of scholarship and critical rigour. Sometimes this is not practicable – or so your collaborators argue. But scholarly integrity and transparency surely remain important. If we accept the arguments of historians like Jordanova that the practice of history is a discipline with the academic conventions of critical argument, evidence and citation – then those professionals who work (in museums or broadcasting or heritage quangos) presenting the past to the public surely *need* historians. The National Park Service in the US provides an instance of collaborative good practice. Yet in Britain we do not seem to have got it quite right yet. Historians are often noticeable by their absence: English Heritage's *Power of Place: the future of the historic environment* (2000) was advised by organizations like the Country Landowners' Association, rather than by historians.⁶²

Finally, Public Historians will probably need to be aware of the state, nationally, regionally



and of course locally. The reasons are many. The state is a statutory provider of cultural services – notably local public libraries. It also is a source of funding – both directly and indirectly, through say the Heritage Lottery Fund.⁶³ Filling in bid forms is time-consuming, for sure; and there is always a danger that bid-speak leads to creeping uniformity and a narrowing vision.⁶⁴ Yet public funding helps, for instance, balance gross regional inequalities – like north and south; and even the most modest project may bid for special funding, perhaps in partnership with other providers – which can mean the difference between reaching a few ineffectively and reaching the many well.⁶⁵ And the state also provides a policy frame, often directly through the Department of Culture, Media and Sport for say combatting social exclusion.⁶⁶ However, here some may feel cynicism about inconsistencies: not just because their local services have been cut back, but because *other* government departments (for example DfES) appear to *discourage* popular access – by urging academics to write for only 'refereed' journals (pres-

The Power of Place: the future of the historic environment, English Heritage, 2000.

sure which is particularly hard on younger historians). Public historians need not only joined-up government – the state encouraging historians to leave their fortresses occasionally, and to work in collaboration with their local library, television station or heritage site⁶⁷ – but we also need joined-up writing.

I hope to have clarified for *Oral History* readers why they have a ‘public history’ section in their journal; and more generally to have opened up the broader debate, so that others will dig deeper. Public history will probably always retain its wide range of meanings and usages – varying according to national culture and whether the context is a practitioner or

academic one. Here I have felt my way between clarity and tolerance, between precision and pluralism. I have tried to avoid dogmatic assertions (‘Public History is x, because that is what I do’). Rather, I suggest, Public History is less about ‘who’ or even ‘what’ but more about ‘how’. Not so much a noun, more a verb. Public History is of real, urgent importance given the ever-growing popularity of representations of the past now. In a context of academic segmentation and narrow professionalisation, public historians provide refreshing, inspiring and necessary expert mediation between the past and its publics. Purveyors of the past to popular audiences ignore historians at their peril.

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NOTES

1. *Radio Times*, 5-11 May, 2001; & 29 September-5 October 2001.
2. *Radio Times*, 6-12 January, 2001.
3. IP Hartley, *The Go-Between*, 1953, London: Penguin, 1958; see Lowenthal, endnote 29.
4. When I visited IWM, barbed wire entangled my clothes and there was ‘real’ desperation in ‘Captain Newman’s’ voice from the trenches.
5. <http://www.historychannel.com/> (US) includes ‘This Day in History’, ‘Relive 100 Years: Click Here’, and a display of Sponsors (including Holiday Inn).
6. Royal Historical Society (RHS) conference, ‘Historians and their Publics’, April 2001, University of York.
7. Simon Ditchfield, ‘It pays to help the public to meet the ancestors’, *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 20 April 2001.
8. I acknowledge an anglophone slant; but I hope it opens up debate on other cultures.
9. University of Sussex, MA in Life History Research: Oral History and Mass-Observation.
10. University of York, History and Heritage, MA option, Sept 2001; www.york.ac.uk/depts/hist
11. Graeme Davison, ‘Paradigms of Public History’, in John Rickard and Peter Spearritt

(eds), *Packaging the Past? Public Histories*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1991, p 4; also applied history courses, see Constance Schulz, ‘Becoming a Public Historian’ in J Gardner and P LaPaglia (eds), *Public History: essays from the field*, Malabar: Kreiger, 1999, p 31.

12. Robert Kelley, ‘Public History: its origins, nature and prospects’, *The Public Historian*, 1:1, autumn 1978, quoted by Davison, 1991; Kelley was an environmental historian and G Wesley Johnson an African historian interested in local history.
13. Ronald J Grele, ‘Whose Public? Whose History? What is the Goal of a Public Historian?’, *The Public Historian*, 3:1, 1981, pp 44-8.
14. Michael Wallace, ‘History Museums in the United States’, in Susan Benson, Stephen Brier and Roy Rosenzweig (eds) *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, Philadelphia, 1986, pp. 146. Wallace is a *Radical History Review* editor.
15. Wallace, 1986, pp 149-50.
16. Michael H. Frisch, ‘The Memory of History’, in Benson, Brier and Rosenzweig, 1986, pp 12, 16-17.
17. NCPH, *A Guide to Graduate Programs in Public History*, Indianapolis: IUPUI, 1996; thanks to Laura Feller, NPS Historian. See also Donald Ritchie, ‘When History goes public: recent experiences in the United States’, *Oral History*, 29:1, 2001.
18. <http://www.publichistory.org>, professionally designed, includes reviews, job-finding tips and a summarizing essay, and offers inducements to ‘be officially recognized as an Associate Editor’.
19. Endearingly defended by P Cantelon, ‘As a Business: Hired, not Bought’, in Gardner and LaPaglia, 1999.
20. <http://WWW.CR.NPS.GOV/HISTORY> and *Directory of National Park Service*

Historians, 2001. Thanks to Constance Schulz for introducing me to Dwight Pitcaithley, NPS Chief Historian; I am grateful to Dwight and Laura Feller for discussion, Washington, May 2001.

21. <http://www.ncph>
22. *Radical History Review*, 79, Winter 2001, interview with Mike Wallace, p 68. <http://chnm.gmu.edu/rhr/rhr.htm>. *RHR* began its regular public history section in 1987; thanks to Dave Kinkela for this.
23. ‘Become a member of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and help us share the lessons of our past with today’s young minds’, leaflet, with inducements to contributors.
24. Rickard & Spearritt, 1991, ‘Introduction’, p 3; Davison, 1991, p 14 on US’s ‘unreflective acceptance of professional credo based on a liberal consensus model of society’.
25. Rickard & Spearritt, 1991, pp 1-2; ‘The Professional Historians’ Association of New South Wales’, 1991, p 215.
26. Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton, ‘Streetwise: Public History in New South Wales’, *Public History Review*, 5/6, 1996-7, p. 12-3; thanks to Paul for copies.
27. George Morgan, ‘History on the Rocks’, in Rickard & Spearritt, 1991, p 78 ff
28. *Oral History*, 29:2, Autumn 2001, pp 21-2 for museum presentations.
29. David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge: CUP, 1985, p 185.
30. Lowenthal, 1985, pp 196 & 210.
31. However, David Glassberg, ‘Public History & the Study of Memory’, *The Public Historian*, 18:2, 1996, stimulated a roundtable discussion which included Lowenthal and Frisch, *The Public Historian*, 19:2, 1997.
32. Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: the national past in contemporary Britain*, London: Verso, 1985, chap 2, pp 53 & 55.

- 33.** Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline*, London: Methuen, 1987, chap 3, pp 31, 55, 111 & 118; while this is helpful on hypocrisies (for example closure of public libraries), it becomes a bit of a rant as it nears the present. For a cooler account from a different perspective, see Peter Mandler, *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1997, Epilogue.
- 34.** Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: vol. 1 – Past and present in contemporary culture*, London: Verso, 1994, pp 242, 207, 210, 297.
- 35.** Samuel, 1994, pp 265, 267, 274 & Afterward; Mandler, 1997, p 474.
- 36.** *The Public Historian*, 6:4, 1984, 'The Debut of Public History in Europe', especially Peter Beck, 'Forward with History: Studying the Past for Careers in the Future'.
- 37.** Thanks to Alastair Thomson, conversation at the Oral History Society conference, 2001; also to Stephen Hussey for his honest email, March 2001. Had *Oral History* not had an Australian editor would this innovation have happened?
- 38.** www.ruskin.ac.uk/prospectus/hist-crs.htm. Thanks very much to Hilda Kean for conversations. H Kean, P Martin, S Morgan (eds), *Seeing History: public history in Britain now*, London: Boutele, 2000.
- 39.** See 'Working-class Women in the North West', *Oral History*, 5:2, 1977, Women's History issue.
- 40.** 'The Vanishing Century: living, losing, retrieved, displayed', May 2000, the First National Public History Conference, Oxford; I am very grateful to Hilda Kean.
- 41.** Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice*, London: Arnold, 2000, chap 6.
- 42.** Other speakers included Patrick Wright, Matthew Evans (chair of Resource), Constance Schulz, and Dave Peacock who, with Simon Ditchfield, York University, ran a 'Heritage Studies as Applied History' HEFCE/FDTL project 1996-9.
- 43.** See Davison, (1991) p 6, still one of the clearest analysts of public history.
- 44.** Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, London: Fontana, 1976, pp 192-7.
- 45.** Joan B Landes (ed), *Feminism: the public and the private*, London: Oxford 1998.
- 46.** Except Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: history, theory & politics*, Routledge, 1995; & Jordanova, 2000, very briefly. Habermas is however currently cultish among early-modern historians.
- 47.** Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, 1962, 1989, Cambridge: MIT & Polity, 1992, p 3.
- 48.** Habermas, 1989, p 164 (168), 'From a Culture-Debating Public to a Culture-Consuming Public'.
- 49.** Habermas, *Structural*, pp 171.
- 50.** Habermas, *Structural*, p 175; my emphases added.
- 51.** Craig Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge; MIT, 1991, pp 26-7 also 11-2.
- 52.** Calhoun, 1991, 'Further Reflections of the Public Sphere', p 440 ff.
- 53.** For example, Seyla Benhabib, 'Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition and Jürgen Habermas', in Landes, 1998, p 82.
- 54.** There was interesting discussion about RAE at the RHS conference, with some suggesting the government pays academics *not* to communicate publicly, others arguing RAE need not constrain historians.
- 55.** Davison, p 7 (also quoting Grele, 1981).
- 56.** See R Rosenzweig & D Thelen (eds), *The Presence of the Past: popular uses of history in American Life*, New York: Columbia, 1998, p 187.
- 57.** 'Magnificent: but is it history?' *BBC History Magazine*, May 2001. *Labour History Review* inaugurated its public history section in 2001, with reviews of labour heritage museums.
- 58.** Jay Winter, 'Public History and Scholarship', *History Workshop Journal*, 1996, 42, p. 169.
- 59.** See also 'Interview with Mike Wallace', 2001, p. 67.
- 60.** *Radio Times*, 21 July, 2001.
- 61.** 'Past is perfect' ('VVe're the new rock'n'roll'), *Guardian*, 29 Oct 2001. 'Forget the cliché that history is the new rock'n'roll... it is good history that is gaining popularity', *BBC History magazine, Books of the year*, Winter 2001. See also www.bbc.co.uk/history
- 62.** Membership of the *Power of Place* Steering Group: the only exception was Professor Lola Young, there as Project Director, Black History and Culture. The report had such headings as 'Before we do anything, we need knowledge', but did not apparently look to historians to provide that. There was, of course, also one archaeologist on the Group; and archaeology is generally differently placed in relation to English Heritage. Thanks to Constance Schulz for discussion here.
- 63.** For instance, the Fawcett Library, established in 1926, has received a £4.2 million HLF grant, reopening as the Women's Library in a new building.
- 64.** Stephen Hussey, 'What Principles?', OHS conference, *Talking Community Histories*, June 2001.
- 65.** For our 'Vanishing Century' exhibition, we successfully bid to a small labour movement charity, gaining about £450 which allowed the display boards to be professionally heat-sealed.
- 66.** For instance, *Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for All: policy guidance on Social Inclusion for DCMS funded and local authority museums, galleries and archives in England*, DCMS 2000.
- 67.** Britain may not go down the contractual route of Australia's Phyllis Phame or America's commercial historical consulting firms, but historians surely need the heightened visibility and employability enjoyed by archaeologists.