# THE SHORELINE AND THE SEA

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I lived for most of my life in a country where folk culture is not always taken very seriously, indeed, where to take it seriously may invite irony, sarcasm, even ridicule. I'm describing England, here, not the United Kingdom. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have rich and often well-protected cultural traditions in music, performing arts, literature and language. Actually, and this is something to bear in mind in what follows, intangible cultural heritage is closely connected with national and community identity in each country, partly because of England's dominance within the United Kingdom. Perhaps that is why the UK is not a signatory to the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. One can imagine that an independent Scotland, were that to be established, might take a different view.

England is also a country whose folk culture, such as it is, is not necessarily admirable. One of the most popular folk traditions is Guy Fawkes Night, which commemorates the failure on 5th November 1605 of a Roman Catholic plot to blow up Parliament and King James I with it. Bonfires are lit across the country, in an echo of ancient pagan winter rituals. On them, the most notorious plotter, Guy Fawkes, is burned in effigy, as people were once burned for their religious beliefs. In the Sussex town of Lewes, where 5th November is a big event, 17 local Protestant martyrs of the 1550s are commemorated alongside the burning of Guy Fawkes. The people of Lewes also burn other unpopular figures. In 2001, it was Osama bin Laden and in 2014, Alex Salmond, then First Minister of Scotland and leader of the independence campaign. In 2003, it was a traveller or gipsy caravan. There are laws against incitement to racial or religious hatred in England, but they don't seem to apply where folk culture and tradition is concerned. Clearly, intangible heritage is a complex subject.

'*There is a cliff, whose high and bending head looks fearfully on the confined deep*': that's how Shakespeare describes the cliffs at Dover, in *King Lear*. Later poets, from Matthew Arnold to Daljit Nagra have returned to the theme and they remain a powerful icon of England. The cliffs' white brow has the purity

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of a classical statue, suggesting an idea of stability and permanence. Of course, it's an illusion. This shore, like shorelines everywhere, is in an unending dance with the sea, sometimes giving, sometimes taking, but never, never the same. Go west from Dover and you find Romney Marsh, the land of the Cinque Ports, rich trade centres in the 13th century, now sleepy towns attractive to tourists, their silted up harbours sometimes miles from the sea. Go north, past the lacy inlets of southern Essex, where Romans built forts and Saxons fought Vikings, and you may find it hard to say where the land starts and the sea ends in these mud banks. If you're on a boat, you might pass over the ancient town of Dunwich, once a regional capital but swallowed by the sea in 1286.

There was a time when I saw the distinction between heritage and culture as the kind of clear line made by Dover's cliffs. Now, the fluid movement between land and sea that characterises England's eastern coast seems a better metaphor. I thought of heritage simply as the culture of the past. It was, as the name implies, a legacy, an inheritance. As such, it could be very difficult to change. A girl born in London acquires a different heritage to one born in Tokyo. She may subsequently move to Japan, marry a Japanese man and bring up Anglo-Japanese children; she may learn the language, the cuisine and social norms. But I doubt whether she can ever feel completely at home in this adopted world because she has a different heritage. She will be seen by Japanese people, even by her new family, as English and, being seen thus, as 'other', she will see herself that way too.

This hypothetical scenario connects two heritages, Britain and Japan, of comparable global power. How much more difficult must it be to negotiate a balance when moving between countries whose political, economic and cultural strength is much more unequal—between, say, Britain and Somalia?

So heritage can be understood as the cultural traditions, values and assets people acquire with the facts of their birth. Because heritage is an accident of birth, I find it hard to understand how it can be associated either with guilt or pride, though many people do. It cannot be changed, as one cannot change one's parents. But it can be added to, so that its relative importance to an individual grows or reduces over time, with the choices they make in life. Migrating to Tokyo is such a choice and the acquisition of Japanese culture will change the nature and meaning of a British person's heritage, even if it cannot entirely replace it.

Culture is different from heritage precisely because it is acquired, not inherited, chosen not given. As its etymology makes clear, the word was originally linked to development through education, aspiration and imitation. A person could be cultivated. For many people, especially those who put their faith in the values of a so-called high European culture, this remains the case

today. Culture was in the past, and to an extent still is, a route to social mobility. A person could advance by learning to appreciate the tastes of the upper classes. From Julien Sorel in *Le Rouge et le Noir* to Pip in *Great Expectations*, the 19th century European novel brims with characters who try to better themselves through acquiring a culture of gentility. This route, whilst apparently meritocratic, was always carefully protected: Pierre Bourdieu is only one of those who have exposed how elites protect their interests through control of cultural capital and the creation of excluding distinctions.

As I say, it once seemed to me that such a clear distinction between innate, unchangeable heritage and acquired, changeable culture was a useful way to think about how culture—understood now in its broadest, anthropological sense to include both heritage *and* art—is used by individuals and social groups. These days, however, it looks more complicated, more ambiguous, than that. It's true that we all have a heritage determined by inescapable facts, including our parentage and the date and place of our birth. And it's true that we acquire culture through our own tastes and choices, throughout life. But I imagine the relationship between these two sides of a person's or a group's cultural identity now as a continual, fluid interaction, like the dance of the shoreline and the sea.

Edwin Muir is a major Scottish poet, whose translations of Kafka, Feuchtwanger and other German writers were important to English literature in the 1930s. He was born in Orkney in 1887 and grew up on the island of Wyre, before moving unhappily to Glasgow as a teenager. Muir's account of his Orkney childhood is a classic of the genre, evoking a cultural heritage whose distinctive strengths depends on the relative absence of external influences. Today, even in places like Orkney or the islands of Friesland, no child could grow up in such a heritage. The rise of the mass media and now digital technology and the Internet mean that there is probably nowhere in Europe, or perhaps in the world, where heritage and cultural identity are straightforward.

In my earlier thinking, rock music would have fallen clearly into the category of art. Some theorists, such as Christopher Ricks or Wilfred Mellers, even advocated for Bob Dylan and the Beatles in the terms normally reserved for high culture. But in the day of retro rock magazines, Legacy Editions of 40-year-old albums and the tribute band, this art form seems to have become part of our heritage. It is certainly part of my children's heritage: music by the Who and Robert Johnson sit in their playlists beside that of Radiohead and Laura Marling. Similarly, *Star Wars*, Tolkein and Monty Python belong to their cultural inheritance, shaping their imaginations more meaningfully than the historic buildings conserved by English Heritage and the National Trust.

In Thetford, a small, rather out of the way town in Norfolk, there is a bronze statue of the actor, Arthur Lowe. He is presented as Captain Mainwaring from

a much loved BBC comedy show called *Dad's Army*, which was broadcast between 1968 and 1977, and regularly repeated ever since. *Dad's Army*, managed simultaneously to mock and to celebrate the Home Guard, a World War II volunteer reserve, and with it a passing way of life. The programme was filmed in Thetford, which now uses the association to attract visitors, although the programme was set in a fictional town on the south coast. But the statue seems ambiguous: does it commemorate an English actor or a fictional character? Is it a memorial to the Home Guard, or to nostalgia for the culture of Britain in its self-described finest hour?

These recent artistic creations do serve a key function of heritage, by providing a cultural space in which different generations can search for and perhaps find common values and pleasures. Families today share more cultural tastes in than in 1950s. Even so, there are large parts of my own heritage that, for reasons both explicable and not, my children have no interest in or even awareness of. They will one day have to clear my bookshelves and take the contents to charity shops. Few of my books mean anything to them. We can choose how much of our heritage to accept, though more sticks to us than we think.

And that is an important point of divergence between heritage and art: who values them. One might almost suggest that culture is what we seek out, what attracts us, while heritage is what other people want us to accept, a kind of filial duty. The preoccupation of people who care about heritage, evident in the discourse of heritage bodies and of legislation and treaties (including the UNESCO Convention on safeguarding intangible heritage) is on protection, conservation and transmission. The immediate aim of heritage organisations may be to conserve but the real prize is to persuade the next generation to value and therefore to accept responsibility for their legacy.

Where tangible heritage—buildings, monuments, archaeology, artistic treasures and museum collections—is concerned, the transmission of responsibility is relatively easy. Institutions and legislation generally protect these assets today, so that it takes more effort to abandon something—what museum jargon calls 'de-accessioning'—than to maintain the status quo. Inertia is a powerful if underestimated force in human affairs. Restitution, as in the case of the Elgin Marbles, which remain in London, or the Benin Bronzes which are beginning to be restored to the descendants of those from whom they were stolen, is at least a matter of controversy and so the debates are infused with energy because people care about the fate of these objects. Public statues may be of lesser artistic value, but they have also become the focus of passionate and sometimes violent contestation about their contemporary meaning. In such cases, an object can serve to facilitate important political, historical and moral arguments.

Things are more slippery for intangible heritage, UNESCO's 'oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, and cultural knowledge'. This heritage—by definition—cannot be seen. Its condition can't be assessed and reported on by experts. It cannot be restored by the application of money and expertise, or returned to its original owner. It can't be controlled or directed, since it exists only in the people who care about and practice it. How can this inheritance, so rich in past experience, present life and future potential, be safeguarded? How can those who care for it today help the next generation to develop an interest in it for tomorrow? How can we transmit what we value, without making it a burden on the next generation? This, after all, is a field where indifference may be more destructive than the passions that can crystalise around objects.

On one level, that transmission happens all the time, consciously and unconsciously. As children, unless we are very unfortunate, we naturally pick up the ticks and tastes of our parents, of the older generation who love and raise us. Forty or sixty years later we find ourselves doing what once we saw our grandmothers do. People constantly pass on knowledge and skills to others, especially the young.

But that may not be enough. When society changes fast—as it has since the industrial revolution and continues to do today—the conditions that spawned and supported specific cultural forms, knowledge and traditions are liable to disappear. In countries like England, where the transition from rural to industrial society was exceptionally rapid and brutal, traditional culture has suffered greatly. Compared with many other European countries, most folk expression in England today represents recovery and revival rather than continuity of practice. Its connection with the past cultures on which it is modelled is complex and uncertain.

Even if English folklorists of the early 20$^{th}$ century accurately recovered the *forms* of fading traditions, nothing about those traditions has the same meaning or value as it did in the past. Performers and audience, even the division between the two, are quite unlike the characters in Thomas Hardy, themselves an evocation of the author's childhood memories. The villages and towns where they perform were once rural slums; today they are middle class havens for commuters and retired people, gated communities with invisible gates.

Intangible culture is threatened when the social conditions that supported it change. But it also dies simply when people lose interest. In 1875, the London theatre manager Richard D'Oyly Carte produced the first Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, *Trial by Jury*. There followed 15 years of extraordinary commercial and artistic success which made Gilbert and Sullivan the foremost theatre artists of the English speaking world, enriching all those involved. Their work

became a mainstay of the English stage for much of the 20th century and supported a tradition of amateur performance in British cities. The D'Oyly Carte Company continued to present the original productions for 100 years, carrying the legacy of Victorian culture almost to the present day. But when money was needed to keep going in the early 1980s, itself a sign of falling ticket sales and support, not enough people cared. The company gave its final performance on 27 February 1982. A changed society had simply declined to preserve the theatre its great-grandparents had so loved and threw it out, as it had previously thrown out their furniture, books, buildings and table manners. It happens and, we know that we can't keep everything. If I ever see Gilbert and Sullivan, like Sophocles and Shakespeare, it will be something between a revival and a recreation.

So how can those who care about today's intangible heritage safeguard this vast and diverse field? The first principle must be to recognise the limits to what can be done. Much as our approach to the sea has changed from coastal defence to a more complex and subtle approach of shoreline management, we have to work *with* the forces that shape heritage and culture, rather than trying to resist them. There will be times when money will be needed simply to protect something that would otherwise not survive in its present form: that is an implicit rationale for the public funding of opera in Europe today. But in some sense, this is to acknowledge defeat, to put a form of heritage on a kind of state sponsored life-support system because there are not enough people interested in keeping it going without that help.

The obvious contrast with opera is musical theatre, which thrives commercially and among the amateur companies who once performed Gilbert and Sullivan. The amateurs, whose activity can be as interesting as the West End culture they make their own, are very numerous. The National Operatic and Dramatic Association has about 2,500 groups on its membership lists, while the most recent research suggests that about 15% of the English population is active in amateur arts organisations. These groups have a combined income of about half a billion pounds, almost entirely raised from ticket sales and their own activities. The intangible heritage they represent will survive, at least for now, simply because so many people derive pleasure and satisfaction from it.

So the second principle must be to keep heritage enjoyable because that is what attracts people to become involved. It may be what the Canadian sociologist Robert Stebbins calls 'serious leisure', but it will thrive if the rewards outweigh the demands. Some of the legislation and regulation imposed by government—in the name of health and safety or in forms of indirect taxation—stretches people's tolerance. Academics, administrators and those who compile heritage inventories should be careful not add to this burden.

A third principle might be to allow heritage to evolve, to accept that it is inevitable, more than that, *desirable*, that it should. We accept that nothing stays the same: our lives today are not what they were even 20 years ago. So we should accept that heritage—however responsible we feel for passing on a legacy we had from those we once loved—will change too. West Bromwich Operatic Society illustrates this perfectly. Founded in 1938, it presented its 80th production in April 2012. But that show, a 1997 musical called *Titanic*, was far removed from *the Maid of the Mountains*, the romantic operetta that was their first. Singing styles have changed with the culture and with the introduction of radio microphones, and the whole production is far more sophisticated than that long distant pre-war performance. But a cast member of the 1938 performance was in the audience for *Titanic*: her niece is Chair of the Committee and two of her grandnieces performed. There is continuity in everything that matters—the social networks, the families, the ideals of the participants and the meaning of the show in the community. It's just the forms that have evolved—and because they have evolved, the society is full of young people, and its own youth productions.

That opening to new possibilities is also evident in the most successful parts of the traditional cultural world. In Scotland, the Fèisean or Gaelic festivals, which were established in the 1980s to pass on the language, music and culture of the Highlands and Islands to young people, have thrived partly because they abandoned the competitive model used elsewhere. That allowed the focus of their teaching to move from a performer's ability to replicate an abstract ideal to celebrating what it was that each child or teenager brought to a traditional song or air. In the best cases, such as Fèis Rois, that led to a rich development of group work, improvisation and the composition of new airs to play alongside those inherited from earlier generations.

In England, the revived tradition of Morris dancing—a formal dance dating back at least to the 16th century and normally performed out of doors—is undertaken with great seriousness by more than a hundred different sides. But the seriousness does not prevent anyone from taking liberties with the tradition, and cross-dressing—another longstanding English tradition—is accepted in the right place. But the Bunnies from Hell would be anathema to anyone concerned with ideas of authenticity in traditional culture. The Bunnies wear pink and describe their style as 'anarchic Cotswold': they have an irregular membership composed largely of anyone who feels like joining in and hasn't got a side of their own to perform with.

Finally, a fourth principle for ensuring the transmission of intangible heritage should be to welcome imports, grafts and cross fertilisation. These have always occurred in European heritage, as cultural influences spread across an inherently diverse continent. It would be impossible to tell the story of

European art without describing the influences of migrant artists and the attraction of exoticism to rulers. Although the exchanges today are worldwide, the processes are much the same. Thus Indian dance has become an increasingly important part of contemporary English culture since the 1970s. It is widely performed in its many traditional forms such as Kathak and Bharatanatyam, necessarily shifting its meaning from the different situations and contexts in which it is seen in Britain. But it has also had a deep influence on contemporary dance, for example through the work of Akram Khan, and on the popular music and dance scene, with the emergence of Bhangra. Many British cities now celebrate Chinese New Year, as well as marking festivals such as Eid and Hanukah. In Leicester, one of Britain's most ethnically and culturally diverse cities, the streetlights serve both for Diwali and Christmas.

There are those who fear or dislike these new forms of heritage, which allow people to claim a right of recognition within the European public space. But our traditions, our heritage, are simply what existed when we grew up. Christmas stands on the foundations of Roman and pre-Roman winter festivals: that does not make it a less Christian event, though its commercialisation arguably does. Heritage becomes dangerous when it is used to separate people, to claim traditions as belonging exclusively to some by virtue of their birth. Such ideas drove European nationalism in the late 19th century and they have not gone away. It is not for nothing that the Serbian forces made a primary target of the Bosnian National Library during the siege of Sarajevo in 1992, with the deliberate intention of erasing unique manuscripts. It is not for nothing that Vedran Smailović's solo performance of Albinoni's *Adagio in G Minor* in the ruins of the library became a symbol of honour and resistance. Today, war in Ukraine is being waged over heritage as well as territory.

We must work to avoid such misuse while safeguarding and passing on the best of our heritage, physical and intangible. The principles suggested here—to recognise the limits of our control over intangible heritage, to keep it enjoyable, to allow it to evolve and to welcome external input—can help to achieve some of that ambition. But in the end, our culture, past and present, is like the ocean. It is always too great for us to understand, control or even see clearly. We do best when we learn to work with it, with humility and respect, dancing along the shifting sands between the shoreline and the sea.