Heritage, whose heritage?
The concept of heritage

SUSAN: Patrick Wright is professor of cultural studies at Nottingham Trent University and the author of *On Living in an Old Country*, a critical look at Britain's obsession with the past, published in 1985.
PATRICK: Heritage is what the present chooses to make of the past. That means that heritage is dynamic. It's a changing concept. And it also means that it tends to be defined in opposition to much that is going on in the present. It's endangered. Where there is heritage, there is often a sense of threat. You know, whether it's a building that's about to be bull-dozed or a way of life that is dying out because of economic change. The heritage that we speak about in this country in terms of conservation tends to be a term that becomes very central – or more central in new ways – as the state becomes involved in this field of administering conservation. But what tends to happen is the past is polarised out from the present in the way we think about it. So the risk in heritage is that there will be, not just that heritage reflects real change and real threats, but that it develops a symbolic dimension and becomes a way of condemning the present. So I mean I noticed, when I first started thinking about this properly in the seventies and eighties, the idea of heritage was completely polarised against the idea of social democracy and the Welfare State. I mean heritage was country houses, it was the social hierarchy of a traditional sort. And it was opposed to, you know…Brideshead was there under the name of heritage but what you had on the other side was council tower blocks, you know, welfare state reforms. So I mean, that's the risk is that heritage will be used as a way of defending bunkered, conservative, prejudiced ideas.
SUSAN: Does it enshrine the idea perhaps that life was better, simpler, more orderly then?
PATRICK: I think all periods are susceptible to this sort of nostalgia. The past was when meaning was intact and when ways of life were reassuring and familiar. So we do have a habit of projecting our ideas back into history and trying to build a kind of accusation about the present in the past. The idea of heritage before this great big efflorescence over the last two or three decades was a kind of specialist area. You'd find it in the local county museums, you'd find curators looking after pot shards and flints. These were enthusiasts. They were they were fairly marginal figures. But what happened in that period of the seventies and eighties was that heritage became this enormous attention. It became linked with the economy, with tourism, with ideas of redevelopment, of urban regeneration and it also became connected to mournful narratives about the loss of imperial ways of life. So my concern was to identify the extent to which what you might call the curatorial agenda – those strict things concerned with looking after museums and interpreting the past, became overwhelmed by this new material pouring into the field which was all about social anxieties of a very different sort.
SUSAN: Let's identify one aspect of heritage, the country house. Why do you think that in particular the country house, at a certain time in the late twentieth century gripped everybody's attention?
PATRICK: The story of the National Trust and the country house is a perfect example of how heritage is changing. And what happens with the National Trust is that after forty or fifty years of dealing with landscapes and small buildings – generally small buildings – the big country house came on the agenda in the thirties in a big way, where many of the large country houses in England and in, well, in Britain generally, are threatened with with bankruptcy or with hardship. So what happens is the National Trust is brought into play, um, during those late 30s primarily and by 1945, which is the year when the Welfare State is founded by the Labour Government and also the year that *Brideshead Revisited* is published, as it happens, you've got the two the two possibilities. By then, the National Trust is owning owns a few of these places and they've negotiated a way of keeping the owners, the families in residence. I mean, they've done all these things to make it a kind of very sort of agreeable English compromise, if you like. But the country house then becomes an alternative vision of British life. And what happens is, as state reform goes ahead, as the economy falters and all these difficulties that come up – And then you've got all the time, growing in the shadows under the

name of tourism, this incredible expansion of the country house as a reborn icon. You know, the National Trust gets more and more and more of them. Its operation is increasingly focused on these things. So, basically, what happens is the country house is saved because of historical circumstances pressing on it in a new and serious way. And I'm in favour of that. I mean the alternative was to grind these buildings up and turn them into motorway stone, you know. I mean they were used as hardcore in motorways, one or two of them – I think these stories are not entirely apocryphal. So it's a good idea that these buildings were not lost or demolished or converted into public schools or whatever it would have been. But the problem is that they were saved in a manner that launched a symbolic narrative that suited a period of extreme politicisation. So, for example, the country house was projected as a symbol of organic community, you know, where everybody knew their place, different dukes and servants, At a time when the reforming state was meant to be remaking the nation, you've got this great historical anachronism suddenly re-emerging as, um, a symbol of a superior way of life! Now, it's not only a right-wing conspiracy this. Because actually I think the country house as a symbol suited left-wing perceptions as well. You know, I mean the left has always benefited from having an idea of the patrician elite to differentiate itself against. So I think what happened was the country house became this way in which various political interests in the post-war decades, the seventies and eighties, could talk about what they were trying to do and who they liked and who they hated.

PATRICK: The problem I think that is really an issue now is: how do we avoid heritage becoming a new uniformity in which everything is levelled, in which the same systems of consumer management are introduced everywhere? So that's my concern. I think that's the biggest threat perhaps to the way this this this whole industry works now is that it is actually levelling and reducing the appearance of historical landscapes and places.

SUSAN: Do you think, Patrick, that in future, heritage could be reinterpreted to include everyone in multicultural Britain?

PATRICK: Yes, it's interesting if you look at heritage in Britain, it's often very closely connected to ideas of empire and ideas of class. So basically what you get is a heritage that often is polarised. So there's a you know there's a very strong working-class heritage which is expressed in terms of open-air museums and industrial archaeology. It's not as if we don't have that. Then there is the sort of Brideshead high 'toff' aesthetic architecture idea of heritage, which is about celebrating a kind of, um, the centre of an imperial dynasty, if you like. But if you go to, say, America, the invocation of heritage is expressed around aboriginal rights or black culture and there is no embarrassment about the term. I mean, in Britain, if you say 'heritage', you then have to apologise, and explain that you're not really saying this or that. But in other cultures, heritage can be used to talk about being a minority tradition. It can be used to talk about being in opposition to a mainstream that is not giving you any room to breathe or live. So, I mean, I think what we need to do is we need to take heritage away from the sort of traditional British considerations that have fielded it and limited it. And you know, I now see the best of our museums (and we do have some really good ones now) not as places of reverence and of patching up busted idylls about what the land used to be or the country used to be, but they're places of cultural enquiry where the different cultures that we are now meet and consider one another's past. You know so what I'm saying is heritage becomes a mode of enquiry rather than a form of reverence. And the key thing is that it must be possible to think of heritage without always giving the priority to the idea of roots. You know, that only things that are rooted and have been unchanging for many years are of cultural significance. This is complete nonsense. But heritage now needs to be a dynamic process. It's about the way the past relates to the present and the way the present relates to the past. It's got to be in that continuum. It's not about the past as a mummified thing. It's not about places where time stands still. It's about time's movement. And I think that's where the most intelligent and interesting curatorial practice is now.