Reviews

Comptes rendus

Gerald George, *Visiting History, Arguments Over Museums and Historic Sites*

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George, Gerald. *Visiting History, Arguments Over Museums and Historic Sites.* Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1990, 115 pp., paper.

Visiting History is a slim volume of 15 essays by the former Director of the American Association of State and Local History. In that position, Gerald George had a greater opportunity than most of visiting museums and historic sites all over the United States, and of engaging in conversation and debate numerous men and women who, in a popular sense, were – and are – on the front lines, responsible for presenting and interpreting history to literally millions of people every day. Over the years, while he became increasingly confident about the ability of professionals to solve technical problems – how to install exhibits, restore buildings and conserve artifacts, as well as attract visitors and look after their basic needs – he was less so about their willingness to engage in an ongoing debate about the nature of the history they dispense and to think in a more than superficial way about why they spend so much time, energy and money in preserving "heritage."

On one level, these essays are a quick read, interesting personal journeys across a landscape familiar to museum and historic site professionals. On another level, however, George raises some serious questions about the sterility of many modern museum exhibits; the seduction of our favourite historical myths and our tendency to perpetuate them in historic sites and recreations; and about our need to confront, not shy away from, the great dilemmas posed by trying to present "real history" to the general public.

The book is divided into three sections dealing with museums, historic sites and the nature of history and its preservation. In two essays, "The Best Laid Plans of Mice and Museums: Observations on Going Astray" and "An Open Letter to the Bozeman Trail Association," George goes to the heart of the matter – what really is this history we are presenting? In the first (reprinted from AASLH *History News* 44: 2, 1989) he challenges the ultimate value, despite the attractiveness of the package and the simplicity of its synthesis, of the carefully designed storyline exhibit, the type that compartmentalizes great themes such as "The First Westerners," and "The Winning of the West," leading to a choice of objects and photographs to illustrate what is essentially a history textbook. We all know such exhibits and, being honest, could say that we have enjoyed many of them. They certainly have great value for the docent-led school class. But George is right when he maintains that they too often demean and marginalize the artifact. Sometimes exhibits are so carefully crafted that compared to the old cabinets of curiosities – however frustratingly uninformative they might have been – they rob visitors of any need to use their imagination.

The problem with the history museum is that it is static and freezes the moment, but history is a process, a continuum. The challenge, therefore, is to engage the visitor's imagination to mitigate the problem. We can best do this, not by reducing the artifact or historical photograph to the status of a one-dimensional illustration in a burdensome storyline, but rather by liberating our collections to tell a whole variety of stories – archæological, anthropological, technological and artistic. The ceramic pot in the "indian setting" thus becomes an agent, not only for information, but also an instrument for multi-dimensional understanding. George

believes, rightly I think, that enlightened computer programming can help the visitor engage the artifacts in a way much less intrusive than that offered by a rigid storyline. An exhibit of artifacts and computer terminals alone might be too spare, but the point is a good one; the artifact as prop alone squanders an opportunity to engage the visitor in a conversation.

In another essay, however, "Are We Seeing Any History Yet?" (a review of *Past Meets Present, Essays about Historic Interpretation and Public Audiences,* Jo Blatti, ed., reprinted from *History News* 42: 6, 1987) the author does defend the museum exhibit, historic house period room or restored urban precinct, claiming that it is more valuable than some critics would have us believe. Such critics maintain that history is not a place but a dimension and that it makes no more sense, therefore, to rope off a house as historic – implying that what is inside the rope has more history than what is outside it – than it does to say that there is more geography in one place than in another. While not implying any approval per se of the sanitized historic site or sterilized battleship far removed from any sense of the horrors of war, George, nevertheless, sees value in what museum professionals try to do in using tangible things to "touch the past." History, after all, is more than intangible ideas. The historical experience was not abstract; places, things, people, events and dates are real enough even if our interpretation of them is not always "truthful." Because they can't easily compete with books as a medium for abstract ideas doesn't make the work of museum and historic sites any less valuable, a fact surely borne out by the millions more who "visit history" than read about it.

This latter assertion presents the museum community with an awesome challenge because it means that, after their school days, most people will interact with history at museums and historic sites. In this context, George's essay "Open Letter," about rebuilding a short-lived fort on the Bozeman Trail in northern Wyoming, makes a pertinent point and sounds a note of caution. He argues, convincingly, that the restoration of the fort would inevitably detract from the central truth of the events of the winter of 1866 – the success of the Sioux in stopping, for a period, the devastating advance of the white man. The fort was insignificant compared to the war for the trail, which ended when the fort was burned down after the Fetterman massacre, an event as shocking in its time as that attending the later defeat of Custer. This essay reminds us that historic sites can sometimes be ill-served by our zeal to reconstruct, to misplace the Visitor Centre, or to allow a clutter of interpretive signs to intrude on the imagination. On a visit to Carcassonne in southern France, Henry James recalled that it was hard to tear himself away from what that medieval city did to his imagination; he had no need of interpretive signs on a trail from a Visitor Centre.

Umberto Eco has written of the great "falsification industry" that ironically feeds the American need for the "real thing." He suggests that through fake recreations and "past-izing" in museums, we are saving what our culture seems hell-bent on destroying. Thus, museums are where we pay homage to what we have actually devoured. In another essay on the recent, dramatic proliferation of museums, George explores and challenges this view of our institutions as trophy rooms. In view of the incredibly rapid technological change that threatens our natural and cultural environment, I believe he is right in suggesting that museums are not a means of clinging to what we once prized, but rather of holding onto something familiar lest we get lost in the maelstrom of keeping pace with the rate of obsolescence.

History professionals working in museums and historic sites need to ponder many of the points raised in this book. George doesn't pretend to have the answers, but his essays pose serious problems. It is hard not to agree with his thesis that, as we move forward, confident in our mastery over the technical aspects of museum and historic site management, we need to push ourselves to debate the fundamentals: What do we preserve? Why? And what do we tell our visitors about them?

Canadian readers should be aware that George deals exclusively with the United States when referring to specific museums and sites in his essays. But the issues are universal and the book is no less a helpful reminder of what should really concern us and merit our attention. I recommend its addition to history museum and historic site libraries.