

Interview

Entrevue

David Lowenthal on Public History: An Interview

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In April 1998 the National Council on Public History held its twentieth annual conference in Austin, Texas. The keynote speaker at the conference was David Lowenthal, Emeritus Professor of Geography and Honorary Research Fellow at University College, London, and Visiting Professor of Heritage Studies at St Mary's University College, Twickenham. Professor Lowenthal is also the author of two highly acclaimed books about history and heritage. *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) is a wide-ranging exploration of the place of the past in our lives and how it has changed over time. *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (London: Viking, 1996) focuses more specifically on society's fascination with heritage in all its forms. This book deals with issues that are central to the practice of Public History, such as the enormous growth of the heritage industry, the problems arising from popularity, the differences between history and heritage and the detrimental effects of conflicting claims of ownership of the past.

In his address to the conference, Professor Lowenthal argued that heritage — the sense of the past that shapes and informs our identities — and history — the attempt to explain the past — are “at loggerheads” and need to be brought back together. He suggested that public historians were well-placed to bridge the gap that separates the passionate, romantic and mythical world of heritage and the objective, systematic and practical sphere of scholarly research. According to Professor Lowenthal, they can take basic facts and interpretations from the academy and use public history methods and heritage venues as a means of delivering a stimulating, accessible and accurate sense of the past. Professor Lowenthal

nevertheless admitted that it is often difficult to deal with the complex issues raised by history in a heritage context, especially when historical analysis contradicts a group's notion of its heritage — he gave the example of the Enola Gay exhibit. Yet, he argued, there are plenty of less contentious areas where public historians can bring history and heritage together and can demonstrate that, far from being remote, difficult and boring, “history is a matter of wonder.”

The purpose of this interview was to allow Professor Lowenthal to elaborate on some of the issues he had raised in his books and to talk about his broad experience with heritage sites and museums and the practice of Public History in those venues. I was especially interested in finding out what Professor Lowenthal thought about issues such as authenticity and the role of artifacts in interpreting the past. Otherwise, our discussion ranged widely over a variety of topics related to the theory and practice of Public History and Museology.

SB: What are your thoughts on the meaning and significance of authenticity as it relates to heritage and Public History?

DL: I have in fact recently had the experience of going to a day on “Heritage that Hurts” at Cambridge. It was run mostly by archaeologists, the people who, more than anyone else, do the heritage through public history program there. They had put on this day to deal with how you can interpret violence, wars, holocausts, slavery — all these terrible things — through material culture. In fact, we got into a really big debate about some of the consequences of trying to do this type of interpretation, assuming that you have to do it through material culture.

In recent years, there has been some discussion about how concentration camps and extermination centres are becoming increasingly trivialized in Poland, Germany and elsewhere in eastern Europe. As these sites become part of tourism, it becomes necessary to bring in more and more people, to lay out some sort of trail or general visit for them. As a result, in many places, these visits have less and less to do with the experience of what happened there. It is, after all, fifty years since the events took place and increasingly the people who go to these places are not particularly interested in feeling the impact; what they want to see is something very strange. Or if they are school children, and there are lots of school children, they just don't know what to expect and they often treat it as a lark. So there are really terrible difficulties about ever getting any kind of empathetic vision. Either all you have are the buildings or you try to recreate some sort of death march of people going to the gas chambers, which is schlock. You really can't do either.

I guess the earlier experience that I had with these issues was the debate over human hair, which was partly a debate connected with the Holocaust Museum [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.]. The question was should they use the hair collected from internees at the camps. Some of the descendants of the victims said no. "This is demeaning and searing and you can't do this." And, of course, what happens to hair anyway is that it becomes brittle and after a time, you just can't show it any more. So what you do is have pictures of it instead or not have it at all and have a sign saying: "We would have liked to have shown the hair of the victims but the feeling among those connected with the victims was that this was too traumatic." So there are all kinds of difficulties, it seemed to some of us, with using authentic structures and artifacts as any kind of focus in depth, to provide a meaningful emotional and intellectual experience.

I'm sure you know about some of the things that are going on globally in connection with authenticity. This is how I got into that act. UNESCO and ICOMOS [International Council of Monuments and Sites] were questioning the concept of authenticity that had been developed in the 1960s and afterwards and incorporated in the Venice charter. This charter was drafted by those who, a generation ago, were concerned about the protection, preservation and display of monuments and sites. They met in Venice and ultimately agreed that you have to have

criteria to help identify and define authenticity and historical significance. They decided that you should do this by looking at how much of the original material structure survived. In fact, though, the criteria were not written in terms of structure but in terms of material, that is, how much of the original material survives. Of course, the participants were mainly people from France, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Spain and other countries where people worked in stone and brick. This is their experience of what is original, what is authentic to life.

As time has gone on, though, the world of conservation, preservation and heritage has grown and now incorporates many more parts of the world in a very important way. In the 1990s, countries like Norway were beginning to question the established conception of authenticity and to say, "Look, we build in wood and we don't really think that authenticity or importance should be defined by how much of the original material remains of a structure because wood, for the most part, doesn't last very long. What counts for us is the form of a structure, the shape, the context or the processes by which it was made or the ideas that inhered in making it." The Japanese began to add their own pitch, which was along the same lines. Sacred structures in Japan famously involved tearing things down every twenty years and rebuilding in pretty much the same form, using the same techniques, the same kind of wood, same craftsmen if possible. So that was the beginning of this rethink of the whole matter of authenticity.

I also had experience with this in putting on an exhibition in London on fakes in 1990. A student of mine at the British Museum had been asked to do this and he asked me and some other people to establish the rationale, help write the catalogue, and ultimately to try to raise money. But we couldn't raise any money. It was quite hilarious because we forgot about the need for money and, as it turns out, the British Museum relies on outside sponsors for big shows. When we did get around to asking people nobody wanted to sponsor the exhibit. They all said, "Oh, no! We couldn't have our names connected with fakes!" Places like Sotheby's and Christie's [auction houses] said this would kill them and ran a mile. Even the photocopier companies ran a mile. Nobody wanted to have their names associated with fakes.

Actually we put on a really splendid exhibition. It was very well received and very well reviewed, partly because it was so

intriguing. We had originals and fakes next to them. I remember thinking what a great opportunity this was to see how the public would react. The public came in droves, and, of course, part of it was the public just loves to see the experts proved wrong. I thought we should have people there interviewing or at least noting what people are saying. But nobody had any students and there was no prospect of the staff doing this sort of field work. So I decided to try it myself. It was a total failure because when I listened or talked to people, I found that, for many of them, everything in the British Museum looked beautiful and awe inspiring. They treated all the objects with such reverence, including those that were clearly labelled as fakes. They still looked and felt so real, were often as gorgeous as any original and probably expensive too. And they were on display in the British Museum. So the whole distinction was, in that sense, collapsing for people.

This experience with the exhibit and the catalogue and other things I've written led me to question the whole meaning of authenticity. It occurred to me that really, authenticity is a false concept. Authenticity is in the eye of the beholder and it keeps disappearing the closer you get to it. In the West, authenticity now inheres in things like the primitive, the natural, the unselfconscious, other cultures. And of course, the more people appreciate these things, the more self conscious and the less authentic they become. Authenticity really is one of those terrible concepts that relates to a Western sense of loss of what people think they had before and no longer have — the time when people did an honest day's work, and didn't use machines and didn't use outsiders and were not in the global art and antiquities market.

I do have problems, especially with art historians and archaeologists, on this point — the archaeologist's whole reason for being depends on material objects and structures. Even museum curators — if they didn't have artifacts what would they have? If archaeologists didn't have remains what would they have? I keep saying, "Well, sure it is nice to have these things if you have them, as long as you don't take them too seriously. But when you take them seriously, it means you get locked into a whole set of values that say, 'It's material, we have it, we treasure it, we display it, so it must be important'." And indeed it is in the sense that, for museums, these things are owned now and

museums feel that they cannot let them go. You know the kind of trouble museums have with evanescent art, that is art that is not made to last — chocolate art, ice art, things like that — where part of the work of art is in the performance of making it and seeing it decay. Museums guarantee to these people that they will not try to conserve these works but then their trustees come and say, "You can't do that. This is property and property means it has to be saved because it has property value." Well, as long as museums are locked into the idea of property value they are at a real disadvantage in terms of actually interpreting stuff. If you start with the idea of property value, you are already demeaning the concept of culture, you are already making it impossible to be honest about the role that things play in culture, which is frequently not to be conserved but to be destroyed or to be used up.

SB: *What do you think, then, the role of the artifact should be in the museum, quite apart from the mandate of the museum to collect and to preserve. What should we be doing with these artifacts? How should we be interpreting them?*

DL: Part of the response that I would give is that if you have a museum that is not simply displaying great works of art for people to admire aesthetically — let's say that you have a social history museum — the artifacts may be enormously important in order to give people an impression, a sense of how things worked or how we got here from there or whatever. But they should never be allowed to take over and it should not matter so much whether they are original materials or original structures or whether they are replicas. I'll give you an example of the problem before I try to come up with some positive answers.

I don't know whether you know the work of the anthropologists who've been studying Colonial Williamsburg, Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg*. It's an anthropological critique of the way in which social history is done there and the difficulty of focusing, as they do, on material objects — not all of this is in the book, some of it is in journal articles. The greatest difficulty inheres in problems related to treasuring or valuing artifacts as much as Colonial Williamsburg has to now because it is hooked into the reproduction of these things for sale and because

part of their pitch is the crafts people who make their productions. Recently, they have tried to insist they are not just making beautiful interior design objects but that they are really making true-to-type eighteenth-century stuff, much of which in America was pretty inferior. So they tell the crafts people, "Sorry, it's got to be worse, less finished, nails showing, edges not so good." The crafts people hate this. They take pride in their work and one of the assumptions that they make is that management is trying to do them down and take away their independence. Well, they take it out on their customers, on their visitors who they perceive as being ignorant of the past and present-minded to a certain extent. One example they give is — they get really crusty these crafts people — a visitor comes and says, "Gee! I didn't know they used nails back then." "Yes," says the blacksmith, "And I suppose you thought they stapled Christ to the cross." You know, really, really black humour of this kind, it's the crafts people's way of coping.

A more serious issue is the bias that inevitably results when you try, as they are now trying at Colonial Williamsburg, to show the whole picture, to show black Colonial Williamsburg as well as white. It was fifty per cent black and most of the blacks were slaves. You probably know about the ways in which they've expanded their operations to show the life of slaves and poor people. But how do you do this if you're doing it with artifacts, which is what they do, and buildings? Well they don't have any or they have so few — as they put it, "We would die for a real slave cabin." On the other hand, they have massive remains from the elite — buildings, furnishings, costumes, everything, plus a lot of information about where they came from and who owned them, who they were passed on to. When they talk about elite material stuff, they have original objects, personal names, family histories, a whole narrative of use and of interest that's personal. For the slave and the poor part of the story they have only replicas and not even very good replicas some of the time because a lot of their past is really very little known. And instead of named individuals, there is an anonymous collectivity, a combination of people, nobody knows who had what or even sometimes what their names were. So naturally what this results in is the audience saying, "Well these are different."

I am exaggerating the difference, it's more of a continuum, but you see the point. Visitors come out with a very powerful sense through

material objects and structures of a highly specific elite past and a very weak sense, highly generalized and much less specific, of ordinary people's and slaves' past, so it's highly skewed. In a situation like this, if you rely mainly on material things I think you're in a real dilemma.

SB: *What do you think of attempts to recreate the past through experience as opposed to objects? Do you see any particular problems inherent in the use of replica and re-enactment to interpret history?*

DL: It's a problem that's embedded in material objects, perhaps more than structures, of ownership, a feeling that these are or were owned by somebody, that's what makes them important. There is a truth in the importance of authenticity in terms of visitors wanting to know: "Was that really George Washington's pen?" That makes it more significant and you have to get over that somehow. I don't deny that this does play a role. Or is this really where the Governor-General lived or have they moved this building from someplace else? I think you have to play it every way.

Now it is possible to get over the dilemma when you recognize that material authenticity is as confused as I was explaining earlier. There are stories about how to deal with this. I covered that in my book, *The Heritage Crusade*, and don't want to do that again. I do think there is another element here that may matter more or as much, as the issue of materials and more or less real replicas; that is place, locality. This comes back to the Holocaust issue. What matters about holocaust sites in Poland and concentration camps in Germany, is that's where it was and even if nothing there really looks very much like it did then, even if it's very hard to get the impression from the buildings, as it frequently is now, the sense that that's where it was seems to matter to a lot of people. It's frequently been said that there are things you just can't move; Stonehenge out of Salisbury Plain would lose all its meaning. People set up replicas here and there, but they don't work in the same way at all.

For my part, what works are places or sites where something important happened, where a real sense of uniqueness of what happened has been retained. I went a couple of years ago to a Parks Canada conference where they were discussing their mandate and guidelines. Christina Cameron talked at length about the difficulties that Parks Canada was having in

terms of what people wanted to see as opposed to what the Parks mandate was — to show things that matter in Canadian history. She talked about how so many of these sites have, as she put it, degenerated from places where something specific and important happened and is commemorated — between the French and the English empires or in connection with the development of Canadian frontier life or the founding of an institution or community — to become totally generic. There is now a tendency to set up bread-making displays, or something like that, where visitors go and watch interpreters baking bread, which could be done anywhere, anytime without reference to any particular event at all. And this is all apart from the ongoing problem of whether you show mainstream or minority versions of what happened at the site.

I want to mention a site that I thought really worked and perhaps speculate about why it worked, which is the village of Oradour-sur-Glane in western France. In June 1944 the Nazis — a couple of SS squads — went in to retaliate against active resistance. They decided to make an example of this town, so they rounded up everybody in the village, 600 to 800 people, and herded them into the central square. They took the men away in groups of twenty or thirty and shot them, here and there. Then they collected all the women and children and shut them up in the church and set fire to it. Everyone was killed except one woman who managed to climb out the back window of the church. So the whole town was gone except for this woman and for a couple of dozen people who had been out working for the day in the pastures or in the woods.

The French decided that this event should be memorialized. They have done it in a most brilliant manner, by leaving that village exactly as it was, so that when you arrive there — the Nazis also set fire to a lot of the buildings that are still standing but it looks as though the village has been fairly well damaged, destroyed — what you see are houses, yards, streets that look as if this had just happened a couple of weeks ago. There are old cars out there and little plaques: “Here is where the Germans killed 30 men,” “Here is where the Germans killed 40 men.” Then there is a somewhat larger plaque outside the church where all the women and children had been incinerated. Then just at the entrance to Oradour, “SOUVIENS-TOI,” and that’s all there is. Of course, this is not easy to do, because you

can’t keep a place looking like this without a lot of work and they have done this brilliantly too. It never looks as though they have come and cleaned it up, it never looks as though they’d gone back to some kind of ancient ruin with second growth taking over. It’s extremely delicately managed. These, by the way, are the same kind of problems with decay and the retention of decay that the English have with a lot of their monasteries or that the Americans have with Wild West towns like Bodie, Arizona, which are kept as perpetually decaying sets of structures. So Oradour is very moving because visitors feel that they are really coming on this scene, more or less, just after it happened.

The decaying town site is all there is in Oradour except for the cemetery, which is very large and, in the centre of the cemetery, an underground museum. This one-room museum is kind of a bunker made of white stone. You go in there and all there is in this room, around all the walls, are the names of everybody in the village who’d been killed — their names, their ages, and their occupations. There are seven or eight glass-covered tables in the centre, with nothing in writing on them. One table contains nothing but thimbles and scissors collected up from the houses, another has pencils and slates from school children, another shoes, and that’s it. I think it’s impossible to leave this site without a sense of participation that has been achieved by the most marvellous use of material things.

SB: *Is it possible, should we even try to replicate or to aim at something similar in museums where we have authentic artifacts but we haven’t the power of place? For example in our museum we have one of the original cavity magnetrons that were used by the Allies to develop microwave radar, an important contribution to the war effort. We can’t replicate the circumstances — the Battle of Britain — that brought this significant piece of technology into our hands or the unique context of international conflict and scientific co-operation in which it was developed.*

DL: I can suggest an even more difficult museum issue that might have some resonance for you. I’ve been involved with the Science Museum in London over some years and they have a continuing difficulty about the display of technology because increasingly what stands as the cutting edge of science is less and less visible. Whereas for the nineteenth century,

they can show steam engines and more or less give visitors an idea of how things worked, what can you do with computers, where everything is in the software? Science museums just haven't figured out how to cope with this in terms of being able to get an audience to react through artifacts, to what's going on inside. There are other problems, too, such as the faith in progress that a lot of science museum curators still have. So some of us have been saying, "What you need to do is show the social effects of science and technology." That's one way of making science visible, if you can figure out how to demonstrate the impact — not just the intended impact of scientific invention, but the unintended and sometimes disastrous consequences — of these things. I think that, in fact, one could develop fabulous displays with a lot of question marks in them about things like the decay of nuclear wastes or the subsidence of underground coal mines in which the focus would be primarily on the hazardous risks involved for communities or for society as a whole in the untoward consequences of science and technology.

SB: Yes, I think it is important to provide some critical analysis of technology but staff at our museum and many others like ours, are under pressure to produce exhibits that are entertaining and, therefore, marketable to both sponsors and visitors and these goals are often at odds or are seen to be at odds with the desire to deal with controversial issues. We're often told that people don't want to hear negative or depressing things about the history of their communities, as you suggest in your book. Rather, most people want to be told simple, clear and generally celebratory stories, in our case, stories that celebrate Canadian contributions to science and technology.

DL: My impression is that no one actually knows what people want to hear and I believe that the public is interested in a lot more than that for sure. I'm going to tell you an amusing story about this, not in connection with museums, but in connection with music. I went to a music colloquium three or four years ago in Banff to honour R. Murray Schafer, a very innovative Canadian composer who also pioneered the idea of trying to understand soundscapes all over the world. This was a fascinating enterprise. It was wonderful watching him and his staff going round taping characteristic sounds in different places. At Banff there were also sound therapists and

Japanese music garden people, things like that. I had to give a talk there, which was mostly about how music is a very universal art, compared with poetry or any form of writing or even painting. I think visual representation and writing are much more culturally determined because of the nature of the medium.

I thought what I had to say was significant but, as it turned out, it was not politically correct. People said, "You seem to be saying that music matters universally, which suggests somehow that we don't need our Canadian music." So I said, "Why do you need your Canadian music? Do you?" And all hell broke loose. People began explaining to me irately about how Canada was submerged by the American recording industry and by American radio and television networks and how if Canadians didn't try to protect themselves there would be nothing Canadian left at all. They went on and on about this in a way that seemed to me extraordinarily impassioned until one man got up and said in a quite pronounced Québécois accent: "But what is this Canadian music? We have Berlioz, what else do we need?" It degenerated into real comedy at this point.

SB: Do you think that there are good reasons for curators and other museum professionals to be struggling to maintain a role for artifacts within exhibits?

DL: Yes I do but they must not be too narrowly material and they should be drawn from a wider range of backgrounds than used to be the case when almost everybody who was a curator in a museum was a hoarder or a miser or narcissistic. My friend who was the director in the Science Museum in London said, "My hardest job in the first year was getting the curators out of their offices so we could clean them. We made the most remarkable discoveries when we did get them out, because they had squirrelled away all this stuff and more or less kept it as their own since they thought it was too valuable to be in the museum." You know the sort of thing I'm talking about.

SB: I was going to ask about collecting because these days everyone seems to be re-assessing what we collect and why. What advice do you have for museum professionals today who are struggling to set collection policies that provide a sensible basis for fulfilling their mandates to preserve and interpret the technical or artistic or historical heritage of their communities?

DL: Not being doctrinaire is the only sensible advice that I can give, because circumstances differ so much from place to place. Also to try to keep on top of developing problems, I mean in England we still have the problem that we have so much stuff in museums that nine-tenths of it can't be seen. And the conservation of that nine-tenths is parlous. In the first place it is badly stored and secondly it exacerbates conflicts between national, provincial and local museums. So much of it is in the national, centralized places and local museums want more of it but would have to show it differently, obviously. Thirdly, it prevents people from thinking they can move ahead to collect more recent or contemporary things.

How to collect what's contemporary is a fascinating puzzle, because whatever you acquire on the assumption, "Well it's much less expensive if we buy it now" — which is probably true — it is certainly nevertheless the case that the next generation is going to look at this stuff quite differently and say, "Ninety-nine per cent of this is quite useless to us." You know, they will say that a lot of the time even if you collect just two-generations-ago stuff rather than contemporary stuff, but it is different collecting things that are now in use. Part of the reason is that we feel differently about things that are still in use. I mean there is the example I've given of the California gas chamber, which was about to be collected by the Oakland museum until the state re-instituted the death sentence and they began using the chamber again. Imagine if they had had to claw it back from the Oakland Museum. I don't think that would have sat well with a lot of people, to take something out of a museum to kill people with.

SB: *Do you think then that instead of pursuing some vague and changing notion of authenticity we should be thinking more about context and the fact that it is constantly changing?*

DL: As is happening in many museums, one of the really neat ways of going about this is to provide conflicting stories, alternative versions of how things were used and what they were for. But always with the aim in mind of startling people and it is quite easy to startle people. I was riveted when I went to Old Deerfield, Massachusetts, three years ago. You know about the massacre, the Indian massacre that took place during the French and Indian War [Seven Years' War]. French troops and Indians came

down from Quebec to Massachusetts, there was a raid and a lot of people were killed and some were kidnapped. A number of these captivity narratives have been recycled now and a lot of historical work done on them. One of the women who was kidnapped, or girl as she was at the time, grew up in this Indian tribal situation — Roman Catholic Indian but tribal Indians nonetheless — married an Indian and had some children. When finally the negotiations to get her released or exchanged were successful, she didn't want to come home. She visited and decided, "No, this isn't where I belong now." The plaque up in Deerfield about this woman who was essentially lost to the community is a good nineteenth-century plaque. It reads: "She married a savage and herself became one." The ultimate iniquity. You could do something with that plaque in a place like that. It's so redolent of another way of looking at things.

SB: *Rather than replacing it with a more politically correct version, which would almost certainly be innocuous and probably quite bland, you could use it as an interpretive tool to talk about the nineteenth century as well as the French and Indian War.*

DL: Yes, to force people to confront the differentness of the past, a very hard job and as you say a lot of people don't want to and a lot of sponsors don't want to. But I think there are ways of doing this that are fruitful and more easy than is sometimes thought. I think first person interpretation is a great device for doing this. Sometimes it works all too well as it did at Louisbourg.

SB: *Does that provide a more authentic experience than being in a "real building" or looking at a "genuine artifact"?*

DL: It provides a more impactful experience because it makes people really confront the differentness. When you go to Plymouth Plantation and you see these characters in the seventeenth-century costumes, okay, so they're in seventeenth-century costume. And these houses are, or are like, what they lived in in 1627. Well, you know you yawn and say, "Gee, what a pathetic way to live," or "Very different from us," or "Think of the sacrifices they had to make." But you're not actually confronting that past as something real, despite the reality or quasi-reality of the artifacts and buildings.

That only happens when people are made to actually talk to someone of the seventeenth century or read and immerse themselves in something of the seventeenth century. The mid-westerner who confronts Elder Brewster in that village and who is essentially a good twentieth-century American booster who believes in capitalism, individualism, progress twentieth-century-style is shocked to discover that this minister of the seventeenth century turns out to be a communitarian who believes in communal life and the communism of which he is an inheritor is one that has a wholly different sense of good and evil. And it does not involve individualism and it does not involve production for capitalism. This poor middle westerner is actually having to face someone whose set of beliefs is utterly different from his without hitting him

because you don't hit people in historic reconstructions. You're supposed to listen to them and maybe even talk back, but if you get angry you're not allowed to show it. Well it's not very often that people actually have to face that sort of thing when they just go to an ordinary museum or an ordinary historic site.

SB: *Can you tell me about a museum that really worked for you?*

DL: The Children's Museum in Indianapolis does because it questions everything that it shows by saying, "This is some of what happened, but look, there are all these gaps in what we know so what you read about in the text books is also full of gaps." I think the idea of casting doubts or raising questions is crucial.